

## Sacred Atheism

### Pre-Empting Death by Prolonging *Death Sentence*

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Blanchot announces a primal apocalypse, a hecatomb, bequeathed by language. What is to be done when every sentence is a pronouncement, or rather proclamation of *L'arrêt de mort*, on that "prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak, in order to speak it?" (JC 36). "What was it that in the beginning was lost ... what had to be put to death for language to come to life"?<sup>1</sup> This on/ e *récit*, titled *Death Sentence*, implicitly asks, "how can I recover it ... how can I turn around and look at what exists *before* if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*" (GO 46). All sentences merely repeat this primal theft and bestow synthetic life on the world, such that there is always this unbridgeable distance that is always everywhere appropriated by language.<sup>2</sup> What causes Blanchot's intense anxiety, in addition, is that "the torment of language is that it cannot even name it" (that "prior presence").<sup>3</sup>

If we are made in the image of language, in *Death Sentence*, image fragments, actively blocking the passage of reappropriation by image alone. As such, our inability to see translates into traumatized images that do not reveal anything substantial. This *récit* enacts obscuring as a fictive event in happening, and whilst it cannot name that which it sentences to death, these sentences exude something *other* that breaks through death sentences.

Blanchot is not fascinated by what that "something" is, but by how he

can clear a space within language for that which “is ‘eternally there,’ just behind the surface of all words and all events, or between their interstices, and at the same time at an infinite distance.”<sup>4</sup> How, is not a question, but a performance of *inappropriation* in which fragments of an *other* dematerialize this language despite the fact that the end result appears as a system of desecration which replaces and defers the obscure and excessive. *Autrui*<sup>5</sup> is summoned from within the sacrificial as Blanchot journeys toward the infinite “come,” despite being exposed to the perils that language mandates as origin. Here, meaning as obscure “springs forth from negation and destruction,”<sup>6</sup> disrupting time in an endless contestation of *Death Sentence* and sentences of death. As such, the means of beginning again are kept in play. Is this not a question of *love*,<sup>7</sup> inextricable from the sacred, since it works to encourage a fascination for the obscure and relates us “to what is outside our limits,” “through which the infinite comes”? (*IC* 51 & 61). And perhaps also because in *L’arrêt de mort*, we are disarmed and denuded by an eternal “come” from *with-in* signs of ruination.

*Love* in this context seeks a relation with the unknowable where relation is according to Fynsk, “an infinite alterity whose coming is the opening of ... the supreme relation which is sufficient to itself.”<sup>8</sup> It is in writing: “the experience of language,” that we discern an alterity that is made irredeemable through the act of writing. Hence, as Kristeva says, “love is a death sentence which causes me to be.”<sup>9</sup> This relation “cannot be thought either in terms of transcendence or immanence,” in Blanchot’s mind, but as he says elsewhere, we get a sense of it somehow (*IC* 71 & 73). *Love*, itself obscure, becomes a repetition through the transference and opening of Blanchot’s work to the foreign(er), and as such to a “vision beyond vision.”<sup>10</sup>

Critchley asks: “why is alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or unethical or neutral?”<sup>11</sup> In positing an attribute like love, as I do, Critchley warns, is this not “to smuggle a metaphysical presupposition into a quasi-phenomenological description?”<sup>12</sup> Newman too, draws our attention to a related issue. In Blanchot, it is by “turning away from the absolute other can one mediate this other, but if one has turned away, how does one know that it is the absolute other?”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, is one turning away from good or evil? In response to this question, I would suggest ‘the other’ could be thought as Agamben thinks it rather than in Critchley’s terms, that is, “that the perfect has appropriated all the possibilities of evil and impropriety and therefore cannot commit evil.”<sup>14</sup> We could then refer to finitude as sacred atheism. For as the Psalmist chants, “Thine is the day, Thine is the Night” (*Psalm* 74: 16).

On the subject of *jour et nuit*, or J(*our*) and N(*uit*): characters who

stand for the dialectical and the neutral which in turn double as philosophical concepts written under literature. The first fragment of the *récit* embodies the thought that kills: the dialectical, enacted through J(*our*)<sup>15</sup> – a female character – as a lingering dying and “the murder from which meaning proceeds.”<sup>16</sup> The second fragment of the *récit* resists thought in an effort to approach the neutral who *immaterializes* as N(*atalie*): the impenetrable N(*uit*).<sup>17</sup> Natalie *unfolds* as N(*euter*), which is “not a term or a concept but a fragment of writing that is radically unstable and resistant to definition”;<sup>18</sup> as well as, a “relation” between probability and improbability.<sup>19</sup> By “relation” I mean an *opening* that renders the improbable virtually in our midst, and as on/ e with the possible. Additionally as Derrida reminds us, Natalie is “the name that celebrates the birth of Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

The fragmentation of the *récit* into two *unrelated* stories functions as “interruption of speech ... (which) does not arrest becoming but, on the contrary, provokes it in the rupture that belongs to it” (*IC* 307). This is a writing that fragments further under comprehension which makes it “a new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite centre from out of which, through speech, relation is created” (*IC* 308).<sup>21</sup> Relation here, is formed in, and by, “exodus and exile,” distance and/ or impenetrable *difference-s*<sup>22</sup> of meaning, causing endless renewal of beginning which resists our grasp, possession and appropriation. In another sense, relation is an inappropriable *opening* that “relates” the probable and improbable which preoccupies the narrator of *Death Sentence*, along with the question: is it not possible that there is a language in which the *unknown* does not capitulate to the known? “Might there not exist relations, that is to say a language, escaping this movement of force through which the world does not cease to accomplish itself?” (*IC* 43). To Blanchot’s mind, “it would be a kind of reserve in thought itself, a thought not allowing itself to be thought in the mode of appropriative comprehension” (*IC* 43). Instead, it requires a “speech of detour” which would free language from its dependence on the gaze; a speech where “everything is disclosed without disclosing anything” (*IC* 29).

In *Death Sentence* this is executed through the denial or ambiguity of everything that is represented. Effectively, meaning devours and/ or degrades itself, such that, the reader is left with an impression that everything turns to nothing, yet, “something” is said *imperceptibly*. It is true to say, “here what reveals itself does not give itself up to sight just as it does not take refuge in simple invisibility” (*IC* 29). Blanchot speaks of finding the obscure and bringing it into the open as open. He asks: “What would this experience of the obscure be, whereby the obscure would give itself in its ob-

scurity?" (IC 44). What the narrator proceeds on, it seems increasingly, is hope, the only relation possible when relation is lost.<sup>23</sup> In what appears hopeless as a result of sentences of death, hope is, paradoxically, "most profound when it withdraws from and deprives itself of all manifest hope," implying hope necessitates the surrender of hope itself (IC 41). To put it differently, absolute abdication of hope leads to "an affirmation of the improbable" (IC 43). As is evident in the next excerpt where *in love*, thought is dismissed and the metaphysical is brought down to its knees:

I was not thinking any more ... I will say very little about what happened then: what happened had already happened long ago ... In the end, I got down on my knees ... and my hand slowly crossed through the dark ... brushed against some cloth ... there had never been a more patient hand ... that is why it did not tremble when another hand, slowly formed beside it ... all this was taking place at an infinite distance ... that all my hope seemed to me infinitely far away ... where my hand rested on this body and loved it and where this body, in its night of stone, welcomed, recognized and loved that hand. (DS 177-8)

We recognize the opening of the text to *another* (hand) which seeks not the same but a relation with the unknowable enabling us "to relate ourselves finally to what is outside our limits" (IC 51). Distance or difference is "maintained absolutely in this relation" (IC 51). This (hand) behind the law or (within) the laws of metaphysics, is indifferent to the x-change of hands that "brush" against it. What we receive from Blanchot's hope is "not obscure, but open to that which is not yet divulged" (IC 265).

