

**Timelessness and Negativity in *Awaiting Oblivion*:
Hegel and Blanchot in Dialogue**

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Set in the minimalist abode of a sparsely furnished hotel room, *Awaiting Oblivion* narrates the encounter between a man and a woman, anonymously known as Il and Elle, respectively. The plot revolves around their relationship, the nature of which is the concern of their dialogue. Their dialogue intermittently emerges through a narrative voice that is, however, infused with the very same confusion and vacillation as is their own speech. The man and woman are caught in an undulating relation of attraction and repulsion, as they endeavour to rediscover the desire they once felt for one another. The themes of waiting and forgetting are manifested within the plot in their vain efforts to remember a past event whilst, paradoxically, simultaneously awaiting the event's recurrence. This event constitutes their first encounter, the memory of which will affect their future relationship. However, each person has his own perception of how this initial encounter had transpired, the memory of which is constantly being revised, over time. The couple engage in lengthy conversations in their attempts to overcome this discrepancy. First, Il expresses his perception of the event. Sensing problematic elements in his account, Elle recounts her version of how things had transpired, while Il attempts accurately to transcribe her words. With time, Il and Elle are able to arrive at a mutually balanced view of the event. Ironically, it is through waiting and forgetting that they are able to arrive at

this point.

As an instance of a disjoint temporality, *Awaiting Oblivion* resourcefully exploits its dislocatory flexibility (displacement is a feature of all language), to effect itself as a self-reflexive, self-engaging critique. It renders mute the voice of presence through its constant renunciation of its right to speak. Time in the *récit* functions as though it were “deranged and off its hinges” (*WD* 78). Time is of the order of the ‘impossible’: chronological time seems to have liquefied, with past, present, and future each taking place, *out* of place. The present is of the anomalous structure of a past *yet to come*. With the displacement of this centre of gravity, the written word, spinning out of orbit, is thrust into oblivion. The timeless time of writing functions as a displacement device, effacing the self as an active presence, and endlessly deferring the contemporaneity of meaning to presence. The themes of *waiting* and *forgetting*, taken together, embody the oscillating structure of the *trace*, and function to negate determinacy, and suspend thought in an incessant search for presence.

At the level of syntax, language undergoes a ‘neutralisation’ through the use of oxymoron: “even saying nothing, she could no longer keep silent” (*AwO* 4), and through antistrophic inversion: “Forgetting, waiting. Waiting that assembles, disperses; forgetting that disperses, assembles. Waiting, forgetting” (*AwO* 32). This latter quotation is a manifestation of the self-eluding rhythm that is at the alienated core of the narrative composition. This *tempo* suggests a non-linear momentum, of a self-propagating impetus: a temporality that reliably eschews every point of origin. Blanchot describes this momentum of ‘detour’ without ‘precipitation’ thus: “In this turn that is rhythm, speech is turned toward that which turns aside and itself turns aside” (*IC* 31). This oscillating rhythm functions to interrupt thought through the themes of *waiting* (as anticipation of the future), and *forgetting* (as eradication of the past): “In forgetting, there is that which turns away” (*AwO* 45). “Through waiting, what is turned away from thought returns to thought, having become its detour” (*AwO* 41).

The self-reflexive language of the *récit* resembles the interweaving configuration of the moebius structure.¹ Thought is caught in the fascination of a *return* to its (always already altered) self: a repetition of difference. Its aperiodic revolution inspires the image of a spiral: a disjointed circle that spins away from itself, displacing itself in its very return. The resulting circumlocutory language reveals itself through the tortuous dialogue which engages the protagonists, who, together, suffer the impossibility of ever knowing one another.

As a result of the gyrating rhythm that orients language in a movement of approach and evasion, time itself, in *Awaiting Oblivion*, is suspended.² In

Blanchot, this 'suspension' is rearticulated as 'fascination,' and thereby appropriates a sense of allure, attraction, absorption, and enthrallment. To write, is to "surrender to the fascination of time's absence" (SL 30). Timelessness in Blanchot deconstructs the transcendental signified through the continual annulment of presence: "The time of time's absence has no present, no presence" (SL 30). The time of timelessness divorces literature from the linear time of history as teleology. It is that which is outside time. Timelessness is the underlying condition of writing as "the carrier of death."³ The 'absence of time,' in Blanchot, expresses the infinite deferral of the presencing of the signified to itself. Meaning presents itself as the "presence of absence:" presence is always overshadowed by the "impossibility of making any presence real" (SL 30, 31).

Presence is effaced in the act of writing, "writing is not accomplished in the present, nor does it present itself" (SNB 32). Writing, in Blanchot, is a mechanism of erasure, rather than a means of preservation of the word.⁴ Blanchot develops this notion in particular through his critique of Hegel's thesis that death, as the power of negation, is the principle underlying existence.⁵ Notably, this association of writing and negation surfaces in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his critique of knowledge as "Sense-certainty."⁶ Through the following thought experiment, Hegel demonstrates how the meaning of the deictic pronoun Now does not preserve its truth in its being written down:

To the question: 'What is Now?', let us answer, e.g. 'Now is Night.' In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth; a truth cannot lose anything by being written down, any more than it can lose anything through our preserving it. If *now*, *this noon*, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.⁷

