

**Woman as the Face of God:
Blanchot, Lacan and the Feminine Impossible¹**

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In his work Blanchot makes reference to several stories or récits by two of his contemporaries, Marguerite Duras and Georges Bataille. I am thinking here particularly of Duras' *The Malady of Death*, and Bataille's *Madame Edwarda*. In the phantasmagoric worlds of these stories strange encounters occur between a man and a woman. We are told little about these people by way of personal attributes, but we do know that each of the women is beautiful. It is this feminine beauty which seems to give the women a status of being in some way separate or outside.

Blanchot subjects these stories to a reading which is informed by Bataille's own theoretical work. He sees this feminine separateness functioning for the man as the absolute Other, God. As such the Other has a double aspect, one which may mark a crossroad, a moment of truth. This is what Bataille calls the "interior experience," and which Blanchot renames in *The Infinite Conversation* as a "limit-experience."

One direction from this crossroad leads to taking the Other as the place of unity, wholeness. Here we may, as Blanchot puts it in his essay on the limit experience, be tempted "by the repose offered by Unity" (IC 206). Here we give ourselves to the Other as the site of complete knowledge and of the supreme Good.

But there is another direction. Here the Other is negativity. As such it

holds for each one of us, whether man or woman, that which in exceeding us dis-confirms us in our being. This excess thus makes a demand of us, but in pursuit of a good which is without utility, a good which “escapes all employ and all end” (*IC* 207). This is an impossible demand.

Blanchot’s recognition of the excess of the Other as constituting a demand which is at once inescapable and impossible is redolent of the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In this paper I will explore these connections a little further. For this purpose I will draw principally on Blanchot’s essay on Duras’ *The Malady of Death*, which was re-published as part of *The Unavowable Community*,² and on Lacan’s seminar from the 1970s entitled *Encore*.³ I will however begin with Freud.

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Freud was driven by his clinical experience to discern in life a fundamental dualism. In his later work this took the form of the *struggle* between love (Eros) and death (Thanatos). It was in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Freud first formulated the dualism in these terms. This was now the fundamental organising principle of all the drives and indeed of all life.

Like all drives, Eros and Thanatos have a repetitive or conservative aspect. As he puts it in *Civilization and its Discontents*, one of them, Eros, or the life-drive, seeks to preserve “living substance,” thereby leading to the creation of ever larger units. The contrary one, Thanatos, or the death-drive, seeks “to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state. That is to say, as well as Eros there [is] a drive of death.”⁴

Freud encountered a difficulty however: how to locate sexuality within this schema. As a drive in its own right, sexuality can be located on the side of Eros, love. But what is it that is repeated or preserved in sex? In other words, asks Freud, what lies at the origin of sexuality?

Here Freud confesses that he is at a loss: “science has so little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a *darkness* into which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated.”⁵ Freud resorts to myth, the one put into the mouth of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. Here sexuality, that is, human sexuality, is attributed to the cutting in two of an original, whole being; what is repeated in sex is the restoration of that original unity.

Lacan’s response to the enigma of sexuality is to re-cast sexual difference in symbolic terms. *Man* and *woman* are no more, and no less, than signifiers.⁶ Sexual difference is carried by the function of the *phallus*, that form of the signifier which, by its indication of no more than absence, difference, installs both the very possibility of signification and also the barring of

the signifier from any fixed meaning.

Into the apparent complementarity of the relations between the sexes suggested by Plato's myth is now introduced an asymmetry, the sexual asymmetry of desire. This asymmetry turns on a being and a having in relation to this function of the oneness of the phallus: for the woman, to be the one, the phallus; for the man, to have it. But since the phallus does not exist, being nothing other than the designator of difference, these relations of being and having re-introduce appearance, semblance, into sexual difference through an idealisation. As a result desire is reduced to demand, thus returning us to a search for our sexual complement:

This is brought about by the intervention of a seeming [*paraître*] that replaces the having in order to protect it, in one case [that of the man], and to mask the lack thereof, in the other [the woman], and whose effect is to completely project the ideal or typical manifestations of each of the sexes' behavior, including the act of copulation itself, into the realm of comedy. These ideals are strengthened by the demand they are capable of satisfying, which is always a demand for love, with the reduction of desire to demand as its complement.⁷

Furthermore, and in common with other signifiers, the meaning-effects of *man* and *woman* can only arise within a discourse, inasmuch as it is discourse which provides a link between those who speak. It is in discourse, and most strikingly in analytic discourse, that signifiers have a place function: that is, they designate subject position. This symbolic place function of discourse is what Lacan calls its *writing* effect.