Displacement becomes the disorder of the day: the dialectic, as the narrative voice throws itself at the mercy of this "non-thought within thought" in a move which "delivers language over to it" (IC 121 & 311). The language of objectivity is turned into object dying under its own gaze, disturbing the flow of univocity as: "man speaks in the work, but the work gives voice in man to that which does not speak, to the unnameable, the inhuman, to what is without truth, without justice and without legitimacy."<sup>24</sup> Here, *love* is the invisible structure of thought, dismissing the verdict of death by means of death sentence through an x-change of hands, signs and sentences. What is repeated, then, is this cross x, over and over again in the *difference-s* that *inscribe*, interpret and translate this work of fiction/philosophy. Not only does this process contribute to the *désœuvrement* of *Death Sentence* by recourse to sentences of death, but, at the same instant, how the obscure (love) breaks out from, and through *Death Sentence*; this is the fundamental focus of this piece.

*Who*, is an “an infinite alterity,”<sup>25</sup> that approaches through s-he who is foreign to me. Even though s-he may be a creation, a thought, who goes by the initial J. and comes as N., s-he escapes our grasp, and exceeds the play of signification. It is fair to say that unless the sentence of death is pronounced on J. and N. it cannot be renounced, complicating the precedence of beginning over end, and rendering one within the other as on/e. More importantly, end or death is the mainspring of ambiguity since alternative meanings are generated and guaranteed as a result of it. In other words, death sentence makes possible “the opening for the occurrence of another possibility.”<sup>26</sup> Meaning breaks up by means of difference both within the *récit* and between those who read, interpret, and rewrite it, which suggests that language is traumatized by an obscurity or opening “operative” *within* “itself.” Although object(ed), this *opening* carries language in a kind of eternal catastrophe that arrests death. At times, Blanchot refers to it as *il y a*: “the existence that remains beneath existence like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning and without end”<sup>27</sup> instigating interruption. Language then is this aporia where ‘something’ does not exist and where ‘something’ is always already something else, thus, turning away from something in turning to something else, from J. to N. for example. This question, or rather demand – “how can I recover it?” “how do I hope to find (it) again?” – itself comes from with-in language and is a question that must remain *open*.

In this *récit*, “the French word for ‘thought’ is feminine and therefore is spoken as ‘*elle*,’ she. This means that there is an implicit identification of N. or J. and other female characters, and that thought.”<sup>28</sup> That Blanchot escapes thematisation through thought “itself” is another factor that will be explored. Of N(atalie), the narrative voice asserts, “she remained in my presence with the freedom of a thought; she was in this world, but I was encountering her again in this world only because she was my thought ... what terrible complicity” (*DS* 172). If the text is, at times, as indicated here, merely inert like a statue, then, who says “come,” and *who* is Pygmalion? These implicit questions are an attempt to open thought and speech to the other by inhibiting the urge to explain, and in so doing, appropriate everything by designating it in words. Instead, a space is cleared in literature in order to invite the other’s approach so as to render meaning nomadic. J., *je*, on the other hand, is the thought of J(*our*) which refuses to die; one which always came back and “won out,” the narrator confesses (*DS* 149). Yet, in the process, something *strange* exchanges hands, becomes second hand, as is indicated by the cast of head and hands. To attempt to predict what that ‘something’ is, is equivalent to clairvoyance. Fortunetellers are synonymous with writers in this story, because they accede to lines/ sen-

tences of a hand to predict future signs and significations.

The narrator sends a cast of J.'s hand to "a professional palm reader and astrologer [us] ... to establish the greater co-ordinates of her fate" (*DS* 137, my brackets). An offer too tempting to refuse; these are the literary line(s) of business after all: to analyze and create a story out of 'unusual' lines:

altogether unusual – cross hatched, entangled, without the slightest apparent unity. I cannot describe them, although at this very moment I have them under my eyes and they are alive. Moreover, these lines grew blurred sometimes, then vanished except for one deep furrow that corresponded, I think, to what they call the line of fate. That line did not become distinct except at the moment when all the others were eclipsed. But the deep hatchet-stroke still ran through the midst of the other lines, and if that line is indeed called the line of fate ... its appearance made that fate seem tragic. (*DS* 137)

These hands and their lines/ sentences, which are my own, not only describe the "narrative" when subjected to the scrutiny of the reader, but also perhaps the two fragments of the *récit* which are "without the slightest apparent unity." Each story is both independent of, and "entangled" in sentence, hands, night and day. While the "lines" of the casts of J.'s hands correspond with the narrator's and by extension the reader's which correspond with the text itself, their/ our entanglement un-works the text so that a prognosis of that 'line of fate' is impossible. J Hillis Miller points out that:

The figure of the casts suggests that the text itself is a mask, the giving of a face to the absent, inanimate, the dead. The text survives as the cast or simulacrum of the events it records, life mask become death mask, just as the casts survive the two women.<sup>29</sup>

It survives only to be re-cast by the reader/ fortune teller in the capacity of translator or critic, thereby keeping it alive as cast. Thus, it is "about time we raised a cross over" the narrative (*DS* 163).

In revealing "his" hand as hers/ ours as the hand of fictive representation, what the reader receives is the process behind the creation of a work of fiction. As such, the work does not pretend to harbour a meaning. Instead, literature finds nothing other than itself as Leslie Hill points out.<sup>30</sup> Blanchot's narrative "does not consist in illuminating things from the outside – the print of the creator's thumb as he shapes figures to his liking. It represents the intervention of the narrator challenging the very possibility of narration" (*IC* 382). The effect is one of distance from the work because the pleasure afforded by comprehension, by making sense of it, is sacrificed. In

fact, it induces a state of anxiety, because the fodder of representation – plot, character, theme etc. – are given only to be snatched away, thereby, facilitating a dis-trust of sense which “enters into the work’s very sphere in the form of an irreducible strangeness” (IC 383). For instance, the writer is distanced from the narrator by “his” polymorphic character. The narrator is distanced from himself, he admits he “preferred to keep life at a distance” (DS 164). There is distance between “him” and “the events ‘he’ experiences or the beings ‘he’ encounters” apparently (IC 383). As such, subject-object disappears in the decentred, disembodied voices of the narrative and we are as a result:

delivered over to another time – to time as other, as absence and neutrality ... an unstable perpetuity in which we are arrested and arrested of permanence, a time neither abiding nor granting the simplicity of a dwelling place. (IC 44)

To explain this idea further, the *récit* does not exist in the time of the narrator, even if this were discernible, continuing instead to be repeated differently in (a) the “time” of reader and interpreter and their historical contexts, as well as, (b) the pulse of an obscure time, which we may call the time of ends as Agamben does, or we may put it as Blanchot does: “we are at the end of one discourse and, passing to another, we continue out of convenience to express ourselves in an old, unsuitable language” (IC 270). The “events” of *Death Sentence* are therefore timeless *inscription*, or the interruption of the time of inscription by its susceptibility to interpretation and translation. There is therefore “a multiplicity of speech in the simultaneity” of one violent language (IC 80). This has the effect not of “collapsing language”<sup>31</sup> but of creating a space in the work for the writing of *difference-s* in any time.