The written Now is preserved, but as an other that is outside the time of historical progression. The Now is a universal in that it functions arbitrarily as an empty sign: it cannot sustain itself within the immediacy of itself, but derives its meaning vicariously through the medium of time. Hence, the meaning of the Now emerges through that which it is not.⁸ The written sign preserves itself "as a negative in general."⁹

Hegel here introduces the dialectic of difference, which posits that meaning emerges in language through the function of negativity. Hegel's dialectic of negativity extends the formulation of difference also to include the movement of deferral. He expresses the impossibility of grasping the Now in its immediacy, in the act of pointing to it: "the Now that *is*, is another Now than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no

more just when it is."¹⁰ Time pervades signification, and instills within it a fissure that renders impossible the concurrence of the signifier and signified. This temporal disjunction between the signifier and its signified emerges in Hegel as the disparity between the *being* as expression of presence or 'essence,' and the *has been*, as that which is 'outside' being.¹¹

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel demonstrates that the structure of time itself – of the history of human discourse – is divorced from the dogmatic model of History as progressive teleology. Indeed, he envisions the construction of meaning as a process occurring within time. This is given formulaic expression through his explicit identification of the Concept (*Begriff*) with time: "As for *time* ... it is the existent Notion itself."¹² When Hegel speaks of time, however, he is referring to specifically human time and, therefore, time as it exists within human consciousness. The entire discourse of the *Phenomenology* is articulated from within the domain of human consciousness. Reality does not enter this sphere of discourse: our knowledge of it is permanently mediated by consciousness. The *Phenomenology*, in its structural totality, functions as a critique of knowing, in that it has its centre in itself: it exists as a work of pure self-reflection into itself. The History of 'phenomenal knowledge' is therefore a self-movement: it is "the process which begets and traverses its own moments,"¹³ and which is intrinsically its own self-affirmation. Hegel distinguishes between "real knowledge" and the Concept or "Notion of knowledge," thus demonstrating that the relationship of reality and its revelation through human discourse is indeed a negative one.¹⁴

Negativity is the force of interruption by which each moment of the dialectic supersedes its abstract immediacy. Through his dialectic of negativity, Hegel demonstrates that the structure of presence is dependant upon the movement of reflection which consciousness effects upon itself. In his section on "Sense-certainty" he enacts his critique of perception, and exhibits the way in which perception is essentially mediated. In the sections on "Self-consciousness," Hegel proceeds to elucidate upon the function of mediation within consciousness. He reveals that the emergence of meaning within consciousness occurs only at the moment of self-consciousness: that is, there can be no consciousness without self-consciousness.¹⁵

Through his extrapolation of self-consciousness, Hegel illustrates how difference is implicated within identity itself. Being is mediated or split in its becoming self-aware. In reflecting upon itself, it becomes other than itself, and thus its self-revelation involves the negation of itself, and preservation of this negated self *within* itself.¹⁶ Thus, the "unity of self-consciousness with itself" is grounded in difference: that is, consciousness realises itself only through an other, or by negating itself. Consciousness merely appears

to itself as unified: the unity of self-consciousness is, therefore, *appearance*. This explains why Hegel contends that “self-consciousness is *Desire* in general”: the act of reflection finds its original motivation in the desire for unity.¹⁷ It is indeed the significance of *Desire* and its implications for the movement of time that is of interest here.

It is through the dialectic of Master and Slave that Hegel is able to expound upon his notion of *Desire*, and to represent its functioning within the interaction between one self-consciousness and another. In elucidating the role of *Desire* within such an interaction, the significance of this concept in relation to the temporality of meaning, emerging through the dialogic relationships by which Being itself is constituted, is revealed. This dialectic of the interaction of Mastery and Slavery is grounded in the *Desire* for recognition.¹⁸ In as much as self-consciousness is *Desire* – that is, in as much as the very being of self-consciousness has its grounding in *Desire* – that which one self-consciousness actually desires from another self-consciousness, is essentially *Desire*. Accordingly, forasmuch as it exercises a “pure negativity,” Hegelian *Desire* has a purely self-propagating function.

The implications of this claim directly relate to the moving force of the Hegelian dialectic: the function of *Aufhebung* or supersession. This is the function by which each moment of presence is displaced through the mediating transfer of time. In effect, the function of *Aufhebung* reflects the character of *Desire*, in that *Desire* is itself a function of negation and essentially preserves itself in its own supersession. The movement of displacement is, thus, evidently implicated in the role of *Desire*. The satisfaction of *Desire* is infinitely deferred through this movement. Thus, the movement engendered by *Desire* – in as much as it is infinite, and is self-propagated or is a ‘self-movement’ – is, again, non-teleological, in that it overcomes every possibility of attaining to a final *telos* in satisfaction.

