

In Other Words:

Writing Maurice Blanchot Writing

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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 approach, 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 argues 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 remarking 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 generally but also the ways in which the hesitant effacement of certainty in Blanchot 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 second 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 literary criticism?

How to Be a Good Reader

Towards the beginning of *Death Sentence* there is an appeal to reticence. "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 destroy 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 carries 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 previously 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.”¹ 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.”² 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 curiuser 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,³ 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.”⁴ 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).⁵ 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.⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.⁹ 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...”) ¹⁰ 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

elevated to the level of the sacred.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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).¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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 meaning¹⁵ 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 époque ... 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.

Criticism that critically fails 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

¹ Edmond Jabès, "In Place of a Foreword", *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover: Wesleyan U. P., 1991), p. 5.

- 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.
- ⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder Publications, 1999), p. 7.
- 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 disappear 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 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. P., 1995), p. 84.
- ⁸ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 86.
- ⁹ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, pp. 84 and 87.
- ¹⁰ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 66.
- ¹¹ Even if the question of the Absolute is also the question of literature, literature neither manifests nor specifically engages the Absolute but rather casts a suspicious glance in its general direction from a space of irreducible distance.
- ¹² Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 19.
- 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 transcendence 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 foundationalism with the contingent. In its attempt to combine the "transcendent dialectic" of *Mahloket* with the "pragmatism" of irony, the method of criticism I am outlining might be termed "transcendental pragmatism." It should also be acknowledged that this notion of criticism owes much to a certain deconstructive thinking, in particular, Simon Critchley's essay "Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or Public Liberal?" in which he argues that deconstruction simultaneously operates at both a transcendent and pragmatic level. See Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 83-105.
- ¹⁴ Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 211.
- ¹⁵ I am alluding to Jean-Luc Nancy's description of the silent laughter within deconstruction as "the lightening of meaning." See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Elliptical Sense", in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 41.

¹⁶ 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.