

**COLLOQUY text theory critique**

*issue 10, november 2005*

**Blanchot, the Obscure**

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**and Dimitris Vardoulakis**

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## Editorial

There is an element of obscurity in the title of this special issue of *Colloquy*: “Blanchot, the Obscure.” That element is due to the comma between the proper name and the adjective. Thus, “the Obscure” cannot be a straightforward epithet of the person or the work of the French author and critic Maurice Blanchot. Rather, the comma is meant to indicate a type of relationality that pertains between Blanchot and the obscure – moreover, an *undecidable* relationality. Thus, in this relation neither the name “Blanchot” nor the adjective “obscure” are to be approached with a pre-established security about their origin and destination. The comma indicates the fragile moment of hesitation before this conjunction of name and attribute.

The work of Blanchot has often attracted the description “obscure.” The kind of relation described above is meant to counteract at least three common and equally erroneous approaches to that nexus. The first is to identify a secretive constitution of Blanchot’s work, construed as a purported youthful political alliance that the mature Blanchot sought to hide at all cost – notably at the expense of value. If, as recent scholarly work has demonstrated, the premise about youthful reactionarism is wrong, then the critique of value is not an obfuscation but rather part of a general and engaged political agenda. Second, the seeming obscurity of Blanchot’s own writings is due to the movement of his thought, which delights in contradictions. Yet as soon as this paradoxical trajectory is welcomed, then Blanchot’s writings attain unparalleled clarity and directness. The third mistake would be to posit obscurity as an ontological quality at the heart of Blanchot’s contradictory logic. Even if Blanchot insists on that which remains unknowable, weak and hence obscure, this does not mean that obscurity can be given a determinate content. Rather, obscurity is that area in thinking which will always remain outside a secure system but in such a way as to make possible – and impossible – the unravelling of thinking. This obscurest shadow of the obscure installs, like the comma, a moment of hesitation and indecision which is not only inevitable but also guarantees the future of thinking and writing. It is then an obscurity that follows Blanchot no less than an obscurity that Blanchot himself follows.

All the articles collected in this volume respond to that obscurity. However, the title “Blanchot, the Obscure” also corresponds to the title of a con-

ference that brought to Melbourne in 19-20 August 2004 an international array of scholars, students of Blanchot's work. Under that title, his readers were invited to respond to Blanchot's obscurity by allowing themselves to be followed by it, no less than follow it themselves in turn. The present volume of *Colloquy* sprung out of that conference. All the conference presentations have been written as full-length articles, which have been reviewed and revised. Also, all those friends who could make not the trip to the antipodes to participate at the conference were also invited to participate in this special issue.

The editors would like to reiterate their gratitude to all those who made it possible for the conference to take place last year: in particular, we would like to acknowledge the support of Brian Nelson, Kate Rigby and Chris Worth; the hard work of Gail Ward; Edouard Mornaud and the warm hospitality of Alliance Française; Elizabeth Presa for organizing the parallel exhibition *White Light: Witnessing Witness*; and, last but not least, Andrew Benjamin, whose advice has been indispensable. Also, as always, we would like to thank the many referees, who remain anonymous but whose reviewing has been indispensable.

At the end of the conference, more than a year ago, a commitment was expressed to persevere with furthering the horizons of Blanchot studies, and to do so through collaborations that transgress national as well as disciplinary borders. The present volume is a product of that commitment. But it would be remiss not to mention as well the forthcoming volume *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy* (University of Delaware Press, 2005), edited by Brian Nelson, Leslie Hill and Dimitris Vardoulakis, which was also conceived at the same conference. However the commitment is not exhausted with these two publications. A commitment is always carried to the future – just like a promise whose infinite deferral marks the responsibility to work towards accomplishing it.

The following *Colloquy* issue will be a general one, but the one after, Issue 12 (November 2006), will also be a proceedings of the conference organized last April, titled "Be true to the earth," edited by Peter Coleman and Kate Rigby. Also, the proceedings of the forthcoming conference "Imagining the Future: Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction" will be published as Issue 14 (November 2007) of *Colloquy*, and they will be edited by Andrew Milner, Matthew Ryan and Robert Savage. The promise has many faces and many areas where it can assume its responsibility.

*Rhonda Khatab*  
*Carlo Salzani*  
*Sabina Sestigiani*  
*Dimitris Vardoulakis*

## Abbreviations of Blanchot's Works

- A** *L'amitié*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- AC** *Après-coup, précédé par le ressassement éternel*. Paris: Minuit, 1983.
- AO** *L'attente, l'oubli*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.
- AM** *L'arrêt de mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.
- AMV** *Au moment voulu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.
- AwO** *Awaiting Oblivion*. Trans. John Gregg. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- BC** *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.
- BR** *The Blanchot Reader*. Ed. Michael Holland. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995.
- CI** *La communauté inavouable*. Paris: Minuit, 1983.
- CQ** *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953.
- DH** *Le dernier homme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953.
- DS** *Death Sentence*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1978. = *SHR*: 129-87.
- ED** *L'écriture du désastre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.
- EI** *L'entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.
- EL** *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- F** *Friendship*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Fp** *Faux pas*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943.
- FP** *Faux Pas*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2001.
- GO** *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*. Ed. Press Adams Sitney. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1981.

- IC** *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- ID** *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Blanchot / Derrida). Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- LS** *Lautréamont et Sade*. Paris: Minuit, 1963.
- LV** *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Minuit, 1959.
- MH** *The Most High*. Trans. Allan Stoekl. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- PD** *Le pas au-delà*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- PF** *La part du feu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- SHR** *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*. Ed. George Quasha. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1999.
- SL** *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
- SNB** *The Step Not Beyond*. Trans. Lycette Nelson. Albany. New York: SUNY, 1982.
- TH** *Le très-haut*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.
- UC** *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1988.
- VC** *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and "After the Fact"*. Trans. Paul Auster. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1985. = *SHR*: 3-50, 487-95.
- WD** *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- WF** *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

## ***ARTICLES***

**Blanchot, Leiris:  
A Question of Age\***

*for Pierre Vilar*

**Christophe Bident**

(trans. Michael FitzGerald)

“He was astonishingly silent and seemed to me remote, even absent.” This kind of statement, common to all accounts, or nearly all, of Maurice Blanchot, here concerns Michel Leiris, at the time of his writing *L'Âge d'homme* (*The Age of Man*) in 1935: it is in this way, at least, that he is perceived for the first time by Denis Paulme.<sup>1</sup> I recall this statement only to unsettle, albeit briefly, the received wisdom concerning two writers who often met, and yet – despite a mutual admiration that was steadfast, or nearly so – never became friends.

Blanchot, Leiris. Of the two men, one could quickly sketch a joint portrait: the withdrawal or *regularity* of the former, the worldliness or *secularity*

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\* This article was originally presented at a colloquium on Michel Leiris, organised by Francis Marmande and Pierre Vilar and held on 16 and 17 December 2004 at the University of Paris-3 and the University of Paris-7. The author had been invited by Pierre Vilar to discuss the relations between Blanchot and Leiris.

of the latter; the few encounters, the real suspicions, but also the political proximity, as at the moment of the *Manifeste des 121*; and further, even at a distance, the shared anxieties, leading so soon to studies in psychiatry for one, to psychoanalysis for the other; the same pleasure in keeping or exuding secrets, the *night without night* or *the other night*, the childlessness after having grown up, these little last-borns, with two elder brothers and an elder sister; finally, the attitude in confrontation with death, right up to the figure of a common fascination, the desire to be able to see oneself dead. Of the two bodies of work, one could just as quickly mark the opposing choices: that of dissimulation, that of exhibition; but also the intersection of the narrative planes, the theatrical scenes, the critical inventories, the mana-words, *terror* or *toro*, for it turns out that a shared, or rather strange, gesturality sustains them, right up to the dramatisation that one and the other accord to writing: "After all, I will have hardly existed other than on paper," confides Leiris to Jean Schuster;<sup>2</sup> "his life is entirely consecrated to literature and to the silence which is proper to it," recalls the notice prefixed to the pocket edition of Blanchot's works. And finally, of the two texts of which Pierre Vilar has invited me to speak, *L'Âge d'homme* and Blanchot's commentary on it, "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," one could, no less rapidly, locate the points of anchorage and connection, the overlaps and the incongruities, direct and indirect, the openings and the silences, the endings and the deferments.<sup>3</sup> *One could*, in sum, moving hastily along all these lines, force Blanchot and Leiris back to back – sometimes in a 'heads or tails,' more often in the challenge of a duel of gazes: thus one attains to a *structure*. And one could then ferret about elsewhere and read of more striking relationships: Bataille, Bacon, Sartre, Picasso, Masson for Leiris; Bataille, Levinas, Antelme, Char, Derrida for Blanchot.

And yet. The recurrence of Bataille's name is significant, at least as an indication. It permits me to underscore a first question, which cannot be answered except in the rediscovery, some day, of a correspondence hitherto kept a secret: When did Blanchot read *L'Âge d'homme* for the first time? At its appearance, in 1939? Later, after the encounter with Bataille, and thus also with Leiris, in 1941? Or only with its republication in 1946? This last date seems the least likely, if one recalls the reference to literature as the gesture of menace in the bullring, found in the article Blanchot devotes to *Haut mal* in 1943 (*FP* 139/*Fp* 161). What can we then assume of Blanchot's reading in 1939? Without doubt, that it has undergone considerable change – not so much Proust and Valéry, Maurras and Daniel-Rops, as Woolf and Thomas Mann, Nerval and Lautréaumont. Supposing thus Blanchot, in 1939 and at the age of 32, or at 34 in 1941, opens a book which commences with the words "I have just reached 34 years of age," what re-

*flection* might be produced by so direct a proposition? He who, in 1948, one year after “Gazes from Beyond the Grave,” will publish a frighteningly autobiographical *récit*, *Death Sentence*, a partial, indirect, secret, veiled and cryptic autobiography, which it is necessary, today, to re-read as such, a *récit* which begins just as dryly: “These things happened to me in 1938,” – what had he been able to experience in his reading of the incipit of *L’Âge d’homme*? He who, in 1956, while he is writing “Battle with the Angel,” his commentary on the first two volumes of *The Rules of the Game*, will attribute the age of 38 to *the last man*, the principal figure of the *récit* which appears the following year, in what way had he thus been able to read the first phrase of *L’Âge d’homme*? The question, the question of the relation of Blanchot to Leiris, therefore comes down to just that, to a question of age, and between them, in all the distance between them, the Bataillan question of experience is lightly displaced, becoming a question of age: what can one read or write at 34 or 38 years old, between *the age of man* and the age of *the last man*? Besides, as you know, Leiris’ proposition – “I have just turned 34” – is followed by this apposition: “34 years, half a life,” which Blanchot, he who publishes his first book, *Thomas the Obscure*, in 1941 at the age of 34, after eight years of erasures, cuts and perhaps immolations, which Blanchot, then, must have read as a cutting-edge: half a life, half a death. Unless he also read it, then, this “half,” in its conjugal metaphor – inasmuch as the associations of woman, of life, of death, of thought, in books such as *Thomas the Obscure* or *Death Sentence*, are unsettled by vertigos and ricochets, impossibilities and epiphanies. I recall, in passing, that it is the death of an intimate friend, Claude Severac, that he evokes in the dramatic fiction of *Death Sentence*, and that the *récits* of the fifties resonate with appeals to Denise Rollin – the one-time mistress of Georges Bataille. And I recall, finally, the numerous names of women which haunt Blanchot’s fiction, Anne, Irene, Barbe (Saint Barbara, but then again the *femme à barbe* – the bearded lady), Colette, Nathalie, Claudia and, just as Bataille, Simone, and just as Leiris, Judith – Judith is the given name of one of the two main female characters in *When the Time Comes*, published in 1951.

