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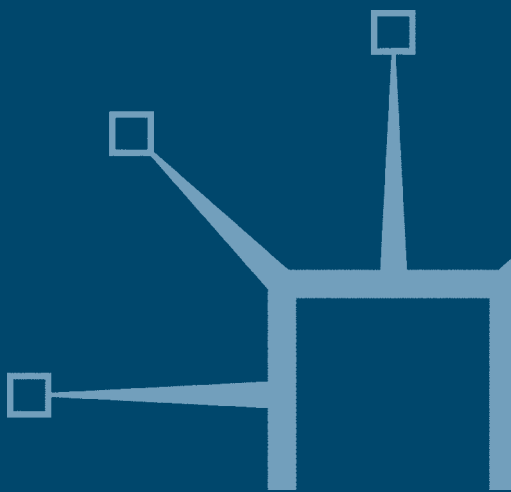
Blanchot's Communism

Art, Philosophy and the Political

Lars Iyer



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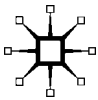

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To my parents

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Preface

The great gesture of Blanchot's thought is to meet events and to transmit them in turn. But how might one witness Blanchot's multiform texts? It is necessary to attend to the way in which his writings *work*, that is, the way in which they allow themselves to be implicated by events such that commentary and event are bound intimately but enigmatically to one another. This is already a difficult task because Blanchot resists a classically philosophical mode of demonstration, thereby risking misreadings and dismissals, as well as the underestimation or marginalisation of his work. But it cannot be a question of identifying the philosophy his writings would bear in reserve, as if it were possible to elevate what he had *meant* to say above the movement of his texts in their opening to events. But the difficulty of leaving space for his work to emerge in its singularity, which is to say, in the claim it makes upon his readers is compounded when this event is linked to a certain communism – to the 'advent of communism'.[1] How should one understand this?

'One (almost everyone) approaches Marxism for the moral reasons that oblige one, at some point, to move away'.[2] For Blanchot, adamant in his refusal of party politics and fiercely opposed to nationalisms of any kind, communism names the voyage out, the unceasing response to a demand even as it tears us, each of us, from the security of any determined political system. 'One does not belong to communism, and communism does not let itself be designated by what names it'; Blanchot calls for the alteration of our notions of politics and of political intervention in response to a demand that escapes and continues to escape the determination of the '*cum*' of our communities, our being with one another.[3] The affirmation of communism (for communism is not longer simply a political position but an *event*) names the practice that would welcome the indeterminacy of what is always 'to come' in any social space.

The title *Blanchot's Communism* does not evidence a simple desire to provoke at a time when communism appears to have run out of resources in the face of the global reach of capitalism and the unrivalled hegemony of the USA. Nor is it intended to mark the 'rebranding' of Blanchot, drawing him out of the study, to sell him to an audience that has grown impatient with an anachronistic appeal to *lit-*

erature. As we shall see, Blanchot's political interventions, in which he joins his voice to others in a way that demands sometimes that he sign his name and at other times he relinquish it, cannot be understood in isolation from his essays on literature. Nor, furthermore, is it the cynical act of the scholarly virtuoso who would throw an unexpected light on a difficult oeuvre, showing skills of wit and pen sufficient to make his way to a higher and more secure place in the academic institution. Nor, finally, is it a question of stressing the relevance of his work, emphasising its proximity to our concerns, linking it to the latest problem. To write on him and with him, to grant his work more than merely scholarly recounting, to allow its transmission in milieus alien to his own, demands a retracing of his engagement with events that wagers our impatience, our desire to know how they can operate for us here and now, our desire to collide notion and notion, text and text in order to open them to the demands of our present. His work, I will argue, is timely because it is so untimely, apposite for all that it seems to evidence what Nietzsche might call *ressentiment* against the passage of time in bringing the spectre of communism into our midst.

Granted, there is never a communism without heritage; one inherits not only a notion of communism but a century of terror. Is our political vocabulary so denuded that we need to revive *this* word, shouldn't one leave it simply to the death it deserves? There is a second problem: the invocation of the word 'community' is inevitably condemned to evoke a shared essence, a being in common, and no doubt should likewise be abandoned in favour of another. Yet the choice of the words 'community' and 'communism' is not arbitrary or ill-judged, because it allows Blanchot to mark a counter-movement within our being together to which the happening of community must bear witness. To use another word for what Blanchot calls community which erased its etymological link to the notion of what is shared or held in common would be to risk setting up a dualism, to suppose that there is something purely non-sharable outside what is shared that could simply disperse every and all community. Blanchot shows that this something is community itself, or, better, that a movement of dispersal accompanies the movement of gathering, that what is held in common is already dispersed in the same movement that brings together a community. An analogous claim can be made for Blanchot's use of the word communism. This word is also marked by terror, torture, famine, mass deportations, and massacres, by the millions dead in Soviet Union and China. And yet just as the word community indicates, for Blanchot, something which cannot be borne in common, which withdraws from

the actualisation of any particular group, the word communism also affirms an experience that slips away from any positive incarnation. Blanchotian communism names the event through which a community is unbound, and the determination of all human relations is actively unworked.

What does this mean? I am reminded of what Robert Antelme writes remembering his time as a prisoner of war in a Nazi work camp:

> … there are not several human races, there is one human race. It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It's because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed. Yet their behaviour, and our situation, are only a magnification, an extreme caricature – in which nobody wants or is perhaps able to recognise himself – of forms of behaviour and of situations that exist in the world, that even make up the existence of that older 'real world' we dream about. For in fact everything happens in that world as though there were a number of human species, or rather, as though belonging to a single human species wasn't certain, as though you could join the species of leave it, could be halfway in it or belong to it fully, or never belong to it, try though you might for generations, division into races or classes being the canon of the species and sustaining the axiom we're always prepared to use, the ultimate line of defence: 'They aren't people like us'.[4]

There is one human race. But this means, and I shall take up this claim at length in chapter seven, the race cannot be divided according to the forces that reveal their true face in the work camp. Communism, the exposure of community to its outside, is the ongoing, affirmative event which outplays the determination of the way in which we live and die with one another.