Gasché observes how Blanchot was aware that “literary language is the movement through which whatever disappears keeps appearing. When it names something, what it designates is abolished; but whatever is abolished is also sustained, and the thing has found refuge (in the being that is the word).”<sup>32</sup> This movement is mirrored in *L’arrêt de mort*, where the sight given by dialectical realism of J(*our*) slides into the shadow of N(euter) rendering the gaze dysfunctional. The two co-exist even though one must disappear for the other to appear. This process shatters the work of realism and

renounces the reassuring distinction between the thing gazed upon and its aesthetic elaboration, which would succeed it ... [U]nworking makes the becoming-image of this thing into the very condition of a writing process which, *by means of the gaze*, would turn away from

representation and the signification it implies.<sup>33</sup>

Realism is interrupted in order to open the work to an other. The passing on from one hand to another guarantees an unworking that renders the work inappropriate. The work is therefore endlessly kept open in order to be shattered/ shared. There cannot be a turn away from the gaze, however, without there being that from which to turn away from. For example, J. precipitates N. because “she” is insufficient without the other and the other (N) comes through J. It is a collaborative *unworking*, one which the reader shares.

In this *impossible* cartwheel performed with-in language which “turns toward that from which it turns away,” through an interruption that points to the absence of the work unworking the work itself, what is left is the unveiling of a veiling (*IC* 31). Consequently, what *comes* “remains undetermined, or better, is said in the mode of the neuter” (*IC* 31). It breaks by means of day, *J(our)*, otherwise known as “the burst of presence,” into hope: a relation with the unknown, which could be expressed as an “affirmation of the improbable and a wait for what is” (*IC* 39 & 41). Hope is qualified by hope itself of a “meeting point between possibility and impossibility” which amounts to an encounter between J. and N. with the disappearance of one in the other as on/ e (*IC* 41). The impossible, here, comes from *within*, and breaks through “the fatality of the day.”<sup>34</sup>

The simmering sexual tension explicit, at times, between the narrator and characters – which is to say in the mind of the reader since these two are on/ e – which bubbles to the literary surface in frenzied violence, is the torment of language which makes inaccessible this *other* that is *impossible* to think. It becomes increasingly apparent that *it* is impossible to not think *it* either since it “is ‘eternally there,’ just behind the surface of all words and all events, or between their interstices, and at the same time at an infinite distance.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, to the narrator, in sentences which bestow death, tension rises to the fore in holding the thought away by means of thought. Artaud, in accord with Blanchot, saw the impossibility of not thinking as “the site of combat: a combat between thought as lack and the impossibility of bearing this lack ... between thought as separation and life as inseparable from thought” (*IC* 294). Accessing the *other* has something in common, for Blanchot, with struggling against thought itself rather than against the female characters that double as these thoughts. Alterity is so effortlessly everywhere dissolved, appropriated or annihilated by existence as thought, that, Blanchot remarks, “what exceeds me is absolutely at my mercy” (*IC* 60).

*Death Sentence* struggles against verdicts of death by declaring that its characters, “events,” and accounts, have nothing in common with realism, as is evident in the next passage:

A thought is not exactly a person, even if it lives and acts like one. A thought demands a loyalty which makes any slyness difficult. Sometimes it is itself false, but behind this lie, I still recognize something real, which I cannot betray. (*DS* 152)

The narrator is in two minds as it were, signaling an attempt to grasp 'something' immaterial or ethereal beneath fictive words. In contrast, the 'love scene' in the section on N., describes the struggle not to touch, to think, to materialize the thought of N(eutral) because it results in loss, of other, so as to manifest the fragility of an *other in* language (*DS* 179). What transpires from the incessant struggle with, and against, thought, is not the joy of utopia, but the trauma of Gethsemane: a literary and literal surrender to the *unknown*, to the *stranger within* thought and word.

Materializing the obscure as obscure necessitates the very surrender of love itself, since in the neutral, love "takes place at an infinite distance" (*DS* 178). It is not love that is sacrificed, here, but the sacrificial sense of love and indeed sacrificial sense itself. According to Blanchot, "Eros is still the nostalgic desire for lost unity ... Metaphysical desire is desire for that with which one has never been united" (*IC* 53). What is desired instead is the cessation of desire itself, akin to the implicit love *in wo/* men of faith. Abraham, for example, who unnaturally refuses signs and the love of one son for an *indefinable* love of the *unknown*.

So far, *Death sentence* is arrested in its refusal to accede to sense by displacing philosophical ideas into literature and hovering on the very threshold of a relation with the foreign(er) in language in this movement forward which creates meaning, and the movement back which takes it away. Hiatus is transcribed through a fragile oscillation between sense and a sense that cannot be discerned. The narrative proceeds, then, by a meaning that is re-cited by means of *difference-s* which keeps the work open. Here, the fascination generated by language "where the thing becomes an image again"<sup>36</sup> is subjected to the illness described by fragmentation, thereby unfolding sense as ungraspable and unintentional.

Aporia is the *disorder* of the narrative for on one level, the narrator doubles as each of the characters and since we – writer, reader, and translator – collude, as this plural I, we participate in unworking sense. On another level, we recreate and perpetuate the sacrificial economy as this excerpt from *Death Sentence* indicates: J. asks the nurse:

"Have you ever seen death?" "I have seen dead people, miss." "No, death! The nurse shook her head. "Well, soon you will see it." (*DS* 141)

When the narrator arrives later, "she turned slightly towards the nurse and

said in a tranquil tone, “Now then, take a good look at death,’ and she pointed her finger at me” (*DS* 149). J. says this in the presence of all who are in her room – the *récit* – including us, although “The comings and goings in the room seemed completely foreign to the unconscious body, itself a stranger in its own agony” (*DS* 150). We need to recall that her flesh is word: “a completely determined and objective reality”<sup>37</sup> harbouring the stranger who lives on in its inaccessible agony. The body is being written as a mask alienated from “self.” Whilst the mask bestows a false reality on J., without it, J. would not be “present” at all. We get a sense here, that despite literary finality, the body as idea, as text, as *je*, “is foreign in its very proximity” (*IC* 45). Indeed, the body must materialize in order to signify as Judith Butler suggests in *Bodies that Matter*.<sup>38</sup> In *Death Sentence*, J. materializes and is disassembled in order to signal the impossibility of appropriating that which is *within* or beneath the body of metaphysics.

Disassembling occurs when the word is permitted to prey on its own flesh through disarticulation to the extent that “infinity becomes its echo,” so that between “us what is left is strangely ungraspable,” and sentenced to be a “no one,” that goes by the name J. and comes as N(atalie) (*DS* 153). “Come,” in the story of J. is the “come” of the false prophet (*Revelation* 6): the performative pull of conventional narrative fascination, luring the reader into the narrative which in *Death Sentence* is a chamber of horror where J. (the dialectical) is subjected to an unidentifiable illness and lingering death, and where the language of metaphysics which pretends to see and make sense of everything is challenged. In this striated chamber, fascination does not lead to the satisfaction of gathering meaning, but the struggle to come to terms with the illness in language embodied by J. Conventional narrative strategy is deployed to entice the reader only in order to demonstrate the danger of this fascination. By virtue of recognizing J. (the metaphysical / sacrificial) in the moments of a dying meaning, that ‘something’ spectral comes to disappear into N(eutral).<sup>39</sup>

J. who stands primarily as the body of metaphysics – a very sick body indeed – slips away towards N. creating a crossover where, in *Death Sentence*, the metaphysical is violently wounded and resuscitated. There is, then, a crossover of Blanchot’s philosophical ideas into literature emerging as a monstrous hybrid: curse and blessing. J. is also the faceless face of a mystery that alludes to mythological figures such as Iphigeneia at Aulis, Pygmalion, and Orpheus and Eurydice. S-he is the other hand that destabilizes the N(euter); as well as the employer of the sculptor (un)known as X who forms the cast of hands (that write) and head (thought). S-he is as ‘X’, the signature of a person who cannot write or sign “her” name, as well as “cast as the formless refiguring of textuality.”<sup>40</sup> S-he hovers on the thresh-

old between sense and the ‘something’ behind, or perhaps *with-in* thought.

