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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

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<td>Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas</td>
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Abbreviations of Blanchot's Works


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.¹ 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

¹ 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;² “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.³ *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 correspondance 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 Bataillian 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 20th of April, Virgo and Libra for Blanchot, born the 22nd 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 Umblical 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 récits, 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 inimitable, 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.” 4 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,” 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.” 5 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 resurface 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; 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* xxxv/*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.” 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.” 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.” 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.”¹¹ 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 razorburn, 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*). 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.”

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”;

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.”

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 ac-
cent 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 neu-
tre. 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 psy-
choanalysis, 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 dark-
ness,’ 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 expla-
nation 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.”  

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.” 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.”

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


8 Leiris, *L’Âge d’homme*, p. 15.


12 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.


15 Leiris, *L’Âge d’homme*, p. 87. This sentence follows that which Blanchot cites in *WF* 253/ *PF* 246.


17 Leiris, *L’Âge d’homme*, p. 27.

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.¹ 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.²

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.”³

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 mnēmes, that is
through a lack of exercising the memory.” 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, ἡμέρης, and external memory, ὑπομνημός. 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.” 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.”

“Let us not pretend to know what it is, this forgetting,” writes Derrida in Spurs. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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 in-temporal’.”

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.”

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: “Forget- ting: non-presence, non-absence” (IC 194). The “I can,” for Blanchot, according to Levinas, represents “the limit of the human.” 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 impossi- bility, 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 re- mains outside the world that it makes possible, as if it were itself impossi- ble.”

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. 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 paronomasias (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.

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.” 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.” 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 hiddeness 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.” 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
Forgetting to Remember

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. (Ill 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.

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. 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.”

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” (*Ill* 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 *mémorie 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 culmi-
nates in a most intense “homesickness,” precipitated by a terminally ill au-
thor 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 remember-
ing. 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.23

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 Ben-
jamin an opportunity to extend the range and scope of memory to photog-
raphy in a manner that stresses its aesthetic function in difference to the
aesthetic standard, which, for instance, Paul Valéry sets for it.24 The aural
culture experience of art tends to emphasize the image of the beautiful as the ful-
fillment 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 aes-
thetic principles of beauty, imagination, and creativity. The aura of traditio-
nal painting consists in the painting’s ability to return our look that ex-
ceeds 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 origi-
nal desire. “What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being satis-
fied,” 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.”25 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)” (Ill 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” (Ill 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” (Ill 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. 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” (Ill 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. 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” (Ill 158). Benjamin says of mémoire volontaire: “it is its characteristic that the information which it gives about that past retains no trace of it” (Ill 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, 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.”

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 Guermantes 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.” 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” (IC 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’.” 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.” “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.” “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.” 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.”

“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.”

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” 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. 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. 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.” It is, then, Michel Foucault who renders
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sembles. Waiting, forgetting." 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.”

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. Yet it was Proust who, Benjamin reminds us, made “the nineteenth century ripe for memories” (Ill 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.

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NOTES

1 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/l/lethe.html>


9 De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 93.


11 De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 92.


15 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.


19 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.


27 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).


32 Levinas, “The Other in Proust”, p. 103.

33 Levinas, “The Other in Proust”, pp. 104-5.


35 Levinas, “On Maurice Blanchot”, p. 145. The forgetting of oneself is imperative to the understanding of Levinas’s diachrony 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 awaits 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).


38 Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation”, p. 98.


41 Levinas, “The Other in Proust”, *Proper Names*, p. 99.

“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].”¹ 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 [l’absence de temps]”² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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): 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). 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. 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 it 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].”6 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]” (El 231),9 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]” (El 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 sepa-
rated, nor are they united, because without a relationship we cannot talk
about separation or reconciliation. Here we cannot define whether some-
thing 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 frag-
ments 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 miss-
ing whole. After all this “relationship without relationship” is the contestation
or the double affirmation itself. So the counter-time is the time without rela-
tionship. 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. Here the opposite connec-
tions 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. Blanchot underlines that there
cannot be any kind of “simultaneity” or “succession” in the contestation (EI
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.\(^{12}\) 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 irremedi-able.\(^{13}\) 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]." 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. 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.” 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].” 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. 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. 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. For this past and this future are left for ever undone and unlived. Here the eternity is in their undone-ness and unlived-ness, i.e., in their absence. So this past and this future are always present in their ab-
sence. Blanchot writes: “always present and always absent … present in its absence [toujours présent et toujours absent … présent en son absence]” (EI 144). So this past and this future is the presence of absence, the “presence-absence [présence-absence]” (EI 145). Consequently, the “deus absconditus [dieu caché]” of the present can be described by a never happening past, by a never succeeding future. Where the eternity will never again mean an “always and for ever present presence.” This always passed, never coming but yet eternity is the counter-time.

If Blanchot would like to describe this temporality in brief, he says: “except the present [sauf le présent]” (PD 27). So this counter-time does not have an identical whole, there is no centre by which a whole can be made from this time. Because its absence – even if it always subsists – cannot elaborate a whole: the absence can always be altered for it does not have any positive form or appearance. Its absence is the absence of the whole, the absence of the present that has got an identity. That is why this absence can sometimes be seen as a past, sometimes as a future, that is why this past is not a past, this future is not a future literally. Blanchot writes:

to-come has always already passed, past is always yet to come, where the third instance, the instance of the presence is excluded, would exclude every possibility of the identical [avenir toujours déjà passé, passé toujours encore à venir, d’où la troisième instance, l’instant de la présence, s’excluant, excluirait tout possibilité identique]. (PD 21)

Consequently the counter-time always consists only of the absence of the present, the absence of that third instance, the instance of that presence in which the identity is possible. Here – without the identity of the present – the past and the futurity are “indifferent.” They have got a common property: the absence of the present. Blanchot says:

in this sense, future and past are indifferent since both are without present [en ce sens, futur, passé sont voués à l’indifférence, puisque l’un et l’autre sans présent]. (ED 40)

The past and futurity are indifferent in the absence of the present, however they are also different, because that in which they are indifferent is the source of every difference: the absence of the identity of the present. So this “indifference” does not mean sameness or identity. Since for every identity the present is a must. The present of the presence is the appearance that is essential for an identity. The present is the realisation of something, so it is the realisation of the identity too. The present means clarity
and transparency which is a fundamental requirement for identity. After all the present is par excellence the instance of the identity, the instance of the reflection, the identity of the “A = A” in the dialectics. So the indifference of the absence is an “indifferent difference [différence indifférente]” as Blanchot underlines (AO 104, EI 566). The counter-time is identical only in its difference. So its absence not only is an absence but a presence too. The presence means the un-identity of its absence. The “presence-absence” is its un-identical identity. This is the “counter-” in this time.

In this temporality the excessive contestation of presence appears as an eternal past, as an infinite futurity. The counter-time is a non-identical mixture of the past and the future, where the present is shown up only – in a for ever passed past, in a never coming futurity – as an absence of the presence. This indifferently different mixture of the counter-time is a “past-futurity [passé-avenir]” for Blanchot (PD 22). So the counter-time is a kind of repetition (répétition / ressassement), the iteration or recurrence of a never identical absence. That is why this temporality cannot be an irreversible succession, a linear progression. Consequently, the repetitive, un-identical counter-time is neither a rectilinear, successive-irreversible, nor a kairological time. But when we say “always” or “never” on this time, these universal quantifiers suppose the presence itself, or even every present in which the “always” and the “never” can be said. Or rather I should have said: “almost always” or “almost never.” This “almost” (presque) means that there is not any kind of present that makes something certain (cf. EI 346). The “almost” pertains to the absence itself, to the absent presence. So the counter-time is a time but only almost. This is the contestation of time, the contestation of temporality.

Blanchot’s writings almost always talk about an absence. The past and the future are also a kind of absence, the absence of the present. The presence of the past and futurity are only a modified, imperfect presence, from which the present is absent. This is the “presence without present” for Blanchot. So here the presence is only “the presence of absence,” the presence of the absent present. It is a “presence-absence.” But one usually thinks that if something is absent, it was present or it will be able to be present, so the absence is the absence of a present, the absence of a real, actual, individual present. This absence can be eliminated. There is the possibility of the present in every absence, here the absence is a passed presence or a coming presence only. So here the absence is thought from the present. But Blanchot talks about another kind of absence. This absence is the “outside [dehors].” The “outside” is an irreducible absence, an “absolute other” for the present. It would be an absolute “exteriority [Äußerlichkeit]” for Hegel. Here the present has “always already passed” and it is
"always yet to come." This absence is not a modification of the present, this absence cannot be thought from the present. Here the absence is not the negation of the presence. According to Blanchot the absence of the present – the “without present” – is the absence of every concrete present. This is the absence of the presence itself, the “without presence.” Or more precisely this absence keeps the presence but makes every actual present impossible: this is the eternal past and the infinite futurity. So it is a “presence without present.” Here the presence is only the “presence of absence,” the presence of the absent presents. From this absence the absence is irreducible. This absence will never be able to become a pure presence or present. The absence will never be sublated. Consequently this time, the counter-time is the temporality of the irreducible absence: the time of the “dehors.”

The absence of the literary space means the absence of the speaking subject and the absence of a certain sense. But according to Blanchot this irreducible absence means much more. The irremediable absence talks about the impossibility of the “representation [représentation]” for Blanchot (EL 38). The literary word is unable to re-present a meaning or anything else, because it contains an irreducible – and therefore unrepresentable – absence, an absence that contests every present. The absence of the author and the exact sense is the consequence of this unrepresentability. But Blanchot’s texts say even more about the absence. Blanchot writes that the absence is the source of every word. Blanchot emphasises that an absence – i.e., a silence – speaks in every word. Or even the absence makes our every sign possible. The “absence” or the “silence” is the origin of the words, this never representable absence gives the “meaning” of words (PF 46, 38-9; cf. EL 44-6). Language, or a word can speak only because it refers to an Other, to an object or a meaning that is different from our spoken or written words, to something that does not appear directly, that is absent. Consequently, “the primary absence [l’absence première],” “silence [silence]” is “the possibility of our understanding [la possibilité de notre entente],” “the possibility itself of our words [la possibilité même de nos paroles]” (PF 77, 302, EL 55-6). So “this emptiness is our sense itself [ce vide est leur sens même]” (PF 302). If somebody managed to eliminate this emptiness, this absence from the words, so that a perfect representation were true, there would not be words at all. Our words do not present or represent anything, they present an absence only, they are the “presence of absence.” This “presence-absence” is what we call words. Thus our words or signs contain and present an irreducible absence, the “outside [dehors],” the “unknown [inconnu]” itself. That is why Blanchot writes: “it is the silence that speaks [c’est silence qui
parle] (LV 297). Therefore, the temporality of the absence, the time of the outside is the *time of our words*. This is the *counter-time*.

It is the absent present to which every possible word refers as its always exterior meaning. So our words are the “*presence without present,*” a presence that has never been and will never be present: an eternal past, an infinite futurity. The temporality of the “*always already passed*” and “*always yet to come*” is our words, language itself. Or, even more precisely, *the temporality of the spoken or written words, the temporality of the language is the counter-time*. That is the reason why Blanchot calls this temporality the “*time of narration* [*temps du récit*]” (LV 22). This temporality is the time of the operation of text or “récit.” Here the “récit” means much more than a simple narration; “récit,” for Blanchot, signifies almost all kinds of texts, almost all texts as Derrida shows. This time is not the temporality of the narrative text only, the “*time of the récit*” also characterises poetics for Blanchot. So the *counter-time is the time of the “récit.”* This récit without a present has never started, will never be able to finish. But it does not mean that the literal text does not have a starting or finishing point physically, but at its first or last moment the literal text always already presupposed an earlier and a latter absence, an irreducible absence which always goes before and after it. So this récit has always already started and will never be completed.

This récit, the récit of the absence, the récit of the silence “*has always already been said [a toujours été déjà dit]:*” it is “*interminable, ceaseless [interminable, incessant],*” Blanchot writes (EL 56, 20-1). Consequently, *the counter-time is the temporality of the infinite conversation (l’entretien infini).*

If an irreducible absence makes the words and the meaning possible, then these words, the meaning of these words cannot be unequivocal. The unknown outside, the never known absence allows the sense but not a concrete, exact sense. It is the possibility and the inevitable *contestation* of every meaning at the same time. Blanchot writes about the absence, about the outside: it is “*without signification but calling the depth of every possible sense [sans signification, mais appelant la profondeur de tout sens possible],*” So this “*presence-absence [présence-absence],*” Blanchot continues, is “*the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens [l’attrait et la fascination des Sirènes]*” (LV 23). This “*every possible sense*” is the contestation of the sense, the contestation of the unequivocal presence of the sense. The “*every possible sense*” is an attraction toward a never realisable absent otherness, toward the sense. Like the sirens, the absence makes the possibility, but only the possibility of a presence. This never realisable presence of the sirens is the meaning. Here the meaning is definitely possible but unrealisable. According to Blanchot the meaning is by definition a kind
of absence but an appearing absence: a presence-absence.

For Blanchot all words are based on absence but only the literary word shows the basis of the words: the absence, the outside, the depth of all possible words. In the ambiguity of literature we can experience the irreducible outside, the absent meaning, that is – at the same time – the possibility of every meaning. In the ambiguity of the literary space we experience the absent present of every possible sense, the presence-absence of every possible meaning. Here absence is not only an absence but a presence too. Here absence is presented. Absence can only be presented through the impossibility of presence. Through an unfinished becoming presence that makes the presence possible and impossible at the same time. Through a presentation that could not be achieved, but the impossibility is appearing through this presentation. “By the failure [par l’échec]” of presentation. (cf. Fp 10-1, 18). The ambiguous meaning is the failure of presentation. The possibility of presentation that remains only a possibility by its failure. So in the space of literature the unrealisable but possible present is the meaning – just like in language itself – but in this space the absence of the presence is much more evident. The absence is underlined by the pluralistic impossibility of the evident meaning. Consequently here, in the “plural speech [parole plurielle]” of literature we experience the counter-time. The time without present. In the ambiguity of the literature the counter-time appears.

For Blanchot this is the “unqualified Saying [Dire inqualifiable]” (AC 97-8; cf. ED 98). The unqualified Saying does not say something, it says the saying itself. It says the possibility of every possible saying, it says the opportunity of every word: the absence. The irreducible absence. The absence, which transforms the presence into an absence, into an irreducible absent presence. But here the absence is not only an absence. Silence is not only silence. Silence is the possibility of every word. So here the absence of silence is not a pure absence: it is a “presence-absence.” An absence that is presented. A silence that is speaking. It is “the depth of every possible sense.” It is the meaning itself. So the “unqualified Saying” does not say one meaning but it talks about every possible meaning. For Blanchot this is the “narrative voice [voix narrative]” (AC 97-8). The narrative voice is not a voice of somebody, of a narrator or of a narrated subject or text. It talks about telling itself but despite of this the narrative voice actually does not say anything, does not tell a story, does not say any concrete meaning at all. Because it talks about only the contested, unqualified meaning. About a possible meaning. This meaning is absent, but presented in its absence. This meaning is the absent present of the literary word. The eternal ambiguity of the literary space. So the temporality of our words –
that can only be experienced in literature – is the counter-time.\textsuperscript{29} In sum, counter-time is the temporality of the “unqualified Saying,” the temporality of the “narrative voice.” The time of literature.

The unqualified narrative voice of literature does not communicate something, its meaning is not a concrete sense, as Blanchot underlines. Its meaning is the talking about the meaning itself, about every possible sense. So the space of literature is a meta-narrative: it talks about itself. So this language, the language of literature cannot be spoken by anybody. For it is a language of the language itself, a language about the possibilities of our word. Blanchot writes: it is a “language that nobody speaks, it is speaking itself / writing itself [langage que personne ne parle, c’est-à-dire qui se parle / s’écrit]” (EL 32, 21; EL 19, 20, 21, 24). But it does not mean that this language has got an identity. The absence that speaks itself as literature does not have any identity, because it is “out of presence [à l’écart de la présence],” “out of every present [à l’écart de tout présent],” so out of the origin of the identity (AO 137; EI 45).\textsuperscript{30} Consequently, if the space of literature does not say or communicate something – a meaning, or anything else apart from the literature – and neither does it talk about itself as an identity, the literary space will say: “\textit{noli me legere}” (EL 17). “Do not read me!” – literature says to us. Because the narrative voice does not have any concrete meaning. Nevertheless it has got meaning, but this meaning does not appear in a present, does not concretise in any present. This “\textit{noli me legere}” means the contestation of every literary text. The contestation of the dialectical wholeness of the text, the contestation of the dialectical mediation, of an absolute mediation of the meaning of the literary text. The contestation of the present as the dialectical centre of time. So counter-time is the temporality of a self-speaking literature, the temporality of the “\textit{noli me legere}.” A temporality of a non-dialectical space of literature.

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NOTES

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\textsuperscript{1} For “counter-time” see \textit{ED} 27 and Blanchot, “Anacrouse,” \textit{Une voix venue d’ailleurs} (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 29-44; for “dead time” see \textit{EL} 27, \textit{CQ} 70, 152, \textit{LV} 270, \textit{AC} throughout.

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{EL} 26, \textit{AO} 99; cf. “the time of the absence of time [le temps de l’absence de
temps] (EL 26).


7 He describes every "simultaneity [simultanéité]" and every "succession [succesion]" as a dialectical relationship (EI 231).


9 Here Blanchot applies the concept of the "relationship without relationship [rapport sans rapport]" by Lévinas.

10 Cf. Derrida about the "pas" in Parages.


14 AO 98, EI 98; EI 563, A 248; cf. "presence without presence [présence sans présence]" (EI 291).

15 Cf. Derrida's critique of "the metaphysics of the present [la métaphysique de la présence]" (De la grammaologie, p. 73).

16 "Ce qui est sans présent ... n'est même pas là comme ayant été ... n'a jamais eu lieu, jamais une première fois" (EL 26); cf. "a past that has never been lived in present [d'un passé qui n'aurait jamais été vécu au présent]" (CI 37).

17 PD 21, LV 18, EI 238. Blanchot also uses "always already [toujours déjà]" (LV 18, PD 80, AO 122, ED 7, 10, 16, 29-30).


19 Blanchot writes about "the eternity in past [l'éternité au passé]" (DH 118) and "an infinite past [un passé infini]" (CQ 46). For him the eternal, never coming futurity is the "avenir."

Cf. the infinite distance in the closeness of “proximity [proximité]” for Lévinas (ED 14).

Blanchot binds the “always already passed [toujours déjà passé]” and the “outside [dehors]” (ED 10, 16, 7, 29-30.). Blanchot writes about the “without present [san present]”; “this being has always already been outside [c’est être toujours déjà au-dehors]” (LV 111).

Of course in the system of Hegel there is not an absolute irreducible exteriority that cannot be sublated. Blanchot, Lévinas and Foucault also use the “exteriority [extériorité]” as the synonym of the “dehors” when they criticise the dialectics.

Cf. EL 45; cf. “From Mallarmé we know that the word is the manifested inexistence of what it designates [On savait bien depuis Mallarmé que le mot est l’inexistence manifeste de ce qu’il désigne]” (Foucault, “La pensée du dehors”, p. 537); and cf. Gregg, Literature of Transgression, pp. 19, 29.

Cf. “this silence makes us speak [ce silence qui nous fait parler]” (PF 77); “a silence from which it [the speech] can really speak [un silence à partir duquel elle peut vraiment parler]” (LV 300); “The silence, this absence is all the force to speak (that is itself our power to give a sense, to separate ourselves from the things in order to signify them) [Le silence, cette absence qui est toute la vertu de parler (qui est elle-même notre pouvoir de donner un sens, de nous séparer des choses pour les signifier)]” (PF 42).


Cf. “the speech … has always already spoken as a speech always yet to come [la parole qui … a toujours déjà parlé comme parole toujours encore à venir]” (EL 238).


Cf. “what speaks is no longer itself [ce qui parle n’est plus lui-même]” (EL 22, 23).
Dying is not Death:
The Difference between Blanchot’s Fiction and Hegel’s Concept

James Phillips

With “Literature and the Right to Death” (1948), Blanchot makes his most sustained contribution to the debate initiated in France by Kojève and Hippolyte concerning Hegel’s philosophy. At times Blanchot’s reading is forced and idiosyncratic. Yet this reading has another motivation than the succinct and faithful paraphrase of the earlier thinker. Arguably Blanchot positions himself within Hegel’s terminology in order to rethink the sense of the expression “the philosophy of art.” What is with Hegel an objective genitive becomes a subjective genitive. The rules therefore change. Whereas Hegel offers in his lectures on aesthetics an expatiation on art fixed under the gaze of philosophy, Blanchot installs art as the subject and submits the conventions and expectations of philosophical discourse to its procedures. In the light of this reversal, what might otherwise be judged a deviation or a lapse with respect to the genre of the philosophical essay can be seen to play its role in Blanchot’s reassessment of the relations between metaphysics and literature.

Blanchot hears the sentence that Plato hands down on poetry and asks himself, “What is to be done?” Hegel, to be sure, overturns the sentence, disputing Plato’s definition of what is essential to art. According to the lectures on aesthetics, the work of art is misapprehended when it is considered an imitation of an imitation. For Hegel, it is no longer to be
thought twice removed from the Ideas. Hence it is no longer inferior in truth even to the naturally existing things that are themselves frustrated suitors of their respective Ideas. The truth of the work of art is not its adequation to something outside. Its truth is to be situated within itself. Hegel appears to come to the defence of art, as he discounts all extrinsic criteria for the judgement of art.

And yet the result is that Plato’s sentence is handed down anew, in even harsher terms. Art is convicted by its own truth. The ignominy of the art that falls short of the Ideas is revived and aggravated in the ignominy of the art that falls short even of itself. Hegel proclaims the end of art because it is no longer able to be true.

But in what sense is the Hegelian truth of art a truth proper to art? Although he ridicules those who judge art on the basis of the accuracy or inaccuracy of its representations, the correspondence theory of truth remains determinative for Hegel’s philosophy of art, at least insofar as the principle of the reconcilability of matter and spirit (\textit{adaequatio rei et intellectus}) informs the discussions of the truth of works of art. If art, for Hegel, is no longer able to be true, it is because it cannot bridge the gap that with the Christian revelation opened between matter and the infinite negativity of Spirit. Art flounders because it cannot do justice, in a very specific sense, to the Crucifixion. Taking over the privileging of harmony and reconciliation in eighteenth-century aesthetics, Hegel measures art as a whole against the impossibility of a depiction that reconciles transcendent divinity and corporeal agony. The anachronisms in Winckelmann’s disquisitions on the art of antiquity acquire with Hegel a theoretical elaboration whose grandeur can avert suspicion from their historiographical unsoundness. What Hegel wishes to pass off as an immanent critique of the truth of art depends on notions from the appreciation of art that even by Hegel’s youth had passed their heyday. Perhaps suspecting the old-fashioned tone of his reflections on art, Hegel anticipates the criticism by pronouncing art itself old-fashioned. Although he employs the terminology of neoclassical aesthetics, Hegel draws a conclusion in keeping with the iconoclasm of early Protestantism. He is insensitive to the task that Christian religious painting set itself when it made its element not so much depiction as the impossibility of depiction and found its truth in its own inadequacy. Art, for Hegel, ceases to be true with the Christian revelation because it is no longer able to effect the reconciliation that nonetheless only many centuries later was made the final cause of art.

The Hegelian answer to the question of what is to be done in the face of Plato’s judgement on art turns out to be disingenuous. Art is said to press its own claim to truth, yet this truth which art finds within itself is a
cuckoo’s egg. Under Hegel’s instructions, art cleans itself up and asserts its autonomy. It is allowed to declare its independence of terrestrial and supernal models, albeit at the price of confessing its antiquatedness. It becomes philosophically respectable, but as it borrows what little respectability it has from metaphysics, it cannot help remaining under the latter’s jurisdiction.

Blanchot does not offer an apology of art in Hegel’s sense. On the contrary, he appears to relish art’s lack of philosophical respectability. In art’s refusal to clean itself up, philosophy confronts a question. Blanchot makes of this question the “essence” of literature. In “Literature and the Right to Death” it reads: “Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (WF 300). But how can literature become a question, how can it take over questionability as its principle without at once collapsing into philosophy? In “The Felicities of Paradox,” a commentary on Blanchot’s text, Rodolphe Gasché stresses that the question literature constitutes for Blanchot is not to be understood in terms of a reflective and cognitive question. Were literature to deliver itself up to the application of a pre-existing epistemological apparatus, it would cease to communicate with the question that is prior to the apparatus itself. The question of literature cannot be “What is literature?,” since the latter is a question where the interrogative force rests wholly with the “What” and where the existence of literature is reduced to the fact that underwrites the analytic task. To ask “What is literature?” is to take for granted a by no means incontestable ontology and to range the question of literature alongside other enquiries into the properties and dispositions of determinate beings. For Blanchot, literature is less a fact than a self-conditioned impossibility. Hence it does not lend itself to the reflective and cognitive question. This holds likewise of philosophy. Were philosophy to ask itself “What is philosophy?” as a reflective and cognitive question, it would presuppose the reflective and cognitive character of philosophy and thereby betray philosophy’s long-standing definition as the interrogation of its own definition. Blanchot, who exhorts literature to wallow in the infamy of its metaphysical condemnation, arrives at a defence of art that is simultaneously a defence of philosophy. It lies in the nature of art and philosophy that their defence entails critique and destruction, since it is in the question that they come into their own. Surrendering to the catastrophe that metaphysics has put aside for it, art leaves too little of itself to continue to be recognised in the cosmos articulated in terms of the answers to reflective and cognitive questions. Something refuses to give itself up to the questions to which philosophy had reserved everything that is not philosophy. In this refusal philosophy gains a rival, and through this rival’s contestation of its title to the ques-
tionable philosophy gains access to the questionability of its own definition.

The claim that Blanchot offers a defence of art on the grounds of its
catastrophe should not be simply interpreted as attributing to him a tran-
cendent position from which he turns art’s difficulties to its advantage. Even
as it puts forward just such a defence, “Literature and the Right to
Death” plays another game, and one which by and large has gone unno-
ticed. Gasché, who discerns not so much a Kantian as Kantesque position
in Blanchot’s treatment of paradox as literature’s enabling condition of im-
possibility, passes over the ratiocinative weaknesses that are the motor of
the text’s essential question. “Literature and the Right to Death” does at-
tempt to answer the critical query “quid juris?,” but however peculiar and
unsavoury its answer may be, by acknowledging the necessity of founda-
tions Blanchot’s text abides by the rules of metaphysics and forgoes a con-
testation of art’s subservience to philosophy. Yet the answer to the critical
query is open to objections. The proper strength of Blanchot’s argument,
however, eludes anyone who would appraise it by conventional philosophi-
cal criteria. This argument conspires with its objections. As its defence of
art does not in the end turn upon its exposition of a paradox, the debunking
of the paradox cannot be left the last word.

Blanchot’s paradox is the ambiguity of death. On the one hand, death
is “a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being,” and on
the other hand, “it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of the being”
(WF 337). Yet the antinomy here resides not in the matter itself, but in the
incompatibility of two understandings of death. One could say that for Blan-
chot literature lays claim to the dispute between Hegel and Heidegger and
makes it its ratio essendi. Literature, which had once submitted itself as an
independently existing fact to philosophical speculation, gives up its last
vestige of autonomy to reconfigure itself as a contention within the history
of philosophy. If Blanchot’s text nonetheless manages to mark out a terri-
tory specific to literature, it is arguably not by means of the paradox pieced
together from Hegel and Heidegger.

Hegel’s death is the negativity in which thought finds itself as the de-
termination of what is, in other words, as the humanity of nature. The truth
of death – its destructiveness grasped in its most intense form – is unmedi-
ated negativity. The experience that we have of death as spectators of an-
other being’s demise is an experience of negativity mediated and mitigated
by our own physiological subsistence. To grasp death as such is to grasp it
in its unmediatedness, as the “No” that befalls everything at once. By push-
ing through to an experience of death in its purity, Hegel arrives at a phi-
losophical conception of death: the seriousness of death is employed as a
justification for invoking the universal. And once invoked, the universal
overssees the securing of death for speculative consciousness. Henceforth, Spirit cannot shrink back from death without self-deception. It cannot founder on the meaninglessness of death as though it were something extrinsic to it, since this meaninglessness is the indeterminacy proper to Spirit as an immanent power of determination. Meaning, because it is positive, comes up against a limit in the negativity of death. More precisely, it begins and ends at this limit which is its determination and thus its positivity. Negativity is the meaninglessness that inhabits meaning, for not only would negativity cease to be the determining power if it exhausted itself in its self-determination as a given meaning, but the plurality of meanings would similarly lose its principle of individuation if negation did not inhabit every meaning and single it out with regard to the other meanings that it is not as well as with regard to meaninglessness. For Hegel, only those who do not look death in the face and hence do not perceive that it has always already occurred are susceptible to what Blanchot calls the horror of impending death.

Hegel aggrandises death – he holds it in full view and names it the very structure of what is – but, according to Heidegger, he thereby trivialises death. Heidegger has a philosophical investment in the horror of impending death, since it is within an analysis of the ecstatic character of Being-towards-death that Heidegger breaks with the derivative understanding of temporality as a sequence of discrete moments. Dasein overlaps its present in its anxious running towards death, and through memory and anticipation it announces the porousness of the “nows” vulgarly conceived as following on from one another in a steady progression. In naming Dasein Being-towards-death, Heidegger dwells on that by which Dasein resists its identification as a determinate being. Dasein cannot be classed among the present-at-hand because its fear (Angst) of death is not an accident of a given being but rather the being-outside-of-itself of time. Dasein is essentially the unintelligibility of time within the light of the metaphysics of presence.

In a lecture course on Hegel from the end of the 1930s, Heidegger criticises Hegel’s account of death for its indifference to finitude and its foreclosure of catastrophe.² It is testament to Hegel’s tactical genius that the objection does not at once appear plausible. As Hegel prides himself on outflanking his opponents, on going as far as possible, and on always taking the absolute position, the charge that he forecloses catastrophe may seem to apply to him least of all. Yet what is essential to catastrophe for Heidegger is not its magnitude, but its movement. Hegel pre-empts rather than thinks death. He begins with the greatest of all catastrophes and as a consequence no further catastrophe can shake him. The death that is the
ownmost possession of human Dasein is incapable of disturbing the reign-
ing catastrophe that is the death of Christ. The death of a given mortal be-
ing, as it is concomitant with the definition of what is mortal, is not properly
catastrophic, at least not to the degree that the death of Christ was an af-
front to the definition of God. Hegel begins with a scandal and it is with this
scandal, and not the resurrection, that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* closes.
Absolute Knowledge is the intelligibility of this unintelligible event: it is not
its mitigation but its setting-to-work as the meaninglessness immanent to
the determining power. As far as Hegel is concerned, it is ontologically
rather than soteriologically speaking that Christ died for us all. Inasmuch as
we think, we have already gone over to death and participate in the nega-
tivity that is the indeterminacy of the determinate and the questionability of
definitions. The death of Christ is the event of philosophy. It is perhaps for
this reason that Heidegger must reject Hegel’s account. With the Crucifix-
ion time comes to a stop and ceases to interfere with the “now” in which
Platonism reads off the properties of beings. The catastrophe, having al-
ready taken place, becomes the *fact* of philosophy and the guarantor of the
metaphysics of presence: thought falls away from itself because it secures
itself against the surprise that could put it into question, against the ecstasy
that could win for it an insight into the darkness of time.

Blanchot sets up an antinomy between the logic of death and the hor-
ror of death, but the contradiction is incidental since the Hegelian and Hei-
deggerian understandings of mortality do not depend on one another: the
bond that Blanchot makes out between them is arguably simply his vacilla-
tion between their separate claims to truth. Judged by philosophical con-
ventions, this is a shortcoming. But to what extent does Blanchot acknowl-
edge the authority of these conventions? The paradox that he expounds at
length in “Literature and the Right to Death” is not unique in his work in be-
ing open to dispute. Blanchot has a marked love of contradictions. Again
and again he advances antithetical propositions without the arguments that
would establish these propositions as dialectical. Given that the labour of
the concept is lacking, the propositions entertain very uneasy relations with
philosophical discourse. A provocation is at stake. Where naïve conscious-
ness refuses to accept as true whatever is contradictory, here contradiction
has itself become the index of truth. Blanchot does not so much abandon
naïve consciousness in favour of the dialectical thinking of speculative phi-
losophy as invert naïve consciousness. He leaves the truth of sense-
certainty behind, but he does not attain the truth of dialectical reason. Exist-
ing in a twilight realm between the life of the sensuous immediate and the
death that is the Hegelian power of understanding, Blanchot dies. Notwith-
standing its debt to German philosophy, “Literature and the Right to Death”
is explicit on its relation to truth: “What is striking is that in literature deceit and mystification not only are inevitable but constitute the writer’s honesty” (WF 310). It is not the affair of literature to justify itself by an exposition of the necessity of its grounding paradox; by answering the question “quid juris?” literature could only come up against a truth that is not its own but rather philosophy’s. It is the affair of literature to play at its justification and to throw it out of kilter.

Literature, for Blanchot, has nothing to gain by erasing its distance from the Hegelian understanding of death. Indeed, to write is seemingly to put one’s death at risk. Blanchot’s figure of the writer obeys rules notably at odds with those of the struggle for recognition: Kojève, in his famous commentary on this section of the Phenomenology of Spirit, discerns the moment of the birth of Man in the putting of one’s life at risk during the struggle for recognition. What defines the animal is the constitutive refusal to desire anything besides the positive, the real and the given, to desire that which does not subserve the maintenance of its own biological existence. Kojève speaks of the human and the animal where Hegel’s own more philosophically astute terms are the person and life (he subsequently criticises Hegel for not respecting the essential difference between Man and Animal, between History and Nature). In place of the Christian machismo of putting one’s life at risk in order to enact the theological distinction between the human and the animal, Blanchot’s writer confronts the possibility of the loss of death. This comportment on the part of the writer is something other than reparations for the Christian disjunction of Man and Animal, since it entails less a return to Nature than a wandering between the kingdoms of life and death. In Kafka’s parable it would be redundant for the hunter Gracchus, as a failed corpse wafted from town to town, to engage in the activity of writing: one of Kafka’s most astonishing and beautiful texts – the letter of 5 July 1922 to Max Brod – details the perverse uses for which the writer employs the gifts of life and death, and for which he had gladly sacrificed everything. Whereas the person in legal and philosophical discourse can lay claim to a right to life precisely and curiously on the basis of a transcendence of mere life, literature can lay claim to a right to death on the basis of its distance from death. With the substitution of the right to death for the right to life, the question arises concerning the source of the authority of the right. The negativity of the Hegelian concept in its transcendence of the sense-certainty of life ceases to be the authorising power and is arbitrarily and insecurely subordinated to the deceits and mystifications of literature.

If Blanchot dies, it is not because he comes down openly on the side of Heidegger in the latter’s dispute with Hegel. He dies rather because he wishes literature to deploy itself in the ambiguous and duplicitous space be-
tween life and death, the existing and the concept, as it is in impropriety that literature finds its proper place. The Hegelianism of such statements as the following is aborted: “Language perceives that its meaning does not derive from what exists but from its own retreat before existence, and it is tempted to proceed no further than this retreat, to try to attain negation in itself and to make everything of nothing” (WF 324). Blanchot does not proceed from this to a dialectician’s encyclopaedia. Even as language is no longer to define itself by a saying of what is, by a passive reception and recording of life, Blanchot does not assign it the complementary task of extracting a determinate reality from its own power of negation. Literary language does not want to say what is; instead, it wants to rub up against it in the dark, to communicate with it inside its own domain as the friction of thing upon thing. “My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature” (WF 327). It is a moribund nature, however, a nature untouched by the honesty and goodwill of the nature of naïve consciousness. This is not the materialism of sense-certainty: “The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them really present outside of themselves. It is an element, a piece barely detached from its subterranean surroundings: it is no longer a name, but rather one moment in the universal anonymity, a bald statement, the stupor of a confrontation in the depths of obscurity” (WF 328). The literary word, by giving itself up to a confrontation with obscurity, differentiates itself from the language of naïve and speculative consciousness alike. It is not the light that captures the truth of what is for common sense or dialectical reason, as it does not pretend to occupy a position of another order than that of materiality.

Literary language addresses existence not with the truth of its sublation but with the meretriciousness of fiction. Whereas the concept retreats from existence in order to return to it as its idealisation, literary language never makes good the rupture from sensuous immediacy. It does not win through to the universality from where it could present itself as the Law of what is. Likewise, it is the parody of sensuous immediacy, its distortion and extension. The image is born, as Blanchot says, when the word does not exhaust itself in the saying of what is, but also says what it is not. The distorting and parodic character of language’s negativity is played down in Hegel’s account, where this negativity is analysed as sublation’s moments of destruction and conservation. Images result from the corruption that the negativity of the word visits on sensuous immediacy. Sensuous immediacy, which for Hegel is always already mediated, is for Blanchot always already in decay: the transitions effected by negativity are not interpreted in the same manner, since where Hegel passes from one identity to another by
means of the negativity of their very distinctness, for Blanchot things become slippery through the corruption of identities in the image.

The concept – what Blanchot discusses as everyday language – assumes the identity of the existing thing and its name, even though the name’s power of designation rests on its exclusion of what it names. The word, as the non-existence of the thing, becomes the thing’s essence. Yet the essentialising movement of language is never consummated, since the materiality of the word is as much the vehicle of ideality as its obstacle. The word can never realise itself as non-existence and hence can never properly claim to be the non-material essence of what it names, because it at the same time has to maintain a foothold in materiality through its own thingliness as a written, spoken or neurologically encrypted word. The word passes itself off as the non-empirical reincarnation and truth of sensuously existing reality when it merely wrenches and twists what is into further empirical configurations of specifically sonic material, textual marks and neuro-transmissions. Literary language, according to Blanchot, is the honest practice of these deceptions. In place of the vertical movement of existence and essence, it offers the lateral movement of the image. Under the pressure of its negation, a cat does not yield the essence “cat” but gives way, in Blanchot’s example, to a dog. The image is not ornamental. It does not presuppose the clearly articulated world of beings of everyday language, to which it would then add an aesthetic gloss. The simile and the metaphor are not the capricious and innocuous reflections of a psychological agent. On the contrary, images are the manifestations of reality’s constitutive decomposition and dissolution. If the name in everyday language kills, it kills in order to save what can be saved of a dying world: it employs its negativity to arrest the flows by which the identities of things are contaminated.

Literary language, for Blanchot, wants to say the world as it exists prior to the concept, to everyday language. Romantic nominalism here turns morbid, since the writer seeks out the primordial decadence of phenomena rather than the resolutely flourishing individuality that Romanticism ascribed to particulars in their independence from lifeless abstractions. Blanchot contends that literature wants “Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life” \( (WF \ 327) \). This is as much as to claim that it wants what, from a Hegelian perspective, is impossible. The extra-conceptual is simply the shadow of the concept. Mulishly forgetting the lesson that Hegel draws from the overthrow of sense-certainty, literature fancies that it can put a brake on the concept’s irresistible progress and say what in being said is not immediately won for ideality and brought back to the luminousness of presence. That which lit-
erature desires already bears witness, in the very distinctness with which it is the decadent world of phenomena prior to the concept, to its own conceptualisation. The materiality to which literature endeavours to adhere is inevitably an object of frustrated attention because it never attains the determinacy, that is, ideality of an object. To propose decay as the proper object of literature does not break with metaphysics, since the proposition idealises decay.

But such a reading of “Literature and the Right to Death” makes it too easy for itself. If Blanchot cannot help returning to the metaphysical fold, it is only on a certain level of his text. It is not self-evident that Blanchot’s reflections on literature are not likewise literary. On one level – on one slope, as Blanchot might put it – the text must betray what it wishes to express, simply because what it wishes to express is said not to collude with signification and the idealising movement of the name. Yet signification is but one of language’s modes. On another level, language cannot help sympathising “with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world” (WF 330). In this sympathy literature declares not only its difference from metaphysics and its light, but also its approximation to the questionability for which it is thinking’s rival. The text’s betrayal to the concept, on which Hegelianism counts, is unable to shatter that bond with obscurity which is grounded in the primordiality of what Heidegger expounds as the being of time. Literature is a witness to the being-outside-of-itself of ecstatic temporality to the extent that it is an unreliable and perjured witness. It is an uprising of the false in the name of a contestation of the veracities of the metaphysics of presence.

The work accordingly unworks itself, but in a different way to that in which the Hegelian work already unworks itself. Irrespective of what its prefix suggests, Blanchot’s notion of “désoeuvrement” does not and cannot consist in a negation of a supposed positivity of the Hegelian understanding of work. The Hegelian work is a sensuous particular that is nonetheless permeated by its own abstraction and negation. The work could therefore be called sublime inasmuch as it is the sensuous presentation of the nonsensuousness of the universal. It flickers between spheres, and it is for this reason that Hegel calls the work of art the mirror of Spirit. But whereas for Hegel the movement in the work’s presentation of the unpresentable is the movement of truth itself, for Blanchot it is the movement that tears open the work to the obscure. The negation in “désoeuvrement” bears not on the positivity of the sensuous, but on the externalisation of Spirit. It is that negativity in relation to the ideal which inheres in corrupt materiality. Orienting itself by the negativity of corrupt matter, Blanchot’s argument applies itself to an unworking and unworkability of the genre of the philosophical es-
say. Are Blanchot’s statements on the truth of literature to be understood in a literary or in a philosophical sense, in terms of an encounter with the obscure and the false or in terms of a judgement by the criteria of ratiocination? Do his reflections on the truth of literature not themselves participate in the deceptions of this truth?

The retreat to literature withdraws from criticism the individual theses of Blanchot’s text only to invite the general philosophical criticism of literature. This retreat does not amount to a transcendental apology of Blanchot’s theses, since literature does not concern itself with the universality and necessity of the transcendental. As a fact neither of reason nor of the senses, literature finds itself unable to escape the falsity to which metaphysics consigned it. Its truth – in other words, its essence – is its fictitiousness. Yet in its falsity it stands guarantor for the truth of metaphysics. Plato’s judgement thus inaugurates a dilemma for the writer: either literature corrects itself in relation to truth and thereby leaves philosophy uncontested, or it gives itself up to falsity and thereby makes itself a party to the definition of philosophical truth as its constitutive counterpart. Blanchot openly advocates the surrender to falsity and the antinomianism of the poètes maudits. A sentence of Kafka’s offers perhaps the sharpest formulation of this antinomianism: “We are digging the pit of Babel.” In place of an alternative to the “good sense” of everyday language, theology and speculative consciousness, there is pastiche. Literature does not assert its autonomy – it expends itself in the excavation of a shaft that is the complement of the tower of Babel that Kant attributes to metaphysics.

The dilemma of literature is however, mutatis mutandis the dilemma of philosophy. The grotesque abasement of literature is not simply a reaction to the triumph of philosophical speculation, regardless how much philosophy has claimed responsibility for this abasement. What has been characterised as the weakness, inferiority and failure of literature is also that on which philosophy is dependent for the articulation of its truth. Either philosophy endeavours to think through the essence of falsehood and thereby passes over into literature or it shrinks back from fiction and thereby allows fiction to determine the definition of truth. So that this dilemma might not be lost to view, Blanchot stages the spectacle of literature’s weakness within the genre of the philosophical essay. The failure attains a power of assault without ceasing to be failure. Writing can only ever enter into its disaster, since whatever it might propose as its autonomy has always been preceded by philosophy’s myth of autonomy. Yet philosophy is implicated in this disaster. Literature’s failure is the failure by which philosophy gauges its own success, and as such it plays a structural role in the definition of philosophy and the latter’s success. Philosophy’s autonomy is thus com-
promised by the disaster of writing.

Along different paths literature and philosophy make their way to questionability. Philosophy puts itself into question in the course of an interrogation of its truth. Literature, by contrast, does not ask what it itself is. In fact, it does not ask what anything is. Its words are not swayed by any curiosity and do not attempt to take up a position in reality from which they could enunciate the latter’s truth. They turn aside from what is and say what is not. Literature seeks out the non-existence that is not the ideality overlooking existing particulars, but rather the fictitiousness of non-existing particulars. In literature the particular is lost to both the truth of existence and the truth of ideality. Without the corroboration of sensuous immediacy or speculative reflection, literature has only its weakness, obscurity and falsehood to put forward in its defence. It thereby makes its defence questionable but, as “Literature and the Right to Death” suggests, its questionability is its defence.

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NOTES


Bare Exteriority: Philosophy of the Image and the Image of Philosophy in Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot

Emanuel Alloa

(trans. Millay Hyatt)

“L’image, la dépouille” Blanchot

I

“Philosophy would henceforth forever be our companion, at day, at night, even by losing her name, by becoming literature, scholarship, non-knowledge, or by standing aside. She would be the unavowable friend in whom we respect – love – that which would not permit us to become close to her, all the while giving us to believe there is nothing awake in us, nothing vigilant unto sleep, that is not due to her difficult friendship.”¹ In a late text entitled Our Clandestine Companion Maurice Blanchot testifies his at once intimate and conflict-ridden relationship to philosophy. If philosophy must be considered as Blanchot’s unavowable, mostly nameless and faceless companion; Blanchot’s restrained presence in turn was not less decisive as a dialogue partner for French post-Heideggerian philosophy (Levi-
nas, Foucault, Derrida, Nancy). In order to apprehend the intricate design left by the weaving shuttle going back and forth in this infinite interchange, I will focus on what could be the common and nonetheless dividing membrane between them: the question of the image. On the one hand, Blanchot’s theory of the imaginary has recently received particular attention; on the other hand, the question of the image – which has long remained external to the main philosophical discourse – could prove to be the very thread of Ariadne which leads to the heart of the self-representation of philosophy. In his recent work *Au fond des images*, Jean-Luc Nancy has established that Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics rests on a questioning of the status of the image as finitude. In this essay I follow the intuition that Blanchot’s writing itself is not only indebted to Heidegger’s thought, but that his reflection on the image reveals striking similarities to those of the German philosopher. In the following two sections, Heidegger’s (II) and Blanchot’s (III) interpretations of the image will be outlined so as to bring forth the common motif of their considerations: the image as the Latin *imago*, as the death mask. In the final section of the essay (IV), I shall argue that the question of the image thus enables us to approach the border which both unites and separates Heidegger and Blanchot. This border between philosophy and literature, around which the writings of both revolve, is the question of exteriority, beyond any representational thinking. As I will try to show, however, exteriority is conceived in Heidegger and Blanchot in two similar, but nevertheless radically opposed ways: the faint, but decisive difference between *laying patent* (“freilegen”) and *laying bare* (“dépouiller”).

II

In 1926, *Undying Faces*, a book of photographs of over a hundred death masks of famous personalities from the Renaissance to the First World War – from Brunelleschi to Frank Wedekind, from Schiller to Wagner and Nietzsche – was published in Berlin by Ernst Benkard. The experience of the massive scale of death in the trenches overshadowed the entire decade of the 1920s, and it is in this decade that a vague desire to endow the phenomenon of death with a meaning transcending its historical circumstances came to be expressed. Despite, or precisely as a result, of the newly emerging culture of remembrance, expressed in the symbolic war memorials erected in small towns all across Germany after the war, there was a sense of unease about accepting death as an anonymous fact. In the death masks of outstanding historical figures, the wounded Weimar Republic not only lent death a singular countenance, but was also able to
found a new beginning upon the rubble of the past. Benkard’s book, which by 1935 had gone into its nineteenth printing and had been translated into English and other languages, formed only the prelude to a series of publications – including Richard Langer’s *Totenmasken (Death Masks)*⁶ in the following year and especially Egon Friedell’s famous *Das letzte Gesicht (The last Face)*⁷ in 1929 – whose far-reaching effects on its time are testified to by numerous writers such as Céline, Canetti, Aragon and Nabokov.

In Strasbourg in 1926, that same year, Blanchot met the young Emmanuel Levinas, who would introduce him to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and with whom he would forge a life-long friendship (for Derrida, “this friendship was like grace; it remains like a blessing of that time,”⁸ a time from which the only verifiable photograph of Blanchot remains). In that year thus, Heidegger held a series of lectures in Marburg. The way in which he intended to undertake his project of “laying patent” (*Freilegung*)⁹ Western philosophy was already beginning to emerge in his interpretation of Kant the same year. In the stronghold of Neo-Kantianism dominating Germany at the time, Heidegger sought to lift the epistemological character of philosophy out of its foundations by bringing forth from under the epistemological mask that had been forced upon him a different Kant. In the second part of the lecture series, *Logic: The Essence of Truth*,¹⁰ whose core idea would form the basis of his subsequent book on Kant, Heidegger demonstrated how the problem of metaphysics in Kant is to be posed, wherein the problem lies, and how the “perishing” (*Verendung*) of metaphysics is anticipated in Kantian thought.

As is well known, Heidegger considers the chapter on schematism, held to be an “insignificant addendum” by Neo-Kantianism, as the connective hinge not only of the entire structure of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but of the three *Critiques* overall. The imagination, which guarantees the synthesis of the manifold of perception with the concept of the understanding, is for Heidegger at the same time the anchoring of a metaphysics of presence of the re-presented (*Vorgestelltes*) – but also the vanishing point where temporality constantly postpones the present-at-hand (*Vorhandenes*), and finite *Dasein* goes beyond itself due to the temporal structure of the synthesis. The sensation provoked by this radical reinterpretation during the 1929 Davos dispute with Ernst Cassirer is also well known, and Levinas, who was there, gave Blanchot a thorough report upon his return. For Heidegger, imagination, defined by Kant as “exhibitio originaria,”¹¹ precipitates a thinking inseparable from the history of Western metaphysics of representation (*Vorstellung*) adequately produced by a subjectivity to itself, but also, as Heidegger argues in Davos, of “a presentation [*Darstellung*], a free giving [*Sichgeben*].”¹²
Let us pause for a moment and clarify what is at stake. On the one hand, the analysis of the “schema-image” is to make explicit the essence of the metaphysics of presence, as it is constructed on the adequation model of truth from within and without. On the other hand, another conception of truth is to be brought forth from beneath this structure, which Kant’s characterisation of imagination as “exhibitio originaria” literally grasps as “original self-offering.” According to Heidegger, these two opposing conceptions of truth – for the question of truth is at the heart of the Marburg lecture series – are so entwined in Kant, that they require, first of all, a philosophical hermeneutics, which Heidegger also renders as “the art of outlaying (Auslegen).” In his laying-patent (freilegend) interpretation, an unknown image emerges from the concept of imagination as the power to represent what is already given; an image that was not visible before and now discloses itself of its own accord. This new image of Kant no longer resembles him – this is the accusation of the Neo-Kantians. Or is it possible that Kant no longer resembles his own image?

The decisive move in Heidegger’s interpretation accordingly lies in his extraction of the problem of the image from a treatment of the epistemological capacity: the focus shifts from the problem of representation (Vorstellung) to the problem of presentation (Darstellung). In the question of presentation, the schema-image has to be understood as a mode of depiction. Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant was so radical that, as Nancy stresses, the example he used to explicate his characterisation of the schema-image as depiction was hardly noticed amidst the debate on whether his reinterpretation was even admissible or whether it did not utterly distort Kant. Instead of making do with an arbitrary example (in other contexts he refers to landscapes or photography), Heidegger here cites a case that at first glance seems anything but self-evident: “A particular mode of depiction is also for example the death mask.”

We have to assume that Heidegger, like most of his contemporaries, came across the phenomenon of the death masks for the first time in Benkard’s Undying Faces. The masks stored in the Schiller archive in Marbach are contained in the book, including several authors crucial for Heidegger. Not least among these was Nietzsche, although his mask was the version reshaped by his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche in an attempt to correct the disfigurement caused by his disease. The most lasting impression on Heidegger seems to have been left by the death mask of Pascal, which he cites as a concrete illustration of a death mask. Why employ this strange example of a death mask for the problem of presentation as depiction?

The first answer is obvious. The death mask is constructed by making
a physical mould of the face and can thus be seen as an objective adequation of the dead person’s features. By means of this depiction, “which itself can be depicted, copied or photographed,” I can “see through the photograph of the depiction directly at that which is primarily represented, that which is meant, namely the countenance of the dead person itself, the dead man himself.” The death mask exerts an extraordinary *effet de réel*, which not only causes the observer to look past the material composition and perceive what is depicted as something real, but the “perishing” of *Dasein* itself is verified by the viewer’s gaze as it imbues the dead with life. But what does the death mask really represent? How can it, being tied to the most contingent circumstance (the expression a face assumes in the instant of death), sum up a person’s general aspect or even his personality? Blaise Pascal’s death mask seems to have struck many of Benkard’s readers as it demonstrates the domination of the spirit over physical suffering. Nothing of the intense pain the 39-year old endured is visible in Pascal’s mask, it has transcended physical contingency and represents faith in salvation. Elias Canetti, who discovered Benkard’s book in Budapest, observes in his diary in 1927 that the photograph of Pascal’s death mask is not a picture of Pascal, but a picture for something else: “Here pain has reached its culmination, has found its long sought after meaning. Pain that is to remain thought is not capable of more.” Not the empirically suffering Pascal, but the concept of pain is sensualised by the picture. Thanks to a dissimilar similarity between a living person and his face frozen in death, room is made for a different understanding of the image. Heidegger writes: “Here a concept of the image appears that differs from the concept of the image qua depiction.” Heidegger is thus able to show how the death mask is exemplary in its ability to explain the method of schematism, since it appears in a space between empirical sensory diversity and a rational unity of concepts.

The initial anxiety caused by the death mask therefore becomes a tactical element in the argumentative chain of proof and marks its uncanniness. The Pascal example is missing from the Kant book. Is this oversight on the part of the thinker of being-toward-death intentional or not? The question remains open. The fact is that Heidegger prematurely closes the abyss torn open by his example.

III

When Heidegger’s publisher Günther Neske edited a Festschrift on the occasion of Heidegger’s 70th birthday, Blanchot included an excerpt from *Awaiting Oblivion*. From this fragmentary, genre-exploding dialogue, in
which Heidegger’s thought unmistakably shimmers through, Blanchot extracts a fragment and offers it back to Heidegger like a reflecting prism. Although their motives initially resemble each other, and although Heidegger’s themes seem recognizable in Blanchot’s fragment, the text obstructs reflection and forces the reader onto another, opaque and image-less surface. The mysterious point around which *Awaiting Oblivion* revolves is the expectation of a revelation, reminding us of Heidegger’s *aletheia*, of a truth that forges a path across the river of forgetting, across *Lethe*, out of the darkness into the bright light (*phos*) of the revealed phenomenon (*phainesthai*). But the longer one follows the feverishly recursive writing in *Awaiting Oblivion*, the clearer it becomes that the imminent revelation will never occur, since it is always imminent. A symbol for this is Lazarus’ resurrection, which Blanchot a few years prior had advanced in *The Space of Literature*.

Every reading is a desperate desire for illumination, an attempt to bring hidden meaning to light, just as Christ called upon Lazarus: *Lazare, veni foras*, Lazarus, come forth – and knock over your tombstone. “To knock over the stone seems to be the mission of reading: to make it transparent, to dissolve it with the penetration of the gaze, which, in a burst, goes beyond it” (*EL* 257). To read an author would thus mean to move obstacles out of the way (Blanchot refers to “excavation”), to “lay patent” (*freilegen*) the path so that it can “outlay” (*auslegen*, literally to disclose or to interpret) itself. Blanchot seems to approach Heidegger in this thinking of the outside, but it is precisely here where he – subtly, but no less radically – turns away from him. In reading, he writes, there is “a vertiginous moment that resembles the irrational movement in which we try to open our already closed eyes to life” (*EL* 257). The desire to read something that is not there to read, to see something that is not there to see, has to be understood as the madness of the day. Now the thaumaturgic effect of reading does not, according to Blanchot, consist in the least in the “cadaveric emptiness” being awakened to life and throwing off its “well-woven bands” (*EL* 257), but rather in the fact that even after the stone has been pushed aside, the grave remains closed, or, like Kafka’s gate to the law, has been open all along. It is not a mystery that clears itself up but the experience of an impenetrable bareness that has always been present. As Blanchot writes in the fragment from *Awaiting Oblivion*: “[T]he presence … was, on the contrary, stripped of mystery to the point that it laid the mystery bare without dis-covering it.”18 Not a mystery that reveals itself, but the laying bare of absent self-evidence. Blanchot continues elsewhere, “such is the character proper to this ‘opening’ that is reading: Only that which is most tightly closed opens; only that which is of the greatest opacity is transparent” (*EL*
The gravestone (sema) is not the sign (sema) for the dead body (soma) lying behind it, which comes forth to return to new life and meaning. The referential structure of meaning itself is crushed on the naked surface of the tombstone. Lazarus does not come outside; he already is the foras, the outside, the exteriority of meaning absolved of its finitude. The gravestone is no longer a sign of passage, no longer a promise of insight, but a radical closure, the closure of the finite. In the mute other, my own potential is deprived of power. While “in the light of day” we may always try to begin again, always try to penetrate things once more, we suddenly come up against a wall or a face that keeps us in its spell and throws us back on our radical passivity:

If we stare at a face, at a corner of a wall, do we not abandon ourselves to what we see, are we not at its mercy, without power before this strangely mute and passive presence? It’s true, but it is because what we are staring at has collapsed into its own image, because the image has returned to this ground of impotence into which everything relapses. (EL 343)

Being caught in the fascination of the image is based on the precedence of the there is before every I can. The experience of this presence, which holds one captive without itself ever being tangible, is the experience of the literary. Only because the image deprives doing of its power can we speak of literature as the space of images. This is why, at the end of the introduction to The Space of Literature, Blanchot narrows the question of literature to the question of the image – just as Heidegger once narrowed the question of the metaphysics of presence to the question of the image. The differences however are striking. Where Heidegger saw the creative imagination as the possibility of rescuing philosophy from The Age of the World Picture, in which the world has become a mere image, Blanchot demands that this reversal in poetic space be even more radical. Where Heidegger thinks he hears the setting-to-work of truth in art, Blanchot sees art as the experience of errancy.

What happens to the image in literary language? The notion of the figurativeness of poetic language is easily misunderstood. Poetry does not create metaphors or allegories; to be precise, poetry does not, in Blanchot’s view, contain a single image. It is rather the world that has become an image in poetry (cf. LV 25). The images of poetic language do not refer to any outside, rather they are their own exteriority, an image of the image, an image of language (and not a pictorial language), or an imagined language, a language no one speaks, that is, a language that speaks itself from its own absence, just as the image appears upon
the absence of the thing; a language that is directed at the shadow of events, not at their reality, by the fact that the words that express them are not signs but images, images of words and words in which things become images. (EL 32)

But does one not run the risk when making language into its own image of repeating the old notion that the image comes “after the thing”? The appendix to *The Space of Literature* entitled “Two Versions of the Imaginary” takes up this problem: “‘After’ signifies that the thing has to distance itself before it can be seized again” (EL 343). By insisting on the becoming-image of the thing, Blanchot continues Heidegger’s notion of the distance that undermines the *stans* of standing face-to-face. But for Heidegger the distance (*Entfernung*) is temporary, since it is always already *Ent-Fernung*, the abolition of distance (*Ferne*). For Blanchot on the other hand, “distance is here at the heart of the matter” (EL 343). The thing that we “seize in the living movement of a performance of comprehension” is, by virtue of becoming an image, made into “the unseizable, the inactual, the impassive, not the same thing at a distance but that thing as distance” (EL 343). The image is not a living representative of something momentarily absent, but a “recurrence of that which does not return” (EL 343). Elsewhere Blanchot makes use of Bachelard’s distinction (borrowed from Minkowski) between the *resonance* and the *resounding* of the image:20 The image can never be an echo of what is known (resonance), but on the contrary effects a stepping outside of itself (resounding) (EI 470). Against this background it becomes clear why Blanchot gives as an example of his concept of the image something that is considerably removed from the way it is commonly understood. It is an example that strongly reminds us of Heidegger.

“The image, the bare corpse” (EL 343) – the image is the corpse (*la dépouille*), bared (*dépouillé*). The corpse is not an image Blanchot introduces in order to illustrate his concept, rather his example undoes the understanding of the image itself: “The image, at first glance, does not resemble the cadaver, but it could be that the cadaveric strangeness is also that of the image” (EL 344). The experience is uncanny as, literally, the suspension of the familiar. The dead person is there and at the same time neither down here nor up there, neither here nor anywhere else: “The cadaveric presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere” (EL 344). While the sight of the corpse de-places the viewer, the corpse remains irrevocably here. Only grudgingly is the corpse moved somewhere else; the dead person monopolizes the space, and fills it with his absence. Although the corpse has approached the condition of a thing as much as possible – it is spread out on the death bed, prepared – and although the dead person has become pure passivity, he seems to have absolute free-
domain of movement and the ability to paralyse the power of the living. At the site of death all everyday activities cease. Just as a damaged tool becomes an image of itself because it no longer disappears into utility and thus can appear as itself for the first time, so the dead person is an image of himself – an image in which the impossibility-of-work (désoeuvrement) of the image appears. The appearance of the damaged (abîmé) is unbearable because it tears open an abyss (abîme): Behind the appearance there is nothing left to hark back to. One cannot tarry in the bare exteriority of the damaged one, but every promise of a place beyond it is denied. The corpse troubles the home (la demeure), because to remain (demeurer) in the abode is no longer permitted. The corpse is uncanny since the dead has no place; the appearance of the dead is a visitation (Heimsuchung), and no here can be a home any longer. Blanchot writes: “the cadaver may be peacefully laying in state, but it is still everywhere in the room and in the house” (EL 348), just as in Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher, \(^{21}\) where the dead roams around, takes away the breath of the living and condemns the house to ruin. Unable to remain in its own place, the cadaver is errant (irrt). Everything about the corpse is restless, wandering (irrend), erroneous (irrig). The concept of errancy (Irre) is shared by both Blanchot and Heidegger. Heidegger employs it in Of the Essence of Truth in order to emphasize that the search for truth always implies a wandering (Irren) in error (Irrtum).\(^{22}\) Blanchot on the other hand raises erring to the truth of the image, to the truth of literature. Literature does not create a place for us to stay, instead we always find ourselves on its shores, at its edge.