In this way Lacan re-works the Freudian *grammar* of sexual difference through a *logical* formalisation. He gives the writing effects of analytic discourse a representation by means of what he calls *mathèmes*. These are formulae based on those of mathematical logic in which the letters comprising the formulae stand for sets or assemblages but do not in themselves have any meaning.

To put Lacan's *mathèmes* of sexual difference into words, into grammar, is necessarily to cloud the rigour of the logic which they attempt to write. But perhaps we can say whereas *man* as signifier is inscribed wholly within the boundaries of the phallic function of discourse, *woman* is *not-whole*; there is something of the feminine which is not so inscribed, not so limited.

This leads Lacan to propose the following paradox as a description of the approach of a man to a woman: "A man seeks out a woman qua – and this will strike you as odd – that which can only be situated through dis-

course, since, if what I claim is true – namely, that woman is not-whole – there is always something in her that escapes discourse.”⁸

In the approach of a man to a woman then there is always a failure: something does not work out. And unlike the woman, the enjoyment of the man, his *jouissance*, is wholly phallic. As Lacan puts it, “Phallic *jouissance* is the obstacle owing to which man does not come, I would say, to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the organ.”⁹

Lacan illustrates this not-working-out with a recasting of Zeno’s paradox, replacing the tortoise as the object of Achilles’ pursuit with the female figure of Briseis, Achilles’ war prize in the *Iliad*. Subject as it is to the phallic cutting up of discourse, Achilles’ pursuit never manages to fully arrive to enjoying that not-whole which takes the form of the body of Briseis: “When Achilles has taken his step, gotten it on with Briseis, the latter, like the tortoise, has advanced a bit, because she is ‘not-whole,’ not wholly his. Some remains. And Achilles must take a second step, and so on and so forth.”¹⁰

At the level of the pursuit of enjoyment there is a missing, a failure of mutuality between man and woman; there is a failure, indeed, of oneness. Sexual enjoyment always involves a detour through the gap of sexual difference which the signifier installs: it involves an alienation in negativity, otherness.

There is a disparity introduced here which takes the form of a polarity. *On one side*, for the man, Achilles, in attempting to possess the body of Briseis, he makes of her a unity, a One, a phallus to have and to hold. His approach is thus necessarily part-wise, step-by-step. Because there is something not-whole, something radically other, in her subject-position, he can never arrive to enjoying her except at infinity.

On the other side, the alienation in otherness of sexual difference which this encounter of the man with the woman demonstrates also implicates the position of the woman herself. As Lacan puts it in “Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality,” in her irreducible otherness to him the man functions as “relay,” installing her as Other not only for him but for herself: “Man here acts as the relay whereby the woman becomes this Other for herself as she is the Other for him”;¹¹ “Everything gets ascribed to the woman in so far as she represents, in the phallogentric dialectic, the absolute Other.”¹²

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With this excursus on Freud and Lacan and sexual difference in mind, let us return to Blanchot, and in particular to his commentary on Marguerite Duras’ *The Malady of Death*.¹³

In this story it is the male character who approaches the woman in an attempt to *know* her through the possession of her body. As Blanchot suggests, this is a man who, having ignored the feminine, now seeks to *know the other* through the female body. He is

always in action in front of this body he looks upon in unhappiness, because he cannot see all of it, its impossible totality, all its aspects; though she be a “closed form” only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole, a sum that would integrate the infinite and thus reduce it to an integrable finite. (*UC* 39)

In his quest the woman becomes for the man a limitless, God-like Being through being for him an indivisible totality or whole. As such she is a being who is in the place of knowledge but is always just beyond anything which can be known, that is, in terms of what can be said of her. In approaching her as that which can be situated in discourse, the man is in the same position as Achilles with Briseis: she escapes his interrogation, the summons which would make of her a sum. It is thus that the woman comes to present herself to the man in Duras’ story as impossible, an impossible object of love.