One can thus begin in a delirium of dates, ages, the delirium of life, which I imagine could carry away a reader, Maurice Blanchot – of whom it is necessary to say over and again that he was not the man of a dry solitude, a lofty retreat, a spiritual criticism and an ethereal fiction – of whom it must be specified again that it quite often occurred to him to multiply arithmetical references, little games of figures and dates, beginning with the figures and dates of his own birth, which he constantly sprinkled across texts immersed in life, existence, experience, in a cyclical movement wherein the differential analysis of the very terms life, existence, experience, might to-

day permit a re-reading of the displacements of this oeuvre. Not in order to legitimate the emotive, emotional or motional framework of the reading, but so as to allow you to sense to what extent Blanchot might have been sensitive to this weighty title, *L'Âge d'homme*, to its dry and balanced opening sentence, an *independent* proposition, as grammar nicely puts it in this respect. Even if this first sentence is followed, as you know, by a series of physical observations, of which none, or nearly none, corresponds to what could be reported in a portrait of Blanchot. Here again, *one could* trace out the opposition of these paradigms: the “average build,” the “brown eyes,” the “coloured complexion” of the one, the largeness, the blue eyes, the pale complexion of the other; but also, the neutralisation of these traits in such or such a detail, the “pronounced brow,” or the “meeting of two signs,” astrological signs, Aries and Taurus for Leiris, born the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, Virgo and Libra for Blanchot, born the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September. Everything is at play, then, from the outset, the outset of the book; the real opposition, the symbolic opening, the access to the imaginary.

In fact, let us read Leiris' titles, all the titles of the intermediary sections of *L'Âge d'homme*: “*Femme de preux*” (“Lady Valiant”), “*Mon oncle l'acrobate*” (“My Uncle the Acrobat”), “*La glu*” (“Birdlime”), “*Fesse mordue*” (“The Stung Cheek”), “*Kay*,” “*L'Ombilic saignant*” (“The Bleeding Umbilical Cord”) ... none, or nearly none, could be a title of Blanchot's. With chapter headings as with physiological traits, nothing displayed, nothing visible, or *nearly nothing*, is substitutable, nor even this time comparable. Traits of men, traits of books differ, but does that say the same of their bodies? I turn to that which I wish to propose today: that Maurice Blanchot, critic, would never have been interested in *L'Âge d'homme* by Michel Leiris, autobiographer, friend of a friend, if he had read in it only a knowing rhetoric, or even a profound renewal of the genre. It was, on the contrary, the life of the man and the exposition of this life which held him in, because neither this life nor this exposition of life resembled his own, because he saw in it – lived in it – a personal and literary courage, in contrast to which he was in the process of taking the diametrically opposed route, except that in the depths of the body, in the vibrations of the throat or the latency of the sexual organs, and in the depths of writing, in the ardour of the existence and the form of experience, he did not remove himself from the vitality of this everyday struggle. Finally, and it is not the least of these paradoxes, each will have at the same time denied and sublimated his own courage. Blanchot will reveal this, if I may say so, in an aside to a text on Louis-René des Forêts' *Le Bavard*, where he places on the *same* plane the closure of the fictional  *récit* and the opening of the autobiographical text: “Michel Leiris gives us the gift, to us as readers, of the security of which he deprives him-

self. This is his generosity: we find our comfort – our ground – where he exposes himself where he will perhaps lose his footing” (“Idle Speech” [1963], *F* 119/A 139).

Distinct and irreconcilable inclinations; incomparable stances. And yet, by his veiled face or pierced mask, a Montaigne via surrealism and a Mallarmé deserting the stage to bring forth *écrits*, neither the one nor the other inscribes himself in the linear progression which seems to carry literature, as we were now commencing or recommencing to say, *always more away towards itself*. Neither avant-garde nor rearguard, Leiris and Blanchot, on their two distinct flanks, ex-centric but not marginal, shift the playing-field, force back the limits of the central body, run and discuss in a manner intensive and critical, but never extensively theoretical, both readable, but inimicable, and each overturning, in their own prodigal slenderness, this voluminous body of literature. I think here of a phrase of Roland Barthes’, who puts himself, somewhat later, “*at the rearguard of the avant-garde*,” which he explained thus: “to be avant-garde is to know what is dead; to be of the rearguard is still to love it.”<sup>4</sup> I would be tempted to say that neither Leiris nor Blanchot themselves will have ever known what is dead, will have ever been able still to love it. Or rather: that they will never have known either how to give or to decree or to recognise death. Their struggle – singular, vital, each with his own arsenal – is a struggle of exception. It ceaselessly interrogates the limits (both the frontiers and the shortfalls) of the gift, of the decree, and of recognition. From the thirties, Michel Leiris had gone several strides ahead – on the question of aesthetics and politics, surely; even as Maurice Blanchot learnt much towards his own slow revolution. But above all on the question of age: Leiris has a lead of six years, five months and two days: at 32 or 34 years old, at 34 or 38, and still at 40 or 46, this *counts*, and despite all that Blanchot knew, it was what struck him most about Leiris. In the matter of “failings,”<sup>5</sup> he had something to prove; and few others could explain to him how “one passes both well and badly (and sooner badly than well) from the miraculous chaos of childhood to the ferocious order of manhood.”<sup>6</sup> I imagine the impact, or impacts, the points of impact that such a phrase might have had on Blanchot.

How, in other words, to understand, without all these impressions of reading, the construction of the article that Maurice Blanchot devotes to *L’Âge d’homme* in 1947? I wish to trace out, with you, its three movements.

In a first movement, that of pages 244 to 249, are interlinked and intersected three questions: that of writing, that of genre, and that of the possibility or impossibility of speech. One finds here a mixture of synthesis and paraphrase of the preface, one or two long citations, some explicit references to Chateaubriand, Rousseau and Kierkegaard. The development of

the critical discussion is not especially linear. It is a more muted discussion, whose references are implicit, which frames Blanchot's reflection. And it is still the friend, Bataille, who straddles the in-between. It is necessary to refer here to the debate which crystallised the meeting of Blanchot and Bataille, at the moment when the latter is writing *Inner Experience*, a debate sometimes aired publicly in the presence of a few friends, amongst them Leiris. It would be necessary here to re-read Bataille's book, paying attention to the spoken and written citations that he makes of Blanchot; and to re-read as well the article that Blanchot devotes to the book at its appearance and which he collects in *Faux Pas*. If the terms of this debate re-surface here, it is because the question of the authenticity of experience and of the legitimacy of its communication, in particular by literature, concern no less the autobiographical, or non-autobiographical, undertaking of Leiris. (I take thus the curious phrase on page 245 of the article: "*The Age of Man* is not an autobiography.") Blanchot cannot but be aware of the distance that Leiris imposes on the "confession" or on the "aesthetic" value, in inverted commas in the preface, just as on the conception of "expression," in italicised capitals in the same preface. Performance, self-knowledge, revelation, cathartic release, psychic indulgence are the various stakes of the new debate, the newly mobilised debate, presented by Leiris and recapitulated by Blanchot *in this order*, because they culminate for him in the putting at stake of any "profound speech" which not only "is born from the vertigo that rises from the impossibility of speaking," but indeed make of this its "motive" and its "single theme" (*WF* 249/*PF* 242). One could read in this classification imposed by Blanchot on Leiris' circumlocutions, and in its final exasperation, an ascent culminating in aporia or paroxysm, an impossibility or a pinnacle, in either case purely rhetorical. But let us not forget: we are only at the end of the first movement; that Leiris will have something to add to this dilemma, for example in *Fibrilles*: "Communication, authenticity, what rotten planks such words are!" he finally spits out after a long passage which complicates the reductive opposition between authenticity and fiction, or between dissimulation and exhibition;<sup>7</sup> in the end, because it concerns there a purely fictional putting at stake which cannot be resolved by criticism, and thus I willingly turn back to the phrase that Blanchot puts in the epigraph to his novel *The Most High*, appearing the year after "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," in 1948, and in which one could with good reason hear a certain echo of Leiris or of the debate with Leiris: "I am a trap for you. Even if I tell you everything – the more loyal I am, the more I'll deceive you: it's my frankness that'll catch you" (*MH* xxxvi/*TH* 7). That Blanchot responds to Leiris above all in literature is more than apparent from the entirety of his fiction. Blanchot will always maintain the opposition, presented

in the preface to *L'Âge d'homme*, between the true and the verisimilar, the "almost raw" and the work of the imagination, in short, to what Leiris calls "the negation of a novel."<sup>8</sup> For though he responds otherwise to it, Blanchot will not be far from having the same program. The negation of the novel is what he demonstrates in 1948 with simultaneous publication of *The Most High*, last novel, and *Death Sentence*, first  *récit*, and is what he will continue to elaborate in publishing henceforth shorter and, if I can say so, more autobiographical  *récits*, reflecting all the more categorically – as in the famous text which opens *The Book to Come*, in 1958 – on the opposition between the  *récit* and the novel. But it is from May 1947 onwards – a mere month after the article on *L'Âge d'homme* – that Blanchot, under cover of another category, had tried to relaunch the same debate. This category is that of the wondrous, which Blanchot defines thus: "the more a work is imaginary, the more it disdains any graspable signification, the closer this work must be to the vital experience of the one who wrote it."<sup>9</sup> One reencounters here the concepts of life, experience, existence; one can well imagine their contemporaneity, beyond Bataille, Leiris and Blanchot. It is important to signal that in May 1947, Blanchot relates this blurring of paradigms – imaginary/vital, signification/experience – once more to Michel Leiris: "*Aurora*, in appearance an entirely unfounded work, is so near to its author that he seems, like Poe's black cat, to have shut himself up in it as though by mistake, leaving his imprint in relief upon it. Whoever, having read *L'Âge d'homme*, where the writer, in a plain-spoken autobiography, delivers to us all the details of his person and his life, reads the purely imaginary fiction that is *Aurora*, is almost frightened to discover, at every instant, buried in the deeper layers of its language, beneath the world and everyday existence, the remnants of his entirely fossilised, entirely disappeared yet always present figure, obstinately manifest in its disappearance."<sup>10</sup> One hears here the paradox of the trace to which Maurice Blanchot will so "obstinately" return. I recall also the first phrase of the preface to *Aurora*: "I was not yet thirty when I wrote *Aurora*, and the world, for its part, knew nothing of the brown plague." And I recall finally that in the closing pages of "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," Blanchot will stress *Aurora* at length – mentioning it three times. It would still be necessary to sketch the relations between this text of Leiris' and the first version of Blanchot's first novel, *Thomas the Obscure*, which each author begins at the same age, and in which numerous thematic and stylistic motifs correspond.

We turn to the second movement. If the first culminates in this dialectic of profound speech and its impossibility, it is because in 1947 Blanchot rediscovers, in Leiris' text, the kernel of questions which have concerned him for at least a decade, whether with Mallarmé or Kafka, before the first meet-

ing with Bataille. What might be noted here is the degree to which Blanchot is one of the few to take Leiris' book seriously to this extent. To this extent – that is to say, to the extent of speaking of Leiris as of Kafka, and, one might add, of Kafka as of Leiris. In fact it is necessary to see how the buoyant rhetoric which suffuses the first two articles of *The Work of Fire*, on Kafka, contrasts with the weightier tone of the article on Leiris. That Blanchot should be more immediately at ease with Kafka goes without saying. But in this gravity as regards Leiris, one detects as well the strategy of the literary columnist: to make room for a book unjustly neglected, if not simply misunderstood, refused. Neither Blanchot nor Levinas, who will also write on *L'Âge d'homme*, would however dream of stigmatising a supposed impropriety in speaking of oneself, which is a good measure of the difference between such an ideological position and, here, an ethical judgement. The question is not, for Blanchot, that of speaking of oneself or speaking of the world, but of imposing rules on a doubled speech. The rule, the constraint; these are the words which dominate the second, briefer movement of the article, pages 249 to 251, two long paragraphs where Blanchot restates, apropos of Leiris, a conception which is his own and according to which literature is organised around what it cannot say – to which he will return in "Battle with the Angel" and which he will name in a still more straightforward way: the "form capable of giving a cohesion to what does not tolerate cohesion" (*F* 133/A 154 see, esp. the whole beginning of the article).