The sight of the corpse breaks through the relation of similarity – I cannot recognize the deceased in that frozen, mask-like face. Paradoxically however, the deceased returns at the very moment the interpersonal relationship is severed, and begins “to resemble himself” (EL 346). But is ‘himself’ not the wrong expression? Would it not be better to say ‘similar to who he was while alive’? Yet Blanchot means exactly what he says. Not until the dead person becomes an impersonal, anonymous neuter does he come to resemble himself. At the moment the self resembles itself, it moves into the dangerous zone of the neuter, where it is lost (verirrt) in itself like its own spirit, a ghost, a revenant that survives itself and only continues to have an effect in its own return.\(^{23}\) The perishing of human existence, bared in the corpse, thus does not mark an existential caesura, but a continuous postponement of the end. Against “certain contemporary philosophies” (by this designation Blanchot always means Heidegger), which see in the finitude of existence the possibility of understanding and the self-resolution of truth – “as if the choice between death as the possibility of understanding and death as the horror of impossibility also had to be the
choice between sterile truth and the verbosity of the non-true" (EL 351) – death for Blanchot is never the end, but rather the impossibility of the end and thus of all “resolution.” Death is unavoidable and yet unapproachable, in the face of death “I do not die, I am deprived of the power of dying, in death one dies and one does not cease dying” (EL 202). Death constantly remains something external without ever becoming an authentic experience. The image would then be another name for exteriority, and exteriority another name for the image.

IV

Wherein then does the image as exteriority differ from Heidegger's concept of the image? In Heidegger's analyses of Kant, his decisive move is to oppose the metaphysics of presence, which culminates in the representation for a self (or a representation of a self for itself), with the temporality of the imagination. (The Kant book, which combines the temporal dimension of Dasein with the hermeneutics of the historical tradition, should therefore not be seen as a preparatory work to Being and Time, but as the announced but never completed second part of the magnum opus). The example of the death mask allows Heidegger to break through the notion of adequation, according to which the representation resembles the represented. The countenance of the dead person reveals something irretrievably distant, which is nevertheless given to me. The structure of this “self-engendering” (sichzeitigenden) giving is essentially a temporal structure, diametrically opposed to the immediacy of the present. From “something is present [to me]” to “something is given” (es gibt), Heidegger transforms egology into a phenomenology of anonymously appearing being. That which is hidden and distant actually becomes present with the event of givenness (es gibt), in that the event is not only “current events” but an actual en-owning (Er-eignis). At the sight of the death mask, Dasein comes into itself as finite existence.

At first glance, Blanchot seems to revert to the metaphysics of presence castigated by Heidegger. Nothing appears on the countenance of the dead person; it rather represents the end of every appearance and the return to the irrevocable immanence of a naked presence. The presence Blanchot is aiming at however hardly resembles the traditional idea of representation: It is not a presence a subject has at his disposal because he produced it himself (pro ducere, to place in front of oneself), but nor is it a Heideggerian coming-into-the-present of a distance as the here and now of a given. In Blanchot's writing nothing is ever “given,” there persists rather something like an insistence of un-giveability. The corpse is not given, but
immediate in that it cannot appear as a medium.

No one has more thoroughly gauged the profound rift that divides the – in many ways akin – figures of Heidegger and Blanchot, than the person who himself always stood between the two: Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas was able to show that Heidegger and Blanchot first differ in the position they each give to exteriority. Heidegger discovered that with an issue “external” to the classical philosophical discourse (the problem of the image) he was able to unhinge the Western tradition. If representation is based on immediacy, then the event of giving introduces a constitutive distance into thinking. Except that Heidegger’s thinking, as subversive as it appears, remains for Levinas subject to a thinking of domination. The appearance, as distant as it may be, as much as it removes me from myself, remains an appearance for me: “By appearing, the most foreign stranger, the strangest thing, already gives power something to hold onto, and submits itself to me.”

Despite all its distance, Heidegger’s thinking remains a thinking of staying.

Blanchot on the other hand does not remove exteriority to an elsewhere, but withdraws it from any localizability. This is why Levinas sees Blanchot as the thinker of the nomadic par excellence, for whom literature is less an exile than an exhibition of man’s basic disposition in an exiled existence. The “Heideggerian universe,” which remains a foundational thinking regardless of the late Heidegger’s assertions, becomes “uprooted” in Blanchot. What is left is a nomadic, “placeless sojourn” in the desert, a sojourning where the difference between night and day becomes blurred. The literary work does not dis-cover the truth, but on the contrary lays bare an essential darkness, the darkness of errancy. As Blanchot writes, “before the obscurity of which art reminds us, just as before death, the ‘I’ as the support of power dissolves into an anonymous ‘one’ on an earth of peregrination.”

This exteriority, into which the reader is abducted, is no longer the reverse of an inside; it is not a night that belongs to and follows upon a day, but a “second night” (EL 220-4), totally detached from any illumination. In this second night – the space of the “second death” and of the corpse’s double – truth no longer develops in the dark, rather the darkness itself turns out to be that which no longer shines. Michel Foucault, who first summed up Blanchot’s writing as a “thought of the outside,” also read this movement as a disempowerment of the classical thinking of the image. The thought of the outside “must no longer be a power that tirelessly produces images and makes them shine, but rather a power that undoes them, that lessens their overload.”

Heidegger and Blanchot’s diagnoses would thus initially seem to be related (denunciations of an age of the depicting world image), but their
proposals turn out to be antinomically opposed. In that very year in which Blanchot adjoins a fragment from *Awaiting Oblivion* to Heidegger’s Fest-schrift, he publishes the article “The End of Philosophy” in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Every movement of transgression necessarily hypostatizes what it tries to overcome, missing real exteriority. Transcending metaphysics thus becomes a movement of its preservation. “The truth is: we don’t want to lose anything.” In such a perspective, Heidegger is the last representative of such a preserving thought. The discovery of the death masks became for Heidegger a starting point from which to bring forth an unseen life from under the frozen image of the past. Blanchot on the other hand strove to reach the point at which all image production, all imagination is brought to a stop.

In Benkard’s book, Heidegger is struck by Pascal’s death mask, in which perception separates itself from similarity in order to move closer to the concept (of fear, of pain). Blanchot, on the other hand, is riveted by the death mask with which Benkard concludes his book: the only anonymous mask, of a young girl drowned in the Seine, the so-called *Unknown Girl from the Seine*. In one of his last writings Blanchot mentions that he had hanging over his desk in Èze in the south of France this photograph of the impersonal and yet so immediately moving countenance of death. The unknown girl reflects neither the universal concept nor any personal individuality into Blanchot’s writing of the blank neuter, this neuter Blanchot had discovered in his university thesis on the philosophy of the sceptics. In ancient scepticism, the equivalence (*isosthenia*) of the forces leads to the zero-point of neither-nor (*ne…uter*), in which the forces neutralize each other and can neither be said (*dire*) nor contradicted (*contredire*). All that is left is destitution (*dédire*) of discourse itself.

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NOTES


4 This parallel has been highlighted by Nancy himself in a footnote to Au fond, p. 168.


7 Egon Friedell, Das letzte Gesicht, ed. E. Schaeffer (Leipzig-Düsseldorf: Orell Füssli, 1929).


9 We deliberately translate “Freilegung” (the hermeneutical effort to let the phenomenon come out into its plenitude) with laying patent to emphasize the difference with Blanchot’s laying bare (“dépouiller”).

10 Martin Heidegger, Logik: Die Frage nach der Wahrheit, Gesamtausgabe vol. 21, 1925/26 (Frankfurt/M: Klostermann, 1995) All translations of Heidegger as well as Blanchot are mine.


14 Heidegger, Logik, p. 361.

15 Heidegger, Logik, p. 361.


1978).


25 Levinas, Blanchot, p. 25.

26 Levinas, Blanchot, p. 22.


30 Blanchot, Une voix venue d’ailleurs (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p.15. One could ask whether the Inconnue de la Seine was the model for the photography of the drowned girl shown to Sorge (another Heideggerian name!), the protagonist of Le Très-Haut (TH 41).
Timelessness and Negativity in *Awaiting Oblivion*:

Hegel and Blanchot in Dialogue

*Rhonda Khatab*

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

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

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

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

As a result of the gyrating rhythm that orients language in a movement of approach and evasion, time itself, in *Awaiting Oblivion*, is suspended.
Blanchot, this ‘suspension’ is rearticulated as ‘fascination,’ and thereby appropriates a sense of allure, attraction, absorption, and enthrallment. To write, is to “surrender to the fascination of time’s absence” (SL 30). Timelessness in Blanchot deconstructs the transcendental signified through the continual annulment of presence: “The time of time’s absence has no present, no presence” (SL 30). The time of timelessness divorces literature from the linear time of history as teleology. It is that which is outside time. Timelessness is the underlying condition of writing as “the carrier of death.” The ‘absence of time,’ in Blanchot, expresses the infinite deferral of the presencing of the signified to itself. Meaning presents itself as the “presence of absence:” presence is always overshadowed by the “impossibility of making any presence real” (SL 30, 31).

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

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

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

Hegel here introduces the dialectic of difference, which posits that meaning emerges in language through the function of negativity. Hegel’s dialectic of negativity extends the formulation of difference also to include the movement of deferral. He expresses the impossibility of grasping the Now in its immediacy, in the act of pointing to it: “the Now that is, is another Now than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no
more just when it is.”¹⁰ Time pervades signification, and instils within it a fissure that renders impossible the concurrence of the signifier and signified. This temporal disjunction between the signifier and its signified emerges in Hegel as the disparity between the being as expression of presence or ‘essence,’ and the has been, as that which is ‘outside’ being.¹¹

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

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

Through his extrapolation of self-consciousness, Hegel illustrates how difference is implicated within identity itself. Being is mediated or split in its becoming self-aware. In reflecting upon itself, it becomes other than itself, and thus its self-revelation involves the negation of itself, and preservation of this negated self *within* itself.¹⁶ Thus, the “unity of self-consciousness with itself” is grounded in difference: that is, consciousness realises itself only through an other, or by negating itself. Consciousness merely appears
to itself as unified: the unity of self-consciousness is, therefore, *appearance*. This explains why Hegel contends that “self-consciousness is *Desire* in general”: the act of reflection finds its original motivation in the desire for unity.¹⁷ It is indeed the significance of Desire and its implications for the movement of time that is of interest here.

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

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

The exposition of the metaphor of Desire further elucidates the underlying drives of atemporal time, which, as has been demonstrated, characterises the structure of the Hegelian dialectic, as it does the notion of History in Hegel. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel configures the structure of historical, or specifically discursive time in terms of a non-linear movement as expressed by the following phrase: “the concrete present is the result of the past, and is pregnant with the future.”¹⁹ Alexandre Kojève, in his reading of Hegel, provides a phenomenological interpretation of Hegel’s composition of time, through an exposition of the role of Desire in the movement of non-linear time. Expanding upon Alexandre Koyré’s formulation of Hegelian time, Kojève provides a functional model which represents non-linear temporality as a circular, futural movement impelled by the past.²⁰
Desire is the impetus for this model in terms of its role in the functions of deferral and of self-preservation and regeneration.\textsuperscript{21}

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

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

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

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

Departing from this ideal of a temporality of completion, Blanchot imagines the time of writing in terms of an eternal return to the absence of the sign, rather than to signification. He proposes a time of irrevocable fracture – the interruption of forgetting – whereby “what was written in the past will be read in the future, without any relation of presence being able to establish itself between writing and reading.” The significance of this fragmentary model of time pertains to the impossibility of temporal continu-
ity, and the necessity of the absence of the instant of presence, which precludes all possibility of unity or identity.\textsuperscript{35} Such a model declines the “demand for circularity” expressed in the accomplishment of history (see \textit{IC} 15). The time of writing, as a function of the passivity of waiting, and the rupture that is forgetting, engages non-dialectical difference – difference as pure lack – which radically ‘dis-continues’ the mediating line of time, rendering every moment an immediate particularity: an instance of impossibility. Writing, in Blanchot, is therefore reformulated as rewriting, which bespeaks the impossibility of textual completion. To this effect, writing as rewriting, is non-representational: the play of difference precludes the possibility of unity, and thus of contexture.

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

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

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

For Blanchot, this situation speaks to the question of the interminability of the work, as well as the impossibility of identifying the work with its (au-
thorial) source, and vice-versa. Although Hegel recognises the inherent paradox that the situation entails, he maintains, nonetheless, that “this illusory appearance of an antithesis” is resolvable. Exploiting Hegel’s own descriptions, Blanchot illustrates that no End can ever be achieved, as the paradox arises anew for each new work. For Blanchot, Hegel’s portrayal of the individual consciousness as a “Nothing working towards Nothing” is of particular significance for his argument. Blanchot proceeds to demonstrate the implications of the circumstances that Hegel portrays. In particular, Blanchot emphasises the impossibility of any essential realisation of the self through the work, for the work essentially disappears in its emergence out of the obscure unicity of its nebulous beginnings into the daylight of its public existence. To become a writer, an individual must, at any given moment in time, put pen to paper, and give himself over to words. Yet, still, he is not a writer, for his words do not exist pending their reception by the public community. In its transformation into a publication, the work thence “enters the stream of history” (GO 28). Blanchot is aware that the work becomes a ‘reality’ as it unfolds in time: the history of discourse provides a context within which the work derives its value. The essential paradox of writing cannot, however, for Blanchot, ever be overcome, remaining as the fact of the work’s disappearance as the condition of its very realization. The work essentially comes into being outside of the individual: the writer vanishes as authorial figure in the movement by which the work is realized. The work rests upon a “vital contingency” (GO 28), which renders futile the conscious efforts of the individual who writes. Impossibly, the movement of transformation by which the work emerges in the face of the writer’s death finds its source in the writer’s own force of negation (GO 28). The relationship of the writer and the work involves an endless repetition of appearance and disappearance: the paradox itself sustains the work in its incessant becoming. For Blanchot the contradictory current of becoming by which the work unfurls in time interminably propagates its own recurrence; a motion whereby “everything begins again from nothing” (GO 24). Blanchot thus articulates the impossibility of establishing an origin for the work which exists in time. Within this revolving temporality, the work is necessarily transfigured so that the presence of what was written in the past is effaced with each and every reading.

Having addressed the manner in which the recurrence of paradox is ascribed a greater significance in Blanchot than in Hegel, now it has to be shown how Blanchot transcends the Hegelian dialectic. In comparing the models of reflection in Hegel and Blanchot, as well as each of their distinctive conceptions of negativity, the manner in which Blanchot’s
poetics effectively expand the confines of consciousness as is formulated within the domain of the Hegelian dialectic, will be illustrated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Awaiting Oblivion* symbolises the relation of the writer to his work as one of absolute alienation, through the relationship of Il and Elle as one of a “double dissymmetry” (IC 70-1). Their relationship of ‘strangeness’ suffers the interruption of a ‘pure interval’ that sustains them in a condition of ‘infinite separation.’ The impossibility of a relationship of unity, and equal reciprocity is formulated in Blanchot as an “interruption of being” (IC 69). This relation is of the “third kind,” and serves as a metaphor for the metaphysical relation of self and other, and of self as other, where writing, as the experience of language, is the medium through which is introduced the fissure of difference into contemporaneity. Il and Elle are involved in a relationship of writing: Il asks Elle to dictate to him that which he will write. There is, however, a profound disjunction between what she says, and what he writes: repetition is disrupted by difference as the mode of language. Accordingly, Blanchot’s model of dialogue excludes any form of immediacy between interlocutors. The other remains wholly other, and “is not reduced to what ‘I’ say of him” (IC 55). Elle’s speech is irreducible to the form of discourse, and remains outside, or in excess of what Il transcribes. Elle functions in their relation as the locus of the Outside: “in speech, it is the outside that speaks in giving rise to speech, and permitting me to speak.” Writing, in Blanchot, is not represented as the spontaneity of meaning in language, as thought, always exceeding its self-presentification, belongs to the space of difference, or otherness: the Outside.
The dynamics of the irreducible relation of Il and Elle, as reciprocally self and other, can be comparatively represented in terms of the structure of proximity as distance; approach as distanciation. In Blanchot, such a relation of absolute estrangement represents the character of neutrality. The definition of the neutral in Blanchot, however, excludes all sense of reduction of difference, or of inequality: “the neutral does not annul, does not neutralize this double-signed infinity, but bears in it the way of an enigma” (IC 71). The neutral bears the sense of ‘non-alignment,’ not in a political sense, but in the sense of this ‘double,’ or multiple ‘dissymmetry,’ which characterises the space of signification arising out of the relation of one to another. The neutral involves the “redoubling of irreciprocity” (IC 70). This definition implicates the movement of displacement of presence introduced into writing through the double dissymmetry of self-reflexivity. In Awaiting Oblivion, the impersonal pronouns Il (he), and elle (she) function to displace the speaking subject as the locus of self-presence. Furthermore, the present itself is displaced, and there emerges a language which has no centre, a language which does not actively speak, but simply is in the “pure passivity of being” (SL 27). The neutre describes a form of language that stands at a ‘distanceless distance’ from representation. To this effect, the neutre corresponds to what is unrepresentable and, like the real, it “cannot be embodied” (SS 220). The neutre is pure difference.

Through writing, language is able to “break the bond that unites the word with myself” (SL 26). The written text incessantly recreates itself precisely through the negation of its author. Blanchot’s récit engages in such a self-negation in that, “the writer who consents to sustain writing’s essence loses the power to say ‘I’ ... and so he loses the power to make other say ‘I’” (SL 27). In Hegel’s dialectic, the ‘I’ is also displaced by temporality: it is, as is the ‘Now’ a has been, and is therefore outside being. The ‘I’ in Hegel, is a pure ‘I’: it is a pure ‘This,’ a universal sign that is as empty as Blanchot’s neutral il (‘he/it’). The neutre, in Blanchot, expresses the value of criticism in literature as apolitical, or as having an ‘indirect relation’ to the political. This is not at all to say that literary criticism bears no political value, on the contrary, the work of Blanchot represents an extensive engagement with the political. It is rather to say that the form of engagement of the literary with the political, is not teleological, and cannot be reduced to historically specific means and ends. Literature bears the power of questioning, yet does not – and in order to remain literature, must not – wield this power as an implement of force. In this sense, writing is an intransitiv- ity, and remains so in its incessant questioning of its own being (see WD 78).
In conclusion, Blanchot’s model of an aporetic temporality interrupts the Hegelian dialectic, and thereby contests the absolute value accorded to conceptual and representational thought. Rewriting constitutes an ‘excentric’ movement of return, and excludes the possibility of a unifying discourse. *Awaiting Oblivion* symbolises the emergence of meaning as a process of oscillation between past and future. In writing, the pure form of time is in suspension, and in this absence of time, the transcendental signified is infinitely sustained in a state of deferral (waiting). The signified is temporally structured as a past present that is yet to come. The signified pluralises itself through its self-reflexive self-effacement from being: the negation of negation. In Blanchot, the non-dialectical *neutre*, which is *neither one nor the other*, enacts this pluralising negation (forgetting) in writing. This is the pure passivity of the language of self-critique, wherein negation is not annulment, but rather the affirmation of otherness.

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NOTES


2 Accordingly, Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*: “(this rare speech), always calling upon detour, and thus holding us as though in suspense between the visible and the invisible, or on the hither side of both” (IC 31).

3 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.17. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot connects the time inherent to the written work with death: “this empty, dead time is a real time in which death is present – in which death happens but doesn’t stop happening … The dead present is the impossibility of making any presence real” (SL 31).

4 Blanchot writes in *The Step Not Beyond*: “Writing, the demand to write, does not struggle against presence in favor of absence, nor for it in pretending to preserve it or communicate it” (SNB 32).

5 Reference is here made to Hegel’s famous phrase: “the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

17 See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105: “This antithesis of its appearance and its truth has, however, for its essence only the truth, viz. the unity of self-consciousness with itself; this unity must become essential to self-consciousness,
i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general." See also p. 110: "The satisfaction of Desire is, it is true, the reflection of self-consciousness into itself, or the certainty that has become truth." This ‘certainty,’ moreover, is grounded in the non-essential origin of Desire, "(b)ut the truth of this certainty is really a double reflection, the duplication of self-consciousness."

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


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

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

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

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

25 Blanchot writes in The Infinite Conversation: “Whoever is speaking gives himself over to forgetfulness in tying the movement of reflection ... to the necessity of forgetting” (IC 214).

26 Kojève writes: “to preserve oneself as negated is to remember what one has been even while becoming radically other” (Introduction to The Reading of Hegel, p. 232).

27 Blanchot writes in The Step Not Beyond: “Effaced before being written. If the word trace can be admitted, it is as the mark that would indicate as erased what was, however, never traced” (SNB 17).

28 Accordingly, Derrida argues: “The concepts of present, past, and future ... the metaphysical concept of time in general – cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace” (Of Grammatology, p. 67).

29 See Hegel, Philosophy of Nature, addendum to §258, pp. 231-2. Revealed knowledge, as that which has become in time, is accomplished as eternal and absolute in and by the final act of sublation, by which all the moments of its becoming – the dimensions of time – are sustained in a paralysis.

30 See Hegel, Philosophy of Nature, addendum to §258, p. 231: when Hegel proclaims that “the Concept is Time,” time is here posited as a pure abstraction: “In its Notion, time itself is eternal however, for its Notion is neither the present nor any other time, but time as such.” The eternal, moreover, is disengaged from temporal continuity: “Absolute timelessness is eternity, which is devoid of natural time.”

31 Hegel expresses the movement within the timeless unity of eternity thus: In this motion “the point tends towards a place which is its future, and vacates one which is the past; but that which it has behind it, is at the same time that at which it will arrive; and it has already been the after towards which it tends.” Philosophy of Nature, addendum to §261, pp. 239-41.


33 In the Infinite Conversation, and in The Step not Beyond, Blanchot rethinks Nietzsche’s Eternal Return in terms of unrepresentability.

34 Blanchot writes in The Step Not Beyond: “Between past, future, the greatest difference is given in that the one would repeat the other without the common measure of a present: as if between past and future the absence of present ruled in the simplified form of forgetfulness” (SNB 16). Within Hegel’s absolutely immanent structure of eternity, the dimensions of time function as universals, and are ideally interchangeable – the future is thus rendered predictable. Contrastingly, in Blanchot, a radical disjunction exists between past and future, such that they cannot be reconciled in a totalizing structure.

35 Blanchot writes in The Step Not Beyond, “future always already past, past always still to come, from which the third instance, the instant of presence, excluding itself, would exclude any possibility of identity” (SNB 11).

36 This is expressed in Awaiting Oblivion through the theme of forgetting. The initial
encounter between II and Elle remains obscure to both characters (as well as to the reader), as perceptions of how their relationship began are constantly revised.

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

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

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

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


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


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

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

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


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

49 Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, “Language, the experience of language – writing – is what leads us to sense a relation entirely other, a relation of
the third kind,” IC 73. A ‘relation of the third kind’ is, in Blanchot, always in displacement, and is not a relation of unification (see IC 67).

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

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

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

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

54 See Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 58: “Consciousness, for its part, is in this certainty only as a pure ‘I,’ or ‘I’ am in it only as a pure ‘This,’ and the object similarly only as a pure ‘This’.”
La pression de la ville: de toutes parts. Les maisons ne sont pas là pour qu’on y demeure, mais pour qu’il y ait des rues et, dans les rues, le mouvement incessant de la ville.¹

Of the over two hundred and fifty fragments from L’attente l’oubli, few prove as remote from its predominant themes as the passage above. The setting of Blanchot’s work is not the city, but a long and narrow hotel room: inside, a man and woman engage one another, each undertaking a series of measures in order to “make it so that she can speak to him.”² Thoughts and depictions of the exterior are therefore altogether rare: only a single other fragment, for example, makes use of the word ville (AO 12/AwO 5). It is true, the theme of movement is central to L’attente l’oubli, and the range of words relating to movement extensive.³ The term “pressure” is also elsewhere employed: Blanchot writes of the act of waiting, for instance, as simultaneously exerting and not exerting “the same continuous pressure” as space (AO 24/AwO 14). This passage alone, however, sheds little light on the “pressure” of the city. In its rhetorical construction, the fragment evinces a logical austerity that affirms its autonomy: P (houses) in order that Q (streets), and Q in order that R (movement), where “movement,” presumably, is a way of shaping and organizing the “pressure” that mounts from all sides. Closed, complete, the fragment would seem to defy ascrip-
tion. The man of *L’attente l’oubli* is a writer and, it seems, the sometime first-person narrator of the work, but is it to a consciousness *properly his* that one could ascribe this thought?

A fragment thus detached solicits its readers not merely with a sense of inscrutability, but, potentially, with a tone of dogmatism or gratuity. Against the threat of both possibilities, and in line with the tone of other passages in *L’attente l’oubli*, let me suggest that the “city” fragment registers with a tone of surprise or discovery. For despite its seeming autonomy, the passage does not so much proceed from a detached consciousness as it appears as an event for thought. The result of such an event is that, as a written artefact, the fragment is less an accomplished form than the initial tracing or sketching of a thought the full scope of which is as yet unappreciable. The tone of surprise or discovery, on the scenario I am outlining, preserves the eventfulness of the encounter, i.e., thought’s confrontation with a limit beyond which it cannot go – though it is precisely towards this “beyond” that it remains directed. If correct, this description would defeat a perception of the passage as closed or complete, and would entail, on the contrary, not merely a sense of thought’s openness, but of its forced or constrained exposure. The eventfulness of this exposure lives on in the tone of the fragment.

The passage, of course, describes an important characteristic of the city, i.e., its arrangement with a view to incessant movement. Yet in its materiality, in its tone of surprise or discovery, the fragment solicits us with an intelligibility the scope and force of which are irreducible to (though never wholly separate from) the content of its words. The distinction is essential, for if with respect to other passages the fragment shares little in the way of content, the material force of its tone will yet serve in relating it not only to other passages, but to what one can refer to broadly as the workings of *L’attente l’oubli*. This paper will be concerned to explain those workings, specifically as they touch upon the status of the surprise in *L’attente l’oubli*. What exactly, for Blanchot, is set forth in a surprise? How is it set forth, i.e. what are the possible vehicles or modalities of a surprise? Who is the possible recipient or even addressee of a surprise?

Providing an account of the surprise, and specifically, of the human voice as the privileged vehicle of surprise, I will be a position to indicate if not who is speaking in the fragment above, then at least why it should register with the eventful tone of a discovery or surprising intuition, and why, additionally, this tone is significant with respect to the meaning of the passage. That meaning turns on Blanchot’s concept of the outside (*le dehors*), to which I will return at length.

In the course of this interpretation, I will provide an expansive account
of Blanchot's concerns with the unexpected (*l'inattendu*). For in order to address the surprise character of the “city” fragment and therefore its character as eventful, one need as well understand Blanchot’s account of the surprise (of the event, the unexpected) and why, in particular, the surprise “presencing” of another human being entails a force of exposure that solicits *in its recipient* a singular if impersonal someone (*quelqu’un*; *il* in Blanchot’s sense of the word) who, if “he” cannot assume the event of the other, can yet stand before and acknowledge the other in “his” constrained exposure. Indeed, for Blanchot, the ethical human relation stages itself as a relation of surprise, a rapport in which the other *who is already here* yet turns to me as someone unexpected. The ethical obligation towards the other is, correlative, that of “clearing a path” so that, in dialogue, the other may reach me not as someone in particular or as someone I know, but as someone unexpected. Let me briefly develop this thought.

*L’attente l’oubli* marks a significant moment in Blanchot’s work largely because it features the emergence of two new forms of writing: the fragment and the dialogue. Dialogue as form, for Blanchot, wavers between two possible directions. It threatens first to “politicize” itself – and this in a number of ways. The “dictatorial” voice, for example, may speak so vociferously, and at such length and at such volume, as to effectively abolish voices of dissent: the conditions of dialogue, in short, may become perverted in the privileging of one voice alone. A dialogue may veer as well into an interrogation, where the interrogator will question his interlocutor so as to force the other to speak, so as to extract a confession. Both positions presuppose dialogue only in order to abolish it, and both, furthermore, operate according to an exclusionary paradigm of day and night. The dictator understands his words as the unique source of light, those of others as an undesirable darkness. The interrogator, for his part, seeks a conversion in his interrogatee: a movement from secrecy to revelation, from the night of the subject’s soul to the daylight of public exposure. The retaliatory threat to one’s interrogator is silence, i.e. the refusal to speak. Silence, of course, is just the given condition of he who “engages” the dictator. In all cases, dialogue is threatened with its own collapse.

The alternative for Blanchot is that “making room” so as to afford the other not only an open place from which to speak, but an open place towards which to speak. This “giving place” prepares for a welcoming of the other as someone unexpected. In his silent staging of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Blanchot will often employ the phrase *frayer un chemin*, to clear a path: Orpheus is said, presumably in his song and ascent, to clear a path for Eurydice (*AO* 59/*AwO* 39, 61/41 112/79 121/85). Correlatively, a central (if not the central) question of *L’attente l’oubli* can be formulated as
follows: how, from within the circumstances of the world, is one to clear a path (frayer un chemin) for the unexpected (l’inattendu)? The unexpected, it will be seen, is but the singular “presencing” of the human being when various features of the human – the voice, the face, the nomadic body – are articulated in conjunction with, or as an adjustment or reference to, the outside. In addition to this opening, introductory section, this paper will thus feature (a) an account of the voice as surprise, which will serve in situating (b) an extended reading of the “city” fragment. Each of these latter sections will be principally concerned with the figure of someone, quelqu’un, as a surprise encounter (e.g. the voice of the other, an event for thought) that never reaches me in particular but only someone in me, quelqu’un en moi. To prepare for this set of readings, a consideration of various critical essays published during the writing of L’attente l’oubli (approximately 1957-62) will provide greater evidence for privileging the figure of “clearing a path,” and further, greater evidence for supporting the claim that the impersonal, singular “presencing” of the human being is the vehicle, for Blanchot, of the unexpected.

* * *

Leslie Hill has noted that something of a first stage of L’attente l’oubli was published in 1959, in a collection of essays honoring Heidegger on his seventieth birthday. Entitled “L’attente,” these few pages are important for any reading of the final work. Yet as one reads Blanchot’s critical essays of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, it becomes soon apparent that references to the dominant themes of L’attente l’oubli are present in many different contexts. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Blanchot’s extended article on Simone Weil (1957), which features a remarkable digression on attentiveness, waiting, and the unexpected, first afforded him the opportunity to take these themes into consideration. In line with this date, Christophe Bident has suggested that L’attente l’oubli can be read as a companion piece to Blanchot’s Le dernier homme, also published in 1957, and a side-by-side study would support his contention. An exhaustive catalogue of cross-references between L’attente l’oubli and Blanchot’s critical essays from years 1957-62 surpasses the scope of this paper, not to mention my privileged points of interest. I would, however, like to turn to a small number of passages from those essays in order to prepare for my later reading of L’attente l’oubli.

During the 1950’s, Blanchot is not alone in reading Heidegger intensely. Levinas publishes at least four important essays during that decade in which his critique of Heidegger becomes ever sharper and Blanchot was not indifferent to this confrontation. A passage from “La philosophie et
l'idée de l'infini” (first published in 1957) is particularly striking for its reference to what Levinas calls un exister païen (a pagan existing) – a term which, in *Totalité et Infini*, will be recast as des “états d'âme” païens. Dasein’s comprehension of being, according to Levinas, entails a subordination of the other (autrui) to the same, and it is thereby that Heidegger’s ontology in *Being and Time* repeats the oldest gesture of Western thought: the face to face encounter with the other is never direct but rather always mediated by a third term (in Heidegger’s case: being) that obfuscates the alterity of the other. Yet, at a specific moment in the essay, the terms of Levinas’ criticisms come to surpass their strictly philosophical content as the claims of history prove unavoidable. Note, in the following passage, the ambiguity in Levinas’ thought directly following his parenthetical remark; the content that develops thereafter is not strictly philosophical in its claims and seems only to reinforce his bracketed reference to National Socialism.

It is difficult to say definitively whether Blanchot was familiar with this passage; however, as his references to Levinas in *L’entretien infini* indicate, he was well familiar with *Totalité et Infini*, and, as noted, Levinas speaks there as well of “a pagan existing.” When one considers that, during the writing of *L’attente l’oubli*, Blanchot was reading Heidegger intensely, and reading Levinas as intensely as well, and when one further considers his heightened interest in Jewish thought beginning precisely during the middle to late 1950’s, it is admissible to hear in the following passage a reference to
Levinas and, thereby, a related critique of Heidegger.

Si le judaïsme est destiné à prendre un sens pour nous, c'est bien en montrant qu'il faut, en tout temps, être prêt à se mettre en route, parce que sortir (aller au dehors) est l’exigence à laquelle l’on ne peut se soustraire si l’on veut maintenir la possibilité d’un rapport de justice. Exigence d’arrachement, affirmation de la vérité nomade. C’est par là qu’il tranche sur le paganisme (sur tout paganisme): être païen, c’est se fixer, se fixer en terre en quelque sorte, s’établir par un pacte avec la permanence qui autorise le séjour et que certifie la certitude du sol. Le nomadisme répond à un rapport que la possession ne contient pas. Chaque fois que l’homme juif nous fait signe dans l’histoire, c’est par l’appel d’un mouvement.  

Être païen is certainly a calculated term, as it counters directly the title of Blanchot’s essay: être juif. This opposition is a narrower version of Blanchot’s greater concern with the term lieu, place. Where does the Jewish nomad engage with “place”? The answer is capital for Blanchot: dans la parole, in dialogue, in the exchange of words. If the question of form is to guide any reading of L’attente l’oubli, then one must acknowledge the dual nature of Blanchot’s work: clearly a series of fragments, it is inseparably a series of dialogues as well. Against the demands of rhetoric that call for a conjunction of speech and place (where place – lieu – can be defined as either rhetorical cliché, figure, lieu commun, etc., or as the historical ground or soil from which one speaks), L’attente l’oubli is an examination of the possibility of speech when speech must issue forth in and with an experience of placelessness. Blanchot seeks to guard against the dual threats that one be forced to speak (as in an interrogation) or that one retreat into complete silence. In addition to examining at length the dialogic rapport between the woman and man of L’attente l’oubli, I will claim that the “city” fragment echoes Blanchot’s criticism of paganism and his correlative favoring of what is a broadly Jewish emphasis on movement and nomadism.

As mentioned, it is already in Blanchot’s 1957 essay on Simone Weil that one can read a brief meditation on attention and waiting (l’attention et l’attente) as well as an important remark on the unexpected (l’inattendu). In addition to these remarks, it contains an interesting digression on the problem of creation, one which will allow for expanding on the idea of the unexpected or unforeseen. Blanchot draws parallels between Weil and the sixteenth century Jewish thinker Isaac Luria, specifically with respect to their related accounts of God’s creation and abandonment of the world. How does God simultaneously create and abandon the world?

Dieu, en créant le monde, ne pose pas quelque chose de plus, mais
d’abord quelque chose de moins. L’Être infini est nécessairement tout. Pour que le monde soit, il faut que, cessant d’être tout, il lui fasse place, par un mouvement de recul, de retrait, et en ‘abandonnant comme une région à l’intérieur de lui-même, une sorte d’espace mystique.’

En d’autres termes, le problème essentiel de la création, c’est le problème du néant. Non pas comment quelque chose est crée de rien, mais comment rien est crée, afin qu’à partir de lui il y ait lieu à quelque chose.

As infinite, God is necessarily everything (nécessairement tout), and therefore, in order to create a world, God’s initial move must not be the positing of something more but of something less (quelque chose de moins). Creation thus touches on the problem of nothingness (le problème du néant), as the central problem of creation turns not on how something is created out of nothing, but rather how nothing is created in order that there come to be a place (un lieu) for something. It is not incidental that the problem of “lessness” (or of positing something less) should return in L’attente l’oubli, the relevant passage of which will be examined below. For the moment, let it be suggested that the act of clearing a path for the unexpected can be clarified with this related account of breaking a whole (un tout) in order that, in the resultant emptiness or nothingness, something may come to be or take place.

The unexpected, it will be seen, is not inaugural in character: it “presences” less as a new world, than as an interruption of the present. Further, the vehicles or modalities of the unexpected are always material or earthly in character: l’inattendu assumes shape in the matters of this world, never through a divine or transcendent intervention. As previously indicated, the unexpected is but the singular “presencing” of the human being when the human articulates itself in and with, in and against a certain experience of “placelessness.” In answering to, and in speaking from this placelessness, the human – the voice and face especially – cannot but intone (or envisage) its relation to the outside. In his essay “Être Juif,” published in the same year as L’attente l’oubli, Blanchot offers a powerful example of the human presence as the unexpected par excellence. There, he writes of Jacob’s encounter with his older brother Esau, and how this encounter is particularly striking for the younger man given his recent struggle with le partenaire de la Nuit.

His words in that context are well known (I quote Blanchot’s text directly): J’ai vu Élohim face à face et j’ai eu la vie sauve. Upon his encounter with Esau, he says: Si j’ai trouvé grâce à tes yeux, tu accepteras mon présent de ma main, puisque j’ai vu ta face comme on voit la face d’Élohim, et tu m’as agréée. And Blanchot to mark the following distinction:
Jacob ne dit pas à Esaü: “Je viens de voir Dieu comme je te vois,” mais: “Je te vois comme on voit Dieu,” ce qui confirme que la merveille (la surprise privilégiée) est bien la présence humaine, cette Présence Autre qu’est Autrui, non moins inaccessible, séparé et distant que l’invisible lui-même; ce qui confirme aussi ce qu’à de terrible une telle rencontre dont l’issue ne saurait être que l’agrément ou la mort. Qui voit Dieu est en danger de mourir. Qui rencontre Autrui ne peut se rapporter à lui que par la violence mortelle ou par le don de la parole en son accueil.\(^{18}\)

The “privileged surprise,” here, is not the presence of God, but a human presence: a Presence that is Other and whom the Other is (la présence humaine, cette Présence Autre qu’est Autrui). This encounter with what Blanchot relatedly calls un homme sans horizon entails a problem of reception the solution to which is one of two alternatives: speak or kill (la violence mortelle or le don de la parole en son accueil). The alternative “speak or kill” does not appear in L’attente l’oubli, yet the work does feature a series of dichotomies that repeat the alternative all while displacing it; a point to be considered in due time.\(^{19}\)

Before turning to an account of the human voice as surprise, I will close with a last reference to Blanchot’s critical essays, in particular his 1962 essay “L’homme de la rue” which, in L’entretien infini, appears as “La parole quotidienne.” The experience of everyday life, Blanchot notes, is essentially bound to “those admirable deserts that are world-cities” (ces admirables déserts que sont les villes mondiales). The street, in particular, is the privileged site of the quotidian; the place where everyday life “publishes itself” or “renders itself public.” In a parenthetical note, Blanchot remarks:

dans la rue, lorsqu’on se rencontre, c’est toujours avec surprise et comme par erreur; c’est qu’on ne s’y reconnaît pas; il faut, pour aller au-devant l’un de l’autre, s’arracher d’abord à une existence sans identité.\(^{20}\)

Against the broadly rhetorical demand that a message or personal identity always speak from a place, the street lays out the desert ground from which to speak as one anonymous person to another. Blanchot’s peculiar reference in L’attente l’oubli to the incessant movement of the city clearly resonates with his thoughts here. Let it be suggested that the “long and narrow” hotel room of L’attente l’oubli mimics something of the length and distance that is characteristic not only of the corridors of the hotel, but of the streets outside. Inside that room, dialogue is “the place” – the opened path – where the woman and man meet one another, just as one would meet another in the street: by surprise.
The Human Voice as Surprise

In L’attente l’oubli, a significant episode of surprise or discovery is recounted in the opening passage of the work, prior to the denoted series of fragments. Recall that Blanchot opens L’attente l’oubli with a scene of writing; precisely, a scene where the movement of writing is arrested, and which, in its arrest, summons the writer before a certain “here.” “Ici, et sur cette phrase qui lui était peut-être aussi destinée, il fut contraint de s’arrêter. C’est presque en l’écoutant parler qu’il avait rédigé ces notes. Il entendait encore sa voix en écrivant.”  

Blanchot does not indicate in the opening sequence why the man writes, yet his difficulties in so doing can be better appreciated if, on the basis of other moments in the work, one were to determine the “narrative reasons” that trigger his writing, and why the interruption that opens the work prepares for the moment of surprise later in that sequence.

If there is a narrative to this work, i.e., a set of interrelated events that could situate her speaking and his writing, it is not only continuously interrupted, but also presented in an order foreign to linear chronology. This temporal ambiguity renders problematic any attempt to situate a ‘before’ and ‘after,’ or to separate an event from its repetition. Deliberate on the part of Blanchot, this ambiguity is calculated so as to render indeterminate whether the key phrase of the text (“Make it so that I can speak to you”) precedes her speaking or follows it as a demand to help her speak anew. The resultant sense of circularity, resonance, and repetition renders difficult any attempt to “flatten” the work’s fragments into a linear sequence. I will return to this ambiguity shortly, and mention it now so as to acknowledge the impossibility of definitely determining how and when their “story” begins.

As indicated in a late fragment, it is perhaps part of the culture of the hotel to pass from room to room, and the narrator is not reticent with respect to the possibility that sex is the pretext for their encounter (AO 91/AwO 62-3). In a later passage that repeats and condenses previous moments in L’attente l’oubli, the narrator tells, if only obliquely, of the man’s decision to begin writing and to do so after such an encounter. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Alors il écoute ce “oui,” se demandant si elle l’a vraiment pro-
noncé (il est si transparent qu’il laisse passer ce qu’elle dit et jusqu’à ce mot même,) elle se renverse comme déjà délivrée et en prenant soin de ne pas mettre entre eux de distance.

Il l’attire, attiré par l’attrait en son mouvement encore inaccom-
pli. Mais tandis qu’elle se soulève en celle qu’il touche, et bien qu’il sache qu’elle glisse, qu’elle tombe, figure immobile, il ne cesse de lui frayer un chemin et de la conduire, allant de l’avant et elle serrée contre lui d’un mouvement qui les confond.

Elle parle, parlée plutôt que parlant, comme si sa propre parole la traversait vivante et la transformait douloureusement en l’espace d’une autre parole, toujours interrompue, sans vie.

Et assurément, quand à la lumière du matin – sans doute vien-
nent-ils de s’éveiller ensemble –, il l’entend demander avec élan:
“Est-ce que j’aurais parlé sans arrêt?” il ne doute pas d’être invité à prendre possession, en cette seule phrase, de tout ce qu’elle lui a dit durant la nuit.22

In addition to noting that her expressing “everything” is more important for Blanchot than the piecemeal enumeration of details, and that the man be-
gins writing in an effort to restore her own words, two additional details are worth commenting upon. First, the chiastic inclination between the woman and man: each is now attracted to the other less in terms of a possible sexual rapport that in a rapport of dialogue, the animating principle of which is “incompletion” or the “as-yet-unaccomplished.”23 Each is inclined less to-
wards a definitive other than towards an unaccomplished (and perhaps ir-
reducible) openness in the other. A pair of key phrases signal how this dia-
logic, chiastic inclination is set into play: *frayer un chemin* and *aller de l’avant*. If she is to speak, the man must somehow clear a path for her to do so; he must proceed ahead of her, just as Orpheus with his song proceeds ahead of Eurydice. What can this mean concretely? As a related passage indicates, the man is bidden to find the words that would allow the woman to begin speaking: “Il devait la précéder et toujours aller de l’avant, sans être assuré d’être jamais suivi d’elle. Ce qu’elle avait à lui dire, il était tenu de découvrir d’abord les mots avec lesquels elle pourrait ensuite le lui faire entendre. Ils marchaient ainsi, immobiles à l’intérieur du mouvement.”24

The correlative (if contrary) demand is that he *not* speak, but merely at-
tempt to hear. To quote her words: “‘Je ne vous demande pas de parler: entendre, seulement entendre’,” as if the man in *simply hearing* could de-
limit between them the space necessary for her speaking to begin.25 In each case, the question is one of inclination, of inclining the other with a non-aggressive gesture that would signal one’s proximity, where proximity
indicates a paradoxical relation of nearness and distance.

Secondly, the man begins writing in order to “take possession … of everything she had said to him during the night.” Passages elsewhere indicate that she had forgotten what she had said, and the passage above gives an indication as to why that may have been. When she speaks, she is “spoken rather than speaking,” as if her words could serve as the locus for a seemingly foreign voice that is “always interrupted, [and] without life.” Though the following claim would require an essay of its own, let it be suggested that her speaking is akin to writing, that the parole parlante that animates and exhausts her parole parlée is none but than the dead letter of writing. Following Plato, Blanchot elsewhere refers to writing as a parole de l’oubli, a term that similarly appears in L’attente l’oubli. Though formulated in speech, her words are more akin to writing as it evinces itself in the absence of an animating speaker, in the absence even an animated face, for as the narrator notes, her face was strangely passionless and disengaged as she spoke (AO 10, 17/AwO 3-4, 9). If upon waking the woman cannot remember her words, the reason is that she never stood behind them, never endowed them with the interpretive authority of a speaking subject (AO 27-8/AwO 16).

The man begins writing in order to “take possession” of her words, yet as the opening sequence indicates, she does not recognize who in his words is speaking. Her reaction is disparaging and even damning: Who speaks, who is speaking? (Qui parle? Qui parle donc?) This moment of non-recognition, together with her forgetting what she had said in the night, point up the ambiguity of her demand, “Make it so that I can speak to you.” Because one cannot determine whether the demand either precedes the night in which she talks ceaselessly and says “everything,” or follows upon his inability to assume her words in transcribing them, one can anticipate an endless circle in which her speaking and forgetting, along with his related attempt to transcribe her words, i.e., to rewrite her “writing,” would repeat itself infinitely as, on every occasion, she would fail to recognize her words in his. Should he succeed in helping her speak to him (again, through the alternatives of finding the appropriate words or of simply hearing), her words would threaten once more to appear as writing, i.e., as always already forgotten. As no one can interrogate a piece of writing, i.e. make it speak in order for it to justify itself, she would be bidden, once more, to repeat her initial demand: Make it so that I can speak to you. Blanchot’s interlocutors seem destined to eternally repeating the same solicitations, and this with no guarantee of ever establishing common ground.

For if the possible common ground is just the writing that transpires under her near dictation, it should come as no surprise to hear the woman,
in the opening sequence, accuse the man of “faithlessness” with respect to her words. He nearly abandons the task when, near the end of the passage, a “surprising thought” (pensée surprenante) occurs to him. He retrieves the pages and begins to write, less under her dictation than in a flash of insight. I quote the full final paragraph, where a written transcription of the man’s surprising thought is preserved. This passage concludes the opening sequence of *L’attente l’oubli*, after which begins the series of denoted fragments.

Il ne put s’empêcher, tandis qu’il réunissait les feuillets – et maintenant elle le surveillait d’un regard curieux – de se sentir lié à elle par cet échec. Il ne comprenait pas bien pourquoi. Il l’avait comme touchée à travers le vide, il l’avait vue un instant. Quand? Tout à l’heure. Il avait vue qui elle était. Cela ne l’encourageait pas, cela mettait plutôt le point final à tout. “Soit, se dit-il, si tu ne veux pas je renonce.” Il renonçait, mais sur une parole d’intimité qui, il est vrai, ne s’adressait pas directement à elle, encore moins à son secret. Il avait visé autre chose qui lui était plus familier, qu’il connaissait et avec quoi il semblait avoir vécu dans une joyeuse liberté. Il fut étonné de découvrir que c’était peut-être sa voix. C’est cette voix qui lui était confiée. Quelle pensée surprenante! Il reprit les feuillets et écrivit: “C’est la voix qui t’est confiée, et non pas ce qu’elle dit. Ce qu’elle dit, les secrets que tu recueilles et que tu transcris pour les faire valoir, tu dois les ramener doucement, malgré leur tentative de séduction, vers le silence qui tu as d’abord puisé en eux.” Elle lui demanda ce qu’il venait d’écrire. Mais c’était quelque chose qu’elle ne devait pas entendre, qu’ils ne devaient pas entendre ensemble.  

Between them, an encounter had taken place and it had taken place principally for him: he had touched her through an emptiness, he had seen her for an instant: an Orphic glance of the eye. The exemplary aspect of the encounter is its seeming irretrievability. For “when” was it that had he seen her? “Before; or, just a while ago” (Tout à l’heure). The event defies dating, and therefore defies among the most minimal requirements for inscription, namely, timing: the “when” of an occurrence. How to retrieve it? At a point of impasse, and because she herself “does not want to,” he abdicates: *si tu ne veux pas, je renonce*. Note the mutual release of both wills: she herself “does not want to” (though it is unclear what she objects to) and he in turn renounces as well. At precisely this point, and with “a note of intimacy” (une parole d’intimité), he hits upon something elemental: it is not her words (and even less her secret) to which he should attend, but her voice. That her voice is confided to him, it is this that he is “stunned to discover,” a dis-
covery that leads him to begin writing anew. If they are to communicate, he is no longer to write “what she says”; he must instead bring her words back to the silence that he had first drawn (puiser) from them. For it is only in and against this silence that there comes to emerge the voice as voice, i.e. the spoken word when the semantic charge of language is made to yield the merely vocal. But who can hear this, let alone write it? Who, in other words, does the voice solicit?

A simpler question: what, in this passage, does he write? A fragment that can be considered the first in L’attente l’oubli: “It is the voice that is confided to you, not what it says.” As the first fragment of the text, it is notable for its eventfulness, for its happening to him much as a surprise or discovery can be said to happen to someone. In terms of both its positioning and tone, the passage invites the possibility that further fragments, even those without context, should similarly register with a tone of surprise or discovery. Such is my contention with respect to the “city” fragment, to which I will turn in the following section. For the moment, let it be noted that his self-applied injunction regarding her voice is barely illuminating with respect as to how he is to proceed as well as to what he, and she with him, aim to achieve. He knows simply that it is her voice to which he must attend. The conclusion of the passage offers, however, an interesting clue as to how communication might take place between them. In remarking the man’s refusal to share his words with her, the narrator notes that this was something they “should not hear together.” As Blanchot’s ensuing descriptions of her speaking indicate, both parties will have to speak to and hear one another in the mode of separation or distance; more precisely, in the mode of a deferred speaking that never resolves itself into a synchronic, mutually verifiable meaning.

* * *

The relation of voice to surprise is thematized at greater length in a late fragment of L’attente l’oubli, where, once more, it arises in a context of renunciation and abdication. It is the woman who initiates the following exchange:

> “Qu’est-ce qui vous surprend dans ces mots? Ils sont simples.” – “Je crois que je m’étais fait à l’idée que vous parleriez pas. Vous n’aviez encore rien dit jusqu’ici, et il n’y avait rien à dire non plus.”

As is his pattern, Blanchot withholds the content of “her words” in order to prioritize the event of speech, which, as event, runs counter to the man’s expectations, he having resigned himself to her silence. She would not speak for she had as yet said nothing, and there was nothing to say. Yet
her words are clearly surprising, and the woman is compelled to ask why that may be, when, to her mind, they are not complicated or extravagant but “simple.” As the passage continues, Blanchot shifts her emphasis from message to medium (though, again, the message was never disclosed):

– “Et vous pensiez que les choses, au point où elles en étaient venues, se retireraient et ne s’exprimeraient pas? Qu’y a-t-il, dans cette voix, de plus inattendu que dans tout ce qui est arrivé et dont vous avez aisément tire parti?’ – ‘Rien de plus. Seulement un peu moins. Il y a – c’est la part de cette voix – tout à coup moins qu’il n’y avait: c’est en cela que consiste la surprise.”

29

Her words may be “simple,” but their eventfulness owes less to their putatively simple meaning than to the presence of her voice. Questioning him, she asks what is it in this voice that is “more unexpected” (plus inattendu) than in all that had happened previously. He counters: the matter concerns not the “more” of the voice, but the way in which it is somehow “less.” He contests not its unexpectedness, only its being something “more.” “Suddenly there is less that there had been before: the surprise consists of this.” The things (les choses) between them – their relation, the things that had happened to them, even the objects around them – are, as he acknowledges, simple, just as her words are simple. But he immediately asserts that there is “une autre simplicité qui est comme affirmée dans la voix. Quelque chose change.”

30 Suddenly, the voice is here, and it is here in the “less-ness” of the world, in the retreat (le recul) of all things from their worldly meaning.

Previously, I quoted from Blanchot’s 1957 article on Simone Weil in part because it features his earliest writing on attention, waiting, and the unexpected. There, in line with Isaac Luria, Blanchot characterizes the problem of creation in terms very similar to the passage above, namely, as a question of “less-ness”: “God, in creating the world, does not posit (pose) something more, but first something less,” the purpose of which is to “make room” (faire place) for an as yet inexistent world. The problem of creation, in other words, is “not how something is created from nothing, but how nothing is created, in order that … there be place for something (or, in order that place be [given] for something).” In L’attente l’oubli, dialogue, and with it the initial appeal of the voice, does not first produce or deliver a message, but it emerges in and with the “less-ness” of the world in order that place be given to both a speaker and an addressee whose positions as speakers are thereby secured, but whose personal and social identities are suspended. The voice, to be sure, is not “nothing” in the religious or philosophical sense of le néant; as Blanchot’s concluding paragraph indicates,
it is “the element of divulgation” that relates two speakers without necessarily relating two identities. Note the repeated correlation of voice and surprise:

Que la voix tout à coup soit placée là, chose parmi d’autres, n’ajoutant que l’élément de divulgation dont même une rencontre aussi simple ne semble pouvoir se passer, cette brusque apparition le surprend, et tandis qu’elle parle d’une manière presque directe, se mettant tout entière dans chaque parole et ne gardant aucune réserve pour rien dire de plus, elle a déjà gagné d’autres niveaux où elle est prête à se faire entendre ou bien s’est déjà nécessairement exprimée, remplissant dans le temps, en avant, en arrière, tout le vide, comme dans la pièce tout le silence, malgré sa faible capacité, tantôt en retrait, tantôt en dehors, toujours éloignée et toujours proche, cherchant et précisant, comme si être précise était la principale sauvegarde de cette voix qui dit, avec un peu de froideur: “Je voudrais vous parler.”

Once more, Blanchot’s terms recall his brief reference to Luria from 1957. Here, the emptiness of time, and the silence of the room, signal the retreat or “less-ness” of the world from out of which the voice emerges as a “startling appearance” (brusque apparition). It carries as yet no message, but in the “less-ness” of the world adds only “the element of divulgation” which, the narrator notes, even the simplest encounter cannot do without. The voice summons without yet summoning someone in particular, and the man’s repeated renunciations are indicative of the self-negation necessary to assuming one’s allotted “place” in a dialogue the precise terms of which have yet to be established. Though it is described as “a thing among things,” its materiality or its presence is hardly akin to the customary stability of things. For while the voice is strangely here, it is also nowhere in particular: retreating, outside, distant and near, struggling for precision, struggling, it seems, to overcome its own character as a separate thing and thus struggling to coincide precisely, without remainder, with the most literal of demands: I would like to speak to you. The force of the phrase, Je voudrais vous parler, as with the related injunction, Faites en sorte que je puisse vous parler, is to be found in this delay, or non-coincidence, between speaking and speaking. In her demand to speak, a voice speaks without speaking just yet, and one senses that if the voice could signify, it would disappear as voice. Instead, it comes forth as a reserve that is yet nowhere hidden, for, once more, it is here as a thing among things. The event of the voice is just the event of this reserve: a delay in “presencing” that accounts for its character as “retreating, outside, distant and near.” To be sure, the
woman speaks – and perhaps hers are the words that, at the beginning of the fragment, are so simple as to prove utterly surprising. Yet the intervallic character of her speaking, its staggered being, its eventfulness, even as it lays down “the element of divulgation” between two people, yet precludes a meaningful transfer from taking place. In this delay, the voice calls to an addressee – calls for an addressee – to help it speak again and for the first time.

* * *

Her voice is unexpected, surprising in its emergence. Is it something new? The voice does not prove surprising for its newness, but for its sudden “here-ness” in the suspension of worldly meaning, for its being laid bare in a plea behind which there stands as yet no culturally or socially identifiable speaker, and which appeals to an as yet unidentifiable addressee. If the voice is eventful, and if an event is the taking-place of a staggered, intervallic presence – something akin to a deferral in time, a curve in space, a speaking that does not speak – then the voice in Blanchot does not emerge as new, but as the “now/not yet” presencing of a reality that has always already been here, and which, in the retreat of the world, suddenly presences in its reserve (its delay, its non-coincidence, etc.). The emergence of the voice, its eventful presencing, turns on the possibility of “clearing a path” so as to leave or make room for another who is already here, so that he or she may yet appear unexpectedly, as by surprise. To cast this thought as a demand, we can ask: how is one to clear a path (to secure, as it were, the “less-ness” of the world) so as to invite the unexpected voice of another, and how, correlative, is one to speak so as to reach the other as a distance? The event of the voice in *L'attente l'oubli* establishes a spectral, simultaneously face-to-face and oblique positioning of two speakers, each inclined towards the other as if inclined to cross a distance – and this without knowing to whom one is already speaking, or to whom one is already listening. This “already” marks the temporal ambiguity of the voice, i.e. the dual positioning of a speaker to whom one cannot yet listen, and of an addressee to whom one has not yet spoken, each of whom is already inclined towards the other by virtue of the voice as eventful presence-reserve or as “the element of divulgation” without which no rapport could be established.

Abdication, renunciation, self-negation, waiting, forgetting and so on, are terms that signal the quieting of the world in oneself, and in this quieting, the forsaking of all third terms (Levinas’ *Neutre*) that mediate between self and another. Quieting the world in oneself, one not only becomes unassumable for the other; the other, in the presence of a forgotten being,
correlatively loses the power to say I. Writes Blanchot: “Celui qui oubliant s’efface de nous en cet oubli efface aussi en nous le pouvoir personnel de nous souvenir; alors s’éveille le souvenir impersonnel, le souvenir sans personne qui nous tient lieu d’oubli.”33 Coping with this form of quieting is difficult for the man of *L’attente l’oubli*, as it demands, in Blanchot’s well-known terms, a passage from *Je* to *Il*, from me to someone or to no one in particular. At one such moment in the text, it is exactly with her demand in mind that he seeks to capitulate, not realizing that such a capitulation is necessary to hearing her speak.

Quand elle commença à chercher des expressions pour lui dire: “Vous ne le saurez jamais. Vous ne me ferez jamais parler. Jamais vous n’apprendrez pourquoi je suis ici avec vous”, c’est alors, dans le mouvement véhément qui lui permettait d’être une voix passionnée, tout en restant un corps immobile et impassible, qu’il l’entendit lui demander tout à coup, sans même changer le registre de sa voix et peut-être même sans changer ses paroles: “Fais en sorte que je puisse te parler.” Il ne pourrait plus jamais oublier cette prière.

Pendant des jours, il avait lutté contre elle, par des mots, par des silences. “Non, je ne suis pas celui que vous voudriez que je sois.” Sur quoi, longtemps après, elle intervenait: “Et qui seriez-vous, si vous l’étiez?” Comme, par une sorte de réserve et peut-être par une difficulté plus grave, il ne voulait pas le préciser, elle concluait triomphalement: “Vous voyez, vous ne pouvez pas le dire, encore moins le nier.”34

More precisely here than on any other occasion in *L’attente l’oubli*, Blanchot *situates* the key phrase of the work (*Fais en sorte…*) and, in so doing, reveals the simultaneous precariousness and potential violence of dialogue. I say *violence* in order to underscore the threat that their dialogue may veer into an interrogation, into the will to make the other speak, *faire parler*, and *precariousness* to underscore the fragile, initial communicability of the human voice prior to its resolution as message. In the place of a semantically oriented exchange, the force of her demand is such as to institute between her and her interlocutor a rapport that forestalls (a) the threat of interrogation and which yet, against (b) her own correlative threat of silence or withdrawal, sustains something of (c) a spectral, impersonal, deferred dialogue. Further, it is the voice as voice that charts a path between, on the one hand, the interrogative demand that the other speak aloud, as if in public and under oath, and, on the other, the correlative retreat into silence as the refusal of such a demand. In terms that are broadly Blanchot’s, the voice eschews both the intelligibility of the day and the irreparable solitude of the
night, and it thereby, as will be seen, skirts an entire series of binary oppositions that have traditionally in the West served in measuring the putative intelligibility of natural and cultural phenomena.

In the first paragraph of the passage above, Blanchot’s narrator offers a split view of the woman’s demand. First, in an unusual use of direct discourse, the narrator quotes the inward thoughts she seeks to express, yet in a second moment he outwardly relays those thoughts in terms far different from their initial formulation. The discrepancy here between thought and expression can be observed on two levels. At the level of meaning, the woman seeks to tell the man that he will never make her speak (Vous ne me ferez jamais parler) or explain her presence, though her actual words express, it would seem, the exact opposite: Fais en sorte que je puisse te parler. At the level of address, she shifts from the formal vous to the personal tu, simultaneously suspending the codified, potentially authoritative distance between two formal speakers and attempting, in its place, to address him as a singular tu. Yet the narrator also maintains that in searching to formulate her thoughts (again, thoughts stable enough to be quoted), she arrives at what must be considered an equivalent rendering, namely, the key phrase of L’attente l’oubli: “Make it so that I can speak to you.” This latter formulation is thus something of a translation of her thoughts as they are initially formulated. Yet how is one to account for both her decision to refuse dialogue and her pleading for it to begin? How does a single expression align, and seemingly equate, moments as disparate as these: You will never make me speak, Make it so that I can speak to you?

In a work whose central “actions” involve the act of forgetting, the concluding sentence of the first paragraph is certainly telling: Il ne pourrait plus jamais oublier cette prière. Her plea, her prayer resists forgetting and, judging from the terms of the following paragraph, this resistance borders on the intolerable. With words and silences, the man “fights” against her but neither option proves effective. He renounces once again (“Non je suis pas celui que vous voudriez que je sois”), never anticipating that his renunciation is indispensable to the possibility of her speaking. Unable to explain who “he” (celui) needs to be; unable to explain who might be the possible addressee of the demand “Make so that I can speak to you,” he is left disarmed against her “triumphant conclusion,” the terms of which are deeply important in L’attente l’oubli. Her triumph: “Vous voyez, vous ne pouvez pas le dire, encore moins le nier.” Blanchot, in his refusal to elaborate on the ‘object’ of the direct object pronoun (le), shifts our attention to the verbs in her sentence: dire and nier, which, as expressed together, inspire the following query: are there features of the world that cannot be taken up in speech but that can even less be denied or negated?
To my count, Blanchot offers seven versions of this dichotomy in *L'attente l'oubli*, all which turn on the dual impossibility of full assumption on the one hand, and full negation on the other. In each case, one is faced with a rapport (or object of rapport) the reality of which lends itself neither to the light of day, nor to the muteness of night. In addition to the dual impossibility of *dire* and *nier*, Blanchot's reader is invited to consider the following versions of this same impossibility.