The word communism also keeps memory of the actual working class movements which sought revolution as their aim, as well as Marx's hope of a society to come which would see each of us freed from our confinement to particular spheres of activity. But above all, for Blanchot, there are the Events of May 1968 in Paris. What affirmed itself in the Events opened each participant to the Other without determining that relation. Protesters were able to come together before judging one other obscure or famous, young or old, rich or poor, and in which they refused to recognize the authority of those in power, at the same time refusing to allow their refusal to be transformed into the

desire for a particular set of reforms. What was sought was not a solution, the satisfaction of an aim. Just as the word community indicates, for Blanchot, something which cannot be borne in common, which withdraws from the actualisation of any particular group, the word communism also affirms an experience that slips away from any positive incarnation.

My thesis is that the affirmation of the advent of communism goes to the heart of Blanchot's work. His writings can be understood as an attempt to shock us from our compliant notions of language and power in order to respond to this advent. They allow us to recognise an intersession or intervention for what it is, witnessing the interruption that allows communism its play in the momentary suspension of the forces which conceal its advent. This does not mean Blanchot is condemned only to keep watch, that he cannot intervene meaningfully in contemporary practises. Determinations of community are not eternal, but historically specific. Granted, Blanchotian communism cannot occur *as such*, there could never be a pure instantiation of a Blanchotian community, but there are ways of understanding existing communities to be more and less open. The affirmation of Blanchotian communism is not simply an anarchistic declaration of war against existing political systems, but a way of holding open a space for a future that is not the dead repetition of the past.

No doubt Blanchot's reflections on communism cannot be detached from other, immensely involved reflections in which it seems to occupy no absolutely privileged role. It would not suffice, in writing of communism in Blanchot, simply to trace every reference in his work to this word, detaching it each time from the rich and complex movement of which it is a part. Indeed, communism is not a master word that could unlock the secret of his writings once and for all but offers an approach to his work, an approach amongst others, insofar as it is permitted to stand in for other words in Blanchot's lexicon, just as other words are permitted to take its place. Yes, communism permits an approach to the heart of his work, but the heart of his work is infinitely rich, and allows countless approaches. *Blanchot's Communism* is neither an attempt to make a definitive judgement of his work as a whole nor a scholarly, micrological reading of any one part of his oeuvre, but an approach, one approach which, I hope, gives us the richness of the writings anew.

Several obstacles stand in the way of a reading of Blanchot's work. *Firstly*, Blanchot's work can seem to belong to a culture that has moved out of reach, to a world that assumes the importance of literature and

the dignity of commentary in a way that seems no longer possible. Blanchot appears as a member of a group of writers and thinkers who were able to survive in an intellectual milieu that has disappeared. Who, in a world where so much of intellectual life has withdrawn to the universities not because of the stupidity of the masses but because their intelligence is so badly underestimated, can fail to envy the forms in which Blanchot and his friends were able to publish outside the academy, or even their shared sense of the importance of countering cultural and political idiocies? Who, in the face of the saturation of culture by Hollywood films and American music, can maintain the importance of art, or of literature? Yet our world of literary prizes and prestige, in which a network of institutional powers barely attempts to hide itself, is also the world that opened to Blanchot and his friends. Perhaps the internet permits the opening of new channels of publication. Likewise, the eruption of the Events of May 1968 or the activism against French colonial activity in Algeria find their echo in contemporary anti-capitalist demonstrations. This is not to claim that Blanchot's work should be made *timely*, as if it could be brought into direct relation to our concerns, but there is meaning in repeating his work in its perpetual untimeliness.

But which Blanchot must one repeat? The *second* obstacle to the reading of Blanchot, lies in the mythologisation to which his early journalism has been subjected. The extreme nationalist who contributed to ephemeral journals like *Le revue français, Réaction, La Revue universelle, La Revue du siècle* and published articles alongside racists and anti-Semites, in *l'Insurgé*, of which he was one of the founding editors, is not the participant of the Events of May 1968 who writes against nationalism and patriotism and invokes the communism his younger self despised. The anti-parliamentarian, anti-communist, anti-capitalist monarchist of this period for whom the social and cultural identity of France is at issue is not the young man who, eighteen years later, would campaign against French colonial interests in Algeria.[5] But, *thirdly*, one must resist the myth of Blanchot's apparent withdrawal from the 'public' world as if it marked a new kind of Stoicism, an apolitical, quietist retreat into the Garden. His later work must not be seen as a retreat from political questions. His later interventions in French public life must not be interpreted as a prolonged compensation for his early political journalism.

Fourthly, there is the difficulty of failing to answer to the specificity of Blanchot's texts, dissolving them into comparative surveys. Figures close to Blanchot have become so imposing that they threaten to

eclipse his work. The danger here is to allow his relation to his friends to remain on the level of intellectual influence or mutual admiration. To keep fidelity with Blanchot's writings must be, I will argue, to postpone the formulation of a reductive account of his intellectual affiliations. One must not be seduced (although it is not Blanchot who sets out to seduce us) by ordinary notions of 'authorship', intellectual history, or biography if one is to understand his work. Nor, in the case of Blanchot, can one reassure oneself that there is a guard-rail between his writings and their 'object'. I will respond to Blanchot's writings by retracing his itinerary without ignoring the provocation that calls him to write, and the specificity of the way in which he meets this call, each time singular. Not to discern this singularity would be to fall short of the response and the responsibility that is required to read Blanchot.

Fifthly, it may seem inappropriate, in the face of the apparently occasional nature of the bulk of his critical work, to seek, in responding to the singularity of his essays, to authenticate a body of thought as distinctly Blanchotian. But even as it is important to participate in the adventure of thought that draws him towards others, it is also necessary to understand how he distances himself from the thought in its originality and specificity in his close readings. Given Blanchot's characteristic method of inhabiting the 'object' of his essays like a parasite, taking over key terms, appropriating conceptual frameworks, only to give them a different orientation, to allow them to drift from their author's intentions, this task is difficult indeed. Who, I have heard an objector say, has the patience to read what appears to be a lengthy paraphrase of Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in the last part of Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, separating out Heidegger's claims from Blanchot's? Even if he is an original thinker, the objector continued, who has the patience to negotiate Blanchot's relationship to other thinkers, when he scarcely bothers to mark this difference in his own texts? One might argue in turn that this is already to have missed the Blanchotian method, or, better, schema of methods: what characterises his procedure is a peculiar parasitism, one to which we might have become accustomed in the work of others. One might also object that the objector still accedes to a problematic understanding of the relationship between the author and a body of discourse, that Blanchot's work is too vast and too rich to summarise, and that the schema of methods evident in his essays will always outplay any attempt to summarise them (there is the related danger that his work will be occluded by a vast scholarly industry that will gather around it). Nevertheless, it is still necessary to risk producing an account of his

work that goes to its heart, albeit not one that helps itself to a position outside or beyond his texts, but would seek to inhabit them, to follow their course. This is why my engagement with his work will take the form of a series of *readings*. I will undertake approaches in the *plural*; the chapters that follow each approach at Blanchot's oeuvre from a particular angle.