The exposition of the metaphor of *Desire* further elucidates the underlying drives of atemporal time, which, as has been demonstrated, characterises the structure of the Hegelian dialectic, as it does the notion of History in Hegel. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel configures the structure of historical, or specifically discursive time in terms of a non-linear movement as expressed by the following phrase: “the concrete present is the result of the past, and is pregnant with the future.”¹⁹ Alexandre Kojève, in his reading of Hegel, provides a phenomenological interpretation of Hegel’s composition of time, through an exposition of the role of *Desire* in the movement of non-linear time. Expanding upon Alexandre Koyré’s formulation of Hegelian time, Kojève provides a functional model which represents non-linear temporality as a circular, futural movement impelled by the past.²⁰

Desire is the impetus for this model in terms of its role in the functions of deferral and of self-preservation and regeneration.²¹

In effect, the time engendered by Desire functions to negate every moment of presence. The present emerges as the dialectical synthesis of what is past and what lies in the future. Kojève terms this a specifically *temporal* present. Presencing involves an embedded structure: presence emerges (negatively) only within the context of a temporal totality.²² The present is, in effect, a fragmented unity: in its movement between past and future, the present is thus divided into “an absolute plurality of Nows.”²³ Hegel demonstrates that ‘presencing’ occurs in an instant in time, wherein meaning is derived in the context of what has passed, and what is yet to come. This evokes the concept of a signifying chain in process, whereby the meaning of a sign emerges in the context of that which precedes and that which follows. He illustrates that ‘knowledge’ is of the order of representation, and is made possible through the function of dialectical negation. Hegel demonstrates the way in which the mode of time engendered by dialectical negation gives rise to contexture. The contextual structure of knowledge, and of representation corresponds to the structure of tautology, which is a self-contained totality. “Absolute Knowledge,” in Hegel, pertains to an absolute capacity for recollection, for complete access to the interiority of the mind, in which is preserved all the moments of the totality of time.²⁴ In Hegel, time, as a function of reflection, is a sublative movement which leaves traces, memorisation is imperative for the creation of a structural milieu as a foundation for the emergence of discursive knowledge.

Having thus expounded some of those Hegelian concepts and themes most pertinent to this paper, let us next compare each thinker in light of these. Digressing significantly from the Hegelian model of knowledge as self-conscious recollection, Blanchot describes a speech that secretly belongs to forgetfulness: a language of deflection, rather than reflection.²⁵ Forgetful speech characterises language which incessantly puts itself into question, the form of which exemplifies Blanchot’s vision of negation. Dialectical negation – the negating mechanism of sublation – relies upon the function of memory as a device of self-unification and self-preservation, in the face of otherness.²⁶ By contrast, questioning in Blanchot pertains to a radical form of negation: identity is uprooted, displaced and forgotten: consciousness encounters the other in an amnesiac state. Through forgetting, language escapes the totalising tendency of discourse, never allowing itself to become unified.

The language of philosophy attempts to preserve the past, and to overcome the future, whereas writing, according to Blanchot, is a structure of effacement, rather than of preservation. Writing, according to Blanchot,

“is not destined to leave traces, but to erase, by traces, all traces, to disappear in the fragmentary space of writing” (*SNB* 50). The Blanchotian trace pertains to the ‘double absence’ of literature. It relates to Blanchot’s radical form of negativity, as both the negation of the given, and of the resulting concept. The incessant oscillation of the trace encroaches upon literature, dissolving the possibility of a totalising discourse. The trace demonstrates the impossibility of a self-conscious discourse. “Effaced before being written,”²⁷ the negating presence of the trace precedes memory. In *Awaiting Oblivion*, the trace functions in the vein of a ‘forgetful memory:’ it erases the moments it traverses, and precludes the possibility of absolute consciousness of time, and hence of self. Indeed, the trace is fundamentally ‘out of synch’ with the structure of linear time, and cannot be assimilated to the totalising form of history as Hegel contended.²⁸

There is a vital dialogue between Blanchot and Hegel, emerging in particular through their mutual engagement with the notions of *timelessness*, and the *eternal*, terms that nonetheless correspond to two radically divergent paradigms of time. Hegel’s eschatological philosophy prescribes a definitive end to history: time is completed the instant consciousness ‘knows’ itself. This self-knowledge is preserved as the totality or abstraction of time, and acquires the form of timelessness as eternity.²⁹ The Concept, as the pure abstraction of time, is eternal, it is devoid of the process of time, and is therefore unchanging, timeless, or an absolute truth: “Absolute timelessness is eternity.”³⁰ Hegel represents Absolute Knowledge as constituted by the circular motion of the spatial unity of the dimensions of time. This eternal construct is sustained through repetition, as truth traverses the moments it has previously lived.³¹ Hegel therefore writes: “The truth of time is that its goal is the past and not the future.”³² The ‘truth’ of time is realised only at the *end* of the becoming of history, of temporality, at which moment the future becomes a thing of the past. Discursive knowledge is of the structure of *that which has become*; discursive history is intelligible, or conceivable only in its reminiscence. Hegel’s notion of timelessness, in which time is rendered as a function of representation, corresponds to a model of repetition contingent on memory – the self-immanent structure of the *eternal* revolves in the vein of a tautology.

Departing from this ideal of a temporality of completion, Blanchot imagines the time of writing in terms of an eternal return to the absence of the sign, rather than to signification.³³ He proposes a time of irrevocable fracture – the interruption of forgetting – whereby “what was written in the past will be read in the future, without any relation of presence being able to establish itself *between* writing and reading.”³⁴ The significance of this fragmentary model of time pertains to the impossibility of temporal continu-

ity, and the necessity of the absence of the instant of presence, which precludes all possibility of unity or identity.³⁵ Such a model declines the “demand for circularity” expressed in the accomplishment of history (see *IC* 15). The time of writing, as a function of the passivity of waiting, and the rupture that is forgetting, engages non-dialectical difference – difference as pure lack – which radically ‘dis-continues’ the mediating line of time, rendering every moment an immediate particularity: an instance of impossibility. Writing, in Blanchot, is therefore reformulated as rewriting, which bespeaks the impossibility of textual completion. To this effect, writing as rewriting, is non-representational: the play of difference precludes the possibility of unity, and thus of contexture.