With respect to her own “presence,” the woman evinces neither doubt nor faith. From the text: *Il lui semble qu'elle ne doute pas plus de sa présence qu'elle n'y ajoute foi. Peut-être parce qu'elle ne doute pas, elle ne croit pas*. (AO 41/AwO 26: “It seems to him that she does not doubt her presence anymore than she invests it with faith. Perhaps because she does not doubt, she does not believe.”)

Faced (as always) with either an impossible or unspecific demand, the man attempts to refuse. And yet: *ce qu'il avait refusé était toujours devant lui, étranger à son consentement, afin d'être étranger à son refus*. (AO 59/AwO 40: “what he had refused was still before him, unknown to his consent so as to be unknown to his refusal.”)

The woman and man are repeatedly said to be bound together by a force of attraction, though, with respect to the precise nature of this force, the narrator is constrained to equivocate: *Ce qui attire, c'est la force de la proximité qui tient sous l'attrait, sans jamais s'épuiser en présence et jamais se dissiper en absence*. (AO 88/AwO 60-1: “What attracts is the force of proximity that holds under attraction, without ever being exhausted in presence or dissipated in absence.”)

The act of waiting is described as *une entrée dans un rapport qui n'est pas d'accueil, ni d'exclusion*. (AO 102/AwO 71: “The entering into a relation that neither welcomes nor excludes.”)

The interval between the visible and the sayable is cast as a “rupture” *qui ne se laisse pas apercevoir ni vraiment dénoncée*. (AO 106/AwO 74-5: “that does not let itself be perceived nor truly denounced.”)

Finally, let me quote in full the earliest example of such a dual impossibility.

> Ce n’est pas une fiction, bien qu’il ne soit pas capable de prononcer à propos de tout cela le mot de vérité. Quelque chose lui est arrivé, et il ne peut dire que ce soit vrai, ni le contraire. Plus tard, il pensa que l’événement consistait dans cette manière de n’être ni
The verbs *dire* and *nier* are burdened with a host of conceptual meanings and it is therefore fair to translate her thought more liberally, asking: are there objects of experience, elements even of humanity, that can be neither represented nor destroyed—and that, perhaps, cannot be represented precisely because they cannot, in the initial movement of comprehension, be negated or destroyed? Are there features of the world, of the human, that resist the transformative power of human production, even the mimetic powers of human artistry? The man of *L'attente l'oubli* cannot imitate or perform who he needs to be (there is no model of “he (*celui*) whom she would like him to be”), but he also cannot deny that there is someone in him—an anonymous *quelqu'un*—to whom she would like to speak, *to whom she is speaking* and at precisely this point of impossibility when he is incapable of expressing who ‘someone’ is. The fact that the man cannot express or say who he must be in order to help her, does not invalidate the experience that there is someone in him who *appears*, however obliquely, at precisely this moment of failure. To ask: who is this someone, is to ask: who is the addressee of this passionate voice? If the position of the addressee, here, can be neither assumed nor denied, then perhaps the voice itself is also of an order that defeats the dual intelligibilities of speaking and negating. Let me rephrase this last thought in the following terms. While the biological organs that facilitate speech may die, may be killed or destroyed, it is yet not clear that the voice with its “element of divulgation” can similarly be negated. Dialogue, if it cannot proceed at the level of message, may nonetheless proceed in the deferred, spectral mode of a voice that speaks without speaking, that declares itself eventfully, i.e. in the staggered time of “now/not yet,” and that thereby summons an addressee who is simultaneously a singular *tu* and no one in particular. Against the dialectic of day and night, of interrogation and the refusal to speak, the woman and man of *L'attente l'oubli* speak in and through the reserve of the voice that summons, in each of their beings, an
impersonal someone who, by dint of this very impersonality, can neither speak nor answer in the name of (or as an instance of) any preceding source of authority.

The Measure of the Outside

The intelligibility of the fragment concerning “the pressure of the city” is to be first approached via the materiality of its tone. A thematic or conceptual reading of *L’attente l’oubli* is not to be discounted; on the contrary, the work operates with a series of terms whose thematic or conceptual force may never stabilize into definitive meanings, but whose operative possibilities are renewed from fragment to fragment. Variations permeate the terms of waiting, attentiveness, forgetting, etc., and such variations are ceaselessly proposed and contested, repeated and refined in the give-and-take of dialogue, and in the fitful movement from fragment to fragment. This open network of echoes and resonances is interrupted when one considers the peculiarity of the “city” fragment, as it neither continues nor contests any particular theme or concept already in play. Blanchot’s decision to include it signals the threat of either dogmatism or gratuity: a voice that speaks dictatorially, on the one hand, or carelessly, on the other. To counter this troublesome autonomy, I claim that the “city” fragment solicits us with a tone of surprise that can be heard in other moments of the work, notably in the opening sequence. There, Blanchot describes the man’s “surprising thought” that he need attend to the woman’s voice as opposed to the content of her speech. Later fragments describe her voice itself as a source of surprise. On the strength of this association, I have argued that the voice in *L’attente l’oubli* serves as a source of communicability without which dialogue could not begin, and that its character as a surprise solicits an addressee without soliciting a specific person. Startling, dispossessing, and yet delimiting, the voice as surprise summons one to a position in dialogue the terms and direction of which are as yet undecided. The “city” fragment bespeaks such a surprise encounter, and its tone is equally, therefore, one of a surprise or discovery. Unlike dialogue, the fragment does not position two interlocutors across from one another, and therefore its speaker is not directly responding to a previously articulated claim. Yet if this passage betrays a sense of surprise, then the structure of response is not altogether eliminated. The tone indicates that something here is given to thought; that the fragment is less a conclusion proceeding from a thinking subject than the initial tracing of a thought first emerging in reflection, and emerging for a subject as yet unprepared to assume its full scope.

The following pages feature an extended reading of the fragment, by
which one should understand not a conclusive interpretation, but an expansion of its immediate claims. In line with Blanchot’s account of the voice as addressed not to me but to someone in me, the “city” fragment, and quite literally, the thinking or writing of it, emerges from and for a writing subject in whom the world has fallen quiet. In this sense, it would be exemplary less of the overall meaning of L’attente l’oubli than of its workings as developed in the dialogue between the two speakers. Those workings, once more, aim to secure the conditions necessary for her to speak to him. Because her speaking (or demands to speak) do not principally consist in delivering a message or expressing a thought, but in speaking in such a way as to withhold a message, the woman aims first and foremost to secure in her interlocutor the position of “an addressee in general,” of an addressee as no one in particular. She solicits the man of L’attente l’oubli not as a universal subject, but as the anonymous, singular recipient of a plea for which he cannot but assume responsibility, though such an assumption repeatedly bears on him as an impossible demand. Hers, as we have seen, is an address that seeks to make its way to an other, and his is the burden of clearing a path, of lessening the world, so as to ensure that this address to reach him – and reach him, one should note, neither in the clarity of public discourse, nor in the ineffable voice of a radically singular subject. Her voice is to reach someone in him, and I suggest that the “city” fragment, its thinking and writing, similarly demands that someone in him prove accessible, i.e., lessened of the weight of the world, that this thought may so reach him. In its tone, in its materiality, the fragment preserves the constraining, delimiting moment of surprise or exposure when thought is addressed, as with the woman’s voice, from without.

*   *   *

To turn to the fragment:

- La pression de la ville: de toutes parts. Les maisons ne sont pas là pour qu’on y demeure, mais qu’il y ait des rues et, dans les rues, le mouvement incessant de la ville.

To offer an initial reading: The houses and the city itself are constructed not for the sake of an interior life, but in order to lend a measure to the outside. The term “measure” appears on several occasions in L’attente l’oubli and I use it analogously to Blanchot’s reference “not [to] the measure that limits, but [to] the measure that measures in reserving the unlimited (non pas la mesure qui limite, mais la mesure qui mesure en réservant l’illimité)” (AO 74/AwO 50; trans. modified). In the relevant passage, Blanchot writes of the “infinity” opened in every question. The essence of the answer, of the
response that is solicited by every question, is not to close this infinity, but somehow to "measure it" in reserving it as infinite. A response does not so much answer a question, as it answers to the infinity that is first opened in the question. A similar responsiveness animates the construction of the city which, in its construction, seeks to measure – to answer to, not to defeat – a sense of exteriority that Blanchot terms the outside, *le dehors*.

The term "outside" is admittedly far less frequently used in *L’attente l’oubli* than in other works by Blanchot. In one instance, he writes of the man’s coming into contact with the woman’s “proximity,” and in her proximity, with the outside, *le dehors* (*AO* 87/AwO 60). Although it is important to retain a sense of the outside that refers to the exterior places and streets of the city, it is clear that Blanchot’s use of the term entails a more radical understanding of the term, one that does not turn on the dichotomy of interior-exterior. The outside, in Blanchot’s sense, is not approachable as a place or an object is said to be approachable. One suffers the outside as an intrusion that evacuates the self of its worldly bearings, such that the outside registers not only as a communication from without, but one’s own passionate communicability with and within the outside. Is there an ontological priority to the outside, one that allows for the claim that it is foundational with respect to our worldly experience? Yes and no. The outside is to be understood as what, with respect to all worldly experience, comes first – without, however, attributing to this “first” the powers of a foundation. For in no sense is the outside (or an experience of the outside) to be considered the grounding possibility of further possibilities in the world. In order to make good on the claim that the outside be considered as what comes first, consider the following passage in which Blanchot writes of waiting as an act that progressively dispossesses the waiting subject of the object awaited.

*L’attente solitaire, qui était en nous et maintenant passée au dehors, attente de nous sans nous, nous forçant à attendre. D’abord l’intimité, d’abord l’ignorance de l’intimité, d’abord le côté à côté d’instant s’ignorant, se touchant et sans rapport.*

If waiting opens a rapport of intimacy (presumably with the object awaited), it yet proceeds in such a way as to eliminate this intimacy, opening he who waits to the ignorance of intimacy, opening this ignorance in turn to an experience of time as dispersed and undone. When I speak of the outside as what comes first, I have in mind Blanchot’s stunning description of a “first” instance that opens onto a previous “first” that opens itself onto a “first” that is not accessible apart from this movement of progressive openings in which a “first” instance yields to another, and this other yielding in turn. The
outside is just this retreat of the world in oneself, a movement from a first to first to first that ultimately opens onto an originary (but in no sense grounding) experience that registers passionately as the dispersion of time.

To claim that the city of Blanchot’s fragment is constructed so as to lend a measure to the outside, is to claim that the city stages an act of recollection or, equivalently, an act of acknowledgement. Recall, here, the claim that the city is akin to a response that seeks to measure the outside. Measure, and not restore, for the outside does not participate in any economy of loss and redemption. As what comes first, the outside is already here, always accompanying the present: though it can be occluded in the thickness of everyday life, it cannot be destroyed, nor for that matter produced. Merely measured: traced, articulated, exposed. The question that I take Blanchot to be asking here is: How is one to give a figure to this experience without occluding it in so doing?

* * *

The houses of Blanchot’s city are constructed not for the sake of an interior life, but for the sake of the streets that are hollowed out and cast forth in the space between buildings. The “pressure” that mounts from all sides is oriented towards the exterior, channeled into a circuit of corridors that organize and lend a shape to this pressure. By virtue of this pressure, the city maintains a peak of movement: the circulation of bodies is “incessant.” Unthought or at least expressed in Blanchot’s words is the insight that there is always someone outside.

To expand on these claims, the houses – and with them presumably, the apartments and hotels – are constructed not for the sake of an interior life, but in order to establish a relation to the outside. Between a sedimentary impulse that registers as “pagan,” and the contrary, broadly “Jewish” impulse towards movement, the city fosters the latter option in order to recall or to acknowledge an experience of the outside that simultaneously precedes and presently accompanies the city. The memory of the city, the memory that the city displays or exhibits to its own inhabitants, is a memory of the desert, the only adequate “memorial” for which it is not a political monument or sacred ritual, but the open-ended movement that circulates ceaselessly in its streets. If this thought is correct, then one must ask: what is the nature of the desert, i.e. of the outside in Blanchot’s sense of the term, such that only an open-ended movement should prove adequate to measuring it? For whom, secondly, does the city exhibit this memory, if, unlike a memorial or religious ceremony, it is addressed neither to the citizen nor to the believer? Is not the thought itself that there is always someone outside an event comparable to the woman’s voice, i.e. a communica-
tive instance whose force is apparent neither to the public citizen nor to private individual, but to he who is only someone himself? I will turn to the nature of the outside as “indestructible” below, but would first like to analyze the terms of the urban landscape that ceaselessly orients its citizens towards the exterior.

Again, there are houses for the sake of streets, as if the streets as exterior spaces followed upon and proved to be dependent upon the initial creation of a set of interior spaces. The streets result from the construction of houses; they do not precede them. At best, one might say that they appear simultaneously as the negative correlate of the positive spaces inside. Against this description, and in line with the thought that the outside is what comes first, the progression from house to street to permanent movement suggests a progression akin to the act of waiting as it is described above: as a “first” instance that yields to a more primordial first, and this first yielding in turn to the outside as the dispersion of time. The houses are first, we can say, because the streets themselves are first, because prior to both the houses and the streets, a sense of exteriority plays itself out in the dispersal of time, an exteriority the measure of which is to be had only with the ceaseless movement of the city’s inhabitants. This description more accurately captures Blanchot’s claim that the houses are constructed not for the sake of remaining inside, but in order to orient their inhabitants towards the exterior – the outside itself (the desert in Blanchot’s sense) being recollected or acknowledged in this very orientation. Thus, though the outside is never to be enfolded in human culture, the latter can open itself so as to outwardly reference it, and in so referencing it, it can refuse or forestall the threat that human culture resolve itself in perfect immanence.

By virtue of its ceaselessness, the movement of the city exceeds the timed (or “time-able”) displacement that an individual may carry out in moving from here to there. The usefulness of coordinates, of discrete points in space, is called into question once one acknowledges that the city’s movement is of a qualitatively different order than that which carries an individual from A to B. How then to qualify it? First, it is constitutively incomplete, of an order foreign to accomplishment. This characteristic recalls other moments of L’attente l’oubli, for what is one to conclude with respect to such “actions” as waiting, attentiveness, and forgetting if not that they operate within an order foreign to accomplishment? Like the city’s movement, they are divested of ends and objects, and one can generally assert that action in L’attente l’oubli is neither proprietary nor anticipatory in its essence. No thought better exemplifies this claim than that Blanchot’s houses are constructed for the sake of leaving, and of leaving behind perhaps the dearest of human properties: the home, the interior, the place of dwelling.
Secondly, a social agent waits for (or is attentive to), and is therefore a social agent by virtue of his or her involvement in a network of worldly meaning. Yet when waiting is divested of its object, and when the city’s movement knows no “where-to,” who could assume such a movement as properly his? Anonymity appears in the citizen body when its actions exceed or divest themselves of all local goals. He who sustains this anonymity is only ever someone, and because the movement of the city is incessant (persistent and foreign to accomplishment), there is always someone outside.

Correlatively, the outside in the radical sense can be infinitely practiced or exposed; such is the entailed correlative to the thought that the movement of the city is, and must be, incessant. The thought that only an open-ended, un-accomplishable movement can espouse the outside merits an extended explanation. If the outside is always already here, preceding and indeed conditioning the achievements of human culture, then cultural immanence is impossible. A world seemingly made over through the forces of human production may yet yield, as with the city’s movement, an excess that cannot be enfolded within worldly meaning. Put differently, immanence is never ultimate because the outside cannot be destroyed, is of an order irreducible to destruction, negation, assumption, redemption, etc. When the human, furthermore, articulates itself as an exposure or susceptibility to the outside, it is immortal. Immortal are those features of the human – the voice, the face, the nomadic body – that are irreducible to human signification, yet which display or give themselves publicly, literally, and anonymously in their vulnerability to the outside. The voice as voice, not as meaning; the face as face, not as figure, are the elemental, first features of human being whose most salient feature is that they cannot be produced, but simply exposed or laid bare.

*   *   *

*La voix ... le retentissement d’un espace ouvert sur le dehors.*

Because there is always someone outside, Someone always is, and in the figure of Someone, the Outside is measured: traced, articulated, exposed, etc. As the Outside does not participate in an economy of loss and redemption; as it lends itself to neither destruction nor representation, it remains foreign to the sentiments of longing and grieving, foreign to the feeling of nostalgia. Lack is not a predicate of that which is indestructibly here. If there is grief in Blanchot, it is for those elements lost to the demands of the day, demands that prevail less against the night than against those immortal features of the world that step forth as a reserve or interval
in presencing: the voice, the face, Someone as the non-figural figure of the Outside.

Against the demand that one either convert to the light of day, or exile oneself in the muteness of solitude, the voice signals the staggered, intervallic event of dialogue making its way to Someone. He who is bidden to answer assumes a correlative and seemingly impossible responsibility: that of lessening the world in himself so as to clear a path for someone who is already here, already speaking and, in so clearing a path, bidding her to come as unexpected.

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NOTES

1 AO 19/AwO 32: “The pressure of the city: from all parts. The houses are not there so that people can live in them, but rather so that there can be streets and, in the streets, the city’s incessant movement.” (In the ensuing pages, I will quote directly from the French in the body of the paper, and will provide the available translations in a note. I will indicate when diverging from the available translations.)

2 Her demand is addressed in formal and informal terms: ‘Faites en sorte que je puisse vous parler.’ ‘Fais en sorte que je puisse te parler.’ I follow Ann Smock in translating the phrase as: ‘Make it so that I can speak to you.’ See Ann Smock, What is There to Say? (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 4. Readers familiar with Smock’s book will readily recognize my indebtedness to many of her thoughts and formulations; I gladly acknowledge her influence on this paper.

3 In what can be considered a possible reference to the city, the man compares the woman to “a crowd” (une foule) and to “a multitude” (une multitude), appreciating in her “a sort of abstract weakness [that is] unable of presenting itself otherwise than in the empty form of a very great number” (une sorte de faiblesse abstraite, incapable de se présenter autrement que sous la forme vide d’un très grand nombre; AO 31, translation mine). Indeed, the woman’s very being is a locus of movement as her “presence” is said to be simultaneously advancing and retreating, evincing a certain “slippage” (glissement) that never quite stabilizes. None of these terms, however, is especially illuminating with respect to the “city” fragment and its depiction of the city’s incessant movement.


5 Though Blanchot himself employs the term exposer (AO 69/AwO 47, 72/49, 104/72), the concept is today largely associated with the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. I do not cite Nancy in this paper, but I gladly acknowledge the importance of his work (and of this concept especially) both in the following pages and for my
thinking of Blanchot in general. A recent work in particular, *A l’écoute*, resonates with many of the points developed below, specifically Blanchot’s account of “listening in general” and that of “the voice as writing.” Nancy’s remarks on the irreducible vocal element of writing – and on *le sens* generally speaking – nicely capture Blanchot’s characterization of the voice as the a-signifying “element of divulgation” without which, as will be shown, no being-with could take place. “Le sens, s’il y en a, lorsqu’il y en a, n’est jamais un sens neutre, incolore ou aphone: même écrit, il a une voix – et c’est aussi le sens contemporain du mot ‘écritre,’ peut-être en musique comme en littérature. ‘Écrire’ dans son concept moderne élaboré depuis Proust, Adorno, Benjamin, et jusqu’à Blanchot, à Barthes et à l’‘archi-écriture’ de Derrida, ce n’est pas autre chose que faire résonner le sens au-delà de la signification, ou au-delà de lui-même. C’est *vocaliser* un sens qui prétendait, pour une pensée classique, rester sourd et muet, entente détimbré de soi dans le silence d’une *consonne* sans résonance.” J-L. Nancy, *A l’écoute* (Paris: Éditions Gallilée, 2002), p. 67. To borrow Nancy’s terms and to anticipate my later position: In opposition to both the “consonance” of a universal voice (one that speaks for all) and the equally closed “consonance” of a particular voice (one that speaks, impossibly it would seem, without reference to the world), Blanchot will privilege the staggered, intervallic “resonance” of the voice which, already resonating in the speaker’s own being, “re-sounds” (sounds anew) in its addressee prior to resolving itself in meaning or significance. Such a resounding is correlative to a surprise occurrence, i.e. to an exposure which, in exposing one to the outside (to the voice as the measure of the outside), exposes the outside as well.

6 For Blanchot’s account of the dictator, see LV 299-300. On dialogue as the threat of interrogation, see the many references in *L’attente l’oubli*, but also DH 73, 76.

7 Gregg translates as “marking out a path.” As will be indicated below, phrases related to “clearing a path” include *aller de l’avant* (AO 40/AwO 26, 85/58-9, 95/66) and *marcher en avant* (AO 59/AwO 39).


9 See “L’affirmation (le désir, le malheur)” El 176-7/IC 121.


exalt the will to power, whose legitimacy the other alone can unsettle, trouble good conscience. When Heidegger calls attention to the forgetting of being, veiled by the diverse realities it illuminates, a forgetting for which the philosophy developed from Socrates on would be guilty, when he deplores the orientation of the intellect towards technology, he maintains a regime of power more inhuman than mechanism (and which perhaps does not have the same source as it; it is not sure that National Socialism arises from the mechanist reification of men, and that it does not rest on peasant enrootedness and a feudal adoration of subjugated men for the masters and lords who command them.) This is an existence which takes itself to natural, for whom its place in the sun, its ground, its site, orient all signification – a pagan existing. Being directs it building and cultivating, in the midst of a familiar landscape, on a maternal earth. Anonymous, neuter, it directs it, ethically indifferent, as a heroic freedom, foreign to all guilt with regard to the other.”

13 EI 183/IC 125: “If Judaism is destined to take on a meaning for us, it is indeed by showing that, at whatever time, one must be ready to set out, because to go out (to step outside) is the exigency from which one cannot escape if one wants to maintain the possibility of a just relation. The exigency of uprooting; the affirmation of nomadic truth. In this Judaism stands in contrast to paganism (all paganism). To be pagan is to be fixed, to plant oneself in the earth, as it were, to establish oneself through a pact with permanence that authorizes sojourn and is certified by certainty in the land. Nomadism answers to a relation that possession cannot satisfy. Each time Jewish man makes a sign to us across history it is by the summons of a movement.” Blanchot makes a direct reference to “Heideggerian paganism” in “[La Gravité du projet…].” See Écrits politiques: Guerre d’Algérie, Mai 68, etc., 1958-1993 (Paris: Éditions Lignes & Manifestes, 2003), p. 66. In the same context, and clearly preoccupied with the opposition of fixity and movement, Blanchot notes: “La vérité est nomade.” See Levinas, Sur Maurice Blanchot (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), for further references to this theme.

14 Blanchot here is citing Gerschom Scholem’s Les grands courants de la mystique juive.

15 EI 169/IC 116: “In creating the world God does not set forth something more, but, first of all, something less. Infinite Being is necessarily everything. In order that there be the world, he would have to cease being the whole and make a place for it through a movement of withdrawal, of retreat, and in “abandoning a kind of region within himself, a sort of mystical space.” In other words, the essential problem of creation is the problem of nothingness. Not how something can be created out of nothing, but how nothing can be created in order that, on the basis of nothing, something can take place.”

16 Though the face (le visage) as measure of the outside is certainly present in L’attente l’oubli (see for instance AO 55/AwO 37, 57/38, 96/67), a more extensive use of the term is to be found in the second part of DH as well as in a related essay, “La parole prophétique,” from LV, p. 117. In DH, for instance, Blanchot writes: “Visage, visage de l’attente, pourtant soustrait à l’attendu, l’inattendu de toute attente, imprévisible certitude,” a passage remarkable for its use of waiting (l’attente) and the unexpected (l’inattendu). (DH 146: “The face, the face of waiting, yet withdrawn from the awaited, the unexpected of all waiting, unforeseeable certitude.” Translation mine.)
“L’indestructible I: Être Juif,” in *EI* 188/ *IC* 128.

18 *EI* 188-9/*IC* 129: “Jacob does not say to Esau ‘I just saw God as I see you’ but ‘I see you as one sees God,’ which confirms the suggestion that the marvelous (the privileged surprise) is indeed human presence, this Other Presence that is *Autrui* – no less inaccessible, separate, and distant than the Invisible himself. It also confirms the terrible character of such an encounter, whose outcome could only be approbation or death. Whoever sees God risks his life. Whoever encounters the Other can relate to him only through mortal violence or through the gift of speech by receiving him.”

19 For an account of the irreducible injunction to “speak or kill,” see Chapter 2 in Smock, *What is There To Say?*

20 *EI* 363/*IC* 243: “When we meet someone on the street it comes always by surprise and as though by mistake, for we do not recognize ourselves there; in order to go forth and meet another one must first tear oneself away from an existence without identity.”

21 *AO* 7/*AwO* 1: “Here, and on this sentence that was perhaps also addressed to him, he was obliged to stop. It was almost while listening to her speak that he had written these notes. He heard her voice still as he wrote” (trans. slightly modified).

22 *AO* 112-3/*AwO* 78-9: “She sat up slightly, leaning to the side on her hand. She was then next to the wall and seemed to rise above their two reclining bodies, looking at both of them and saying in a voice whose cold clearness surprised him: ‘I would like to speak to you. When could I do that?’ – ‘Yes.’ – ‘Can you stay as of now?’ – ‘Yes.’ / While he listens to this ‘yes,’ wondering if she really pronounced it (it is so transparent that it lets what she says, including this very word, pass through), she leans back as if she were already set free, while taking care not to put any distance between them. / He attracts her, attracted by the attraction in her as yet unaccomplished movement. But while she rises up in the one he is touching, and although he knows she is slipping, falling, a motionless figure, he does not stop clearing a path for her and leading her, pressing forward, as she holds on to him tightly in a movement that renders them indistinguishable. / She speaks, spoken rather than speaking, as if her own speech passed through her alive and painfully transformed her into the space of another kind of speech, always interrupted, lifeless. / And most certainly, when in the morning light – undoubtedly they have just awakened together – he hears her ask fervently, ‘Could I have spoken without stopping?’ he does not doubt being invited to take possession, in this single sentence, of everything that she said to him during the night” (trans. slightly modified).

23 I borrow “chiastic” from Smock, *What is There to Say?* p. 22.

24 *AO* 40/*AwO* 26: “He was supposed to precede her and to always take the lead, without any assurance of ever being followed by her. He was obliged first to discover the words with which she could then make him hear what she had to say to him. They proceeded in this way, motionless within movement.”

25 *AO* 16/*AwO* 5: “I am not asking you to speak: to hear, only to hear.”

26 Blanchot’s discussion of the *Phaedrus* takes place in “La bête de Lascaux,” an essay on Char originally published in 1958 and reprinted in *Une voix venue*
d’ailleurs (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). See in particular pp. 51-5. On la parole d’oubli in AO/AwO, see 51/34.

27 AO 9-10/AwO 3, emphasis mine: “While he gathered together the sheets of paper – and now she was watching him through curious eyes – he could not help feeling that he was bound to her by this failure. He did not understand very well why. It was as if he had touched her across the void; he had seen her for an instant. When? A few minutes ago. He had seen who she was. That did not encourage him; it suggested rather the final end to everything. ‘All right,’ he said to himself, ‘if you do not want to, I renounce.’ He was giving up, but on a note of intimacy, in an utterance that, it is true, was not addressed directly to her, less still to her secret. He had been aiming for something else that was more familiar to him, that he knew and with which he had seemed to live in joyous freedom. He was stunned to discover that it was perhaps her voice. It is the voice that was entrusted to him. What a surprising thought! He picked up the sheets of paper and wrote, ‘It is her voice that is entrusted to you, not what she says. What she says, the secrets that you collect and transcribe so as to give them their due, you must lead them gently, in spite of their attempt to seduce, toward the silence that you first drew out of them.’ She asked him what he had just written. But it was something that she must not hear, that they must not hear together” (trans. slightly modified).

28 AO 98/AwO 68: “‘What in these words surprises you? They are simple.’ – ‘I think that I had gotten used to the idea that you would not speak. You still hadn’t said anything so far, and there wasn’t anything to say, either.’”

29 AO 98/AwO 68: “– ‘And you thought that things had gotten to the point where they would withdraw and not be expressed? What is it in this voice that was more unexpected than anything that happened and that you profited from so easily?’ – ‘Nothing more. Only a little less. There is – this is the voice’s role – suddenly less than there was: this is what the surprise consists of.’”

30 AO 99/AwO 69: “another simplicity that is somehow affirmed in the voice. Something is changing.”

31 AO 99/AwO 69: “That the voice is all of sudden placed here, one thing among others, adding only the element of divulgation that even such a simple encounter does not seem to be able to do without, this abrupt appearance surprises him, and while she speaks in an almost direct manner, putting herself completely into each word and keeping nothing in reserve so as to say nothing more, she has already acceded to other levels where she is ready to make herself heard or has already necessarily expressed herself, filling in time, ahead, behind, the entire void, as she fills all the silence in the room, in spite of her weak ability, which is sometimes withdrawn, sometimes outside, always distant and always near, searching and specifying, as if being precise were the principal safeguard of this voice that says, somewhat coldly, ‘I would like to speak to you’” (trans. slightly modified).

32 Blanchot’s concerns with “less-ness” and emptiness are not limited, of course, to this mention of Luria in the Weil article. The terms are broadly associated with the poetics of Mallarmé for Blanchot, and can be encountered elsewhere in his fiction. See for instance the narrator’s description of Nathalie in L’arrêt de mort, 91: “Je ne peux cependant pas dire qu’elle fût un visage parmi d’autres: elle était moins que toutes les autres, c’était là sa particularité, et ce moins, quand j’y songe, est une
anomalie vraiment étrange, une surprise, un phénomène angoissant, qui aurait pu m'éclairer si j’y avais été sensible et que pourtant j’entrevoyais quelquefois, pensant à cet être si rare que je négligeais pour tant d’autres.” In my translation: “I cannot say however that she was a face among others: she was less than all the others, this itself was her particularity, and this ‘less-ness,’ when I think about it, is a truly strange anomaly, a surprise, an anguishing phenomenon, that could have enlightened me if I had been sensitive to it and which yet I could sometimes glimpse, thinking about that being who was so rare and who I neglected for so many others.”

33 AO 57-8/ AwO 38: “He who, forgetting, effaces himself from us in this forgetting effaces in us the personal power of remembering ourselves; thereupon awakens an impersonal remembrance, a personless remembrance that takes the place of forgetting in us” (trans. modified).

34 AO 44/ AwO 28: “When she began to look for expression to say to him, ‘You will never know. You will never make me speak. You will never learn why I am here with you,’ it was then, in the vehement movement that allowed her to be an impassionate voice while remaining a motionless and impassive body, that he heard her suddenly ask him, without even changing the register of her voice and perhaps even without changing her words: ‘Make so that I can speak to you.’ He would never again be able to forget this plea. / For days he had struggled against her, through words, through silences: ‘No, I am not the one you would like me to be.’ About which, must later, she objected: ‘And who would you be if you were?’ Since he did not want to give a specific reply, because of a kind of reservation or perhaps some more serious difficulty, she concluded triumphantly, ‘You see, you cannot say it, let alone deny it.’”

35 AO 11-2/ AwO 4: “It is not a fiction, although he is incapable of pronouncing the word truth in connection with all of that. Something happened to him, and he can say neither that it was true, nor the contrary. Later, he thought that the event consisted in this manner of being neither true nor false.”

36 AO 24/ AwO 14: “Solitary waiting that was within us and has now passed to the outside, waiting for ourselves without ourselves, forcing us to wait outside our own waiting, leaving us nothing more to wait. At first, intimacy, at first, the ignorance of intimacy, at first, instants unaware of each other existing side by side, touching and unconcerned with each other.”

37 An analogous movement from a first to a more primordial first and so on, can be seen in the following passage: “Les mots que porte la parole que porte la voix que retient l’attente” (AO 101/ AwO 71: “The words carried by speech carried by the voice restrained by waiting.”). This single sentence echoes the man’s writing in the opening sequence as he attempts to forego his initial relation with her words, in order to pay heed to her voice, in order ultimately to access the silence he first heard in her words.

38 EI 386/ IC 258: “The voice … the reverberation of a space opening onto the outside.”
Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* is a philosophical inquiry into the Holocaust that seeks to understand the significance and meaning of the Holocaust independent from the empirical fact of its occurrence.

The holocaust, the absolute event of history – which is a date in history – that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up, where the gift, which knows nothing of forgiveness or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied … How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought? (WD 47)

Blanchot’s claim that the “movement of Meaning was swallowed up” suggests, in its implicit relationship to the conceptual and philosophical status of the Holocaust, the absence of meaning. What Blanchot suggests, however, is not that meaning was first present and then erased throughout the course of the Holocaust, but rather that meaning was absent, in the first place, from the event of the Holocaust. Couched within Blanchot’s assertion of the absence of meaning is his claim to the Holocaust as the event in which “the gift … shattered without giving place to anything that can be af-
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rowned, that can be denied," as an event that did not “happen” in the manner of any other event. The conceptual and philosophical status of the Holocaust does not deny the empirical fact of its occurrence but rather exists in tension with its date in history. Out of this tension arises Blanchot’s thinking of the Holocaust as “the absolute event of history,” an event that is at once a historical reality as well as a violent historical rupture that challenges, in the first place, its status as an event. For what this tension between the philosophical and empirical status of the Holocaust gestures towards is the difficult question of the imperative to remember and to ascribe meaning to that which, properly speaking, cannot be known as an experienced presence, and therefore as memory. It is, as Blanchot claims, the question of how memory can safeguard both the empirical and philosophical status of the Holocaust when the Holocaust is marked by the violent absence of meaning “where all was lost, including guardian thought.” The problem of “guardian thought,” in this regard, becomes the problem of containing the story of the Holocaust as an I. That is, “guardian thought” seems to be contingent upon memory, and yet memory is contingent upon having first thought of the Holocaust in the present as a presence. Insofar as the Holocaust did not “happen” in the present, thought is always a memory; therefore, memory of the Holocaust is always a kind of impossibility, hinging on the very “guardian thought” that is absent in the first place. What Blanchot’s assertion of the primary loss of “guardian thought” opens up is the question of the I in relation to an experienced present, for what is lost is not only the possibility of memory but also the presence of the I during the event of the Holocaust.¹ This rupture between the I and experience emerges as the inherent failure of the I to tell about an event that it cannot tell. It becomes the central problem of Blanchot’s fictional text The Instant of My Death. For as much as The Writing of the Disaster opens the philosophical and conceptual space for questioning the relationship between the I, experience, and memory, it is The Instant of My Death that enacts and testifies to this problem of the I and, in so doing, becomes its own poetic writing of the disaster. Reading The Instant of My Death and The Writing of the Disaster together offers us a chance to investigate the intersection between fiction and philosophy that raises questions about the status of fiction and philosophy as modes of writing that inform each other in terms of the conceptual status of writing about the self.

First published in French in 1994, nearly fifty years after it was first written and fourteen years after the publication of The Writing of the Disaster, The Instant of My Death is often considered one of Blanchot’s more cryptic and complex fictional texts. The 2000 English translation of The Instant of My Death, published in a joint volume with Jacques Derrida’s 1998
essay *Demeure*, however, complicates its fictional status by raising the question of its autobiographical reference. Although much of the scholarship about *The Instant of My Death* considers the status of fiction in relation to structural and conceptual questions of narrative, it is Derrida’s essay *Demeure* that considers the relationship between fiction, autobiography, and testimony. Briefly mentioning a letter sent to him one year prior to the English publication of *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida cites the similarity between the central event of *The Instant of My Death* and Blanchot’s personal experience. Although *Demeure* appears after *The Instant of My Death*, it nevertheless haunts and complicates Blanchot’s text as an autobiographical referent that, as Derrida argues in *Demeure*, raises the question of the fictional status of testimony. In order to consider the relationship between fiction and testimony, we must first turn to the text of *The Instant of My Death*. Opening with a memory, *The Instant of My Death* is a first person narrative that attempts to tell about a brief encounter in front of what is initially assumed to be a German firing squad. Confronted by a lieutenant and his army, the narrator and his family are called from their Château and are ordered to stand in front of the firing squad. Agreeing to line up in front of the firing squad if the women from his family are spared, the narrator faces what is later revealed to be the Russian Vlassov army (*ID 3*). In a temporal rupture, the narrator suddenly discovers himself to be free from the aim of the firing squad and alive in Paris, questioning the status of his survival. This plot, however, unfolds from the narrator’s opening claim to a memory: “I remember a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself” (*ID 3*). Immediately raising questions of autobiography, the first sentence complicates the narrative voice and the subject of the narrative by confusing the autobiographical promise inherent in the title’s claim to “my death” and the subject for whom “my death” belongs. It is with this initial disruption to the question of who is telling the story of *The Instant of My Death* that the narrator locates the action of the text outside a Château in France at the end of the Second World War. What is striking about the action of the narrative is the absence of “my death.” As the opening sentence suggests, and the text’s plot confirms, the death announced within the title never empirically occurs. On an empirical level, therefore, the question of autobiography is also raised insofar as the very event which is at the center of the title and the narrative is absent. The young man of the opening narrator’s memory, however, survives by “death itself,” suggesting the presence of a death whose empirical absence calls into question its own status as a death. That the narrative of *The Instant of My Death* is written in the present tense, despite the logical impossibility of narrating from the position of an empirically present death, complicates, in a manner similar to Blan-
chot’s questioning of “guardian thought,” the problem of the I telling the story of a death which, properly speaking, the I cannot tell.

What the questioning of the status of the death in *The Instant of My Death* opens up is not simply the problem of the I in relation to experience as a conscious presence, but also the question of the status of a story that blurs the separation between autobiography and fiction. “To write one’s autobiography,” Blanchot asserts in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “in order either to confess or to engage in self-analysis, or in order to expose oneself, like a work of art, to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide – a death which is total inasmuch as fragmentary” (*WD* 64). For Blanchot, a fragmentary and total death is a death that can never be experienced in the present; it is rather death which is inherent in the notion of survival. Recalling the narrator’s claim to a memory of a young man whose survival is guaranteed by “death itself,” the notion of survival, in this regard, is bound to what Blanchot calls “the inexperience of death” (*WD* 37). A paradox insofar as it assumes an encounter with a death that inevitably belongs to an inaccessible past, “the inexperience of death” gestures towards the conceptual status of death as that which signifies the inherent failure of the I to experience death in the present. Writing one’s autobiography thus signifies the constant struggle to know, to own, and to possess death as a presence; for it is in writing one’s autobiography, as Blanchot suggests, that the I attempts to tell the story of a death that it can never fully possess. In this regard, to write one’s autobiography is to be bound to the inherent failure of the I’s desire to contain a death that it cannot possess. It is therefore to be trapped within a perpetual suicide that affirms, at each turn, the paradox of “the inexperience of death” which gestures towards the impossibility of the I to know death as an I. The particular purchase of Blanchot’s claim to the relationship between autobiography and death is to raise the question of the conceptual status of the I in relation to philosophy, writing, and fiction. To suggest the inherent failure of the I to tell its own complete story, which would indicate the story of the author’s death, is to suggest, both on an empirical and conceptual level, the failure of autobiography to maintain its status as autobiography. It would seem, then, that any attempt at autobiography becomes fiction as the I announces, as Blanchot claims, its inherent failure and absence. For as much as empiricism puts into question the status of death, it is the refiguring of death within a conceptual and philosophical framework that puts the status of the I into question. The questions that Blanchot explicitly raises in *The Writing of the Disaster*, a seminal philosophical work, complicate the status of philosophy in relation to fiction and writing as a problem of language. The theoretical problem of the I’s relationship to death, and therefore to
writing about the self, is a problem of language deeply embedded within the ambiguous space between fiction and philosophy.

What *The Instant of My Death* marks and testifies to is precisely this problem of language that is voiced in the philosophical inquiry of *The Writing of the Disaster*. In its opening call to a memory, the first sentence of *The Instant of My Death* raises, within fiction, the problem of the I and its relationship to autobiography and death. The title of *The Instant of My Death* promises to tell, in its first person assertion, the story of an autobiographical experience with death. The title, however, is followed by a strange claim to a memory: “I remember a young man – a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself” (*ID* 3). The first sentence immediately complicates the autobiographical status promised by the title by calling into question the I who is telling the story. Is the I who remembers the same I who promises to tell the story of “my death”? Does the “my death” announced in the title belong to the young man of the memory? If this is the case, it would seem fitting that the title read as *The Instant of His Death*. That it does not, however, gestures towards the inherent failure of the I to possess death and to therefore contain the story of “my death” as an I. Shifting from the opening memory to the scene of the young man standing in front of the firing squad, the narrative continues in the first person, suggesting that the I who narrates the primary action of the text is the voice of the young man from the opening narrator’s memory. With two I’s, distinguished from each other by memory and thus by time, voicing the narrative, the autobiographical status of the text is further put into question by the attempt to write about “the instant of my death.” Recalling, however, that “my death,” or any other death, is empirically absent from the text, both I’s enact their inherent failure to narrate the actual instant of “the instant of my death” (*ID* 11). The narrative traverses through an account of the instant in which death is anticipated and the instant in which death becomes a missed experience, but never actually arrives at and conveys “the instant of my death.” As a missed experience, the absent center around which the narrative revolves, “the instant of my death” enacts the inability of language to account for “the instant of my death” in the experienced present as a presence. Not only does the text of *The Instant of My Death*, in its promise to tell of “my death,” and its subsequent failure of either I to do so, stage Blanchot’s philosophical claim about the relationship between autobiography and death within fiction, but it also indicates that the problem within language is the impossibility of language to account for the instant of “the instant of my death.” The question of the status of a death that is empirically absent in relation to the status of writing about the self becomes a question of how to speak about “my death.” This question is, as Blanchot’s
question about “guardian thought” suggests, about the problem of writing from the first person position as it is the disaster that ruptures the relationship between the I and experience.

Blanchot asserts that the I is constituted as an I by its incommensurable relationship to the other which “weighs upon me like an obsession with death” and makes me responsible to the other (WD 40-1). In keeping with Blanchot’s philosophy, the other is to be understood as something of a philosophical abstraction that cannot be converted into any kind of presence that would locate the other as a name, theme, or definition. Such a relationship with the other is marked by what Blanchot identifies, after Heidegger, as the “always already” because it is before the I is able to identify itself as an I that this relationship with the other “occurs” (WD 40). As it is before the I is able to assert itself, the relationship with the other does not “happen” in the manner of any other event, and thereby remains within a time that precedes even the past and is thus historically out of time. What is particularly important about this relationship with the other, at least with regard to Blanchot’s thinking of the Holocaust within The Writing of the Disaster, is that this relationship calls into question the conceptual status of the I in terms of a fractured temporality that remains outside of the realm of an experienced present. It is this temporality and the putting of the self radically into question that marks, for Blanchot, the disaster. In claiming the Holocaust to be “the absolute event of history” that irreparably fractured temporality and meaning, Blanchot figures the Holocaust as the disaster. What is at first a philosophical fragment about the Holocaust in Blanchot’s thinking of “guardian thought” becomes, as The Writing of the Disaster continues, about the disaster, an abstraction that resonates within the inadequacy of naming the Holocaust as the disaster. Indeed both the Holocaust and the disaster remain within the paradox of inexperience that resonates as an absent center unable to be accounted for within language. For what this movement between the Holocaust and the disaster enacts is the absence of the Holocaust as the disaster, and because it is not, properly speaking, present, naming becomes inadequate. The Holocaust cannot simply be a referent for the disaster, and similarly, the disaster cannot simply be a referent for the Holocaust when what is ultimately at stake is the totalizing absence of meaning and the I. Is the Holocaust the singular and only disaster, or is it one disaster of many that cannot be named? Does the disaster refer to the Holocaust or does the Holocaust refer to the disaster? These questions gesture towards the notion that only within language can the disaster be understood to exist outside of its limits. Only in writing can the I stage its inherent failure to contain the story of “my death,” of the disaster, and therefore occupy the creative space between fiction and phi-
losophy, and emerge as testimony. If writing arises, as Blanchot argues in *The Writing of the Disaster*, out of the relationship with the other and is always a kind of impossible gesture towards the disaster, in what way is *The Instant of My Death* its own writing of the disaster?

Writing from the position of the I about the disaster becomes an impossibility, for it is the disaster that strips the I of its first person position:

The disaster does not put me into question, but annuls the question, makes it disappear — as if along with the question, "I" too disappeared in the disaster which never appears. The fact of disappearing is, precisely, not a fact, not an event: it does not happen, not only because there is no "I" to undergo the experience, but because (and this is exactly what presupposition means), since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it. (*WD* 28)

The paradox of the disaster is that despite its empirical absence, it nevertheless remains as a kind of absent presence indicated in the struggle of the I to regain its first person position after having survived the disaster that was never present in the first place. There remains, despite the annulment of the I, the desire to know, to shed light upon the absent meaning of the disaster and "the inexperience of death." This desire, as Blanchot continues to assert, is staged in writing where the position of the I is put radically into question by the paradox of the notion of survival as bound to "the inexperience of death." Writing, in this regard, does not situate death in the future, but rather acknowledges that it has already taken place without having been experienced. "The language of writing," Blanchot claims, "in its repetitive difference, its patient effraction — opens or offers itself in the direction of the other" (*WD* 79). To write is to engage the I in a relationship that affirms it as limited and constituted by its relationship to the other. "The language of writing" becomes a performance of the inherent failure of the I to tell the story of the disaster in the present. Insofar as it affirms the I's relationship to the other, writing stages the temporal fracture that characterizes the disaster as disaster. The I therefore becomes other to itself in writing and in so doing opens the literary space in which the I may bear witness to its own limitations. The particular importance of Blanchot's notion of "the language of writing" is not exclusively to suggest that the I surrenders itself to an abstract notion of the other, but to also engage this relationship as an obligation that can only be voiced in the writing that gestures towards its own failure. This writing is, as I suggest in the manner of Derrida's argument in *Demeure*, at once testimony and fiction.

In her critical encounter with Blanchot's philosophical inquiry into
Auschwitz, Sarah Kofman questions how testimony and the story are able to coexist:

If no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to witness. But how? How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story? How can one speak the unimaginable?

Whereas testimony refers to an event that is outside of the written text, the “idyllic law of the story” suggests that fiction exists on its own terms, referring to itself insofar as the context is its own story. As Derrida’s essay De-meuré argues, testimony has inherent within it the autobiographical voice. Insofar as it is told from the first person position, testimony is privileged as that which tells the truth about an experience that happened only to the person delivering the testimony and cannot be replaced by another’s experience. With this in mind, it would seem that, by its very nature, testimony is never threatened by the “idyllic law of the story,” and is always distinguished from fiction by its inherent truth value. That, however, to question the possibility of testimony in relation to fiction suggests, Kofman continues, that the status of fiction has inherent within it an allegorical quality that allows it to coexist with the story. Herein lies the particular purchase of Kofman’s question: the question of providing testimony for precisely that experience which can never be owned by the I who speaks, but is instead spoken in order to witness the very impossibility of providing testimony for the endless silence of those who want to “safeguard true speech against betrayal.” This implicates testimony as that which cannot “escape the idyllic law of the story,” and is rather made possible, in the first place, the very moment that testimony takes on a particular allegorical dimension. For what Kofman’s consideration of the duty to speak gestures towards is the inherent impossibility of testimony, and the inherent impossibility to contain and to tell of the “unimaginable” as an I. As the title and problematic opening line of The Instant of My Death enact, what begins as the promise to testify to “the instant of my death” reads as a story of a memory of a young man “prevented from dying by death itself.” What may begin as the promise of testimony emerges as an allegory, a story about the inherent failure of testimony.

In Demeure, Derrida asserts that “Literature serves as real testimony. ... It is a fiction of testimony more than a testimony in which the witness swears to tell the truth ... without the possibility of this fiction ... no truthful testimony would be possible.” It is fiction, as Derrida suggests, which
opens the possibility for “truthful” testimony. “Truthful” testimony is not one that claims itself to be truthful, but rather one that announces its own inability to tell the truth. Such testimony recognizes, within its own terms, the inability of the I to maintain its position as an I in the moment of, for example, “the instant of my death.” Testimony, therefore, can only be possible as what Derrida calls the “fiction of testimony,” as an allegory that tells the story of its own failure. As much as testimony may assume the autobiographical voice that writes about a singular experience, it is fiction that opens the creative space in which the I is able to write as an I. It does so, however, within the “idyllic law of the story,” that is, within the freedom of using fiction’s creative license to create the illusion of an I who is able to fully bear witness to what Blanchot calls “the disaster,” to what Kofman calls “the unimaginable,” and to the instant of “the instant of my death.” For fiction does not simply say, for example, “I cannot testify to the instant of my death that does not, properly speaking, belong to me,” but instead performs its own inherent failure. It is a failure, however, that is ultimately the most singular experience, as it is the failure itself that signifies the truly unique and irreplaceable position of “the instant of my death.” Unable to assert its own truth, testimony must turn to fiction in order to find its irreplaceable voice. “Real” testimony, as Derrida calls it, arises within literature, within the very space that allows the I to speak as an I and prevent “true speech” from the claim to truth, the very “betrayal” that underlines Kofman’s questions.

The inherent failure of testimony as that which cannot assert its own truth ultimately becomes the problem of the inability of language to account for the experience which testimony assumes to be addressing in the present. What the title of *The Instant of My Death* demonstrates is that the I cannot write about or from the actual instant of “the instant of my death” in the present tense. Rather, writing from the position of the I, and this is where Derrida’s work in *Demeure* is particularly poignant, necessarily assumes another tense in which “the instant of my death” is addressed as an anticipated future or a past, experienced event. The instant of “the instant of my death” cannot be accounted for within language, for any attempt to do so would necessarily assume the I to be dead and therefore without speech in the first place. Important in this assertion is that the problem with language is not exclusive to testimony and is one that fiction also confronts. The question then becomes as much about the failure of fiction to account for the instant as it is about the failure of testimony to account for the instant of “the instant of my death.” This is precisely the place in which Blanchot’s fictional text, in its relationship to *The Writing of the Disaster*, takes shape as its own poetic writing of the disaster. That is, *The Instant of My*
Death enacts, through fiction, the philosophical inquiry into the disaster and the problem of the I that is at the center of The Writing of the Disaster. As previously mentioned, the title of The Instant of My Death promises to testify to the experience of “my death,” or perhaps more appropriately, to the inexperience of “my death.” What occurs, however, in the five pages that constitute the text, is a fragmented narrative that never actually tells of the death promised by the title. On an empirical level, the fictional narrative fails to account for the death announced in the title. On an allegorical level, however, the narrative also fails, as I argue, to create the first person position from which the I may tell the story of “the instant of my death.” In complicating the narrative voice, the text’s opening sentence also calls into question the fictional status of the opening memory. Is the narrative telling the story of a memory of a young man or is it telling of the memory itself as a historical reality?

What is especially striking about the narrative of The Instant of My Death is its fractured telling that never clearly asserts the narrative voice in relation to the primary action of the text. As a result, two different narrative voices seem to drive the action of the text: the I who opens the text with a memory of a young man and the I of the young man, presumably telling the story which constitutes the memory of the first I. Although both narrative voices assert the first person position, they seem to be initially separated by temporality. The I who announces the memory speaks in the present tense about the past and the young man speaks in the present tense about the present. This temporal difference at first functions to distinguish the narrative voices from each other, but is quickly annulled by the attempt to narrate the instant of “the instant of my death.” In the description of the encounter between the young man and the firing squad outside the Château, the I who speaks is clearly the voice of the young man. As the narrative approaches the young man’s imminent death, however, the narrative voice shifts and marks a tension between the otherwise distinguished narrative voices:

I know – I do not know it – that the one at whom the Germans were already aiming, awaiting but the final order, experienced then a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however) – sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death? (ID 5)

The narrator’s waiver between “I know – I do not know it” can be read as either the voice of the young man or the voice of the opening narrator. Separated by a hyphen, by a linguistic mark of silence, the shift from “I know” to “I do not know it” suggests an ambiguity that enacts the very tension that
collapses the temporal difference between the narrative voices, and therefore the very thing that distinguishes the voices from each other. At once knowing and unknowing, the I who speaks can also be read as the simultaneous presence of both voices. The I who knows is the I of the young man, asserting the singularity of his confrontation with the firing squad. In the claim to not “know it,” the I of the opening narrator is voiced, affirming the position of the young man as singular and irreplaceable. The hyphen therefore becomes the linguistic mark that opens the narrative to the simultaneous presence of both voices without seeming to compromise their difference. This narrative tension occurs, however, in the very moment of an imminent death and as such, occurs in a moment that, in the manner of Blanchot’s philosophy in *The Writing of the Disaster*, refigures the I as an absence and fractures the relationship between the I and experience. In this textual moment, the narrative collapses into an anonymous “one,” conflating the young man and the opening narrator into the aim of the firing squad and rendering both first person positions as absent and voiceless. In turning to the nameless “one” as the subject at “whom the Germans were already aiming,” the story fails to maintain, even within fiction, the voice of either I in the very moment of the “encounter of death with death.” Although the death itself remains empirically absent, there exists the trace of it having already occurred in the narrator’s questioning of the “encounter of death with death.” For this questioning suggests the presence of death as an absence, having “happened” in the temporal manner of what Blanchot calls the disaster.

Haunted by this “encounter of death with death,” the narrative returns to the voice of the opening narrator and now positions the young man as having survived the death that did not happen as an assembled experience in the present. The young man becomes, in some sense, a survivor of the disaster, bound to the notion of death for the very constitution of his survival:

> In his place I will not try to analyze. He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead – immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Rather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal. Henceforth, he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship. (*ID 5*)

Announcing the young man’s position as singular and irreplaceable, the opening narrator refuses to substitute the young man’s nuanced experience with a narrative. What seems, however, to be the very analysis which the opening narrator supposedly rejects emerges as a questioning of the young man’s survival within the notion of “the inexperience of death.” In a
narrative move that recalls Blanchot’s assertion about the paradox of survival in writing one’s autobiography, the opening narrator locates notions of death and immortality within a tension that testifies to the missed encounter with death. At once joining and separating the words “dead” and “immortal,” the hyphen appears once again as a linguistic mark that interrupts the narrative and, in so doing, inscribes the young man’s survival within an absent death whose presence can only be indicated as the disaster. For it is the very fact of not being immortal or eternal that affirms the young man’s capacity for an “encounter of death with death” that then reaffirms his newfound position as a survivor of such an encounter. This fact of the young man’s survival is, however, marked by “the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity,” and therefore by a collectivity that seems to disrupt the singularity of such a position. Arising out of the singularity of “the inexperience of death,” “the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity,” does not rear-ticulate the young man’s survival within a collective identity, but rather articulates the young man’s survival within a collection of fragmented identities, similarly marked by the disaster. The Instant of My Death becomes, in this textual moment, as much about the disaster as that which is the philosophical abstraction of all such paradoxes that put “guardian thought” radically into question, as it is about the singularity of the story of “the instant of my death.”

The effect of the disaster upon the young man’s survival is not necessarily to question the empirical fact of having survived an imminent death, but rather to question the status of a survival defined by its dependence upon a death that did not empirically happen. Important in this distinction is not only the paradox of such a survival, but also the questioning of the relationship between this survival and identity. What does it mean to survive death by death itself? It is in the manner of this questioning that the narrative once again blurs the position of the I:

There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. “I am alive. No, you are dead.” (ID 7-9)

Attempting to speak from the “moment when the shooting was no longer but to come,” the I who narrates is presumably the voice of the young man. Unable to be translated, “the feeling of lightness” remains as the excess of
a past that cannot be fully accessed in the present. As such, it has become “the infinite opening up,” the unanswerable rupture between the I who stood as the “human target,” and the new life bodied forth out of a death that has already come to pass without having been experienced. The question then of what remains and of what it means to survive such a death arises out of the “unanalyzable feeling” that “changed what there remained for him of existence.” What is most striking, however, about this “unanalyzable feeling” is precisely its unanalyzable quality that marks the failure of the I to contain the moment in the present as either fiction or testimony. Recalling the opening narrator’s earlier assertion that “in his place I will not try to analyze,” the claim to “know” and to “imagine” an “unanalyzable feeling” as unanalyzable and to therefore possess it as such further identifies the I who speaks in this narrative moment as the young man. However, “this unanalyzable feeling,” the very feeling which reaffirms the irreplaceable position of the young man, becomes that which changes what “remained for him of existence.” The narrative shift to the anonymous third person as the person for whom existence now remains as an untranslatable fragment enacts the very annulment of I in the disaster. No longer recognizable to himself, the young man is unable to possess his newly acquired existence as an I; for it is an existence that is in constant motion with an internal death that is inescapably bound by its confrontation and collision with the death outside of him.

The I who survives remains entirely foreign to the I who stood before the firing squad. Able only to regain the position of the I in quotation marks, a linguistic move that suggests the creative license of speaking in the place of another, the I states: “I am alive. No, you are dead.” In what seems to be a question and response announced by different voices, the I who claims existence, presumably the young man, is also dead, forever bound to death for his survival. Reading as the voice of an anonymous other, the claim to “No, you are dead” inscribes both the paradox of survival as well as the failure of the I to contain the story of a survival that has been bodied forth out of the disaster. This story of survival is refigured in the final narrative fragment as the attempt to piece together fragments of a written text. As the narrative shifts from the third person to the first person voice, it becomes a haunting echo of the foreignness between the I who stood as the “human target” and the I who survives. It is, however, this final mention of a lost manuscript that marks the attempt to account for “the instant of my death” within the problem of “guardian thought,” that is, within the relationship between the I and memory. Ultimately failing to preserve “the instant of my death” within memory, and therefore within an experienced past, the final narrative fragment ends the text with the writing of “the instant of my
"death" as an absence whose presence is inscribed in the very writing that fails to account for "the instant of my death":

Later, having returned to Paris, he met Malraux, who said that he had been taken prisoner (without being recognized) and that he had succeeded in escaping, losing a manuscript in the process. "It was only reflections of art, easy to reconstitute, whereas a manuscript would not be." With Paulhan, he made inquiries which could only remain in vain. ... What does it matter. All that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself, or to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance. (ID 11)

Like the manuscript, the young man is unable to be fully reconstituted, to be translated into a new narrative that tells the story of young man who survived death by death itself. What remains is "the feeling of lightness," the absent meaning that, in its loud and untranslatable silence, etches the endless repetition of "the instant of my death" that can never be known and experienced in the present. "The instant of my death" emerges, in its absence, as the inescapable instant of the disaster. Out of this instant arises the I who is forever haunted by the continuous repetition of a death that remains suspended within a past never experienced in the present. The young man who returns to Paris has become other to the self that stood in the aim of the firing squad. The Instant of My Death becomes, then, in its inherent failure to testify to "the instant of my death" and to contain the story of "the instant of my death" from the position of the I, its own poetic writing of the disaster.

It is indeed the enigmatic language of a memory of a young man whose inherent failure to tell the story of "the instant of my death" from the position of the I that allows The Instant of My Death to emerge as testimony to a survival paradoxically bound to a death that remains as a kind of absent rupture. For it is in the fictional space of The Instant of My Death that testimony arises out of not only the inherent failure of testimony to assert its own truth, but also in the inherent failure of fiction to account for the I in the instant of "the instant of my death." It is in this failure that testimony finds its voice resonating within the relationship between the obligation to speak what Kofman calls the "unimaginable" and the problem of the I in "guardian thought." Haunted by the letter Derrida received from Blanchot, The Instant of My Death at once occupies and rejects its fictional, testimonial, and autobiographical status. What seems at first to be a testimony is revealed to be a fictional narrative that traverses around an absent event that bears a historical referent to Blanchot's own autobiographical experience. Ultimately, the text moves freely between each genre, using the fractured nar-
rative to enact the very problem of language and the inability of language to account for “the instant of my death,” rejecting, in the first place, its singular status as testimony, autobiography, or fiction. Indeed it is this movement that, in blurring the separation between fact and fiction, marks the text’s most poignant intersection with The Writing of the Disaster. The Instant of My Death not only announces the inherent failure of testimony, but also questions the status of writing about the self in relation to philosophy. The Instant of My Death becomes as much about the disaster as is The Writing of the Disaster, and as such, asserts, through fiction, the problem of the I in relation to the disaster. In a textual space that is not clearly fictional or philosophical, The Instant of My Death becomes a poetic writing of the disaster that testifies to the disaster as that which irreparably fractures the relationship between the I and experience. In this regard, The Instant of My Death also becomes a kind of allegory for the philosophical work of The Writing of the Disaster, questioning in its own terms how thought can “be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought?” For what The Instant of My Death enacts, without sacrificing its conceptual status, is the “unimaginable.” In its inherent failure to testify, The Instant of My Death becomes testimony to what Kofman writes as “the duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to witness.”

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NOTES

1 For this paper, I use the term “the I” in the manner of Blanchot’s philosophical discourse in The Writing of The Disaster in order to invoke the relationship with the other. The term “the I” works to figure consciousness and identity in terms of its relationship to the other. Indeed alternative terms such as “the self,” “consciousness,” or “the subject” may in fact be more appropriate to the discussion of the relationship between experience and memory, and as such deserve careful consideration. In their inherent reference to identity, these alternative terms raise questions of the psychoanalytic relationship between consciousness, experience, and memory. It is important to recognize that, when speaking of events embedded within a historical reality, the psychoanalytic import of employing a term such as “the self” is to presuppose the presence of a formerly “whole” or constituted self that has been irreparably fractured by such an event. Because it is not my intent to explicitly address the psychoanalytic import in this paper, I have chosen to use “the I” in order to maintain consistency.


See Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 45. Here Derrida argues that speaking or writing the statement “the instant of my death” in the present is impossible as it necessarily implies that the I who speaks does so from the position of death. Implicit within “the instant of my death” is another tense that allows the statement to be spoken despite its inherent impossibility. That is, “the instant of my death” has inherent within it, as Derrida asserts, “every possible tense: I am dead, or I will be dead in an instant, or an instant ago I was going to be dead.” To speak “the instant of my death” is to therefore speak of death as well as from death.

See Derrida, *Demeure*, pp. 33-4, 45. The possibility of the instant of “the instant of my death” exists, as Derrida argues, in relation to its own impossibility. The moment that one offers the instant as testimony, it is therefore bound to the possibility of being reproduced and repeated beyond the first claim to the instant. Testimony depends, in this regard, on the reproducibility of the instant, that I can speak the instant today and tomorrow in order to affirm a certain truth value. The moment that the instant is divided into repetition, it no longer exists as a singular instant. Yet, it is the very fact that I can reproduce the instant of my testimony that affirms the singular and irreplaceable nature of the instant and thus of my testimony in the first place.


Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 45.
In her *Paroles suffoquées*, Sarah Kofman writes that Robert Antelme’s *The Human Race* shows us that the abject dispossession suffered by the deportees signifies the indestructibility of alterity, its absolute character, by establishing the possibility of a new kind of “we,” he founds without founding – for this “we” is always already undone, destabilized – the possibility of a new ethics. Of a new humanism.¹

By way of an apparently rhetorical, though necessary question, Kofman continues: in spite of everything that calls humanism into question “after the death of God and the end of man that is its correlate,” she writes, “I nevertheless want to conserve it, while giving it a completely different meaning, displacing and transforming it. I keep it because what other, new ‘word’ could have as much hold on the old humanism?”²

At once prophetic and contemporary, this question is surprising, if not disarming. Following the death of God, it is said, ‘Man’ takes the stage, his emergence the necessary event of history. Yet the end of man is the ‘correlate’ of the death of God. The space occupied by divinity, or the sacred, has withdrawn. Humanism attests to a *mimesis* of the transcendental theme, and unwittingly confirms the emptiness of a sign without origin. Humanism

**Man is the Indestructible:**

Blanchot’s Obscure Humanism

**John Dalton**
announces nothing new: the nihilism at the heart of onto-theology emerges fully. Its hypocrisy and pretension fatally exposed, humanism may now – and ought to be – discarded as a ‘metaphysics of the subject,’ a regime of negativity, exclusion and violence.

And yet, the existential instance remains – ‘here we are.’ Or, for the present purposes, the question about the ‘who’ sustains itself. ‘Who’ would consent to be the subject of a new ethics and a new humanism? This much situates the problem of humanism in the work of Maurice Blanchot, a problem intimately posed in rapport to Antelme. The question of humanism and the ethical task of humanistic thought retain their urgency – the ‘we’ is everywhere invoked, everywhere assumed and everywhere demanded. Against the disavowal of humanism (what amounts to the same nihilism, equally unable to contend with its own historicity), a new way of thinking humanism is called upon, one gesture or traced according to Derrida’s ‘une autre insistence de l’homme.’ Certainly in debt to Blanchot, and to Blanchot’s own reading of Heidegger, Derrida does not directly advocate a rethinking of ‘human being’ according to the language of ontology. But it nonetheless remains that ontology sustains the only significant examination of the question of ‘Man’ today. The rapport of Eigenlichkiet and proximity that Derrida explores in “The Ends of Man” takes as its point of departure the dissension of the ontological sign of ‘Man.’ The very figure of proximity itself remains irreducible: the ontological language of proximity gives sense to the deconstructive thinking of the sign, the trace, alterity, and, we may say, the subsequent appeals to ‘becoming,’ affect, sense and value.

To enter this reading, it is necessary to recognize how the spatial metaphor of proximity presupposes a temporality. The turn toward the theme of the other is not in any way a repudiation of the human: rather, it permits a way of engaging the very question of the relation of humanity to itself, a relation that can only emerge once the place of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ become problems of language and time. We may say that ‘the other’ is one of names of the demarcation between an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ humanism. The drawing of a limit for what humanity may claim for itself – for what action may be engaged or condemned in its name – is at once historical, juridical and political: it is also commemorative and ethical, the appeal to a better future and to the exigency of memory. Humanism confronts its other not as its contrary, but when face to face with its most extreme possibility – the inexplicable atrocity of a humanity that reserves the right to put to death in the name of humanity itself. Between the old and the new humanism lies the monstrosity of the inhuman, what otherwise takes the name of ‘the camps,’ the ‘crime against humanity,’ ‘affliction’ and ‘disaster.’

It would perhaps first of all be necessary to ask again what remains
exceptional for 'the ends of man.' After (or within) the conflict over Les fins de l'Homme, no matter how ill understood concept of 'end' (or for that matter, 'origin'), and whatever incredulity and impatience greets a thinking of humanism today, what is most dramatic in this conflict is not the repudiation of humanism, nor less the effacement of a 'subject,' but the force of placing what is 'human' into question. This, it must be stated, is the very possibility of a humanism – humanity emerges as a concept when humanity has become a problem for itself.

Properly speaking, an ontology of humanism is not a 'critique' of humanism, setting the regulative limits and conditions within which the idea of man is thinkable and necessary, nor less is such a thinking comparable to a political disagreement, the committed exchange of ideological mystifications (though Blanchot does not hesitate to employ the word 'ideology,' and perhaps in a less sophisticated manner). Understood in the double genitive, the 'ends' of man touch upon the dissension of the form of the concept of the human: the possibility and the finitude of 'the human.' The sense in which the name or time of 'man' is today finished – that, to paraphrase Hegel, 'man' is a thing of the past – remains dominated by the problem of form, of what the 'human' is and 'ought' to be.

The name of 'man' becomes historical, and for the first time, is able to articulate itself according to a responsibility for its own time, our own here and now and our future. The historicity of 'man' – that 'man' emerges at a definite point, and from this point onward gazes into the possibility of self-annihilation – means that the 'human being' finds itself in becoming a decision for itself. For this reason, it remains in dispute what the 'ends of man' – the completion of this theme – would mean. It cannot be said that the theme of the 'ends of man' has exhausted itself, that the problem of the meaning of humanism is anachronistic, that turning again toward a humanism attests to a naive regression. Rather, we need to question with greater caution, with attention to the tradition within which humanism becomes thinkable. The question of 'end,' and of the place of completion proposed by this theme, is predicated upon the profoundly historic philosophemes of ergon and potentia, of the setting into work of what becomes a work for itself. In short, the problem of form, and of the form of form.

The manifold sense of 'end' is concentrated upon this point: end as purpose, end as limit, end as completion, and end as failure. The problem of the end cannot be thought without reference to the formal structure of the philosophical ergon, nor the place of 'man' as the contemporary staging of the ergon. If the name of man is the name for a universal experience of the demand of freedom (freedom of and for the decision we take for our own possibility of being), then man as such is the ergon of the ergon, the
setting into work of any possible setting into work. If indeed literature’s return into itself duplicates the ‘aesthetic education of man,’ then the fateful separation of literature from the aspirations of humanism, the arrival (or incessant departure) of the anonymous passivity of the il, nonetheless retains the form of form, the work as the comprehension of its own end and possibility – the negativity that must name its own negativity, think itself as Orphic failure. The displacement of ‘man’ from the center of meaning, the claim that ‘man’ is an effect (of language, of desire, of structure, etc), means this: that ‘man’ becomes a historical problem, and forms him or herself as the problem of history, of what it means to be a finite here and now. The end of man becomes nothing other than the interminable, endless question of what a human ‘end’ may or ought to be.

Unavoidably, the temptation to rehearse the dominant tropes of Blanchot’s writing asserts itself: what ‘appears in its disappearance,’ and so on. Rather than pursue such figures – though without decrying their compulsion – it is necessary to isolate precisely the problem of form, what in the small text “The Anthenaeum” Blanchot describes accordingly: “Literature (by which I mean all its forms of expression, which is to say also its forces of dissolution) suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself, and, in this manifestation, has no other task or trait than to declare itself.” Blanchot continues, with a sentence decisive for the present theme:

Literature, in short, declares its power. The poet becomes the future of humankind at the moment when, no longer being anything – anything but one who knows himself to be a poet – he designates in this knowledge for which he is intimately responsibility the site wherein poetry will no longer be content to produce beautiful, determinate works, but rather will produce itself in a movement without term and without determination. (IC 354).

One further sentence deserves to be cited. The Frühromantik movement takes its measure not from the revolutionary manifesto, but the ‘Revolution in person’: that is, the event itself, the figure of the event as a work affirming itself: “The terror, as we well know, was terrible not only because of its executions, but because it proclaimed itself in this capital form, in making terror the measure of history and the logos of the modern era” (IC 355). Blanchot qualifies this by declaring: the revolutionary act is to be given its decisive force by establishing it as close as possible to its origin. This origin is the principle of ‘absolute liberty.’ For this reason, any figure of ‘history’ remains insufficient. It is history that must be set in motion, recreated, promised to a future, yet stripped of everything that would determine any goal it may assume, other than the goal of naming its own possibility of mo-
tion. We should also note that the Romantic exigency to ‘poetize all of reality’ was also understood as a ‘potentialization.’ Man affirms himself in the event that makes possible man as an event – the creative rapport to experience (in which privilege is given to the forms of poetry, politics and love) – and if in so doing, should also turn to literature and language to think the most formal possibilities of form (alongside the three critiques of Kant), and so absenting him or herself from the figures of representation (or more precisely, consenting now to be absented, or tracing one’s own abstention so as to affirm the work’s own solitary freedom), this ‘humanism’ does so in the name of a more profound, essential freedom, a more profound, essential finitude: a responsibility to create from out of the origin.  

Modern humanism affirms ‘man’ as a work. At issue, then, is how the logic or structure of the *ergon* comes to determine the event of responsibility in which a ‘humanism’ may emerge, and how a ‘new’ humanism or a new ethics may in turn be proposed. In order to pursue this question in Blanchot, it will be necessary to circle back upon the initial problematic.

Did not the ‘abject dispossession of the deportees’ finally strip modernity of its humanist illusion, calling humanism into question so profoundly that the outrage in ‘the name of man’ signifies, instead, a disavowal of philosophical responsibility (for example, the turn to ‘rights’ and law, where law is not comprehended for what it is – pure form, responsibility without a subject, an institutional decision on violence)? What reconciliation is possible? And this is first of all to ask – can there be an ‘us,’ or more disturbingly, or more urgently – ought there to be an ‘us’? Any appeal to ‘community,’ no matter the elision of the identity of a ‘being-in-common,’ is an offence to memory – or more prosaically, is simply no longer possible: the responsibility that this name would affirm has become empty, if not corrupt. One’s only response would be silence.

The insistence upon such questions, though, locates oneself as a subject of memory. This in turn, turns the question of community around. Perhaps community and identity are neither a goal nor a desire, but a condition (one for which refusal and differentiation – a right to insubordination – remain essential): in which case, the problem of community also assumes the problem of form. How may a ‘people’ come to be? There is no transcendence of the singular or the plural (‘the’ nation, ‘a’ people) without at the same time the appeal to and the elision of alterity, and in this elision, always, the possible fury of extermination. But similarly, there is no opening to an-other’s demand without a deflection of one’s own time and place, one’s own facticity. The appeal to the universal remains the vital condition of Western political thought (which perhaps denies the task of ‘political thought’ as such). The claim of the universal is also the delimitation and cri-
tique of every form of community, such that ‘we’ are then said to belong in a more significant manner – precisely where the limit and value of any given ‘community’ is held in critical suspension, open to *polemos*, loss and reinvention.

The ‘we’ of the humanist universal attests to a critical responsibility. The figure of the ‘human’ is the figure of justice, a ‘humanism,’ before it is the determination of a taxonomy (race, species, a political group, etc). The ‘form’ of the human is not itself a classification, but the appeal to the unique and exemplary instance of what resolutely resists subordination, that maintains itself in the affirmation of a *droit à l’insoumission*, that is, in regard to the responsibility that this right puts into motion. Humanity is not first of all a mass, but the event of a protest, or exigency, to form oneself for oneself. This responsibility, whether it be individual or collective, and so prior to a subject, enters into itself, its own form, as a responsibility for solitude. ‘We’ have no one else to rely upon, no one else to appeal to, save ourselves.

The ‘we’ of humanity is, formally, without limit: no singular community dominates the dissension of human being. To cite Blanchot: “There is no solitude if it does not disrupt solitude, the better to expose the solitary to the multiple outside” (*WD* 5). Being a question for itself, the responsibility of community is finally without a contrary, though is not self-contained (or ‘narcissistic,’ misrecognizing itself). It is exposed to the problem of its limit: it affirms itself as absolutely inclusive, a community for whom no one is left out. (And this is also the profound temptation of the fascist community. It may be that fascism is not at all ‘exclusive’ in any conventional sense: it seeks to dominate everyone and everything. Dominating even death and the right to kill, it leaves nothing aside, not even the nothing.)

And yet. If ‘we’ remain dominated by the event of mass atrocity, if this event is still unfolding insofar as we have not yet found a way to respond, we cannot be assured that any contemporary humanism schematically divides between a ‘before’ and an ‘after,’ and that the temporality of this division measures a knowledge or an ethics, a perfectibility. We cannot say that today, we know better than to demand ‘humanism’ and its rights. Humanism is opened up to its ‘other’ – which is not God, nor the animal, but its own capacity for cruelty and outrage. How is it that humanism, predicated upon the singularity of being human, is able to respond to the ‘indestructible’ character of alterity? And what, indeed, is ‘indestructible’ about alterity? Its ‘absolute character,’ if such a phrase can be admitted, is less a return into itself than the gesture of the unbound, an experience or an event absolved of all relation. Does this appeal to the indestructible remain within the contours of a transcendence, the force of a projection that asserts a ‘being-human’ beyond, or before, or without, the insistence on the condi-
tions of history, politics and desire? The other who is prior to history would be as equally indestructible as impossibly irresponsible, non-affirmable. What is ‘indestructible’ is not therefore what resists violence to survive and affirm itself, but is the condition of that violence: the violence of the crime against humanity, for example, is rather the affirmation (without positivity) of humanity, meaningful only insofar as a political and biological concept of the human must be presupposed and (legalized) violence authorized in its name. If this appears dialectical, it is because even the dialectic must answer to the solitude of responsibility. It is no scandal to observe that the dialectic is indeed the violent narrative of the humanization of truth. The question for us is to what extent is humanism a horizon of both modern subjectivity and the contemporary philosophical-literary thinking of its end, such that any thought of a ‘new way of being’ is already determined by the humanistic ergon.

For Blanchot, Antelme’s text is vital. We begin, writes Blanchot, “to understand that man is indestructible and that he can nonetheless be destroyed.” Blanchot continues: “man should remain indestructible – this fact is what is truly overwhelming: for we no longer have the least chance of seeing ourselves relieved of ourselves or of our responsibility” (IC 130). Without the least chance of our responsibility in any way broken or come to an end, is it that a new ‘we’ would inherit everything said under the old name of ‘humanism,’ and yet, for reasons of critical vigilance, find ourselves unable to speak its language? The turn to ‘the ethical’ so pronounced in contemporary thought would seek to enact a transformation that is neither a break, nor a repudiation, nor less a revolution, but precisely a responsibility to find a new mode of responsibility, one that thinks itself from out of its own possibility. If ‘man’ is not an origin, but the effect of a ‘relation,’ for Blanchot, it falls to humanism alone to speak the event of this relation. To this Blanchot attests in the 1962 text “Being Jewish”:

what we owe Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God, but the revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation: the infinitely distant, the absolutely foreign. (IC 127)

The singularity of ‘being Jewish’ is universalized. This Judaism no longer affirms a specific origin or experience: “even when God is nominally present, it is still a question of man; of what there is between man and man when nothing brings them together or separates them but themselves” (IC 127). Judaism does not abandon its identity or history, but would carry its particularity into a universal experience. It would speak of a right to universalize. For Blanchot, Judaism is a humanism precisely insofar as it is a
human experience of a relation opened up to ‘the other.’ And it is necessary to be more precise: it is not a relation of ‘one’ to ‘the other,’ but the opening of the relation itself, where the term of relation, ‘to’ means, rather, ‘beyond,’ or ‘without.’ There is nothing beyond ourselves that brings ‘us’ together or that separates us from each other. As Levinas would say, ‘we’ are without alibi.

This gestures toward the most dramatic and significant possibility of humanism: that every ‘human’ experience, no matter how singular or particular, is able to testify to the facticity of existence itself, that what can happen to anyone can, indeed, happen to anyone. Or to express this proposition more generally: all existence is finite, contingent, historical, without purpose, that all relations of power and domination, privilege and exploitation, happiness and freedom, belonging and particularity, remain finite. This facticity would be the condition of any claim to the universal. It renders every universal a singular statement: this can happen. (In this manner, we all witness, and all of the time. The last wish, though remains true. We read books on Auschwitz: know what happened, do not forget, but never will you know [WD 82]. Yet the camps keep reappearing: the rape-camp of Omaska, Abu Grahib, to begin a list.)

If we concede that nothing special or unique remains for humanity – if humanity is an accident – what then is significant about the relation to alterity as an experience of responsibility? The commitment to identify ‘responsibility’ as the essential and defining trait of humanity – that there is ‘nothing’ to humanity as such save a responsibility to or for alterity – would appear to secure a ground of necessity. The ‘ought’ of responsibility sustains the insistence upon an absolutely unique status of the human species. Only we can name our own possibility, only we may then be assured of our significance. But this ‘must’ remains a decision. It traces the curvature of a responsibility that can always be disavowed, evaded. With the most advanced and technological means, we can kill en mass, and this means nothing at all (we can recall Hegel’s reading of the French Revolution). We can no longer say because we can be responsible, we must.

Responsibility is not significant because it is, in some way, an end-in-itself, or assures the time and place of a humanistic significance. The very ability to be responsible is consistently put into question by Blanchot. The relation between the event of responsibility and what I find myself responsible for (for example, a political stance) is not a hermeneutic revelation. The prior or ‘phenomenological’ condition of responsibility – that it is addressed, that my address is always in response – does not itself offer the language by which to decide on how we ought to be responsible, or why. Responsibility is not an experience that can be decided upon in advance.
Rather, I only ever find myself in a condition of responsibility, which I may affirm or disavow, take on or remain indifferent towards. The refusal of responsibility is not necessarily evasion or denial: on the contrary, it may sustain a more intense responsibility, or it may appeal to a naivety, an innocence that finds delight in ridiculing the frustrations of ‘bad conscience,’ aporia, even decision itself.

Nevertheless, Blanchot’s thinking remains critically engaged with the phenomenological possibility of the meaning of responsibility, and by extension, the ‘humanity of being human.’ Even so, a reading needs to remain circumspect. Blanchot’s writing is also literary: it affirms the rights of imagination, of fiction, above and beyond the rigour of philosophical thinking, to say yes to another rigour and another exactitude, but which is not for that reason a ‘purely’ literary or aesthetic task. The detour of literature, we may say, is no less a site of responsibility, one that answers for itself as much as it evades itself,\(^5\) insofar as the experience reserved for literature is, perhaps, the facticity of facticity itself: becoming a question for itself, literature becomes literature (in the uncertainty of this designation) in the very form of its detour.

Any thinking of the ethical begins with an immediate problem – ‘what should I do,’ ‘who should I be.’ Such problems substantialize the question of normativity – giving reasons, being accountable, appealing to legitimacy, calculation, etc. None of which, one should add, is in any way dispensable. It falls to the phenomenological account of ‘responsibility’ to attempt to think how ethical thinking is at all meaningful, and prior to the distinction between reason and irrationality. Reflection upon the conditions of responsibility address what is perhaps obscured by normativity: that an event of address and response is taking place. I am not only concerned with a specific issue through which I come to a concept or experience of responsibility, but with the ontological possibility of responsibility (or justice, or ethics). This approach calls upon what is ‘essential,’ or more problematically, ‘originary.’ For Blanchot, this mode of ethical thinking affirms an experience that is both personal and anonymous. Uniquely called, I assume the place of anyone – or rather – no one. Yet can I assume a responsibility in which, to cite Levinas, “I never finish emptying myself of myself?”\(^6\) As Blanchot asks in The Writing of the Disaster:

if responsibility is rooted where there is no foundation, where no root can lodge itself, and if thus it tears clean though all bases and cannot be assumed by any individual being, how then, how otherwise than as response to the impossible, and through a relation which forbids me to posit myself at all (if not as always posited in advance, or presupposed, and this delivers to me to the utterly passive), will
we sustain the enigma of what is announced in the term “responsibility.” (WD 26)

Which is to ask – who is the ‘I’ that can assume responsibility, or who can find themselves in this calling? What is significant is that responsibility must be assumed. It must be taken over in order to take place. Perhaps this can only emerge with the ontological (and modern) problem of form: that the movement of thought must name its own possibility in its very movement.

What I would like to propose is that the place of humanism – even after the death of God and the death of ‘man’ – remains the horizon within which the question of responsibility is meaningful. The ‘I’ of humanism, the ‘I’ that speaks for or as a ‘we,’ must be thought of as both a historical, particular ‘I,’ and as an event that indeed sustains “the enigma of what is announced in the term responsibility.” It is less that my positing myself is forbidden, but that modern humanism calls upon the positing of an I (what Blanchot will later name a Self-Subject) open to its own horizon, and in this way, to its other – the absolute and violent negation of humanity itself. At issue, then, is a humanism that has changed. It is less than clear – it remains obscure – what this humanism is, or could be, or ought to be. It is not a humanism of the sovereign individual – though it remains sovereign. It is not a humanism of the liberal-democratic citizen, though it appeals to the language of rights (most famously, a right – droit – to death). It is not a humanism of the collective identity of mankind, but it affirms mankind as such, indeed, the anonymity and solitude of mankind beyond every form or possibility of community – an anonymity that remains to affirm the essential moment of a profoundly traditional humanism: the pure fact of the being-human of humanity beyond or before any possible determination or form (such as that of a ‘people,’ a ‘nation,’ a ‘group,’ etc). For example: against the detractors of May ’68, Blanchot writes: “it was a splendid moment, when anyone could speak to anyone else, anonymously, impersonally, welcomed with no other justification than that of being another person.”

But this joyous moment, which perhaps captures Blanchot’s thinking of community, is not however the essential possibility of humanism in his work. That possibility lies is in a much darker, and I would argue, more terrifying space. It is a space defined by an ontology or phenomenology of responsibility, but at the same time, and so difficult to separate out, the relation of law and atrocity.

This space presents itself at the end of Blanchot’s “Atheism and Writing: Humanism and the Cry.” Here, in the choice for an ‘ideology,’ Blanchot is decisive:

we will choose our ideology. This is the only choice that might lead
us to a nonideological writing: a writing outside language and outside theology. Let us shamelessly call this choice humanist. A humanism of what kind? Neither a philosophy nor an anthropology: for to tell nobly of the human in man, to think the humanity in man, is quickly to arrive at an untenable discourse and (how to deny this?) more repugnant than all the nihilist vulgarities. What, then, is this “humanism”? (IC 262)

This humanism will testify to itself through what is most distant from language. It will not accord with the ‘logos of a definition’: this humanism is instead a ‘cry’

– cry of need or of protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry – or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls. It may be that, as one likes to declare, “man is passing.” He is. He has even always already passed away, inasmuch as he always been adapted to and appropriated by his own disappearance... So humanism is not be repudiated: on condition that we recognize it there where it adopts its least deceptive mode; never in the zones of authority, power, or the law, not in those of order, of culture or heroic magnificence... but such as it was borne even to the point of the spasm of a cry. (IC 262)

At the end of this text, we are called upon to wait without hope for that which breaks up the ‘humanist’ cry (the ‘joy of anonymity’?). The incisive and troubling question, though, concerns the ‘origin’ and sense of this cry. Is it a cry that issues from what Blanchot names a “naked relation to naked existence,” the image of the human being stripped of social and political meaning, divested and traumatized, earlier than history and prior to politics? Or is it a cry that is in response to historical and political events, events given the name, in the twentieth century, of genocide and the ‘crime against humanity,’ the politics of dehumanization that Hannah Arendt famously describes as an ‘assault on human plurality,’ and that, in a manner similar to Blanchot’s writing on Judaism, universalizes the fate of European Jewry as an irreducibly human event? Here, to cite Arendt: the crime against humanity “is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon the characteristic of the ‘human status’ without which the very words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning.” And further: the “crime against humanity” addresses humanity as a whole. It is a crime that directly and irrevocably “violates the order of mankind … the world shared in common.”

If Blanchot’s humanistic cry is first of all a response, and meaningful as a desire to rehabilitate the concept of the ‘human status’ in the face of
terror, a cry that has a truth (the least deceptive mode), and in this manner, engages the responsibility of a political act, it is a cry still engaged in the *logos* of a definition. It is still a definition that must enter into the common existence of the name. It must enter into time and take on the shape of a meaning. The place of ‘naked existence,’ of vulnerability, itself has a history. It would not be outside of ‘writing,’ it could not itself define the exigencies of a humanism. Yet at this point, there is no suggestion that such a response is reducible to its context. One’s response to an event (like the deportations, genocide) can nevertheless profoundly affect – indeed, transform – our understanding of the meaning of humanity, its present time and place, and its possible rapport to a future. It is in the face of atrocity that humanism is no longer meaningful according to the glory of enlightened self-assertion, but according to the boundary of the *intolerable*. And this means deflecting the problem of humanism once again. Humanism neither takes place as a purely given ‘being-in-common,’ nor as the affirmation of a plurality of irreducible differences open to alterity, but as a space defined by a certain *law* (humanitarian law, for example, ‘human rights,’ international courts). Humanism today is articulated as ‘protecting’ the rights and dignity of the vulnerable and the exploited. Man can be destroyed: this today is perhaps the very meaning of contemporary humanism and ‘human rights.’ But an immediate qualification is required. This is not a ‘contextualization’; on the contrary, the ‘intolerable’ calls for a responsibility that cannot be limited to a relative knowledge, a particular way of being. It is here that perhaps the call for a new ethics and a new humanism is the most pronounced, a call that insists that what may be true of the past and the present cannot be said of a possible future. If contemporary human rights discourse cannot articulate this responsibility, it is because it cannot think into its own facticity. It maintains itself in alliance to juridical-political power and legitimacy. It upholds the citizen-subject as the perfected form of social being. The question for the contemporary *apostolos* of human rights is direct: is there a future for humanism without the form and violence of the law?

At this point, we may return to Blanchot’s reading of Robert Antelme. A number of significant passages call for citation. In the midst of the horror of the Nazi prison camp, Antelme will as yet appeal to the fact of an irreducible humanity: “Contested then as a man, as a member of the human race,” Antelme writes, “the calling into question of our quality as men provokes an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race.” The SS may kill, but they “cannot make a man into something else.” Their power is finite: “it serves,” argues Antelme, “to make us think about the limitations of that race, about its distance from ‘nature’ and its relation to ‘nature’; that is, about a certain solitude that characterizes our race; and finally – above all
Antelme’s affirmation of an “almost biological” belonging to the human race attempts to limit and contain the force of destruction. Man can be destroyed utterly, but the one who destroys a human being is him or herself another human being. Blanchot supports this argument: “At this moment when he becomes the unknown and the foreign, when, that is, he becomes a fate for himself, his last recourse is to know that he has been struck not by the elements, but by men, and to give the name man to everything that assails him” (IC 131). Yet for Antelme, the vision of ‘indivisible oneness’ is, resolutely, not an appeal to alterity. If, as Kofman suggests, we are indeed afforded the responsibility to think a new ethics and a new humanism in response to Antelme’s experience, we need to then think how Antelme’s understanding of humanity comes first not from a positive concept of the human, but is a response to horror, and finds within its outrage a political voice. At first, it may appear that Antelme bears witness to irreducibility of a biopolitics, that Antelme’s outrage attests to what Agamben names the ‘zone of indistinction,’ the politicization of vita nuda.

If man has become a fate – which would be another way of stating the form in which ‘humanity’ becomes a problem for itself – this fate is exposed to the limit of its sense. Certainly, the word ‘fate’ is today reserved for rhetorical impact. But the word ‘fate’ traces the profoundly historical dimension in play. If cruelty and atrocity take on the forms of the unknown and the foreign – the inexplicable – what is inexplicable is precisely human cruelty and human atrocity. If what is ‘human’ takes meaning from its limit (the crime against humanity), then humanity as such is defined within a responsibility for its own violence. And this responsibility is not first of all juridical. Or if it should be juridical – and perhaps may only be traced according to the invention of juridical norms (international law, human rights, the crime of genocide, and so on), it points rather to the finitude, the institutional character, of the law. Neither justice nor responsibility are reducible to any figure or form of law. For this very reason, the critical theme of ‘biopolitics’ remains insufficient. It is not that a biopolitics makes possible a modern humanism, but the reverse. Biopolitics is only a meaningful term of critical intervention given the defining threshold of the inhuman (and we should likewise take into account the history of the concept of biopolitics, its relation to the critique of instrumental rationality, and indeed, the Kantian prohibition of using the other as an end, etc).

Blanchot continues. He cautiously cites the term ‘anthropomorphism,’ suspending it. ‘Anthropomorphism’ would be the ultimate echo of a humanist ‘truth.’ But it does not signify any such human triumph. It no longer speaks of the self-assertion or pre-eminence of humanity:
But it is precisely in affliction that man has always already disappeared: the nature of affliction is such that there is no longer anyone to cause it or to suffer it; at the limit, there are never any afflicted – no one who is afflicted ever really appears. The one afflicted no longer has any identity other than the situation with which he merges and that never allows him to be himself. (IC 131-2)

There are many reasons for why this passage is significantly troubling. It identifies a murderous political program with what we might call the phenomenology of responsibility itself. This is perhaps a shocking claim, but should not be read as a fatal accusation against Blanchot. But to cite two more passages. Firstly:

this unknown from whom I separated by an infinite distance, and making of me this infinite separation itself – at this moment need becomes radical: a need without satisfaction, without value, that is, a naked relation to naked existence; but this need also becomes the impersonal exigency that alone bears the future and the meaning of every value, or more precisely, of every human relation. (IC 133)

And a second, longer passage:

When, therefore, my relation with myself makes me the absolutely other (L’Autre) whose presence puts the power of the Powerful radically into question, this movement still signifies only the failure of power – not ‘my’ victory, still less ‘my’ salvation. For such a movement to be truly affirmed, there must be restored – beyond this self that I have ceased to be, and within the anonymous community – the instance of a Self-Subject: no longer as a dominating and oppressing power drawn up against the ‘other’ that is autrui, but as what can receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true speech. Moreover, on the basis of this attention to affliction without which all relation falls back into the night, another possibility must intervene: the possibility that a Self were in my place, but become responsible for it by recognizing in it an injustice committed against everyone – that is, it must find in this injustice the point of departure for a common demand. (IC 134)

Antelme’s claim of a ‘biological oneness’ is not necessarily biologistic, or anthropomorphic. What is at issue for Antelme is belonging – the space of what relates one person to another, friend and enemy, prisoner and guard. The assertion of a biological belonging already presupposes an ontological ‘being-in-common,’ a condition of relation that allows the category of the biological to assume meaning. Man is the indestructible that can be de-
stroyed – and Blanchot insists that ‘he remains wary of this formulation’ – this does not appeal to a triumph of a human spirit. It means, rather, that even the act of murder presupposes a ‘humanity’ defined by its relation to what is ‘other.’ The dehumanization of the camps is both the radical negation of the values of humanism, but at the same time signifies the essential possibility of humanity: humanity only is humanity as a question for itself, as a relation to its limit, or inhumanity.

It is here that the work of Giorgio Agamben is particularly significant. I will only very briefly sketch Agamben’s argument. For Agamben, the biopolitical is not uniquely modern. Rather, Agamben traces its origin to the distinction, in Aristotle’s Politics, between zoē and bios. In a properly biopolitical space, the management of life and bodies (the material substance of human existence) relies upon the conception of life as zoē. Life is life itself, not any particular form of life (bios – and once again, the problem of the ergon emerges). Agamben is typically read as arguing that biopolitics manages what he calls ‘bare life’ (vita nuda). Yet, because this management is intensely political – it falls to the state to manage the life of both citizens and non-citizens – bios and zoē become indistinct. In the case of asylum-seekers, for example, they are thoroughly depoliticized (presented as nothing but a ‘suffering humanity’ incapable of responsibility and decision, unable to win recognition for the universal right to seek and enjoy asylum – and such imagery is common to both conservative politics and humanitarian agencies). But in this manner, asylum-seekers are thoroughly politicized. National identity and electoral advantage may be easily won at the cost of pathologizing the stranger. The border of the nation-state is not only traced as a geopolitical cartography, but delimited by the razor-wire of the detention centre. The camp takes place as a localized state of exception, a legal black hole. By deciding upon the sacrificial ‘exception,’ the biopolitical regime excludes by including. The ‘camp’ becomes the nomos, the biopolitical (or bio-juridical) ontology of the modern.

Agamben’s principle reference, however, is neither Blanchot nor Antelme nor Foucault, but Hannah Arendt. Here, Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism (1954) would allow us to further define the lineage of the concept of a ‘naked existence.’

Writing particularly in regard to the problem of statelessness and the phenomenon of refugees, Arendt explores the meaning of a universal humanity and universal human rights in the face of their manifest negation. The concept of human rights seems to affirm a being who exists nowhere in particular. As soon as the figure of man appears, he subsequently disappears, becoming a member of the ‘people,’ the ‘citizenry’ or the ‘population.’ Man becomes anonymous (we should also note the Blanchotian
resonance). We seem unable, Arendt argues, “to define with any assurance what … general human rights, as distinguished from the rights of citizens, really are.” Human rights become meaningful, rather, as the substantive legal rights of a community able to forcefully assert their legitimacy. In contrast, and as a consequence, the stateless come to represent the ‘abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.’ Arendt concludes her account of statelessness with the claim that

The great danger arising from the existence of people forced to live outside the common world is that they are thrown back, in the midst of civilization, on their natural givenness, on their mere differentiation. They lack that tremendous equalizing of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth and yet, since they are no longer allowed to partake in the human artifice, they begin to belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species. The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general.

The figure of the refugee takes up the empty place of the figure of ‘man as such.’ Powerless before the ‘rights’ of the nation-state, man, Arendt concludes, can lose all so-called Rights of Man “without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity.”

This paradox involved in the loss of human rights would appear to be provided for by the very foundation of modern humanism. The self-assertion of humanity – where humanity must take responsibility for itself – is an event of differentiation and emergence. Yet humanist self-assertion does not add anything to the concept of man. Man would be a given, prior to history and prior to politics. Humanism attempts to subtract, to remove, what stands in the way of the excellence of human potential and the responsibility of self-definition. Accordingly, it is possible to identify the political structure of ‘being thrown back upon a givenness’ as the origin of the figure of ‘affliction’ and vulnerability – there where we become “nothing other than this Other that we are not” (IC 130). The subject-at-risk of the modern state and the inhumanity of the crime against humanity would indeed define the figures a contemporary biopolitics. But this biopolitics can only take shape according to the modern conception of humanism and its particular form of responsibility, a form, once again, that has as its problem – its responsibility – as the form of form itself. Humanistic responsibility demands taking over a givenness and transforming it into a work of self-definition. This amounts to the Kantian form of law; imposing one’s law
upon oneself, the subject affirms its freedom to do so, and becomes a subject in this freedom. The extermination of other 'ways of being in the world' is not the failure or negation of a humanistic responsibility. On the contrary, the projects of political definition articulate themselves as a work, if not a necessity and a sacrifice. Contemporary with the formation of the nation-state, the crimes of genocide only become meaningful as a rapport to law: the problem finally, of law, is that law appeals to being itself the form of form – to being that which decides upon decision and responsibility. The law comes to decide upon, to declare illegal and unacceptable, the very violence that political-juridical institutions would otherwise authorize in the name of sovereignty. If modern international law is today engaged in the dismantling of state sovereignty, it does so in order to preserve its own form as a decision on violence as much as it enacts this decision in the name of a justice for which it will be forever inadequate.

The identification of 'man' as such with the victims of totalitarian violence is a powerful political judgement against that violence, an attempt to bear witness and to condemn the nihilism of modern law and politics. Man has not been destroyed, but survives. Refusal here takes on the force of affirmation, the universal appeal to a 'common demand': we have nothing and no one else to appeal to. Our relation to alterity, then, is not a relation to the infinite difference of ‘the other,’ but to a form without content whose nullity figures as the nothing that the work, to name its own possibility, must call to language and presence.

Is Blanchot’s humanism based on an ontology that would suspend the historical and political forces to which it responds so as to arrive at an essential and originary understanding of humanity as a relation to this alterity? The proximity to the language of biopolitics would suggest that such a way of thinking humanism does not get behind or before its historical moment. The concept of the biopolitical itself is too intimately bound to the figures of law, too bound to the concept of the social body as a nomos of subjectification (or too bound to the concept of a ‘social body’ in the first instance). For this reason, contemporary thought needs to remain critically vigilant toward the themes of ‘naked existence’ and ‘affliction.’ Yet seeking to release a critical potentiality, Blanchot’s thought offers more than its historical moment. It commits itself to the figures of political freedom and liberty, to invention and creativity, and affirms their force as a responsibility without finality, to the point of ruin.

If we think the ‘crime against humanity’ as a political response aimed at destroying, in Arendt’s words, a certain way of being in the world, the crime against humanity certainly assumes meaning on the basis of a division between ‘humanity’ and ‘non-humanity,’ or between ‘naked’ and mean-
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...ingful life. Yet this distinction is already present in the very concept of humanity itself (though perhaps less for the reasons suggested by Arendt and Agamben): the politics of humanistic self-assertion are dependent upon presupposing a pre-political humanity that must arrive at itself by a decision or an affirmation, taking a responsibility for itself. Every humanism is already taking over of itself, entering into the problem of itself according to the circuit of a repetition. As a self-transcendence, what humanism must ‘overcome’ is, finally, nothing other than itself. This would indeed define the space and possibility of any modern legal system, and for this reason, any contemporary critique of a ‘biopolitical modernity.’ If modern law defines its humanism according to the limit of the intolerable, this negativity is itself meaningful on the basis of the ontological problem of nullity and absence, the undetermined and the ‘not-yet.’ It falls to the place of law to give this limit, and thus, its own form – a content. A modern humanism defined by a moral-legal response to the most horrific forms of nihilism remains dominated by this nihilism: modern humanism hollows itself out.

Here, the biopolitical distinction between naked existence and meaningful life finds itself understood according to a more original and essential reflection: the question of the place of responsibility, whether avowed or denied, the responsibility taken for defining the human, the non-human, and indeed, the ‘superhuman,’ the ‘new man’ of totalitarian regimes (and, it may be said, of modern capitalism, those entrepreneurial ‘masters of the universe’). It may be argued, accordingly, that it only becomes possible to think a biopolitics after the totalitarian atrocities of modernity (atrocities that repeat themselves in contemporary democratic states, and not only in the ‘war on terror’).

If it can be said that an event like the ‘crime against humanity’ today informs our understanding of humanism – that is, for us today, humanism is meaningful as a refusal of what would ‘destroy humanity’ rather than as the affirmation of a human potential (perhaps because ‘human potential’ has become indistinct from the enjoyment of destruction), then it is possible to read Blanchot’s ‘humanism’ as an example of this historical and political shift. Yet Blanchot’s thinking is prior to or more original than a biopolitics. Following Levinas, Blanchot’s humanism would suggest a way of suspending the impasse of the biopolitical thesis. In thinking the problem of form, what is at issue is a new potentialization, a potentialization that both comprehends its historical moment, and at same time exceeds it, is able, with significant critical insight, with a language of rights and an appeal to justice, to invent something new. A new humanism without the figure of the human assuming any given form. The potential to assume form – taking over one’s own possibility – would describe a circle or repetition that fatefully does not
coincide with itself, and for the singular reason that form is not originary. There is no question or problem of form that is not preceded and made possible by repetition. Naming the repetition has only ‘always already’ repeated the repetition.\textsuperscript{13} It is only at this point of apparent impossibility that the radical question of ‘something new’ becomes a responsibility and a task of the work (literary work, political work). A responsibility for the new event breaks with the form of history itself.

The exigency to rethink ‘humanism,’ or a ‘new kind of we,’ or a ‘new ethics,’ remains an act of responsibility, one that situates all the forms of belonging and community, where ‘belonging’ and ‘community,’ the ‘we,’ are themselves already the finite forms of the relation of the one to the other. Our ability or power to be responsible is not an originary decision, but one that, if to take place, must be taken over, in the mode of a repetition. The ‘humanist cry’ is not itself, therefore, a ‘necessary’ condition, or the only possible mode, of a relation to alterity. Yet even the joy of anonymity in Blanchot is conditioned by the place of trauma or affliction. Nothing here is originary: there is only the form of becoming a problem for ourselves, which, in circling around itself, fails to decide upon a future. If it can be said that we ourselves are the ‘nothing’ and the no-one else to which a common humanity must address its aspiration for a common demand, perhaps then another contour of responsibility emerges: one that does not begin with what humanity is, or what humanity has been reduced to – though without forgetting this – but with what it \textit{ought to be}, how humanity can be reimagined and reinvented beyond the forms of law and violence, which is to say, beyond or without the form of form. This in turn calls for another thinking of facticity, of the being-potential of human being. Certainly Agamben’s work responds to this exigency: but even here, potentiality must not be thought of as the unfolding of what is already present, \textit{in potentia}, such that nothing new can take place (or that a potentiality that prohibits any figure of identity becomes, in turn, a new law-preserving violence, the over-confidence that ‘alterity’ and difference will offer a new politics of non-violence). How we think ‘potentiality’ – even and especially the concept’s formal and logical structure – is already situated within a certain horizon of meaning. Whatever meaning can be attributed to human being must be thought, first of all, in terms of being a possible way of being. Yet more is needed here. If modern humanism is organized around the figure of the intolerable, and if this figure is nothing other and nothing besides than the \textit{inhuman}, then the inhuman is we ourselves, the potentiality of our own violence. And what this means, finally, is that there can be no meaningful ‘ethics’ or a new humanism that refuses to attend to the disaster of man-made mass-death. There can be no responsible thinking of a ‘form of life’ that does not address the
factual possibility of the inhuman. Yet rethinking humanism means thinking humanism beyond or without the horizon of modernity’s enabling negation, and means thinking ‘responsibility’ beyond or without the violent solitude of a ‘we’ defined by our capacity for violence against each other. It would mean thinking without the inhuman as the defining limit of what is human. We could no longer rely upon the law to define the limits of humanity and its violence, and in turn, we could no longer rely upon the concept and limits of form itself. We would find ourselves thrown back upon an essential responsibility: to be the place where responsibility is at all possible, to be a self that, to paraphrase Blanchot, in recognizing an injustice recognizes an injustice committed against everyone.

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NOTES

2 Kofman, Smothered Words, pp. 89-90, n. 62.
3 See, for example, the fragment on Schleiermacher: “By producing a work, I renounce the idea of my producing and formulating myself; I fulfil myself in something exterior and inscribe myself in the anonymous continuity of humanity” (WD 7).
4 As Blanchot writes elsewhere: “There is a limit at which the practice of any art becomes an affront to the affliction” (WD 83). Of course, it is also possible to reverse this proposition: art that is itself afflicted and that afflicts its addressee (whoever that may be), presents the agon of its own limit. Art and literature affirm their ‘right’ to death without regard to ‘the ethical’ or the ‘the political.’ Our own ‘affliction’ calls upon art to exceed all the forms of expression, to say something as yet unsaid, whatever the cost.
5 It would remain questionable to assert that literature expresses a more significant responsibility, or greater insight into the lawless demand of inspiration. With attention to the limits of genre, Blanchot’s thinking is not opposed to the phenomenological or ontological question, but is another space or site where this question may find itself. Yet Blanchot is not simply part of a philosophical tradition, a familiar history. The ontological question posed to literature – the meaning or the being of the literary text – cannot be thought without a literary writing within which this question is located.
7 Maurice Blanchot, “Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him”, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and


13 “A nonreligious repetition, neither mournful nor nostalgic, a return not desired. Wouldn’t the disaster be, then, the repetition – the affirmation – of the singularity of the extreme?” (*WD* 5).
I think of something very simple: the experience of weariness that constantly makes us feel a limited life; you take a few steps on the street, eight or nine, then you fall. The limit set by weariness limits life. The meaning of life is in turn limited by this limit: a limited meaning of limited life. But a reversal occurs that can be discovered in various ways … the meaning of the limit, by affirming it, contradicts the limitation of meaning, or at least displaces it.

Maurice Blanchot (IC 379)

There is a brief passage that stands as preface to Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, in which the author claims: “a book, even a fragmentary one, has a centre which attracts it. This centre is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed centre which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain, more imperious” (SL v). I will argue that this elusive, ever displaced centre can be considered a space not only in a conceptual sense, but in a properly architectural sense. This paper will contend that Blanchot’s conceptual work on the space of literature lingers in an uncomfortable proximity to that space we conventionally name “architecture.” What I will examine below is what Blanchot himself has identified as a “spa-
tial movement that is in relation with the becoming of writing” (IC 260), such
that we forge a passage to and fro between at least two different registers
of space.

It is generally accepted that Blanchot’s conceptual assemblage con-
cerning the space of literature is not straightforwardly engaged with exten-
sive, quantifiable, or conventional space. Instead, the space of literature is
an exemplary non-place, or what Michel Foucault has described as belong-
ing to “placeless places.” Nothing really happens in the hallways, rooms,
and stairwells that are detailed in Blanchot’s récits, but I will suggest that
these settings are crucial to the writer’s sparse narratives and that they
bear an intimate relationship with his philosophical work. I will suggest a
two-fold sense of the concept of space in Blanchot’s œuvre, by way of a
reading of Death Sentence. This récit not only details the breaching of one
threshold after another, as Blanchot’s characters venture through series of
dimly lit rooms, but the astonishing appearance of a rotunda in the midst of
one character, Nathalie’s apartment. Like a mirage, this focal space of fas-
cination, milieu of the impersonal, appears only to sink again into obscurity,
exposing us for the smallest moment to the chiaroscuro of the limitless
Outside.

Blanchot’s space of literature is, on his own account, no space at all. It
is more akin to the “intimacy shared by someone who writes [the work] and
someone who reads [the work]” (SL 37), an intimacy that requires no real
proximity. Or else it is the demand of a thought that comes from elsewhere,
that impresses itself upon the writer, and places the writer at risk; “the risk
to which the literary experience exposes us” (SL 44). The space of litera-
ture is an exemplary non-place or nowhere, out of time, out of place. Ann
Smock, one of Blanchot’s translators, explains that Blanchot’s concept of
space describes a dimensionless region toward which the reader and writer
are drawn, that is, literature’s “domain.” But to enter this domain we must
traverse a threshold. The movement that propels us forward demands at
least a single step [pas]. Both Blanchot and Jacques Derrida comment on
the double sense of the French word, “pas,” which can be used to both
designate a step and to signify negation. The step across the threshold that
is no step at all, is captured, as it were, in suspended animation, for just a
brief instant before it becomes entirely dissipated.

We can locate the architecture of Blanchot’s récits within this small in-
terval, at the threshold. What’s more, we find that this threshold not only
pertains to the prosaic surface that demarcates a doorway, but that it is
also presented through the threshold that is a pane of glass, a marginal
motif that has a recurring place in Death Sentence, and which I will treat in
passing below. Even the names cited in Blanchot’s narrative are held, but
for their initials, in parenthetical brackets, which behave as a textual threshold that keeps the act of naming at bay. The question of the threshold, which will be considered crucial here, also pertains to the disciplinary divide between philosophy and literature. We are well aware that the distinction between fictional and philosophical writing becomes increasingly obscure in Blanchot’s work. In the context of Blanchot’s oeuvre, we discover series of thresholds, some material, even architectural in their expression, others that are more like incorporeal events. Between thoughts and things, sense and sensation, between disciplines, between the darkened rooms discovered in so many of Blanchot’s récits, we apprehend something that is close to unbearable. We apprehend the dissolution of good and common sense, and bear witness to a fall into the realm of the impersonal, wherein the writer travels the passage from the first to the third person. This is what Blanchot has also named the Outside, or “the space opened up by the movement of writing” (SL 176). The force of the movement of writing potentially inspires an unending, interminable process. The clarity of the singular “I” is made obscure and Blanchot asks: “what would this experience of the obscure be, whereby the obscure would give itself in its obscurity?” (IC 44). The intimacy of the Outside, Blanchot suggests, clouds us in an obscurity that engenders vertigo, and yet it is this milieu that he asks us to go in search of.

Blanchot’s Death Sentence is predominantly set in Parisian apartments or hotels, where we tend to discover ourselves in the interior, hidden from the innumerable activities and everyday banalities of the streets below. Paradoxically, Blanchot’s interiors leave their inhabitants exposed. While being maintained by the material protection of an interior, they are exposed to the Outside, which cannot be considered a straightforward condition of exteriority. Instead, the Outside describes a relation that works between enclosure and exposure through the convoluted, even contortionist process of “enclosing oneself outside oneself,” while remaining in the comfort of one’s own home (SL 52).

Michel Foucault comments on the role of “houses, hallways, doors and rooms” in Blanchot’s narratives, suggesting that they are “placeless places” composed of “beckoning thresholds, closed, forbidden spaces that are nevertheless exposed to the winds, hallways fanned by doors that open rooms for unbearable encounters.” Though Blanchot’s récits are by no means detective novels, they nonetheless display what Walter Benjamin calls “the horror of apartments” that is peculiar to that genre, where “the furniture is at the same time the site of deadly traps, and the suite of rooms prescribes the fleeing victim’s path.” And despite this, nothing can be said to really happen inside the series of rooms Blanchot presents, or else,
nothing is resolved with respect to the events we witness.

The narration of *Death Sentence* can be divided into two parts, much like two adjoining rooms. Within the second room there resides the promise of an explanation of the events that have occurred in the first. As it turns out, such an explanation is indefinitely deferred. The death sentence, *(l’arrêt de mort)*, is a stay of execution, and the event of death will not be witnessed. It will remain outside the survey of the narration, or beyond the enclosure the described rooms offer. The event of death or the passage to the space of death, which seems to hold the narration in unresolved suspense, refuses to be directly broached. There is also a small back room that the narrative steps into at its closure, an antechamber of sorts that stands at a certain distance from the body of the text. The contents of this small room of conclusion are seemingly addressed to those who arrive late, after the event of writing, in order to survey the narrative. It reads as a warning of sorts. It says “do not trespass,” for if the body of the text is breached then the late arrival, that is, the reader, will be made a victim of the text, and the writer will become the hunter who has captured his prey.\(^5\)

In much the same way that the writer, Blanchot, or else his narrator (and this distinction too is uncertain) concludes by threatening the reader with the possibility of becoming entrapped, many of the rooms depicted within *Death Sentence* prove to be spaces of capture.

Throughout *Death Sentence* the narrator inhabits a number of non-descript hotel rooms. Though his “official address in Paris” *(DS 17)* is on the rue d’O., he does not maintain a residence in any single place and occasionally rents two or more apartments only to seek short term accommodation in yet another. The narrator explains: “the next day I took a room in another hotel, though I kept this one. I lived that way as long as I had the means to, sometimes in three or four different places” *(DS 54)*. Furthermore, he describes the “need to make the place where one lives a place where nothing happens ... to make it a vacant place” *(DS 38)*. In multiplying his places of address, the narrator multiplies the number of thresholds that he and his predominantly female companions must negotiate. There is a recurring event that marks a number of these rooms at their thresholds. They are breached by strangers who are unexpected and uninvited. Not only are the narrator’s rooms violated in this way, but the narrator also surprises himself by trespassing into unfamiliar apartments, thereby placing himself in the role of uninvited stranger. Within the textual walls that contain the first part of *Death Sentence*, the event of a breached threshold inaugurates the intimate friendship that develops between the narrator and the dying woman, who is marked only with the initial, J.

Only informally acquainted, the narrator and J. are staying at the same
hotel. The narrator writes: “she was in a little room on the second floor and I was in a fairly large room on the third” (DS 7). One night J. senses the presence of the narrator venturing in and out of her room. She hears his departing footsteps and becomes convinced that he is dying. It is as though with his receding steps he passes away. Enthralled by this conviction, she enters his room through a door, which, according to the narrator, had been locked. Then, with what the narrator describes as a “noble impulse,” she stretches herself out on the bed beside him (DS 7). Much like the relationship Blanchot imagines between the reader and the writer, it is their strangeness to each other, their unfamiliarity, that allows this immediate intimacy. With this encounter, which details the first breached boundary within the narrative of *Death Sentence*, the crossing, the passage across the threshold, is given as indissociable from a premonition of death. J.’s impulse is noble because it seems that she remains unperturbed in the face of death, and that she is prepared to take death on, and yet, at the very same moment, she herself becomes death, or the harbinger of death. She is a stranger, the archetypal figure of the other exemplified in the personification of death, and like death she has penetrated the space of the living.

Illegitimate entries, locked doors that open once they are pushed, intimate and violent entanglements between characters who are virtual strangers to one another, all these elements concatenate across Blanchot’s *récit*. Although the event of penetration occurs only once in the first part of the narrative, in the second part the thresholds of rooms are repeatedly breached. Thus, in the first section of the *récit*, the scene is set for all the rooms that follow. They are places of waiting, in which the event of arrival can never be anticipated. As Derrida points out, this waiting, awaiting oneself, the other, awaiting each other, all such waiting, suffused with expectation, owns up to “a notable relation to death.”

Here is an expanded list of illegitimate entries, which multiply in quite rapid succession as the narration of the second part of the *récit* proceeds. The narrator enters his neighbour’s room on the rue d’O. by accident. Although they had planned no rendezvous, she is sitting there in her dressing gown as though waiting for him. There is the suggestion of some intimacy shared between the neighbours, for C(olette) has had the opportunity of reading to the narrator aloud. But the narrator becomes quickly irritated by his neighbour, and it is evident that their intimacy is not sustained. On another occasion the narrator has only just arrived home when an unfamiliar woman enters his apartment. Having crossed the threshold she stops still struck by a combination of fear and fascination, and then, when she attempts to flee, the narrator violently captures her. This capture is conducted
in a fit of rage. The narrator depicts himself as becoming wild, even uncontrollable, but this overwrought encounter facilitates the inception of his intimate relations with N(athalie) (within whose apartment we will eventually discover the rotunda). On yet another occasion the narrator visits a former acquaintance who is about to be re-married, her name is S(imone) D. Forgetting the number of her apartment, he accidentally pushes against a door and by coincidence finds himself in the sought after room. He muses: “I too had opened a door, and was inexplicably entering a place where none expected me” (DS 44).

It is in relation to S(imone) that the narrator draws attention to yet another threshold, that of the pane of glass of a shop window. The narrator describes his pleasure in apprehending S(imone) behind a glazed threshold: “after I had been fortunate enough to see her once through a pane of glass, the only thing I wanted during the whole time I knew her, was to feel that ‘great pleasure’ again through her, and also to break the glass” (DS 44). Directly on seeing her behind the glass, Simone emerges and informs the narrator that her husband has died and that she never wants to hear his name again, thus, in the narrative, an erotic pleasure becomes associated with a death. The narrator explains that, whether reading a book, or sharing someone’s company, “my very pleasure was behind a pane of glass and unavailable to me because of that, but also far away and in an eternal past” (DS 48). The threshold of the glass maintains a milieu of fascination, the obverse of which is the ordinary sway of simple actions, everyday people, and, as such, conventional space. One evening the narrator observes N(athalie) at the theatre with another man. She wanders “very near and infinitely separated from me, as if it were behind a window” (DS 60). She appears very beautiful, but they keep their distance. She regards the narrator with a gaze that arrives from behind her eyes, a gaze he describes as cold, friendly, and dead.

The act of venturing into the space of a stranger, including the space designated by their gaze, potentially facilitates not only a meeting with oneself become strange or a doubling of oneself, but also the possibility of sharing an immediate intimacy with a radically unfamiliar other. There is a sense in which the characters gathered in Blanchot’s Death Sentence are awaiting each other at a distance, and that the space of waiting is negotiated in between them, at the threshold, so to speak. The passage to death is figured as an impasse, an aporia, suffered, as Derrida suggests, as a paralysing fascination. According to the narrator of Death Sentence, it is a thought that obliterates the recollection of yesterday and plans for tomorrow, but a thought of which the narrator can write: “I look at it. It lives with me. It is in my house. Sometimes it begins to eat; sometimes, though
rarely, it sleeps next to me” (DS 32). Given the intimate proximity described above, we can begin to understand the logic of the event that presents itself at the numerous thresholds featured in Blanchot’s *Death Sentence*. Death is personified in the figure who breaches the threshold, and though the territory of death is maintained in its inaccessibility as though preserved behind a pane of glass, the space of dying continues to interrupt the text as its characters forge the passage into the realm of the impersonal.

In the timeless state of fascination, one character after another finds, or rather loses themselves and their capacity to utter the “I.” And with each little death identity is momentarily neutralized. Blanchot writes: “Of whoever is fascinated it can be said he doesn’t perceive any real object, any real figure, for what he sees does not belong to the world of reality, but to the indeterminate milieu of fascination” (SL 32). Blanchot’s characters are frequently assailed by sensory, seemingly erotic disturbances, stricken with the syncopation of sudden attacks, and fits of shivering. For example, after making a gesture toward opening a closet in one of the narrator’s rooms, J. suffers a “strange attack” that causes her to tremble incessantly (SL 132). The series of rooms depicted by Blanchot also accommodate locked drawers and closets that shelter nameless, sometimes horrifying things that cannot be grasped or put to use. What’s more, the human body itself can be counted among these contained spaces. The space of fascination, the milieu of the outside is articulated by such spaces, and the spatial *punctum* of *Death Sentence* is to be discovered in N(athalie)’s apartment.

At a certain point in the very midst of N(athalie)’s attic apartment Blanchot’s narrator imagines a large rotunda, that is, a structure with a round plan, that culminates above one’s head in a dome. This is also a structure common to picturesque landscape gardens of the eighteenth century, where it would be discovered as a folly set in the midst of a leisurely and labyrinthine stroll, where it was to provoke surprise and delight. N(athalie)’s apartment is one of the more convoluted spaces described in Blanchot’s *récit*, “an immense place, with an infinite number of rooms; except that they were not rooms but closets, nooks, bits of hallway” (DS 55). The narrator only ever visits one small room of the attic, which is simultaneously perceived as small and expansive. The rotunda is a preserve imagined in the midst of this space, yet the moment the narrator describes its form it becomes displaced. He tells us: “in my mind there is the image of a large rotunda, quite beautiful and well kept up, but perhaps in another building” (DS 55). This interior, made sacred through its sacrificial displacement, might be considered the preserve of death. It is an interior void that is both implacable and ungraspable, an inside that is at the same time an outside. Another variety of co-habitation is at issue here. The intimacy of the elusive
rotunda lends death an infinite preserve, at the same time as preserving the subject in proximity to death.

N(athalie)’s attic is an interior space transformed by way of fascination into the Outside and then, enfolded in this Outside, there shimmers like “a flash,” for just a moment, a rotunda, that is, a perfectly composed interior. By the obscure clarity of this flash, day-to-day life is ruptured (IC 241). With Nathalie’s rotunda, we bear witness to a limit that is affirmed amidst the otherwise grim rooms Blanchot’s narrator traverses. In attending to this rotund space we could call forth a phenomenology of roundness after Gaston Bachelard, who, by way of a series of literary citations maintains that “being is round.” The truth of roundness, of the circle, is decidedly different for Blanchot who argues that phenomenology “maintains the primacy of the subject” (IC 251). Where Bachelard encourages us to collect ourselves in the immediacy of full roundness, in the intimacy of an inside, Blanchot instead imagines the circle of the rotunda without a subject, as belonging to the realm of the impersonal, or as the “reverberation of a space opening onto the outside” (IC 258). Rather than a phenomenological experience of being in its immediacy, for Blanchot “the centre of the circle [lies] outside the circle, behind it and infinitely far back; as though the outside were precisely this centre that could only be the absence of any centre” (IC 280). This is not a lofty space from which everything can be surveyed from the point of view of a subject. Instead, entering the realm of the impersonal we traverse the passage of a life, that is to say an indefinite life, any life whatever. And with Blanchot this passage always carries the whiff of death about it.

With respect to the thought from the Outside, there is a tangled thread of fascination that travels from Blanchot through Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and not necessarily in that order. With his foldings of thought Deleuze reconfigures a relationship between the Outside and the inside of thought by considering the inside as a fold or operation of the Outside. He writes: “the outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside.” The fabric of the Outside is thus folded in such a way that Deleuze can ask whether there is not, after all “an inside that lies deeper than any external world?” Likewise, Blanchot affirms that a bad interiority is simply not interior enough, and asks: “mightn’t there be a point where space is at once intimacy and exteriority, a space which outside, would in itself be spiritual intimacy? ... there we would be within ourselves outside in the intimacy and in the intimate vastness of that outside?” (SL 136). By acceding to such a space, which Foucault describes as a “dazzling interiority,” we give ourselves over to
the infinite murmurings of a dissipated discourse, folded out of what Foucault simultaneously imagines as “the sparkle of the outside.”

What I have ventured to suggest above is that Blanchot relies on the narration of voluminous, even quantifiable space in order to depict the scintillating, intervallic space of the Outside, the space of fascination, and the space of literature. Blanchot explicates in extended space the infolded implications of the Outside, and between these two registers the force of complication results in relations of strangeness and affective terrains. The rooms depicted in _Death Sentence_ both are and are not fixed locatable places. Blanchot’s logic of place, while maintaining, for the most part, fixed spatial coordinates, and even domestic details, reveals the transformative topology of a meandering conceptual passage that stretches and bends, and that frequently wreaks corporeal havoc upon its inhabitants. Intensity, Deleuze explains, envelops distances and is explicated in extensity, whereas extensity “develops, exteriorizes and homogenizes these very distances.” The narrator of _Death Sentence_ traverses a multiplicity of homogenous interiors that are mercilessly exposed to the strangeness and heterogeneity of the Outside. That is to say, there persists the everyday imbrication of a multiplicity of deaths, which are excruciating at the same time as being tainted faintly with the erotic. These, finally, are maintained at the threshold of one overarching Death. A multiplicity of little deaths are implicated in Death proper, as Death itself is explicated in each little death. Blanchot’s writings beget an infinite passage backwards and forwards between these registers, he conducts an interminable conversation that continues to complicate the relations borne by the subject, to her or himself, and to others. Finally, the joyful affirmation of life that Deleuze celebrates is unlikely to be found in the folds of Blanchot’s darkened rooms. And so we might ask, what of an immanent life here, if life is to be forever maintained behind the perfect preserve of a pane of glass, or on one or the other side of a threshold? Where, finally, is what Deleuze describes as a “life within the folds,” folds that “one fills with oneself” in a transformation that converts the space of dying into a force of life?