This biting formula leads us to the essential: the third movement, whose first sentence takes us and develops this question of form. "The very 'form' of *The Age of Man*, the stiffness of expression, the ordered constraint which allows unleashing, the reticence which is frankness, all these characteristics are not simple writing procedures but are part of the existence that they help to bring into the open" (*WF* 251/*PF* 244). One sees here that what interests Blanchot in *L'Âge d'homme* is neither a rhetoric nor a stylistics, but the relation between a form and an existence, a coiled-up or walled-in relation such as he recalls of Poe's cat, and thus simply inferred or rather extrapolated. That is the formulation of a realism or of an existentialism of form, which is astonishing in Blanchot, and which probably astonishes Blanchot himself, who justifies himself straightaway with a citation from Leiris: "That corresponded to a symbolic attempt at *mineralization*, a defensive reaction against my internal weakness and the disintegration I felt threatened with; I would have liked to make myself a kind of breast-plate, pursuing the same ideal of *stiffness* in my exterior that I pursued poetically."<sup>11</sup> Thus there would be, according to Leiris, a parallel quest, and doubly symbolic, in poetry and in existence. But what interests Blanchot, again, is not this theoretic embryo, vaguely conceived in the universe of a

psychoanalyst father and an aesthete mother, or the inverse. What interests him is the writing of the sentence, starting with the italics – *mineralisation*, *stiffness*, these terms which refer to the sentence preceding the one cited by Blanchot, a sentence thus juxtaposed to the one he cites, but which he precisely does not cite: “Having skin frequently irritated by razor-burn, I had come into the habit of powdering my face (from my fifteenth year) as if it had been a matter of dissimulating beneath a sort of mask and fully imprinting my person with an impassivity akin to that of plaster.” This sentence Blanchot does not cite, but he evokes all the same: “this affectation of impassiveness, this plaster-cast mask,” he writes (*WF* 251/*PF* 245). At this point Blanchot’s reader cannot but evoke *Death Sentence*, a *récit*, let me recall, published the following year, whose entire second part revolves around plaster masks, mortuary masks, by turns hidden and revealed. It is therefore a motif – the motif of the neutral mask, one might say – which stops him here, and moreover it is his entire critical approach which he finds, in germ, formulated, between liquidity and minerality, singularity and neutrality, experience and existence, life and poetry, impression and abstraction. It is this incessant to-and-fro between terms which will not cease to preoccupy him, and the elaboration of a poetics of the neuter is itself sustained only by these vertigos of singularity.

One can thus see that once this step has been taken, Blanchot wants to go no further into the book on which he is commenting, or rather, on which he is not content to comment. “We do not wish to go into the movement of themes,” he writes at the start of the following paragraph (*WF* 252/*PF* 245).<sup>12</sup> The only possible citation is thus, for him, the following, which he elevates to a law of the book: “I cannot rightly say that *I die*, since – dying a violent death or not – I am only partly present at the event.”<sup>13</sup> This is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot the law of selection of themes, facts, images and their offshoots: always, a metaphor or metonymy of death. It is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot just as much the law of *Aurora*, citations from which begin to litter the article, in comparison with citations from *L’Âge d’homme*, on minerality or death for example (and indeed Blanchot finds in these some telling parallels). It is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot the law of his own, that of *Death Sentence* but also of *The Madness of the Day* (1949), and moreover that of the *récit* which he will not deliver until much later, *The Instant of My Death*, where he recounts how he was lined up by a firing squad, in June 1944, only to be miraculously saved, “prevented from dying by death itself,” “as if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him,” forever in deferment, whence this short interior dialogue “always in abeyance:” “I am alive. No, you are dead” (*ID* 3, 9, 11). Again, one can better understand

accordingly the commentary with which he matches the citation of this “*I die*,” since he also evokes with it the death of Claude Severac, the death of Anne in *Thomas the Obscure*, the death of J. in *Death Sentence*, and his own wartime episode in the line of fire: “The fact that we cannot experience the reality of death to the end makes death unreal, and this irreality condemns us to fear dying only unreally, not really to die, to remain as if we are held, forever, between life and death, in a state of non-existence and non-death, from which our whole life perhaps takes its meaning and its reality. We do not know that we die. We do not know either that others die, for the death of another remains foreign to us and always incomplete, since we who know it, we are alive” (*WF 252/PF 246*). And, a few lines later: “Such a vertigo between living and dying explains, according to Michel Leiris, that in life, a loss of self, which is an enactment of death, can sometimes reassure us against death and help us to face it” (*WF 253/PF 246*). To look death in the face: one finds here, partially cited, the famous formula of La Rochefoucauld and the phrase of Hegel’s so often adduced by Bataille, but also, a passage from the article that Blanchot publishes a few days after having been in the line of fire, where he evokes the one “prisoner to eyes which subjugate”;<sup>14</sup> and at the bottom of the page one comes across an occurrence of the title of the article, “gaze from beyond the grave”: “we desire to be able to see ourselves dead, to assure ourselves of our death by directing a veritable gaze from beyond the grave toward our nothingness, from a point situated beyond death.” Blanchot has just cited, in the meantime, another passage from *L’Âge d’homme*, which once more conceals, the way one series can conceal another, another citation – this one therefore invisible but *traced*, in outline, by the commentary: to live death through the ‘little death,’ real disappearance through erotic vertigo, is more or less, writes Leiris in a sentence juxtaposed anew to the one Blanchot has just cited, “as though it were a matter of settling a bill in full, sacrificing a part to be done with the whole, consigning one’s losses to the flames [*faire la part du feu*, ‘to cut one’s losses’] and gleefully watching the stables burn.”<sup>15</sup> From one title to another: “gaze from beyond the grave,” the title of the article, masks “the work of fire [*la part du feu*],” the title of the book. Or in other words, Leiris drives Hölderlin off the cover, since the title initially conceived by Blanchot was *Between Dog and Wolf*, extracted from a poem of Hölderlin which returns by way of epigraph. But let us be honest: Leiris is not alone, since the work of fire further refers to at least Bataille and Nietzsche. What’s more, the expression takes on, in Leiris’ sentence, a pejorative accent that Blanchot will reverse. But rightly so: that signals well enough the difference which separates him, even amidst these proximities, from Leiris. One dramatisation refers to another dramatisation, like the

comic to the tragic, the light to the heavy, or better yet: perhaps Blanchot and Leiris will never be in agreement as to where to agree or as to the accent to place on one or other of these terms in the undertaking that they share, that of literature.

“A veritable gaze from beyond the grave.” To see oneself dead, this impossible and purely oneiric or fictional vertigo, is the obsession which sends Blanchot back, beyond *Aurora*, to the poem *Nights without Nights* that he cites on the last page of the article, and which he will cite afresh in “Dreaming, Writing,” his 1961 article on Leiris, this time on the first page, the texts thus linking up like so many episodes in the relation of the two men and their literatures. Like so many paving-stones: for from 1947 to 1961 the question remains the same, first simply sketched, then developed more fully, a question which has long interested Blanchot and which he will have been aided by Leiris to pose on his own account, in terms of the *neutre*. In the forties and fifties, Blanchot articulates it most often around the opposition of the first and third persons: thus ends the article on *L'Âge d'homme*, and it will become, in 1955, one of the dominant leitmotifs of *The Space of Literature*. The *neutre* does not appear as such, but in the forms of the third person, the impersonal, the *that* (we are not far, still, from psychoanalysis, or from the Nietzschean *it*), the mask, death, “its eternity of marble and its cold impassivity,” Blanchot reiterates (*WF* 255/*PF* 248). One can understand then that the article is *oriented* from the outset, *polarised* by the final citation, that of *Nights without Nights*, this dream in which the subject introduces his head through an oculus [*œil-de-bœuf*], and there again is the optic metaphor, into a “cylindrical clay-plastered garret,” and there again is Africa, a “cramped space,” and there again is the black cat, this dreamt anxiety in which the subject looks in fact into himself. The whole article, yes, is oriented by this dream or rather by the commentary upon it, a line, a sentence, the last of the article and thus the first: “*The Age of Man* is this lucid gaze by which the *I*, penetrating into this ‘inner darkness,’ discovers that what is looking in it is no longer the *I*, ‘structure of the world,’ but already the monumental, gazeless, faceless, nameless statue: the *He* of Sovereign Death.” One could thus also say that the whole article of 1947 is oriented by the article of 1961; what must still be envisaged would be a comparative reading of these two articles. I will anticipate here only one term of such a reading, the *neutre*, because it enables an explanation according to Blanchot of the introspective gaze as a gaze upon the double, upon unsettling and anguishing resemblance: “this monumental ‘He’ that Michel Leiris anxiously sees himself becoming when he looks at himself in the empty, lightless depths of his silo” (*F* 146-7/*A* 169). This silo could lead to a Leirisian gloss, at least an anagram: one rediscovers in it

the *lois*, the laws of the dream, the laws of literature, brought into apposition as in Blanchot's title, "Dreaming, Writing," laws which are those of vigilance, of the *neutre*, such that literature – Blanchot's, Leiris' – becomes, like the dream, the site where "a neutral power of resembling, which exists prior to any particular designation, is ceaselessly in search of some figure that it elicits, if need be, in order to settle on it" (F 146-7/A 168). There, it seems to me, fourteen years after the first article, is the best definition of *L'Âge d'homme*.

In 1961 then, the light erotics of the work of fire is volatilised in the abstraction of the *neutre*, and *L'Âge d'homme* indirectly and belatedly receives from Blanchot its most probing rule – that which unifies in a single principle the infinite circulation, the untimely disclosure, the dissemination of figures. In sum, Blanchot specifies the content of what he had in the meantime named, in "Battle with the Angel," the "form capable of giving a cohesion to what does not tolerate cohesion." Within this paradox writing lives; one finds here animated – never fossilised, as one might have suspected from the end of the first movement of "Gazes from Beyond the Grave" – this relation between the possibility and the impossibility of speech. Again it is necessary to specify that the neutral power in question here has nothing to do with any form of neutralisation, particularly of a sexual nature. For from Leiris to Kay or from Blanchot to J. (I note in passing, though it has probably already been remarked, that the "Kay" of Daisy, in *L'Âge d'homme*, is none other than an Anglo-Saxon initial, and, specifically, Kafka's "K."), it is always a question of speech to a woman, whether or not in the desire "to bind oneself to a story," as Blanchot will write in *When the Time Comes*, of which it is the major leitmotif. Or as he will take up again in *Awaiting Oblivion*, in 1962 (note again the coincidence with the article on *Nights without Nights*), another major leitmotif, between a man and a woman: "have it so that I can speak to you." As you see, the dominant phrases of Blanchot's literature resound with a relation to Leiris. I would like in this connection to come back to a third and final veiled reference to *L'Âge d'homme* in "Gaze from Beyond the Grave": once more, a passage not cited, but which is juxtaposed to one cited in Blanchot's article. Blanchot quotes, on page 248, the extract on "the maniac for confession," the one who, paradoxically, out of timidity, overflows with intimate confidences, "especially with women." What strikes me is that the preceding paragraph recapitulates or summarises with incredible exactitude numerous situations from Blanchot's *récits*: "Here I address this woman uniquely because she is absent (to whom would one write if not to someone absent?). For by her distance, she merges with my nostalgia, insinuates herself between myself and most of my thoughts. It is not the point, certainly, that she is the *loved*

*object*, only the *substance of melancholy*, the image – fortuitous perhaps, but no less appropriate for it – of all which I lack, which is to say all that I desire and which keeps me from this urgent need to express myself, to formulate in phrases more or less convincing the always-too-little that I feel and fix it on paper, persuaded as I am of the idea that a muse is necessarily a death, that the edifice of poetry – like a canon which is nothing but a hole encased in bronze – must rest on that which one does not have, and that in the final account it is merely a matter of writing to fill in a void, to at least site, by relation to the most lucid part of ourselves, the place where this incommensurable abyss gapes open.”<sup>16</sup> The canon apart, or again, the rule apart, this abyss is that of Blanchot.