Now this presentifying of the being-of-the-woman-for-the-man as a body bears a relation to what Lacan discerns as that part of the woman which is not-whole. In the “Guiding Remarks” he explicitly draws our attention to this part, one which has hitherto been overlooked:

What is unquestionably involved here is a conceptual foregrounding of the sexuality of the woman, which brings to our attention a remarkable oversight. This is an oversight which bears directly on the issue which I would like to draw your attention to here, namely, that of the feminine part, if the term has any meaning, of what is played out in the genital relation, in which the act of coitus occupies, to put it no higher, a limited and local place.¹⁴

We have here again a double allusion. Firstly, there is that “part” which is not there, namely, the phallus, the “term” which installs the possibility of meaning, and which is also “played out in the genital relation.” But the reference to “genital” immediately takes us also to that feminine part which is also (for the most part) unseen and which also has a part to play: the woman’s sexual organ, that is, her cunt, to give it its uncompromising Anglo-Saxon name.

Thus in the Duras’ story the man “cannot see all of [the woman’s body], its impossible totality, all its aspects; though she be a ‘closed form’

only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole." He demands to know the other through this female body, but in pursuing her in these terms his gaze phallicizes her; she presents as "closed form," a semblance of the phallus; she is phallus only in as much as some unseen part of her escapes being so formed.

And then towards the end of the story, even though it seems that he has already had sex with her many times, the woman "*opens*" to his gaze. What does he see? He sees her cunt, no doubt, but also, it seems, a hollow. Is this the other which he is searching for? This hollow of the woman cannot be seen; this is an unnameable non-presence to which the narrator gives the name "dark night": "She says: Look. She parts her legs, and in the hollow between you see the dark night at last. You say: It was there, the dark night. It's there."¹⁵

By his approach the man acts as relay in the way that Lacan suggests. He foments her enjoyment in the display of her actual sex through the escape of some part of her. At this moment she becomes for him, and in turn for herself, something radically ungraspable and strange; she becomes the absolute Other, a non-integrable infinite.

Again, it is when Madame Edwarda opens her cunt to the gaze of the man in Bataille's story of the same name that she too becomes the absolute Other, God. In each encounter in this story the male narrator draws our attention, in explicit and stark detail, to the part of the woman. As well, there is the woman's insistent injunction for the man to look. Here is the description of the first of these encounters:

"I guess you want to see my old rag and ruin," she said. ... She was seated, she held one leg stuck up in the air; to open her crack yet wider she used her fingers to draw the folds of skin apart. And so Madame Edwarda's "old rag and ruin" loomed at me, hairy and pink, just as full of life as some loathsome squid. "Why," I stammered in a subdued tone, "why are you doing that?" "You can see for yourself," she said; "I'm God." "I'm going crazy—" "Oh, no, you don't, you've got to see, look..."¹⁶

What Blanchot discerns as significant in these encounters is that in the moment of this opening to the man the woman reveals something radically concealed, veiled. With the complicity of the man's carnal, searching gaze, she abandons herself to what escapes that gaze and in this enjoyment she presents him with a non-assimilable singularity, a veritable break in the world:

It is not because Madame Edwarda is a young woman exhibiting herself in a manner that is, all in all, rather banal, by exhibiting her

sex as the most sacred part of her being, that she breaks with our world or with any world; it is rather because that exhibition conceals her by handing her over to an ungraspable singularity (one can literally no longer grasp her) and that thus, with the complicity of the man who loves her momentarily with an infinite passion, she *abandons herself* – it is in this that she symbolizes sacrifice – to the first comer (the chauffeur) who does not know, who will never know that he is in touch with what is most divine or with the absolute that rejects any assimilation. (UC 47-8)

This is not a break to which one can arrive, Achilles-like, through wilful persistence. As the woman in the Duras story says just before she opens her legs to the gaze of the man, such a break happens through a lapse in the logic of the universe. And this logic, we can add, is Achilles' logic; it is phallic: "You ask how loving can happen – the emotion of loving. She answers: *Perhaps through a lapse in the logic of the universe*. She says: Through a mistake for instance. She says: Never through an act of will."¹⁷

Thus for the woman, for her part, in this enjoyment in displaying herself to the man as not-whole she abandons herself to a Oneness which is beyond the domain of knowledge which the phallic function circumscribes. The gaze of the man functions as necessary relay for this something of the being of the woman which escapes in her enjoyment. It is, nevertheless, an enjoyment specific to her; it is in excess of the phallic.

It is significant that it is precisely when the man *inadvertently* gives the woman orgasmic pleasure that he might in some way also partake of her excess enjoyment: "Perhaps you get from her a pleasure you've never known before."¹⁸ At this point even the omniscient figure who both narrates the story and directs the male character finds that he/she too lacks a knowledge which can be articulated.