To write conventionally is masculine: the narrating I/ eye is a he, and as narrator, strives to unify the work; events unfold from his perspective. Not so in *Death Sentence*, where the narrator is unanchored in sense through the displacement of time, space and perspective and is therefore equivocal. The narrator of *Death Sentence* is a parody of he who would control and centralize the narrative account given. Therefore, the reader is not lured into a web of deceit but to the traps and trap doors in conventional fiction. It is impossible to follow the narrative voice because we set out without ever arriving at any fixed place. Take as example his deterritorialised places of residence: “he” has no particular home, instead, moving between Paris and other cities where he rents temporary accommodation: “the next day I took a room in another hotel, though I kept this one. I lived that way as long as I had the means to, sometimes in three or four places” (*DS* 168). S-he also resides in the two stories of the *récit* as well as the room personified as an inner world of “conscience, heart of hearts ... he haunts rather than inhabits.”<sup>41</sup>

Crossing between many rooms enables the narrator’s movement between, and escape from, one meaning to an *other*. It also fulfills “his” craving for the most intense solitude and the most “profound darkness,” the thought of darkness: the N(eutral), which is not a thought at all, which is why “he” rages against any thought that takes shape and form. As is evident in the following excerpt in respect to N.: “I was extremely afraid, of alarming her, of transforming her, through fear, into a wild thing which would break in my hands” (*DS* 178). His project is to denude her of the “lifeless material”: the thought and words that conceal her strangeness as is suggested by what follows:

the coldness of a body is nothing ... but there is another barrier which separates us: the lifeless material on a silent body, the clothes which must be acknowledged and which clothe nothing, steeped in insensitivity, with their cadaverous folds and their metallic inertness. This must be the obstacle that must be overcome. (*DS* 179)

There is the suggestion here, that there is “nothing” remembered of the heart of matter because it has been covered by “cadaverous folds”; we cannot make sense of something long forgotten, and although we cannot find it again, the “obstacle ... must be” to *uncover* words.

This restless wandering we discover carves open a space in which the reader is not simply a voyeur, nor perverts the course of the “narrative,” but actively marks, “touches” and “clasps” the “body” of the text in a personal and intimate manner. So while words are a completely “determined and ob-

jective reality,"<sup>42</sup> flesh is not only determined, lives and dies with-in words, but by virtue of this impossibility is positioned *with-in* an *opening* that never dies. It is unclear whether Blanchot viewed it in these terms. What he does assert is this:

impossibility is relation with the Outside; and since this relation without relation is the passion that does not allow itself to be mastered through patience, impossibility is the passion of the Outside itself.  
(IC 46)

Whether the "Outside" referred to is literally outside language is a moot point, especially when the next comment is considered: "impossibility is nothing other than the mark of what we so readily call experience, for there is experience in the strict sense only where something radically *other* is in play" (IC 46). And, *Autru* "originates only in the space and time of language – there where language, through speaking, undoes the idea of an origin" (IC 71). Blanchot then equivocates on this point.

So whilst the rooms of the *récit* double as the space for ideas – the body of ideas that are tactile and aural – they are also the space of the infinitely un-cited, unsightly, sightless, for on the one hand, the space of writing is living proof that these events embalm its secret in a cast, in propopoeia, with the initial J. On the other hand, however, it results in the "love scene": "penetration" of language by an *other*.

At the same time, the "yale key"<sup>43</sup> that "opens and closes" the fragmentary body of text is stolen or rather borrowed by N., along with the card bearing the "sculptor X's" whereabouts. As such, the absence of the key and the anonymity of the work's sculptor imply that "the absence of the origin is what enables the work of literature to appear," rendering it "hard for the work to come into being at all."<sup>44</sup> It is impossible to lock or unlock the "narrative" without the stolen key. Furthermore, Hill notes how "a condition of possibility turns into impossibility when the search for the origin (symbolized by the key) is the site of the work's ultimate ruination (the brackets are mine)."<sup>45</sup> As such, N. is the enactment of loss and inappropriation which results in a radical suspension of death sentence.

Another point of contrast with conventional narrative is that this *récit* never really begins because the beginning is repeatedly deferred such that there is a reenactment of the narrating process itself that "tells the event it is, the event of telling."<sup>46</sup> For example, the *récit* begins by asserting: "I have already tried to put them [the events] into writing many times," as well as, "I must not forget that I once managed to put these things into writing" (DS 131). In addition, when the narrator states, "this story concerns no one but myself. It could actually be told in ten words" (DS 131) and the first sen-

tence of the second story begins, “I will go on with this story ... But not everything has yet happened” (*DS* 152), the account, as Miller contends, turns into an event and *visa versa* to disturb “their relation, and giving either an event no story ever tells ... or else a story that recounts nothing.”<sup>47</sup> Past, present, and future, are depicted as essentially slipstream and therefore confused as is evident in this sentence: “after these events, several of which I have recounted – but I am still recounting them now” (*DS* 153). One of the keys to narrative structure – chronological time – has therefore been snatched from us, disabling the situatibility of the story in time or place.

The opening sentences draw attention to the narrating “I” and “his” lack of trust in the words deployed. There is, furthermore, no indication that the narrator is male, which leads to the assumption that narrative voice is determined by the neutral, that is, “the voice of the narrator ... is the neuter voice behind the personal voice, the ‘it’ behind any ‘he’ or ‘she’ ... a prosopopoeia without prosopopoeia ... the voice is not so much impersonal as neuter, ‘ne-uter,’ neither the one nor the other.”<sup>48</sup> This point is illustrated by the following passage where “he” describes J.’s hands as his own:

J.’s hands were small ... but their lines seemed to me altogether unusual – cross hatched, entangled, without the slightest apparent unity. I cannot describe them, although at this moment I have them under my eyes and they are alive. (*DS* 137)

The spacio-temporal nature of the narrative voice is therefore indeterminate. It is this “indifferent difference” that breaks sedentary meaning and “alters the personal voice” (*IC* 386). Like N. who is extremely forgetful, “it is narrative ... that is a forgetting” (*IC* 385) for in the forgetting “is the presence of an infinite absence.”<sup>49</sup>

We are, moreover, alerted to the fact that the words are a staging, a blindfold, on ‘something’ else, when the narrator writes: “it may be that these words are a curtain behind which what happened will never stop happening” (*DS* 152). Implying therefore that, firstly, an event can never be told or the telling comes to stand as the event because “the event” is beneath the veil of words. That which *is* ‘excluded’ by words, however, manifests as withdrawn by means of this exclusion suggesting it is always already passing, and being passed, *with-in* words, as happens in the Paris Metro where the foreign(er) comes to pass as foreign.

“He” writes the foreign(er) *in* the second story of the *récit*, and apart from the inevitable lapses, his sole purpose is to render *difference* inapproprable by appropriation as is suggested by this passage: “I did not move, I was still on my knees, all this was taking place at an infinite distance, my own hand on this cold body, seemed so far away from me, I saw myself

widely separated from it" (*DS* 178). In this instance, the mind estranges itself from intention, signaling a radical difference in, and deferment of, image. In the *Infinite Conversation* Blanchot expresses how this is possible: "to speak at the level of weakness and of destitution – at the level of affliction – is perhaps to challenge force, but also to attract force by refusing it" (*IC* 62). This is why all betrayals of this distancing of thought, on "his" part, increasingly lead to acute bitterness where "he" admits spending most of his life, as is evidenced in the following passage:

I cannot understand this reserve, and I who am now speaking turn bitterly towards those silent days, those silent years, as towards an inaccessible, unreal country, closed off from everyone, and most of all from myself, yet where I have lived during a large part of my life, without exertion, without desire, by a mystery which astonishes me. (*DS* 153)

This is in striking contrast to the omnipotent narrator of conventional fiction who attempts to control the world with "cadaverous folds" of "metallic inertness." Whilst there is the ability to be everywhere and nowhere, like God, with the neutral, the disembodied yet multi-bodied narrator pursues *difference-s* that rend the "narrative," shattering/ sharing all signs of omnipotence. Without the exchange of *difference-s*, "everything would sink into absurdity" (*GO*: 43). In effect, the reader appears to be approaching a horizon which constantly recedes, culminating in a skirting of the work's edges which doubles as the work's center. Peripheral sense impressions fail to weave together the thread bare fabric of the narrative, consequently, sequencing is impossible. For even though the narrative appears to be unfolding, it unfolds only to devour itself and therefore gets nowhere – nowhere near making narrative sense as we know it. Hence understanding and certainty are never assured, nor is this literature or philosophy in its traditional sense. What Blanchot calls "the legitimate interest" of the reader is radically challenged since the reader "cannot properly situate himself in relation to what does not even present itself as situatable" (*IC* 384). The narrative, if it still bears this name, frustrates the reading process, provoking the reader to contribute to its carnivalesque foreplay.