The notion of timelessness in Blanchot is accordingly, radically divergent from Hegel’s notion of timeless eternity. In contrast with the reinteriorising movement of return implicated in Hegel’s self-immanent totality, Blanchot imagines the eternal re-turning by which writing exceeds the closed circle of knowledge to be a nomadic movement, disengaged from any form of continuity, and hence from temporality. The movement of detour and forgetting knows no precipitation, nor does it ever arrive at a destination (see *IC* 31). Forgetting “frees the future from time itself” and carries it “to the greatest power of lack” (*IC* 278-80). Literary time is sustained in a timeless passivity of waiting: the apathetic anticipation of an impossible future. The Hegelian model of a temporality of completion is subverted by Blanchot’s fragmented futural model of time which not only posits that the future is unknowable (knowledge belongs to the future, not vice-versa), but also proposes that even that which has passed cannot become present to consciousness.³⁶ Literature’s space is sustained in a ‘seizure’ of contestation, a time of ‘ecstatic’ “loss of knowledge” (*IC* 206).

Blanchot’s model of timelessness describes an irrevocably futural time of excess. Rewriting constitutes a surplus, it inscribes itself within the supplement of time, and at the limit of the possible (See *SNB* 32). His anti-theory of writing reveals that the structure of identity necessarily produces a surplus, by which totality is rendered unsustainable (See *SNB* 40).

What needs to be addressed next is a certain passage extracted from the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel discusses the tautological nature of the relation between the individual and work, which is of particular significance for Blanchot. In *Literature and the Right to Death* (*GO* 21-62), Blanchot provides an analysis of Hegel’s discussion of the paradox of the individual who seeks to realise himself through action, with a focus on the paradox of writing in particular.³⁷

For Blanchot, this situation speaks to the question of the interminability of the work, as well as the impossibility of identifying the work with its (au-

thorial) source, and vice-versa. Although Hegel recognises the inherent paradox that the situation entails, he maintains, nonetheless, that “this illusory appearance of an antithesis” is resolvable.³⁸ Exploiting Hegel’s own descriptions, Blanchot illustrates that no End can ever be achieved, as the paradox arises anew for each new work.³⁹ For Blanchot, Hegel’s portrayal of the individual consciousness as a “Nothing working towards Nothing”⁴⁰ is of particular significance for his argument. Blanchot proceeds to demonstrate the implications of the circumstances that Hegel portrays. In particular, Blanchot emphasises the impossibility of any essential realisation of the self through the work, for the work essentially disappears in its emergence out of the obscure unicity of its nebulous beginnings into the daylight of its public existence. To become a writer, an individual must, at any given moment in time, put pen to paper, and give himself over to words. Yet, still, he is not a writer, for his words do not exist pending their reception by the public community. In its transformation into a publication, the work thence “enters the stream of history” (GO 28). Blanchot is aware that the work becomes a ‘reality’ as it unfolds in time: the history of discourse provides a context within which the work derives its value. The essential paradox of writing cannot, however, for Blanchot, ever be overcome, remaining as the fact of the work’s disappearance as the condition of its very realization. The work essentially comes into being outside of the individual: the writer vanishes as authorial figure in the movement by which the work is realized. The work rests upon a “vital contingency” (GO 28), which renders futile the conscious efforts of the individual who writes. Impossibly, the movement of transformation by which the work emerges in the face of the writer’s death finds its source in the writer’s own force of negation (GO 28). The relationship of the writer and the work involves an endless repetition of appearance and disappearance: the paradox itself sustains the work in its incessant becoming.⁴¹

For Blanchot the contradictory current of becoming by which the work unfurls in time interminably propagates its own recurrence; a motion whereby “everything begins again from nothing” (GO 24). Blanchot thus articulates the impossibility of establishing an origin for the work which exists in time. Within this revolving temporality, the work is necessarily transfigured so that the presence of what was written in the past is effaced with each and every reading.

Having addressed the manner in which the recurrence of paradox is ascribed a greater significance in Blanchot than the arrival at an End, now it has to be shown how Blanchot transcends the Hegelian dialectic. In comparing the models of reflection in Hegel and Blanchot, as well as each of their distinctive conceptions of negativity, the manner in which Blanchot’s

poetics effectively expand the confines of consciousness as is formulated within the domain of the Hegelian dialectic, will be illustrated.

The successive moments of the Hegelian dialectic are revealed and preserved by means of the reflexive impulse of self-consciousness. Negation here is an active process, which gives rise to a temporality of the mode of self-reflection. Hegel illustrates that the dialectical process of reflection does not simply involve the negation of the other, but also the preservation of this negated other within consciousness. To this effect, dialectical negation corresponds to the formula, the *negation of negation*, and results in an affirmation.