Sixthly, there is the danger of assuming that Blanchot's work is insufficiently developed. I will return to this point below. This is intended, in particular, to counter those like Jean-Luc Nancy for whom Blanchot's work is insufficiently thematic or explicit; or others who use quotes from Blanchot as a kind of ornament to their texts. But there is, *seventhly*, the concomitant danger of allowing it to remain in its opacity, refusing to provide a general reading of his work because it remains in its opacity, refusing to provide a general reading of his work because it remains too rich. It is not enough simply to tarry before his writings, to be stirred by their beauty or moved by their profundity and then turn away to another source of edification. To respond as Blanchot's multiform writings seek to respond to the events or the texts that demand passion, one must retrace their course, their argumentative response, without rushing to 'results' and translating his thought into a body of doctrine. It is true that his writings exhibit a certain tenacity, that they point towards a certain excess, enacting a kind of negative anthropology, discovering, in the place of a certain notion of the human being as creator, as artist, as actor, a 'no one' without personal attributes, but it is the *way* in which he negotiates texts and events that distinguishes his work. To claim Blanchot is a 'great' writer or thinker without understanding what greatness means in his work, is to risk assimilating him to the cultural order he did so much to escape. The temptation exists to canonise his work whilst leaving it intact, replacing the movement of his essays with a monument: his prose, after all, is sumptuous; his volumes satisfyingly bulky, his discretion legendary enough to grant his life and work a seductive mystery.

But his work seems to reach us from a distance beyond the world we inhabit, from a time when, amazingly, literature seemed important, when bands of friends could ensure the publication, review and distribution of books like *Le Bavard* and there was something at issue in combating a commodification of art that is now more or less complete. If this seems implausible, utopian or anachronistic, this is *our* failure.

The temptation for those who write on Blanchot's work, of the milieu from which his thought emerged, of those we too quickly and

too easily call his friends, and of the various events to which his work would open even to the extent of turning his writings from the norms of philosophical or literary critical discourse, is to point with laudable modesty beyond their own work, encouraging their readers to make their own journey into the texts. But this modesty is a guise; Blanchot's commentator must always risk proclaiming something final, delivering the last word on an oeuvre that instructs us over and again about the impossibility of any such proclamation. No commentator is the supplementary clerk they might pretend to be – the ghost who would accompany Blanchot and disappear, in the end, back into the shadows. A work of commentary, real and substantial, survives; despite the precautions one tries to take, the care to follow the course of an oeuvre, to inhabit it and to be inhabited in turn, it is necessary to make a decision, reach a verdict, draw a conclusion about the oeuvre in question and determine it in this decision.

And indeed to do so is to follow Blanchot's example. One might think, for all the weight of his works, that there is no author more indefatigably patient than Blanchot, none who realises the danger of impatience, or judgement or critique, none more aware of the need to negotiate a reading with the utmost tact. But he also understands the necessity of decision, that, for all our patience, it is necessary to respond to what calls for thought or action here and now. There is the temptation to avoid the need for a decision, to simply retrace Blanchot's steps, to retreat into the history of ideas whilst being puzzled at the vehemence of his claims, or, in an analogous gesture, to abandon them because they are too mournful or too dour, refusing to read by assuming that a reading has already occurred and that the 'results' of his work are spread out before us, ready to use or to discard. Yet to attempt to resist the urge to realise a definitive work, to remain Blanchot's shadow, the dark, empty ghost of a ghostly writer, is to belie the words one writes and the interpretative schemas that impose themselves. Written work produces and substantiates a writer; the existence of a manuscript demands an acknowledgement of his or her part in a book that did not write itself.

In my introduction, a kind of overture to the chapters that follow, I sketch a preliminary account of community, communism and worklessness. In chapters one and two, I contextualise this account through a detailed reading of Blanchot's reading of Bataille, through which he negotiates the Hegelian-Kojèvean background he shares with Bataille, before staging an encounter between his *The Space of Literature* and Heidegger's great essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art', a text to which

Blanchot is strongly indebted. In chapters three, four and five, I explore Blanchot's rich and complex negotiations of the texts of Levinas and Bataille, showing how Blanchot's reflections on literature and art play themselves out of the place Levinas assigns them in *Totality and Infinity* and arguing that Bataille's practice as a writer in the texts that were at one time to be gathered under the name *The Atheological Summa* suggest, for Blanchot, an alternative account of the opening to the other person to that found in Levinas. I explore Blanchot's account of Bataille's Acéphale group in chapter six, arguing that the advent of Blanchotian communism cannot be understood as the outcome of a particular political programme. In chapter seven, I provide a more positive delimitation of the political role of Blanchotian communism by exploring the way in which the Events of May 1968 might be said, in a manner to be clarified, to provide a joyful repetition of the terrible events recorded in Antelme's account of his life as a political prisoner in Gandersham and Dachau.

I am currently preparing a book called *Blanchot's Testimony* which will extend and deepen the analyses of this volume.

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Chapter 5: 'Born With the Dead: Blanchot, Friendship, Community'. *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 5 no. 3 (2000) 39–50.

Chapter 6: 'Our Responsibility: Blanchot's Communism'. *Contretemps, an Online Journal of Philosophy*, 2 (2001) 59–73.

Chapter 7: 'The Movement of Testimony: Affliction in Blanchot and Antelme', *J_Spot, Journal for Social and Political Thought*, vol. 2 no. 1 (2003).