A final point. In some sentences Blanchot and Leiris will nonetheless find themselves with the same measure of the canon, will adopt the same dosage of the rule: these are short sentences, placidly balanced, all the more placidly inasmuch as they tacitly burst with affect. In Leiris’ work, and especially in *L’Âge d’homme*, one comes across them now and then, often at the beginning or end of a chapter, before or after the dissemination of figures. In Blanchot, they are particularly to be found in a *récit* published in a serial in 1949, later collected under the title *The Madness of the Day*. They are the personal expansion of this phrase from *L’Âge d’homme*: “Like many others, I made my descent into hell, and, like some, I have more or less come back.”<sup>17</sup> It would be necessary to re-read the entire *récit* – where one would find sunken eyes, a cut hand, a disemboweled bull, quack doctors. As Leiris says after the episode of the ‘cut throat’: “my every representation of life has remained marked by it.”<sup>18</sup>

Decidedly, neither Leiris nor Blanchot will have ever been able to give, to decree, nor to recognise death. Or rather, to do so took them their whole life, a whole life of writing.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Denis Paulme, “Michel Leiris: quelques souvenirs,” in *Michel Leiris: le Siècle à l’Envers* (Tours: Farrago, 2004), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Leiris, Jean Schuster, *Entre Augures* (Paris: Terrain Vague, 1990), p. 33. Cf. also *L’Âge d’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 181: “I had attained to the age of manhood ... I answer my vocation ... confirmed to devote all my activity to literature.”

- <sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Gazes from Beyond the Grave" (1947), *WF* 244-55/*PF* 238-48. Blanchot's other texts on Leiris are: "Battle with the Angel" (1956), *F* 129-39/*A* 150-61; "Dreaming, Writing" (1961), *F* 140-48/*A* 162-70. See also some pages in "Poetry and Language" (1943), *FP* 135-40/*Fp* 157-62; and a few lines from "Du Merveilleux" (1947), in eds. Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar, *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques* (Tours: Farrago, 2003), pp. 42-3.
- <sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, "Réponses" [1970], in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 3: 1038.
- <sup>5</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 196.
- <sup>6</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 40.
- <sup>7</sup> Michel Leiris, *Fibrilles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 286.
- <sup>8</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Blanchot, "Du Merveilleux", p. 39.
- <sup>10</sup> Blanchot, "Du Merveilleux", pp. 42-3.
- <sup>11</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, pp. 183-4.
- <sup>12</sup> He will make the same gesture in "Battle with the Angel," remarking in a note: "This is why the commentator must respond to the candor of the author with an equal reserve. He must be very careful not to make the portrait of a portrait, which, always further simplified, might risk imposing itself on the living model like a death mask" (*F* 298/*A* 157). The "death mask," precisely, is reserved for literature.
- <sup>13</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 85.
- <sup>14</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Des Diverses Façons à Mourir," in *Journal des débats*, 29 June 1944.
- <sup>15</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 87. This sentence follows that which Blanchot cites in *WF* 253/*PF* 246.
- <sup>16</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, pp. 154-5.
- <sup>17</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 27.
- <sup>18</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 104.

**Forgetting to Remember:  
From Benjamin to Blanchot**

**Amresh Sinha**

*Forgetting is the primordial divinity, the venerable ancestor and the first presence of what, in a later generation, will give rise to Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses. The essence of memory is therefore forgetting: the forgetfulness of which one must drink in order to die.*

Blanchot ("Forgetful Memory", IC 315)

Let us begin with Lethe, a river in Hades whose waters caused forgetfulness to dead souls who drank from it. The daughter of Eris, Lethe was the sister of Thanatos (death), and with Zeus she bore the Graces/Charites. According to some myths, she was the mother of Dionysus. She was the goddess of oblivion and the river with the same name. When someone died and went to Hades, they had to drink from her water so they would forget their previous existence on earth. Once they had drunk from the waters of Lethe, they were left with nothing to reminisce about for eternity. If ever anybody was allowed back to life, again they had to drink from the river so they would not remember the afterlife. One of memory's earliest myths proclaims that at the dawn of philosophy, at the oracle of Lebadeia, a descent into Hades required that the questor be first taken to Lethe, the spring of forgetfulness, and then to Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, the second spring, the spring of remembrance.<sup>1</sup> Jean

Pierre Vernant recounts the legend thus:

Before venturing into the mouth of hell, the questor, who had already undergone rites of purification, was taken to two springs named respectively Lethe and Mnemosoune. He drank from the first and immediately forgot everything to do with his human life and, like a dead man, he entered the realm of Night. The water of the second spring was to enable him to remember all that he had seen and heard in the other world. When he returned he was no longer restricted to knowledge of the present moment: contact with the beyond had revealed both past and future to him.<sup>2</sup>

Two questions that immediately come to mind are concerned with the anteriority of forgetting in relation to memory. Why was the initiate taken first to Lethe? What was the motivation behind this unusual ritual in the cavern of Trophonius in Boetia that demands forgetfulness as the first step? Secondly, why is the power of memory, which enables him to remember what “he had seen and heard in the other world,” constituted as the second step – though unmistakably a step, an unmistakable step – toward knowledge? The dip in the Lethe cleanses the initiate from the distracting and unmitigated sorrows of the past like a clean slate. It is well known that for the ancient Greeks, knowledge, a source of immortality, derived from memory. One could ask, is the knowledge that memory brings to us the knowledge that memory is the *first presence* of what was before it, namely forgetting?

In a world that is perpetually mourning for the loss of memory, it is, then, not easy to write a few words in praise of the power of forgetting. And especially to inscribe in writing what itself is seen as one of the fundamental reasons for the historical decline, or, if you will, neglect of the mother of Muses’s, Mnemosyne’s greatest gift – memory. Legends about memory, from King Theuth in the *Phaedrus* of Plato to Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* concerning the Druids have always been uncomfortable with – if not downright opposed to – writing. According to Caesar, the Druids did not allow their students to write down the verses they were supposed to memorize. “They believe that religion forbids these courses to be written down.... They seem to ... have established this custom for two reasons: because they do not wish to divulge their doctrines, or to see their pupils *neglect* their memory by re-lying on memory, for it almost always happens that making use of texts has as its result decreased zeal for learning by heart and a diminution of memory.”<sup>3</sup>

In the *Phaedrus*, writing is associated with the decline of memory. These “marks which are outside the mind” – the writing, mark as the erasure – “allows forgetfulness to infiltrate into the soul through *amêlêtêsia mnêmes*, that is

through a lack of exercising the memory."<sup>4</sup> Historically speaking, it is not too late to speculate at this stage that with the introduction to writing, the function of memory was perhaps already starting to decline. Derrida has observed that writing as such (in Plato) is opposed to itself in the forms of internal memory, *mnêmê*, and external memory, *hypomnêsis*. Why is the writing bad? Is it because it "appears" to be good for memory only "externally" and not internally? What is true in writing helps memory from within *only* externally, whereas the truth is always produced dialectically from within, that is to say, from logic. "Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other."<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, too, comments on the question of writing and memorization in relation to the Judaic form of prescriptive writing, as in the stone inscription of the Torah "written with the finger of God," with that of Plato's recipe for writing as an antidote, a *pharmakon*, to memory. He writes: "let us note in passing the huge divide that opens up here between Plato and Moses: for one, writing, which is external and alien, is bad because it makes up for the loss of memory and thus encourages the failings of living memory (why bother remembering something since it can be written down?). For Moses, writing assuredly guarantees memorization, but it is also (or primarily) the 'doing,' the 'acting,' the exteriority which precedes interiority or will institute it [in the form of a commandment] – in the same way that Deuteronomy, in which Moses begins the whole story over again in the first person, redoubles and prolongs the difficult Exodus."<sup>6</sup>

"Let us not pretend to know what it is, this forgetting," writes Derrida in *Spurs*.<sup>7</sup> Let us also not be in haste in consigning forgetting to an "undifferentiated" status of forgetful nonremembering and elevate remembering to the realization of "redifferentiation," as in Merleau-Ponty's work. For the status of forgetting is, however, not contained within the articulation of a differentiation that sets itself apart from the other *only* in relation to it; rather, it constitutes itself in relation to itself, or, in other words, to borrow a turn of phrase from Blanchot, "what is forgotten points at once toward the thing forgotten [not remembered] and toward forgetting" (*IC* 315). Forgetting is the movement from the inside to the outside, "the most profound effacement," according to Blanchot, of the thing forgotten toward forgetting, toward forgetting's sovereign status (*IC* 315). He writes: "To forget what holds itself apart from absence and apart from presence, and nonetheless causes both presence and absence to come forth through the necessity of forgetting: this is the movement of interruption we would be asked to accomplish" ("Forgetting, Unreason", *IC* 195). Thus for Blanchot, forgetting is

not only a possibility of slipping outside (of possibility), but also the movement of “interruption” that forgets its own forgetting. Paul de Man will come dangerously close to this sense of forgetting in his writings on the rhetoric of temporality, where temporality also has the tendency to slip away in self-concealment in relation to its own origin.

The intimate relationship of remembering and forgetting deepens once we take into consideration that the past that emerges from the vertiginous folds in our memory is not quite identical to the past that was actually experienced at that time. De Man comments on the temporal structure of the past and its reversal through the remembered past in the texts of Marcel Proust, in *Blindness and Insight*, in the following terms: “The power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or feeling that actually existed, but it is a constitutive act of the mind bound to its own present and oriented toward the future of its own elaboration.”<sup>8</sup> De Man’s reading of the structure of temporality of the past as it is mediated in the presence of memory indicates a departure from the original temporality, in the sense that this moment in the presence of memory, in “memory’s immobile presence,” as Blanchot would have said, is structurally different, for it is bereft of the “original anxiety and weakness” that characterizes a past experience without precedence – for it has nothing before it – and has become the “creative moment par excellence.”<sup>9</sup> In Proust’s world, the “creative moment par excellence” is the division of a past and a present from its future obligation that is the retrospective domain of writing. De Man suggests that the transcendence of time (from a past and a present to its futurity) reenters the temporal process and, thus, marks the “arrival of the past” in the decisive event: “the event to write.”<sup>10</sup> Remembrance, thus, for de Man signals the disruption of the temporal flux, is the “forgetting” of the temporal continuity, and “enables a consciousness ‘to find access to the intemporal’.”<sup>11</sup>

Not only is time in memory a figure or metaphor, its authentic function as a continuous temporality has also been disrupted by the encounter of the futuristic act of writing into a reverse field of spatiality. This space of writing has a life that “steals away,” “escapes” the presence of temporality and affirms itself through the absence and the lack and the effacement of the forgotten words. Such a life of forgetting is inaccessible “to the space of *memoire*,” “where ... memory holds sway” (*IC* 195, 194). And the only spatial configuration of time possible in our experience is the manifestation of a transitional element, namely, what Walter Benjamin calls, the instant. Memory is the instant of an experience, lived synchronically, which is devoid of any temporality whatsoever, though it depends on the lapse of time. What one experiences in memory is hardly time, but the timelessness, or

the lack of it – the death of time. Neither past nor future is remembered in memory, but the self in its absence is now re-presented as a forgetting through images. Memory sees itself fleetingly as eternally present in the instant of forgetting.

To “forget forgetting,” to get away from forgetting, forgetting “gets away,” “escapes,” as Blanchot puts it, is the slippage into the outside, not as the antithesis of inside, or, as it should never be construed, an “escape” from inside to the outside. To forget forgetting for Blanchot implies, on the other hand, an “outside” of “possibility” itself. In other words, to forget forgetting, therefore, remains a possibility outside the realm of possibility itself, that is, forever an interruption. To forget forgetting, in Blanchot, is not a condition of possibility that depends upon the journey, the movement from the inside to outside, from the internal *memoire* to the external amnesia, that is, the absorption of memory into the outside of history. No such movement between the inside and outside, but a perpetual outside that stays outside of itself. Thus to a large extent, following Levinas’s trace of thought, Blanchot’s “outside” itself is “situated beyond all critique and all exegesis.”<sup>12</sup>

Levinas puts Blanchot’s work outside the realm of both literature and philosophy, as non-presence, non-absence; a condition that Blanchot has attributed to forgetting in the very first sentence of his essay “Forgetting, Unreason,” in his book *The Infinite Conversation*. Blanchot writes: “Forgetting: non-presence, non-absence” (*IC* 194). The “I can,” for Blanchot, according to Levinas, represents “the limit of the human.”<sup>13</sup> This “non-presence, non-absence” is not to be judged by the limit of the human, that is, the possibility of the ultimate possibility that resides in philosophy, as in the thought of Hegel and of Heidegger. It is the humanist contradiction of atheism, which holds on to a thought of secularism, of atheistic negation of gods in the emergence of Being, that makes Blanchot’s work so significant, because the secular thought has not really forgotten the withdrawal of gods – the retreat of gods with which the humanist tradition began, perhaps as early as the beginning of the early Lyric poem in archaic Greece in the seventh century – in the forgetting of gods. As far as forgetting in Heidegger is concerned, it is most obviously the forgetting of the truth of Being in Western metaphysics, which one can, perhaps, suggest began as early as Aristotle. Instead of heeding the “call of being,” humanity began to think in images. It began to place trust in science and technology, and, thus, utterly lost its true nature by the dominance of science and rationality.