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NOTES

5 The figure of the hunter or a trap is deployed in both Death Sentence and Awaiting Oblivion. In these texts a stranger, generally a woman, is captured in the confines of a room. See DS 157-8 and AwO 62.
7 Derrida’s three relations of waiting include: 1) Awaiting oneself in oneself. 2) In so directing one’s waiting, even if it is directed ostensibly toward oneself, there persists the expectation in waiting of the arrival of some other, or some event, specifically, death. 3) Waiting for each other, or awaiting each other. This final relation of waiting awaits not only the other, but that which is absolutely other, that is, death. See Derrida, Aporias, pp. 65-6.
8 Derrida, Aporias, p. 12.
11 Deleuze, Foucault, p. 96. Italics in original.
12 Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot”, p. 16.
13 Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot”, p. 18.
15 Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, p. 123.
16 Deleuze, Foucault, p. 123.
Blanchot announces a primal apocalypse, a hecatomb, bequeathed by language. What is to be done when every sentence is a pronouncement, or rather proclamation of *L'arrêt de mort*, on that “prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak, in order to speak it?” (*IC* 36). “What was it that in the beginning was lost … what had to be put to death for language to come to life”?¹ This on/ *e récit*, titled *Death Sentence*, implicitly asks, “how can I recover it … how can I turn around and look at what exists before if all my power consists of making it into what exists after” (*GO* 46). All sentences merely repeat this primal theft and bestow synthetic life on the world, such that there is always this unbridgeable distance that is always everywhere appropriated by language.² What causes Blanchot's intense anxiety, in addition, is that “the torment of language is that it cannot even name it” (that “prior presence”).³

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Death Sentence this is executed through the denial or ambiguity of everything that is represented. Effectively, meaning devours and/ or degrades itself, such that, the reader is left with an impression that everything turns to nothing, yet, “something” is said imperceptibly. It is true to say, “here what reveals itself does not give itself up to sight just as it does not take refuge in simple invisibility” (IC 29). Blanchot speaks of finding the obscure and bringing it into the open as open. He asks: “What would this experience of the obscure be, whereby the obscure would give itself in its ob-
scurity?” (IC 44). What the narrator proceeds on, it seems increasingly, is hope, the only relation possible when relation is lost. In what appears hopeless as a result of sentences of death, hope is, paradoxically, “most profound when it withdraws from and deprives itself of all manifest hope,” implying hope necessitates the surrender of hope itself (IC 41). To put it differently, absolute abdication of hope leads to “an affirmation of the improbable” (IC 43). As is evident in the next excerpt where in love, thought is dismissed and the metaphysical is brought down to its knees:

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

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

Displacement becomes the disorder of the day: the dialectic, as the narrative voice throws itself at the mercy of this “non-thought within thought” in a move which “delivers language over to it” (IC 121 & 311). The language of objectivity is turned into object dying under its own gaze, disturbing the flow of univocity as: “‘man speaks in the work, but the work gives voice in man to that which does not speak, to the unnameable, the inhuman, to what is without truth, without justice and without legitimacy.’”24 Here, love is the invisible structure of thought, dismissing the verdict of death by means of death sentence through an x-change of hands, signs and sentences. What is repeated, then, is this cross x, over and over again in the difference-s that inscribe, interpret and translate this work of fiction/philosophy. Not only does this process contribute to the désœuvrement of Death Sentence by recourse to sentences of death, but, at the same instant, how the obscure (love) breaks out from, and through Death Sentence; this is the fundamental focus of this piece.
Who, is an “an infinite alterity,” that approaches through s/he who is foreign to me. Even though s/he may be a creation, a thought, who goes by the initial J. and comes as N., s/he escapes our grasp, and exceeds the play of signification. It is fair to say that unless the sentence of death is pronounced on J. and N. it cannot be renounced, complicating the precedence of beginning over end, and rendering one within the other as on/e. More importantly, end or death is the mainspring of ambiguity since alternative meanings are generated and guaranteed as a result of it. In other words, death sentence makes possible “the opening for the occurrence of another possibility.” Meaning breaks up by means of difference both within the récit and between those who read, interpret, and rewrite it, which suggests that language is traumatized by an obscurity or opening “operative” within “itself.” Although abject(ed), this opening carries language in a kind of eternal catastrophe that arrests death. At times, Blanchot refers to it as il y a: “the existence that remains beneath existence like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning and without end” instigating interruption. Language then is this aporia where ‘something’ does not exist and where ‘something’ is always already something else, thus, turning away from something in turning to something else, from J. to N. for example. This question, or rather demand – “how can I recover it?” “how do I hope to find (it) again?” – itself comes from with-in language and is a question that must remain open.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In revealing "his" hand as hers/ours as the hand of fictive representation, what the reader receives is the process behind the creation of a work of fiction. As such, the work does not pretend to harbour a meaning. Instead, literature founds nothing other than itself as Leslie Hill points out. 30 Blanchot's narrative "does not consist in illuminating things from the outside – the print of the creator's thumb as he shapes figures to his liking. It represents the intervention of the narrator challenging the very possibility of narration" (IC 382). The effect is one of distance from the work because the pleasure afforded by comprehension, by making sense of it, is sacrificed.
fact, it induces a state of anxiety, because the fodder of representation –
plot, character, theme etc. – are given only to be snatched away, thereby,
facilitating a dis-trust of sense which “enters into the work’s very sphere in
the form of an irreducible strangeness” (IC 383). For instance, the writer is
distanced from the narrator by “his” polymorphic character. The narrator is
distanced from himself, he admits he “preferred to keep life at a distance”
(DS 164). There is distance between “him” and “the events ‘he’ experi-
ences or the beings ‘he’ encounters” apparently (IC 383). As such, subject-
object disappears in the decentred, disembodied voices of the narrative
and we are as a result:

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

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

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

renounces the reassuring distinction between the thing gazed upon
and its aesthetic elaboration, which would succeed it … [U]nworking makes the becoming-image of this thing into the very condition of a
writing process which, by means of the gaze, would turn away from
representation and the signification it implies.\textsuperscript{33}

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

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

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

\textit{Death Sentence} struggles against verdicts of death by declaring that its characters, “events,” and accounts, have nothing in common with realism, as is evident in the next passage:
A thought is not exactly a person, even if it lives and acts like one. A thought demands a loyalty which makes any slyness difficult. Sometimes it is itself false, but behind this lie, I still recognize something real, which I cannot betray. (DS 152)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This restless wandering we discover carves open a space in which the reader is not simply a voyeur, nor perverts the course of the “narrative,” but actively marks, “touches” and “clasps” the “body” of the text in a personal and intimate manner. So while words are a completely “determined and ob-
jective reality," flesh is not only determined, lives and dies within words, but by virtue of this impossibility is positioned within an opening that never dies. It is unclear whether Blanchot viewed it in these terms. What he does assert is this:

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

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

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

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

Another point of contrast with conventional narrative is that this récit never really begins because the beginning is repeatedly deferred such that there is a reenactment of the narrating process itself that “tells the event it is, the event of telling.” For example, the récit begins by asserting: “I have already tried to put them [the events] into writing many times,” as well as, “I must not forget that I once managed to put these things into writing” (DS 131). In addition, when the narrator states, “this story concerns no one but myself. It could actually be told in ten words” (DS 131) and the first sen-
tence of the second story begins, “I will go on with this story … But not every-
thing has yet happened” (DS 152), the account, as Miller contends, turns
into an event and visa versa to disturb “their relation, and giving either an
event no story ever tells … or else a story that recounts nothing.”47 Past,
present, and future, are depicted as essentially slipstream and therefore
confused as is evident in this sentence: “after these events, several of
which I have recounted – but I am still recounting them now” (DS 153). One
of the keys to narrative structure – chronological time – has therefore been
snatched from us, disabling the situtability of the story in time or place.

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

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

The spacio-temporal nature of the narrative voice is therefore indetermi-
nate. It is this “indifferent difference” that breaks sedentary meaning and
“alters the personal voice” (IC 386). Like N. who is extremely forgetful, “it is
narrative … that is a forgetting” (IC 385) for in the forgetting “is the pres-
ence of an infinite absence.”49

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

“He” writes the foreign(er) in the second story of the récit, and apart
from the inevitable lapses, his sole purpose is to render difference inappro-
priable by appropriation as is suggested by this passage: “I did not move, I
was still on my knees, all this was taking place at an infinite distance, my
own hand on this cold body, seemed so far away from me, I saw myself
widely separated from it” (DS 178). In this instance, the mind estranges itself from intention, signaling a radical difference in, and deferment of, image. In the Infinite Conversation Blanchot expresses how this is possible: “to speak at the level of weakness and of destitution – at the level of affliction – is perhaps to challenge force, but also to attract force by refusing it” (IC 62). This is why all betrayals of this distancing of thought, on “his” part, increasingly lead to acute bitterness where “he” admits spending most of his life, as is evidenced in the following passage:

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

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

The contestation of comprehension averts unity of sense, and in deferring to yet other sense, averts the “reduction that dialectical movement … makes coincide with an overcoming” (IC 42). Reason and comprehension, in contrast, demand surrender to a sense, ensuring difference is siphoned into the univocal and intelligible. But, as already indicated, Blanchot’s project is to explore other possibilities in an effort to unleash that which does not “accomplish itself” (IC 43). Death Sentence therefore is an effort to
deny access to itself in order to facilitate “the experience of strangeness … open a relation to the other and deliver humankind to a nomadic truth.”

The distance of the narrator’s and reader’s gaze, like N.’s, is considerably weakened “because the distant in its non-present presence is not available either close up or from a far. It cannot be the object of a gaze” (IC 44). Reading has thus become “a serious task” shaken from its mooring in the dialectical order of sense.

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

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

I think that after she cried out I grew wild. I saw her lunge towards the free air, and the instinct of the hunter seized me. I caught up with
her near the stairway, grabbed her around the waist, and brought her back, dragging her along the floor as far as the bed, where she collapsed. My fit of rage was one of the few I have had since my very angry childhood, and it was uncontrollable. I do not know where this violence came from … I do not think this furious energy was directed at her in particular. (DS 158)

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

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

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

The impossibility of doing away with sense is implied, even though words are deployed, ultimately, to turn our gaze away from the sacrificial realm of communication. Moreover, ascent or descent from sense as we are accustomed to it, as well as delaying and postponing the event contemplated, is also implied by the narrator. Progressively, the reason for this lag becomes increasingly evident: common sense is dissolved and we are
deprived of supports and keys to the work,\textsuperscript{52} such that, the strangeness of the work – sense deprivation – results in intense frustration as J. and N. become estranged from meaning. This means that the common meaning which makes communication communicable, becomes radically fractured, which raises the question of how this feat is accomplished, and whether “the encounter with the other can only take place ‘outside’ discourse,”\textsuperscript{53} as Blanchot, at times, supposed. This is a crucial point. For Blanchot, the law can never be transgressed since every step forward results in a step back into the metaphysical. Yet, in this \textit{récit}, the “outside-r” is written from inside discourse, having the effect of “continually dismantling the organism. Causing asignifying particles … to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity.”\textsuperscript{54}

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

The work is not only second hand (a cast) by virtue of being x-changed from one hand to another thereby creating the nomadic tendency of its meaning. However, and in addition, the difference with, and in, Blanchot’s \textit{Death Sentence}, is “his” struggle to maintain openness in the heart of his text. By writing distance between the sacrificial thought which kills, and thought as open, which Blanchot conceives as irreducible to either one sense nor another, he accedes therefore to a refusal of final meaning and as such infinitely extends the “moment of dying, where death puts impossibility into play” (\textit{IC} 72). This process displaces truth “causing us to set out and wander from home.”\textsuperscript{57}
Even if sense is nomadic, how does it “capture that prior presence” that disappears within every sentence of death? Blanchot believes he must wrestle against thought in order to “find it again.” Like Jacob who wrestles all night with the angel for a blessing, and is wounded in the intensity of struggle, a wound which turns into a blessing, Blanchot too experiences this dark night of the literary soul in which every sentence of death exudes “what had happened long ago … there was someone in the room … of a proximity people are not aware of … That room does not breathe, there is neither shadow nor memory … And yet, the most intense life is there … that life transforms the life which shrinks away from it into a falsehood” (DS 177). In *The Space of Literature*, he describes this night as one in which:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the long wait for the narrator, the idea of J. falls into “nothingness”
(DS 148). Her inescapable and incurable illness is prolonged as long as the
narrator toys with the idea of writing about “the events” of that “illness.” Co-
incidentally, J.’s resurrection “took place at dawn, almost with the sunrise,” at
daybreak, revealing her life is created in the image of Jour, by man (DS
145). This is confirmed by the following passage in which even in J.’s sleep
he is able to access her, but he is unable to access her during the night
which is associated with the neutral: “Her sleep had a strange way of dis-
solving in an instant, so that behind it she seemed to remain awake and to
be grappling with serious matters there, in which I played perhaps a terrifying role" (*DS* 148). However, the previous night, in his absence, “she seemed to approach a truth compared to which mine lost all interest … She saw what she called ‘a perfect rose’” (*DS* 148). These are not the literary flowers he had brought her the previous day which she disliked and “which were already going to seed” when she received them (*DS* 147). Therefore, this is not “the rose is a rose is a rose” of representation: the flower penned by words, but presumably the “perfect” and therefore inconceivable rose. An allusion to the biblical *rose*, which is itself mysterious, is implicit here. Derrida describes it as “not the resurrection but the ‘rose’ of resurrection in *L’arrêt de mort.*”

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

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

The present is a suffering in the abyss of the present, indefinitely hollowed out and in this hollowing indefinitely distended, radically alien to the possibility that one might be present to it through the mastery of presence. What has happened? Suffering has simply lost its hold on time, and has made us lose time. Would we then be freed
in this state from any temporal perspective and redeemed, saved from time as it passes? Not at all: we are delivered over to another time – to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse … Not that pure immobile instant, the spark of the mystics, but an unstable perpetuity in which we are arrested and incapable of permanence, a time neither abiding or granting the simplicity of a dwelling place. (IC 44)

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

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

Behind the thought of the murder of ‘her,’ we glimpse the ‘thought’ of the il y a: “the opening of essence or the affirmation of being prior to (or beyond) negation … which both enables and pre-empts the possibility of negation and language as such … the site of relation (or non-relation) with the other.”

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

How do we then understand the neutral? Blanchot maintains there is nothing to be understood by neutral; it is not indifference nor homogeneity or interchangeability as commonly understood. The neutral is constituted by language but is not a grammatical gender. In the Infinite Conversation, Blanchot gives the following example of the neutral:
The one who does not enter into what he says is neutral; just as speech can be held to be neutral when it pronounces without taking into account either itself or the one who pronounces it, as though in speaking, it did not speak but allowed that which cannot be said to speak in what there is to say ... [it is] the meaning that comes to be glimpsed without ever either presenting itself or disappearing ... the neutral is that which carries difference even to the point of indifference ... an unidentifiable surplus. (IC 303)

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

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

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

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

After S(imone) had disappeared for years, he sees her again “through
a store window … behind a pane of glass” (DS 161). Since she still ap-
ppears as the thought that is vitrified, what would give him most pleasure is
“to break the glass” in order to perhaps access the “it” behind the glass/mask that is S(imon)\. N(atalie) (DS 161). Natalie too, at the theatre, “was very near and infinitely separated from me, as if it were behind a window” (DS 172). The glass appears to seal that “prior presence,” prior to language which is transparent. It is possible that he sees N. as the “embodiment of his thought … just as the child in ‘Une scène primitive’ sees that scene through a window that seems suddenly to shatter.” This flickering realization comes through thought by means of thought itself, and the transparent barrier that he wants to shatter resonates with glas: the death knell.

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

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

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NOTES

1 Rodolphe Gasché, “The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-space of Literature”, in ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing (Lon-
2 “The language of literature is language that has become entirely image … a language that has become the image of language … which appears when a thing is absorbed by its image,” Christopher Fynsk explains in “Crossing the threshold: on ‘Literature and the right to death’”, in The Demand of Writing, p. 81.


4 J. Hillis Miller formulates this idea as a question in Versions of Pygmalion (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 207.

5 Who is Autrui? “The unknown, the stranger, foreign to all that is either visible or non-visible, and who comes to ‘me’ as speech when speaking is no longer seeing” (IC 213).


7 Of love, Blanchot writes: “only the day can feel passion for the night … It is only in the day that the other night is revealed as love that breaks all ties, that wants the end and union with the abyss. But the night is what one never joins; it is repetition that will never leave off, satiety that has nothing, the sparkle of something baseless and without depth” (SL 168).

8 Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 86.


15 The day which represents the dialectical economy, wants only to banish the night, the neutral, however, paradoxically “day makes the night … Night speaks only of day, day’s reserve and its profundity” (SL 168).

16 Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 74.

17 In The Space of Literature, Blanchot describes the ‘night’ in more detail. He writes, “in the night, everything has disappeared. This is the first night. Here absence approaches – silence, repose night … What appears in the night is the night that appears … Here the invisible is what one cannot cease to see; it is the incessant making itself seen.” Adding later, the night is seen insofar as “we dress it up as a kind of being; we enclose it, if possible, in a name, a story and a resemblance” (SL 163).

18 Leslie Hill, “Introduction”, The Demand of Writing, p. 3.
To Blanchot, “the unknown is neuter,” and “supposes another relation,” one which
will respect it’s inability to be “rendered present” (IC 298 & 300). The neuter “is not
a third gender opposed to the other two and constituting for reason a determined
class of existents or beings. The neuter is that which cannot be assigned to any
genre whatsoever: the non-general … as well as the non-particular. It refuses to
belong to the category of subject as much as it does to that of object” (IC 299). In
pursuing N, the narrator of DS turns “into a wanderer in search of nothing” (DS
176).


Blanchot is describing the work of René Char which is applicable to his own.

This is a reworking of difference in repetition as formulated by Gilles Deleuze. Di-
ference inhabits each and every repetition working undercover of signification. Dif-
fences merely repeat, carry and manifest difference as diversity. As such, it has
been reformulated as difference-s to indicate one operates within the other as
on/e.

Hope is endlessly non-depletable. The fulfillment of one hope merely passes to
another infinitely. As such, hope is the meeting point between possibility and im-
possibility which never coalesces.

Roger Laporte, “Maurice Blanchot Today”, The Demand of Writing, p. 28.

Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 86.


Blanchot cited by Christopher Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 76.

Miller, Versions of Pygmalion, p. 193.

Miller, Versions of Pygmalion, p. 186.


141.

Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 78.

Miller formulates this idea as a question in Versions of Pygmalion, p. 207.

Fynsk, “Crossing the Threshold”, p. 83.


Day wants only to banish the night, to appropriate it, instead paradoxically “day
makes the night … Night speaks only of day; it is the presentiment of day, day’s
reserve and its profundity” (SL 167).

Hill, “Introduction”, p. 11.


A key is, among other things, “a thing that gives or precludes the opportunity for, or access to, something.” It is what is required to resolve a problem, crack a code. A key assists in understanding the symbols on a map or mathematical table and is “a literal translation of a book written in a foreign language.” Keys link one thing with another conceptually. In *Death Sentence*, the missing key is significant and significantly stolen from the “story.” Definitions of the term “key” are taken from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9th ed. Della Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).


Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, p. 201.

Susan Hanson, “Foreword: This Double Exigency: Naming the Possible, Responding to the Impossible” (*IC* xxxi).

Derrida, “Living On”, in the margin of p. 129.

Blanchot as such deliberately conceals the key to his work, and tells us that he has; thereby creating a fascination with the obscure. In the process, the very heart of *Death Sentence* is open: since it does not have one sense but facilitates a sharing in/ of the obscure.

Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxvi.


Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxxi.

Hanson, “Foreword”, p. xxxii.

This is not clear at all; she is, however, referred to as more “youthful” and beautiful the nearer she gets to death, revealing the “narrator’s” impatience to do away with her.

For a discussion on the “rose” see Derrida, "Living On", pp. 149-64 border lines.

Critchley, “Il y a”, p. 109


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

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

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

But there is another direction. Here the Other is negativity. As such it...
holds for each one of us, whether man or woman, that which in exceeding us dis-confirms us in our being. This excess thus makes a demand of us, but in pursuit of a good which is without utility, a good which “escapes all employ and all end” (IC 207). This is an impossible demand.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This leads Lacan to propose the following paradox as a description of the approach of a man to a woman: “A man seeks out a woman qua – and this will strike you as odd – that which can only be situated through dis-
course, since, if what I claim is true – namely, that woman is not-whole – there is always something in her that escapes discourse.”

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

With this excursus on Freud and Lacan and sexual difference in mind, let us return to Blanchot, and in particular to his commentary on Marguerite Duras’ The Malady of Death.
In this story it is the male character who approaches the woman in an attempt to know her through the possession of her body. As Blanchot suggests, this is a man who, having ignored the feminine, now seeks to know the other through the female body. He is always in action in front of this body he looks upon in unhappiness, because he cannot see all of it, its impossible totality, all its aspects; though she be a “closed form” only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole, a sum that would integrate the infinite and thus reduce it to an integrable finite. (UC 39)

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

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

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

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

Thus in the Duras’ story the man “cannot see all of [the woman’s body], its impossible totality, all its aspects; though she be a ‘closed form’
only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole.” He demands to know the other through this female body, but in pursuing her in these terms his gaze phallicizes her; she presents as “closed form,” a semblance of the phallus; she is phallus only in as much as some unseen part of her escapes being so formed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

In this mystical being-one as Hadewijch experiences it, God lets himself be known not only as inexhaustible and self-sufficient, but also as other, as the wholly Other... [This distinction] makes a permanent part of the most absolute love relationship. ... It is exactly in the being-one that Hadewijch learns a demand that relates to her as
a human being. Love, who is willing to be possessed unbraked, is at the same time the Other, “*who tells her what is wanting to her.*” The same woman who can sink in abysmal fruition is immediately placed against herself: the human being truly dies in God, but not in order, as human being, to come to its end. One who experiences the blessed “feeling that surpasses all things” is sent back into the world with impressionable senses and sharpened spiritual powers.  

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

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

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

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

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

Because she is *not-whole*, the woman in the Duras story makes present to the man the “pure,” meaningless signifier in its writing function: the function of designating place in a discourse. This is the signifier in its phallic function of inscribing the non-existence of that which would ensure Being, that is, the sexual relation. Or, again as Blanchot puts it, the woman stands for “that disappearance which inscribes itself in writing” (*UC* 46).
In this guise the woman does indeed function as that unseen God who, as Lacan says, is “the third party in this business of human love”; she is indeed the face of God, that semblance. And it is I think in standing for the in-existence of The woman, that Being who would give the man Unity, that she addresses what Blanchot calls a “silent injunction” to the community of lovers.

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

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

This is the community which the man in the Duras story himself finally encounters directly with the absence of the woman. After the woman’s sudden disappearance he attempts at first to dismiss the experience either by laughing it off as an invention, a fantasy or by telling it as a story, “as if it were possible to do so.” But then the woman’s absence begins to insist on “the impossibility of reaching her through the difference that separates [them].” At this point he gives up looking for her, but in so doing is enabled to “live that love in the only way possible”: “losing it before it happened.”

He takes up life as the inescapable demand that this impossible love addresses to him, thereby instituting that always already present place of loss, his intimate lack-in-being.

This is what Blanchot alludes to, I think, in the closing paragraphs of The Unavowable Community when he invokes Wittgenstein’s proposition, “Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent” (UC 56). This needs to be heard now not as an injunction to silence in the face of the unspeakable but as the silent injunction of the feminine unspeakable. That very impossibility requires us to speak. As Blanchot puts it, “one has to talk in order to remain silent.” And he asks, “With what words?” This is the paradoxical question that both Lacan, in his reading of Freud, and Blanchot, in his reading of Duras, address to each one of us as an incitement to the
writing of the unavowable community.\textsuperscript{25}

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\section*{NOTES}

\textsuperscript{1} I have been greatly assisted in writing this paper by reading Jean Allouch’s “Homage paid by Lacan to the Castrating Woman”, in \textit{Papers of the Freudian School of Melbourne}, Vol. 20 (Melbourne: The Freudian School of Melbourne, 1999).

\textsuperscript{2} The essay was originally published as “La maladie de la mort (éthique et amour)”, \textit{Le Nouveau Commerce}, 55 (Spring 1983): 31-46.


\textsuperscript{4} In Sigmund Freud, \textit{The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works}, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. XXI, pp. 118-9; this edition of Freud’s works is hereafter abbreviated as \textit{SE} followed by volume number. The title of this particular work could also be translated as \textit{The Malaise in Civilization}.

\textsuperscript{5} Freud, \textit{SE}, vol. XVIII, pp. 56-7, my emphasis.


\textsuperscript{8} Lacan, \textit{Encore}, p. 33.


\textsuperscript{12} Lacan, “Guiding Remarks”, p. 94.


\textsuperscript{14} Lacan, “Guiding Remarks”, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{15} Duras, \textit{The Malady of Death}, pp. 50-1.


\textsuperscript{17} Duras, \textit{The Malady of Death}, pp. 49-50, my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{18} Duras, \textit{The Malady of Death}, pp. 9-10.


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

22 Lacan, Encore, p. 70.


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

Mark Hewson

Blanchot’s critical essays are characterized by the delicate and elusive balance they maintain between the study of particular works and the independent reflection upon literature. This ambiguity is typically to be observed, in passages of greater intensity, in the discussion of those writers, such as Hölderlin, Mallarmé or Kafka, to whose work Blanchot’s studies have frequently returned. The critical study accompanies and reflects upon the manner in which “literature” appears as a motivation and a theme for the particular writer. The reflection does not, however, remain at the level of the commentary, but tends to fuse its standpoint with that of the works studied, to take over their affirmations for its own account or to develop its own affirmations from the language of the source-text. We will study here this movement in the course of two of Blanchot’s essays on Hölderlin.

Hölderlin’s work is a privileged reference for Blanchot because, as he states in the opening pages of “Hölderlin et la parole sacrée” (first published in 1946, and collected in La Part du Feu), it emerges itself out of a reflection on the nature of poetry:

If one wishes to reflect on what is signified by the fact that the poem, that song exist, and if one claims to interrogate this fact from outside, this interrogation can only lead to Hölderlin, because here this question, experienced for itself and from within poetry, gave rise to the poem. (PF 118)¹
The reading in the essays to be examined bears only a limited resemblance to a work of interpretation in the sense in which this is understood in literary criticism: it does not seek to justify its interpretation through argumentation and documentation, nor does it examine alternative possible readings or consider obscurities or refractory passages; it only occasionally gives references, often does not clearly mark the transition from one poem to the next, and discusses no other commentators (except Heidegger). ²

The genre of the text is not that of the contribution to knowledge, that would say something about Hölderlin’s poetry, and corroborate this statement through textual evidence: rather, the commentary mobilizes the lexical, figurative and narrative means of the poems to focus them on the question posed by Blanchot’s own text, namely: “what is signified by the fact that the poem exists.”

This interpretation is not purely external and superimposed, but takes its bearings from the movement of self-interpretation in Hölderlin, by which the latent sense of themes and motifs develops through their repetition in a series of poems. One such motif is the dramatic figure of anticipation appearing in so many of Hölderlin’s poems. In both of Hölderlin’s first two major works, the epistolary novel Hyperion, and the tragic drama, Empedokles, the protagonist combines a religious or metaphysical intuition of the whole of nature, with a political vision of a possible reformation of the political and the social order, with this perception as the founding principle. In “Archipelagus,” the long poem narrating the rise and fall of ancient Greek civilization, the Greek islands are depicted as languishing without the praise and the honour conferred by the temples, songs and cities of the past; and at the conclusion the imminent return of the “spirit of Nature” and the concomitant reawakening of the human soul is announced, a vision emblematically concentrated, as often, in the anticipation of the festival-day (Festtag) that will mark the renewal of the bonds of man and divinity. The stance of these works, made up of metaphysical insight and a mood of expectation (which at the same time implies a withdrawal from the existing order of things) can be seen in the speaker of the poem “An die Deutschen” (“To the Germans”): the poet speaks of wandering (irren) through the land, with the sense of being present in “the workshop of the creative spirit,” conscious of something happening, and yet unable to say precisely what, divided between the exhilaration provoked by the signs of change, and conflicting feelings of impatience and doubt: the poet looks forward to the moment when doubt will be silenced before the “divine day” (or divine light, himmlische Tag). But “An die Deutschen” leaves the poet mournfully abiding by the “cold shore” of his own time, no longer recognizing the contemporaries, and not yet finding the community he foresees, a solitary voice...
that finds no echo. For Blanchot, such passages reveal a predicament essential to the poetic existence, as one lived necessarily en attente, always still to come:

The poet has to exist as anticipation of himself, as the future of his own existence. He is not yet, but he has to be already as he will be later on, in a “not yet” that constitutes the essence of his mourning, of his distress, and also of his great wealth … Ich harrte, ich harrte, this word constantly recurs to express the anguish and the sterility of waiting, as the word ahnen indicates its worth and potential … The solitude of the poet … is only apparent, for it is anticipation [pressentiment]. (PF 125)

In a straightforward representational sense, anticipation is a projection, in imagination, towards a not yet given state of affairs, considered as capable of arriving independent of the imagining subject. In the interpretation, however – suggested in Hölderlin, spelled out by Blanchot – the projection initiating out of the human desire or will changes its sense: it becomes a response to something which is already there, but which has not yet come to clarity, which does not of itself have the necessary force of existence, and requires the poet’s attention to show itself. The poet’s solitude and anticipation is thus only at a first level a matter of temperament, something proper to the individual: its real sense lies in the elective relation between the poet and this anterior and potential power, designated in Hölderlin as “nature,” “spirit” (Geist) or the “sacred.” Poetry becomes a prophetic vocation, conceived not primarily in terms of the linguistic conventions it employs, but rather in terms of the gods who grant or refuse themselves. In Heidegger’s interpretation, the gods of Hölderlin (or “nature,” as an elemental divinity, or “the sacred”) are recognized as a manner of naming the being of beings: thus nature here for Heidegger, to take only one of many similar formulations, signifies that which “grants to all real entities the open space within which the real as such can first appear.” In one of the most striking passages of Blanchot’s commentary, the noumenal presence to which the poet dedicates himself is interpreted via the metaphor of “the day” (le jour, der Tag), in the form that it takes in Hölderlin’s poems:

The sacred is the light (le jour): not the light of day as opposed to night, nor the celestial light, nor the infernal fire that Empedocles will seek. It is the light, and yet anterior to the light, and always anterior to itself, a light before the light [un avant-jour], a clarity before clarity. We come closest to this in reflecting on the moment of waking, the infinitely distant moment of the break of day, which is also that which is most inner, more interior than all interiority. (PF 127)
One sees here how, without any indication, the commentary makes the transition to an independent reflection: the motif of the beginning of the light reappears in a number of Blanchot’s texts, and often has the same implication here, evoking a particular form of anamnesis, in which what is recollected is not an anterior life, but the very beginning, the point of origin from which one has always already departed. The fascination exercised by Hölderlin’s work over writers such as Heidegger and Blanchot – evident, for example, in the shift from the transcendental-philosophical style of the earlier Heidegger to the eschatological motifs in the later work – has much to do with the complexity of the temporal structure of this anamnesis. The recollection of the beginning (which has been forgotten in the present social order; see “Natur und Kunst”) becomes the basis of an anticipation, turned towards its repetition in the future, as the dawning of the new epoch: the vocation of the poet is to awaken the people to this epochal transformation, as Dionysus awoke the ancient peoples in bringing the holy wine (“Dichterberuf”). “In the first signs, the poet sees already the completed work, and flies, like the eagle before the storm, announcing in advance the coming gods.” The work of the poet and of the poem, according to this conception, is to make explicit, to bring out of concealment, and thus to allow a new beginning to accomplish itself:

Before the poem, the light is the most obscure of all. As the origin of visibility, the pure beginning of what is to appear, it is the most profound mystery – and also the most terrifying: it is the unjustified, from which justification has to be drawn, the incommunicable and undiscovered which is as such also that which opens and which, through the rigor of poetic language, will in the end reveal itself. …The poem, through its language, leads that which is unfounded to become foundation: it allows the abyss of the light to become the light which makes things appear and which constructs. (PF 128)

The first light is “the most obscure of all,” “the abyss of the light [l’abîme du jour]”: this is the light represented at the beginning of the poem “Heimkunft,” the chaotic and mixed condition of the helle Nacht (“pale night”) preceding the morning, when the habitants of the valley are still in darkness, even as the first light begins to give form and contour in the Alps above. The role of the poet then would correspond in this poem to that of the storm-bird, who knows that it is time (merkt die Zeit) and calls the day to impose itself (ruft den Tag). The passage is constructed out of fragments and allusions of many more poems than can here be investigated: but the tendency of the figuration and of the reading can already be discerned: the language of poetry effects a movement of passage, a mediation: it allows
the light that is still nascent, unformed, *jung an Gestalt*, to gather density, and become the light of day, in which things assume the stability of an appearance and a sense (see *PF* 127-128).

In order to situate criticism and study in relation to this strange discourse, one can begin by clarifying the implicit (because unformulated) structure of the relation between Blanchot’s and Hölderlin’s language. In the passage we have been discussing, the mode of Blanchot’s text is essentially that of the doubling commentary, ranging freely over Hölderlin’s production and drawing together narrative and figural structures to reconstruct a consistent tendency of the thought of the poems. But this is not all that the commentary contains. Throughout the dense and perhaps excessively complex presentation of “Hölderlin et la parole sacrée,” poetry is linked to a fundamental impossibility, a “contradiction … at the heart of poetic existence” (*PF* 121: see also 122, 125, 128). The rhetoric of the essay as a whole is maintained by the constant production of contradictions, each of which is dissolved only to reappear in another form. In its final form, the contradiction lies in the nature of the poetic task itself, in the form in which we have seen it formulated: the “pure interiority” of the sacred, the evanescence of the moment of awakening cannot be reconciled with the permanent, earthly, exterior nature of language:

In truth, this cannot take place, it is the impossible. And the poet is only the existence of this impossibility, just as the poem is only the echoing, the transmission of its own impossibility. (*PF* 128)

In these lines, the essay shows its continuity with the rhetoric and the thought of the collection to which it belongs, *La Part du Feu*, a work in which the language of paradox, contestation, of contradiction and negativity is constantly present, producing a reading experience which is often reminiscent of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In particular, this is to be seen in a series of texts circling around the poetics of Mallarmé: the poetic work aspires to express the absence, the nothingness which, for Mallarmé, is the essential condition of language (*PF* 71). The intricate rehearsal of the relation of poetic language and meaning that is to achieve this result ends in the conclusion that the idea of the work in Mallarmé is “contradictory, unrealizable, and as Mallarmé says, nothing but a ruse. But it is necessary to add that real poetry is an effort to reach the unrealizable, that (according to the poets), this impossibility and this contradiction is the “foundation of poetry, which it attempts vainly to realize” (*PF* 69).

In subsequent works, however, beginning with *L’espace littéraire*, the rhetoric of contradiction cedes to an affirmative conception of the literary work. This transformation clearly takes place in concert with an intensified
engagement with Heidegger, which in *L’espace littéraire* tends to overshadow the thematics and language of negation so prevalent during the period of *La part du feu*. But it can also be seen as an appropriation of the metaphysical-religious poetics of Hölderlin, ambiguously affirmed and negated in “Hölderlin et la parole sacrée.” The ambiguity is again apparent at the end of the text. Contrary to all that had been said to this point about poetry as an impossible task, it is now allowed that the poem, as expression of the sacred, can attain fulfillment, provided that the final contradiction, the existence of the poet as particular individual, is overcome through the poet's “disappearance.”

The temptation of Empedocles was death. But for Hölderlin, for the poet, death is the poem. It is in the poem that he has to accede to the extreme moment of opposition, the moment at which he is compelled to disappear, and, in disappearing, to bring to fulfilment the movement in which he is engaged, which can only be fulfilled through this disappearance. (PF 135)

This line of thought, alluding at once to the drama *Empedokles* and the personal fate of Hölderlin, is merely suggested in the dense final paragraphs of “Hölderlin et la parole sacrée,” but it comes to the foreground when Blanchot takes up the reading of Hölderlin again in “La Folie par excellence” (1951), a review of a work by Karl Jaspers on the psychology of poetic creation and the connection between madness and literature. For the purposes of this study, our attention will be confined to the second part in which, in the course of a few brief pages, Blanchot returns to the exposition of Hölderlin’s poetics.

The discussion here takes its point of departure from the poem “Brot und Wein” – during certain stretches merely a paraphrasing translation, directed by the interpretive frame, which again concerns the poem as an interrogation of “the essence of poetry” (“La Folie par excellence” 112). With the reference to “Brot und Wein” the starting point shifts from the relation between the poet as self and nature as a whole (as in the previous essay, in passages following “Wie wenn am Feiertage”) to a religious and philosophical-historical conception. According to the thought set forth in Hölderlin’s major poems, the historical time of modernity is the time of the absence of the gods, the retreat of the divine presence as it was present to Greece no less than to early Christianity. “Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?,” the poem asks, what need is there for poets in the time of distress? In this time, in which the divinity that poetry once announced and celebrated has abandoned the human world, the poet endures a condition of enforced idleness, has nothing to do but wait, in solitude (*so zu harren, ohne Freunde*). In
the discussion of this passage, we find again the movement that discerns in the representational content of the poem indications of an experience linked to the nature of poetry. In lines anticipating his subsequent descriptions of the poetic condition as *désoeuvrement* (an ambiguous French word connoting a state of idleness or disuse, perhaps most idiomatically translated as “inertia”), Blanchot writes: “This is the empty time, the time of error, in which we are entirely without direction, because the certainty of presence, of a genuine ‘here’ is lacking” (“La Folie par excellence” 113). In its reading of what at first appears as a merely subjective phenomenon, the commentary follows Hölderlin’s poem, in which the situation of abandonment is modified by the insight into the historical nature of divine revelation. To paraphrase: it is not at all times that man can endure the presence of the divine: but the night makes strong, error helps.\(^{15}\) The being-outside of “error” is therefore not merely negative, but it has a “sense,” and signifies the persistence of a relation to “the truth” (i.e., the divine, the certainty of presence), even in its absence:

Error helps [das Irrsal hilft]: error is a moment of the truth, it is the expectation which anticipates it [elle est l’attente qui la pressent], the depth of sleep which is also vigilance, the forgetting which is the essence of the memory of the divine. Thus error is the silence by which that which is no longer there, the divine, the true, is nonetheless there, is present in the mode of awaiting, of anticipation, escapes the travesty of that which is false (the indefiniteness of error preserves from the false, the inauthentic). (“La Folie par excellence” 113-4)

The work of poetry becomes then the endurance and the accomplishment of “error”: a movement suggested in “Brot und Wein” through the comparison of the poets with the “migration” of the priests of Dionysus in “holy night”: and elsewhere in the blindness of the poet (“Der blinde Sänger”) and in the ability of the mortals to “reach into the abyss” (“Mnemosyne”).

The poet has to consent: he has to become blind. He descends into the night...but his heart remains awake and this awakening of the heart which precedes, which makes possible the apparition of the light, is the courageous anticipation of the first light. The poet is the experience [l’intimité] of distress, he lives profoundly the time of absence .... The night in him becomes the experience [l’intimité] of the night. In him night, fatigue, the empty time become anticipation of the first light ... not the prudent light [der besonnene Tag], but the day that breaks, the light that is its own beginning, the origin, the point at which the sacred is communicated and founded in the rigor of language. The poet is now the relation to the immediate, to the in-
determinate, the open, that in which possibility takes its origin, but which is impossible, prohibited to men as to gods, the sacred. Certainly, the poet does not have the power to communicate the incommunicable but in him ... the incommunicable becomes that which makes possible communication ... The poet is the one in whom transparency becomes light, and his language retains the unlimited: it gathers and contains the infinitely extensive power of the spirit [esprit, Geist in Holderlin] on condition that his language is authentic, the language that mediates because in it, the mediator disappears, puts an end to his particularity, returns to the element from which he comes. ("La Folie par excellence" 114-5)

The contradiction of the sacred as the incommunicable and language, as determinate, the leitmotif of the earlier essay, has been subordinated to a mere clarification. Certainly, the poet cannot "communicate the incommunicable" – but poetry can nonetheless be positively thought of as a work of mediation between the divine and the human worlds. Mediation here does not only or necessarily signify the Promethean intercession, translating and betraying the divine to the human, "veiled in song," for the protection of its recipients (see "Wie wenn am Feiertage"). "The sacred" depends on the poet, in order to come to itself: the intervention worked by poetry is again expressed as the movement from transparency (the transparency of the gods who dwell above the light) to the light of day, or as the movement from excess to measure. The accomplishment of this task, however, demands the "sacrifice" of the worldliness of the poet, his existence as a particular individual, a necessity expressed in the drama Empedokles, and the continuation of this dramatic motif in the poems ("Dichtermut," "Ganymede," stanza viii of "Der Rhein") which link the poet to a sacrifice of his self, as part of his message. 16

The comparison of the two texts indicates some of the possible directions open to critical discourse confronted with Hölderlin’s poetic thought, and beyond this perhaps, with modern poetry more widely, to the extent that, in its reflection on the possibility and reality of poetry, it comes in one way or another, like Hölderlin, to posit poetry as "a metaphysical activity" (in the phrase of Nietzsche). How does the critical discourse position itself in relation to a poetics which determines itself by its relation to a point of transcendence or a point of anteriority – the celestial spheres of Heimkunft or the zone of indeterminacy designated as "Nature" in "Natur und Kunst" – to which poetry alone can give meaning and reality? In both of Blanchot’s texts, the primary gesture is the commentary which gives at least the implicit assent of the immanent exegesis: in the first text the exegesis is qualified by being coupled with a critical discourse which reveals it as an impos-
sible project, albeit one that in its failure can reveal a fundamental ontological division. In the second text, this discourse falls away: the affirmative repetition of Hölderlin’s poetics is, however, accompanied by a much greater emphasis on the negation of the poetic self. Poetry is not a matter of a vision or an immediate revelation: it is authentic to the extent that it founds itself in and abandons itself to the night, the endlessness of error, prior to the beginning announced by the poem. This extends the exegesis of Hölderlin, and opens up a field of reflection which will have its consequences within Blanchot’s work, and would need to be further examined in that context: one can doubt, however, that it provides the function of a critical distance. Modern poetry provides criticism with an alternative: either it can remain within the discursive field of research, one in which the question of origin and transcendence is a priori bracketed, inadmissible except as a documented historical representation: or it remains in continuity with the metaphysical premises of the poetry, interpreting these without reducing them to the status of representations, in which case the commentary remains “poetic,” from the standpoint of the discipline. If the language of Blanchot’s essays on Hölderlin continues to have such a recurrent subterranean presence in his own later reflections, it is no doubt in part because it was in these texts that he encountered this alternative and decided for the latter possibility.

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NOTES

1 The translations of all passages cited are my own. Page references are to the original French.
2 “Hölderlin et la parole sacrée,” in its initial publication in Critique (in 1946), appeared on the occasion of the French translation of one of Heidegger’s texts on Hölderlin, the commentary on the poem "Wie wenn am Feiertage" from the Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung.
3 This solitude becomes central in the closely related poem, "Rousseau": the French thinker appears as an allegorical figure: he is the one who reads in the signs of his own time changes that are to come, prophesizing "the coming gods."
4 On the “prophetic” conception of the poet in Hölderlin and in Romanticism more generally, see the recent work of Ian Balfour, Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002). An influential article in the specific context of Hölderlin is Otto, “Die Berufung des Dichters”, available in Über Hölderlin (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1970).
Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1951), 57 ("Die Natur...verschenkt] allem Wirklichen die Lichtung, in deren Offenes hinein alles zu erscheinen vermag, was ein Wirkliches ist"). Heidegger's thought is present in the language of Blanchot's text, more than it is in the form of explicit discussion: thus, the sacred is glossed by Blanchot as a movement of emergence, prior to determinate entities (venu antérieure à tout "quelque chose vient," PF 125): or as the "radiant power whose coming-forth is the law, the principle of appearing of that which appears, the origin of all power of communication" (Puissance rayonnante dont le jaillissement est la loi, principe d'apparition de ce qui apparaît, origine de tout pouvoir de communiquer, PF 125). These passages freely translate the language in which Heidegger writes of being, especially when the sense of being is elaborated via the Greek word physis. Physis is often rendered by Heidegger as Aufgehen (arise, emerge), which is doubtless also the sense of jaillissement here. On the connection between being and appearing in Heidegger, see Einführung in die Metaphysik, (Sixth edition. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 75-88.

See, e.g., AMV 51-2, 76-81, 143-5 and also La folie du jour. In discursive mode, see the essay on Joubert in Le livre à venir, especially the conclusion, 90-1.

Kennt er im ersten Zeichen Vollendetes schon/ Und fliegt, der kühne Geist, wie Adler den/ Gewittern, weissagend seinen/ Kommenden Göttern voraus ("Rousseau"). In the philosophical poem, "Natur und Kunst oder Jupiter und Saturn," the poetic knowledge of what is on the point of beginning comes from the memory of the immemorial. On this intrication of past and future, see, in addition to Heidegger's commentaries, Emil Staiger's essay "Über 'Natur und Kunst’" in Über Hölderlin, 33-44.

"Avant le poème, le jour est ce qu'il y a de plus obscur. En tant qu'origine de la transparence, commencement pur de ce qui va jaillir, il est le mystère le plus profond – et aussi le plus effrayant: il est l'injustifié, à partir de quoi il faut prendre justification, l'incommunicable et l'indécouvert qui, en tant que tel, est aussi ce qui ouvre et, par la fermeté de la parole poétique, va devenir à la fin ce qui se découvre. … Le poème, par la parole, fait que ce qui est infondé devient fondament, que l'abîme du jour devient le jour qui fait surgir et qui construit."

The revealing of the incommunicable, for example, alludes to the conclusion of "Germania"; the transition from the abyss of the light to the light as constructing the day in which we dwell refers to the itinerary of the river in "Der Rhein," stanzas iii to vi.

"Le Mythe de Mallarmé," "Le mystère dans les lettres," "Le paradoxe d'Aytré," "La littérature et le droit à la mort." Many other texts of this period construct similar arguments. In "The language of fiction," Hegel's concept of symbolic art, its constitutive Unangemessenheit, its inadequacy to what it intends to signify, is affirmed as the general paradigm for art (PF 86).

A sign of this change is that one finds in L’espace littéraire very little of the language of deception, trickery, and lure, discussed in Nordholt’s study, and which is indeed characteristic of La part du feu, where it relates to the need for literature to give the appearance of doing something of which it is constitutionally incapable. (See the chapter entitled “La tromperie comme vérité propre de l’oeuvre” in Anne-

12 *Critique*, 45, 1951, 99-118. The essay is available in English in *BR*, 110-28. References, however, will be to the original journal publication, and the translations, again, are my own.

13 Passages from this discussion were extracted to provide the conclusion of the final essay in *L’espace littéraire*.

14 Error here, as in Hölderlin’s word *Irrsal*, or in the French *errer*, signifies the wandering movement of a migration. The motif appears in a related sense in a number of poems: see “Der Main,” “Rousseau,” “Dem Allbekannten,” “Der Ister.” It reappears in a somewhat different context, with the disciples in “Patmos,” who are separated and driven off on their separate paths, after the death of Jesus.


16 “the poet has to be ruined, in order that in him and through him the excess of the divine become measure, the measure common to all, and this destruction, this effacement at the heart of poetic language is what makes language speak [ce qui fait que la parole parle], what makes it into the sign *par excellence*” (“La Folie par excellence” 116).

17 This strategy has become known in English language criticism through early essays of Paul de Man, such as “The impasse of formalist criticism” and “Heidegger’s exegeses of Hölderlin,” both appended to the second edition of *Blindness and Insight*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
The Subject of Narration:

Blanchot and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*

*Caroline Sheaffer-Jones*

_The madness of writing – the insane game – is the relation of writing, a relation established not between writing and the production of the book but, through the production of the book, between writing and the absence of the work._

Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*

_He dived once more into his story and was drawn down, as by a siren’s hand, to where, in the dim underworld of fiction, the great glazed tank of art, strange silent subjects float._

Henry James, *The Middle Years*

_“I’ve been ever so far; all round about – miles and miles away.”_

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*

**Telling Tales**

Writing and that which it entails are the subject of countless texts by Maurice Blanchot. In particular, Blanchot has focused on the notion of the work, or more precisely on a groundlessness or an absence of the work,¹ which he has designated from different perspectives over the course of
more than half a century. In various ways, Blanchot has conceived of the
work as an affirmation of its undoing. The question of narration, often about
a confrontation with death, is fundamentally important, as is evident for ex-
ample in Blanchot’s Death Sentence, The Madness of the Day or The In-
stant of My Death. In a sense, it is bound up with the possibility of the work.
Writing about Henry James in “The Turn of the Screw” in The Book to
Come, Blanchot discusses narration. What is described is indeed a certain
absence of the work relating to the writer’s difficult struggle to narrate eve-
rything. I will examine Blanchot’s reading of James to expose this concep-
tion of narration centred on seizing the truth. It is apparent that Blanchot
approaches the question very differently in “Narrative Voice (the ‘it’ [‘il’], the
neutral),” in The Infinite Conversation in which there is a decentring of the
work. I will show that this text as well as certain writings by Derrida make it
possible to arrive at a conception of narration in Henry James’s The Turn of
the Screw (1898) which strongly contrasts with the one put forward by
Blanchot in The Book to Come. Thus, alongside Blanchot’s reading of The
Turn of the Screw which relates to the project of realising the work as a to-
tality, Blanchot makes possible a more radical approach to the text,
illustrating the non-totalization of the work whose borders are uncertain. In
this way, Blanchot can be shown to step beyond an impossible conception
of the absence of the work.

What is repeatedly in play in Blanchot’s discussions of the work from
various perspectives is the question of its limits. However in Blanchot’s
early text “Literature and the Right to Death,” in The Work of Fire, it is
Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, more especially Alexandre Kojève’s
reading of it, which takes on a key role. Literature is conceptualized in
terms of the phenomenology of spirit with all of its figures of meaning. It
would be absolute knowledge in the form of a Book. The work is not in the
world, but is the realisation of everything, that is the absence of everything,
of nothing; it is “the meaning of meaning of words,” “that life which supports
death and maintains itself in it” (WF 343; PF 330). In later texts, Blanchot’s
writing testifies to a marked shift away from Hegel and Kojève, firstly to-
wards Heidegger and the question of Being, evident in some texts of The
Space of Literature and The Book to Come, then to Lévinas and also
Nietzsche, as is already apparent in The Infinite Conversation. This ongo-
ing displacement is important, since no text states the last word.

A certain displacement in Blanchot’s writing is evident when one com-
pares his thought on narration in the reading of James in The Book to
Come with his approach in “Narrative Voice (the ‘it’ [‘il’], the neutral).” What
is significant is that these discussions about narration expose two different
conceptions of the groundlessness of the work. They can be characterized
in terms of the two different aspects of play which Derrida defines in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference*. In his discussion of structuralism, Derrida opposes its negative, nostalgic, Rousseauistic side of thinking of play to the Nietzschean “affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.” Derrida adds: “This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as the loss of the center.”

While one side is directed towards a truth or dreams of this origin which escapes play, the other does not search for the beginning or end of play but affirms the game. Presence or absence is not thought prior to the game but as a function of it. Derrida insists that the two irreconcilable interpretations of interpretation share the field of social sciences and that it is not a simple matter of choosing between them. I will indicate the way in which Blanchot’s writing on narration points not just to a nostalgic conception of play in *The Turn of the Screw* but also beyond it.

Blanchot’s reading of the work of many writers in *The Book to Come* is indeed about the search to narrate everything and to reach end-game, showing the nostalgic side of play. This is already apparent in the opening section of *The Book to Come*, “The Song of the Sirens,” which comprises two texts: “Encountering the Imaginary” and “The Experience of Proust (BC 1-24; LV 7-40).” The first of these is about the precarious approach of the writer or narrator towards an intangible point of revelation, however elusive it may be. The writer’s task is no more straightforward than that of the traveller who is attracted to a source and through which he will navigate more or less successfully. In this text, under the title “The Secret Law of the Story,” Blanchot describes the “point of encounter” (BC 5; LV 12), which he defines as belonging intrinsically to the story (récit) in contrast to the novel (BC 5-7; LV 12-4), but it is almost impossible to reach. Although the goal is mapped and supposedly exists, some try to get to it too early, others too late. Some impatiently say: “it is here; here, I will cast anchor” (BC 4; LV 10) whereas for others, Blanchot insists, it was always beyond the right point. Blanchot’s conception of the writer is part of the dream of truth and search for presence to which Derrida has drawn attention.

Under the heading “The Secret of Writing” in “The Experience of Proust,” the other text of “The Song of the Sirens,” Blanchot focuses on a pivotal aspect of the work of the writer Proust. He describes the way in which the “imaginary navigation of the story” is happily superimposed on the “navigation of his real life” which led him to “the fabulous point where he encounters the event that makes every story possible” (BC 11; LV 20). It is at this so-called meeting point that his experience can be truly understood
and realized. Already in *The Space of Literature* writing is tied to the “absolute milieu,” where the thing becomes image, figure and then finally that which is without form, indeed that supposed presence of the absence of everything after or before the existence of the world (SL 33; EL 27-8). Blanchot conceives of such a presence, albeit more elusively, in relation to the fascination of narration in *The Book to Come*. “The Song of the Sirens,” the opening section on the imaginary and Proust, reveals the point of attraction towards which the writer’s work is nostalgically oriented. The work would turn into the tale of everything and its absence. What Blanchot writes of Broch in *The Book to Come* typifies the writer’s pursuit:

> The search for unity was Broch’s great passion, his torment, his nostalgia: unity, the hope of reaching the point of the circle’s closing, when the one who has advanced far enough obtains the right to turn around and to surprise, as a united whole, the infinitely opposed forces which divide him. (*BC* 120; *LV* 177)

It is as if there were some hidden centre at which the work would disclose the mystery of the world. It is on that impossible point that Blanchot’s reading of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* is also centred.

**Preliminaries**

A prolific writer, Henry James is renowned in particular for his novels and tales, among others, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *Washington Square* (1881), *The Aspern Papers* (1888), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). At the beginning of his article on James, Blanchot immediately focuses not on the writer’s completed works, but on the plans for his novels in his *Notebooks* and compares his methods to those of Kafka and Proust. James is quoted as saying: “The subject is everything – the subject is everything” (*BC* 126; *LV* 187). While in one sense this statement may be understood as emphasizing the crucial importance of the subject, as if nothing were more fundamental, it is also to be comprehended literally. Blanchot returns persistently to these words and to the issue of what is meant by the subject. It is the question which is central in his own text on James. He wonders whether the anecdote told to James by the Archbishop of Canterbury and on which the story was based would be its subject (*BC* 128; *LV* 189-90). In starting to define the subject of a story, Blanchot points beyond the superficiality of the work to its fathomless depths, where everyday life is put aside and certainly nothing of substance remains. “A story with a subject,” writes Blanchot, “is thus a mysterious work freed from all matter: a story without char-
acters, a story where the uneventful day-to-day happenings and the inti-
macy without occurrences, conveniently available sources, cease being a
resource” (BC 127; LV 188). Such a story is not simply about endless epi-
sodes or the “play of superficial or capricious succession” but constitutes a
“unified whole”; what counts is not the game of unpredictable events, nor in
fact the lives of the characters, for ultimately the focus is “the secret centre
of everything” (BC 127; LV 188). Blanchot clearly associates the subject
with that which is most fundamental in the work, with its heart and soul,
which is sinister rather than vibrant.

In passing, Blanchot considers whether the narrating governess might
be the subject of the story. In this role, she also adds to its ambiguity.\(^\text{12}\) However ultimately, he concentrates on the “truth” of The Turn of the
Screw, although it is difficult to seize: the tale is “a fascinating, indubitable,
ungraspable story, in which truth has the slippery certainty of an image,
close, like it and like it inaccessible” (BC 130; LV 191). It is perhaps this
truth which most profoundly constitutes the subject of the story in Blan-
chot’s reading. In fact, it is paramount in the brief section devoted to Henry
James in “The Pain of Dialogue” where Blanchot considers the pressure
exerted by the governess on the child in The Turn of the Screw to speak
the truth which cannot be spoken. Furthermore, Blanchot maintains that the
dark, “hidden truth” which seeks to emerge in the conversations in James’s
writings is central and brings the characters together around the incommu-
nicable (BC 153; LV 227-8).\(^\text{13}\) It is evident that, for Blanchot, the subject of
The Turn of the Screw only concerns the narrating governess to the extent
of her involvement in narrative space, that “beyond,” where everything is
ungraspable. She draws the children into “the indecisive space of narration,
into that unreal beyond where everything becomes phantom, everything
becomes slippery, fugitive, present and absent,” a region which may be just
“the evil heart of every story” (BC 130; LV 192). Indeed Blanchot affirms
that the subject of The Turn of the Screw is “James’s art, that way of al-
ways circling around a secret” (BC 130; LV 192). It is that turn of the screw
around a mysterious centre which is important: the circuitous movement
which Blanchot considers characteristic of James’s approach. The subject
of the story is James’s art of turning around, like Broch, to narrate the inac-
cessible truth.

Blanchot notes that there is something which escapes James and
cannot quite be contained in his work. Blanchot writes: “There is, in the
form that is unique to him, an excess, perhaps a side of madness against
which he tries to protect himself, because every artist is frightened of him-
self” (BC 131; LV 194). Blanchot writes about James’s fears of beginning a
work, of losing himself in the preliminaries and the detours of his art. Yet
James then supposedly moves gradually closer to finding himself and the “true meaning of this preliminary work” (BC 131; LV 195). It is through the divine, magic, roundabout paths of the notes which precede the work that James would attain the “fullness” of the story to come. Quoting James, Blanchot reflects on why it is that “the patient, passionate little notebook becomes ... the essential in life” (BC 132; LV 195):

It is because in these hours of confiding in himself, he is grappling with the fullness of the story which has not yet begun, when the still undetermined work, pure of any action and any limit, is only possible, is the “blessed” drunkenness of pure possibility. (BC 132; LV 195)

In effect, what counts in Blanchot’s reading is the prelude to the story when James would truly encounter himself, gathering his thoughts together; what is important is some unbridled Dionysian force towards which James is attracted, that point of fascination or “secret centre” (BC 132; LV 196) of the work. Precisely through his notes, James would attain the limitless potential of the story. He would discover some fabulous twilight zone where he would already have conjured up the completed work while at the same time not having begun. At that time of research, James’s pen exercises “‘an enchanted pressure’, becomes the ‘deciphering’ pen, the magic needle in movement, whose turns and detours give him a premonition of the innumerable paths that are not yet traced” (BC 132; LV 195).

In his plans, James experiences that which is “not yet”; his focus is “the other side of the work, the one which the movement of writing necessarily hides” (BC 132; LV 196). His “care” would be pure inspiration. In a sense, he would be like Orpheus in The Space of Literature, whose “unique care” is “to look into the night at what the night dissimulates, the other night, the dissimulation which appears” (SL 172, Blanchot’s emphasis; EL 228-9).14 According to Blanchot, the “paradox” of James’s preliminary work is that it is defined, yet it also represents the opposite:

the happiness of creation which coincides with the pure indetermination of the work, which puts it to the test, but without reducing it, without depriving it of all the possibilities which it contains (and such is perhaps the essence of James’s art: each instant to make the whole work present and even, behind the constructed and limited work which he puts into a form, to give a presentiment of other forms, the infinite and light space of the story such that it could still have been, such that it is before any beginning). (BC 132-3; LV 196)

For Blanchot, the “essence” of James’s writing is in some origin of his work
where everything would be possible. James’s art is to be understood above all in terms of his preliminary work which makes the totality of his work present.

Blanchot emphasizes that James calls the pressure which he applies to the work, namely that “pressing solicitation” to make it “speak completely,” by the name of the “turn of the screw.” This is the “subject” of James’s story. It is the pressure exerted by the governess to make the children speak their “secret” which is essentially the pressure of narration itself, the marvellous and terrible movement which the act of writing exercises on truth, torment, torture, violence which finally lead to death where everything appears to be revealed, where everything however falls back into doubt and the void of the shadows. (BC 133; LV 196-7)

The words “‘The subject is everything’” (BC 126; LV 187) designate this region beyond the play of capricious events, where the writer would approach the incomprehensible truth. It is no coincidence that following the above passage Blanchot quotes the dying writer of James’s The Middle Years. It is as if the writer at death, in the same way as James in his preliminary work at the start of his trajectory, were close to the source. Indeed the subject would turn full circle to comprehend “everything.” Blanchot imagines James’s own endeavour in terms of that fabulous pure possibility: that point at which nothing, almost nothing, would be turned into the ultimate work.

**The Movement of Writing**

In reading The Turn of the Screw, Blanchot focuses on the author of the preparatory notes or the dying writer who would approach some elusive point. However the words of James’s failing writer, Dencombe, quoted by Blanchot at the end of his text, do not necessarily imply that the author is almost always turned away from the light, only to catch a glimpse of truth. Dencombe states: “‘We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art’” (BC 133; LV 197). It is “the rest,” “the madness of art,” indeed the excess, which cannot be comprehended once and for all. Thus, in this reading, James’s The Turn of the Screw, like Dencombe’s speech, is not simply about an ultimate turning point or about the pursuit of truth, but about the inexplicable turns and detours of narration which are always in play in the work. This “madness of writing” is also important in Blanchot’s reinscription of James’s words in a much later article entitled “We Work in the Dark.”
With reference to Blanchot’s writing on narrative voice, it is possible to indicate a reading of James’s *The Turn of the Screw* which is not nostalgic but shows an affirmation of play. In “Narrative Voice (the ‘it’ [‘il’], the neutral),” in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot emphasizes the way in which narration as conscious vision has been brought into question. If Flaubert still believed in narration, in telling as showing, without really dwelling on its limitations, Thomas Mann already began to challenge it (*IC* 382-3; *EI* 560-1). Insisting that telling is certainly not self-evident, Blanchot contests the use of a centralized perspective in a story in the form of a privileged “I,” or perhaps also in the guise of a third person. For the problem is that these stories equate the narrative act and the transparency of a consciousness, as if telling were only being conscious or revealing. What takes place with Kafka, for Blanchot, is a distancing of the main character from himself, the other characters and events. This decentres the work and brings into the narration a different speech or speech of the other (*IC* 383-4; *EI* 561-2). It is then the narration itself which comes into play.