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Introduction: The Claim of Communism

It may seem the word 'community' can never measure up to the demands of our time, lending itself too easily to a banal political rhetoric, ecumenical enough to appeal to the left and the right, but open-ended enough in the end to mean nothing at all. It offers itself to those who seek to remedy the breakdown of traditional values by appealing to the lost unanimity that would remain the yardstick by which this breakdown could be measured. It can answer the need to recover the idyllic image of a society bound by a shared history, identity and fate (the Athenian city, the early Christian community, the Roman Republic, the family or the commune). It can also stand for a vanished moral unity, for the cohesion and solidarity of a society founded on hard work and cooperation that would call for a politics that might produce and harmonise individual, familial and civic responsibility. Or, in another tradition, it can place itself in the service of the vanguard who would look to the workers as embryos of a subject-position that it would take it upon itself to wake up, addressing them in the second person, the 'you', in view of their potential as the subject of history, the proletarian community to come. But for both traditions there is an implied dissension of the third person plural, of the unity and univocity of the 'we', which prevents the positing of a lost unanimity.

And yet it is not the loss of a sense of the collective, of the unicity of the 'we' that one must mourn, but the disappearance of a certain dissension and difference that would be constitutive of community. In the opening lines of an essay indebted to Blanchot, Nancy writes, '[t]he gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer [...] is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the

conflagration of community'.[1] Nancy is right. What is threatening is the *closure* of the play of community in the face of which the classic discourses of the right and the left must admit defeat. The *right*, understanding the community in the traditional sense, can only experience the dissolution in question as the outbreak of nihilism. Community, for Blanchot, is neither a notion to be granted new sense in the face of the breakdown of traditional values, nor the appeal of a 'we' whose collective body would mend all the tears that have appeared in society. But this does not prevent a certain *left*, open and receptive to what the political might mean, responding to it in a different sense.

The Blanchotian community does not exist outside other groups and communities, but *inhabits* them insofar as it is linked with a non-working idling, a slackening in the work of identification. It refers to an experience of an *in*determination that precedes and outlasts the determination of any particular group. *Désoeuvrement* implies an active loosening of the communal bond. As such, it is not to be understood negatively, that is, as a pocket of heterogeneity that would have to be overcome. *La communauté désoeuvrée* is woven into our existing communities; it remains a non-working reserve that cannot be overcome by work.

The Blanchotian community cannot be achieved as such through a simple refusal of work, a laying down of tools. Nor can it be realised through an appeal to counter the power of a hegemonic community with an alternative community of commensurable power. The Blanchotian community is an ongoing event that happens in the very articulation of being together. It happens in the experience of worklessness that falls outside work and its voluntary renunciation. As such, it does not offer itself to a conventional political programme. Indeed, from the perspective of a conventional politics, it is questionable whether it can be said to happen at all. But it happens and continues to happen as an ongoing event even as human beings come together, sharing projects, working for a common purpose, and giving up their needs for the good of the group.

The Blanchotian community continues to happen, but it reveals itself, or better, reveals its play in the interstices of human existence together only when the bonds that bind us to one another in view of shared tasks slacken. At these moments, it becomes clear that the attempt to organise the community into a frontier, a common defence [*com-munis*], or to contract into the common or the as-one [*comme-un*], must always fail. The 'we' is divided in the very place where it would constitute itself. There is a lapse in the very work of identification that

governs the articulation of what is held in common. It is as if, at these moments, something determined the constitution of community from without. But the determination of any group is limited by an indetermination that is at play in the very movement of determination. This worklessness does not precede community, but is interwoven with it, calling for identification even as it escapes its measure. Community must remain inadequate with respect to any determination that depends upon a shared identity or a common goal. This means there is always a temptation to work against worklessness, for a community to seek to make up for its own lack of identity, for its own divided and undecidable opening by seeking to close itself. Nevertheless, 'common' to the members of the community is an experience of exposure, accusation and interpellation; undecidability that is built into community itself. Granted, this experience must also be concealed if the production of the ordinary notion of community is to take place, but this ongoing displacement of what is held in common is part of the articulation of community; attesting to its constitutive differentiation.

Blanchot's aim is not to work towards a pure happening of community, marching upon a new Winter Palace or storming a new Bastille, as if it were a programme of political reform like other programmes that would offer an achievable political 'result'. It is, rather, of attesting to the differentiation at the heart of our being together. Blanchot's critical practice cannot thus be regarded as indicating a *marginal* experience. Even if its relation to what is traditionally called politics is indirect and elliptical, the notion of community calls for a new elaboration of the political insofar as it calls for a reframing of the political as such.[2] The workless community cannot become the object of a new political theory, but challenges particular determinations of the political field. Here, thought is political not because its value lies in its applicability to real situations, but because it bears the marks of a constitutive worklessness that happens as the workless community.

Here, one might suppose Blanchot's work converges with Jean-Luc Nancy's, whose essay '*La communauté désoeuvrée*', retrieves and develops Bataille's notion of community.[3] Nancy pays tribute to Blanchot, in whose work he discovers a neglected practice of communism associated with art and literature. Nancy is right to foreground the importance of community in Blanchot's reflections on art and literature, arguing that work is never apolitical or politically neutral. But Nancy argues that the theoretical elaboration of this notion is sporadic and undeveloped: Blanchot was 'not truly able to communicate, explicitly and thematically (even if "explicit" and "thematic" are only very

fragile categories here) with a thinking of community'.[4] Granted, Blanchot is not a writer of political science or political philosophy in any conventional sense. Yet the notions he developed in his commentaries on literature allow him to affirm a certain happening of community. This affirmation is not an *application* of his thought, that is, an ethics or a politics that would take second place to the first philosophy of a metaphysics or ontology, but belongs to its articulation, which is to say, in Blanchot's case, in commentaries on specific works of art and on events. The question of politics in Blanchot's work is indirect, but discourse on what he calls community, on communism, can never be normative or normalising. It attests to what is exceptional and extraordinary in its happening to the extent that it comes to us from without, refusing anticipation or reappropriation. And it does so by discovering the claim of communism in the most unexpected 'objects'.

Nancy's essay would presumably supplement Blanchot's work with a fully 'explicit' or 'thematic' rendering of community Blanchot was unable to accomplish. But Nancy leaves his reading of Blanchot in suspense, which is to say, he suspends the question as to why the reflection on community in Blanchot is never 'explicit' or 'thematic' enough – why it is never simply a question of becoming *more* explicit or *more* thematic, whether or not one places inverted commas around these words. Are the notions of the explicit and the thematics wagered in Nancy's attempt to communicate with community? Is it Blanchot who would have indicated the limits of the ostensibly explicit and thematic account of community as one finds it in Nancy?