The contestation of comprehension averts unity of sense, and in deferring to yet other sense, averts the "reduction that dialectical movement ... makes coincide with an overcoming" (*IC* 42). Reason and comprehension, in contrast, demand surrender to a sense, ensuring *difference* is siphoned into the univocal and intelligible. But, as already indicated, Blanchot's project is to explore *other* possibilities in an effort to unleash that which does not "accomplish itself" (*IC* 43). *Death Sentence* therefore is an effort to

deny access to itself in order to facilitate “the experience of strangeness ... open a relation to the other and deliver humankind to a nomadic truth.”<sup>50</sup> The distance of the narrator’s and reader’s gaze, like N.’s, is considerably weakened “because the distant in its non-present presence is not available either close up or from a far. It cannot be the object of a gaze”(IC 44). Reading has thus become “a serious task” shaken from its mooring in the dialectical order of sense.

Still on the topic of “eating the word,” I refer to Derrida’s reference to two Biblical passages which he explains in respect to a different context. *Ezekiel* 2:8 and 3:3 which Derrida condenses to: “Then did I eat [the scroll of the law]; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.”<sup>51</sup> The other reference was raised by Harold Bloom, according to Derrida, as it appears in *Revelation* 10: 8-10, where John is asked to eat “the little book” which is sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. Both Ezekiel and John are in prophetic *vision* during these episodes. Ezekiel is sent to prophesy with the warning that it is not going to be heard no matter how he articulates his prophetic vision. John, on the other hand, extends an invitation at the end of this vision: “And the Spirit and the bride say ‘Come.’ And, let the one who hears say ‘Come.’ ... He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly’” (*Revelation* 22: 17). In *Death Sentence*, as in the *Book of Revelation*, the word is both sacred *and* dispensable – given to be eaten, and to call on the *one* who is coming. In *Death Sentence*, the narrator must eat “his” own words if he is to permit the emergence of the obscure as obscure. “He,” paradoxically, must “appropriate” the inappropriable without deploying sense whilst using the language of sacrifice, that is, he must orphan intentionality in rendering it unintentional, and herein lies the struggle of thought against itself: the word must “eat its own flesh” passionately (*DS* 153).

“Familiarity is just what has disappeared forever between” all who partake in this long day’s suffering journey into N(ight) (*DS* 153). In this groping for an end to desire, satisfaction and intentionality, the inevitable fall back into thematisation occurs as is suggested by the next excerpt. On the verge of this *other* thought, “what happened next shows how far she [N.] had slipped out of the natural order of things. As she was turning around, she bumped into the table, and it made a noise. She reacted to the noise with a frightened laugh, and fled like an arrow. Then everything becomes confused” (*DS* 158). Confusion indicates that “he” loses this struggle against thought in attempting to control her by “dragging” her into thematisation:

I think that after she cried out I grew wild. I saw her lunge towards the free air, and the instinct of the hunter seized me. I caught up with

her near the stairway, grabbed her around the waist, and brought her back, dragging her along the floor as far as the bed, where she collapsed. My fit of rage was one of the few I have had since my very angry childhood, and it was uncontrollable. I do not know where this violence came from ... I do not think this furious energy was directed at her in particular. (DS 158)

The intervention of the narrator is described as violent, predatory, and a pattern learned in childhood. Later, in a more composed state, and with determination, he proclaims: "But know this, that where I am going there is neither work, nor wisdom, nor desire, nor struggle; what I am entering, no one enters. That is the meaning of the last fight" (DS 167). *Désœuvrement*, however, has already begun, it must begin again and again, because the fact is that "as soon as the thought has arisen, it must be followed to the end" (DS 158). Death of sense is preempted by the eternal resuscitation of death sentence. It is a "fight," "because sooner or later a person [a thought] who has been asked to stay outside will come there [to mind] or prowl around nearby" (DS 157, my brackets). And in the interim, there is this sweet, joyful hope that:

what is eloquent is the passing moment and the moment that will come after it. The shadow of yesterday's world is still pleasant for people who take refuge in it, but it will fade. And the world of the future is already falling in an avalanche on the memory of the past. (DS 162)

Blanchot appears to represent narrative as a representation, and in so doing (a) shatters the delusion which transfixes us to narrative sense; (b) a staging of the narrative as the narrative itself forces us to see behind seeing and how we become complicit in the process of staging. Ultimately what we see as a result of this process are the conditions that permit vision and visibility. Indeed, the narrator tells us, *the real story* is "shut up" in "the closet" inaccessible to us and, as we discover later, is a cast of head and hands. Whose head and hands? This changes as the story exchanges hands, for the narrator announces everything to be revealed in the story on J. is being made-up progressively by those of us who enter J.'s residence that doubles as the text.

The impossibility of doing away with sense is implied, even though words are deployed, ultimately, to turn our gaze away from the sacrificial realm of communication. Moreover, ascent or descent from sense as we are accustomed to it, as well as delaying and postponing the event contemplated, is also implied by the narrator. Progressively, the reason for this lag becomes increasingly evident: common sense is dissolved and we are

deprived of supports and keys to the work,<sup>52</sup> such that, the strangeness of the work – sense deprivation – results in intense frustration as J. and N. become estranged from meaning. This means that the common meaning which makes communication communicable, becomes radically fractured, which raises the question of how this feat is accomplished, and whether “the encounter with the *other* can only take place ‘outside’ discourse,”<sup>53</sup> as Blanchot, at times, supposed. This is a crucial point. For Blanchot, the law can never be transgressed since every step forward results in a step back into the metaphysical. Yet, in this *récit*, the “outside-r” is written from inside discourse, having the effect of “continually dismantling the organism. Causing asignifying particles ... to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity.”<sup>54</sup>

The *real* story: merely a cast of head and hands created by the sculptor whose identity is signified by the X which itself signifies “the signature of a person who cannot write or sign their name.” The X also “forms the plural of many nouns” in French; additionally, X indicates “incorrectness,” and in Algebra denotes “an unknown quantity, and in Christianity is the cross that annihilates he who claimed to be Christ.”<sup>55</sup> As such, the X can supplement the head and hand of a transcendent and/ or immanent one as on/ e, indicating that the writer and reader’s contributions become on/ e but are never the same. It implies this work titled *Death Sentence* in the process of being re-worked by others, continues a *désœuvrement* (an unworking) of the work itself. The work, then, is only the “life” someone else gives it via translation, and interpretation. Sense lives therefore only in exodus, in passing or crossing over from writer to interpreter and so on interminably, so that, “the event of setting out, of beginning, is thus tied to the experience of strangeness, and placed at the very origin of speech – a speech that would not work to secure, like the concept, a dwelling place, but rather open a relation to the other and deliver humankind to a nomadic truth.”<sup>56</sup> Sense therefore must be made so that it can be sha(tte)red.