Gerald Bruns provides another context through which we can analyze the concept of possibility as mediated through poetry, that is, through work. Bruns quotes Blanchot saying that, since the poem exists, thus arises the

very possibility of future: "It is ... because the poem exists that future is possible" (WF 103). Each work is a negation of that which already exists, thus it is possible to write a book, a book that is not yet written. Each book, then, is a negation, in terms of possibility, of all other books, but the moment the book is written, it is no longer mediated by possibility, but by its own impossibility, for it will never be written again. And, therefore, the future is no longer a part of it. "The work in this respect might be thought of as 'a refusal to take part in the world.' As a work of mediation, it always remains outside the world that it makes possible, as if it were itself impossible."<sup>14</sup>

Bruns interprets Blanchot's notion of the "possibility as negation" in the Hegelian sense. Therefore, the impossibility of possibility, which Blanchot is perpetually examining in his textual limits, is precisely this movement that turns away from the negativity of the Hegelian dialectics, the *Aufhebung* of *Aufhebung*, and it is, thus, simply a negation of negation. The movement of the Hegelian self-consciousness as a project of interiorizing consciousness that gathers itself in the memory of its own spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is precisely what is interrupted in Blanchot's thinking of the forgetting, which contends that forgetting is an essential aspect of memory that disrupts the movement of internalization.<sup>15</sup> Blanchot takes forgetting as a way to escape the teleological grasp of history, in order to make way for an "unreachable limit."

Forgetting as an endless detour of memory that refuses to identify itself with the limits or the extremes of the possibility of the past. The wandering forgetting, not unlike Benjamin's *flâneur*, is neutral to the sense of arrival and departure; instead, it is a perpetual movement outside the motion of a destiny or place. There is no sense of time in Benjamin's *flâneur*, similarly, neither for forgetting in Blanchot. With the abundance of paronomasia (the stringing together of words derived from the same root which nevertheless function grammatically as different parts of speech) and oxymorons in Blanchot's critical as well as literary texts (although his works make the so-called distinction between fiction and criticism an impossible limit), the aspect to the mastery ("to use language as if it were solely an instrument of power") of language is forever reduced to a *mise-en-abyme*.<sup>16</sup> The "fascination" with words overtakes the orientation of sense and meaning with which language conducts its teleological mission and renders it oblivious to the acts of literature, whereby meaning is already constituted prior to the autonomy of language, that is, words.

"The power of forgetting ... the capacity of feeling 'unhistorically'" that Nietzsche finds so essential for the state of happiness is in some sense reciprocated by Benjamin in "The Image of Proust," where he speaks of the

Proustian desire for “the elegiac idea of happiness.”<sup>17</sup> What makes happiness, as it were, tick, is none other than this power of forgetting, a power that is reminiscent, for both Nietzsche and Benjamin, of the great reliever, sleep. Neither Zarathustra nor Proust can prophesy or write without the aid of forgetting, without the assistance of darkness, without the power of slumber. At the bottom of the feeling of happiness, forgetting always provides succor. This happiness in forgetting is echoed in Blanchot’s *Awaiting Oblivion*: “Why this happiness in forgetting?” – “Happiness itself forgotten” (*AwO* 43). In contradistinction to the phenomenological perception of the continual state of becoming that occurs in the broad daylight of *remembering*, the Blanchotian *forgetting* is even more luminously etched in the darkness of the night. As Nietzsche reminds us: “Forgetfulness is a property of all action, just as not only light but darkness is bound up with the life of every organism.”<sup>18</sup> The striking image of day and night sends us back to Benjamin who comments on how Proust turned his days into nights to facilitate the “Penelope work of forgetting.” Historians, Nietzsche says, “refrain from sleep,” thus deny themselves the dreams that *express* the “deeper resemblance” of things. In remembrance (for Benjamin, *das Eingedenken*), life glances back and stays there in mute silence at the horrific state of things, in suffering and pain; but without forgetfulness it will become unhealthy, sterile, and stagnant. Only through learning to forget can mankind hope to attain happiness. Pain causes happiness to be forgotten. Yet one cannot speak of happiness, suggests Nietzsche, without realizing suffering and pain. Echoed in Blanchot, the relationship between memory and pain is articulated in the following sentence: “What is this pain, this fear, what is this light? The forgetting of light in light” (*AwO* 44).

To come back to the forgetting that itself turns away from us: this is no ordinary forgetting, where one loses things because of “absent mindedness,” through distractions. On the contrary, this forgetting that we still do not pretend to know, which is neither non-presence nor non-absence, keeps an unflinching vigil on an all-encompassing reach of memory and keeps it from inundating the hiddenness of things. The step beyond has always reminded us to preserve things *in* memory. *The Step Not Beyond* warns us, is an injunction, to preserve and hide things *from* memory.

It is as if, in Blanchot’s words, forgetting were “the very vigilance of memory,” which is irreducible to the difference between absence and presence (*IC* 315). Paul de Man will evoke this with reference to Hegel on memory, that is, the thinking memory (*Gedächtnis*), which is different from recollection (*Erinnerung*), in which “memory effaces remembrance”: “In order to have memory one has to be able to forget remembrance.”<sup>19</sup> And Benjamin certainly affirms the intertwining of memory and forgetting, when he compares the weaving of memory in Proust’s text to “the Penelope work

of recollection, or should I say, the Penelope work of forgetting.” Benjamin writes:

For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night was woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (III 202)

Benjamin’s reading of *mémoire involontaire* in “The Image of Proust” is closer to forgetting than remembering. It is my task here to establish the centrality of *forgetting* in both Benjamin’s and Blanchot’s work. It is to provide an uncanny glimpse of the “ascendancy” of forgetting – in its intertwining with remembering and its constitution of the “space of writing” – as the difference between life and literature to which both Benjamin’s above mentioned essay and Blanchot’s essay, “The Experience of Proust” in *The Book to Come*, can be traced.

What has Marcel Proust in common with a shy, self-effacing, yet “primordial” forgetting? We are already quite familiar with Benjamin’s famous analogy of the asymmetrical relation of the Penelope work of remembering to a Penelope work of forgetting in Proust’s texts. The consequence of such asymmetrical exchange, according to Blanchot, reverses the ordering of remembering and forgetting and advances a speculation that memory, “*me-moire*,” the space of memory, is far more disposed towards forgetting, “*Moira*,” the “portion of obscurity,” than to remembering (IC 314). The exegesis of the Benjaminian text “The Image of Proust” is the endeavor of one of my earlier essays, to which I will periodically pay attention.<sup>20</sup>

In the meanwhile, let me draw your attention to a curious passage in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* – right after the famous “*petites madeleines*” affair of the “all-powerful joy” of the unexpected “*mémoire involontaire*” – in which Proust contemplates a journey through the “dark region” that he must undertake, a descent into Hades in order to stand “face to face with something that does not yet exist,” his future as a writer.<sup>21</sup> Proust had already drank a second mouthful, in mythological terms it is equivalent to drinking

twice from the sacred springs of Lethe and Mnemosyne, which makes him realize that the power of memory is already declining, waning, before the future engagement of writing begins to take a firm foothold in his desires. We have all witnessed in ourselves the effects of declining memory, some of us as we grow old often talk of dim memories, but scarcely one sees or hears someone dispensing a few words in praise of an all-powerful joy of forgetting, except, perhaps, Nietzsche. As the memory recedes from us and the forgetting takes over, we start inventing things for what we thought was real. Some forgettings are even so dense and so deep that we would probably require the anchorage of memory as a rope – a Proustian trope – to climb out of it. The possibility of writing is revealed in the impossibility of forgetting memory as “fragments of existence withdrawn from time.”<sup>22</sup>

It is also Blanchot who tells us that before Proust had become the accomplished author of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, he, as the author of *Jean Santeuil* – what Blanchot calls a “complete-incomplete work” – is more of a pure writer who writes for the sheer joy of writing, where memory is an agency for living the instant that no longer belongs to either the past or the present. In “The Experience of Proust,” Blanchot writes:

He [Proust] does not see in it the simplest pleasure of a spontaneous memory, since it is not a question of memory, but of “transmutation of the memory into a directly felt reality.” He concludes that he is faced with something very important, a communication that is not of the present, or of the past, but the outpouring of the imagination in which a field is established between the two, and he resolves henceforth to write only in order to make such moments to come to life again, or to respond to the inspiration this transport of joy gives him. (BC 18)

The lack of interiority in the phenomena of reminiscence in Proust is further attested to by Blanchot as the joyous “encounter with the song of the Sirens”:

We see that what is given to him at that instant is not only the assurance of his calling, the affirmation of his gifts, but also the very essence of his literature – he has touched it, experienced it in its pure state, by experiencing the transformation of time into an imaginary space (the space unique to images), in that moving absence, without events to hide it, without presence to obstruct it, in this emptiness always in the process of becoming [the Nietzschean element of Proust’s involuntary memory]: the remoteness and distance that make up the milieu and the principle of metamorphoses and of what Proust calls metaphors. But it is no longer a matter of applying psy-

chology; on the contrary, there is no more interiority, for everything that is interior is deployed outwardly, takes the form of an image. Yes, at this time, everything becomes image, and the essence of image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought; without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning; unrevealed and yet manifest, having that presence-absence that constitutes the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens. (BC 14)

Proust's writing is the work of time, for it restores in the narrative the experience of life in a manner in which the narrative transforms itself into a narrative of time that fulfills itself in the time of the narrative. In Proust, Blanchot writes that the encounter between life and literature is not only superimposed, but "this encounter ... seems to provide him with the only space where the movement of his existence can be not only understood, but also restored, actually experienced, actually accomplished" (BC 11). "Thus he ends up," Blanchot tells us, "living in the mode of the time of the narrative" (BC 12). "The exteriorized time" – a time outside of itself – is that which annihilates, erases, time. But what Proust destroys in time through his writing, as an act of defiance against time, is precisely this destructive element of time against which his writing inveighs as a metaphor for restoring what has been ravaged by time and age. Therefore, in essence, in Proust, life itself is understood outside in the experience of writing, or in the writing of the experience, whichever way it may be, but it is always already accomplished in the form of the writing of memory, the inaccessible song. Proust's *madeleine*, "a wandering image" drifting between the shores of past and present experience, is like the Sirens' "enigmatic song" that Ulysses hears as he comes into the sight of their enchanted island (BC 17, 5).