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Responding to Nancy in *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot claims to 'take up a reflection, never in fact interrupted although surfacing only at long intervals, concerning the communist exigency, the relations between that exigency and the possibility or impossibility of a community at a time when even the ability to understand community seems to have been lost'.[5] A concern with community is already present in his discussion of the stakes of reading in *The Space of Literature*. As he argues, the reader belongs to a community of all readers – to a certain tradition of reception that encloses literary works 'like angels with intertwined wings'.[6] And yet, at the same time, a decision occurs with any new reading, since the meaning of a particular text is never entirely decidable. This does not mean that the meaning of a literary work is in the hands of the reader, but that the community

of readers that protects a certain determination of the literary work can never have the last word. Another experience of community, of reading, wagers their determination of the work.

How should one understand this? In an admirable essay, Timothy Clark contrasts Blanchot to Roman Ingarden. Ingarden argues that in coming across a clause, for example, 'the head of the firm', the reader renders it concrete by relating it to his own experience. For Blanchot, by contrast, a sentence of this kind can never be so concretised; it plays itself out of the hands of any particular reader, including its writer.[7] It is the possibility of being read that allows the work of art to come into existence, but it is the structural impossibility of determining the text through this reading that prevents the completion of the work of art. Each reader is given over to experience the meaning of which it is not in his or her hands to decide. Reading, to this extent, is a leap in the dark.

The work of art has always depended for its fortune on a certain community of reception – an audience, or a tradition, that depends on rules of various kinds, whether they be determined by the academy or the salon, the Royal court or the church. This is what allows the work of art to yield up its solitude, to set itself alongside other paintings in the museum, or to rest with other books in the universal library, contributing to the treasury of a nation. The work of art can become useful, edifying and apparently obedient. The scandalous work, once thought fit only for the flames, is welcomed for posterity; the outsider artist who spends a life in defiance of the institution eventually paints for everyone.

Does the decline of the power and prestige of the court and the retreat of the authority of the church allow art to become visible as what it is? True, outside their contexts, wrenched from the worlds they inhabited, the altarpiece, the temple, the portrait appear to affirm themselves as themselves. When one encounters them in the museum they are, to be sure, admirably conserved, secure, preserved behind glass panels and accompanied by explanatory plaques; they are the property of the nation or of those captains of industry for whom, as artworks, they have an ineluctable economic, cultural and aesthetic value. Yet this same absorption of the artwork might seem to negate the 'reality' of the original context in which it (or rather, what we only subsequently learnt to call the work of art) appeared. It may seem that to reflect on the relationship between artwork and community demands that one plunges into its original context in order to understand their co-origin in the liturgy, in the ceremonial rite. But this

would compel us to turn from the world in which we encounter the work of art, forcing us, as Blanchot observes, 'to retire into the nostalgic memory of a remote past'.[8] One cannot recall the language the artwork spoke in a time before it became the work of art, the language that only those who lived in the same world could hear – the world in which it opened and whose opening it allowed.

Will the work of art ever speak the language it spoke at its birth? Or does it disclose what no historical community could permit itself to witness: the diabolical worklessness that threatens our civilisation, our *humanity* then as now? The artwork reveals our desolation; but it would also reveal a distance that has always insinuated itself at 'our' heart. If art is no longer an appendage of the court or the clergy, if it no longer confirms the supremacy of royalty or divinity, this does not mean that it can attain sovereignty in its own name. But the old order to which what we now know as the artwork answered gives way to another. Artists are born where there were once artisans; distinct personalities appear where there were once anonymous labourers. The work of art is exalted and esteemed even as it struggles with a world that welcomes it too readily. Soon, the audience for art will always seem out of synch, seeking the empty forms of an older art even as the vanguard would try and invent an audience that escapes the official system of the institutionalised spaces. The very notion of art will never satisfy the vanguard; the artwork, sufficient to itself, secured of its own existence, offers itself too readily to the museum. Whence the desire with the Surrealists and their successors to free art itself from art, transforming art into a practice without name and without ancestors, overturning the distinction between the work of art and a more general practice of existence. But the contrast between work and existence must always collapse. The public will eventually absorb the avant-gardes; the scandals for which the avant-garde group were notorious are forgotten and they are known only for the works preserved in a gallery. But this absorption is never complete. True, the work of art finds its place in the museum or the library, but in the surprise of nuance or sonority that may await the most seasoned audience, the work of art refuses itself to the angels whose wings would enfold it. The work of art struggles with any formal determination. In this way a community of respondents is born for whom the work of art is the embodiment of rules that come into being and pass away with the singularity of the work.

It is, perhaps, only the *modern* of art that allows us to understand the way in which the struggle in question brings together and disperses a

community. The artwork does not celebrate the wealthy patron it would portray, or the religious order it would uphold. The modern work of art *surprises* its addressees because it transgresses the rules that determine the shared taste of the salon or the academy. It is not merely the capacity of words to transmit information that the modern poem celebrates, but the sonority of those words, their heaviness. Likewise, it is not the measurable frequency of colour or sound that is at stake in the modern painting or piece of music, but the nuance and the timbre of that colour and sound. The modern work of art disturbs a certain *classical* determination of the relation between matter and form, where classicism would name the subordination of matter to a particular determination of art, which is to say, to a too ready acceptance of the angels' embrace. Modernism, then, might appear to indicate simply the rebellion of matter against form, the fallen angels against the heavenly order, not as it refuses form altogether, but as it struggles against its formal determination, and, in this struggle, which happens as our encounter with the work, retains a capacity to surprise that predates and outstrips the formulation of any particular avant-garde. From this perspective, the manifestos of twentieth century art, the rapid formation and dissolution of avant-gardes are an attempt to *mobilise* this peculiar capacity sensed to greater or lesser extent by their fervent advocates. But if the value of avant-garde artwork depends upon its ability to escape the museum, to overcome itself, then it has resolutely failed. To oppose oneself to the classicism for which art is art only insofar as answers to a set of rules is not enough to escape the museum.

Blanchot does not lament with Heidegger the idea of artworks being shipped from gallery to gallery like coal in the Ruhr, or the stacking of volumes of Hölderlin's poetry like mounds of potatoes. Nor does he join his practice to the vanguard which always depends upon notions of framing, positionality and support. The artwork can refuse the outstretched angels' wings, for Blanchot, even as it is bound to certain institutions. Here, Blanchot accedes to neither marketplace nor museum, abandoning the notion of the overcoming of art in politics, the abandonment of the artwork for a general practice of existence. This is because he understands the happening of the artwork, insofar as it opens to a community of recipients, *in terms of worklessness*. Indeed, it is his account of the happening of the work of art that first allows him to develop his notion of community.