Blanchot associates the neuter with Kafka’s narration: in it speaks an “il,” a third person which is neither a third person nor simply impersonality. The subjects are in “a relation of non-identification with themselves”: “something happens to them which they can only seize again by letting go of their power to say ‘I,’ and what happens to them has always already happened to them” (*IC* 384-5; *EI* 564). Narrative voice (*narrative*), to be distinguished from narrating voice (*narratrice*), is thus not that of a particular subject. The “il” is dispersed and mobile. “Its place” is both where it is always missing, therefore empty, and a “surplus of place” or “hypertopia” (*IC* 385, 462 n. 2; *EI* 563-4, n. 1, 565). Blanchot states that this voice signals an emptiness in the work like Marguerite Duras’s “absence-word”: “a hole-word, hollowed out in its center by a hole, the hole in which all the other words should have been buried.” It is “a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent” (*IC* 385; *EI* 565). “Spectral, ghostlike,” it is “the indifferent-difference that alters the personal voice,” decentring it (*IC* 386; *EI* 566). The work thus lacks a centre and does not form a whole.

The elaborate framing of the story of *The Turn of the Screw* highlights the act of narration. The tale is not simply about one subject, be it the governess or indeed James, who presents a centralized perspective, but about a multiplicity of decentred subjects. The narration of the story is not simply about the limited particularities of an individual supposedly accounting for the world, which, as Blanchot underlines, becomes a characteristic of the novel (*IC* 381; *EI* 559). At the start of the story, in the first person, the narrator talks of being around a hearth in an old house where a number of
people were telling strange stories. Douglas, who was among them, later sends away for a manuscript which is secretly locked away in a drawer. Finally, he reads this tale by the governess who has been dead “these twenty years.” Yet Douglas too is dead and the story told by the narrator is a transcript which he made of the manuscript given to him by Douglas just before his death. The frame gives the impression not so much of subjects following on from each other in a quest for truth, but of a plurality of subjects, who occupy each other’s places, there being no final position or truth. The governess’s words live on in the narration. She is neither simply alive nor dead. Through the evocation of the real and the unreal together, ghosts alongside the living, it is as if the quick were always doubled by shadows; death is clearly already part of life and not just a point at the end.

The narration of *The Turn of the Screw* constantly affirms, in the descriptions of time and place, the emptiness of another time, another place. The governess compares the house, Bly, where she might meet the ghosts Quint and Miss Jessel, to a “theatre after the performance” (*TS* 243). There are moments which are almost like repetitions of other times. After first seeing Quint through the window, the governess recalls other instants when she had “looked for him in vain in the circle of the shrubbery.” She adds: “I recognised the signs, the portents – I recognised the moment, the spot. But they remained unaccompanied and empty” (*TS* 243). It is as if what took place were not altogether real, but reminiscent of some other action. In James’s story, various characters occupy each other’s place, adopt each other’s perspective and to a certain extent stand in for each other. The narrative voice shows the characters shifting around, enacting a series of repetitious and somewhat unreal moves. The governess writes for example: “It was confusedly present to me that I ought to place myself where he had stood. I did so; I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he had looked, into the room.” (*TS* 185). This change of position is all the more significant as the person whose place the governess occupies is a ghost. It is as if the living and the dead were to a certain extent interchangeable and the instant of death interminable. The narration is not that of a personal voice but rather this narrative voice traces an unlimited number of moves in which the figures are out of touch with themselves, decentred, absent.

It is as if the apparition described by the governess and identified by Mrs Grose as Quint, dressed in his master’s clothes, were not the only one who resembled an actor (*TS* 191). One character is almost resurrected in the form of another. Indeed the governess works in place of the previously deceased governess Miss Jessel, in a sense her double, and what is apparent is that both are at once ghostly and real. At some moments in particular, it is evident that the governess is as much an “intruder” as Miss
Jessel, as much a passing image in James’s text as the former employee. She writes of her:

She rose, not as if she had heard me, but with an indescribable grand melancholy of indifference and detachment, and, within a dozen feet of me, stood there as my vile predecessor. Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it, the awful image passed away. Dark as midnight in her black dress, her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers. While these instants lasted indeed I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I who was the terrible intruder. (TS 257)

The gazes of the governnesses and the fact that one might have no more entitlement to be at the table than the other reinforces a certain interchangeability between the characters. The possible substitution of places of one who is alive and one who is dead has the effect of making them both appear to be actors. It is evident that in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the subjects are clearly in a “relation of non-identification with themselves.” Rather than the conscious vision of one subject, there are multiple subjects dispossessed of themselves.

Through its narration, the text does not highlight the culmination of the search for truth, but rather many truly unfathomable moments. The governness finally grasps Miles: “at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (TS 309). Yet, in a sense, the story continues in the events which are related at the start, that is in the frame in which the storytelling takes place and in which the background to the governness’s tale is given. Her final words are echoed towards the beginning, when the focus is once more the heart. It is the narration of the governness’s story which produced an effect on Douglas. The first person narrator, who later transcribed the story, asked him whether he “took the thing down” and he replies simply: “‘Nothing but the impression. I took that here’ – he tapped his heart. ‘I’ve never lost it’” (TS 149). The narration touches his heart; it is impressed upon him, as if in listening to the governness’s story, he were also part of the story, virtually taking the place of the child Miles. It is as if the outside frame and the inside story were difficult to distinguish, the listener already in a sense also an apparition, or perhaps Miles living on in Douglas. In James’s ghostly story, there is no finality to death; what has passed on also returns. Thus when Douglas reads the story, it is also as if he sensed the very presence of the governness long gone, while becoming
oblivious to the first person narrator in front of him: “Douglas, without heed-
ing me, had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to
the ear of the beauty of his author’s hand” (TS 157). Through the echoing
voice of another, the governess speaks her words, just as Douglas’s per-
formance seems to extend beyond those around him to those of the past,
indeed also without doubt to the listeners of the future. The narrator or the
writer is in part caught up in another time, another place, and has no possi-
bility of finding himself; he can have no vision of unity.

The writer’s work is not complete but open, constructed to a certain
extent by its inheritors. As Derrida underlines in The Ear of the Other, texts
have a testamentary structure.¹⁹ The Turn of the Screw designates an
emptiness associated with the pressure of narration; the narrative voice is
made up of a multiplicity of speakers, one in the place of another, perhaps
a ghost of the other. Characters in James’s story stand in each other’s
places or take each other’s places like the governess and her predecessor;
they mimic actions like actors. Indeed through repeating James’s title The
Turn of the Screw as the title of his own text, Blanchot does not simply
speak from “outside,” but, in a sense, revisits the place of Henry James as
the author of The Turn of the Screw, becoming involved like the first person
narrator, as well as Douglas and the governess, in another turn of the
screw of narration, an interminable, unfathomable displacement.

What is apparent is that James is not simply involved in making the
work “speak completely” (BC 133; LV 196) or in approaching such a “point”
as in Blanchot’s reading of James. The “essence” of James’s art cannot be
to apply to the work such a tour de force that it would give the sense of all
forms contained in its form “prior to any beginning” (BC 133; LV 196), the
work becoming the ultimate creation. His art is not in reaching “behind the
work” to make “the whole work present” once and for all, but rather in an af-
firmation of the incessant, ungraspable “movement of writing” (BC 132-3;
LV 196). By envisaging James in search of some “secret centre,” ap-
proached through preliminary notes or dying words, Blanchot pursues the
nostalgic side of play which Derrida describes. In such a pursuit, or per-
haps the dream of success, the noncentre is often defined, as Derrida
maintains, in terms of the “loss” of centre. Rather than illustrating the
writer’s search for unity, The Turn of the Screw shows multiple perspec-
tives: dispossessed subjects, doubled by ghosts, returning and disappear-
ing. The work is pervaded by the unknown, a fathomless narrative voice
which is perhaps “the oblique voice of madness” (IC 387; EI 567) indeed, in
a sense, the “absence of the work.” As Blanchot underlines, narrative voice
always affirms an excess which, precisely, cannot be contained. It is that
absence which is fundamental to the subject of narration. Narration is thus
what Blanchot calls in another context, the “language of the detour” (IC 29; EI 40). For composing a work, such as The Turn of the Screw, is less about turning around in nostalgic pursuit of the truth than about an endless diversion or, as Derrida has described with reference to Nietzsche, an affirmation of play. Blanchot writes in “Speaking is not Seeing” in The Infinite Conversation: “To find [trouver] is to turn, to take a turn, to go around. To find a song is to turn a melodic movement, to make it turn. No idea here of a goal, still less of stopping” (IC 25; EI 35-6).

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NOTES

1 The third and final section of Maurice Blanchot’s The Infinite Conversation takes its title “The Absence of the Book (the neutral, the fragmentary)” from the last text in it, “L’absence de livre.” In that text, Blanchot uses the term “absence d’œuvre,” the “absence of (the) work,” as well as “désœuvrement,” translated by “worklessness or unworking.” Michel Foucault also published the important text “La folie, l’absence d’œuvre” as an appendix to Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1972), 575-82. Blanchot writes: “To write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness),” IC 424; EI 622. (Throughout this article, I have modified the English translations.) On this major issue, see among other texts, Paul Davies, “The Work and the Absence of the Work”, Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996), 91-107; Gerald L. Bruns, Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1997), 145-72; Leslie Hill, Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary (London: Routledge, 1997), 103-20.

2 The text was previously published as “Le Tour d’écrou,” Nouvelle Revue française, 24 (décembre 1954), 1062-72.

3 The title of this text is translated in The Infinite Conversation as “Narrative Voice (the ‘he’, the neutral),” IC 379; EI 556. The French text was previously published as “La voix narrative”, Nouvelle Revue française, 142 (octobre 1964), 674-85.


7 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 369-70; L’Écriture et la différence, 426-8.

8 “La rencontre de l’imaginaire” also has the sense of the encounter of the imaginary kind, the imaginary encounter. On the image, see in particular BC 91-2, LV 136-8; SL 32-4, EL 25-8; “Vast as the Night", IC 318-325, El 465-77.

9 I have translated récit by “story,” rather than “narrative” used in The Book to Come. The récit is an event, an exceptional event, or the approach to one, as opposed to the light-hearted fiction of the novel, yet the difference cannot be so clearly established. This is also evident when Blanchot refers to Plato’s Gorgias and the récit of the Last Judgement.

10 See also “The Essential Solitude and Solitude in the World”, SL 251-3; EL 341-4.


13 From a different perspective, after quoting Georges Bataille’s Guilty in the final pages of The Unavowable Community, Blanchot discusses the relationship of the book with the unknown and Bataille’s “negative community” of those without community; see also the last section “The Heart or the Law.” See UC 1-26; CI 9-47.

14 On inspiration, see, in particular, SL 173-87; EL 230-50.

15 The citation is to be found in Henry James, “The Middle Years”, in The Novels and Tales of Henry James, New York Edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 16: 105. All references to James’s work are to this edition.


18 James, The Turn of the Screw, 12 (1908): 149 hereafter cited as TS.

The question of obscurity is raised immediately in the title of Beckett’s text, *Ill Seen Ill Said*. One of the more intriguing instances of one of those slippages between Beckett in French and Beckett in English precisely raises the questionable status of what is ill seen ill said. The French version reads “Si seulement elle pouvait n’être qu’ombre.”¹ In the English, the sentence occupying the analogous position in the text reads: “If only she could be pure figment.”² Here we note the appearance of two sentences holding the seemingly equivalent positions within the versions of the text yet which nevertheless refuse simple assimilation to one another. What immediately stands out is this strange leap from “ombre,” in the French, to “pure figment,” in the English. “Ombre” tends to mean shadow, darkness, shade or ghost, whereas “pure figment” means a product of fictitious invention, a fashioned image. What is at issue here in this substitution?

Firstly, and most obviously, the question is raised as to how and why “ombre” can be translated as “figment”? What allows this passage? What do they hold in common that allows this to happen? What intimate relation exists between a “figment” and the “ombre,” the image and its shadow. To put it another way, what essential relation exists between obscurity and literature, and how and why does Beckett effect this passage from the realm
of light to that of the word? And, more importantly, what is at stake in this movement?

The movement from “ombre” to “figment” repeats the movement of the title of the piece, *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The “ombre” is the mode in which things are ill seen, closed to vision through an original obscurity that hinders perception, not to the point of rendering them invisible or removing them from sight, but situating them at this neutral point between visibility and invisibility. The figment is what is ill said – ill said because it is a moulding or a fashioning of some thing that is external to the perceiving and speaking subject into a plaything of the mind, ill said because it is inadequate to what it represents, or expresses, in part due to the fact that what it seeks to represent is always already ill seen.

The link then between the “ombre” and the “figment” would be this word “ill.” Things are already ill seen and ill said. There is a desire evident in both sentences to push them to their relative extremes, to render the “ombre” purely invisible, outside of all perception, and to make the external world into a “pure figment,” caught up exclusively in the machinations of a solitary mind, pure interiority. The desire concurrently pursues the complete exclusion of external stimuli and the complete inclusion of their representations. These two moments of complete exclusion and inclusion are inextricably linked as part of a single movement, in the desire to rid oneself of the “ill,” of the ambiguity of being, to replace it with a “nothing to be seen,” and an “everything can be said.” This is the simultaneous desire for everything and nothing, being and nothingness.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said* we read of a roving eye which has “no need of light to see.” What kind of eye is this? How does it function in the absence of light? What is at stake in this separation between the organ of vision and its medium, light? The answer that most easily comes to mind would be to say that the eye is closed, and everything seen is only imagined, in the mind’s eye, to use an appropriate phrase. And indeed this is what the voice tells us it wants:

> What remains for the eye exposed to such conditions? To such vicissitude of hardly there and wholly gone. Why none but to open no more. Till all done. She done. Or left undone. Tenement and unreason. No more unless to rest. In the outward and so-called visible. That daub. Quick again to the brim the old nausea and shut again. On her. Till she be whole. Or abort. Question answered.

But this is only what it wants. The outside refuses to be reducible to a “pure figment.” The eye desires its complete incorporation, to close itself to the world of uncertainty and obscurity and control what it sees through closed
eyes, whether the old woman is “done. Or left undone.” An attempted de-
nial of the outside is met by the refusal of the outside to be refused. The
nausea returns. The desire for the end of the old woman is the same as the
desire to have her whole, complete – in either case she can be left behind,
she can be done with, fixed permanently as an unchanging image, mem-
ory. The desire to abort also desires to have done with. But these goals are
never achieved, even achievable. The outside remains in its obscurity and
changeability.

In How It Is we read of a voice, a voice describing the situation, and of
another voice ventriloquising the voice we hear; “I say it as I hear it” is what
we read, the voice telling us that it is simply relaying the words of the voice
that he hears. Here, in Ill Seen Ill Said, we have a different dynamic with
similar traits; we are told of that which is seen rather than what is said:
“Seen no matter how and said as seen,” (following the logic of which could
lead us to rename How It Is as Ill Said Ill Said). The question of what is
seen as ambiguous and uncertain holds itself in a strange relation with the
question of the voice. How do these two modes of perception, hearing and
seeing, relate? What do they hold in common and what holds them apart in
their uniqueness? What is at issue in the alternation between a receptivity
to language and a perceptivity of vision.

The act of seeing, the perception of the surrounds, functions in this
text by means of ambiguity and uncertainty. At one time it is an immediate
shift in circumstance: “But she can be gone at any time. From one moment
of the year to the next suddenly no longer there. No longer anywhere to be
seen. Nor by the eye of flesh nor by the other. Then as suddenly there
again. Long after.” Changes happen without cause, immediately, sud-
denly. Vision has no means to understand the effect of forces, which are
invisible, and which effect change. Vision can only register the change, and
the suddenness of the event startles it. The old woman incessantly disap-
pears, and reappears, lost to the gaze and then grasped by it again, lost to
the ‘other’ eye, and then retrieved. Has the eye lost patience with looking?
Does it always pay attention? “Without the curtains being opened. Sud-
denly open. A flash. The suddenness of all!” Is this a discontinuous sight
that is being proposed, a vision that breaks up through time and allows for
temporal lacunae and lapses? Or is it the outside world which is not playing
along to the rules that govern vision? “She still without stopping. On her
way without starting. Gone without going. Back without returning. Suddenly
it is evening. Or dawn.”

There is another relation between vision and time that appears, that of
the slowly arising or fading image, a folding or unfolding of that which is
seen. “Next to emerge from the shadows an inner wall. Only slowly to dis-
solve in favour of a single space." The eye pierces the darkness, and a wall appears, then disappears slowly. Then: “For slowly it emerges again. Rises from the floor and slowly up to lose itself in the gloom. The semigloom.” Images are given and then taken away, then regained, as the old woman is, but this time slowly, the process of change is gradual and perceptible. And in this instance the wall hinders vision of what is behind it when it is present, sight has to contend with external conditions that affect its operation. And between the appearance and disappearance of things there occurs the state of seeing what is not visible, through the gloom, the semigloom, the arrival of darkness, or other factors that impinge upon the operation of vision: “Long this image till suddenly it blurs.” The operation of sight here undergoes the trials of these factors: immediate change of state; gradual appearance and disappearance; the interruption through blurring or darkness. None of these are explained, indeed they are constitutive of the gaze as the conditions of its operation. But what causes these changes? How does something belong to the realm of vision and then remove itself from sight?

Vision is typically presented as the model for understanding and immediate knowledge. Clarity of thinking is prized, knowledge seeks enlightenment. The action of vision, in its capacity as a model for thought, assumes an immediacy, a complete grasp of what is given to sight, a fixing of things in their place, an operation of capture; and what is outside of vision can be brought into vision’s realm through the application of light. In opposition to this would be the operation of language which is ambiguous and imprecise, where clarity and obscurity do not relate to each other in the manner ascribed to vision. But vision in *Ill Seen Ill Said* has been deprived of the certainty that is assumed in the use of the gaze. The eye does not fix things in their place, they appear and disappear, blur, move suddenly or slowly. There is no clarity provided in this vision. There is no possibility of shedding light on the subject, of illumination, because what the eye here sees is outside the law of light, the domain of vision. “For an eye having no need of light to see,” the laws of illumination do not apply, and cannot be used as a guarantee of certainty. The perceptions of the eye are ambiguous, and this serves to undermine the stabilising and orienting function of light. The fixity of things as they are seen is one of our strongest anchors to the world; the constancy of vision is a solid reference, enabling a measure by which the world can be judged, and a true form that can be thus mastered and controlled. But this is precisely what is withdrawn through the vagaries of the gaze in *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

But what is at stake in this withdrawal, what is at issue in the disavowal of the primacy of the visual? What demands this questioning of
light, light which appears as self-evident to us, which gives us the world of stable forms around us? To answer these questions, Blanchot approaches them through Nietzsche and the latter’s critique of visibility, asking: “But then why, among all possible metaphors, does the optical metaphor predominate? Why this light that as metaphor has become the source and resource of all knowing, and thus subordinated all knowledge to the exercise of (a primary) metaphor? Why this imperialism of light?” (IC 162). The answer proffered is that light has an inordinate and treacherous influence on the thought, in that within thought vision has become the model and metaphor for being, and sight has become the model and metaphor for thought:

Nietzsche recognised – this is the meaning of his untiring critique of Plato – that being is light, and he submitted the light of being to the labour of the most severe suspicion. A decisive moment in the destruction of metaphysics and, even more, of ontology. Light gives pure visibility to thought as its measure. To think is henceforth to see clearly, to stand in the light of evidency, to submit to the day that makes all things appear in the unity of a form; it is to make the world arise under a sky of light as the form of forms, always illuminated and judged by this sun that does not set. The sun is the overabundance of clear light that gives life, the fashioner that holds life only in the particularity of a form. The sun is the sovereign unity of light – it is good, the Good, the superior One that makes us respect as the sole true site of being all that is “above.” (IC 160)

What is raised here is the issue of the dominance of the metaphysical thinking of being, of ontology, as it is thought through the metaphor of light. “Light gives pure visibility to thought as its measure.” Light aspires to be more than a metaphor, it becomes the measure of thought, the clarity to which it aspires. The sun, as the source of light, provides the image of the single point, the sole origin of thought, the thinking of the one and of the whole, the point at which thought can become adequate to being through this illumination the sun provides. Philosophy will be complete once thought can cover the things of the world in the same manner as they are bathed in the light of the sun. Things hidden in the shadows can be brought to light, nothing shall be left in the dark, what is not yet visible will become visible, it is only a matter of time and application. Everything will be given a coherent form and that form will fit itself into the form of forms which is the world, and it will do this in the manner of the light which provides things their form through the access given to their visibility. But this visibility is the object of the Nietzschean critique of ontology and metaphysics, a critique which is followed by a an attempt to think otherwise than through the paths of light:
Nietzsche little by little [sought] to free thought by referring it back to what does not allow itself to be understood either as clarity or as form. Such is finally the role of the Will to Power. It is not as a power [pouvoir] that the will to power [puissance] imposes itself in principle, and it is not as a dominating violence that this force becomes what must be thought. But force escapes light: it is not something that would simply be deprived of light, an obscurity still aspiring to the light of day. Scandal of scandals, it escapes every optical reference; and thus, while it may only act under the determination and within the limits of a form, form – an arrangement of structure – nevertheless always allows it to escape. Neither visible nor invisible. (IC 160)

Nietzsche’s response to the dominance of the thinking of light as a model for the thinking of being is to rather think force and becoming. Force and becoming, as both are neither visible nor invisible, operate outside the realm of light, and are not subject to the clarity of understanding and the stability of form. They do not open themselves to sight. This is what happens in Ill Seen Ill Said, where events occur, suddenly or slowly, that the eye has no way of accounting for, because the causes, the forces that are acting there, do not proffer themselves to the gaze. To the gaze they do not exist, because they do not play on the field of the visible. The ideal of light that is the metaphor for being and the ideal vision that is the metaphor for thought both point to an active role for the gaze, the gaze which seeks out and grasps, comprehends; an active illumination. However, the eye in this text is purely passive in its registration of what happens, its only actions being opening and closing (alongside the shedding of tears, which perhaps have their own relation to the obscuring of vision). Closing the eye would be an active refusal of sight and an attempted negation of the world, whereas the eye we have here is passive as regards the world, unable to close for good, open to all stimuli. This occurs in much the same manner as Blanchot describes the passive hand that writes being interrupted by the active hand of mastery and control (SL 25).

There may be some confusion in the mention of the modes of activity and passivity in the above paragraph concerned with force, because there is no passive force, all forces are active, or positive, as Blanchot states following Deleuze. To be passive as regards a force is to let the force act out all of its possibilities, “whoever says force says it always as multiple” (IC 160-1); the active seeks to control forces for certain ends, the desire for a single force, therefore limiting their effect. “Force says difference. To think force is to think it by way of difference” (IC 160). Passivity bears a regard for this difference; activity would seek to annul the differences and subsume them under a posited unity. Force as a multiple and differential ca-
pacity is essentially a relation.

But *Ill Seen Ill Said* is not primarily concerned with forces. Their nature is uninterrogated. They remain, they act, but they are never explained and rarely alluded to. The other means of escaping this tyranny of the gaze, the one more explicitly put forward here, is through language, what is ill said. Language functions in a different register to that of light, again neither visible nor invisible, although its action is intimately tied in with the operation of sight, ill said always being tied to ill seen. Language perverts vision, and here moves toward a neutrality that in some senses would be the ground on which forces act, their condition, neither positive nor negative, yet always both. Blanchot ties this force, which Nietzsche describes as a "pathos of distance," to language when he concludes that “difference, the play of time and of space, is the silent play of relations, ‘the multiple disengagement’ that governs writing – which amounts to saying that difference, essentially, writes” (IC 162).

Blanchot then inquires as to what is this fatal attraction of light, what is it about light that demands that it be taken as a metaphor for being and sight as a model for understanding. What do we have to mistrust about this gift of light that makes things evident? Does it not guarantee the forms of the outside world, ensure their constancy, fixity and therefore their meaning, laying this meaning bare for the mind to grasp, proffering it for our use and pleasure? But Blanchot perceives in light a duplicitous treachery, that what it promises is very different to what it gives, that what it gives is only the promise of a solidity of form, the promise of the immediate comprehension of the object. But this promise is one that it can only keep by deceiving the eye. Light acts as a guarantor of meaning in Nietzsche and Blanchot (along with light’s avatar, God), through the apparent immediacy of what it presents, but it is this presentation itself that Blanchot calls into question:

for it is perhaps in light itself that meaning is dissimulated. Light illuminates – this means that light hides itself: this is its malicious trait. Light illuminates: what is illuminated by light presents itself in an immediate presence that discloses itself without disclosing what makes it manifest. Light effaces its traces: invisible, it renders visible; it guarantees direct knowledge and ensures full presence, all the while holding itself back in that which is indirect and suppressing itself as presence. Light’s deception, then, would be in the fact that it slips away in a radiating absence, infinitely more obscure that any obscurity, since the absence proper to light is the very act of its light, its clarity, and since the work of light is accomplished only when light makes us forget that something like light is at work (thus making us forget, in the evidency in which it holds itself, all that it supposes –
the relation to unity to which light returns and that is its true sun). Clarity – the non-light of light, the non-seeing of seeing. Light is thus (at least) doubly deceptive: because it deceives us as to itself, and deceives us in giving as immediate what is not immediate, as simple what is not simple. The light of day is a false day, not because there would be a truer day, but because the truth of the day, the truth about it, is dissimulated by it; we see clearly only because light is clear and does not offer itself in the clarity it provides. But the most serious problem – in any case, the one with the gravest consequences – remains the duplicity by which light causes us to have confidence in the simplicity of the act of seeing, proposing mediation to us as the model of knowledge whereas light itself, out of sight and in a hidden manner, acts only as mediator, playing with us through the dialectic of illusion. (IC 162-3)

Blanchot here charges light with withholding and concealing its true nature, with pretending to be what it is not. Light pretends to offer the vision of things in their immediacy, but to do so it must make itself invisible, and thus hide the means, the medium, by which it acts. Light blinds us as to its true mode of operation. “The very act of its light” is predicated upon its own absence, its own withdrawal; what it renders visible is achieved through making itself invisible, as if it completely disappeared in the service of vision and entirely exhausted itself, without remainder, simply as a means for sight. But light is still always a medium, and in the service of vision, it can never completely disappear, there is always a remainder, but these facts are hidden, and this is light’s “gravest” duplicity: light is a medium that makes us forget the medium and assume what it presents as immediate. This has serious consequences in that it proposes for us a model for thought and for knowledge which would be immediate, that thinking and its object, the world, would be joined, united, and a perfect adequacy could be achieved between them. Immediacy also assumes that perfect presence is possible, indeed evident, that the world can be present, wholly and completely, to the viewer, there for him to analyse and grasp, without any parts being hidden from the light. Immediacy and presence assume the world being brought to an ideal truth, a visual truth. But the fact that light’s apparent immediacy is based on its functioning as a medium, that the presence it seems to offer is founded its own absence, throws serious doubts on the conceptions of knowledge, thought and presence as they manifest themselves in relation to the metaphor of light. And just as importantly this questions the foundations of the thinking of being as presence.

Nietzsche, however, and at least according to Blanchot, does not simply oppose a mediated form of knowledge to the immediate proposed
through analogy with light. Rather his work effects a “refusal of the immediate, refusal of mediation” (*IC* 163), a thought and a writing as non-mediation, outside of the binary opposition between mediation and the immediate. Being is always thought through the twin frames of either an immediate experience that the subject has of being, or through mediated knowledge, being as expressed through its attributes. But Nietzsche “thinks the world in order to free thought as much from the idea of being as from the idea of the whole, as much as from the exigency of meaning as from the exigency of the good: in order to free thought from thought, obliging it not to abdicate but to think more than it can, to think something other than what for it is possible” (*IC* 163). To think otherwise than the thought of being requires a thinking not subject to the demands of light, a thinking not governed by the laws of illumination. Writing, as occurs in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, accedes to such an exigency, as in Nietzsche the fragment is the mode of writing that permits other forms of thinking to arise.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said* vision is doubly perverted, firstly through its own inability to function adequately, and secondly through its perversion by language, perverted though the affirmation of vision as much as through its negation:

Reexamined rid of light the mouth changes. Unexplainably. Lips as before. Same closure. Same hint of extruding pulp. At the corners same imperceptible laxness. In a word the smile still there if smile is what it is. Neither more nor less. Less! And yet no longer the same. True that light distorts. Particularly sunset. That mockery. True too that the eyes then agaze for the viewless planet are now closed. On other viewlessness. Of which more if ever anon. There explanation at last. This same smile established with eyes open is with them closed no longer the same. Though between the two inspections the mouth unchanged. Utterly. Good. But in what way no longer the same? What there now that was not there? What there no more that was? Enough. Away.¹³

Here, light is affirmed through the fact that what is seen with the eyes open has an excess over what is seen with the eyes closed. The old woman’s smile is identical to both eyes, yet somehow it is less to the closed eye, the “other” eye opposed to “the eye of flesh.”¹⁴ This lessness is the remains of the world inaccessible to vision, or the inadequacy of thought as regards the thinking of being through light, thought’s inability to imitate the functioning of light. This suggests an ill seen and a worse seen, a worse seen which is also identical to the ill seen. The closing of the eyes, to shut out the world and make it present to the mind for contemplation, is somehow
worse than vision through open eyes. Yet the voice still strives for the closing of the eyes:

Not possible any longer except as figment. Not endurable. Nothing for it but to close the eye for good and see her. Her and the rest. Close it for good and all and see her unto death. Unremittent. In the shack. Over the stones. In the pastures. The haze. At the tomb. And back. And the rest. For good and all. To death. Be shut of it all. On to the next. Next figment. Close it for good this filthy eye of flesh. What forbids? Careful.¹⁵

The question is asked as to “What forbids?” the closing of the eye of flesh for good, closing it for good and seeing her. Perhaps she is only seen by this other eye, and not by the eye of flesh, but still the eye of flesh is prevented from closing. But what prevents this having done with it? An answer is proffered to the question of what prevents the divining of the old lady, what forbids her being grasped by sight: “What but life ending.”¹⁶ Dying is what prevents the eye from closing, indeed the closed eye is precisely death – dying is what forbids death.

There is a relation here between light and death, in some manner similar to the relation above between light and being that occurs in Nietzsche and Blanchot. Both complete visibility and complete lack of visibility define an attempt at achieving death, through complete comprehension or complete denial. Ill seen defines the impossibility of such an achievement; it maintains sight within the time of dying, between pure visibility and invisibility. So rather than an obsession with, or an interrogation of, either death or being, ill seen designates the movement of sight within the sphere of dying, the neutral time of the infinite movement toward death. This is a deflation of ontology, of the metaphysics of presence, alongside a simultaneous refusal of ideal absence. This refusal of ontology in no way implies an ethics, for as Levinas states, “ethics is an optics.”¹⁷ Light is the medium for the originary relation with the face of the other, but here we cannot assume light as the guarantor of this relation: as we have noted, light is treacherous, and in this case the relation with the face of the other is corrupted through the dissimulation of light in and by itself. Ethics as the founding relation with the other fails to take into account that which ethics itself is founded on, light.

The inverse of this ethical relation to the other is the impossibility of a stable subjectivity, and it is this lack of subjectivity that is dramatised in Ill Seen Ill Said. The eye that sees, the voice that speaks, both lack a sufficient constancy to qualify themselves as “a subject,” and even if we posit their conjunction we still do not arrive at subjectivity. They function as the point of articulation between the ill seen and the ill said, they operate as the
questioning of what happens at this point, what relates the ill seen to the ill 
said, and how the passage is effected from one to the other. We are given 
within this simple articulation something that perhaps precedes the subject, 
a point governed by neutrality rather than the laws of subjectivity, a point 
that assumes the roles of both passivity and activity regarding the world. 
Neither can we call this point “being,” for this would still be subject to the 
law of visibility, subject to a metaphysic that promises immediacy and com-
pletion.

Blanchot describes this point as neutral, but the neutral cannot justify 
either itself nor what occurs at this point. The neutral is the condition for 
both the ill seen and the ill said, but escapes the jurisdiction of both, being 
outside of the realm of the visible-invisible as much as that of speech-
silence. But we have seen how Beckett here brings together the ill seen 
and the ill said through the act of writing. The event of literature forces per-
ception to approach expression, it brings reading and writing toward each 
other, bringing the ill seen and the ill said into some form of contiguity, and 
the point of their impossible contact would be the point of absolute neutral-
ity, a relation that would be completely neutral. Writing lies outside the 
sphere of the visible-invisible. Perhaps it also lies outside of speech and si-
lence.

To elucidate writing’s articulation of the relation between the ill seen 
and the ill said, we return to Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche. In Nietzsche 
we find the attempt to think the world, and not being, “in order to free 
thought, obliging it not to abdicate but to think more than it can, to think 
something other than what for it is possible” (IC 162), an exigency that we 
hear through his fragmentary writing. Here arises the question as to how to 
think this world. Blanchot responds: “In thinking the world, Nietzsche thinks 
it as a text” (IC 165), or, more specifically, “Mundus est fabula” (IC 166). 
Nietzsche arrives at this point, again, through the destruction of opposi-
tions, in this case between “the real world” and its contrary (“Real and – 
how ill say its contrary? The counter-poison.”) \(^{18}\) Named in this case as “the 
apparent world.” In the chapter How the Real World at last Became a Myth, 
the idea of the real world is first of all destroyed, but, “We have abolished 
the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... But no! 
with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!” \(^{19}\) The op-
position between the real and its contrary had again been shown not to 
hold up under the rigours of Nietzsche’s thought. Which leads Klossowski, 
in a like manner to Blanchot, to state that “le monde devient fable, le 
monde tel quel n’est que fable: fable signifie quelque chose qui se raconte 
et qui n’existe que dans le récit; le monde est quelque chose qui se ra-
conte, un événement raconté et donc une interprétation.” \(^{20}\) Blanchot also
reads Nietzsche this way, quoting him as writing “The world: the infinite of interpretation (the unfolding of a designation, infinitely)” (IC 164). At the end of How the Real World at last Became a Myth, we read the incantation, “In- cipit Zarathustra,” and what is important to note here is that the question Zarathustra raises is one of interpretation, it is always a question of how did Zarathustra speak, the answer being “thus spake Zarathustra.” Zarathustra’s relation to the world is through the “how” of his speech, in what mode, in what manner, in other words through his interpretation. And one of Zarathustra’s lessons is that this world that is an interpretation has no subject that interprets: “One may not ask: ‘who then interprets?’ for interpreta- tion itself is a form of the will to power, it exists (not as a ‘being’ but as a ‘process,’ a ‘becoming’) as affect” (IC 164). But Blanchot warns us:

Interpreting, the movement of interpretation in its neutrality – this is what must not be taken as a means of knowing, an instrument thought would have at its disposal in order to think the world. The world is not an object of interpretation, any more than it is proper for interpretation to give itself an object, even an unlimited object, from which it would distinguish itself. The world: the infinite of interpreting; or again, to interpret: the infinite: the world. These three terms can only be given in a juxtaposition that does not confound them, does not distinguish them, does not put them in relation, and that thus re- sponds to the exigency of fragmentary writing. (IC 164)

This neutral movement of interpretation is the articulation of the ill seen ill said, the point where they come into contact is the point of interpretation. Interpretation lies between what is ill seen and what is ill said, and this is why this point is tied to writing. It is the point of combination of the perceived passivity of perception and the perceived activity of speech. That it is always ill seen and ill said is its form of response to the demand of writ- ing, the demand not to see or write in terms of light or unity. But this point of interpretation also corrupts both the ill seen and the ill said, as neither are self-sufficient, and does not allow them the possibility of anchoring themselves in any fixed position, in any fixed relation to the world, because the world itself is this interpretation, this fable. “The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous words their treacheries.”21 This is the neutrality of interpretation, the impossibility of having done with interpretation, the necessity to ill-interpret again.

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NOTES


20 Pierre Klossowski, *Un si funeste désir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963), p. 181: “The world becomes a fable, the world as such is nothing other than a fable: a fable signifies something that narrates itself and which does not exist except in the narration; the world is something which narrates itself, a narrated event and thus an interpretation” (my translation).

The Blanchot/Beckett Correspondence: 

Situating the Writer/Writing at the Limen of Naught

Curt G. Willits

In 1943, in *Faux pas*, six years prior to Samuel Beckett’s famous aesthetic pronouncement in “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit” (“The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express”),¹ Maurice Blanchot wrote in his essay “From Dread to Language”: “The writer finds himself in this more and more comical position – of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it” (GO 5). The similarity between the two positions is intriguing, and perhaps no mere coincidence. Indeed, reading Blanchot’s theoretical pieces, we discover the plane of the unfeasible that inhabits, as well, the Beckettian universe.²

Blanchot writes in “From Dread to Language”:

The world, things, knowledge, are for [the writer] only reference points across the void. And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothing is his material. … What is more … it stands apart from all investigation; it cannot be taken as an end; one cannot propose to the will that it adopt as its end something that takes possession of the will by annihilating it … [and therefore] the writer’s “I have nothing to say,” like that of the accused, contains the whole secret of his

solitary condition (GO 5).

This passage announces a literature of exile. Blanchot summons the writer to the limit-experience of the eternal return of naught, an experience that transforms the writer into a witless insomniac, eyes wide but seeing nothing at all, almost, who ushers the night into day: an experience of non-identity and difference-in-itself – of “my consciousness without me” (“Literature and the Right to Death” [1948] GO 47).

Similarly, Beckett’s project to write a “literature of the unword” corresponds to Blanchot’s situating the writer/writing at the threshold of the il y a, a term tropologically designating (after Levinas) the passive, indifferent, irreducible naught of Being. The Levinasian/Blanchovian “there is” is to be thought, following Nietzsche’s thinking the eternal recurrence of the same, as Being without beings – eclipsed from the world of event, causality, and representation. For Nietzsche, this is the thinking of nihilism, what Blanchot calls “a movement of infinite negation” (“Reflections on Nihilism” IC 145). Blanchot however points to the utter impotence and powerlessness, the “logical vertigo,” that accompanies this movement of thought (or willing):

It is nihilistic thought par excellence: it is how Nihilism surpasses itself absolutely by making itself definitively insurpassable. … Eternal Return is not on the order of … power. The experience of the Eternal Return involves a reversal of all … perspectives. The will that wills nothingness … [is] without either will or end. (IC 148-9)

This liminal experience of naught drives Beckett’s “literature of the unword,” his “aesthetics of failure.” Indeed both Blanchot’s and Beckett’s poetics welcome the unaccountable, a silence paradoxically uttered by no one. To be sure, it is emphatically silence not associated with Heidegger’s silent voice of conscience that calls for an individual to shape authentically his or her destiny in relation to death’s certainty (in Being and Time). It is silence that cannot be aligned, indeed, to either human interiority or exteriority. It is, rather, silence without possibility. Always forgotten and powerless, it is already always outside, other than, itself.

But how must, as artists, Blanchot and Beckett proceed? In the 1948 essay “Peintres de l’Empêchement,” Beckett asks: “Car que reste-t-il de représentable si l’essence de l’objet est de se dérober à la représentation?” (“For what is it that remains representable if the essence of the object is to hide from representation?”) And he replies: “Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade.” (“It remains to represent the conditions of this hiddenness.”) The following year, 1949, Beckett articulates these “conditions,” after Blanchot, in his seminal aesthetic dictum (quoted above in our essay’s opening paragraph), not in terms of an objective analysis of the
“hiddenness,” but in terms of the ontological situation of the writer – i.e., in terms of the writer’s bewildering obligation to write unknowingly, impotently, impossibly, nothing.

In the conclusion to his study of Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, Thomas Trezise writes:

Subjectivity expresses itself to the extent, and only to the extent, that it has always already been forced outside of itself, that it is always already intersubjective. Expression is therefore to be understood as both a compulsion, a necessity or an obligation and, paradoxically ... the involvement of subjectivity in a universe without power. ... [Thus] preceding subjectivity itself in its traditional understanding, intersubjectivity designates what Blanchot calls “Quelqu’un” [“someone”], an Other that is not another subject.\(^5\)

Heidegger shows the way for Blanchot’s irreducible Other. In speaking about the purely other-ness or “distantiality” of this primordial “outside,” Heidegger writes: “The ‘who’ [of Dasein in its everydayness] is not this one, not that one, not oneself ... not some people ... and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the ‘they’ [das Man]. ... Everyone is the other, and no one is himself”\(^6\) – that is, everyone is always already a divisive nonevent.

However, whereas Heidegger opposes Dasein’s inauthentic everydayness of the subject-less they (that acts as the ontological ground for definitive, “in-the-world,” manipulative others) to Dasein’s projection of possibilities toward authentic, meaningful selfhood “toward-death,” Blanchot valorises the meaningless everydayness of the anonymous “quelqu’un.” And it is this “Other” endlessly other, this “outside” that is neither outside nor inside, to which the writer must relinquish him or herself.

Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1949) – the last novel in the trilogy: *Molloy, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* – suggests such an “outside” as a paradoxical and ultimately meaningless verbal event. As an unending, linguistic metaphor for an imageless image, *The Unnamable* gives voice to that which Blanchot calls “the narrative voice,” that of the voiceless, irreducible, ghostly “quelqu’un”:

This tone, these words, to make me think they come from me ... a voice that never stops, you don’t know where it’s coming from ... They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking ... Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere.\(^7\)
As if describing the situation of the itinerant voices of *The Unnamable*, Gerald L. Bruns characterizes Blanchot's burdensome “space of literature” as “the invasion of the writer” by “an impossible task”:

The event resembles the prophetic invasion of an alien divinity that breaks one off from the world. No one asks to be a prophet, words stuffed in one’s mouth, raving in the desert. Responsibility takes the form of exposure, being exposed … to something like an empty, abandoned space. In this space one is no longer a cognitive subject that can take the measure of its surroundings. Rather the subject has been turned out of its house, deprived of any refuge; it is now a restless, itinerant ego, if “ego” is still the word.8

Such ontological exile, opening upon an oppressive, schizoid wandering – as Beckett depicts in *neither*, “from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither”9 – forces the writer to submit to the neutral worklessness of language, to a silence that speaks. In *Malone Dies* (the novel preceding *The Unnamable*), Malone does “die” – but only as the “author” must who has fallen into such a pitiless, unconscionable solitude as the extreme limit of dying *alone* requires, an “essential solitude” (see Blanchot’s “The Essential Solitude” SL 19-34) that is outside of and “outlives” subjectivity. *The Unnamable* is what, subsequently, remains of writing when it is bereaved of its “author,” its intending overseer – the writer reduced to merely a defective transmitter or impaired conduit. *The Unnamable* exists, therefore, as a writing of Blanchovian import, a writing filtered through a demented, nonintending consciousness *writing itself*, as nothing at all. As an unintentional, fortuitous recording of the tumultuous passivity within the boundless interspace of intersubjectivity, such writing exists as a verbal daguerreotype of literary “space” where “everything has disappeared,” however dissimulated.

In his essay “Where Now? Who Now?” Blanchot indicates that Samuel Beckett’s

*The Unnamable* is precisely experience lived under threat of the impersonal, the approach of a neutral speech that speaks itself alone, that goes through the one who hears it, that is without intimacy, excludes any intimacy, one that cannot be silenced, for it is the incessant, the interminable. … the one writing is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself, dispossessed him and let go of him, gave him over to the outside, making him a nameless being, the Unnamable, a being without being who can neither live nor die, cannot cease or begin, the empty place in which the listlessness of an empty speech speaks, one that with great difficulty regains a porous and agonizing I. (BC 213)
For *The Unnamable*’s narrative voice(s), there can be no comforting (human) illusion of a unified subjectivity. Indeed, any notion of a transcendent- 
tal ego is already always a movement in futility, dispatched by the intermin-
able violation of the “they”:

How many of us all together, finally? And who is holding forth at the 
moment? And to whom? And about what? These are futile teasers. 
… I expiate vilely, like a pig, dumb, uncomprehending, possessed of 
no utterance but theirs.¹⁰

*The Unnamable* lays conspicuously bare the (non)event of the narrative 
voice, the site of the writer/writing at the threshold of the *il y a*. Blanchot de-
scribes this “space of literature” as 

the indeterminate milieu of fascination. … Distance here is the limit-
less depth behind the image, a lifeless profundity … where objects 
sink away when they depart from their sense, when they collapse 
into their image. Fascination is fundamentally linked to [the] neutral 
… indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone. … To write 
is to enter the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threat-
ens. It is to surrender to the risk of time’s absence, where eternal 
starting over reigns [and] what happens to me happens to no one … 
repeat[ing] itself in an infinite dispersal. … Where [language] be-
comes … the opaque, empty opening onto that which is when there 
is no more world, when there is no world yet. (SL 32-3)

From the very beginning of *The Unnamable* – “Where now? Who now? 
When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving”¹¹ – the plane of composi-
tion, the universe in which the impossibility of the ephetic narrative re-
volves, addresses the limit-experience of the *il y a*. Indeed, what at first ap-
pears to be the inception of a Neo-Heideggerian, hermeneutical enquiry 
into the question of Being – of the thrownness (“Where now?”), the fallen-
ness (“Who now?”), and the within-time-ness (“When now?”) of Dasein, an-
ticipating perhaps a new perspective on Dasein’s disclosedness – becomes 
instead a narrative that derails any possibility of a phenomenological en-
quity. The narrative’s abrupt “Unquestioning” of the “where,” “who,” and 
“when” not only swiftly disposes of the Heideggerian circular, questioning 
“as-structure” (of Dasein’s fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception) of 
understanding/interpretation, but also forecloses any notion that Dasein 
could even possibly exist in the “Unbelieving” of the “I, say I.”¹² All that re-
mains of the “I” in *The Unnamable* is a nondeictic echoing – for *The Un-
namable* is, rather, *écriture* at and as its own never-ending end: character-
ized by an unrelenting assault on words, on signification, in a meticulously
wrought movement of desultory purposelessness, characterized by the
paradoxical play of signifiers voiding themselves of meaning, already al-
ways on the way to nothing, but always by way of something, forever con-
demned to step back inside the circle of logocentrism in stepping outside it.

In “Where Now,” Blanchot recognizes Beckett’s aesthetic obligation:

The work … demands that the man who writes it sacrifice himself for
the work, become other – not other than the living man he was, the
writer with his duties, his satisfactions, and his interests, but he must
become no one, the empty and animated space where the call of the
work resounds. (BC 215-6)

The writer’s self-annihilation effected by the work, by the work’s “test of im-
possibility” (BC 216), the work’s worklessness (see “The Gaze of Orpheus”
GO 102-4), is what Blanchot recognizes in the trilogy as Beckett’s “experi-
ment,” fully realized in The Unnamable. Interestingly, at one point in The
Unnamable, the narrative voice comically alludes to the actual in situ of the
Blanchovian (and now, we may say, Beckettian) writer, the writer as “a deaf
half-wit, hearing nothing of what he says and understanding even less”:14

“Set aside once and for all … all idea of beginning and end. Overcome, that
goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness. Equate me,
without pity or scruple, with him who exists, somehow … with him whose
story this story had the brief ambition to be.”15 This passage suggests from
Beckett’s Watt Sam’s ill heard and ill recorded narrative of Watt’s cryptic,
fragmented, and perversely inverted utterance of Watt’s threshold experi-
ence with Knott, an event resonant with Blanchot’s statement from “From
Dread to Language” (published, as previously stated, in 1943 when Beckett
was still at work on Watt): i.e., “the existence of the writer is proof that
within one individual there exists side by side a mute who has lost all words
[which crudely Watt has become] firmly wedded to an orator, master of dis-
course [which somewhat Sam is, in his demented way]” (GO 6). Similarly,
in so many words, negating Sam’s point of view in favour of the liminal
Watt/Knott’s, The Unnamable’s first-person narrative constructs a fictive
body and mind for the novel’s “deaf half-wit” writer:

When I think, that is to say, no, let it stand, when I think of the time
I’ve wasted with these bran-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn’t
even the first, when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach,
tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with soli-
tude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence, and even still, to-
day, I have no faith in it, none, so that I have to say, when I speak,
Who speaks, and seek, and so on.16
We must be careful: an autobiographical aside from Beckett is not what is at work in *The Unnamable*; for this seeming turn toward interiority, suggesting a conscious human perspective – engaged in mulling over the topical orientation of the limit-experience – is purely dissimulation, a play of surface upon and masking of the narrative voice. Leading us back into the interiority of consciousness is not, to be sure, Beckett’s or Blanchot’s aim.

Michel Foucault highlights the problem: “Thought about thought [which Foucault calls the ‘I think’], an entire tradition, wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority.”¹⁷ In contrast, for Foucault, the “I speak,” language’s utterly dumbed-down physicality, is already always present in any speaking, but it is veiled in the noetically imbued (traditionally understood) sign. The dissimulation of the “I speak” by the meaning-giving sign apotheosizes the interiorized certitude of the “I think” and the signifying utility of language in general. Writing’s task, therefore, is to deconstruct the “I think,” nullifying interiority (and therefore any sense of an exteriority as well) by prioritizing the erasure of signification while privileging the no-thing that marks, under such perverse linguistic conditions, the “I speak.” Paradox looms, however, in the movement of language to elude meaning. As Foucault indicates: “To negate one’s own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak.”¹⁸

Blanchot comments:

The narrative voice that is inside only insofar as it is outside, at a distance without any distance, cannot be embodied: even though it can borrow the voice of a judiciously chosen character or even create the hybrid position of mediator (this voice which destroys all mediation), it is always different from what utters it, it is the indifferent-difference that alters the personal voice.” (GO 142)

As indicated above, at one particular point *The Unnamable*’s narrative teasingly suggests that one Samuel Beckett speaks. The narrative, drawing upon a pseudo-autobiographical sketch of Beckett, suggests that Beckett (who seemingly speaks via the “I”), now through with creating characters, avows that his material from here on shall concern the impersonal neutrality of language (narration) itself, aligned ontologically to the writer’s liminal experience of naught, to the situation of the writer at the borders of an infinite time of dying.

Blanchot admits that *The Unnamable* temptingly evokes something of this “malaise of a man fallen outside of the world and … floating eternally between being and nothingness, incapable henceforth of dying and inca-
pable of being born, shot through with ghosts, his creatures, in which he
does not believe and which tell him nothing" (BC 216). We are in fact en-
couraged seemingly by Beckett’s script to adopt such an anthropomorphic
interpretation when reading “the time I’ve wasted with these bran-dips, be-
ginning with Murphy … when I had me, on the premises” — that is, until
we realize that the manifestation of a creature we too easily associate with
Beckett’s name is not just another imaginary whim devised by a demented
human subject (i.e., the writer), but is rather merely the construction of a
desultory string of useless signifiers (that we have isolated and hyposta-
tized from the text’s ongoing ebb and flow of useless signifiers) issued from
an inhuman, unimaginable nonorginary site, the site of the Blanchovian
“quelqu’un,” merely “borrow[ing] the voice of a judiciously chosen charac-
ter,” wherewith speech speaks not.

We must keep in mind that, as the vagrant mouthpiece of the narrative
voice, the writer is irreducibly without prospects or hope of recuperating
phenomenologically a subject-object or interior-exterior bearing. It is not
therefore Beckett or anyone else who speaks in The Unnamable. Rather,
as Blanchot unequivocally states: as the writer is plunged into and seized
by an inescapable dread toward writing at the limit, s/he is “trapped and
turning in circles in a space that one can’t leave, even by death, since to be
in this space in the first place, one had precisely to have fallen outside of
life” (BC 213). We would indeed be grossly misrepresenting the text to
suggest that The Unnamable is merely the rantings from the interior ex-
tremities of a romantic, "self-annihilated" author, or merely the protracted
complaint of a demented writer, liminally bereft of consciousness, whose
script is but a description of a indeterminate journeying localized at the bor-
ders of the surd space of the imagination. As The Unnamable’s narrative
voice confesses: “The poor bastards. They could clap an artificial anus in
the hollow of my hand and still I wouldn’t be there, alive with their life, not
far short of a man, just barely a man, sufficiently a man to have hopes one
day of being one.”

Indeed, what we want to believe is meaningful in The
Unnamable never, ultimately, is.

Similarly, The Unnamable’s “trouble with the pronouns” is indeed prob-
lematic if the novel’s pronouns are read from a nondeconstructed, logocen-
tric bias. Traditionally, of course, pronouns designate someone’s or some-
thing’s presence. However, The Unnamable’s pronouns should be read as
nondeictic, emptied of being, pointing neither here nor there, to no-thing
and to no one. “I, say I. Unbelieving.” Blanchot tells us that the demand of
the neuter upon the narrative voice “tends to suspend the attributive struc-
ture of the language, [suspends] that relationship to being, implicit or ex-
plicit, that is immediately posed in our languages as soon as something is
said” (“The Narrative Voice” GO 143). For Blanchot, the “exaction” of the neuter’s demand is illustrated by *The Unnamable*’s impulse that, as the work strives to be accomplished, leads it toward that point where it is put to the test of impossibility. There, language does not speak, it is; in it, nothing begins, nothing is said, but it is always new and always begins again. (*BC* 216)

Possessed by the inhuman treadmill of the “outside,” the writer becomes the neutered voice-box through which the voiceless voice speaks: “with closed eyes I see the same as with them open … nothing, I see nothing, well that is a disappointment, I was hoping for something better than that, is that what it is to be unable to lose yourself.” 22 “Self” used here—or any self-referential pronoun in *The Unnamable*—is not to be confused with a substantial self of Cartesian certainty or with an unsubstantial self of romantic uncertainty. Rather the confusion lies with our inability to conceive of “the one outside of life we always were in the end, all our long vain life long,” 23 the unnameable outside “who” speaks, yet does not speak (through the vanquished author, now no one), who paradoxically says, “I’ll speak of me when I speak no more.” 24 The “I” and the “me” and the “he” are always, throughout the text, no thing at all, are always, that is, inconsequential signifiers of the Other “who” is always outside any concept of otherness. As Blanchot tells us, the narrative voice is not heard, first of all, and everything that gives it a distinct reality begins to betray it. Then again, being without its own existence, speaking from nowhere, suspended in the tale as a whole, it is not dissipated there either, as light is, which, though invisible itself, makes things visible: it is radically exterior, it comes from exteriority itself, the outside that is the special enigma of language in writing. (“The Narrative Voice” GO 142)

The failed movement of Beckett’s novel toward a totalized realization of unnameability, of attaining *in the end* a “literature of the unword,” bespeaks the utter(ed) worthlessness of this irremissible vagabondage of words. Words build upon one another, and then elide themselves, constructing futile image after futile image toward the ever evasive imageless image. What remains is an inexhaustive, ever mounting and collapsing, accumulation of failing possibilities to inscribe the ineffable, inevitably posited and inevitably rejected. Always there are more words, rendering/exposing yet another hoax, another lie in an infinite series of lies, another impossible attempt to recover nothing at all. And this round of error is exigent for all words/images brought into play. (We are reminded of Foucault’s lauding
above of Blanchot’s persistently deconstructed discourse, “to cast it ceaselessly outside itself, to deprive … not only of what has just been said, but of the very ability to speak.”) Hence, after conjuring various pictures of light and shadow, people and things, sights and sounds, vice-existers and surrogates, *The Unnamable*’s narrative voice invalidates them by simply saying such (but only to begin again its hopeless circuit of “meaning”-laden but ultimately empty words):

And the sounds? No, all is silent. And the lights, on which I had set such store, must they too go out? Yes, out with them, there is no light here … Nothing then but me, of which I know nothing, except that I have never uttered. … And Basil and his gang? Inexistent, invented to explain I forget what. Ah yes, all lies, God and man, nature and the light of day, the heart’s outpourings and the means of understanding, all invented, basely, by me alone, with the help of no one, since there is no one, to put off the hour when I must speak of me.25

Once we understand that there is no “me” to speak of, except as “no one” – two words that still imply a presence, a new conceptualization of the “me” that can never be “me” – we can understand why the unnameable voice can also say, “I alone am man and all the rest divine”;26 for “man” is nothing, in truth a de-centred, empty intersubjectivity, already always outside himself, always compromised by the neuter that he essentially is. However, utterance – constituted by our inability to elide the involuntary exigency of language/thought – populates and thus covers over the neuter with “things,” “beings” (marking the fateful “fall” of “man” from the everydayness of the *il y a* into the realm of words and concepts):

Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to, there is no one, it’s an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me from it, there is nothing, nothing to discover, nothing to recover, nothing that can lessen what remains to say.27

One may reservedly conjecture that through Blanchot’s theoretical essays in the 1940s, Beckett found two literary figures – the subject-less writer and the voiceless voice – that would continue to inform such novels, after *The Unnamable*, as *Texts Without Words* and *How It Is*. Indeed, the burlesquing of an eternally silent voice and a “deaf, dumb, and blind” writer appear to function as Beckett’s lynchpin to prick open the equivocating speech of Blanchot’s narrative (voiceless) voice and to allegorize in (sham)efully “meaningful” shaggy-dog stories the tragi-comic conditions of the Blanchovichian writer, inscribed as a vain and idle, yet unrelinquishing, exigent fancy.
Besides Blanchot’s essays on Beckett’s post-World War II trilogy and the novel *How It Is*, and his tribute to Beckett after Beckett’s death, no other criticisms apparently exist by either man that refer to the other’s work; nor did the two writers communicate through letters. Nonetheless, a writerly correspondence does surely exist between the two artists. Blanchot’s advocacy of the writer’s hemiplegic self-forgetting, -exile, -dispossession which drives a vagrant, aporetic writing conspires with Beckett’s: a writing poised in stark contrast to the dialectical hypostasis of logocentrism, a writing of nonrelational passivity, without aim or result, a writing of bad conscience at the threshold of the *il y a*, akin to the condemned prisoner’s “I have nothing to say.”

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**NOTES**


2 Although it may loosely suggest as much, the intention of this study is not to claim that Beckett was influenced by Blanchot’s critical theory. However, since both were working, by the time of their mature works, in the same general aesthetic direction – i.e., to write nothing – a case of influence could possibly be made for either writer.


12 The “I” of Dasein is not an “I” of thing-grounded designation, but is the “I” of what
the word Dasein explicitly means. For clarity’s sake I quote from Being and Time: “Even when Dasein explicitly addresses itself as ‘I here’, this locative personal designation must be understood in terms of Dasein’s existential spatiality. In interpreting this we have already intimated that this ‘I-here’ does not mean a certain privileged point – that of an I-Thing – but is to be understood as Being-in in terms of the ‘yonder’ of the world that is ready-to-hand – the ‘yonder’ which is the dwelling-place of Dasein as concern” (155). The “I” in Beckett’s The Unnamable, however, displays neither a deictic sensibility nor a “locative personal … existential spatiality” as “concern.”

13 In the essay “Where Now? Who Now?” Blanchot emphasizes the problems the characters in Molloy and Malone Dies pose in contrast to the success of the absence of character in The Unnamable. About Molloy, Blanchot says, “But, as irregular as the view we are given of him is, Molloy remains an identifiable character, a definite name who protects us from a yet more troubling menace.” Molloy transforms into Moran, Blanchot believes. But Blanchot is not impressed, arguing that the “metamorphosis” introduces “an allegorical, perhaps deceptive, meaning, for we do not feel the scope of the profundity hidden there.” About Malone Dies, Blanchot writes that “Malone, like Molloy, is a name and a figure,” and complains that Malone’s obsessive story-telling overshadows and therefore detracts from what is more intriguing, “from Malone, the one who is dying” and, more importantly, from the “infinite time of his death,” “in order not to let this empty time speak.” But upon reaching The Unnamable, Blanchot boldly announces: “We may be in the presence not of a book but rather something much more than a book: the pure approach of the impulse from which all books come, of that original point where the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores the endless pointlessness in it, but with which it must also maintain a relationship that is always beginning again, under the risk of being nothing. The Unnamable is condemned to exhaust infinity” (BC, 210-7).

18 Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot”, p.22.
26 Beckett, Unnamable, p. 300.
There is something undeniably curious about the work of Maurice Blanchot. His writings would seem to belong to the obscurities of the night in such a way that they refuse critical interpretation even as they suggest the possibility of a reflection on the practice of literary-critical reading. There is a sense in which Blanchot is to be located always someplace else, both somewhere beyond his text and sometime not yet contemporaneous with it. The imprint of his hand might hover over the grain of the page casting its hermitic shadow and guarding against what might gather itself there, but this hand, if ever it did, no longer belongs to him. The writer writes, Blanchot argues, to the extent that the writer has always already been written by writing; writing is what the writer must give up in order to write so that writing, in fact, would carry always within itself a resistance to any of the advances a hermeneutic or metalanguage might feign to hazard.

But what would the implications of this argument be and, in particular, what would this mean for Blanchot scholarship? In principle, the question here is double. It concerns whether the work of Blanchot contributes to the end of the common practice of literary criticism, broadly understood as analytic interpretation, or whether the impossibility his work does and does not perform suggests the terms for another form of criticism; specifically, one that is neither proscriptive nor explicatory but that recasts the critical from
the perspective of a discourse that paradoxically presents itself under the
sign of its own erasure. The inevitable problem with such a critical ap-
proach, however, is that its practice unavoidably will run the risk of effecting
nothing other than the parodic return of criticism to the labyrinthine mystery
of the Blanchotian register. Even if this is the case, however, this paper ar-
gues that it is only by writing within the margins of Blanchot's text that the
ambiguous mystery of his work can be properly approached. Indeed, if, as
Blanchot writes in “Literature and the Right to Death,” literature itself is
“language turning into ambiguity,” then the question of such ambiguity can
be answered only by “rediscovering it in the ambiguity of our answer” (WF
341). From this perspective, the structural challenge that therefore faces
the literary critical is the methodological practice of a form of writing and
reading structured around the principle of ambiguity itself. It bears remark-
ing that the formulation of such a practice necessarily accords a certain
propriety or value to ambiguity. As such, the first part of this paper seeks to
address not only the exigency of ambiguity across Blanchot's work gener-
ally but also the ways in which the hesitant effacement of certainty in Blan-
chot is inseparable from the demand of a certain conduct of reading, which
is to say, from a certain “good” or “proper” technique of reading. In the sec-
ond section, I outline two particular methods of literary criticism that such a
version of reading suggests. In sum, then, the question is two-fold: first,
how is one to read Blanchot on his own terms, and second, what might this
version of reading do to – or more optimistically, do for – the practice of lit-
erary criticism?