Benjamin, too, is not distant from Blanchot when he recalls the image of Proust as neither the image of life nor the image of literature or poetry. The creative in-difference (*schöpferische Indifferenz*) at the center of Proust's "lifework," Benjamin insists, is not found in the description of life as Proust saw it, "but [in] a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it" (III 202). For Benjamin, the image of the author comes into being through the encounter of life and literature at the threshold of fiction and reality. The amalgamation, that is, the interaction of literature and life has a profound significance for Benjamin in his conception of memory that determines a large number of his critical projects. What else besides memory can possibly trace the movement between life and literature? Not only is the image, as we have encountered it in Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, a product of the fruitful interaction of life and literature, mediated by memory, but, at the same time, it also functions as the site of forgetting. "The Pene-

lope work of forgetting,” as Benjamin characterizes *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, depends on the relationship of life and literature that culminates in a most intense “homesickness,” precipitated by a terminally ill author on his sick bed, who in a “deliberate and fastidious way” weaves the text of forgetting, which will be only unraveled in the daylight of remembering. In Proust, one might boldly suggest, a time to remember is also a place of forgetting. This element of forgetting, which is implied in the process of aging, is the “place” for the “rejuvenation” of the past, of memory, and, above all, of *mémoire involontaire*.<sup>23</sup>

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (III 155-200), Benjamin seeks to reconcile what is normally associated with the two distinct and divergent aspects of memory, that is, the involuntary and the voluntary memory to which Proust devoted almost his entire work. This reconciliation offers Benjamin an opportunity to extend the range and scope of memory to photography in a manner that stresses its aesthetic function in difference to the aesthetic standard, which, for instance, Paul Valéry sets for it.<sup>24</sup> The auratic experience of art tends to emphasize the image of the beautiful as the fulfillment of its real function. Such images of the beautiful are far from the mere sensation of what actually exists. The object in the painting looks back in a way that exceeds the gaze of the looker. This is a look that the mechanical reproduction is unable to return.

Although, in the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin is content with assigning the role of *mémoire volontaire* to photography and has not yet moved in the direction of labeling it as a political weapon, that purpose is achieved in his “Artwork” essay (III 217-51). In the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin is satisfied with distinguishing photography from painting as a non-auratic art form, whose perception of the world is no longer governed by the traditional aesthetic principles of beauty, imagination, and creativity. The aura of traditional painting consists in the painting’s ability to return our look that exceeds the appropriating glance. Benjamin writes: “The painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill” (III 187). The “cult” of the beautiful creates a desire for the beautiful that can never be satisfied, because, as Benjamin says, it perpetually “feeds” on its original desire. “What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being satisfied,” according to Benjamin, “is the image of the past” (III 187). The irrevocable distance between the past from which we are irremediably cut off is the distance, that is, “the image of the past,” that the aura of the beautiful “reproduces” as it “conjures it up ... from the womb of time,” for instance, in a figure like Helen in *Faust* (III 187). Photography neither aims towards reproducing the beautiful image of the past nor participates in the perpetuation of a desire, which is “veiled by the nostalgia of tears,” as in the case of Baudelaire, as Benjamin points out (III 187).

Baudelaire, as Benjamin points out (III 187).

Baudelaire's visceral opposition to photography is not due to some sort of blindness to modernity or a lack of historical sense. What seemed to have unnerved and terrified him about the function of the daguerreotype was its "natural alliance to the mob."<sup>25</sup> He expressed rather too clearly what he considered the "mistaken developments" of photography at the prompting of the "stupidity of the broad masses," which "demanded an ideal that would conform to their aspirations and nature of their temperament ... Their prayers were granted by a vengeful God, and Daguerre became his prophet" (III 186). Baudelaire is alluding to the "asinine belief" of the masses that "art was nothing other than the accurate reflection of nature" and that photography, indeed, is the most suitable medium for it. Benjamin expresses his solidarity with Baudelaire on this point, and we shall see how his argument about photography and film proceed to differentiate them from the traditional view of the artistic form.

The decisive bracketing of the aura with *mémoire involontaire* sets the stage for theorizing the advent of photography as very much "the phenomenon of the 'decline of the aura'" (III 187). The limitation of photography or of *mémoire volontaire* is duly noted by Benjamin. What photography cannot achieve is built in its structure, for it cannot "faithfully" reproduce the image of the past, which is only possible through the involuntary illumination of a memory that remains repressed at the unconscious level. Benjamin compares the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, the most exemplary and enigmatic experience of auratic writings, with *the mémoire volontaire*, that "perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory," the "one that is in the service of the intellect" (III 186, 158). Simply put, the difference between these two types of memory is that the former has an accidental but full relationship to the past, whereas the latter, though clearly present in its "attentiveness" to the past, happens to retain no trace of it. In historical terms, both these memories imply the "atrophy of experience" (III 159). "The object of the story," according to Benjamin, is not "to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds in it the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the potter's hand" (III 159). In the same essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin would once more evoke the traces of experience of "the practiced hands" on the "utilitarian objects" in association with the auratic object of perception, which is, subsequently, "at home in the *mémoire involontaire*" (III 186).

Involuntary memory finds its trace in a moment in history in which the personal and individual past can no longer be reconstituted by the recourse to the experience of the traditional past. Such memory already crystallizes

outside the conscious experience of the individual who has no control over it. Involuntary memory, thus, can no longer be associated with the inventory of an individualized objective memory, because it reflects upon the contingency of the chance encounter with the objective world that lies “beyond the reach of the intellect.” And thus to restore the experience of the individual past with the material of collective past, at a time when it is increasingly difficult to reconcile these two antagonistic tendencies, voluntary memory comes to our aid, but not in order to reconstitute the order of the past that no longer has its home in the individual consciousness. Instead, it is present, as Proust would say, in “some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us)” (III 158).

However, the way Benjamin approaches this topic, which manifests itself as “the crisis of reproduction,” and which he sees as “an integral part of a crisis of perception,” is not without a trace of ambiguity. Prompted by the destruction of traditional experience of a community, for instance, of storytelling – a specific mode of communication that passed on the experience of the storyteller to the listener – the new experiences that *mémoire volontaire* encompasses are certainly not geared towards retaining that element or trace of the past. In its experience, *mémoire volontaire* has ceded its ineffectual and intellectual domain from personal to impersonal information, which is “encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction” (III 186). If it is purely a matter of contingency whether an individual would ever come to form an image of herself, that is to say, whether an experience akin to the *madeleine* would ever occur in her life, then the safest bet for her would be to make use of the data available to her that she cannot assimilate. Especially in relation to a world where both individual and collective experiences are progressively witnessing their own decline, a new set of standards is emerging that values information over experience.

Nonetheless, in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin finds a redemption and reconciliation of the two elements of memory. Here, according to Benjamin, “the voluntary and involuntary memory lose their mutual exclusiveness” (III 160). The same two elements of memory, whose synthesis and assimilation to *mémoire involontaire* he so profoundly admires in Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, will later in Benjamin’s own text assume the form of *Gedächtnis*, the conservative function of remembrance that protects impressions in the Freudian sense, and *Erinnerung*, a memory that has been allocated a disintegrative or destructive function.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin assigns primarily two functions to *mémoire involontaire*. First, he notes that Proust’s work is an effort to “restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation,” and second, it is also a magnificent task of resurrecting his own childhood. For the concept of *mémoire involontaire* entails within it

the idea that “where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust’s work) kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again” (III 159).

The contingency of involuntary memory evades the “promptings” of the voluntary memory and gives access to a past that is beyond the reach of the intellect. Voluntary memory is fraudulent as far as the real memory is concerned, for it is merely an “echo of a past sensation.” And not only that but it is also “conditioned by the prejudices of intelligence,” which makes the matter only worse. Whereas *mémoire involontaire* is constitutive of that experience which is not a “part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in many ways,” but rather a mode of collective experience that has already ceded its presence to material objects outside.<sup>27</sup> Since the memory has already transpired into something else, most probably it is present in some material object or it is lying submerged in the recess of the senses that can only be aroused by a chance encounter. Proust demonstrates the nature of *mémoire involontaire* in his treatment of the famous *madeleine* affair, and its access to the past that he remembered very “poorly” before then, despite the “promptings of a memory that obeyed the call of attentiveness” (III 158). Benjamin says of *mémoire volontaire*: “it is its characteristic that the information which it gives about that past retains no trace of it” (III 158).

The access to one’s own past in *mémoire volontaire* is limited to the “promptings of a memory which obey(s) the call of attentiveness.” Voluntary memory fails to conjure the image of the past, because instead of the past, what we get from it is only the image. That is why one encounters in the photograph a memory that retains no trace of the past. This to some extent explains why it is always so difficult to remember the experience of what was going on in one’s mind when a photograph was taken. Benjamin’s insight into the nature of *mémoire volontaire* explains that, despite its attentiveness, that is, its *presence*, it fails to conjure up the past. The simultaneity of remembering and forgetting gradually destroys what has survived in us from the past, since it is in perpetual contradiction with reality. To appreciate the real worth of the Proustian memory, we must in deference to the parable of the twin fountains of remembrance and forgetting drink simultaneously from the twin sources.

In Benjamin’s Proust essay, the twin sources – Mnemosyne and Lethe – are intertwined; his literary project to invoke the “highest physiognomic expression” of the image of Proust, as a writer, is elusively bound to the “counter-play” of remembering and forgetting. We would be better served if

I sketch it in advance that the function of remembering and forgetting, despite their similarity, despite their intertwining, should not for a moment be approximated as a relation of identity. The difference is preserved in the memory of what Derrida calls elsewhere “*alêtheia*.” And, yet, to perceive a difference between remembering and forgetting as purely antithetical or oppositional categories of memory indicates a misreading, a misrepresentation. What we arrive at after a close reading of Benjamin’s essay on Proust propels us to realize the difference between the presence and the absence of the self. As Carol Jacobs reminds us through her brilliant essay on the same Benjamin text: “Thus all remembrance of things past indicates the inevitable absence of the self from itself.”<sup>28</sup>

In Proust, Benjamin tells us, remembering and forgetting are forever a “place” of intertwining, a crossroad, a junction – for instance, the intertwining of the roads in Combray that Proust discovers in one of his walks, and also the intertwining of the uneven cobblestones of the Guermites on the uneven flagstones of the Baptistery of San Marco in Proust’s memory. To put it another way, remembering and forgetting forge together where they intersect with each other, in that instant – “a place in time where time itself finds a place – a space that reflects time through images.”<sup>29</sup> In a wonderful passage, Blanchot writes: “forgetting is the sun: memory gleams through reflection, reflecting forgetting and drawing from this reflection the light-amazement and clarity – of forgetting” (*JC* 315). And here I am well aware that to quote Blanchot now is rather “out of place,” but is not that the place of Blanchot?

Let’s take another detour, a final detour, to Levinas, who proclaims that in Blanchot “forgetting restores diachrony to time. A diachrony with neither pretension nor retention. To await nothing and forget everything – the opposite of subjectivity – ‘absence of any center’.”<sup>30</sup> Thus for Levinas, forgetting that is opposed to remembering, and “waiting that is not waiting for something,” are “juxtaposed” as “Waiting, Forgetting” “without any conjunction having linked them in a structure.”<sup>31</sup> “Waiting, Forgetting,” not for something or anything, for that will cheapen the discourse of the radical alterity of the Other that Levinas has attributed to Proust’s *œuvre*. In Proust, observes Levinas, there exists “an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the other.”<sup>32</sup> “But Proust’s most profound teaching,” Levinas tells us (although he wonders whether poetry is capable of teaching anything at all), “consists in situating the real in a relation with what forever remains other – with the other as absence and mystery.”<sup>33</sup> Yet even Levinas cannot help, albeit unknowingly, but provide an analogy to Benjamin’s explication of Penelope’s work of forgetting, the unraveling of the threads in the night of forgetting, just like Blanchot, whose work is, as Levinas claims, “Waiting,

forgetting, loosen that ontological field [that is, the ‘inextricable weave of being’], release a thread, untie, erode, relax, obliterate.”<sup>34</sup> “And forgetting turns away from the past instant but keeps a relationship with what it turns away from ‘when it remains in words.’ Here diachrony is restored to time. A nocturnal time: ‘the night in which nothing is awaited represents this movement of waiting.’ But the primordial forgetting is the forgetting of oneself.”<sup>35</sup>

Memory brings us face-to-face with what has been forgotten, the primordial forgetting of the self as the other in the discourse of history. But the former depends for its own existence on the latter (Hegelian dialectics of Master and Slave would corroborate such apprehension), and if not so, then what will be the joy of remembering anything more than the day already ordained to the rituals of remembering. The “unprecedented feeling of happiness”<sup>36</sup> that Proust felt at the advent of the involuntary memory is rather produced by, what Blanchot calls, “the transmutation of the memory,” “where the past opens up onto the future that it repeats, so that what comes always comes again, and again, and again” (*BC* 18, 17). In Proust time is made to work, work against the constant threat of destructive time, against the threat of “losing the ‘time’ to write” (*BC* 15). Proust must accomplish the task of writing before the impending disaster of his life, but in a manner that suspends, or neutralizes, the onslaught of the disastrous time, the destructive time that is racing ahead to put a claim on his life, a race against time, that is, death. Henceforth, he must accomplish in his writing the entire experience of his life as he begins to encounter it through his involuntary memory.