The artwork happens for Blanchot as it is received by a community of recipients. This happening cannot exhaust the artwork, since it does

not happen in the same way each time it occurs. It happens singularly, which is to say, in the solitary encounter with the work. But what is it that happens? One might understand it, broadly and provisionally, in terms of the materiality of the work. The artwork 'is' its materiality as it overruns what its audience expect of matter. The surprise of the artwork is the surprise of the worklessness of matter. But just as the Blanchotian community is intertwined with community, worklessness is intertwined with the work. Worklessness is not a pure break, the opening to another order, but an interruption that happens as a material, communal event insofar as it escapes our desire to put it to work, that is, to subordinate it to particular projects. Work, here, is not to be understood as a specific set of tasks I undertake to earn my living, but, more generally, as the movement of identification upon which my self-identity and identity in general is predicated. The identity of a community depends, likewise, upon work. But the community of respondents before the work of art are not brought together through a shared task. Or rather, even if they did desire to edify themselves by visiting a museum together, or starting a book club or a study group, the encounter with the artwork disrupts this shared task. This is why Bataille's memory of drunkenly reading a book with a friend, which I will discuss in chapter five, is so significant for Blanchot. The symposium, in the literal sense of the word, is not brought together in order to learn something from a book. It is not devoted to a shared project. The reading does not bring its participants together, but disperses them. Better, it disperses each reader because it retains a capacity to surprise.

Blanchot's account of a sovereign refusal inherent to the work of art is explicitly carried over into the political sphere in *The Infinite Conversation*, where the notion of literary writing is linked to the experience of a certain communism. At issue is an indeterminable reserve whose 'object', in this instance, is the relation to others insofar as they escape the convenient social categories into which our relationships are forced, which allow us to prepare and mediate our encounters, contextualising them on familial, neighbourly, national, political and linguistic grounds, thereby laying out a familiar and understandable determination of the social space. Blanchot does not call for a rejection of such roles, advocating an abandonment of all social convention. Put schematically, an experience of the other person would be 'modern' in the same way as the experience of a certain work of art because it, too, affirms the workless materiality that cannot be mobilised or put to work. What does this mean? Turning to Blanchot's writings on May

1968, it is notable that he presents the relationship between the demonstrators as a kind of *greeting*. In anonymously published texts later collected under Blanchot's signature as 'Disorderly Words', one finds the affirmation of the refusal of the recuperation of a certain relation to the other person within the dominant forms of political organisation and power relations in society. Their author quotes Marx: 'the end of alienation can only begin if man agrees to go out from himself (from everything that constitutes him as interiority): out from religion, the family and the State' and Lenin: 'the soul of Communism is what makes it intolerable, intractable', in order to affirm the 'easy going Communism [*le communisme commode*]' that would allow itself to be reconciled with nationalism, with the institutions enfranchised with political power.[9] But it is not the end of alienation that the author would seek, understood in terms of a return to a homeland, to the bosom of the family, to the security of religion. The intractability of communism lies in the disidentification of any specific determination of community, of religion, the family, the state. Above all, this communism without heritage restlessly refuses to settle into any body of doctrine, to stabilise itself as a theory. It answers to the worklessness of the '*cum*', the being-with of community as it refuses to close itself up into a political programme.

No doubt it is because of its 'dis-arrangement [*le désarrangement*]' or 'disarray [*le désarroi*]' that the movement failed.[10] However it is not clear that one should measure the Events unfavourably against the achievements of 'traditional' revolutions, to complain that no Bastille or Winter Palace was taken, no old regime definitively overthrown, is to misunderstand the transitory role of the committees and, ultimately, the absence of a determined political will. Far from seeking to reform existing institutions, the committees appeared and disappeared in their multiplicity to direct specific actions provisionally, locally, according to the transitory demands of the instant. Was it not the *absence* of political program that allowed this refusal to reveal itself as an effervescent spontaneity latent in the institutions that exerted social control? But it was also the intractability and intolerability of this communism, its impatient refusal of institutional power that made the movement vulnerable. It fell victim to the authorities, it failed, but, in its failure, in the bright flash of the Events, it attested to an instant in which its participants were *drawn outside* in response to a nameless demand that opens up the social space. This is why the author of 'Disorderly Words' can write: 'tomorrow it was May' – yes, this 'tomorrow' can and will return, that same festivity, but only in an instant that is dissevered from the present.[11]

The impatient writer of 'Disorderly Words' has a more patient alter ego; to read these short essays and handbills after the Events, long after, with the knowledge of who wrote these dense and feverish pages, is to be able to insert them into the course of an oeuvre. Blanchot is also the negotiator of texts, the careful exegete who indirectly responds to the communitarian exigence through his readings of texts and his interpretation of certain events. Blanchot's participation in the Events, for all its urgency, is not the outcome or the realisation of the commentator who articulates his thought through subtle displacements in his commentaries, who refuses to enter the public space, to give interviews, or to clarify his 'position' with respect to his thought. Written in the instant to respond to the instant, the texts subsequently published as 'Disorderly Words' are a radicalisation of what is already implicit to his theoretical writings.

Blanchot does not elevate the Events of May 1968 to the status of an unattainable ideal, the prototype of future action. The Events were an 'exception', he acknowledges in 'Intellectuals Under Scrutiny', and as such, 'it provides no solution, even if it gives an idea of a revolution that does not need to succeed or to achieve a fixed goal, since, whether it endures or does not endure, it is sufficient unto itself, and since the failure that eventually rewards it is none of its concern'.[12] An intractable revolution, a demand to go outside, to respond to the always prior response of the other person, to take up our responsibility: this is what also testifies to the advent of communism.

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Seldom are Blanchot's notions of community and friendship articulated as such. His work is marked by his relationship to friends to whom he was bound not by ties of mutual esteem or shared interests, but by the question of friendship and community itself. I have already shown impatience by setting out the features of community without attending to the way they are developed in Blanchot's text. Sometimes, of course, this impatience is necessary. But it is also important to patiently retrace his negotiation of the work of his friends Georges Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas, thinkers for whom, likewise, friendship and community are not themes, but indicate the very movement and orientation of their thought.