The work is not only second hand (a cast) by virtue of being x-changed from one hand to another thereby creating the nomadic tendency of its meaning. However, and in addition, the difference with, and in, Blanchot’s *Death Sentence*, is “his” struggle to maintain openness in the heart of his text. By writing distance between the sacrificial thought which kills, and thought as *open*, which Blanchot conceives as irreducible to either one sense nor another, he accedes therefore to a refusal of final meaning and as such infinitely extends the “moment of dying, where death puts impossibility into play” (*IC 72*). This process displaces truth “causing us to set out and wander from home.”<sup>57</sup>

Even if sense is nomadic, how does it “capture that prior presence” that disappears *within* every sentence of death? Blanchot believes he must wrestle against thought in order to “find it again.” Like Jacob who wrestles all night with the angel for a blessing, and is wounded in the intensity of struggle, a wound which turns into a blessing, Blanchot too experiences this dark night of the literary soul in which every sentence of death exudes “what had happened long ago ... there was someone in the room ... of a proximity people are not aware of ... That room does not breathe, there is neither shadow nor memory ... And yet, the most intense life is there ... that life transforms the life which shrinks away from it into a falsehood” (DS 177). In *The Space of Literature*, he describes this *night* as one in which:

everything has disappeared ... Here absence approaches – silence, repose, night ... What appears in the night is the night that appears ... Here the invisible is what one cannot cease to see; it is the incessant making itself seen ... [The night is seen insofar as] we dress it up as a kind of being; we enclose it, if possible, in a name, a story and a resemblance. (SL 163)

In other words, it passes as you and I. Blanchot gives it right of passage in this *récit* by holding its identity *open* even though he dresses it up and denudes it via the props of conventional fiction.

Can we therefore make any sense of the narrative at all? To an extent, since the narrative voice gives a twisted glimpse of the objective real: the stuff of conventional narrative, such as plot, theme, and character. The conventions readers have been habituated to, and are fascinated by. It is twisted because it is invariably *deconstituted*. In fact the story would be illegible but for these delicious conventional morsels. And, the understanding craves them long after their dispersal. For example, J. among other things, is a “young girl”<sup>58</sup> with a “middle class” family. Her mother, Mme. B, is a will-o’-the-wisp character, and is “reproached” by her daughter precisely because she rarely visited, and when she did, “no sooner had she arrived than she would find some excuse for going away again” (DS 136). Not surprising given the mother’s debasement/ effacement in the history of literature and psychoanalysis which the narrator is implicitly perhaps pointing to.

J.’s younger sister Louise, on the other hand, “exasperates” the narrator, not only because she evokes the thought that is killing J., but also because she is a dangerous woman, a femme fatale who traps men. Louise, the narrator divulges, “made the rounds of all the fortunetellers and tried to captivate prosperous looking men in cafes (having the waiter bring them another drink). She succeeded once or twice” (DS 138). Louise is thus

thought of as an obstacle to overcoming this clairvoyance and as such is a dangerous thought. As an embodiment of conventional thought, she bars access to the strange(r): N.

J. and Louise's father had been killed in "1916," presumably in World War I; alluding to a deliberate literary parricide, perhaps. J. has a strong will but is unable to overcome a debilitating illness. The sicker she gets, and as approach of death becomes imminent, she becomes irresistibly attractive to the narrator: "dazzlingly" youthful and strikingly beautiful in fact, but with a twist: the narrator says, "I thought her beauty came from the radiance of her eyes ... but her eyes were almost always closed, or if they opened, they opened for a brief instant," indicating his ability "to reduce her to insignificance" through the power of his gaze (*DS* 141 & *IC* 61). The narrator is much more respectful of N.'s gaze, he admits:

I still dreaded that look. A look is very different from what one might think, it has neither light nor expression nor force nor movement, it is silent, but from the heart of the strangeness its silence crosses worlds and the person who hears that silence is changed. (*DS* 178)

Not unlike the "pitiful" Deleuzean face, and the audible face of Levinas.

Fascination fades to misapprehension when what is fictitiously real is not "reduced to a constellation of individual lives, of *subjectivities* – a multiple and personalized 'he,' an ego manifest under the cloak of a 'he' that is apparent" (*IC* 381). In its place, in the presence of inter-subjectivity, J. dies in the absence of the narrator and the reader's attention, lives on in "his" and our presence by means of complicity, as is suggested here when the narrator says: "Mysterious as were the consequences of those events, it seems to me that my deliberate absence, which allowed them to happen, is even more mysterious," pointing explicitly to "his" hand in, or rather authorship of, her illness (*DS* 138). Yet, she is absolutely terrified of the night, which perhaps threatens to obliterate her forever. Her position is precarious either way, if he does not kill her, she dies, and if he does not think her into existence she is exterminated.

In the long wait for the narrator, the idea of J. falls into "nothingness" (*DS* 148). Her inescapable and incurable illness is prolonged as long as the narrator toys with the idea of writing about "the events" of that "illness." Coincidentally, J.'s resurrection "took place at dawn, almost with the sunrise," at daybreak, revealing her life is created in the image of *Jour*, by man (*DS* 145). This is confirmed by the following passage in which even in J.'s sleep he is able to access her, but he is unable to access her during the night which is associated with the neutral: "Her sleep had a strange way of dissolving in an instant, so that behind it she seemed to remain awake and to

be grappling with serious matters there, in which I played perhaps a terrifying role" (*DS* 148). However, the previous night, in his absence, "she seemed to approach a truth compared to which mine lost all interest ... She saw what she called 'a perfect rose'" (*DS* 148). These are not the literary flowers he had brought her the previous day which she disliked and "which were already going to seed" when she received them (*DS* 147). Therefore, this is not "the rose is a rose is a rose" of representation: the flower penned by words, but presumably the "perfect" and therefore inconceivable rose. An allusion to the biblical *rose*, which is itself mysterious, is implicit here. Derrida describes it as "not the resurrection but the 'rose' of resurrection in *L'arrêt de mort*."<sup>59</sup>

J. is, remarks Critchley, a "figure of speech by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as acting or speaking."<sup>60</sup> Her terminal condition speaks as her, but is a condition imposed by writer and reader as they resuscitate her into a cast, "a face for that which has no face and our strange relation to death."<sup>61</sup> Death is also a metaphor of the limit, the threshold of the law, and "our strange relation to death," Critchley points out, is that death is a frontier infinitely crossable and therefore impossible to cross according to Blanchot. However, there must be something inside and/ or outside the law that drives the law into this terminal state from which it is renewed consistently. For example, J. who is cast as death, deliberately keeps at the edge of consciousness, as a means to save a self that is not only condemned to death but also desires this death, thereby alluding to the tension that comes into effect in the thought that would abandon thought itself.

The oxymoronic demand is that J. wants to be and not be. Yet, the "thought that came back to me ['him'] later and in the end won out" was the thought that "scattered like sand" J.'s pulse (*DS* 149). In other words, her death is impossible as long as his/ our thought gives her literary existence. Here, the impossibility of terminating that which language gives "life" to is sentenced to an endless dying to highlight the very process of the impossibility of transcending the limit. End is obliterated as Blanchot claims, yet it is obliteration that brings to sense something other than our senses of it. In time, death is endless yet arrested by recourse to displacement into a time that is endless. Not the end of time but the time that ends time in "absence and neutrality" as is suggested here:

The present is a suffering in the abyss of the present, indefinitely hollowed out and in this hollowing indefinitely distended, radically alien to the possibility that one might be present to it through the mastery of presence. What has happened? Suffering has simply lost its hold on time, and has made us lose time. Would we then be freed

in this state from any temporal perspective and redeemed, saved from time as it passes? Not at all: we are delivered over to another time – to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse ... [N]ot that pure immobile instant, the spark of the mystics, but an unstable perpetuity in which we are arrested and incapable of permanence, a time neither abiding or granting the simplicity of a dwelling place. (*IC* 44)

The difference between Agamben and Blanchot is Blanchot's belief that this time of ends "cannot redeem us." Yet, the laws of metaphysics are ending in renewal, such that, redemption is *within* and breaks (through) the law.