Hegel demonstrates that the reflective process by which consciousness represents itself to itself as a unity, is a pluralising and transformative one. His thesis on reflection and plurality offers a critique of the concept of reflection as a model of identity.⁴² The negating of negation involved in reflection results in an “absolute plurality” of sense: a “manifold otherness.” Within the totality of Absolute Spirit, thought continues its infinite, pluralising movement: new truths continue to appear and to vanish, but nothing surpasses the absolute truth of self-consciousness.

In Blanchot, ‘reflection’ is reformulated in terms of ‘echoing’ within the structure of dialogue.⁴³ The metaphor of dialogue implicates this ‘doubling up,’ and involves speech as an ‘irreducible plurality.’ To speak, is “to seek *autrui* ... in their irreducible difference” (JC 82). A plural speech involves interruption through difference. *Awaiting Oblivion* makes use of this dialogic form. Fragmentation, as a function of interruption, and disruption, is another source of multiplicity in the *récit*. Reflection, in Hegel, functions to affirm the totality of consciousness itself, which takes the form of self-reflexivity.⁴⁴ In Blanchot, self-reflexivity takes instead the form of the self-questioning of language: a process which also involves the “negating of negation” and which opens up language to plurality and the Outside.

Blanchot addresses this issue of reflection in his essay entitled *Literature and the Right to Death*. He writes, “Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (GO 21). This idea critically speaks to Hegel’s thesis on self-consciousness, which demonstrates the necessity of self-awareness for the production of discourse. Thus stated, it marks a crucial moment of rupture and division between the history of discourse, and the practice of literature as that which occurs outside the temporality of the system of knowledge. For Blanchot, the question, *what is literature?* bears the significance of all that literature possibly can be, and should be valued in itself without interest in an explication. It is at the moment when language defers itself to pure questioning that it ceases to seek itself. Reflection then loses its essentialising desire for iden-

tity, and becomes a purely passive movement.

Comparably, in Hegel, Spirit achieves such freedom at the moment when consciousness becomes aware of itself as its own 'self-movement.' Premised upon the structure of questioning, however, Blanchot's model of reflection offers, beyond Hegel's, a more fundamental critique of the essentialist conception of reflection. The question of literature cannot be overcome – literature maintains itself in the deflective movement of the self-questioning of language. The model of reflection as it applies to literature describes a language with the capacity to take a detour away from the interiorising activity of conceptual discourse, and of representation, which belongs to a temporality of completion, and wherein the end reflects back into the beginning. The critical function of questioning cannot be sustained within the Hegelian dialectic, but is subsumed within and thereby rendered obsolete, or superseded by the totalising movement which characterises his tautological model of reflection. The system of discourse, of philosophy, questions always within its limits, rather than *at* the limit. Literature, in contrast, has the ability to contest itself, and through contestation, take 'flight' from itself, it seeks the Outside.

In both Blanchot and Hegel, the concept of reflection discards the essentialising perspective. However, it is Blanchot's engagement with such tropes of the language of passivity as the *neutre*, impossibility, and the outside that enables him to transcend the Hegelian dialectic. The dialectic provides an account of the history of discourse, following the transformation of the structure of thought from the age of empiricism to the era of modernism. In this exposition, the negative labours to attain to a state of self-consciousness "where appearance becomes identical with essence."⁴⁵ Absolute Spirit avows itself to have attained Absolute Knowledge at the moment of Self-consciousness, at which point it declares the becoming of time obsolete, or indeed superseded, and thenceforth reiterates eternally the preserved moments of its self-revelation, designating itself a timeless totality "above time." Blanchot refuses, however, the limits imposed upon language by the structurally embedded form of the self-conscious mind; he aspires to transcend modernist thought. His version of 'timeless' time further radicalises the critique of teleology initiated by Hegel, by liberating time from the structure of tautology within which the dialectic confines it.

Whereas in Hegel, discourse depends upon the appearance of the unity of self-consciousness to itself, in Blanchot's poetics, consciousness reveals and revels in its fragmented ontology.⁴⁶ Blanchot explores the full potential of the dialectic, allowing consciousness to lose itself in otherness. He exhumes that which lies beneath the dialectic, the unconscious space which Hegel does not allow to manifest itself in the dialectic. Blanchot's

timeless 'space' of literature pertains to his vision of a language free of contexture, of a pre-discursive form of signification. The enigmatic character of his artistic prose serves to create such a space of the order of the unrepresentable. Blanchot writes: "To write is to surrender to the fascination of time's absence" (SL 30). Blanchot, precisely as he denounces the philosophical endeavour to master death, correspondingly critiques the idea that language essentially accomplishes a mastery over time.⁴⁷ His pseudo-narratives dispel this illusion via their anti-linear representation of episodic sequencing, as illustrated in *Awaiting Oblivion*. Whereas in Hegel, action is given the utmost value as the source of transformation, in Blanchot, the labour of the negative ceases. Negation acquires a passive function: the negative is neutralised. His poetics engage with a "time without negation, without decision," wherein the only movement is that of a return to the absence of a beginning.⁴⁸ In Hegel, consciousness is set upon an active path towards its own self-realisation. Blanchot follows the movement of consciousness beyond the moment at which it attains self-consciousness, and into the space opened up, and yet left unexplored by the dialectic, where consciousness no longer seeks itself. Thus, Blanchot pronounces the "time of timelessness is not dialectical" (SL 30).