Blanchot met Levinas at Strasbourg University in 1924, where they were both students, committing themselves in friendship through a deliberate pact that lasted until Levinas's death in 1995. It was

always, as Blanchot emphasises, a friendship that passed through a friendship with philosophy. And perhaps their friendship always recalls Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which they both admired as students at Strasbourg. Contra Heidegger, Levinas argues that philosophy must always answer to friendship, to fraternity, understood as the relation to the other person, as the opening of the ethical and the opening to God. Blanchot's response to Heidegger is, to say the least, more equivocal. I will make only a first step in the overwhelming task of retracing Blanchot's engagement with the thought of Heidegger. And, likewise, I will only begin to explore the philosophical contretemps between Blanchot and Levinas. As I will show, whilst retaining the sense of a non-indifference to the other person, Blanchot draws his account of this relation back into his concern with the neuter, which is always, contra Levinas, 'the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone', which can be associated neither with the good nor the ethical. This is what allows him to link the relation to the other person to the relation to the artwork, turning from the Levinasian account of the ethical, not in order to abandon it completely, but to respond to it in a different sense.

It is striking that Blanchot allows his conversationalists in *The Infinite Conversation* to direct the question of *autrui* towards the question of or from community. As he allows a conversationalist to write: 'if the question "Who is *autrui*?" has no direct meaning, it is because it must be replaced by another: "What of the human 'community', when it must respond to this relation of strangeness [*rapport d'étrangeté*] between man and man – a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation – that the experience of language leads one to sense?"'.[13] What is crucial for Blanchot is the fact that *autrui*, the Other, is another human being who can likewise respond to the Other.[14] Even as I am exposed and obliged in my relation to you, you can be exposed and obliged by me. This is not a reciprocal relation, since the relation in question is dissymmetrical and unilateral; it is, rather, a criss-crossing of relations. The thought of community in Blanchot is linked with the attempt to think what he allows a conversationalist to call this 'redoubling of irreciprocity', a 'double dissymmetry [*double dissymétrie*]', a 'double discontinuity' and a 'double-signed infinity'.[15]

The shift from the question 'Who is *Autrui*?' to the question concerning community is part of Blanchot's more general attempt to attend to a certain opening of community that structures our experience of ourselves and others, to the '*cum*' of our being-together that recalls the prior alteration of society and humanity. More broadly, it answers to a

rejection of any attempt to determine the relation to what he calls the outside. Here, Blanchot follows Bataille, a philosopher no less concerned with the opening to the Other than Levinas, but who refuses to determine this opening as an opening to the good.

Blanchot met Bataille in 1940, at a time when both were moving away from a turbulent period of political activity. It is really the Bataille of the war years, the author of the fragmentary texts that make up his *The Atheological Summa* who is closest to Blanchot. Bataille's writings do not indicate a retreat from reflections on communal life but their intensification. On the one hand, Bataille proclaims in *Inner Experience*: 'I become irritated when I think of the time of "activity" which I spent – during the last years of peacetime – in forcing myself to reach my fellow beings. I had to pay this price. Ecstasy itself is empty when envisaged as a private exercise, only mattering for a single individual'.[16] But on the other, as Blanchot comments, 'everything he had written before – though he may have remembered it only partially – was but the aborted prelude of the exigency of writing'; the 'nocturnal communication' that opened in the creation of *Madame Edwarda* or *Le Petit* permitted the opening of a unilateral relation between text and a small number of 'friends', the 'reader-witnesses', who are bound to one another in a 'literary communication'.[17] But to claim Blanchot greatly admires these texts is not to assimilate his friendship with Bataille to a mutual admiration. Indeed, when Blanchot comes to invoke friendship in a famous eulogy, he does not record anecdotes, nor reflect at any length on the particularities of his friends, but remembers what, in that friendship, affirms a certain indetermination, a freedom within the hegemony of the same, a space that will not permit us to rest content with our institutions and our notion of politics. For Blanchot, Bataille is, above all, a *writer*, which is to say, one whose work attests to the advent of communism without allowing it to be translated into conventional politics. Writing does indeed maintain a relation to a worklessness that the horrors of our age threaten to make disappear. They are horrors precisely because they would threaten this disappearance.

It is significant that, in his contribution to the collection *For Nelson Mandela*, edited by Derrida and Tlili, Blanchot invokes the systematic murder of the Jews when he responds to a question he asks himself in an essay entitled 'Our Responsibility', 'What is a fitting way to speak and write about the segregation of whites and blacks?'[18] He answers 'communism, community and democracy are precluded' and 'we are party to the barbarity, the suffering and the countless murders to the extent that we

greet these facts with a certain indifference and spend our days and nights untroubled'.[19] Communism is *precluded*: the advent of communism is repressed by massive reactionary forces. But community can never be totally excluded; the play of worklessness must be given issue. In this way, communism, the opening of community, happens in the midst of the worst atrocities. Antelme reminds us of the fleeting awareness on the part of the SS that they are bound to their victims because they belong to the same human race, and of the dim knowledge on the part of the prisoners that they resisted and would continue to resist the measure of power. But the play of communism changes nothing about the politics of the camp, which is predicated upon a denial of the opening of the political beyond its determination.

Recalling his own awakening to the significance of the deportation of the Jews in a letter from the 1980s, Blanchot recalls his realisation 'that the Jews were our brothers, and that Judaism was more than just a culture, more than just a religion even, because it was the foundation of our relationship to others [*autrui*]'.[20] Evoking the memory of the same events, as well as alluding to his own allegiance to the Maquis, Blanchot makes what he calls his *personal confession* in the form of a fragment of René Char: 'I want never to forget that I have been forced to become – for how long? – a monster of justice and intolerance, a cooped up simplifier, an arctic individual with no interest in the fate of anyone who is not in league with him to kill the hounds of hell. The round-ups of Jews, scalpings in police-stations, terrorist raids by Hitler's police on stunned villages, lift me off the ground, strike my chapped face with a red-hot slap of molten iron'.[21] Blanchot proceeds to comment: 'that was written in 1943[….] That improbable date hangs suspended above our heads. Its return is always possible. And it is that date, in my view, which denies intellectuals any hope of disappearing and so shying away from being questioned, from the torment of being questioned'. The intellectual is questioned because of the distance between the happening of communism, which always occurs, and existing political institutions.