In Proust, one does not remember, or better, is loath to remember, what can be recalled. The happiness of remembering resides in a memory that comes from forgetting as a gift, as a Derridean gift without return.<sup>37</sup> This memory is not collected or evoked by a mechanism, through the institution of the archive, that knows how to recall and remember, but it is given to us from the depth of an immemorial past that is inaccessible to the mechanism of intelligence, because it lacks the “intentionality” of phenomenological consciousness, the “egological” reverberation of the I in the being-in-the world.<sup>38</sup> What comes to us in its own volition, what is never asked for, we can only wait for in utter happiness and full of “supplication” without anticipation. It comes to us defying Proust’s own title of his book *À la Recherche*, “In Search,” for it is precisely this search that one must abandon if one truly wants the taste of the *madeleine*. It requires enormous patience and waiting. The ontological dimension no longer separates forgetting from waiting, but, instead, it forms an antistrophic bond: “Forgetting, waiting. Waiting that assembles, disperses; forgetting that disperses, assembles. Waiting, forgetting.”<sup>39</sup> It is, then, Michel Foucault who renders

sembles. Waiting, forgetting.”<sup>39</sup> It is, then, Michel Foucault who renders the meaning of this “forgetting, waiting” in Blanchot’s narrative to appear in a broader relief in the simultaneity of approaching and distancing: “the approach of forgetting, the distance of the wait – draw near to one another and unendingly move apart.”<sup>40</sup>

We started at the dawn of philosophy and crossed over to the nocturnal hour, from the synchrony of time to the diachrony of time – “the time of the other” – to the night of oblivion in Proust. For Blanchot: “*In* the night one can die; we reach oblivion. But this *other* night is the death no one dies, the forgetfulness which gets forgotten. In the heart of oblivion it is memory without rest” (SL 164). What took the nocturnal journey of death that began with a dip in Lethe but came back through the power of forgetting is none other than the memory as an erasure of time. “Here, then, time is erased by time itself: here death, the death that is the work of time, is suspended, neutralized, made vain and inoffensive. What an instant! A moment that is ‘freed from the order of time’ and that recreates in me, ‘a man freed from the order of time’” (BC 13). “A man freed from the order of time” is, undoubtedly, Proust. To Benjamin, it is the “convoluted time” of Proust that makes him the prophet of forgetting. Similarly, Blanchot on the “mnemopoeitics” of Proust remarks, “there is in his work perhaps a deceptive but wonderful intertwining of all the forms of time” (BC 11). Proust is truly a man of forgetting, or we could insist that he wrote the most monumental treatise to memory – to *mémoire involontaire*, which precedes the workings of *mémoire volontaire* – because he was himself being forgotten by the literary trends of his time.<sup>41</sup> Yet it was Proust who, Benjamin reminds us, made “the nineteenth century ripe for memories” (III 205). It is to him that we should devote this line from Blanchot to end this homage to the “inspiration,” to the Siren’s song, to forgetting: “It was necessary that he, too, enter into forgetting” (AwO 4). That is, in the end the hiddenness, the meaning of hiddenness, of “the final hiddenness of death, is the root meaning of Lethe,” and therefore, of forgetting.<sup>42</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The location of Lethe in the underworld, in classical and Gnostic imagery, originates from the oracle cave of Earth-deities (*Chthonioi*) at Lebadeia, where an individual made elaborate preparations to enter down into the dark pit to learn his fate

through “things seen” or “things heard.” Among the preparations, “he has to drink of the water of Lethe, in order to achieve forgetfulness of all that he has hitherto thought of; and on top of it another water Mnemosyne, which gives him remembrance of what he sees when he has gone down.” Classical writers made Lethe one of the principle rivers of the underworld, along with Acheron, Cocytus, Phegethon, and Styx, “Lethe”, *The Mystica*, Date of access 15.3.05 <<http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles//lethe.html>>

- <sup>2</sup> Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 81.
- <sup>3</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 57.
- <sup>4</sup> Vernant, *Myth*, p. 111.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 103.
- <sup>6</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Thanks (Be Given) to Jacques Derrida”, *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 321.
- <sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 141.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 92.
- <sup>9</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 93.
- <sup>10</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 99.
- <sup>11</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 92.
- <sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “On Maurice Blanchot”, *Proper Names*, trans Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 127.
- <sup>13</sup> Levinas, “On Maurice Blanchot”, p. 127.
- <sup>14</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1997), p. 40.
- <sup>15</sup> Hegel writes in the last paragraph on “Absolute Knowing” that Spirit’s “fulfillment consists in perfectly knowing what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its withdrawal into itself in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 492.
- <sup>16</sup> John Gregg, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *AwO*, p. xvii.
- <sup>17</sup> Benjamin, “The Image of Proust”, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 201-15, here p. 204. Hereafter all references to *Illuminations* will be abbreviated as *Ill* followed by page number.
- <sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrain Collins (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1857), pp. 6-7.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”, *Critical Inquiry*, 8.4 (1982), p. 773. This stage of involuntary recalling or *Erinnerung* in Hegel is, according to de Man, “rather like” Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*. And since de Man equates *Er-*

*innerung* with *mémoire involontaire* in Proust, it is but natural that *Gedächtnis* is similarly identified with *mémoire volontaire*. For Proust, we must point out, the significance of *mémoire involontaire* is definitely of a higher order than *mémoire volontaire* in aesthetic representations. This, of course, is an oversimplification of Proust's understanding of the same term. No proper justification can be possibly made which would situate the experience of *mémoire involontaire* within the content of what "is already ours." In Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin has discerned a movement toward repetition in which a similar experience is produced with a difference.

- <sup>20</sup> Amresh Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting in Walter Benjamin", *Connecticut Review*, 20.2 (1998), pp.99-110.
- <sup>21</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), 1: 49.
- <sup>22</sup> Proust, *Remembrance*, 3: 568.
- <sup>23</sup> See Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting", p. 102.
- <sup>24</sup> See Benjamin's epigram in the beginning of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*III* 217).
- <sup>25</sup> Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography", *One Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left, 1979), p. 256.
- <sup>26</sup> See Irving Wohlfarth's fine analysis of *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung* in "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections", *Glyph*, 3 (1978), pp. 148-212.
- <sup>27</sup> According to Benjamin, for Proust the *mémoire involontaire* is not only not present in the individual's past; but is "unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouse in us), though we have no idea which one it is" (*III* 158).
- <sup>28</sup> Carol Jacobs, "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust", *The Dissimulating Harmony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 101.
- <sup>29</sup> Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting", p. 99.
- <sup>30</sup> Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 146.
- <sup>31</sup> Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145.
- <sup>32</sup> Levinas, "The Other in Proust", p. 103.
- <sup>33</sup> Levinas, "The Other in Proust", pp. 104-5.
- <sup>34</sup> Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145.
- <sup>35</sup> Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145. The forgetting of oneself is imperative to the understanding of Levinas's dia-chrony of time formulated in opposition to "the egology of synthesis, the gathering of all alterity into presence, and the synchrony of representation" ("Diachrony and Representation" [1982], *Time and the Other*, trans Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Duquesne University Press, 2002), p. 100). It is also important to note that dia-chrony, in that sense, is not a "reduction of time to the essence of being." (p. 103). Instead of being a language of representation and information that waits on the meaning of the being, in diachronic time, Levinas lays down the tenets of ethics as first philosophy, as a "facing up" to

an unlimited responsibility “for-the-other” (p. 107). It is prior to the discourse of memory (“has never come into memory”). In its an-archic responsibility, diachronic time functions “outside of all reminiscence, re-tention, re-presentation, or reference to a remembered present. The significance of an immemorial past, starting from responsibility for the other person comes into the heteronomy of an order. Such is my nonintentional participation in the history of humanity, in the past of the others, who ‘regard me.’ The dia-chrony of a past that does not gather into re-presentation is at the bottom of the concreteness of the time that is the time of my responsibility of the other” (pp. 111-2).

<sup>36</sup> Herald Weinrich, *Lethé: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> See Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation”, p. 98.

<sup>39</sup> Gregg, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *AwO*, p. xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside”, *Foucault/ Blanchot*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Masumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, “The Other in Proust”, *Proper Names*, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Perlman, *Imaginal Memory and the Place of Hiroshima* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 35.

**“Counter-time”:**

## **A Non-dialectical Temporality in the Works of Maurice Blanchot**

**Zoltán Popovics**

Maurice Blanchot's works characterise time as something which is “without present, without presence [*sans présent, sans présence*]” (EL 26). This temporality is not constituted by the passing of the moments. This temporality is not a successive, irreversible line of passing presents. That is why this time is called “counter-time [*contretemps*]” or “dead time [*temps mort*].”<sup>1</sup> This immobile, in-actual, non-moving, always postponed time is neither the temporality of everyday life, nor the time concept of philosophy. For Blanchot this time is the “time of narration [*temps du récit*]” (AC 98), the time of the “narrative voice [*voix narrative*]” (EI 566). According to Blanchot this counter-time is par excellence the time of literature, the time of art. But how can it be possible? How and where can the temporality of “the absence of time [*J'absence de temps*]”<sup>2</sup> be possible?

At first, most evidently writing (*écriture*) is that in which there is nobody behind the words. In the written text, Blanchot emphasises, there is nobody who can explain the text, who can explain the meaning of a written text.<sup>3</sup> We know at least since Plato that, in contrast with the conversation, the author is missing from the written words, just as the exact manifestation of a meaning is missing too.<sup>4</sup> So the written text is not the presentation or even the re-presentation of a meaning, and it is not the representation of the intention of an author either. That is why for Blanchot the text is character-

ised by a fundamental absence: the absent meaning and the absent author. This double absence of the written word is called the "prophetic speech [*parole prophétique*]" or "sacred speech [*parole sacrée*]" in the works of Blanchot. Because like the prophecies, like the sacred texts the real speaker and the real sense of the speech remain hidden in these words. Somebody, usually a god, speaks through the prophet and through his text, a god who stays away, who keeps the secret of his words. So the text – and par excellence the poetic text – is primarily not a manifestation, a presentation or a presence of something (of a meaning, of a sense, of an intention, of an author or of a lived experience etc.), this is only a "presence of absence [*présence de l'absence*]" (EL 26):<sup>5</sup> *the presence of the absent meaning, the presence of the absent author*. In Blanchot's description, the literary text or the written text is covering and obscuring its own origin, the meaning and the writer. This text is showing up only the absence of its origin and the absence of its explanation or aims. Therefore, the literature is "neutral [*neutre*]" and "impersonal [*impersonnelle*]," Blanchot says. But how can we experience the absence? How can any non-presence be experienced? How can something be experienced if it does not exist? This paradox of the "presence of absence" is the domain of literature, the space of literature for Blanchot.

For Blanchot this "counter-time" is not the "negation [*négation*]" of time. The absence of time, the "dead time" does not mean that time does not exist at all. Because this time does not rest upon the contradiction, the exclusion, nor the dialectical negation. As Blanchot writes, "the time of the absence of time is not dialectical [*Le temps de l'absence de temps n'est pas dialectique*]" (EL 26).<sup>6</sup> But what does this *non-dialectical time* mean? Every negation supposes something that is negated. So the negation looks like this: "non-A." Where "non-A" negates and excludes "A," where "non-A" contradicts "A" and vice versa. Or where "non-A" exists, there is not "A," etc. Therefore, if the counter-time were dialectical, it would not be time, it would be non-time. The dialectics also supposes that the contradiction and the negation between "A" and "non-A" can be reconciled, because they have a common ground, the "A." Or the "non-A" can be deduced from the "A." So there is a possible third element which is the reconciliation of "A" and "non-A." This is the Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*). According to Blanchot in contrast with the dialectics there is no third type of time which can mediate between time and counter-time. That is why counter-time has never been called the negation of time or the inexistence of time by Blanchot. So the dead or counter-time cannot be interpreted as a non-time. There is no negation between time and counter-time, there is a non-dialectical connection between them.