Awaiting Oblivion symbolises the relation of the writer to his work as one of absolute alienation, through the relationship of Il and Elle as one of a "double dissymmetry" (IC 70-1). Their relationship of 'strangeness' suffers the interruption of a 'pure interval' that sustains them in a condition of 'infinite separation.' The impossibility of a relationship of unity, and equal reciprocity is formulated in Blanchot as an "interruption of *being*" (IC 69). This relation is of the "third kind," and serves as a metaphor for the metaphysical relation of self and other, and of self as other, where writing, as the experience of language, is the medium through which is introduced the fissure of difference into contemporaneity.⁴⁹ Il and Elle are involved in a relationship of writing: Il asks Elle to dictate to him that which he will write. There is, however, a profound disjunction between what she says, and what he writes: repetition is disrupted by difference as the mode of language.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Blanchot's model of dialogue excludes any form of immediacy between interlocutors. The other remains wholly other, and "is not reduced to what 'I' say of him" (IC 55). Elle's speech is irreducible to the form of discourse, and remains outside, or in excess of what Il transcribes. Elle functions in their relation as the locus of the Outside: "in speech, it is the outside that speaks in giving rise to speech, and permitting me to speak."⁵¹ Writing, in Blanchot, is not represented as the spontaneity of meaning in language, as thought, always exceeding its self-presentification, belongs to the space of difference, or otherness: the Outside.

The dynamics of the irreducible relation of *Il* and *Elle*, as reciprocally self and other, can be comparatively represented in terms of the structure of proximity as distance; approach as distancing. In Blanchot, such a relation of absolute estrangement represents the character of neutrality.⁵² The definition of the neutral in Blanchot, however, excludes all sense of reduction of difference, or of inequality: “the neutral does not annul, does not neutralize this double-signed infinity, but bears in it the way of an enigma” (*IC* 71). The neutral bears the sense of ‘non-alignment,’ not in a political sense, but in the sense of this ‘double,’ or multiple ‘dissymmetry,’ which characterises the space of signification arising out of the relation of one to another. The neutral involves the “redoubling of irreciprocity” (*IC* 70). This definition implicates the movement of displacement of presence introduced into writing through the double dissymmetry of self-reflexivity. In *Awaiting Oblivion*, the impersonal pronouns *Il* (he), and *elle* (she) function to displace the speaking subject as the locus of self-presence.⁵³ Furthermore, the present itself is displaced, and there emerges a language which has no centre, a language which does not actively speak, but simply *is* in the “pure passivity of being” (*SL* 27). The *neutre* describes a form of language that stands at a ‘distanceless distance’ from representation. To this effect, the *neutre* corresponds to what is unrepresentable and, like the *real*, it “cannot be embodied” (*SS* 220). The *neutre* is pure difference.

Through writing, language is able to “break the bond that unites the word with myself” (*SL* 26). The written text incessantly recreates itself precisely through the negation of its author. Blanchot’s *récit* engages in such a self-negation in that, “the writer who consents to sustain writing’s essence loses the power to say ‘I’ ... and so he loses the power to make other say ‘I’” (*SL* 27). In Hegel’s dialectic, the ‘I’ is also displaced by temporality: it is, as is the ‘Now’ a *has been*, and is therefore outside being. The ‘I’ in Hegel, is a pure ‘I’: it is a pure ‘This,’ a universal sign that is as empty as Blanchot’s neutral *il* (‘he/it’).⁵⁴ The *neutre*, in Blanchot, expresses the value of criticism in literature as apolitical, or as having an ‘indirect relation’ to the political. This is not at all to say that literary criticism bears no political value, on the contrary, the work of Blanchot represents an extensive engagement with the political. It is rather to say that the form of engagement of the literary with the political, is not teleological, and cannot be reduced to historically specific means and ends. Literature bears the power of questioning, yet does not – and in order to remain literature, must not – wield this power as an implement of force. In this sense, writing is an intransitivity, and remains so in its incessant questioning of its own being (see *WD* 78).

In conclusion, Blanchot's model of an aporetic temporality interrupts the Hegelian dialectic, and thereby contests the absolute value accorded to conceptual and representational thought. Rewriting constitutes an 'ex-centric' movement of return, and excludes the possibility of a unifying discourse. *Awaiting Oblivion* symbolises the emergence of meaning as a process of oscillation between past and future. In writing, the pure form of time is in suspension, and in this absence of time, the transcendental signified is infinitely sustained in a state of deferral (waiting). The signified is temporally structured as a past present that is yet to come. The signified pluralises itself through its self-reflexive self-effacement from being: the negation of negation. In Blanchot, the non-dialectical *neutre*, which is *neither one nor the other*, enacts this pluralising negation (forgetting) in writing. This is the pure passivity of the language of self-critique, wherein negation is not annulment, but rather the affirmation of otherness.