The thought of the other as a writing of suffering, as suffering in writing, that thought becomes other, *other* than thought, so the reader survives to experience J.'s death, because it is her death that enables the cross-over to the ethereal N(eutral). Just after her death, the last sentence of part one announces: "what is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it" (*DS* 151). What is extraordinary is:

Behind the thought of the murder of 'her,' we glimpse the 'thought' of the *il y a*: "the opening of essence or the affirmation of being prior to (or beyond) negation ... which both enables and pre-empts the possibility of negation and language as such ... the site of relation (or non-relation) with the other."<sup>62</sup>

What is implied here is that "Names put things into our possession ... but it annihilates and suppresses ... the particularity of things, their status as uniquely real things, or as *existants*."<sup>63</sup> In (un)marked contrast, N. "was someone she herself did not know" (*DS* 160). The narrator confides, "by getting involved with N(atalie) I was hardly getting involved with anyone ... it is the most serious thing I can say about a person" (*DS* 167). Repeating this sentiment several times: "I never knew who she was" (*DS* 159); "I did not know her" (*DS* 159); "Do I notice her at all?" (*DS* 165). Not only can nothing be said, or understood, about her as long as she is *de*-scribed in these terms, she cannot be seen either. The object is to "crush glass into our eyes" in order to turn the gaze away so as to retain N's alterity as unobjectifiable.

How do we then understand the neutral? Blanchot maintains there is nothing to be understood by neutral; it is not indifference nor homogeneity or interchangeability as commonly understood. The neutral is constituted by language but is not a grammatical gender. In the *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot gives the following example of the neutral:

The one who does not enter into what he says is neutral; just as speech can be held to be neutral when it pronounces without taking into account either itself or the one who pronounces it, as though in speaking, it did not speak but allowed that which cannot be said to speak in what there is to say ... [it is] the meaning that comes to be glimpsed without ever either presenting itself or disappearing ... the neutral is that which carries difference even to the point of indifference ... an unidentifiable surplus. (*IC* 303)

In the narrative, the neutral is described as N. in the following manner: "By approaching her, by talking to her, I was disobeying the law; by touching her, I could have killed her ... through the workings of a profound justice the greatest adverse forces console us and upraise us, at the very moment they are tearing us apart" (*DS* 167). N., however, was prone to forgetting. Not only is s-he "thoughtless," "she was extremely shy, though capable of unreasonable behavior" (*DS* 159). Moreover, she had "weak vision, vision which was even abnormal ... at night, under artificial light, she could hardly see at all" (*DS* 172). "She was someone she herself did not know" and, "she remained convinced that I never knew who she was, and yet treated her not as a stranger but like someone who is all too familiar" (*DS* 160 & 159). Affirming later, "I do not know what her character is, I do not know if she has one" (*DS* 166). And, "she was less than all the others, that was her peculiar quality, and this quality of being less" (*DS* 169). Here, apart from a description of the neutral, s-he doubles as Eurydice withdrawing without loss. Though she consistently gets lost because of an incurably bad memory she does not forget everything for this would include the very fact of forgetting.

N. is sketched in sharp contrast to other female characters, Louise for example, to whom speaking, telephoning and writing "is a big production." As the full bodied thought, Louise is an existence full of myth that can kill. "Louise did not have much presence of mind, or much heart" (*DS* 143). As such, she appears as a woman penetrated and dominated by masculine discursivity as is implied here: "she lived off the kindness of gentlemen" (*DS* 143). Her words are fatal as is conveyed in her entreaty via the telephone to "come, please come, J. is dying" which pre-empted J.'s pulse to "scatter like sand" (*DS* 143). The narrator keeps his distance from her and is "appalled" when she talks to him directly, for she is, for all thoughts and purposes, a "go-between," a mediation of use and exchange value: thought commodified. "Louise looked like J. when J. was alive," he tells us, to point to her as a creature of the day who prowls the night trapping men in her fictive web: "she was often absent, and might or might not return home at night" (*DS* 135). Louise is represented as the castrated female, an Electra

who magnifies paternal authority in her dependence on them. In particular the narrator's presence to kill (revive) her sister but she also defers to his authority and approval even to have J. embalmed.

N. asks the narrator, "Do you know other women? Yes of course," he answers but later adds, "infidelity's only merit is it keeps the story in reserve," in the closet as it were (*DS* 169). Unlike N. who is no-one, these 'other' women such as Louise, C(olette) and S(imone) are thoughts that "keep the story in reserve, as it prepares a feeling which will burst into view when it has lost all its rights" (*DS* 169). They are, therefore, conceptual props employed to flesh out, to incubate, the one who is coming. C(olette) who appears in the second fragment of the *récit* is "pure make-believe": the stuff of fiction (*DS* 154). She intervenes and interferes with "that solitude turned to speech" the narrator so desperately desires to avert. She is the thought which recites to him "this knowledge so incredibly old ... croaking a kind of message that was always the same," to which he concludes, "there is a time for learning ... time for understanding, and a time for forgetting," forgetting C(olette) (*DS* 155). Until in the metro – a cavernous dark hole – where he laments that, had someone else not reminded him of her, she would have remained "a kind of immense, impersonal, though animate hole, a sort of living gap, which she emerged from with difficulty" (*DS* 156). C(olette) collapses into a literary vagina dentata who devours the narrator's access to the night and the time of forgetting as is suggested by the following sentences: "it was clear she was making a play for me" and, "she was always wanting to come into my room and I did not like that" (*DS* 154 & 155). Much to his annoyance, one night he inadvertently finds himself in her room. Generally, he finds her "tiresome," and he is repulsed by her "cold respectability," which has the effect of driving him from her presence. However, he says, "she taught me something that I would not perhaps have discovered until much later if it had not been for her": the importance of forgetting, forgetting the thought that is C(olette) (*DS* 155).

The narrator is somewhat more excited by the diminishing thought that is S(imone). A figure seemingly suspended between day and night, as a prelude to the *vien*. S. lives in a "single room divided in two by a large curtain, with one side for the day, the other for night" (*DS* 160). S-he is referred to as "the sadness on the other side of the wall" to which he is initially indifferent but which later overwhelms him when he realizes that her grief communicates a despair that cannot be communicated since it "changes the face it borrows into a mask" (*DS* 164 & 165).

After S(imone) had disappeared for years, he sees her again "through a store window ... behind a pane of glass" (*DS* 161). Since she still appears as the thought that is vitrified, what would give him most pleasure is

“to break the glass” in order to perhaps access the “it” behind the glass/mask that is S(imone): N(atalie) (*DS* 161). Natalie too, at the theatre, “was very near and infinitely separated from me, as if it were behind a window” (*DS* 172). The glass appears to seal that “prior presence,” prior to language which is transparent. It is possible that he sees N. as the “embodiment of his thought ... just as the child in ‘Une scène primitive’ sees that scene through a window that seems suddenly to shatter.”<sup>64</sup> This flickering realization comes through thought by means of thought itself, and the transparent barrier that he wants to shatter resonates with *glas*: the death knell.

On the subject of *glas*, he presupposes the daughter of his landlady, “looks through the window ... looking into my room when I am not at home” (*DS* 168). His suspicion is confirmed when he discovers her in the act. He promptly “slapped her and took her to her mother” (*DS* 168). Why so furious, and what does she see? Supposing that this is an allusion to the child in “Une scène primitive” (*WD* 72) she is evidently fascinated by something in the narrator’s absence, that is, in this room which is the space of literature/ philosophy while he is outside it. In contrast to the child in ‘Une scène primitive,’ the glass is not shattered, the narrator is. The girl is not overcome by the ravishing joy of the child of the primal scene, but a primitive seeing: the shattering of that which gives sight: “the condition of visibility.”<sup>65</sup> the narrator.