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By way of illustration of this excess *jouissance* on the side of the woman, Lacan refers to the love mysticism of Hadewijch, a thirteenth century Flemish Beguine or unofficial nun. In one of her visions Hadewijch testifies to being-one with God in an orgasmic-like ecstasy so intense that it threatens life: "My heart and veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me that if I did not content my Beloved, and my Beloved did not fulfil my desire, dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die."¹⁹ She goes on to describe how at one point God comes to her in emphatically carnal form as a man. Her response is correspondingly

carnal:

With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful and beautiful, and with a glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another. Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported. Also then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.²⁰

This vision then speaks of a sexual encounter between a man and woman in which Hadewijch *appears* to be in the position of the woman. But *logically* the description is from a position reminiscent of that of the man in the Duras and Bataille stories. God comes to her in the *appearance*, “the form and clothing of a Man,” but this is only by way of being an *abandonment*, a *giving* of himself to her. Like the men in the stories, it is *she* who encounters here the Other, God, “the ultimate of what can be seen” as Blanchot puts it (*UC* 52). Hadewijch is in the same position as the man in the Duras story who partakes in the encounter with the sight, the appearance, of Woman/God, in a “pleasure one cannot name” (*UC* 52).

This is a *jouissance* which is barred to the subject who speaks. To put it another way, in encountering, in partaking of, this excess enjoyment on the side of the Woman the subject, the phallic subject, fades, disappears, *dies*. And it does so just at the moment of oneness with the Other when It too fades and “comes to nought.”

Hadewijch insists however that this is not a repose in Unity. If in such an encounter with God as Love she dies, God nevertheless remains as wholly Other. As one commentator argues:

In this mystical being-one as Hadewijch experiences it, God lets himself be known not only as inexhaustible and self-sufficient, but also as other, as the wholly Other... [This distinction] makes a permanent part of the most absolute love relationship. ... It is exactly in the being-one that Hadewijch learns a demand that relates to her as

a human being. Love, who is willing to be possessed unbraked, is at the same time the Other, “*who tells her what is wanting to her.*” The same woman who can sink in abysmal fruition is immediately placed against herself: the human being truly dies in God, but not in order, as human being, to come to its end. One who experiences the blessed “feeling that surpasses all things” is sent back into the world with impressionable senses and sharpened spiritual powers.²¹

Here we have that same polarity to which I have already referred. If in approaching God, that Oneness, Hadewijch dies as a phallic subject, that is, as a human being, it is only to encounter what is lacking to her as a subject. To approach God as the Beloved is necessarily to approach the Other. But this Other is not only the site of a wished-for Oneness, Being, it is also the site of that otherness which is the symbolic. It is this double aspect of the Other, with the Beloved in the form of a woman, which Blanchot reads as that which the man encounters in the Duras story.

To have an intimate encounter with this Other in its radical otherness is to encounter an excess, an excess which is at once intimate and extrinsic to one’s being as this particular human, speaking subject. This is to encounter one’s *non-being* or, to use one of Lacan’s formulae, one’s subjective destitution.

This encounter is thus an impasse; this is an impossible love. But in this *impasse*, human being, although it “dies,” might point to a *pass*, designating that which is beyond. In this impasse which designates a pass it is from the *writing* produced in the encounter that one is *interrogated* as to one’s being-in-the-world.

Blanchot himself draws on Levinas to articulate how this impasse might be productive of an ethics of acting in the world:

An ethics is only possible when – with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat – an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that *the Other always puts it into question* to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself. (UC 43)

Because she is *not-whole*, the woman in the Duras story makes present to the man the “pure,” meaningless signifier in its writing function: the function of designating place in a discourse. This is the signifier in its phallic function of inscribing the non-existence of that which would ensure Being, that is, the sexual relation. Or, again as Blanchot puts it, the woman stands for “that disappearance which inscribes itself in writing” (UC 46).

In this guise the woman does indeed function as that unseen God who, as Lacan says, is “the third party in this business of human love”,²² she is indeed the face of God, that semblance. And it is I think in standing for the in-existence of *The* woman, that Being who would give the man Unity, that she addresses what Blanchot calls a “silent injunction” to the community of lovers.

In the moment in *The Malady of Death* when it seems that the man might partake of the enjoyment he has inadvertently given the woman, but when the narrator for once confesses ignorance, the not-knowing pleasure of the woman seems in danger of overwhelming the narrative itself. It is at this point that the story addresses precisely such an injunction to us as readers. In this moment the malady of death does indeed foment itself “in her who is present and who decrees it by her very existence” (*UC* 39).