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NOTES

- ¹ The "interior eight" serves as Lacan's diagrammatic model of the topology of the subject. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: Tavistock / Routledge, 1981), p. 156. Lacan describes it as having a "Moebius surface" whose "outside continues its inside." The diagram (p. 156), illustrates the structure of infinitude in that it has no determinate point of origin or end. It is the site of repetition without a return to origin. This is the model of self-reflexivity in Lacan; of consciousness "turned back upon itself" (p. 74).
- ² Accordingly, Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*: "(this rare speech), always calling upon detour, and thus holding us as though in suspense between the visible and the invisible, or on the hither side of both" (IC 31).
- ³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.17. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot connects the time inherent to the written work with death: "this empty, dead time is a real time in which death is present – in which death happens but doesn't stop happening ... The dead present is the impossibility of making any presence real" (SL 31).
- ⁴ Blanchot writes in *The Step Not Beyond*: "Writing, the demand to write, does not struggle *against* presence in favor of absence, nor *for* it in pretending to preserve it or communicate it" (SNB 32).
- ⁵ Reference is here made to Hegel's famous phrase: "the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the

life that endures it and maintains itself in it." See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.19.

⁶ Although the concept of *negativity* is developed throughout the entire text of the *Phenomenology*, the passage extracted from his section on 'Sense-certainty' is particularly significant for the purposes of this paper, in that it specifically addresses the functioning of *time* in relation to language through an analysis of the operation of the word *Now*. Refer to Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 58 – 66.

⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 60.

⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 60: "The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general. This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is *not*. ... A simple thing of this kind which *is* through negation, which is neither This nor that, a *not-This*, and is with equal indifference This as well as That – such a thing we call a *universal*."

⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 60.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 63.

¹¹ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 63: "The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been*, and this is its truth; it has not the truth of *being*. Yet this much is true, that it has been. But what essentially *has been* [*gewesen ist*] is, in fact, not an essence that *is* [*kein Wesen*]; *it is not*, and it was with *being* that we were concerned."

¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 26.

¹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 27.

¹⁴ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 49: "Natural consciousness will show itself to be only the Notion of knowledge, or in other words, not to be real knowledge. But since it directly takes itself to be real knowledge, this path has a negative significance for it, and what is in fact the realization of the Notion, counts for it rather as the loss of its own self; for it does lose its truth on this path."

¹⁵ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105: "With that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of *consciousness*, and the whole expanse of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time only as connected with the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself."

¹⁶ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 21: "But Spirit becomes object because it is just this movement of becoming *other to itself*, and of suspending this otherness." And, p. 105: "self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially a return from *otherness*."

¹⁷ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105: "This antithesis of its appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness,

i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general.” See also p. 110: “The satisfaction of Desire is, it is true, the reflection of self-consciousness into itself, or the certainty that has become truth.” This ‘certainty,’ moreover, is grounded in the non-essential origin of Desire, “(b)ut the truth of this certainty is really a double reflection, the duplication of self-consciousness.”

¹⁸ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 111: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.”

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, trans. M. J. Petry (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), addendum to §259, p. 235.

²⁰ Kojève’s words here reproduce those of Alexandre Koyré: “In the Time of which Hegel speaks, on the other hand, the movement is engendered in the Future and goes toward the Present by way of the Past: Future → Past → Present (→ Future).” Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 134.

²¹ Kojève’s model works on the reasoning that Desire is indeed directed toward another Desire. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 134: “Now we know that Desire can be directed toward an absolutely *nonexistent* entity only provided that it is directed toward another Desire taken as Desire.” Through this reasoning, Kojève is led to conceive of the function of deferral that is implicated by the interaction of desiring beings. He expresses his logic thus: “to act in terms of the desire for a desire is to act in terms of what does not (yet) exist – that is, in terms of the future” (p. 135).

²² Hegel expresses the emergence of *presence* as reliant upon its distinction from the past and future. The *Present* is of the structure of a ‘vanishing essence:’ “the *finite* present is the *now* fixed as being, and as the concrete unity, distinguished from the negative, the abstract moments of the past and the future, it is therefore the affirmative factor; yet in itself this being is merely abstract, and disappears into nothing” (*Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 233). Hegel expresses the embedded structure of *presence* thus: “(t)he present is, only because the past is not: the being of the now has the determination of not-being, and the not-being of its being is the future; *the present is this negative unity*” (p. 235, my emphasis).

²³ This movement between past and future is demonstrated in the section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (p. 63) in which Hegel demonstrates that the ‘Now’ is always already superseded. In effect, this demonstrates that in its pointing-out, the ‘original ‘Now’ is stretched out in time along a ‘plurality’ of instances (or ‘nows’) as it reaches to meet its supersedent (*future*) self.

²⁴ Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*: “this knowing is its (Spirit’s) *withdrawal into itself* in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection” (p. 492). The function of memory is internal to dialectical movement, in that what is negated is also *preserved*. The *recollection* of a memory involves a movement of *internalisation*, whereby Spirit moves or reflects into itself in an effort to retrieve a moment of the past which was at one time *internalised*. Spirit is deemed to have attained Absolute Knowledge at the moment of self-consciousness, at which stage it has fully mastered the capacity for self-internalisation. Hegel uses the German word *Erinnerung* to its fullest semantic ca-