How to Be a Good Reader

Towards the beginning of Death Sentence there is an appeal to reti-
cence. “Once I am dead,” the narrator comments, “the ‘living proof,’” the
remnants or residue of a writer’s life, “will represent only the shell of an
enigma, and I hope that those who love me will have the courage to de-
stroy it, without trying to learn what it means. … I beg them not to open
what is closed” (DS 3). There is a request to not go looking, to leave alone
what remains, to let be. The question such an appeal raises is whether this
means that in order to remain faithful to the demand Blanchot’s work car-
ries it would be better to speak neither of Blanchot nor of his work, to leave
closed what closes itself, to do this out of a kind of friendship and gratitude
that discloses itself through the reticent distance it keeps. Perhaps. Yet as
Blanchot explicitly comments in The Writing of the Disaster, “to be silent is
still to speak. Silence is impossible” (WD 11). Indeed, as Blanchot previ-
ously outlined it in “Interruption: As on a Riemann Surface,” silence is in
fact that which permits speech in the first place, so that even in silence there would be an already complicit relation identified between the work and the reader (IC 75-9). How, then, to speak both of and from a point of distance and non-comprehension? How to speak of the unspoken that gives speech without turning the unspoken into what is speakable? It is no doubt a question addressed less to the figure by the name of Blanchot than it is to methods of criticism, to the institution, say, of comparative literature. How is one to write about that which maintains the exteriority of writing from discourse, that shadows its own exegetical effacement in its obliteration of the generic distinction between, for example, literature, philosophy and criticism? How to speak, as Blanchot puts it, “only to interrupt oneself and render possible the impossible interruption?” (IC 79).

In his “In Place of a Foreword” Edmond Jabès writes that “a good reader is, first of all, a sensitive, curious, demanding reader. In reading, he follows his intuition.” Jabès goes on to explain that intuition would involve, for example, entering a text by way of a detour, that is, not entering by way of the main door, if there is one, but by that of a wrong door, moved, as one is if one is a good reader, by an “insatiable desire to unlearn or to founder in the abyss.” This amounts to saying, however, that it would never be in fact possible to tell whether one was being a good reader or not; to read well would be to lose oneself in reading, to never know what, if anything, one were doing. The good reader, then, is passive, faceless, and perhaps most of all, secretive. The good reader curls up with the work in a quiet corner, abandons themselves to a reading that does not ask any questions but simply lets the work be. This is the secrecy of reading but it is also reading’s secret that, by not caring for the work, simply returns the work to its own ambivalent obscurity, which is to say, to writing. Things are curious, and, no doubt, growing curiouser still. But it is precisely this curiousness and this “in-difference” that means that the (good) reader will never have done with reading or even have come to it. The good reader would be the one who responds to the text simply by returning dumbstruck to it. The proper or the good response would be the one that does not respond but simply repeats the impossibility of responding. In this sense, the good reader is the one who does not read because this not-reading is the very thing that maintains the text’s legibility; the text is legible because it is not yet read. If the good reader happens to encounter the text at all it is only by encountering the absence of an encounter. At no moment, Jabès writes, has one left one’s own, even if that also means, in this context at least, at no moment has one been one’s own. The good reader responds by remaining both outside the text and themselves, either with fascination or with words always already overwritten, which do not explain but circle and
leave untouched and move off in their own non-direction toward the rift that both suspends and announces them.

What is it to speak of a “good” reader here? Does the adjectival qualification effectively prescribe a mandate of reading which, to all intents and purposes, would appear to be resolutely opposed to the non-reading Jabès proposes? Does it suggest that there is also a “bad” way of not-reading? Which is to ask: does any discussion of reading inevitably involve an implicit ascription of value, even if the attribution of value is precisely that which reading, not-reading, puts into question? Does the questioning of value itself belie a notion of value in the sense that it privileges the form of the question? In a manner of speaking, yes. If the object of the question of value were utilitarian, that is, a means to an end, then undoubtedly this would be the case. However, when it comes to literature and reading, things are far less certain. Indeed, it is far from clear whether it could be said that literature or reading constitute anything that might remotely resemble a means to anything whatsoever, let alone whether either could ever survive such a putting-to-use. In relation to the literary work the question of value could have little or no significance precisely because the literary work is unemployable, that is, an end in itself. In the *Critique of Judgment*, for instance, Kant defines the aesthetic object as having a purposiveness without purpose. For Kant, the purposiveness of the work of art is that each of its parts correlate into an end, but it is also without purpose because the end it both creates and constitutes is simply affective and cannot be put to any external function or ascribed any value. For Kant, the experience of the work of art would be only pleasure without measure. Thus, if the notion of value bears on the literary work at all, it does so only because the non-functionary status of the literary work would be in fact that which puts the notion of value into question. At the same time, however, as it is precisely the literary work’s passivity that puts the notion of value into question, so the literary work could never be charged with recasting value from the point of view of passivity. Antithetical to work, passivity is neither negative nor positive, but neutral. It is, quite literally, always different and indifferent to itself, indifferent to both difference and indifference.

In the context of “literary” reading, therefore, good and bad are themselves indifferent to opposition. There is no good reading as there is no bad reading: there is only reading, blank reading. Yet this is also precisely why it is necessary to distinguish between good and bad reading. The work requires reading in that, along with writing, reading is a condition by way of which the work becomes a work. At the same time, in order that the work be available for reading, it is necessary that reading fail its task. For Blanchot, the good reader would not be what he terms the critical reader but the
literary reader. Rather than interrogating “the work in order to know how it was fashioned” (SL 203), which is to say, rather than subordinating the openness of reading to an active means of elucidating the value and meaning of the work (and, by proxy, the value of reading itself), all of which Blanchot identifies with critical reading, the literary reader – or what Blanchot refers to as “the true reader” (SL 203) – passively collapses before the work, giving “the work back to itself: back to its anonymous presence, to the ... impersonal affirmation that it is” (SL 193). The work says nothing and of the work, therefore, there is nothing to say. If the work is to remain communicable at all, this is what it is necessary to say, always again, always badly, and always for the first time. As such, the task of the good reader is not to say the work but rather to procure a space in which the work can continue not to say itself. The good reader reads badly, although precisely because one reads, one must also admonish oneself for never reading badly enough. It is necessary, as Beckett writes, “to fail again, fail better.” In this regard, the good reader is not simply the one who fails but the one whom, failing, leaves open a space for failure’s infinite repetition. That is to say, good reading is nothing more than a reading that breaks down, that peers and squints and no longer reads, that forms itself by way of an un-reading that obscures it. If the good reader puts the book down and speaks of the work at all, they do so only from the standpoint of what both it and they do not say.

The good reader, therefore, reveres neither the work nor the word but responds to each by way of irreverence. Indeed, as Blanchot’s own practice of literary criticism so often demonstrates itself, misquotation and paraphrase are the figures of good reading par excellence; by speaking of the work they affirm only the work’s non-sovereignty, non-identity. The Blanchotian literary reader abandons reading, gives up on it, lets it come to them in a dream, in “the reawakening of the interminable” (SL 267), in which consciousness (intentionality?) is held captive and captivated, removed from and by what it encounters; exerting itself in this “remove” (understood in the double sense of taking off or disconnection and moving again or re-move). Writing in response to a request to provide a commentary on two of his short fictions, Blanchot wrote: “You will never know what you have written, even if you have written only to find this out” (VC 59). The same, it would seem, is emblematic of reading. Like a detour that, strictly speaking, doesn’t begin, the literary reader drifts across the page only to forget the work at daybreak, returning it to itself, to its own hesitation.

Broadly outlined, then, to be a good reader is to engage a method of reading that is the dissimulation of comprehension. It is to be out of place, unsure, unsteady; it is to experience an inexorable equivocation of deduc-
tive reasoning. That is to say, it indicates a non-productive activity, one that wastes in the time it takes, that takes place as the very abject dissipation of its own experience. It is, in other words, a reading that does not advance but that remains always incomplete, such that it is possible only to return to reading, which is to say, such that it is possible only to aggravate the experience of not-reading, of not-being-able. In this sense, to be a good reader is to accept the laughable interminability of reading, of failing to read; it is to set off, but to have taken, therefore, always already the wrong path. It is to let the work lead further away, even if here that means in fact only to be led back to the beginning and for that beginning to be unfamiliar, unheimlich, untrodden. In so doing, the wrong path necessitates that good reading be counter-intuitive, that it proceed in fits and starts, with questions and effacements, in a manner always turning, that is always wandering against the limit of what it has not been quite possible to comprehend; that is always forming, always falling; that is good because deficient, because inadequate, because it gives nothing other than the work still to be read.

Yet what are the implications of such a notion of reading for the work of criticism? On the one hand, such a notion of reading effectively renders the critical response not only superfluous and unnecessary but also always already mistaken. On the other hand, even if the literary work as conceived by Blanchot is resistant to, that is, no longer either susceptible or open to critical reading, this “no longer” does not occlude literary criticism but rather repositions it from the non-perspective of literature’s resistance. As Blanchot succinctly comments in “What is the Purpose of Criticism”:

Critical discourse has this peculiar characteristic: the more it exerts, develops, and establishes itself, the more it must obliterate itself; in the end it disintegrates. Not only does it not impose itself – attentive to not taking the place of its object of discussion – it only concludes and fulfills its purpose when it drifts into transparency. (LS 2)

On this model, the discrete attention of criticism means that critical commentary enters not as a tear but as le tiers, the third term, of the work, that the work requires, demands and always already solicits and by way of which the end, the work itself, is experienced. Moreover, if a self-effacing criticism fleetingly reflects the literary work at all, then self-effacement must mirror – at least one of – the essential features of the literary work itself, namely its tendency to obliterate communication in favour of bare or non-determined communicability. Indeed, it is for this reason that Blanchot goes on to comment that “criticism ceases being distinguished from the creative discourse of which it would be the necessary actualisation or, metaphorically speaking, the epiphany” (LS 4). It is indistinguishable pre-
cisely because criticism that voids itself before the work actually belongs to the work itself, both constitutively and essentially.

In many respects, the indivisible yet differential relation Blanchot identifies here between the creative and the critical is a methodological insistence that, at all turns, criticism resists the temptation to become “a death mask” (“Battle with the Angel” F 298, n.3). At the same time, however, and despite the relatively direct formulation of Blanchot’s dictate, the actual practice of criticism would appear to be incommensurable with such a theoretical mandate. As Blanchot puts it in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the dichotomy between writing and commentary lies in that commentary, by its very nature, “signifies and produces signification.” As such, it is “unable to sustain [the] absent meaning” of writing, or, worse still, flouts the literary by seeking to establish a relation with what is not there (*WD* 42). Writing puts commentary into question even as commentary itself depends upon writing in order to communicate. Commentary is at one and all times stretched out across the rack of its own irrecoverable paradox. But what then is commentary to do? On the one hand, if commentary does not establish a chain of relation between itself and the work it ceases to be commentary. On the other hand, the absence of commentary would be precisely that which produces, and perhaps with increasing urgency, the imperative to comment. Should the critical work, therefore, emulate the literary reader and become itself self-consciously literary? But wouldn’t this be a move that neither the literary nor the critical could sustain precisely because, a) as has been argued, the literary in fact depends upon the critical, and b) such a move would effectively repudiate the literary by venerating it as an object not only of worth but of superior value to the critical?

Without wishing to occlude the possibility that there may well be other methods of negotiating this problematic, two modalities in particular, it seems to me, remain available to the critical. The first relates to a certain tradition of rabbinic exegesis; the second to irony.

**How Not to Be a Good Literary Critic**

In reference to Jabès, Blanchot describes rabbinic exegesis as a double movement of response and distance. “The dignity and importance of exegesis in the rabbinic tradition,” Blanchot writes, consists in that “the written law, the unoriginal text of the origin, must always be taken on by the commenting voice — taken on, but unjoined, in this dis-junction that is the measure of its infinity” (“Traces” F 224, emphasis added). The proximity between exegesis and text, that is, is founded upon the paradoxical discontinuity between the two, the irreparable distance of one from the other. The
Tables of the Law first must be broken, and the written law then, marked by the hiatus of imitation, is only an infinitely responding meanwhile comment on the “foreignness of origin” (“Translating” F 59), “as if one could never speak except the second time” (F 224), and even then only in the space, non-space, of rupture. “To write,” Blanchot comments, “is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as it produces itself through the work, traversing it throughout” (IC 424). The Law, the text, in other words, is legible precisely because it is not unique, is traversed by difference, is written at all times in other words. The space of commentary is infinite, gaping, divided. Even if the focus of the question remains the same, the written is approached only by way of the always repeatable dual movement of approximation and self-contestation.

In his remarkable study of Talmudic reading, The Burnt Book, Marc-Alain Ouaknin defines Talmudic thinking as an “open dialectic.” Talmudic study, Ouaknin explains, is based on a notion of Mahloket, or dialogue, that is, a modality of thinking that constantly opens itself to its own contestation. “The Master of the Talmud,” Ouaknin writes, “seeks to be shaken up, to be disturbed, to suffer setbacks, to be overwhelmed.” Fragile and always on the move, Mahloket does not synchronise truth as in, for example, Platonic dialogue, but is, rather, diachronic. Mahloket seeks to set its “reading” to an interminable questioning; it takes place in the “interrelational space” between itself and the enigma (the text) it seeks to engage. Thus, even as it is impelled by a desire for the text, rabbinic exegesis maintains a respectful distance from the text. As Blanchot comments, it “does not worship signs but ... sets itself up in the gaps they indicate” (F 225). The Talmudic reader, then, is not an interlocutor, but a passive listener. Talmudic exegesis does not interpret (tellingly, Ouaknin points out that the title of the second chapter of the Talmudic tractate Hagigah is “One Does Not Interpret...”) but is instead left to think only the strangeness of the relation to the work it both maintains and ruins in that it sets itself up – the better to fall? – in the face of that which withdraws, writing itself as the void of writing so that, always by way of this detour, it returns only to the question that provoked it but which it cannot contain. In this sense, and to invoke a phrase from The Writing of the Disaster, the Talmudic commentator would be “a writer in spite of himself” (WD 38).

I do not mean to suggest, however, that the work of Blanchot be thought as analogous to the Talmud. Moreover, while it is more than probable that the question of the Absolute is also the question of literature in that both exist outside or at least at a remove from dialectics of value, still less do I wish to suggest that the literary work (in its broadest sense) be
The point rather is that the hermeneutic principle of Mahloket provides an operative method for literary-philosophical criticism to begin to think the work of Blanchot. Mahloket, Ouaknin notes, “is possible because the law is Halakhah: the etymological meaning of this term being ‘walking,’ ‘step.’ Mahloket appears because the law is not a product but production.” Indeed, it could be argued that the wandering essence of Halakhah that instantiates Mahloket forms the very definition of Blanchotian “writing,” that exigency of worklessness that maintains itself in the infinite space of detour, a detour, in other words, where “sight sees itself deceived” and deceives itself still (F 170). The literary-critical method of Mahloket or detour would be the discretion but also the candour of admitting what remains beyond my grasp, my limits, my fallibility, even as I insanely cross them with this admission. The madness of this position, however, does not nullify the possibility of literary criticism but rather calls for the critical to be recast from the point of view of an irreducible and ever restless irony, whereby irony would be a bathetic or workless laughter at the heart of discourse, that Blanchot terms, with reference to the work of Klossowski, “the hilarity of the serious” (F 170).

As Paul de Man comments in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” irony is duplicitous and undecidable; it doesn’t say what it says, but neither then does it say what it doesn’t say. Indeed, the duplicity of irony necessarily also extends to any discourse on irony. At the same time, however, this duplicity is also irony’s condition of signification. “Curiously enough,” de Man writes, “it seems to be only in describing a mode of language which does not mean what it says that one can actually say what one means.” The “not-itself” of irony does not mean that irony is negative; rather this “not-itself” is in fact what establishes irony in discourse. Irony maintains itself in discourse by way of its differential relation to it. Yet by the same token irony also dissimulates the possibility of discourse by dividing signification from itself. In a manner similar to desire, therefore, irony is an experience of un-fulfilment, fissure and alterity. Neither one thing nor another, the speech of irony is the interval of speech. Irony lightens meaning by putting meaning into play so that irony would be the play of meaning when meaning lacks, the barely controlled laughter’s shoulder shuddering sense of senselessness, of estrangement, ex-centric and exiled, a promise of transgression. As such, irony would be related perhaps to that crucial term-non-term in Blanchot, the neuter. “[T]he one who does not enter into what he says is neutral,” Blanchot writes in “René Char and the Thought of the Neutral,” “just as speech can be held to be neutral when it pronounces without taking into account either itself or the one who pronounces it, as though, in speaking, it did not speak but allowed that which cannot be said
to speak in what there is to say” (IC 303). Indeed, one page later in the same essay Blanchot explicitly aligns the neutral with irony: “neutral, if meaning operates or acts through a movement of retreat that is in some sense without end, through an exigency to become suspended and by an ironic outbidding of the époche … it is not through the operation of placing between parentheses that the neutral would come about, but rather that this operation nonetheless corresponds to one of the neutral’s sleights of hand, its ‘irony’” (IC 304). Or again, from The Writing of the Disaster. “Apathy, the infinite passivity. This is the grand irony – not Socratic, not feigned ignorance – but saturation by impropriety (when nothing whatsoever suits anymore), the grand dissimulation where all is said, all is said again and finally silenced” (WD 45). But then, to repeat, always to repeat, if this is the case, the explication of irony must be itself necessarily ironic. “[I]f the “possibility” of writing is linked to the “possibility” of irony,” Blanchot contends, “then we understand why one and the other are always disappointing: it is impossible to lay claim to either; both exclude all mastery” (WD 35). Even as it fails the critical, the ironic work of criticism critically responds to the work by preserving the work’s secret, its neutrality.¹⁶

In this sense, irony operates as a kind of inter-ference, that is, a noise that paradoxically infers the work precisely by way of its disruption of the possibility of either communication or address. It does not view the literary work as a repository of (multiple) meaning(s) but as something which is essentially foreign to itself, an unhinged and “contentless affirmation” (SL 206) that is no longer present in any guise whatsoever when the discourse of meaning comes into play. Ironic interference is a form of identification (in the Freudian sense of displacement) without particular attachment, that is ambivalent, that crosses out what it says in a movement that prevents it from ever fully identifying with itself. In other words, as with the hermeneutic principle of Mahloket, but also in a manner reminiscent of the work of translation, irony is at all times without object, is always in other words. Indeed, the analogy with translation might serve a potentially instructive function here. For like translation, the ironic work is a featureless writing that is always elsewhere from where it purports to be. Like translation, irony proceeds in fits and starts, by way of hesitation and turning, because not only does it write into a language that is not the work’s own but it also writes both from and into a language that is never irony’s own. Irony, rather, plays across language, between it, concerned only with following the way one word plays into, across or away from another word. Whether it be on the level of aural, semantic or formal resonance, play sets the literary and critical text in relation to one another, but only insofar as the terms of this relation are constantly shifting by way of their incessantly playful dupe-lication.
Indeed, ironic literary criticism mimics literature to the degree that the reflective surface it produces is never identical with either the literary work or itself and thus serves to make legible the distance between work and communication as the essential condition of each. Irony would be another language by way of which literature appears in that, never quite belonging to it, irony would be the mark under which literature’s withdrawal is rendered transparent. Thus irony’s tools of paraphrase, partial quotation, misquotation, approximation, analogy, association, identification, pastiche, parody, are not signs of critical inefficiency but rather reflect all the more fully the non-coincidence or difference of the literary work from itself. Irony’s freedom marks the work’s legibility.

Criticisms that critically fail the critical – isn’t this the thought that Blanchot’s work gives the critic to think? In turning to look at Blanchot criticism loses Blanchot; if criticism wishes to think the transgression of writing criticism must transgress itself, presenting itself there where it disappears, even though I am already failing my argument by presenting it, by trying to explain why the critical doesn’t cut it unless it cuts itself. The task of the critic would be to think a hermeneutic that allows the work to remain work. The fragment or aphorism might be the exemplary mode of such a critical writing: the formal brevity of the fragment irrevocably shadows what is said with what it has not been possible to say. As a result, however, I, the reader, the critic, am lost to myself. A ridiculous thought, perhaps, one that could only inspire laughter, and yet: I am lost. I am lost to the extent that I don’t even know it but only curl up under the mark of this question of being-lost, of not-being-lost, curling under the sense that something close-by might be going on without me but leaving it this way, not looking for it in the manner that it doesn’t look for me, always around another corner, chasing not its reflection but the surface of the mirror, the shelterword “fascination,” my death-song, my substance. It is here, perhaps, that Blanchot’s work awaits, waiting to be received and waiting to receive itself, as if it might have something to say, something more or something less, although it may be that this thought is itself ironic.

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NOTES

2 Jabès, “In Place of a Foreword”, p. 5.

3 “One needs to have wandered a lot, to have taken many paths, to realize, when all
is said and done, that at no moment one has left one’s own.” Jabès, “In Place of a
Foreword”, p. 5.


5 In reference to dreaming Blanchot asks: “Do we not often have the impression that
we are taking part in a spectacle that was not intended for us or that we have
come upon some truth as from behind someone’s shoulder, some image not yet
grasped?” The same, it would seem, is true of reading (“Dreaming, Writing” F
144).

6 “If criticism is this empty open space into which the poem moves, if it seeks to dis-
appear in front of this poem, so that this poem may truly appear, this is because
this space and this movement toward self-effacement (which is one of the ways in
which this space manifests itself) may already belong to the reality of the literary
work and also be at work within it, while it takes shape, only moving outside it
when it has achieved its purpose and to accomplish that purpose” (LS 4).

7 Marc-Alain Ouaknin, The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud, trans. Llewellyn Brown

8 Ouaknin, The Burnt Book, p. 86.

9 Ouaknin, The Burnt Book, pp. 84 and 87.


11 Even if the question of the Absolute is also the question of literature, literature nei-
ther manifests nor specifically engages the Absolute but rather casts a suspicious
glance in its general direction from a space of irreducible distance.


13 Ouaknin describes the “open dialectic” of Mahloket as a “transcendent dialectic” in
that “it opens itself up to the recognition of another mind [and so] implies the tran-
scendence of the subject as the acceptance of leaving the world, the constituting
of the Other before me.” Ouaknin, The Burnt Book, p. 85. Irony, on the other hand,
might be thought a pragmatic dialectic in the sense that it implicitly situates foun-
dationalism with the contingent. In its attempt to combine the “transcendent dialec-
tic” of Mahloket with the “pragmatism” of irony, the method of criticism I am outlin-
ing might be termed “transcendental pragmatism.” It should also be acknowledged
that this notion of criticism owes much to a certain deconstructive thinking, in par-
cular, Simon Critchley’s essay “Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Pri-
vate Ironicist or Public Liberal?” in which he argues that deconstruction simultane-
ously operates at both a transcendent and pragmatic level. See Simon Critchley,
Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French

14 Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the

15 I am alluding to Jean-Luc Nancy’s description of the silent laughter within decon-
struction as “the lightening of meaning.” See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Elliptical Sense”, in
Although related, in this sense the ironic work of criticism would mark a departure from the fourth level of meaning in Hebrew tradition, the Sod. Rather than deciphering the secret meaning of a text by "breaking up the words and combining the letters in different ways (notarikon) or in setting up numerical equivalences more or less directly derived from the traditional numerical values ascribed to letters of the Hebrew alphabet" (Henri Atlan, "Niveaux de Signification et Athéisme de l'Écriture", in La Bible au Présent [Paris: Gallimard, 1982], p. 86; quoted in Ouaknin, The Burnt Book, p. 69), the ironic work of criticism lets the text's secret be by always turning away from it.
“An outstretched hand…”

From Fragment to Fragmentary

Leslie Hill

A hand outstretched, refused, which in whatever manner we would not be able to grasp. [Une main qui se tend, qui se refuse, que de toute manière nous ne pourrions saisir.]

Blanchot, Le Pas au-delà

I

A hand, perhaps yours or mine, hers or his, extends itself or is extended, and reaches out. In that selfsame gesture, or shortly after, it withdraws, retreats, and resists. Not given, not taken: the hand, it seems, has always already eluded our grip.

But what is at stake in this meeting or missed encounter, this contact or loss of contact between one hand and another?

In other words, what is the reach – the extent, import, and address – of the gesture described and enacted by Blanchot’s fragmentary words? And what is it that Blanchot hands on to us, his readers, or down to us, who are last to speak? But who are we?

Like other readers during the last thirty or so years, I have on numer-
ous occasions stretched out my hand or hands towards *Le Pas au-delà*, this *Step Beyond* that is plausibly also a *Step Not Beyond* (as the English translation has it), only to find Blanchot’s 416 uneven and unequal fragments escape me. Like others, too, I know, I have groped without success towards an understanding of the strange and singular invocation that greets us on the threshold of the book, and which consists, as many of you will remember, in the following injunction: “Let us enter into this relation [ce rapport: relation, relationship, report, ratio, return],” without it being at all certain to whom this invitation is being extended and to what kind of space, whether inside or outside, it promises or threatens us with access.

Admittedly, on that threshold also stands a title: *Le Pas au-delà*, and here too, like others, I find myself stumbling, not knowing whether to go forwards or back, tripping over the oxymoronic doubleness of the book’s singular name, which on seven different occasions in the course of the text is no sooner advanced than withdrawn, as though it were always already a kind of unreliable quotation, an apocryphal, apocalyptic message written in some distant and untranslatable tongue. My aim here is not to examine in any detail those seven separate instances of the phrase “le pas au-delà” in *Le Pas au-delà* itself. What I do want to underline, however, is the extent to which each occurrence is itself marked or re-marked, differentiated and deferred, by the recourse to typographical devices such as a question mark or pairs of quotation marks, and by the appearance of the phrase in parentheticals or within the confines of various sceptical asides.  What this leads us to think is clear enough. It is that if *Le Pas au-delà* is indeed the name of the book, it is a name that itself is always already a homage to the namelessness or anonymity that makes all names both necessary and unnecessary, possible and impossible as such.

“Taking three paces, halting, falling, and immediately after, steadying itself in this fragile fall [Faisant trois pas, s’arrêtant, tombant et, tout de suite, s’assurant en cette chute fragile]” (184; 135); so writes Blanchot’s text towards the end, perhaps describing itself, at any rate offering an initial gloss on the three-stepped fragment with which I began and to which I shall return in an instant. But who is the reader who can find steadiness in such precarious progress?

How, then, to read? The question is a simple one, which endlessly remains, but, as always, takes on a particular inflexion here, now, at this time, in this place. We are enjoined, it seems, to trust in chance. In any case it is impossible to do otherwise. Chance has always already gone before; it cannot be abolished, even by a dice-throw. It can as a result never be denied, only ever affirmed. Chance always decides: on the side of the undecidable. And let me say this is indeed what happened. For it was, I assure
you, entirely by chance, while preparing for another paper, another occasion, another invitation, thumbing my way through *Le Pas au-delà*, that I once more came across Blanchot’s outstretched hand.

The fact is, this fragment appealed to me: in all senses of the word. Like a favour, granted as well as asked. “Le fragment favorable,” says *Le Pas au-delà* at one stage: “Favourable fragment” (90; 63). So, why this fragment? It was simple yet enigmatic; incisive yet elusive; transparent yet opaque. It simultaneously offered itself to reading and withdrew from reading. Without resolution. For no text is entirely readable or entirely unreadable, and if it is impossible at times to tell the difference between an appeal and a rebuff, as the Thomas of *Aminadab* discovers to his cost, this is only because, once the act of reading begins (and it began a long while ago for each of us), no possible end is ever in view. Readers know this, of course, just as they know, according to lines Blanchot once wrote, then effaced, at the end (without end) of *L’Arrêt de mort*, “that there is no ending on the basis of whoever wishes to end alone.” We are enjoined, immediately after, not to assume these thoughts to be an expression of misfortune, but instead to imagine the hand that writes them. Only then, perhaps, Blanchot concludes, in words made famous by Pierre Madaule, will reading become “a serious task.”

But if the hand that is outstretched cannot be grasped, this is not to say the hand that writes does not require from us a response. What follows, then, since I am the one who am writing here, now, in this place and at this time, last to speak, and yet because of that, first to speak, is an attempt to answer affirmatively, if my powers allow, the demand made upon me by Blanchot’s text. Since that is the price and cost of what, according to the possibility and impossibility of names in general, Blanchot names without naming as the “step beyond.”

II

In the original French, printed in italics, stamped at the outset with the familiar-unfamiliar device of a lozenge, diamond, or rhombus, standing like a tombstone at the head of all but one of the fragments that make up *Le Pas au-delà*, the fragment by Blanchot I want to read here is a mere sixteen words long. It barely constitutes a sentence, even less a proposition. It is perhaps more in the way of an invocation, evocation, or address, perhaps even an answer to an absent question. Whatever its status or genre, it reaches out. It points, indicates, or gives a sign, recalling a famous fragment from Heraclitus, cited on occasion by Blanchot, and taken by him as an indication that writing is thinkable neither as concealment nor as uncon-
celalment, but altogether otherwise: “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign [n’exprime ni ne dissimule rien, mais indique].” Neither legei nor kruptei, insists Blanchot, but sêmeainei.

So, if Blanchot’s own enigmatic fragment is a sign, albeit a sign that turns aside from manifestation and concealment alike, where does it point, in what direction does it reach?

Something of the appeal of Blanchot’s fragment, I want to suggest, derives from its grammatical structure. The fragment has no main verb. It consists of an invocation, a naming or nominating, qualified by three subordinate clauses. Of those three, the first two feature reflexive verbs, that is to say, verbs which are active and transitive, but which take as their direct object the subject that is governing them. As Blanchot’s hand stretches out, then, it both stretches out itself, as subject of the verb, and stretches itself out, as direct object. In other words, as the possibilities of English translation make plain, the hand both stretches out (active) and is stretched out (passive). And the same applies to the act of refusal: as the hand refuses itself, it itself refuses or is refused. (There is a further grammatical complexity which is that both the verb tendre and the verb refuser may also be used intransitively, and it would not be far-fetched to consider that in both self-reflexive clauses there still lingers something of the ghostly presence of the intransitive.) In self-reflexive expressions, of course, which are anything but uncommon in present-day French, the distinction between the active and passive voice, though still in evidence, becomes largely of secondary importance, and what speakers are dealing with probably has more to do with what in ancient Greek and other languages is called a middle voice, neither active nor passive, but between the two: neuter, if you will. (Latin, of course, like French, has no direct equivalent for the middle voice, which it tends to convey by the use of the passive, as in such so-called deponent verbs as loquor, I speak, or moritur, he, she, or it dies. Blanchot, a childhood speaker of Greek and Latin, Christophe Bident tells us in his biography, would no doubt in later life ponder such canonic examples at length.)

The unusual syntactic structure employed in Blanchot’s fragment has a number of striking consequences. For if the two verbs (se tendre, se refuser) function in effect as both active and passive, transitive and intransitive, this suggests that the hand “itself” or “as such” in these two clauses can be thought to be occupying simultaneously the position of both subject and object. But while being in a sense both subject and object, Blanchot’s hand is in fact neither. Its neutral status – less than a subject, less than an object, and holding in its span the possibility of always being the other – falls short of all proper binary opposition, which it oversteps and exceeds.
In the relationship it has with itself, as signified by Blanchot’s two reflexive verbs, something about the hand necessarily escapes, which is the possibility of it always being other than what it is, and accordingly the impossibility of grasping it, or of it being grasped, unequivocably as subject or object. In its turn (or turning), this syntactic indecision about the hand is responsible for a number of other ambiguities. For not only is it impossible to tell whether the hand is stretching out actively or passively, or whether it is itself refusing another hand or being refused by it, there is also considerable doubt as to whose hand it may be anyway: is it yours, extending (itself) towards me and then pulled away, or is it mine, reaching (itself) out towards you and being refused? Does the hand belong to some nameless third person, and therefore become an object for the first-person plural (nous, we) invoked in the third subordinate clause, or does it itself belong, so to speak, to whoever that first-person voice anonymously names?

There are other kinds of indecision, too, dividing the text from itself. Can we be certain, for instance, that this is a human hand? Equally, is it male or female? If it is impossible to tell, how should we handle the fact that the only two nouns that appear in the fragment (main, meaning hand, and manière, which is what is done with a hand) are both in the feminine? What is the gender of nous? Moreover, what is the extent of the present tense used in both initial clauses? Is this a continuous present, a sign that a hand is reaching out as we read, or a repetitive present, an indication that the gesture recurs time and again, or is this a hypothetical present, that has never taken place as such, and is unlikely ever to do so? Much of the argument put forward by Blanchot in Le Pas au-delà hinges, as readers will recall, on the writer’s refusal to grant the present or presence the prestige and authority that it has so long enjoyed in metaphysical tradition. Such a stance (if it is a stance) is sometimes dismissed as a sign of postmodern scepticism or relativism. Blanchot’s point, however, is much simpler. It is to observe, on the basis of such examples as displayed in this fragment, that the present tense rarely, if ever, belongs to the present. It is always separated from itself as non-identical repetition. As readers always know, I who am writing this now in the present will no longer be present when you the reader begin reading it in the present, even though each of us is doing what we are doing, irrepressibly and irrevocably, in the present tense. But when is that present ever present to itself or present to reading?

Blanchot’s sentence – hardly a sentence, more a phrase or cursory notation – has a third subordinate clause. Here, remarkably enough, the relationship between subject and object, between nous and the relative pronoun que, seems initially to have been restored, as no doubt befits the seizing or grasping of the one by the other. But not only is the first person
plural, *nous*, left anonymous and unexplained (does it refer to the writer, the reader, or the whole of humankind?), the present tense of the two previous verbs is also erased, supplanted by an enigmatic conditional tense: *pourrions*. As readers will know, the conditional (which is more properly a mood than a tense, but no matter) generally serves three sorts of usage in modern French. It is either attached to a conditional subordinate clause (even if a hand were to be outstretched – the implication being that the hand is *not* currently outstretched – it would not be possible for us to grasp it); or it can indicate a future in indirect speech (I wrote: if a hand was outstretched, it would not be possible for us to grasp it in the past or the future); or it can convey the sense of an unconfirmed allegation or hypothesis, which the speaker or writer does not endorse (it is claimed– unverifiably – that in no circumstances might it be possible for us to grasp an outstretched hand). Common to each of these examples is the motif of virtuality, the possibility that, if conditions were different, things might be otherwise, and this is why, of course, the conditional gets its name. But here too Blanchot’s syntax undergoes or performs a curious suspension. For what the reader is given in the latter half of the fragment is a hypothetical conditional clause that, we are duly informed, can never apply. There is no way or manner, asserts the text, no turn or sleight of the hand, by which a hand may be grasped by us, and what the clause therefore describes as a spectral encounter ever come to pass. So if the form *pourrions* (could, would, or might be able) is correctly termed a conditional, it is, obscurely enough, in Blanchot’s fragment, an unconditional conditional, a hypothetical absolute, the effect of which is to open up within language, within the text, within the reader, an abyss that it is possible to describe only as an impossible possibility – at the very moment we are being alerted to the possible existence of a possible impossibility.

It is not that Blanchot is somehow attempting to leap over the rules and received conventions of French syntax in a concerted attempt at poetic transgression. The verbal structures explored in this fragment are banal, unexceptional, and unspectacular. They are not part of so-called poetic discourse, but ordinary language. At any event, Blanchot argues, transgression as such is impossible; to break the law is ultimately to fulfil the law and strengthen its authority and power. But if as a result the step beyond (or *not* beyond) cannot promise or deliver transcendence, this is not to say it can guarantee immanence either. For both the one and the other fall subject to erasure. What the “step beyond” affirms, and does so time and again in *Le Pas au-delà*, is that everything (including the word or concept of everything itself) is always already in default of itself as a site of disruption or interruption, difference or deferral, dislocation or dispersion, without it ever
being possible to recoup within any kind of dialectical or other unity, or to gather together within any kind of worldly horizon this essential non-coincidence with itself that affects each of the concepts, themes, or experiences that Blanchot details in his text, ranging from the most philosophical to the most everyday, including (or rather: precisely not including) temporality, writing, literature, naming, repetition, the fragment, fear, death, dying, desire, anguish, knowledge, or experience itself. In turn, this is what is at stake in the fragment that concerns us here: at work (not at work) in Blanchot’s sixteen words is a process (not a process), the effect (not an effect) of which is to neutralise subject, object, temporality, and the limit of possibility dividing the possible from the impossible, and vice versa, not in order to declare such notions inadequate or redundant, but to affirm the otherness that, without ever being namable as such, divides from itself each and every experience, word, or thing, and exposes it to radical exteriority, but without which language, thought, literature would barely occur at all.

In writing Le Pas au-delà (and the same could be said, I think, of L’Écriture du désastre), Blanchot’s overriding concern, so to speak, is to problematise and resist thematisation, the identification of any thing, word, or concept as itself “as such.” This is no easy endeavour; it is one that cannot be approached directly, only by an infinite detour, and as a result of perpetual vigilance, even perhaps an expectation of failure. Words themselves arguably do not help. We know, for instance, from Nietzsche that God lives on in grammar itself, alongside the rest of Western metaphysics, and Blanchot seems to suggest as much himself when he comments as follows, in Le Pas au-delà, on the word God:

God: language speaks only as the sickness of language [comme maladie du langage], in so far as it is split down the middle [fissuré], broken apart [éclaté], and put at a distance [écarté], a failing [défaillance] that language immediately recuperates [récupère: recoups] as its own strength [validité], its power and its health, in a recuperation [récupération] that is its most intimate sickness, of which God, this always irrecuperable [irrécupérable] name, always yet to be named and naming nothing, seeks to cure [guérir] us, a cure [guérison] for which itself has no cure [incurable]. (70; 48)

But there is here an important nuance, inseparable from the nearly untranslatable idiomatic complexity that Blanchot increasingly brings to bear on and in his thinking, which is that, if language is the sickness from which Western onto-theology is suffering, then the only possible – impossible – cure for that disease is language itself. (Readers of L’Arrêt de mort will recall that, by way of a quotation from Kafka taken from Max Brod’s biogra-
phy, a similar point is made about death and dying. Language, in other words, is where the divide between immanence and transcendence is decided; but by that very token it is also where the divide is always already suspended, together with all the concepts to which it gives rise. Language, then, for Blanchot is never simple, or unified, never gathered in one place around any opening, emergence, or giving. It is always at odds with itself, simultaneously healthy and sick, sick and healthy, without it ever being possible to identify which of these it is, for it is both and neither: neutral. Radical homeopathy, suggests Blanchot: language is what we must trust, since we have no alternative; but it is also what we must distrust, because we have no alternative.

Syntax, of course, is not all. There is also rhythm, but understood less as regular flow (according to what Blanchot in L’Écriture du désastre, following Emile Benveniste, refers to as a dubious etymology) than as “shifting configuration,” i.e. a form in which repetition and difference, like the ebb and flow of the waves, have not yet been anchored to the self-presence of the one place and assimilated to the re-presentation of identity. “All is rhythm,” Hölderlin is reported as saying to Bettine von Arnim, according to Isaaq von Sinclair, and went on: “Man’s entire destiny is a single heavenly rhythm, just as the work of art is a unique rhythm.” Blanchot cites the remark, approvingly, on at least two occasions, notably in L’Entretien infini shortly before the quotation from Heraclitus mentioned earlier (EI 42; IC 30), and towards the end of L’Écriture du désastre (ED 173; WD 112). But he adds a note of warning. “All, here,” he explains, “does not mean the cosmic in an already ordered totality which it would be the task of rhythm to maintain.” Rhythm, Blanchot insists, “is not in accordance with nature, language, or even ‘art’ though that is where it seems to predominate” (ED 173; WD 112; trans. modified). Hölderlin’s perhaps apocryphal remark is made to resonate, then, with the earlier borrowing from Heraclitus: as a sign or indication that what is at stake in fragmentary writing, as practised by Blanchot’s two favoured predecessors (to whom might be added Nietzsche and René Char), is not the nature and extent of the aesthetic (which, it will be remembered, for both Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis was the principal horizon and final justification of the fragment as such), but, in far more radical and contestatory manner, the disseminatory articulation of language and writing in so far as both are always already fragmented, which is also to say: no longer bound within the (negative) horizon of the Romantically ironic fragment, but always already re-marked, that is, dispersed and multiplied according to the shifting configurations of rhythm.

Reading for or according to the fragment means attending to the singularity of a rhythm. It comes as no surprise, then, that not just semantically
or syntactically, but rhythmically too, there is something remarkable about Blanchot’s own fragment, those mere sixteen words I am still endeavou ring to read. Rhetorically, the fragment seems to divide up, neatly enough, into two evenly paired, symmetrical units, each eight words long, the first comprising the initial nominative clause and opening two subordinate clauses (Une main qui se tend, qui se refuse), the second the third, counterbalancing subordinate clause (que de toute manière nous ne pourrions saisir), with a caesura falling between these two paired units, occurring after the word refuse. This carefully calculated rhetorical patterning, however, is not all. For the fragment is also inhabited by a spectral, verse-like poetic structure that is both more complex and less evenly balanced than its prosaic counterpart. “In the genre called prose,” wrote Mallarmé, whom Blanchot later quotes on this very point, “there are sometimes wonderful lines of verse, made up of all kinds of rhythms.”

If one follows Mallarmé here, and reads Blanchot’s sentence, as its length seems to demand, as a possible fragment of poetry, in accordance with standard prosodic conventions (which mainly require the reader to count mute e sounds not occurring at the end of lines of verse), it yields the following phantom pattern: Une main qui se tend, / qui se refuse, / que de toute manière / nous ne pourrions saisir. In other words, the rhythmic structure of the fragment is such that it is possible to read it as though it was made up of two lines of verse, the first with 6 + 4 syllables, thereby producing on the reader the effect of a regular decasyllabic line or dizain, ending on the word refuse, but followed, on the other hand, by an awkward, poorly articulated six- or seven-syllable hemistich (depending on whether manière is treated as a two- or three-syllable word), and concluding with seven badly limping syllables tagging along at the end.

Two kinds of rhythm coexist, then, dividing the fragment from itself. Either way, to read the fragment as prose or as poetry is to encounter dissymmetry. In the first case, it is because the fragment’s address and two opening subordinate clauses are placed in equilibrium, or kept in check, by a single subordinate clause contributing far less to the argument of the sentence than its counterpart; as a result of the equal-unequal balancing act between the two halves of the sentence, the fragment quite markedly falls away at the end. But if the fragment is read as cryptic poetry, or at least with attention to its prosodic structure, the effect is perhaps even more radical. For the comparative euphony of the first part of the fragment, brought about by its verse-like regularity, is sabotaged by the clumsy patterning of the second. In its handling of rhetorical, phonetic, and prosodic structures, then, what Blanchot’s outstretched hand manages to do, then, is to contest its own status or standing as a rhetorical or aesthetic object.
But there is more. The calculated-uncalculated clumsiness of the second part of the fragment has a powerful effect on the three-step structure of the argument the fragment seems to be presenting. The fragment begins with a hand, which is first extended, refused, but then it proves not to have been possible to grasp it anyway. The sequence of these three motifs is again remarkable. For if it was not possible in any event to grasp the hand, there was little reason for the hand to refuse, unless of course, rather than an act of stubbornness or wilful non-cooperation, this refusal was already something more akin to an always prior injunction. And if the hand were always already synonymous with refusal, what is the reason for it being extended in the first place? As the reader asks these questions, it is apparent that no answer is forthcoming. Words are proffered, but logical unity, coherence, ultimate meaning are all refused. Rather than proceeding through a three-phase process towards some appropriate conclusion, reading is forced to move backwards, impelled, as it were, to scrutinise and challenge anew the meaning of each and every previous assertion made as though in a spirit of generosity by Blanchot’s outstretched hand. In other words, instead of a progressive, teleological dialectic, taking us through affirmation (a hand outstretched), and its negation (a hand refused), towards some synthesis (embodied perhaps in some so-called democratic, but always less than democratic community, in which hands are exchanged, as objects by subjects, in the name of an allegedly mutual respect of all citizens for one another, a respect that remains carefully silent about the fact that some hands are stronger than others), what Blanchot’s fragment promises (without promising) is the possibility (or impossibility) of an unavowable community that can never be made present or realised as such.

This probably explains Blanchot’s use of the word *saisir*, falling at the end of the fragment like a premature, forced conclusion. Like its German counterpart, *(be)greifen*, the word indicates both a concrete and an abstract operation, physical as well as ideational, meaning simultaneously to seize by the hand and by the concept. In this regard, what Blanchot’s fragment offers is nothing short of a condensed, yet nevertheless incisive reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which it does not contradict as such, since to do so would be to confirm the thought of contradiction that animates the *Phenomenology*, but which Blanchot’s fragment nevertheless mimes by way of its own three-step progress, if only to have the dialectic itself stumble and trip over its own always prior assumptions, notably its reliance on the necessary primacy of conceptuality and the concept. It is surely no accident either that the caesura audible in Blanchot’s fragment falls on the word refusal. For refusal in Blanchot is itself a caesura, having many different philosophical, poetical, and political connotations. As such (and it is important
here to begin to refuse what is implied by any such formulation as such), refusal is precisely not an act of opposition or gesture of negativity, nor is it an appeal to any prior system of values, political, moral, or otherwise; refusal for Blanchot does not therefore belong to any dialectic, the power and authority of which it indeed refuses, resists, and contests. As Blanchot’s outstretched hand indicates, refusal is therefore not an act of will, founded on the self-assurance of a philosophical, literary, or political subject. It is itself a step beyond that is not a step beyond, that is, it inscribes itself within Blanchot’s text as a re-mark, a withdrawal, an interruption, an interval, a position without positionality or place without place, and as an affirmation reducible neither to an assertion nor to a negation. In that sense, refusal is perhaps simply another name for the neuter, as Blanchot presents it or refuses to present it.

Another fragment, the longest in Le Pas au-delà, describes more explicitly what is at issue here. Blanchot writes:

Something is at work [à l’œuvre] by virtue of the neuter [de par le neutre], which is also the work of worklessness: there is a neuter effect [effet de neutre] – which speaks the passivity of the neuter – which is not an effect of the neuter [effet du neutre], since it is not the effect of a Neuter supposedly at work as cause or thing [cause ou chose]. There cannot be said to be a working of the neuter [travail du neutre], as there is a working of the negative [travail du négratif]. The Neuter: a paradoxical name: it barely speaks at all, a simple, mute word, and yet always veiling itself, always displacing itself outside of its meaning, working [opérant] invisibly upon itself while never ceasing to unravel [se désenrouler], in the immobility of its position that repudiates all depth. The neuter neutralises, neutralises (itself), and therefore evokes (but only evokes) the movement of Aufhebung, but while it suspends and retains, it retains merely the movement of suspending, that is to say, the distance it produces by the very fact that, by occupying the ground, it makes it disappear. (105-6; 75)

It will be remembered that the hand, for Hegel, alongside language, was the philosophical organ par excellence. This allows us to understand, I think, at least part of the extent of the intervention into thinking made by Blanchot’s fragment. For as Hegel writes in the Phenomenology, following in the footsteps of a long-standing anthropocentric tradition which privileges language as communicative interaction and body parts as tools, “next to the organ of speech [dem Organ der Sprache], it is the hand most of all by which a man [der Mensch] manifests and actualizes himself [sich zur Er-
An outstretched hand…

scheining und Verwirklichung bringt]. It is the living artificer [der beseelte Werkmeister] of his fortune.” “We may say of the hand,” Hegel adds, with crucial import for the rest of his own philosophy and much that came after, “that it is what a man does [sie ist das, was der Mensch tut], for in it, as the active organ of his self-fulfilment [dem tätigen Organe seines Sichselbstvollbringens], he is present as the animating soul [als Beseelender gegenwärtig]; and since he is primarily his own fate, his hand will thus express this in-itself [dies Ansich].”

In 1973, then, this period of acute political dissensus following the événements of May 1968, Blanchot stretches out his hand. Towards Hegel and the dialectic of possibility that Hegel's name serves to identify. As he does so, Blanchot acknowledges the reach and extent of the world of possibility, where hands are both proffered and refused in struggle and interaction, but then interrupts both himself and the dialectic – in order to write, in other words: to resist. Indirectly, obliquely. And to refuse the dialectic by suspending it, withdrawing its imperious appeal to human or humanist possibility, grounded in the self-manifestation and self-actualisation of “man,” and reaching out, impossibly, for what refuses to position itself as object and is at any event unattainable as such.

At this stage in my reading, a hand – the hand that is the measure of all things – bids me pause, if only for a moment. The fragment itself, however, is not ended, nor is the infinite movement of its reading, which (I know) carries on elsewhere. Take this to be both a promise and a warning.

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NOTES

1 Blanchot, PD 146. Lycette Nelson’s less idiomatic rendering runs as follows: “A hand that extends itself, that refuses itself, that we cannot take hold of in any way” (SNB 106). Subsequent references to the book will be given directly in the text; of the two sets of page numbers, the first refer to the Gallimard text, the second to the SUNY translation, which for reasons of accuracy or stylistic consistency I have modified in most cases.

2 These seven occasions when Blanchot’s text re-presents its title (making eight occurrences in all) are as follows. First, almost at the beginning, comes something resembling a definition, albeit a paradoxical one: “Time, time: the step beyond [le pas au-delà],” we read, “that does not occur within time may be said to take us [conduirait] outside time [hors du temps], without this outside [dehors] being time-
less [intemporel] (8; 1). Second, some twenty pages later, glossing the thought of eternal return, Blanchot adds a reference to the step beyond in a parenthesis, seemingly by way of an afterthought: "In a certain sense," he writes, "the law of return … might make us to accept (that is, suffer in the most passive passivity, in the step beyond [de par la passivité la plus passive, le pas au-delà]) the temporality of time in such a way that, suspending or dissipating all present and presence, it suspends or dissipates the authority or foundation on which the law of return depends in order to be announced at all" (26; 15). Readers then have to wait more than a hundred pages for the next occurrence. This comes as part of a discussion of suicide which is described, in an aside, and with the addition of quotation marks, as "that 'step beyond' [le «pas au-delà»] which is not a stepping beyond [là où cependant l'on ne passe pas]" (135; 97). A similar strategy is adopted for the fourth citation of the term, which is again given in quotation marks, and doubly withdrawn, so to speak, by the use of a conditional verb. "As custom dictates," writes Blanchot, "we busy ourselves doing nothing, we help the living, and help them in death, but not with dying [le mourir]: something there occurs, in the absence of all else and by default, something that does not occur, which might be termed the 'step beyond' [qui serait le «pas au-delà»], which does not belong to duration, repeats itself without end" (145; 105). The fifth occurrence repeats this pattern: "Nothing answers [répond: responds, corresponds] the neuter, this name without name," we read, "except a faltering answer [la réponse qui défaillle], that has always been on the point of answering and always failed in answering, that was never patient enough to 'step beyond' [«passer au-delà»], albeit this 'step beyond' [ce «pas au-delà»] never occurs" (162; 118). Throughout, Blanchot plays insistently on the homophonic relationship between pas (meaning step or pace, but inevitably evoking the negative ne… pas) and the words passé (past time), passif or passive (passive), and passion (passion); the next instance is a case in point, with Blanchot also adding a question mark to the quotation marks: "the 'pass' of the entirely passive [le «pas» du tout à fait passif] – the 'step beyond'? [le «pas au-delà»?] – is more the folding back [repliement: retreat, withdrawal], as it unfolds [se déployant], of a relation of strangeness neither suffered [subie] nor accepted [assumée]" (167; 122). The last occurrence in the book echoes what has gone on before, referring to "the 'step beyond' of the entirely passive [le «pas au-delà» du tout à fait passif] to which we may be said to answer in dying [en mourant]" (174; 127). Blanchot’s effort to re-present the title of the book in this oblique, sceptical, questioning manner fulfils, I think, an essential purpose, which is to withdraw conceptual identity from the phrase, and transform it, so to speak, into a written trace, exhibiting the complex logic of non-identical repetition. Rather than conceptualising the step beyond, then, Blanchot’s seven-fold recitation of the title of the text in book enacts the very movement of erasure and dissemination which the strange name of the ‘step beyond’ serves to address.

3 Blanchot, AM 148. These lines were printed in the original edition only and they were deleted in all subsequent (French) editions. They appear, however, in Lydia Davis’s translation DS 81. They provide Pierre Madaule with the title of his own récit about L‘Arrêt de mort, entitled Une tâche sérieuse? (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

4 The reference is to Heraclitus, Fr. 93, The Presocratic Philosophers, second edition, eds. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P.,
1983), p. 209. Blanchot cites the fragment in a number of places. Probably the earliest reference is to be found in the essay, "La Bête de Lascaux" (1953), now reprinted in Une voix venue d'ailleurs (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 56; "The Beast of Lascaux," trans. Leslie Hill, Oxford Literary Review, 22 (2000), p. 11. Using a slightly different French translation, Blanchot refers to it twice again in EI 43-4; 131; IC 31-2; 92. Blanchot uses the fragment, originally found in Plutarch, in order to disengage language, writing, poetry, from phenomenology, understood as a discourse that confers an absolute privilege on what appears "as such."


7 See Blanchot, ED 170-1; WD 110-1. “To write,” Blanchot explains, “is to distrust writing absolutely by trusting in it absolutely. Whatever foundation is ascribed to this double movement, which is not as contradictory as this compressed formulation might suggest, it remains the rule of every writing practice: ‘giving withdrawing’ [le «se donner se retirer»] finds here, not its application or illustration, for these are inadequate terms, but that which, by means of dialectics and outside dialectics, justifies itself by letting itself be said, as soon as there is saying and by virtue of what there is saying [se justifie en se laissant dire, dès qu'il y a dire et par quoi il y a dire].”

8 Blanchot’s main stimulus for rethinking rhythm in this way, as he readily acknowledges, is a famous article by the eminent linguist, Emile Benveniste, "La notion de «rythme» dans son expression linguistique," first published in 1951, and republished in the author’s Problèmes de linguistique générale (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 327-35.

9 Blanchot continues (ED 173-4): “Rhythm, even as it makes room [tout en dégag- eant] for the multiple, whose unity is thus no longer apparent [se dérobe], and though it may seem to follow a regular pattern and assert itself according to rule, nevertheless always threatens the rule, which it exceeds through an inversion [un retournement] by virtue of which, while being at play or at work within measure, rhythm itself is not however measured by it. The enigma of rhythm – dialectical or non-dialectical: neither the one nor the other escapes it – is extreme danger. That, in speaking, we should speak in order to make sense [sens] of rhythm, and to make rhythm outside meaning [le rythme hors sens] both perceptible and meaningful, this is the mystery that traverses us, from which we will not be released by revering it as sacred.” These comments are worth putting next to a slightly later passage from Blanchot’s essay "La Parole ascendante, ou: Sommes-nous encore dignes de la poésie? (notes éparses)", in Vadim Kozovoi, Hors la colline (Paris: Hermann, 1984), p. 120.


11 "Au neutre," says Blanchot, "répondrait la fragilité de ce qui déjà se brise: passion
plus passive que tout ce qui aurait de passif, oui qui dit oui avant l’affirmation, comme si le passage de mourir y avait toujours déjà passé, précédant le consentement” (162; 118).

REVIEW ARTICLE
Back to the Other Levinas:

Reflections prompted by Alain P. Toumayan's

Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of

Difference in Blanchot and Levinas.


Michael Fagenblat

Since the exultant reception of Levinas' work, particularly in the United States, an imposing obstacle to this oeuvre has steadily been erected. It is not Levinas' complicated, often unstated philosophical disputations, nor his exhortatory style, nor even the originality of his argument that constitute the most formidable obstructions to his work today. On the contrary, the greatest difficulty today is the ease with which Levinas is arrogated, a facility that risks making him so accessible as to be wholly irrelevant. The ubiquity in contemporary intellectual circles of an “ethics of the other” leads, from ever diverse paths, directly to Levinas; and it is just this that prevents us from reading him well.

For some time the greatest obstacle to Levinas' work has been the glib and vague moralising piled upon it. Most often what we hear about Levinas from those who speak in his name are agitated appeals for a “responsibility for the other,” appeals which remain not only politically but even ethically unspecified. Those who have sung Levinas' praises most heartily tend to belong notionally to the Left. After all, from where could the orphan, the
widow, the poor – the stranger, “the Other” – appear but from the Left? Tellingly, however, the Levinasian Left is usually rather “depoliticized,” following Levinas’ own precarious suspension of the compromises and calculations of politics, expressed in his appeal, *Politique après!*. The irony here is that Levinas begins his critique of Husserl with a potent critique of the “purely theoretical” method of the phenomenological reduction but ends up with an ethics that is so impassive, indeed formal, that it risks itself becoming pure theory. Levinas is thus not altogether excused from the anaemic realisation of his thought. The ineffectuality results not merely because Levinas never extended his vision of ethics into the field of manifold, often antagonistic relations – that is, into life – but also because he wrote too much, too often and, ironically, too reductively about the enigma of the other. Reading Levinas’ later essays, most of which, it is important to recall, he was invited to deliver to generally Christian seminaries in northern continental Europe, one could get the impression that for Levinas there is very little to life beside an obsessive relation with the other that is wholly determined ethically, supplemented perhaps by an almost secret reference to the real authority behind the face, be it God or the impersonal “third” of illeity. It is of course in this secret reference to the authority behind the face that the true Levinas should be sought, as Derrida already pointed out in 1964, and not in a fetishised relation of responsibility to any particular other person. Thus it is the transcendence of the anonymous and/or the divine that is the real and non-ethical source of (ethical) subjectivity.

That is why, despite the admittedly “somewhat narrow focus” adopted by Alain P. Toumayan, many readers of Levinas will benefit from his re-focusing our attention on the latter’s work. The modesty of intent allows Toumayan to examine the “mutual inspiration” of Blanchot and Levinas in considerable detail, a task wholly justified by the novelty and authority of their writings. Reading Toumayan one could pinch oneself to remember that Levinas is, after all, arguably the most obsessive moral perfectionist in the western philosophical tradition. The virtue of this book is that it hardly touches on Levinas the moralist. Such forgetfulness is a welcome relief, and helps bring back into relief dimensions of Levinas’ thinking that have often been unduly subordinated “to the Other.”

**Art or Ethics?**

Toumayan’s focus is on the work of art, aesthetics as it is developed through the encounter between Levinas and Blanchot. One of his great strengths is to engage Levinas as a philosopher of the real, a thinker inquiring into the most intimate and extreme conditions of human life, rather than
the plain moralist with stock platitudes that lack all specification. If Levinas is to retain any of the vitality that unquestionably animates his greatest works, it will have to be despite the moral reductionism that characterises his academic popularity. Toumayan helps us return to the dynamic Levinas, to the site of the great human tension where we are enjoined to work out why life is, as Levinas insists, less important than the imperatives of life, though at a stage when such imperatives have not yet resolved their original, animating ambiguity. We are taken back to the vibrant beginnings of Levinas thought, to a Levinas who is still on the way to ethics, before he has discovered the Shibboleth of “responsibility for the Other.” We return to a time of uncertainty, where responsibility – subjectivity – is not yet betrayed by being aligned exclusively with autrui, the other person. Though such is not Toumayan’s stated intention, his book helps us overcome the greatest challenge facing readers of Levinas today, to deface the Other and demoralise responsibility.

The vitality and intrigue of this nascent stage to Levinas’ thinking lies in his struggle to find a way out of nihilistic, impersonal existence and to overcome materialistic solipsism. The way out has not yet been marked l’éthique; eroticism, myth and especially art are engaging temptations to which Levinas is still prepared to yield. The key work of Levinas analysed by Toumayan is, with good reason, an essay from 1947, Existence and Existentiens, one of the few true masterpieces of phenomenological thinking, “written down for the most part in captivity” during the War. At the centre of this book lies Levinas’ much discussed and equally misunderstood concept of the il y a, the amorphous, undifferentiated background of there is existence upon which our world of identifiable, illuminated objects appears. The il y a is the remainder of life which remains when both being and nothingness have been drained out of it, a mythic region of “existence without a world” which Levinas describes as the real substratum of meaningful human life.

One of Toumayan’s central and most persuasive claims is that the encounter between Blanchot and Levinas takes place in this abyssal realm of il y a existence. It was Levinas who discovered the il y a as a site for exploring the exoticism of life, how the clarity of being gives way to an opacity of existence, an opacity that even death does not overcome. That, according to Levinas, is the flaw with both Hegel’s conceptual dialectic and Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology. The latter, according to Levinas, tames the exoticism of life by feigning to disclose the totality of being and to master death by acceding to the null truth of “being-as-a-whole.” Moreover this pretension to mastery is repeated more grievously on the plane of ethics when Dasein lays hold of the power for disclosing the Other as but a
participant in one’s own anxiously self-absorbed appropriation of the truth of being.\(^9\) Hegel likewise identifies the concept of being with that of nothingness, making both equally adequate to comprehension. He too seeks to expunge the otherness of the real, to domesticate its uncanny spectre through the use of concepts. The descriptions of the excess of *il y a* existence over being-in-the-world thus provide Levinas with a way of contesting and resisting philosophical intellectualism, replacing it with an account of the real that neither the phenomenology of being nor the dialectic of reason can appropriate.