Inasmuch as everything in that community of lovers, that is, our human community, the one constituted by the non-sexual-relation, is not working out, discourse functions: we do not stop talking about it. And to the extent that this community is not-working-out the words of this *désœuvrement*, this *un-working*, to use Blanchot’s term, re-instate that community as a never-to-be-completed project of writing. This is the unavowable community: it is one whose very existence is implicated in its never being able to speak the whole truth about itself.²³

This is the community which the man in the Duras story himself finally encounters directly with the absence of the woman. After the woman’s sudden disappearance he attempts at first to dismiss the experience either by laughing it off as an invention, a fantasy or by telling it as a story, “as if it were possible to do so.” But then the woman’s absence begins to insist on “the impossibility of reaching her through the difference that separates [them].” At this point he gives up looking for her, but in so doing is enabled to “live that love in the only way possible”: “losing it before it happened.”²⁴ He takes up life as the inescapable demand that this impossible love addresses to him, thereby instituting that always already present place of loss, his intimate lack-in-being.

This is what Blanchot alludes to, I think, in the closing paragraphs of *The Unavowable Community* when he invokes Wittgenstein’s proposition, “Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent” (*UC* 56). This needs to be heard now not as an injunction to silence in the face of the unspeakable but as the silent injunction of the feminine unspeakable. That very impossibility requires us to speak. As Blanchot puts it, “one has to talk in order to remain silent.” And he asks, “With what words?” This is the paradoxical question that both Lacan, in his reading of Freud, and Blanchot, in his reading of Duras, address to each one of us as an incitement to the

writing of the unavowable community.²⁵

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NOTES

- ¹ I have been greatly assisted in writing this paper by reading Jean Allouch's "Homage paid by Lacan to the Castrating Woman", in *Papers of the Freudian School of Melbourne*, Vol. 20 (Melbourne: The Freudian School of Melbourne, 1999).
- ² The essay was originally published as "La maladie de la mort (éthique et amour)", *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 55 (Spring 1983): 31-46.
- ³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
- ⁴ In Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. XXI, pp. 118-9; this edition of Freud's works is hereafter abbreviated as *SE* followed by volume number. The title of this particular work could also be translated as *The Malaise in Civilization*.
- ⁵ Freud, *SE*, vol. XVIII, pp. 56-7, my emphasis.
- ⁶ Lacan, *Encore*, p. 33.
- ⁷ Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus", trans. Bruce Fink, in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, W. W. Norton), p. 279.
- ⁸ Lacan, *Encore*, p. 33.
- ⁹ Lacan, *Encore*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Lacan, *Encore*, p. 8.
- ¹¹ Lacan, "Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality", trans. Jacqueline Rose, in eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 93.
- ¹² Lacan, "Guiding Remarks", p. 94.
- ¹³ Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, Grove Press, 1986).
- ¹⁴ Lacan, "Guiding Remarks", p. 87.
- ¹⁵ Duras, *The Malady of Death*, pp. 50-1.
- ¹⁶ Georges Bataille, "Madame Edwarda", *The Olympia Reader*, ed. Maurice Girodias (New York: Black Watch, 1965), p. 663.
- ¹⁷ Duras, *The Malady of Death*, pp. 49-50, my emphasis.
- ¹⁸ Duras, *The Malady of Death*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ Vision 7 in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 280.

²⁰ Vision 7 in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p. 281.

²¹ Paul Mommaers, Preface, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p. xvi, my emphasis.

²² Lacan, *Encore*, p. 70.

²³ Cf. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 92.

²⁴ Duras, *The Malady of Death*, pp. 52-5.

²⁵ My paper reads Blanchot through Lacan, drawing out what I believe are strong parallels at the level of the theory of the subject, parallels which Lacan himself draws attention to. It would be to mistake my purpose here to read the ethical imperative which, *at this level*, I find in both authors as having some direct implication for the political. Furthermore, it would be to re-import the ontological to take the encounter of this subject with the impossible as offering support for the transcendent, even of the kind propounded by negative theology. If the community is *unavowable*, this is true of any possible community of speaking beings inasmuch as in any relation of one with an other there is a gap, a missed encounter. The impossible here does not designate a transcendent but is rather another way of speaking of the *subjective disparity* of the subject itself, a disparity most manifest in the absence of the sexual relation. In other words, this is an impasse at the level of the *logic* of the subject.