But in Blanchot's description time itself presupposes a dialectical relationship. If one thinks that the past or the future is a negation or non-existence of the present, it is a dialectical relationship. For Blanchot the vulgar time concept rests on this dialectical negation too.<sup>7</sup> In this time concept the presence and the absence negate, exclude and contradict each other. Consequently the "*presence of absence*" is possible only when there is *not a dialectical negation* – contradiction, exclusion – between the presence and the absence. Blanchot would like to talk about a time, a so-called counter-time that is not a dialectical negation of time, about a time in which there is no dialectical negation. Inside this time there is no negation between presence and absence, or among the parts of the time (among present, past and future), as there is no negation outside this time, between the time and the counter-time. That is to say, *the counter-time is a non-dialectical time*. So the presence of the absent meaning or the absent author can be thought and experienced only from a non-dialectical time. But there is another consequence of this non-dialectical counter-time. The absence of the meaning and the absence of the author do not mean that there is no meaning of a text or there is no author of texts. If we suppose this, we think dialectically. Blanchot does not want to think dialectically. But how can this non-dialectical relationship be described? How can we think non-dialectically?

In the works of Maurice Blanchot this "non-dialectical [*non-dialectique*]" relationship is the "contestation [*contestation*]" (cf. *El* 231). The contestation means unsettling, doubting, questioning or contending in Blanchot's texts. He writes about the time of the absence of time: here "the contradictions do not exclude each other and do not reconcile each other either [*Les contradictions ne s'y excluent pas, ne s'y concilient pas*]" (*EL* 27). He writes the same about the non-dialectical contestation: it "ignores the contradictions [*ignore les contradictions*]," here "the opposition does not oppose but juxtaposes [*l'opposition n'oppose pas, mais juxtapose*]" (*El* 231). It means that the contestation substitutes the dialectical negation – i.e., the contradictions, exclusions and oppositions – with juxtaposition. The negation is always subordination, because "non-A" is deduced from an "A," because the purpose of negation is the surpassing of negation, the reconciliation or *Aufhebung*. The juxtaposition makes every negation impossible, for it makes the subordination impossible. So *the contestation is juxtaposition*. Here the negation and the consequence of negation, the reconciliation are impossible together. So contestation is not a negation, nor is its dialectical reconciliation.

The juxtaposition makes two opposite, contradictory and exclusive variations possible at the same time. In the negation there is only "A" or

there is only "non-A." In the contestation there are "A" and "non-A" together. Or more precisely, in the contestation there is not "non-A," there is only a "B" which is not the opposite of "A." The contestation is the suspension – not the denial, nor the solution – of the dialectical negation. This non-dialectical contestation is the *incertitude*, the *indecision* of the "and." Incertitude where the presence and the absence are possible together, where the "presence of absence" is possible. Here the absence is not the opposition of the presence, the absence and the presence are juxtaposed. Or when we cannot decide between the presence and the absence. When the presence and the absence are co-ordinated. So *the counter-time is not the negation but the contestation of the time*. It does not eliminate but makes time and temporality uncertain. Consequently, the "without present, without presence" *does not eliminate the present and the presence, it rather makes them uncertain*.

According to Blanchot the contestation is not a negation but an *affirmation*. Blanchot follows Nietzsche when he uses the affirmation instead of the Hegelian, dialectical negation. Foucault and Derrida emphasise that it must be understood as a "double affirmation [*double affirmation*]."<sup>8</sup> A double "yes" for two opposite possibilities, by which the opposites become non-opposite and they transform into a juxtaposition. It says the same affirmation, the same "yes" for both the existence and the non-existence. The counter-time is that time which says "yes" for the presence and for the absence too. So *the counter-time is a non-dialectical double affirmation of time. The double affirmation of the presence and the absence*. It is the contestation of the certainty of time, the contestation of a sure present and a sure absent. The counter-time is an uncertain mixture of the presence and the absence. It is not a non-time as well as it is not an eternity, the counter time is only an uncertain, contested time. Where we cannot distinguish the time and the non-time, the present and the past, the present and the future form each other; where the presence and the absence are inseparable. It is a co-ordinative temporality, far from the subordination of the dialectical negation.

For Blanchot the contestation is "*without relationship [sans rapport]*" (*EI* 231),<sup>9</sup> the contested things are without relationship. This means that there is no common ground, or even a common ground cannot be determined among the contested things, in the contestation. Blanchot writes: there is "an empty undetermined that does not separate, does not reunite them [*blanc indéterminé qui ne les sépare pas, ne les réunit pas*]" (*EI* 231). In contrast to this the dialectics presupposes an absolute – and therefore common – ground by which we can compare things and enounce a statement (saying "A") or a negation (saying "non-A"). This common ground,

centre or rule makes a connection and a comparison possible. This common ground makes a whole or a system from the contingent parts or fragments. It puts every part of a system into its own place through comparison with the others. Without this fundament we cannot state, nor can we negate anything about the parts, because they cannot find each other in the same space, in the same relationship which is essential for the comparison. Here we cannot define the relationship between the parts. They are not separated, nor are they united, because without a relationship we cannot talk about separation or reconciliation. Here we cannot define whether something is opposite or not. So there are only parts or even *fragments without a whole* in the space of the contestation. In order to be precise these fragments without relationship are not preceded, are not followed by a whole.

Therefore the contestation is “without relationship” or it has contested uncertain relationships only. Otherwise we have to say a double “yes,” a double affirmation for every fragment of this missing relationship and missing whole. After all this “relationship without relationship” is the contestation or the double affirmation itself. So *the counter-time is the time without relationship. Without relationship between the presence and the absence, without relationship among the present, past, future. Without the wholeness of a dialectical time. But this “without” does not mean “no,” it is not a non-relationship but – without a common ground – it much more means the possibility of several probable relationships.*<sup>10</sup> Here the opposite connections are unknown, as the reunited reconciled connections are unknown too. This is the double affirmation of every possible relationship. *The counter-time is the double or even “multiple and pluralist” affirmation of several possible temporal relationships.*<sup>11</sup> Blanchot underlines that there cannot be any kind of “simultaneity [*simultanéité*]” or “succession [*succes-sion*]” in the contestation (*El* 231). Because any well arranged relationship – like the simultaneity and the succession – presupposes a whole that the contestation contends and makes uncertain. So the counter time is several possible temporalities but not *one* time.

The time without relationship is a time without a whole. This time is made of disconnected elements and lacking overall coherence, for instance lacking simultaneity or succession. So *the counter-time is a fragmented or interrupted time*, as Blanchot says. It is characterised by the “*interruption* [*interruption*],” the interruption of time. The interruption of the wholeness of time. From Plato to Husserl, philosophy supposes that time is a kind of unity or whole which makes a coherent order from the temporal elements, from the present, past and future. So time is the dialectical reconciliation of the temporal elements. In the end, there is no irreducible interruption in this time. That is why it is a dialectical time. Here time is a system under the

terms of dialectics. But Blanchot and Bataille – and after them Derrida and Deleuze also – speak about an “irreducible difference [*irréductible différence*]” or an *irreducible “interruption”* within time.<sup>12</sup> Without a preceded or followed whole the interruption provides irreconcilable parts, parts without relationship, parts without negation, where the parts are contested. Here the interruptions or the differences of the temporal fragment are irreducible. Otherwise for one fragment the other fragment is the “Other [*Autrui*],” an “outside [*dehors*]” to which there is not access, whose alterity is irremediable.<sup>13</sup> In this time, the absence and the presence can be together without any reconciliation or opposition among their irreducible differences. In this time the present, past and future can be together, can be mixed in a never united temporality. Consequently, this counter-time is an *irreducibly interrupted fragmented time*. *The temporality of the “dehors”* for Blanchot, the temporality of the “absolute other [*absolument autre*]” for Lévinas.

The space of literature is a place where the absence reigns: the absence of the reality, the absence of the exact meaning, the absence of the subject who would be able to guarantee the sense of the text. That is why one might suppose that the purpose of dealing with literature – as reading or writing – is the more perfect elimination of the absence: the elimination of the absent meaning, the elimination of the absent sense of the author, the realisation of an absent reality. Here the time of literature would be the movement of the elimination of these absences, a movement from absence to presence. But Blanchot emphasises that literature does not lead from somewhere to somewhere. It is not a place from which the absence can be eliminated and can be substituted with a pure or purer presence. The literary cannot be replaced by a better and cleaner non-literary reality. The space of literature is *the space of the irrecoverable and irreducible absence*. But this absence is not a perfect absence, it is only a “presence of the absence,” the literary presentation of the absence. If somebody managed to eliminate absence from literature, it would not be a better literature, it would not be a literature, it would be non-literature only, as Blanchot writes (*LV* 273). Therefore the space of literature is the space of the contestation. Where presence and the present are contested, mixed with absence and non-present. Where time itself is also uncertain, unequivocal, or contested. Actually it is not a dead time but a dying time, it is much more a *living but dying time*. It is not a non-time, it is only a counter-time or even a *contesting-time*.

Blanchot writes: “The time of the absence of time is without present, without presence [*Le temps de l’absence de temps est sans présent, sans présence*]” (*EL* 26). But because this counter-time is a non-dialectical time it is a “presence without present [*présence sans présent*]” or a “non-present

presence [*présence non présente*].”<sup>14</sup> This temporality contains a present or a presence but contests them. To be precise, the counter time contests the actuality – the *hic et nunc* – of a presence only. In one word this time is “a time without present [*un temps sans présent*]” or an “inactual [*inactuel*]” time (*PD* 33, 36; *EL* 27). The time without present, the inactual time can be described as a kind of past or a kind of future. The past is a presence but without a present, the future is also a presence without present. Blanchot often writes about a past or a future when he criticises the actuality of time, or when he talks about the time of literature.<sup>15</sup> But what kind of past or future is it?

The past contains a present but this presence is inactual, a passed presence. The future’s presence is also without a present, it is a coming present. So it seems that the contested present would be the past or the future. But Blanchot insists that the contested time is *neither a passed present, nor a coming present*. If the counter-time is a kind of past or a kind of future, it cannot be the past or the future of the everyday life, it cannot be a passed or a coming present. If this time could contain a centre from which the past and the future could be deduced as a negation, this time would be dialectical. So a non-dialectical past or future cannot hold a precedent or subsequent present in itself. That is why Blanchot says: “This ‘without present’ nevertheless does not refer to a past [*Ce ‘sans présent’ ne renvoie cependant pas à un passé*]” (*EL* 26). Inasmuch as something “which is without present” that “is not even a past” but something which “has never happened, never been at first.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, *the counter time is a past or a future, but this past is not a passed present, just as this future is not a coming present*. Here presence is not the centre of this time. The presence is not the dialectical core – the absolute – of time.

So the dead time is “always already passed [*toujours déjà passé*]” and “always yet to come [*toujours encore à venir*].”<sup>17</sup> Here the past is not preceded by a present, as the future is not proceeded by a present. This past is not a “retention,” this future is not a “pretension” of the presence.<sup>18</sup> In this time the past has always already passed and the future is always yet to come. This temporality is an eternal past and/or an infinite futurity.<sup>19</sup> Because it has never started in a present, so it will never finish in a present too. In this time there is an irreducible rupture, a never sublated interruption or a never mediated difference: *the absent present, the absence of the present*. Here the present of the presence for ever “not yet [*pas encore*]” and “no longer [*ne plus*]” happened, or even “already [*déjà*]” and “not yet [*pas encore*]” happened.<sup>20</sup> For this past and this future are left for ever undone and un-lived. Here the eternity is in their undone-ness and un-lived-ness, i.e., in their absence. So *this past and this future are always present in their ab-*































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