- capacity to convey the sense of 'recollection' as well as 'internalisation' (see Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* [Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Reference, 1992], pp. 186-8).
- ²⁵ Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*: "Whoever is speaking gives himself over to forgetfulness in tying the movement of reflection ... to the necessity of forgetting" (IC 214).
- ²⁶ Kojève writes: "to preserve oneself as negated is to *remember* what one has been even while becoming radically other" (*Introduction to The Reading of Hegel*, p. 232).
- ²⁷ Blanchot writes in *The Step Not Beyond*: "Effaced before being written. If the word trace can be admitted, it is as the mark that would indicate as erased what was, however, never traced" (SNB 17).
- ²⁸ Accordingly, Derrida argues: "The concepts of *present*, *past*, and *future* ... the metaphysical concept of time in general – cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace" (*Of Grammatology*, p. 67).
- ²⁹ See Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, addendum to §258, pp. 231-2. Revealed knowledge, as that which *has become* in time, is accomplished as *eternal* and *absolute* in and by the final act of sublation, by which all the moments of its *becoming* – the dimensions of time – are sustained in a paralysis.
- ³⁰ See Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, addendum to §258, p. 231: when Hegel proclaims that "the Concept is Time," time is here posited as a pure abstraction: "In its Notion, time itself is eternal however, for its Notion is neither the present nor any other time, but time as such." The eternal, moreover, is disengaged from temporal continuity: "Absolute timelessness is *eternity*, which is devoid of natural time."
- ³¹ Hegel expresses the movement within the timeless unity of eternity thus: In this motion "the point tends towards a place which is its future, and vacates one which is the past; but that which it has behind it, is at the same time that at which it will arrive; and it has already been the after towards which it tends." *Philosophy of Nature*, addendum to §261, pp. 239-41.
- ³² Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, addendum to §261, p. 241.
- ³³ In the *Infinite Conversation*, and in *The Step not Beyond*, Blanchot rethinks Nietzsche's Eternal Return in terms of unrepresentability.
- ³⁴ Blanchot writes in *The Step Not Beyond*: "Between past, future, the greatest difference is given in that the one would repeat the other without the common measure of a present: as if between past and future the absence of present ruled in the simplified form of forgetfulness" (SNB 16). Within Hegel's absolutely immanent structure of *eternity*, the dimensions of time function as universals, and are ideally interchangeable – the future is thus rendered predictable. Contrastingly, in Blanchot, a radical disjunction exists between past and future, such that they cannot be reconciled in a totalizing structure.
- ³⁵ Blanchot writes in *The Step Not Beyond*, "future always already past, past always still to come, from which the third instance, the instant of presence, excluding itself, would exclude any possibility of identity" (SNB 11).
- ³⁶ This is expressed in *Awaiting Oblivion* through the theme of forgetting. The initial

encounter between Il and Elle remains obscure to both characters (as well as to the reader), as perceptions of how their relationship began are constantly revised.

³⁷ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 240. Hegel articulates the dilemma as follows: "An individual cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the *End* of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a *conscious* individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as *entirely his own*, i.e. as an *End*."

³⁸ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 241: "This illusory appearance of an antithesis which still remains, is removed by the transition or the means."

³⁹ Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death": "Now, the same is true for each new work" (*GO* 24).

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 239.

⁴¹ Rodolphe Gasché argues the necessity of paradox in Blanchot, in his compelling analysis of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death." See Gasché, "The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-Space of Literature" in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) pp. 34-69.

⁴² This thesis appears in his critique of "Sense-certainty," in which he posits that the presence-structures of the *Now* and the *This* are of the form of *that which has been superseded*, and proceeds in a hypothetical estimation of the subsequent chain of signification that would be activated by the negation of their presence. The resulting synthesis is a structure of multiplicity: "However, this first, thus reflected into itself, is not exactly the same as it was to begin with, viz. something *immediate*; on the contrary, it is *something that is reflected into itself*, or a *simple* entity which, in its otherness, remains what it is: a *Now* which is an absolute plurality of *Nows*" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 64).

⁴³ See "A Plural Speech", *IC* 80-2.

⁴⁴ See Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 62. Here, Hegel subverts the notion of 'sense-certainty' as immediate knowledge in positing: "the *whole* of sense-certainty itself as its *essence*." That is, sense-certainty *means* only in relation to, upon doubling up on, itself.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105: "With that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of *consciousness*, and the whole expanse of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time only as connected with the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself."

⁴⁷ See Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," trans. Brian Massumi, in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), p. 55.

⁴⁸ Blanchot writes in *The Space of Literature*: "Time's absence is not a purely negative mode. It is a time when nothing begins, when initiative is not possible" (*SL* 30).

⁴⁹ Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, "*Language, the experience of language – writing – is what leads us to sense a relation entirely other, a relation of*

the third kind," IC 73. A 'relation of the third kind' is, in Blanchot, always in displacement, and is not a relation of unification (see IC 67).

⁵⁰ In Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion*, although Elle is dictating to Il, he nonetheless writes on his own accord. Although Elle has the opportunity to revise his account, and to "erase whatever doesn't seem right" to her, she finds that it is impossible to determine what elements should be eliminated on account of their apparent falsity (see AwO 1).

⁵¹ Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*: "I have in this relation with man a relation with what is radically out of my reach; and this relation measure the very extent of the Outside" (IC 69).

⁵² Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*: "*in this relation ... one is never comprehended by the other, does not form with him an ensemble, a duality, or a possible unity; the one is foreign to the other ... We call this relation neutral*" (IC 73).

⁵³ In Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion*, the impersonal character of writing is intensified by the more frequent use of the formal *vous* as a form of address between the characters, rather than the more familiar *tu*, in the French.

⁵⁴ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 58: "Consciousness, for its part, is in this certainty only as a pure 'I;' or 'I' am in it only as a pure 'This,' and the object similarly only as a pure 'This'."