The absent centre, the *open*, is other than J(*our*) and N(*uit*) which enables the displacement from one to the other, and the passing of one with the other, without ever manifesting except as on/ e. Speech is born out of *difference-s*, out of that “*difference* (that) writes itself” *within* differences. This can be characterized as a relation without relation that could be designated *passion* because it refuses to ‘disengage’ with the impassionate world created by sentences of death. The task then is not to pursue what preceded language, even if this were possible, but to ask: how is it that, despite the hecatomb of language, meaning is rendered unstable and this instability instigates renewal of meaning itself? In this case, the “way out” of death sentence always already arises from within this language of devastation.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-space of Literature”, in ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing* (Lon-

- don: Routledge, 1996), p. 54.
- <sup>2</sup> “The language of literature is language that has become entirely image ... a language that has become the image of language ... which appears when a thing is absorbed by its image,” Christopher Fynsk explains in “Crossing the threshold: on ‘Literature and the right to death’”, in *The Demand of Writing*, p. 81.
- <sup>3</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 55.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Hillis Miller formulates this idea as a question in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 207.
- <sup>5</sup> Who is Autrui? “The unknown, the stranger, foreign to all that is either visible or non-visible, and who comes to ‘me’ as speech when speaking is no longer seeing” (IC 213).
- <sup>6</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 66.
- <sup>7</sup> Of love, Blanchot writes: “only the day can feel passion for the night ... It is only in the day that the other *night* is revealed as love that breaks all ties, that wants the end and union with the abyss. But the night is what one never joins; it is repetition that will never leave off, satiety that has nothing, the sparkle of something baseless and without depth” (SL 168).
- <sup>8</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 86.
- <sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva cited by Graham Ward, “Kenosis, Discourse and Resurrection”, in eds. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash, Graham Ward, *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 61.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On • Border Lines”, trans. James Hubert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 91.
- <sup>11</sup> Simon Critchley, “Il y a – Holding Levinas’s Hand to Blanchot’s Fire”, in *The Demand Of Writing*, p. 116.
- <sup>12</sup> Critchley, “Il y a”, p. 116.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Newman, “The Trace of Trauma: Blindness, Testimony and the Gaze in Blanchot and Derrida”, in *The Demand Of Writing*, p. 160.
- <sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p. 14.
- <sup>15</sup> The day which represents the dialectical economy, wants only to banish the night, the neutral, however, paradoxically “day makes the night ... Night speaks only of day, day’s reserve and its profundity” (SL 168).
- <sup>16</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 74.
- <sup>17</sup> In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot describes the ‘night’ in more detail. He writes, “in the night, everything has disappeared. This is the first night. Here absence approaches – silence, repose night ... What appears in the night is the night that appears ... Here the invisible is what one cannot cease to see; it is the incessant making itself seen.” Adding later, the night is seen insofar as “we dress it up as a kind of being; we enclose it, if possible, in a name, a story and a resemblance” (SL 163).
- <sup>18</sup> Leslie Hill, “Introduction”, *The Demand of Writing*, p. 3.

- <sup>19</sup> To Blanchot, “the unknown is neuter,” and “supposes another relation,” one which will respect its inability to be “rendered present” (*IC* 298 & 300). The neuter “is not a third gender opposed to the other two and constituting for reason a determined class of existents or beings. The neuter is that which cannot be assigned to any genre whatsoever: the non-general ... as well as the non-particular. It refuses to belong to the category of subject as much as it does to that of object” (*IC* 299). In pursuing N, the narrator of *DS* turns “into a wanderer in search of nothing” (*DS* 176).
- <sup>20</sup> Derrida, “Living On”, p. 155.
- <sup>21</sup> Blanchot is describing the work of René Char which is applicable to his own.
- <sup>22</sup> This is a reworking of *difference in repetition* as formulated by Gilles Deleuze. *Difference* inhabits each and every repetition working undercover of signification. Differences merely repeat, carry and manifest *difference* as diversity. As such, it has been reformulated as *difference-s* to indicate one operates *within* the other as on/e.
- <sup>23</sup> Hope is endlessly non-depletable. The fulfillment of one hope merely passes to another infinitely. As such, hope is the meeting point between possibility and impossibility which never coalesces.
- <sup>24</sup> Roger Laporte, “Maurice Blanchot Today”, *The Demand of Writing*, p. 28.
- <sup>25</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 86.
- <sup>26</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 66.
- <sup>27</sup> Blanchot cited by Christopher Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 76.
- <sup>28</sup> Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 193.
- <sup>29</sup> Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 186.
- <sup>30</sup> Hill, “Introduction”, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 55.
- <sup>32</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 56.
- <sup>33</sup> Marie-Clair Ropars-Wuilleumier, “On Unworking”, in *The Demand of Writing*, p. 141.
- <sup>34</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 78.
- <sup>35</sup> Miller formulates this idea as a question in *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 207.
- <sup>36</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 83.
- <sup>37</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 54.
- <sup>38</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) p.32.
- <sup>39</sup> Day wants only to banish the night, to appropriate it, instead paradoxically “day makes the night ... Night speaks only of day; it is the presentiment of day, day’s reserve and its profundity” (*SL* 167).
- <sup>40</sup> Hill, “Introduction”, p. 11.
- <sup>41</sup> Derrida, “Living On”, p. 156.
- <sup>42</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 54.

- <sup>43</sup> A key is, among other things, “a thing that gives or precludes the opportunity for, or access to, something.” It is what is required to resolve a problem, crack a code. A key assists in understanding the symbols on a map or mathematical table and is “a literal translation of a book written in a foreign language.” Keys link one thing with another conceptually. In *Death Sentence*, the missing key is significant and significantly stolen from the “story.” Definitions of the term “key” are taken from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Della Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
- <sup>44</sup> Hill, “Introduction”, p. 13.
- <sup>45</sup> Hill, “Introduction”, p. 13.
- <sup>46</sup> Ann Smock, “Conversation”, in *The Demand of Writing*, p. 135.
- <sup>47</sup> Smock, “Conversation”, p. 135.
- <sup>48</sup> Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 201.
- <sup>49</sup> Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 86.
- <sup>50</sup> Susan Hanson, “Foreword: This Double Exigency: Naming the Possible, Responding to the Impossible” (*IC xxxi*).
- <sup>51</sup> Derrida, “Living On”, in the margin of p. 129.
- <sup>52</sup> Blanchot as such deliberately conceals the key to his work, and tells us that he has; thereby creating a fascination with the obscure. In the process, the very heart of *Death Sentence* is *open*: since it does not have one sense but facilitates a sharing in/ of the obscure.
- <sup>53</sup> Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxvi.
- <sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 4.
- <sup>55</sup> *Oxford Concise English Dictionary* 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
- <sup>56</sup> Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxxi.
- <sup>57</sup> Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxxii.
- <sup>58</sup> This is not clear at all; she is, however, referred to as more “youthful” and beautiful the nearer she gets to death, revealing the “narrator’s” impatience to do away with her.
- <sup>59</sup> For a discussion on the “rose” see Derrida, “Living On”, pp. 149-64 border lines.
- <sup>60</sup> Critchley, “Il y a”, p. 109
- <sup>61</sup> Critchley, “Il y a”, p. 109.
- <sup>62</sup> Hill, “Introduction”, p. 14.
- <sup>63</sup> Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox”, p. 31.
- <sup>64</sup> Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 202.
- <sup>65</sup> Newman, “The Trace of Trauma”, p. 167.