But if Levinas first taught that the real is not a philosophical concept, the point was not to return to this “undetermined menace.”\(^10\) The task of abiding in such horror was taken up by Blanchot, who saw the *il y a* as the very space of literature, the occasion when writing betrays its marriage to meaning in search of a life of its own. The *il y a*, recall, is existence deprived of light and intelligibility, beyond or indeed otherwise than being in the world. So when Blanchot challenges the way ordinary language appropriates and thus annihilates existing things for the sake of its general economy of meaning it is not surprising that the other language that emerges, literature, can only occupy a space of darkness and contestation, of language existing in the twilight of meaning where it loses its mastery over the objects it identifies. The interesting thing is that Levinas and Blanchot meet like opposing secret agents at the border of the *il y a*, each one suspicious of the other’s destination. If for Levinas the *il y a* is troubling, haunting, the abject that must be overcome or repressed for the world to be accomplished, for Blanchot this very spectrality becomes an obsession, a fascination, the only real space for the essential solitude of the writer, for here alone do words outlast their instrumental meaning. The *il y a* presents a fundamental choice for those who cross it: art or ethics? Levinas turns away from the *il y a* toward ethics, for it is the ethical relation with an other that sends the unworld of the *il y a* to the background and replaces it with a stable, intersubjective world. Ethics thus spans the distance between the foundational chaos of the *il y a* and the everyday, objective or intersubjective world. For his part Blanchot heads straight for the *il y a*. For him this unworldly origin is the writer’s goal, for literature begins only when the ordinary, representational power of language fails and another language is presented in its place, the other language of the *il y a*, “that deep fund of impotence to which everything reverts [ce fond d’impuissance où tout retombe].”\(^11\) That is why Levinas criticised his friend for not taking leave of the *il y a*, while Blanchot criticised Levinas for doing exactly that.\(^12\) All this is clear from Toumayan’s study. We might, however, venture two further steps, one forward and one sideward.
Art and Ethics

If indeed Blanchot “reproduces the basic terms” of Levinas’ account of the *il y a* while “reversing its direction,” moving toward the *il y a* rather than away from it, looking ahead we can observe an interesting reversal of just this reversal (155). In the 1970’s, Levinas having spent some three decades putting the distance of ethics between himself and the chaotic horror of the *il y a*, the *il y a* returns to the ethically rendered world to disturb and threaten all of its accomplishments. In *Otherwise than Being* the *il y a* is no longer, as Toumayan acknowledges, a transcendental stratum to be surpassed by the ethical subject. By now Levinas has abandoned the transcendental method that still determined his earlier thought and there is no longer any talk of a pre-ethical self, a transcendental subject who would accomplish the world by moving beyond its original isolated encounter with the *il y a*. Now, rather, ethics itself is the original, unsurpassable condition; there is no self prior to the ethical relation, not even one facing off against the *il y a*.13 However this does not mean, as one might expect, that the *il y a* disappears once and for all or has been vanquished. There remains the threat that the ethical world may yet collapse, reduced to vicious chaos. From where does this danger come? How can the *il y a* still threaten the ethical relation if that relation is original? The reason is that while responsibility-for-the-other is indeed now in the original position and therefore there is no neutral existence to be overcome, this responsibility-for-the-other itself runs the risk of radical indeterminacy in which the Other is confused with the *il y a* itself.14 The *il y a* thus returns in Levinas’ later work not as the original chaos out of which order is accomplished ethically but as Levinas’ acknowledgement that “the Other” to whom one is “immemorially” related is no longer assured its human face. To be sure, “ethics” precedes the isolated existence of individuals and the first given is, as Toumayan shows, the givenness of a relation. But on condition that this original relation no longer be restricted to ethics or responsibility but appear, rather, in its original, confused neutrality. Thus the *il y a*, as it appears at the end of Levinas’ work no less than at the beginning, threatens to overwhelm the ethical relation with its impersonal, chaotic otherness.

It is just this that Blanchot understands and hence he rejects Levinas’ exclusively ethical approach to the other. And yet while Blanchot is thus in a way more loyal or open to the otherness of the *il y a*, refusing to let the moral authority of the stranger commandeer its unappropriatable strangeness and transcendence, he too acknowledges that this otherness assails the human relation in a privileged manner:

Each time we project strangeness onto a non-human being or refer
the movement of the unknown back to the universe, we disburden ourselves of the weight of the human ... whose presence gives us all measure of strangeness. (IC 60, trans. modified)

Where, then, if not in “ethics” or “responsibility,” does the otherness of the \textit{il y a} impose itself on the human relation? For Blanchot, it is in friendship and community rather than “the language of ordinary morality” that this otherness intrudes upon us (WD 25-6). The argument here is that the language of “ethics” or “responsibility-for-the-other” falsely attempts to purify and determine the relation with the other and thus responds to it “only abusively, naming it by its contrary” (WD 25-6). Having abandoned identity, the relation to the other can no longer refer to action, agency or the ability to calculate “in the most facile way possible” consequences that can only be put to “the service of order” (WD 25-6). Thus Blanchot finds “only secondary meanings” in the terms \textit{ethics} and \textit{responsibility}, preferring instead the neutral relations of friendship and community (IC 60). In friendship the “common strangeness” abides so that “what separates becomes relation” without determining this relation in terms of the instrumentality of the world (F 291), while community itself is the sharing of a “relation of transcendence” that lacks all identity and thus can likewise never be put to work (UC 10).

Levinas and Blanchot thus diverge at the \textit{il y a} only to cross paths again at the same spot; Levinas uncharacteristically acknowledging that the other person must be abandoned to the indeterminacy of transcendence and Blanchot likewise acknowledging that its neutral, impersonal otherness is perhaps most intimately attested in human conversation, friendship and community. Toumayan is thus right that Blanchot opens by reversing the direction of Levinas’ argument. But looking ahead we see that this reversal is itself reversed, first by Levinas when he admits to the defacement of the other to the point of a “possible confusion with the agitation of the \textit{there is [il y a]}” and then by Blanchot when he accepts the impersonal but all too human character of the encounter with the \textit{il y a}. All this must be acknowledged if we are to accept that there is never literature without ethics, just as there is never ethics without a range of equally original, antithetical relations to the real. There can therefore be no absolute priority to the ethical relation but only a relation that is immemorially compromised by the ambiguities of the real. Only in thus moving beyond ethics can we go back to Levinas.

\textbf{The Myth of Levinas’ Ethics}

A second step, sideways from Toumayan’s book, affords an altogether different angle on the ambiguous origins of Levinas’ work. Here it is \textit{Totality}
and Infinity that provides the correct distance by which to gain perspective on the il y a. In this work Levinas modifies the il y a in a slight way that nevertheless sends us to an entirely different landscape. In this magnificent book the il y a continues to serve a transcendental function, providing Levinas with the background condition from which an isolated subject emerges in order to accomplish an ethical world. However what is interesting in Totality and Infinity is the mythic status given to this pre-worldly existence under the title of “the element.”17 Not that one should be surprised. As Levinas himself says, that which is “outside of being and the world... must be called mythical.”18

What sort of a myth is this? Toumayan refers to Catherine Chalier, one of France’s foremost Levinas scholars, who suggests that the il y a recalls the tōhû wăbōhû, the “unformed and void” (JPS trans. Gen. 1:2) upon which the act of creation takes place.19 We shall do well to explore the biblical story of creation in more detail, for Levinas’ account of the emergence of the self out of “mythic,” “elemental” existence parallels in a profound way the biblical myth of the world’s hard won order wrested from the powerful forces of chaos and evil that precede creation. Moreover, the Bible no less than Levinas suggests that the created order is vulnerable to collapsing into the original chaotic disorder and evil upon which it is founded.

What is the biblical conception of creation? This question, far too manifold and beyond my capacities to explore, can nonetheless be approached with a view to learning a great deal about the theological origins to Levinas’ thought, and perhaps even to shed light on an obscure theological spectre to Blanchot’s avowed atheism. Jon D. Levenson’s remarkable book, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, clears the ground of our “ontotheological” misreading of creationism in the Bible as creatio ex nihilo and presents in its place a resounding account of the dramatic risk that the created world runs as it hovers over the brink of chaos.20 Levenson shows that for a major voice in the Bible creation takes place not out of nothing but in opposition to “disorder, injustice, affliction, and chaos, which are, in the Israelite worldview, one.”21 The alternative to a created world is not the abstract philosophical concept of nothing or nothingness. Rather, “creation is a positive that stands in pronounced opposition to the harsh negative of chaos. The world is good; the chaos that it replaces or suppresses is evil.”22 My claim is that Levinas deploys profound biblical intuitions in acknowledging and describing the il y a, which fits the bill described by Levenson as the disordered, chaotic and thus evil “substratum of creation.”23 In the Bible, as in the world Levinas describes as “accomplished” or “created” from the abyssal horror of the il y a, we observe the “fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos,” from which follows “the
role of humanity in forming and sustaining the world order.” Through its endeavours “to neutralize the powerful and ongoing threat of chaos.” The role of chaos in the Bible, the tōhû wābōhû or “unformed and void” of Genesis 1:2, is precisely the role played by the il y a in Levinas’ ethics. It is the persistent threat of deforming, indeed unforming or decreating the world, a world whose order is only retained by continually warding off the threat of chaos, for Levinas through ethics and for the Bible through the covenantal relation that includes moral and cultic obligations. Accordingly, “creation becomes the corollary of covenant”; “the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing [Levinas might add: pace Hegel and Heidegger, pace philosophy] but the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order.” This narrative of chaos followed by order followed by a covenant invested with the task of keeping the chaos at bay should now be seen as the template for what Paul Davies rightly calls Levinas’ “linear narrative” in which il y a is followed by “hypostasis” then by the “ethics” that accomplishes or creates the world. The il y a is thus a theologico-mythic origin, the primordial chaos of the “unformed and void” from which a created world emerges on the basis of a covenantal or ethical relationship. Moreover the moral charge of the il y a is one of radical evil precisely because it is opposed to the created order of the world in which human life ought to flourish (see Gen. 1:28-29).

Not just the argument, but also the imagery of biblical chaos anticipates the il y a. Toumayan has shown how reliant Levinas and Blanchot are on aquatic images in order to describe their experience of the il y a – think of Thomas’ entry into the sea which leads him to the obscurity of existence, the other night, the space of literature and finally the disaster itself. Likewise the imagery used by the biblical authors, inherited and modified from Babylonian and Canaanite mythology, is for the most part a sea of symbols and figures, gods and elements that dramatise the threatening and sometimes actual experience of the world’s dissolution. The threat of oceanic chaos is overcome provisionally in the act of creation but persists into our own time – one cannot but think of the recent tsunamis; terrible reminders of the vulnerability of our ordered or, in biblical terms, created world and of the horror that assaults when that order is suspended by the opposing force of oceanic chaos – and is finally vanquished only in redemption, Endzeit gleicht Urzeit, when the primordial waters are definitively subdued. Not only is there “water” in the beginning alongside the “unformed and void” and “darkness” of Genesis 2:1, all three commingled in opposition to “the wind of God” that creates light and order and then pronounces this order “good,” but there are significant further accounts in the Bible that tell, in decidedly aquatic imagery, of a primordial combat myth when chaos
was subjugated and replaced with order:

   it was You who drove back the sea with Your might,  
   who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;  
   it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan [who resides in  
   the sea],  
   who left him as food for the denizens of the desert.  
   (Ps. 74: 13-14)\(^\text{29}\)

“The immediate background of this passage,” says Levenson, “is a Ca-  
naanite myth...(ca. 14th century B.C.E.), in which the god Baal defeated  
the ocean, there conceived as masculine and known variously as Prince  
Yamm (‘Sea’), Judge River, Lotan (the biblical ‘Leviathan’), the twisting  
seven-headed dragon, and ‘Tannin,’ some other sort of monster.”\(^\text{30}\) The  
story of the Flood, long recognised to recapitulate the story of creation on a  
more explicitly moral plane, again shows how the chaotic forces of water  
are opposed to the moral order of creation.

   All the fountains of the great deep burst apart,  
   And the floodgates of the sky broke open. (Gen. 7:11)

Another striking and important source for the primordial but provisional  
suppression of oceanic chaos which produces a stable, created world is  
Isaiah 51:\(^\text{31}\)

   Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor,  
   O arm of the L ORD!  
   Awake as in days of old [ qedem],  
   As in former ages!  
   It was you who hacked Rahab in pieces,  
   That pierced the Dragon [ tannin].  
   It was you that dried up the Sea [ vām],  
   The waters of the great deep [ tēhôm];  
   That made the abysses of the Sea  
   A road the redeemed might walk. (Isa. 51:9-10)

All the references to the Dragon ( tannin), the Sea ( yam) and the great deep  
( tēhôm) explicitly recall the opening account of creation in Genesis 1, re-  
minding us that the order of our created world has been wrested from pri-  
mordial chaos and, as the prophet attests, can in fact collapse, abandoning  
us to the disaster. Levinas would agree, and his rejection of Blanchot’s  
abiding in the disaster affirms an ethical world vulnerable to the ongoing  
threat of the il y a or the tōhû wăbŏhû. Levinas’ plea to leave the il y a for  
the sake of an ethically created world places him in line with the prophets
(including some Psalmists and Job) who enjoin us and God to activate our ethical agency against the evil chaos that subtends our fragile, created world. Of course Levinas remains modern, and intriguingly emphasises our political purpose when he invests all the agency for sustaining the covenantal, ethical world with human beings, in the first person singular, and not with God.\(^{32}\)

This antediluvian prehistory to Levinas helps us understand why the \(i l\ y\ a\) is both the furthest thing from God and the spectral identity with which one is always at risk of confusing him. Here the pagan, gnostic and atheistic temptations assert themselves all at once.

The pagan temptation is not that which regards the \(i l\ y\ a\) as a vital agency, a god or hostile but anonymous “counter-intentionality” working against the ethically created world. This degree of autonomous evil can be borne by monotheism, and indeed “the combat between God and evil” is recalled “throughout the Bible.”\(^{33}\) The temptation of paganism, rather, arises when such powers are invested with a transcendence and a power equal to that of the God; for Levinas this temptation would be the equalisation of the authority of the Other with that of the \(i l\ y\ a\) and of the freedom of the ethical subject with that of the elemental. This full blown paganism is rejected by Levinas, just as the redactors of the Bible reject it by subordinating these powers to the creative work of God when they strip the sea monsters of their names in Genesis 1:21 and insist that they are created rather than primordial. “In Genesis 1, the waters have not only been neutralized but demythologized and even depersonalized.”\(^{34}\) The monotheistic breakthrough thus consists not in the denial of forces opposed to God but in their denigration and subordination, just as Levinas’ ethical monotheism consists not in denying evil but in successfully warding it off through the ethical relation. Were Levinas to succumb to paganism then the transcendence of the Other would be constantly indistinguishable from the transcendence of the \(i l\ y\ a\) (rather than only occasionally, as Levinas in fact admits) and the ethical subject would never attain the freedom to overcome the mythic elemental in which the self first finds itself. We would be left with determinism, moral neutrality and no possibility of progress, a cycle where the moral and anti-moral forces cancel each other and thus a world whose ethical order is but a ruse, as Levinas dreaded. If the Other failed to distinguish itself from the \(i l\ y\ a\), at least for the most part, then the goodness of creation would founder, the ethically accomplished world would decrate to the neutrality of existence. It would result in a self essentially riveted to its elemental, animal existence, lacking sufficient agency to accomplish an ethical world.

Nevertheless, the superiority of creation over chaos does not imply the elimination of the mythic but its domestication, both for the Bible and for
Levinas. The forces of evil are not annihilated or utterly subordinated to God; they are provisionally subdued through the covenant of creation; just like ethics, for Levinas, is borne on the abyss of the il y a. Levinas thus accepts a mythical version of monotheism in which evil is a force to be contended with throughout the duration of history. Monotheism is not in the last instance the idea that there is no power save God’s but a commitment to the ultimately better power of YHWH over those that oppose him. “This is a theology with absolute faith in God’s ultimate goodness, but a rather qualified faith in his proximate goodness.”\(^\text{35}\) This view is expressed by Levinas when he persistently acknowledges the autonomous power of the elemental and the il y a while asserting that ethics can and must put a distance between the human world and the evil in existence. That is why ethics is not simply an accomplishment that has brought about the world but at the same time also a task which always awaits. Nowhere does Levinas say that the il y a is left behind at creation or annihilated, precisely because his implicit view of monotheism sees evil as persistently opposed to creation and kept at bay only, and not necessarily, through ethics. Levinas thus takes up the thread of his Jewish precursors in order to advance an ethical, mythical monotheism which seeks to neutralise though not eliminate the forces of evil. It was Rosenzweig who first discovered Hegel’s early manifesto for “a mythology of reason,” but it is Levinas who takes the mythic into the heart of phenomenology by retelling the old Jewish drama of covenantal opposition to the persistence of evil.\(^\text{36}\)

As for the gnostic temptation, it too arises by failing to appreciate the theological significance of the il y a at the very earliest stages of Levinas’ thought. Here the mistake is to take Levinas for a modern gnostic for whom, as he somewhere says, “Being is Evil.”\(^\text{37}\) The only but crucial reason why Levinas is not a gnostic is because the evil of being is opposed precisely to the goodness of the world and not to that of another world; being is evil because it is the world robbed of its ethical accomplishment and returned to its chaotic il y a origins. The answer to the evil of being is thus not the other-worldly salvation of a gnosist that gives up on the world but on the contrary an ethical or covenantal commitment to the world in place of anonymous, evil being.

However Blanchot does not succumb to either of these temptations. Nor, despite explicit sympathies, does he fall for the lure of atheism, at least not in the sense of claiming a belief or taking an epistemic stance against faith. For him the temptation to view death or finitude as an absolute that can and therefore must be mastered never surpasses the endless, indeed infinite uncertainty of dying. The mythical theology that I claim infuses the il y a goes a long way to explaining why, for Blanchot, the neutral
also appears as a “counter spirituality,” as Kevin Hart argues, in which the sacred is bound to darkness, neutrality and impersonality. Would the “darkness over the surface of the deep” that accompanies the “unformed void” before creation be that “other night” which is excluded from the diurnal order of the world? If for Blanchot God and theology, *autrui* and ethics, remain fundamentally impersonal and neutral this is not because of any certainty or polemic but because of a passivity that he could not overcome. Blanchotian atheism should be situated beyond the distinction between belief and disbelief or, as he might have put it, where the ordinary language of atheism functions only abusively, by way of its contrary, and in the most facile way possible by putting the experience of the disaster to the service of knowledge.

Are we too left with an experience of transcendence whose uncertainties bind us to the impotence of an allegedly depoliticised theory? On the contrary. It seems to me that by resituating the *il y a* in mythico-theological terms we pave the way toward a reclaiming of precisely the fields of life disavowed by Levinas and Blanchot: history and politics. Here the task that awaits is to develop a political mythical theology, but with careful attention to how transcendence makes multiplicity its only proper expression. By situating evil in the heart of transcendence we situate ourselves within the battle against it. The task ahead is to show how the transcendence of the good is distinguishable from evil by a covenantal commitment to its interpretation. In that way mythical theology can become part of history and our response to transcendence can remain politically engaged even as we take responsibility for its meaning.

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NOTES


André Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 158 and passim. Is not the vigorous critique outlined in this “Conclusion” undone when ethics is reduced to the structure of subjectivity, such that “Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity incontrovertible into an act” (Otherwise than Being, p. 117)?


4 This is the thrust of Jean-Luc Marion’s critique of Levinas; see for example, Marion, “From the Other to the Individual,” trans. Robyn Horner in Regina Schwartz, ed., Transcendence: philosophy, literature, and theology approach the beyond (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 43-60.

5 Moreover, as a recent essay by Toumayan attests, situating Levinas at the threshold of artistic inspiration reveals the psychological complexity to Levinas’ moral phenomenology; see his admirable essay “‘I more than the others’: Dostoevsky and Levinas,” Yale French Studies, 104 (2004), pp. 55-66.


7 The title of chapter IV of Existence and Existence in which the il y a is described.


10 Levinas, Existence and Existents, p. 60.

11 Cited by Toumayan, Encountering the Other, p. 130

12 See the references to Levinas and Blanchot in Toumayan, Encountering the Other, p. 206 note 14.

13 Indeed Toumayan emphasises this throughout his book by tracking “the concept of difference” in Levinas and Blanchot.

14 “The rumbling of the ‘there is’ is the non-sense in which essence turns, and in which thus turns the justice issued out of signification. There is ambiguity of sense and non-sense in being, sense turning into non-sense. It cannot be taken lightly” (Levinas, Otherwise than Being, p. 163). I take Levinas here to be acknowledging that justice (what he calls “the signification of the one-for-the-other,” or “subjectivity”) and ontology (what he calls “essence” and aligns with theory, knowledge and appearance) are both backgrounded by the chaotic non-sense of the il y a. That is
why the separation of justice from ontology risks plunging the former back into the il y a even as it attains its difference from ontology. See also the decisive passage in Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” Of God Who Comes to the Mind, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 69. Critchley discusses this in Very Little...Almost Nothing, p. 78 and note 49.


16 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” Of God Who Comes to the Mind, p. 69.


18 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 142. Levinas avoids explicitly identifying the element with the il y a, though he does everything to assure their indistinguishability. “The element extends into the there is [il y a] (p. 142)” suggests a difference, but this falls away when we learn that the element, just like the il y a, is “existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence” (p. 142), that it “comes to us from nowhere” and “remains entirely anonymous” (p. 132). The only difference is that the element is enjoyed through the body’s sensibility while the il y a is endured through consciousness. However both function as the background upon which the hypostasis of a subject takes place, and both, as I will emphasise, persistently threaten to draw the subject toward participation in their amorphous reality.

19 Chalier leaves us with the suggestive remark that the “unformed and void” upon which the world of light and order is created, is “l’une de ses possibilities constantes” for the world, and indeed “l’une de ses plus dramatiques tentations même,” Levinas: l’utopie de l’humain (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), p. 42. The analysis that follows of Jon D. Levenson’s book, beginning with the title of that book, suggests that in this remark Chalier, like her teacher Levinas, displays far stronger biblical intuitions than she is aware or prepared to acknowledge.


21 Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xix.

22 Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xx.

23 Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xx.

24 Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. xxix.

25 “Genesis 1:2 thus describes the “world,” if we may call it that, just before the cosmogony began” (Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 121). Levinas’ From Existence to the Existent and Totality and Infinity should thus be understood as a phenomenological moral cosmogony, a view which remythologises Levinas
and thus resituates his work in the social and political field of historical action rather than the dehistoricised and depoliticised purely ethical relation.


27 Paul Davies, “A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas,” in *Philosophers’ Poets*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 37-69. Note too that Conclusion 4 of *Totality and Infinity* is called “Creation” and argues that the world accomplished through ethics is best described as a created world because of its break from the impersonal realm of neutral existence.

28 *Existence and Existent*, p. 61. This also explains Levinas’ reliance, in his description of the *il y a*, on Levy-Bruhl’s account of mystical participation in “primitive” societies. Like the *il y a*, primitive mysticism takes place “before all Revelation, before the light comes,” where it is allied with death and impersonal existence (*Existence and Existent*, p. 61).

29 Cited by Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 7. All the biblical passages referred to here are cited by Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 7-11.

30 Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 8. The Tanin is polemically subordinated to being but one of God’s creations in Genesis 1:21 (JPS translates the *tanin* as “the great sea monsters”), which Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* treats as a demythologizaton of the original Near Easter cosmogonic combat myth.

31 Here “produce” is the apt term that should be understood as Levinas himself uses the term in *Totality and Infinity* to suggest both the accomplishing but also the dramatising of the world’s order out of chaos; see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 26.

32 In this respect Levinas belongs to the Lithuanian tradition of Orthodox Jewish theology whose modern exponents include Joseph B. Soloveitchick, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and David Hartman (see, for example, my “Lacking All Interest: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Pure Practice of Religion,” *Harvard Theological Review* 97:1 (2004), 1-32. As Levenson well shows (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, ch. 3), the theologoumenon of primordial evil finds a “correspondence” in Jewish anthropology (in the persistence of the *yetzer ha’rah*, the Evil Impulse) and eschatology (in the war with Amalek throughout the ages), so that the transfer of agency from God to the ethical subject is effected on established lines of correspondence. Levinas’ phenomenology is the perfect vehicle for this transference since phenomenology always claimed to return to the basic structures of consciousness, perception or being, in short, to the basic structure of experience, so that it is precisely in phenomenology that we should expect to find a correspondence between the theological, psychological and historical narrations of the relationship between evil and an ultimately (if not originally) good world.


34 Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 122; see too Knohl, *Divine
Symphony, p. 13.

35 Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil, p. 45.


37 This is the suggestive mistake made by Phillip Blond, “Emmanuel Levinas: God and Philosophy,” in Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology, ed. Phillip Blond (New York: Routledge, 1998).


39 That is what I think is residually wrong with Simon Critchley’s reading of the il y a. Critchley learns out of the essential ambiguity of the Other that its authority cannot be appropriated solely (if at all) for “ethics,” and this seems to me largely correct. As the il y a becomes indistinguishable from ileity “ethics” itself becomes indistinguishable from the neutrality of what Blanchot calls “literature.” Here the danger is thus not of an atheistic reading; that is perfectly legitimate given the fundamental ambiguity of “the Other.” Here too however both Levinas and the Bible are to be preferred; the il y a is in a profound way only experienced atheistically, without God, just as evil in the Bible arises in the absence of God, which is why the prophets call on God to come back at just these times. The temptation of atheism, then, is falsely construed when it is taken as an assertion of cosmic loneliness and a denial of God’s support, for just this religious experience of abandonment is attested by the presence, autonomy and indeed transcendence of evil. The mistake here, however, as often, is one of dogmatic atheism; not the acknowledgement of the transcendence of evil but the unfounded insistence that evil and death are the only forms of transcendence. The mistake of dogmatic atheists is to insist with as much certainty as naive theists that the ambiguities of transcendence can be named once and for all. Between the two dogmatisms lies the true and uncertain life, religious or secular, open to other names for the sense of transcendence. For Critchley’s view, see Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, pp. 76-83.
Reconnaitre: to recognise, to acknowledge. As Christophe Bident states in the incipit of his book, this verb predicates something ambiguous, fluctuating, evasive; but, he adds, at the same time decisive and necessary. Especially in our time, the age of the TV-reality, when everything is proclaimed recognisable in anything else, and therefore everything is undifferentiated. Bident’s slender but dense book is a meditation on the acts of recognition which strongly argues for the inescapable necessity of the reconnaissance, recurring principally – but not exclusively – in the works of Robert Antelme, Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze. Reconnaissances: the plural hints at the many facets and uses of the term, from the singular of “recognizing a baby,” to the collective of “recognizing a state, a nation”; from the juridical of “recognizing a crime, a right,” to the metaphysical of “recognizing a god, or a truth” (13); but, most of all, the plural, already in the title, suggests and stresses the argument and thesis of the book: recognition is not a single act, punctual and determinant, but an incessant and infinite movement.

Our age is the epoch of the impossibility of recognition, what Bident calls “la maladie de la reconnaissance” (15): the excess of visibility leads to in-visibility; the speed and unilateralism of the mediasation of the real excludes the act of recognition. Its substitute is communication, the inflational use of language, the wordy violence of the lack of precision, of the false representation. False representations that create false recognitions, the illusion of the domination of the real through its unilateral nomination. This nomination, empty and tyrannical, is the negation of the intellectual work, it is the interruption and crystallization of the flowing movement of recognition, and ends in a monistic nihilism, in the catchwords of the “philosophes de télévision” (31), who work for the disappearance of thought. Therefore,
argues Bident, now more than ever, we need the work of *reconnaissance*: a precision of names, words and languages, which at the same time is able to include the infinity of the alterity, the necessity of the contestation, the impossibility of a final scene: infinite movement. The task and responsibility of our time is, for Bident, “to recognise recognition,” *reconnaître la reconnaissance* (43).

Usually philosophers have been suspicious of this term and have used it with caution and reservation. Thus, Bident interrogates art and literature of the twentieth century which have respected and preserved the infinite gesture of recognition, the tension between visible and invisible, readable and unreadable, knowable (*connaissable*) and acknowledgeable (*reconnaissable*). Recognition, insists Bident, is not posterior to cognition, but is its ultimate and most profound act: recognition leads beyond cognition, to the rejection of any resolution of identity, of any totalitarian recuperation, in the name of an “exhausting attention to the other” (57). Thus, in Bataille, *reconnaissance* can face and confront “the impossible,” in Bresson “the invisible,” in Resnais “the undecidable,” in Beckett “the unnameable,” in Antelme “the indestructible.” Rejecting the onto-teleological foundation of western culture, the act of recognition preserves a “petite santé” (58), a tiny remain of intellectual health against our age’s malady of indifferention.

In Antelme’s testimony about War World II, *L’Espèce humaine*, Bident stresses the perseverance of the recognition of the other within a human machinery that aimed precisely at the abolition of any possible recognition. The concentration camp is the annulment of every distinction through a generalised indifferention that attempts to reduce the other to naught. Antelme’s perseverance in recognition is based on resemblance, the common belonging to the same *espèce humaine*, the human race, which unites SS and prisoners. But to recognise the resemblance means, for Bident, to reject assimilation in the name of an ineliminable alterity, “to prevent every assimilation thoroughly considering every resemblance” (73). The act of recognition remains faithful to its object in respecting the constant change of its vantage point, of its address, of the conditions of its enunciation, in conserving the heterogeneity and the internal movement of the other. The most truthful recognition is to denounce any external resemblance.

Blanchot’s texts are thus, for Bident, the privileged *locus* that opens up the space of contestation for the incessant movement or recognition. His intellectual trajectory as literary critic and author of fiction merged into a peculiar genre, where the philosophical thought fragmentes and the voice of the narrator interweaves with the one of the critic. Blanchot’s “récit critique,” suspended between literary theory and *art poétique*, takes on the mission of recognising and preserving the singularity of every creative act, the un-
appropriable solitude essentiel of every work and its “interminable, anonymous, impersonal affirmation” (95). With the notion of neutre, Blanchot’s acts of recognition preserve in the other the movement of incessant creation – that impersonal alteration which permeates every singularity – and therefore perform recognition beyond the prevarication of a nomination and definition, beyond any relation to name and label, hors de tout rapport. To recognise the movement of in-propriety and in-appropriation in every singular work means to exclude the possibility of labelling it with a name, and is therefore infinite reflexion at the heart of the abysmal un-recognisable. The narrative voice attempts recognition through blind gestures, fragile traces, impossible routes and, in these gaps between book and silence, it enacts its necessity.

Reconnaissance is thus “deteritorialization of thought” (114), adventure beyond or behind every limit, which never forsakes its movement. That’s why, argues Bident, its perfect image is the sea: like the sea, the movement of recognition is the drifting of any singularity, of any unifying drive, of any propriety: suspension in space. Deleuze’s événement enacts this infinite movement: it asks for the recognition of a determining indeterminacy, of an individuating neutrality, of an impersonal singularity, of an identity in incessant process of becoming. The événement is beyond any characterization, au-delà de tout personnage. The extreme attention to gestures, impressions, sensations, marked by a desubjectifying power, becomes the concern of every possible recognition: “prendre figure n’est jamais de repos” (131). Reconnaître is thus a movement at the same time neutral and singular, “intime” and “extime,” with no end, which infinitely exposes the subject and the object of its predication, and cannot be reduced to any formula, any deed, any causality or determinism. It does not implicate any belonging and therefore suspends each time initiality and finality.

It is hard to pay full justice to (to reconnaître) the complexity and density of this book in a short summary. But, unlike the infinite movement of reconnaissance, the reviewer must stop at a certain point. And there is no better such point than Bident’s last image: love is the final and most appropriate gesture of signification for the acts of recognition. Love does not make claims for identity, but each time resists recognition, determination, and its own fulfilment thus preserving thus that part of ignorance that belongs to the incessant movement of being. Like love, “reconnaître est le sens du sens” (157), the meaning of meaning, and the incessant and impossible research for that meaning: “on n’a jamais fini de reconnaître.”

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The principle of contestation is a pivotal theme in the thought of Blanchot, the scope of its significance being enduringly observable throughout the span of the French intellectual’s career, and traversing the diversity of his critical concerns. When approached with the manifold notion of contestation in mind, the complex connections between these various intellectual concerns are elaborated, and a new dimension is brought to each, as is illustrated by each of the readings in The Power of Contestation.

The word ‘contestation’ conventionally communicates a sense of active dissension or disputation. Blanchot’s singular treatment of this term, however, involves contesting the very form of power traditionally implicated in this term. La contestation figures in Blanchot as radical questioning, and is vital to his approach to language and literature, ethics, and politics. In the introductory chapter to this volume, the authors trace this concept to an early essay by Blanchot, “On demande des dissidents,” which gives expression to his distinctive and somewhat radical views on the value of politics, and the conditions of “the true form of dissidence.” What is manifest even here is that, for Blanchot, the “true conditions of struggle” cannot be described in terms of a simple opposition or contradiction, for “contradiction does not represent a decisive separation” (IC 8). Blanchot considers politics to be a movement of refusal, or contestation, which calls into question, and resists reacting in terms of, the dialectical economy to which conform power relations. Already, in this essay of 1937, Blanchot’s formulation of non-dialectical negativity – the passive vitality of what would later come to
be articulated in terms of *le neutre* – is palpable. Contestation must be understood in relation to the notion of *le neutre*; “this non-power that would not be a simple negation of power” (*IC* 51), neither affirmation, nor negation, but, rather, the suspension of the dialectical economy which opposes the one to the other. Geoffrey Hartman describes this as “a negativity stronger than terror or nihilism … or the contrariety of dialectics” (57).

The question of politics for Blanchot needs to be addressed – and can only be truly contested – from an intellectual space outside the political realm itself. Blanchot’s turn (noted by Geoffrey Hartman) from political journalism to literature in 1938, appositely (if not somewhat ironically) emphasises his radical notion of contestation, as a ‘politics’ of *le neutre*. The question that presented itself for literary criticism, in the wake of this retreat from politics, concerned the extent of this disengagement and the consequences that it posed for the value and status of literary practice. Vivian Liska articulates this concern as to how literature may be qualified as a source of contestation: “How deeply can literature involve itself in the world, in history, in politics, and culture, before it loses its own voice, its space and specificity? How far can it retreat within itself before it turns into acquiescence with things as they are?” (80). Her question conveys the intricacy implicated in the problem of the relation of literature to the political sphere, in displaying the fragile tension of which this relation consists, which in Sartre’s concept of *littérature engagée* is reduced to a determinate and unambiguous correspondence.

In his decisive essay of 1949, “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot responds to the demand for justification implicit in the imposing question of philosophy, ‘What is literature?’, maintaining that this demand is extraneous to literature, the sole concern of which is the question of its very possibility. “Let us suppose,” he writes, “that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (*GO* 21), and with this gesture, literature is posed as the question of its very possibility, and as such, it becomes a nullity. This description of literature as void, and yet also as a site of resistance, contains a significant critique of the notions of the ethical and the political – of authenticity, responsibility, and legitimacy. Existing purely as the suspension of the question of its own possibility, literature is, for Blanchot, the site of contestation. As an interruption of the worldly temporality of power and possibility, the literary space holds the conditions for an experience of a ‘pure’ language of disengagement. Literature is a “power of contestation” in as much as it is maintained as the negation of itself, and preserves this radical disengagement from questions of legitimacy: “literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity it may constitute an extraordinary force” (*GO* 22).
Blanchot’s meditations on the relations of writing and death introduce thought to the possibility of writing experienced as disengagement. Literature engages the conditions for relation to the impossible – an experience of relation irreducible to dialectical appropriation. The aesthetic dimension of existence, for Blanchot, involves the subject in an experience of radical passivity. Indeed, literary contestation effects the dissolution of the ‘metaphysics of subjectivity,’ and suspends the play of mastery which conditions decisionist language. Contestation is thus enacted in the literary work by désœuvrement, which describes the force of double negation by which literature renders null and void its own power to name by conceptualisation. Contestation is the means by which is challenged the will to power involved in the practice of all totalising discourses and in this respect contestation in Blanchot is implicitly a concern with ethics.

Literature provides the conditions of possibility for a rapport with that which is outside the subject; an experience of communication that is irreducible to a logic of relation; a relation that is not one of dialectical appropriation, and that does not tend toward unity. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot, through his engagement with Levinas (but also with Bataille), begins to think the conditions of possibility for communication as such in terms of the notion of double dissymmetry, by which is neither constituted a ‘transsubjective’ nor an ‘intersubjective’ relation (*IC* 69). His conceptual configuration of relationality (as *relation of the third kind*) in terms of metaphysical asymmetry institutes the factors of non-reciprocity, and radical separation that interrupt communication as an economy of exchange.

Notwithstanding the differences between Blanchot and Levinas, both would concur that the conditions of possibility for communication are circumscribed by the irreducibility of language, and in this respect, the question of ethics manifests in the work of each thinker, as a problem of response. The exigency of ethics in Levinas, is given in the demand for response to the other who calls into question the power of my being in the world. For Blanchot, the self – its power and authority – is subjected to questioning by the excessive demand of writing. In Blanchot, in order to approach the problem of response, one must first attend to the exigency of questioning, of perpetually turning oneself back into question (see *IC* 11). The experience of being put into question is thus the condition for relation with the Other. Contestation is linked to this experience, and indicates Blanchot’s implicit concern with ethics. Blanchot renders these connections more evident even as early as his review of *L’expérience intérieure*:

Questioning, experience, communication are narrowly defined terms – to say no more. Questioning is the calling into question of a particular and limited being, and it is also, consequently, an effort to
break this particularity and these limits. … Communication … begins being authentic only when experience has stripped existence, has withdrawn from it that which linked it to discourse and to action, has opened it up to a nondiscursive interiority where it loses itself, communicates with itself outside of any object that could give it a purpose or that it could serve. It is no more participation of a subject with an object than union by language. (FP 40)

The most critical of all questions, for Blanchot would be that which “calls me into question most radically” – the question posed by the relation of a being to the death of another (UC 9). Blanchot finds the question of the death of the other to be that which founds the possibility of community (see UC 10-1).

These ethical concerns of Blanchot explicitly preoccupy a number of the chapters in The Power of Contestation. The problem of ethics entails an analysis of the question of testimony for both Michael Holland and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for whom witnessing is also a form of contestation, which inevitably implicates, or brings into question, an other. This question merges with the question of language and responsibility in the discussion carried out by Hartman with regards to the problem of responding to the Holocaust. The problem of response is taken up again by Jill Robbins within the context of the encounter of Blanchot with Levinas. Robbins attends to the conditions of possibility for an ethical relation of communication, with reference to the figure of “Plural Speech”: the exigency underlying The Infinite Conversation. She considers the conditions for a language of contestation with respect to the structure of interlocution as a relation of interpellation and intervallic rupture. Gerald Bruns enters into a discussion of the ethics of relationality to illustrate the way in which there is an “internal coherence” between the experience of writing and friendship, both of which involve the calling into question of the philosophical subject of cognition. In both the experience of writing, and in interpersonal or interlocutionary relations, an ‘interruption of being’ occurs such that the unity of discourse is contested.

The interruption of discourse occurs in literature in the instance of fragmentary writing. Both Bruns – in contemplating the ‘ontology’ of the artwork – and Leslie Hill – in reflecting on the self-contestation of art – meditate on the “politics of the fragmentary” (25). Hill identifies the writing of the fragment as the “essential embodiment of art’s self-questioning” (105). Fragmentary writing – which, as Bruns implies is not a form of discourse, but rather the interruption of it – features the quality of interminability and incompletion; it effects the impossibility of narrative, and is in this sense (remarks Bruns) an-archic. The writing of the fragment is a contesta-
tion of the conditions of limitation prescribed in the form of genre. Writing, Bruns argues, is a “nonproductive expenditure” (125), exceeding the limits of genre. Thus, as Kevin Hart observes, contestation can be understood in parallel to the play of transgression.

Accordingly, Hill attends to the complexity of the relationship between literature, criticism, and philosophy, in view of the fragmentary demand in writing by which language thwarts the endeavour for generic delimitation. The literary ethic of self-questioning is the gesture by which is enacted the désœuvrement of the work of literature. Contestation in literature thus pertains to the irreducibility of difference to the form of genre, such that the figure of the border – the condition of the limit – is rendered unsustainable. Resisting the “logic of differentiation” involved in the conditions of limitation implicated in the form of genre is, for Hill, “the counter-law of singularity itself” (105). Writing, as Blanchot’s diverse work illustrates, cannot simply be situated outside or excluded from the philosophical, the ethical, and the political; the outside is not a category or a place of occupancy, but rather the space in which such categories come to be contested.

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In 1949, enmeshed in the web of words that would later secure his fame, Samuel Beckett brought forth a novel-length prose work of unparalleled extremity. Originally entitled *Mahood*, in keeping with the “serial selves” that populate his earlier fiction (Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran and Malone), the book is “voiced” by a self-eliminating narrator, ever on the verge of syntactical meltdown but somehow persisting, bound by the determining rigours of grammatical form. Now lost in the abyss of language, now disoriented by the vertigo of identity, the voice presses inexorably on, through the unbending imperative of a double negation: the “inability to speak,” and the “inability to be silent.” The title Beckett finally assigns to this unsettling work, *L’Innomable* (*The Unnamable*) turns on a similar paradox, giving both name and description to what otherwise cannot be identified or explained.

Reviewing *L’Innomable* in 1953, Maurice Blanchot conjectured: “What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears into it?” The Unnamable, he suggests, is “a being without being who can neither live nor die, cannot cease or begin, the empty place in which the listlessness of an empty speech speaks, one that with great difficulty regains a porous and agonizing I” (*BC* 210, 213). The paradox of the title deepens still further given that, roughly since Heidegger, the unnamable and its surrogates – the unspeakable, the unthinkable, the inexpressible, and, by extension, the abject, the irremediable, the impossible – have become potent philosophical themes. Far from bringing about the ruination
of discourse, as they might seem to promise, these terms have abetted its endless proliferation, providing long-lasting fuel sources for Continental philosophy and critical theory.

The most recent venture into this well-ploughed terrain is Marie-Chantal Killeen’s ambitious study, *Essai sur l'indicible: Jabès, Duras, Blanchot*. Following the trail back to the nineteenth century, she argues that the direct progenitor of the unnamable, or *indicible*, is an even more ambitious undertaking – the quest for origins, totality, the absolute. Traditionally associated with Romantic or symbolist poetics (from Novalis and Blake to Rimbaud), the search for the myth of origins rises up most conspicuously in the Mallarméan Book, the undeclared “sequel” to the Jena Romantics’ desire for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total oeuvre or infinite Work that aimed to link philosophy and literature to myths of foundation. In spiritual support of these two projects is a dizzying rolcall of nineteenth-century figures – Hegel, Spencer, Renan, Darwin, Marx, Wagner, Balzac, Zola – all supposedly embarked upon the same grand narrative, the same enigmatic search for origins.

In the twentieth century, by contrast, the errors of this way of thinking become paramount. The writing of the *indicible* is the translation of the earlier task, and its coeval concepts of unity, teleology and totality, into a more specific and astringent theoretical language. Distinct from both the “unavowable” (as in a Foucauldian techniques of power) and the “ineffable” of the mystical tradition, this postmodern *indicible* is first and foremost concerned with making apparent an “original nothingness.” In Heidegger, it is articulated as the ontological difference between beings and Being; structuralist linguistics deploys it in terms of the linguistic difference whereby meaning is produced; and for psychoanalysis, it figures as the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject. Now, the task of writing no longer seeks to celebrate a mythic Origin, but rather to reveal, through the interruption of myth, something unrevealable: the non-coincidence of the subject with herself, with the community, with the word.

Over the past forty years, *la question de l’indicible* has occupied another formidable line-up of European thinkers, namely Barthes, Derrida, Eco, Foucault, Kristeva, Levinas, Nancy and Sollers. These figures write the *indicible* by means of fragments, constituted and gathered around juxtapositions, ruptures, repetitions and contradictions. Such writerly practices lend themselves, in turn, to non-linear ways of reading, taking us away from the traditional novel towards the more elliptical and dispersive modes of poetry. The characteristics of this postmodern *indicible* can be identified as vulnerability, availability (spareness) and humility; everything, in short, that causes us to *doubt*. 
So far, so familiar. These are standard moves in the genesis of theoretical discourse – the turn from aesthetics to theory, from form to formlessness, from work to désoeuvrement. Does Killeen have anything new to add to this already overworked field of enquiry? No doubt beguiled by Beckett’s imposing example, she anchors the discussion in fiction, rather than in theory or philosophy. Approaching it in this manner, she contends that the works of Blanchot, Edmond Jabès and Marguerite Duras mark a major turning point. They adumbrate the unnamable as a place for an encounter with impossibility, silence and alterity. In addition, says Killeen, these writers see the aesthetic as inescapably a question of ethics; their works reaffirm our limits and reopen gaps, recounting and illustrating the fact that there is no direct apprehension of the world or of language.

This concern with the “limit” indicates, for Jabès, Blanchot and Duras, not the end of writing as such, but its veritable origin, and its most pressing demand. Focused not on communication, one of literature’s traditional goals, but on the incommunicable, they produce a literature of involution, fascinated by its own conditions of production. Language functions here not as an instrument that keeps faith with representation, but as matter, and so these writings present sustained reflections on their own material substance.

Jabès identifies two unnamables, “God” and “Auschwitz,” incarnated through a Judaic reinscription of Mallarmé’s Book of books. Judaic thought itself operates as a “fiction” in this writing, and the indicible becomes a religious trope; thus, to say God is to speak his absence (the Hebraic reinscription of YWVH, for ‘Yahweh’, is a form of sous rature). For Blanchot, the indicible is apparent in the unnarratable récit, affirming nothing other than its own limit, where death appears as the infinitely other. And in Duras’ writing, indicibilité manifests itself as radically incompatible sexual difference, an immanent unnamability between beings. To speak this relation to the other sex, which is a relation to the impossible, constitutes for Duras a challenge that lies at the source of all things, and all writing.

In her Blanchot chapter, Killeen devotes the first half to a discussion of death, the second to a sustained analysis of Blanchot’s 1948 récit, L’Arrêt de mort (Death Sentence). The earlier section usefully outlines some key differences between Blanchot and Heidegger. The zero-sum game of Being and beings, suggests Killeen, can also be seen in Blanchot’s animadversions on Death and dying. Thus, being-towards-death – resolute Dasein anticipating its end-point – is refigured into death as radically other, hence absolutely unknowable. Blanchot stresses the anonymous character of dying, in order to depersonalise the humanistic conception of the “proper” death that attempts to incorporate death into existence, to make it a part of
life and experience. Blanchotian death withdraws us from the tranquil assurance of death as something that preserves our individuality, our unique and indivisible selves, right to the very end. Far from empowering us, the “end” of death is le très mauvais infini, an end that can never be surmounted. In contradistinction to Heidegger, Blanchot renounces death as possibility – as mastery, as comprehension, as the work of time. It exposes us to a radical reversal, an about-turn that is the “original experience” the work must touch.

A further refiguration concerns the status of the work of art. Heidegger gives it a privileged relation to truth – as unconcealment of being, simultaneously revealing and withdrawing itself. Blanchot, however, contends that the work of art has no relation to truth; rather, it unveils itself to itself alone. Being is thus irreducible to the double manoeuvre of concealment and unconcealment. For Blanchot, seeking to escape the logic of presence and absence, visible and invisible, the neutre – his substitute for Heideggerian Being – precedes the understanding of such categories. This then opens onto Killeen’s main area of discussion. Through the neutre, she says, which is synonymous with the indicible origin, Blanchot demands that we imagine death – or “the other night” – as an origin, by way of the return it enacts to the undivided and undifferentiated. The two terms, beginning and end, are figured as recommencement and the interminable, a beginning that has always already begun, and an end that is always “to come.” “Death” and “existence” are not two opposed states perfectly distinct and separate, but two sides of a limit, manifested as fault-lines.

All of these qualities are discernible in Blanchot’s fiction, says Killeen, which recounts nothing except the impossibility of writing. Locating the postmodern indicible in the structure of the double bind, she considers Death Sentence to be one of the pivotal works that conveys this. (In its most incisive moment, a dying woman says to her doctor: “If you don’t kill me, then you’re a murderer”, DS 141.) The way of the indicible is to proceed via error, digression, analogy, and so too with Death Sentence. Death eludes everything, including narration, and so it “organizes” the récit negatively, playing the same role as the unnamable does in its structuring of language.

In analysing Death Sentence, Killeen recognizes two modes of repetition, in the form(s) of those theoretical stand-bys, mise-en-abyme and palimpsest. Where a mise-en-abyme erases the differences between the parts, confounding the Whole, a palimpsest necessarily maintains and accentuates the differences – heterogeneous parts inscribing themselves outside a Whole that they exceed. Thus, instead of reabsorption into the One, the palimpsest is composed of supplements and interruptions, of
repetition without end, in a vertigo of division. The notion of an "original" text is thus made untenable by the combination of heterogeneous materials. The palimpsest pulverizes textual unity and the stability of sense, creating an infinite chain of signification. As different textual strata emerge, the Derridean trace can be glimpsed, made legible by écriture that blocks écriture.

Killeen considers the characters in Death Sentence as palimpsestes faits chair (125; "palimpsestes made flesh"), living bodies in the process of becoming cadavers. The statue-like states into which the characters enter signifies the "petrification of matter." Furthermore, the emphasis on repetition, self-differentiation and non-coincidence makes paramount the "original nothingness" on which everything is founded. The arrêt de mort, or suspension of death, thus makes manifest a distance at the heart of language, vision, social interaction, and everyday life itself. Like a palimpsest, it compels people and things to appear and disappear, depriving them of presence and prompting interruptions of being.

Killeen’s reading of Death Sentence is persuasive, as are her discussions of Jabès and Duras. But the book is best seen as a guide to some of the theoretical debates surrounding these three writers, rather than as an original intervention in a congested field. Killeen acknowledges Leslie Hill’s seminal critical study, Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary (and the earlier Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires) but appears to be unaware of his more recent Blanchotian foray, Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit (2001); a lamentable oversight, given the close proximity (as the title indicates) of Hill’s concerns and her own. Perhaps most regrettably, at two instances she raises, then immediately drops, the question of poetry and the indicible. All the claims made on behalf of the latter would seem to coalesce in the elliptical, intuitive, non-declarative phenomena that are poetic language and poetic form. The focus on fiction provides welcome relief from yet more “theory about theory,” but it also misses an opportune moment to explore a more exigent and compelling route to the unnamable. Half a century after Beckett’s intrepid foray, this ever-elusive (non)concept can seem as distant and ungraspable as ever.

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**Chris Danta**

*All things conspire to stand between us –
Even you and I*

Judith Wright, “All Things Conspire”

Of all the words Maurice Blanchot has taught his readers to re-evaluate, perhaps the strangest is fascination. With its obviously rhapsodic overtones, this is a term critics and philosophers like to derogate. Thus, in his 1933 book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Theodor Adorno disparages fascination as “the most dangerous power in [Kierkegaard’s] work.”\(^1\) By opposing criticism to fascination, Adorno here seeks to keep the operations of philosophy and criticism separate (and safe) from the operations of poetry. However, no such separation can be safely attempted in relation to the work of Blanchot. Indeed, over the course of his writing career, Blanchot perhaps does nothing other than provide the ‘dangerous power of fascination’ with more and more dignified names: literature, the Outside, the imaginary, the neuter, criticism, community. The immediate achievement of Kevin Hart’s study, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*, is to recognise how Blanchot also gives the dangerous power of fascination the most dignified of all names: the sacred.

With a poet’s sensibility, Hart recognises how metaphor can do the work of criticism and *The Dark Gaze* is a beautiful rendering into English of the metaphor at the heart of Blanchot’s thought. The phrase describes the ontological attunement we experience as a result of entering into a state of fascination. Fascination, Blanchot thinks, puts us in contact with an “anteior reality” which dissimulates our subjectivity by disabling our dialectical or
purposive relation to things. In Blanchot’s pivotal account of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is fascination that prevents Orpheus from accomplishing his task of bringing Eurydice back from the underworld. When Orpheus breaks the prohibition of the gods and looks back at his dead wife Eurydice, his dark gaze consecrates the distance between them as ever more sensible, objective and insurmountable. Interestingly, Blanchot does not hesitate to think the production of this interval in terms of the sacred. By sacrificing Eurydice, he writes, Orpheus “gives the sacred to itself” (SL 175). What follows from this, significantly, is that the sacred consecrates the interval between Orpheus and Eurydice as purely human. “The sacred night encloses Eurydice” (SL 175), but only as Eurydice remains in relation to Orpheus rather than to the gods. In this one sense, Orpheus does in fact manage to cheat the gods.

The sacred night encloses Thomas’ vision in a similar way in the eerie beginning to Blanchot’s 1941 first novel, *Thomas the Obscure*. Blanchot writes: “[Thomas’s eye] saw as object that which prevented it from seeing. Its own glance [regard] entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed the death of all image.” As Hart remarks, this dark gaze “stops Thomas seeing in his usual manner and enables him to see the night as it truly is” (12). What Thomas sees when his sight is so disabled is the dark, imaginary or metaphorical interval at the heart of being which, by keeping each and every thing separate from itself, designates separation as the *te-los* of the human gaze.

According to Hart, Blanchot “tacitly accepts that the Latin word *religio* has its root in *religare*, meaning ‘to bind’; and so regards religion as bespeaking a deep unity” (16). Blanchot was an avowed atheist; yet, as Hart rightly reminds us, one who has written (in *The Writing of the Disaster*): “We carry on about atheism, which has always been a privileged way of talking about God” (59). What finally distinguishes Blanchot’s account of the sacred is that it characterises the human relation in terms of the sacred. For Blanchot, Hart explains: “It is not the human that is wonderfully strange, as Sophocles declared, but the human relation; and what makes it strange is that our relation with others, even friends, involves a reference to the unknown or, if you like, the impossible or the sacred” (121). The sacred is here the last in a chain of counter-spiritual signifiers – no doubt expressing a debt to Blanchot’s close friend, Georges Bataille – that is designed to contest the sense of unity bespoken by the religious.

In Chapter 7, “The Human Relation,” Hart cites one of the anonymous speakers from Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation*:

[The human relation] is most terrible because it is tempered by no intermediary. For in this view there is between man and man neither
god, nor value, nor nature. It is naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation. Can this really be asserted? (191)

If there is a moment in which this formulation of the human relation can be asserted, it is surely in the moment of fascination, when the dark gaze converts being itself into an insurmountable yet still human interval. When Orpheus turns to face Eurydice and so transgresses the prohibition of the gods, what he confronts for the briefest of moments is “naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation.”

Combining impeccable scholarship with a lightness of touch, The Dark Gaze ably demonstrates Blanchot to be an exemplary thinker of sacrifice and the sacred. In so doing, it enables us to re-approach the story that was the touchstone of so much of Blanchot’s thinking and writing. As Ovid notes with great pathos in his now canonical account of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: “What was there [for Eurydice] to complain of, but that she had been loved?” As Orpheus turns against the will of the gods, his desire exceeds the bounds of (his) subjectivity, and enables the other (whether Eurydice or ourselves) to experience desire in a pure state, that is, to be loved by him. What his dark gaze gives expression to – what it consecrates – is the irreducibility of the human relation. Orpheus’ is no doubt one the strangest expressions of love in literary or mythical history, especially for those who would seek to identify love with eternal patience (or with the “nearness of the Eternal”). But, as Hart would be the first to remind us, Orpheus’ moment of absolute carelessness also contains coiled within it “tightly folded references to the sacred and faith” (222) – references we can attribute to no one other than Maurice Blanchot.

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NOTES


CREATIVE WRITING
"Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96."

As far as anyone could make out, these were the last written words of my old friend, erstwhile colleague and correspondent, M.. M. was one of the greatest obituarists of our time, an obsessive archivist whose twin passions for researching the facts relating to the lives of others on the one hand, and for writing their obituaries on the other, served only to fuel each other. Unlike the other great obituarists, M. did not fall into the genre by chance. He was not a staff writer assigned to obituaries as a test of his factual rigour, nor did he enter the realm of obituary towards the end of his career, a worn-out journalist put out to pasture. For M., the genre of obituary was not a means to an end, but provided the end in itself.

Although his obituaries did not gain a wide readership until the early 1960’s, M. had commenced his relentless assault on the genre on February 21st, 1953, exactly 50 years to the day before his dead body was discovered slumped over his writing desk in an unusual condition. That first obituary was commissioned by M.’s good friend, the editor of a Leftist pamphlet that would appear intermittently around the University corridors during the mid-1950’s, a young ideologue whose current task is this account of the facts regarding the life and death of M.. Its subject was a Bangladeshi language martyr named Abul Barhat. Barhat was studying for a Master’s degree at the University of Dhaka; M., at that time also undertaking a Master’s
degree, accepted the commission, driven perhaps by an empathy for his fellow student, for whom language had provided grave considerations. Although raw and in desperate need of sensitive editorial attention, the basic style of that first obituary was remarkable, and set the template for every single obituary that followed. And follow they did, at the prodigious rate of one a day, every single day for the rest of M.’s life. If one were to count the piece that concluded, “Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96,” then M.’s oeuvre would amount to a staggering eighteen thousand, eight hundred and fifteen obituaries.

The style of M.’s obituaries, which I am not alone in considering “remarkable,” was characterised by an uncanny empathy with the deceased. Sensing this quality in “Abul Barhat,” I put it down to the similarities in the personal circumstances and intellectual concerns of obituarist and deceased. However, as time passed and obituary followed obituary, the sensation that it was not M., but the deceased themselves who were writing their own obituaries, became ever more pervasive. It is a well known fact that many people, especially those of a psychic disposition and those whose own ends were considered near, found M.’s obituaries almost unreadable, their solemn terseness unsettling to some and downright terrifying to others. Not for M. the humour of a Robert McG. Thomas or the wit of a Hugh Massingberd; his obituaries made no apologies for taking death quite seriously.

M. prided himself on being the sole practitioner of the obituary whose sole practice was the obituary. Upon completion of “Abul Barhat,” M. took me to one side and confided to me, in hushed, conspiratorial tones, that he had found his genre, that he had figured out a way of writing that offered a sense of completion. Prior to “Abul Barhat,” M. had been ashamed to think of himself as a writer, a potential writer, a student of creative writing. Anyone who entered his digs was confronted by the physical manifestation of this shame, reams and reams of paper littering the floor, stories that went nowhere. Walls covered in notes that formed a deranged archive of bibliographical and biographical references. M. had now found a genre in which he could write, his only genre. Time can testify to the fact that he made it his own.

Unable to attain a worthwhile position at any reputable academic institution, I fell into journalism, entering the rounds of provincial rags. Before long, minor editorial posts came my way, followed at length by more substantial appointments. All the while M. eked out what I supposed to be a meagre existence as a freelance obituarist. As his reputation grew, M.’s dispatches began to command respectable fees, but he never took up a
staff position. Even in the 1980’s, with the positions engendered by the re-
appraisal of the obituary as a meaningful genre, M. remained resolutely in-
dependent. A complete recluse, M. shunned the limelight of literary celeb-
ritry that could have been his to take. Indeed, the extent of his perversity 
became the stuff of legend. While anthologies of other renowned obituarists 
began to appear in book form, many topping the bestsellers’ list, M. refused 
to permit any such publication on his behalf. So it was that M.’s many devo-
tees inaugurated a thriving trade in his antique cuttings, in which yellow 
scraps of paper from forty-year-old copies of The Watford Observer could 
fetch upwards of five thousand pounds. For the curious of lesser means, M. 
came to stand for microfiche.

After that secret meeting in which M. announced his generic inten-
tions, I never again set eyes on the man. M. graduated in absentia, hence-
forth choosing to work in complete solitude at his private address. How-
ever, a correspondence of sorts did ensue. Only of sorts, in that the letters I 
received from M. saw him make good on his promise never to stray from 
the genre of obituary, as every single letter was an obituary of someone or 
other. These death letters, as I came to think of them, although concerned 
with persons from all walks of life, from the rich to the poor, from the notori-
ous to the virtually anonymous, all had one thing in common; the fact that 
the name of dead appeared in every instance as a subtitle to that of its ad-
dressees. This fact disturbed me. The singular peculiarity of receiving an 
obituary as a letter never passed, the form of address possessed by every 
single one served as a reminder of my own death, the death for whom 
every other death is a precursor. The address not only to my name, but 
also to my abode, to my property, to my name as my property, to my death 
as my property, often sent me into the very depths of self-reflection. I cher-
ished our correspondence.

To never receive another letter from my friend, that is the greatest 
loss. I always imagined that it would be M. who would be writing my obitu-
ary. This despite the fact that rumours were rife that M. had already been 
dead for many years, that the obituaries written under his name were in fact 
the work of ghost writers. These rumours reached an hysterical pitch upon 
the discovery of his body. The fact that this obituary arrives somewhat later 
than might have been anticipated, is due to my unwillingness to commit it to 
print until I had pieced together a satisfactory account of the precise details 
surrounding M.’s death, which at the time were subject to some debate.

This debate surrounded the unusual condition of M.’s body upon its 
discovery, and the forensic and other material evidence found at the scene. 
I will take these points one at a time. Firstly, the body. The toxicological re-
ports of the autopsy concluded that the strange chemical constitution of the
body corresponded with that found in one type of corpse, and one type only, that of a lithopaedion. A lithopaedion (from the Greek *paido-lithus*, literally "child-of-stone") is a foetus that has become dislodged from the cervix, before settling in the abdominal cavity, where the build-up of calcium causes it to become fossilised within the body of its mother. Only three instances of such lithopaedia have been reported, the earliest dating back to 1582. The autopsy concluded that for the body of an adult human to become calcified in such a manner, the human would have to have died many years beforehand, with estimates on this figure ranging from twenty to seventy-five. A careful and considered process would then have to be applied to the body over the entire duration of this conjectural period.

Now to the second point regarding local evidence. No sign could be found of any disturbance at the site of the body; neither forensic clue as to any other human presence, nor a trace of any of the materials that would have been required to affect such fossilisation. Furthermore, there was the ineluctable evidence of the obituaries, draft copies of which were filed chronologically, from the first, "Abul Barhat," to the last, "Maurice Blanchot," in each of which the handwriting was confirmed by experts to be that of M.. Simply put, an alive, non-fossilised M. had written an obituary that concluded with the words, "Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96."

Interlocutors on the subject of M.'s death are inevitably divided into two camps. On the one hand there are those of a scientific disposition, who find themselves unable to refute the autopsy’s findings. On the whole they tend to believe in a conspiracy theory, involving a murderous newspaper editor and a team of ghost writers employed on his behalf, that is as convoluted and incredulous as only conspiracy theories can be. On the other there are those, largely enthusiasts of M.'s work, who put their faith in the forensic evidence that would appear to prove that M. was the sole author of his obituaries, his hideous physical transformation affected posthumously, miraculously. That M. had not been seen for around fifty years meant that it was impossible to ascertain the facts in this case. I, however, have come to a conclusion as to how M.'s demise came to pass, and this is why I now feel able to complete this undertaking.

In relation to the debate surrounding M.'s death, I could never fall into the scientific camp. No, I could never believe that the death letters that I received in M.'s name could have been written by anyone other than M. himself, such was the power with which they spoke to me, so clearly could I detect the mark of the man with whom I had been so close so long ago. Neither could I fall in with the legion of M.'s fans who believe that his strange transformation took place posthumously, the great obituarist's
mythical entombment.

I believe that M. met with a terrible, drawn out end, but one in which he delighted, in which he took the greatest pleasure. Prior to his engagement with the genre of obituary, to the genre of obituary, M.’s life was devoid of meaning. To see him then was to see a hollow man, obsessed with literature but quite unable to bring it within his grasp. Writing “Abul Barhat,” M. was affected by a change of the deepest order; I could not mistake this in our subsequent, final meeting. Such was M.’s commitment to the obituary that he would enter into his own death henceforth, the better to serve his genre, the better to enter into the deaths of his subjects. He was never seen again. Even if he had been seen, he could not have been recognised, for who could ever recognise death? Reading “Maurice Blanchot,” I sensed no empathy with the writer who was born on September 27th, 1907, and who died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96. There was only a sense that a long and slow transformation had been completed.

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