Granted, community gives itself to be experienced in an act of self-destruction, in which, in its singularity, its refusal to come to presence, can be neither abstracted nor concretised. Community can only be discussed in default. In this case, is it not better to remain silent? But the happening of community, Blanchot insists, bears 'an exacting political meaning'; witnessing occurs, the intellectual must speak, but, as he asks, 'with what kind of words?'[22] With the words that attest to the distance between the advent of communism and the democratic process

through which one might attest to this advent. And yet there is a difficulty in drawing upon the antiquated model of the intellectual, understood, on Lyotard's diagnosis, as one who would assume 'administrative, economic, social, and cultural responsibilities', by situating themselves 'in the position of man, humanity, the nation, the people, the proletariat, the creature, or some such entity.'[23] Who now, Lyotard asks, in the essay to which Blanchot responds with 'Intellectuals in Question', could take pride in the universalising thought that would tell us clearly and directly what is to be done? For Lyotard, 'It is precisely this totalising unity, this universality, that thought has lacked since at least the middle of the twentieth century.'[24] And yet, might one argue with Blanchot and, indeed, with Lyotard, that a certain practice of writing, no longer conceived as the medium through which truth could be simply and easily conveyed, resists this unity. Writing may appear to be irresponsibility itself, in which one writes without being present to defend what one writes. Who can call the writer to account? The intellectual, here, is not condemned to writing as to an infinite detour from the immediacy to which he or she would answer, but would bear witness to an exposition of nothingness or non-actuality which, although it does not issue in a system of prescriptive norms, nonetheless bears a profound ethical and political demand.

This is why Bataille's practice in the heterogeneous texts which may be grouped under the general title of *The Atheological Summa* is exemplary for Blanchot. Bataille allows himself to be exposed to the chance of an encounter with a community of readers. Bataille argues that the question of morality is indissociable from the attempt to break with the unity that organises our experience, which is ultimately predicated upon the model of the unity and identity. Whence the emphasis on what he calls *inner experience* – a trial through which the writing 'I' is wagered by allowing itself to be borne along on a ceaseless movement of contestation.

'The expression of inner experience must in some way correspond to its movement',[25] Bataille writes; his text must not conclude, must not rest itself in a system of theses, nor assure itself of the transparency of its message. This text, one might say, is carried along by a *scepticism* that resists any attempt to posit a principle or law – a scepticism, fundamentally, about the discursivity of *The Atheological Summa* itself, since, because we assume too quickly and too easily what it means to write responsibly. He does not, as some allege, give up on the procedures of theoretical discourse as such, resting content in a mystical indication of the ineffable, but wagers these procedures insofar as they risk

themselves to the realm of stable ends and objectives, to what might be called, more generally, the realm of the project.[26]

Yes, it is necessary to deploy language as the vehicle of sense, to argue, to observe, but it is also necessary to reveal the way in which language escapes the realm in question, opening a space into which author and reader disappear. Bataille writes, 'I write for the one who, entering my book, would fall into it as into a hole, who would never again get out'[27]; but he writes as one who has already fallen into this hole. Since this scepticism is not itself a 'result' that can be communicated once and for all, this struggle must be repeated ever anew. This is the struggle 'inner experience' would name. The 'circular agitation' in which Bataille would suspend himself and his readers is a struggle against the great reductive forces of our culture, which are predicated, ultimately, upon the subordination of experience to the project.[28]

The Blanchotian intellectual is not merely *condemned* to writing, enduring the risk of an infinite detour from what he or she *really* intends to say. I have already quoted the opening sentence of Nancy's essay: 'The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer [...] is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community'.[29]

For the Blanchotian intellectual, it is not merely a question of seeking out other testimonies, or of broadening the range of phenomena under theoretical scrutiny. The task is to transform this scrutiny itself by understanding how the testimony of the dislocation of community is experienced. For the right, the appeal to the community is always conservative, an attempt to restore a lost sense of values. The Blanchotian community, which is to say, the openness of an indetermination that prevents the closure or the hypostasis of any community, is a notion for the left, since the field of politics, the political, is at issue for the left in a way it is not for the right. But openness as such cannot form the object of a political movement; it cannot stand as an end with respect to the goals its members would hold in common, or as an alternative to the work that would allow a group of people to establish themselves as a group. Openness is not an alternative to sharing, to holding in common, or to the celebration of a shared tradition. It belongs to these movements, to tradition, to collective work, and cannot be thought apart from them. Whilst all types of association depend for their future on the openness that Blanchot calls community, this future, the affirmation of the indeterminable, of worklessness as it outplays work,

may or may not be safeguarded in a particular tradition or a particular politics. The question Blanchot poses in the name of community bears upon the threat of the reactive forces that would not only prevent community from happening, but also prevent it appearing as an event which bears a political significance.

Community, then, cannot be marshalled as such; it refuses to make itself into an end or a project. One cannot indeed lobby parliament, or campaign to reform existing laws, or revolt in the face of all laws and all authority in the name of community whilst it is to be determined as the object of particular reform. Communism is not determinable. But one can orchestrate revolt when a particular determination of politics and a particular image of the political threaten to saturate the social space. Rereading the pages of Blanchot's essay on de Gaulle, one does not find a general appeal to anarchy, to the unceasing revolutionisation of the political state; he calls for action because the current state of affairs does not answer another kind of relation.[30] The handbills distributed in the streets during the Events, or the essays published anonymously in *Comité* do not advocate a simple spontaneity, but are subject to specific conditions. It is always a question of negotiating between communism and democracy, which is to say, the transformation of existing institutions. Communism *happens* despite everything, despite every decision we make, but it remains to show how one might respond to this happening, assuming responsibility for acting with the aim – never easily translatable, calling for different negotiations at different times – of attesting to these spaces of freedom.

Blanchot's critical practice calls for an attempt to save events from the uprush of events, that is, to witness them, allowing them to answer to their singularity, but also to show how these events, in their very singularity, permit of comparison to other events. This, of course, requires a theoretical underpinning that would allow one to answer to the indeterminability of community: a practice of commentary that would show how, in the close, patient scrutiny of events, of texts, of happenings, of philosophies, one might discover and attest to other such events in our present. It would show that the past is contingent; that a future is possible because its course is not prescribed. It is to hope for the repetition that would affirm the indeterminable, the leeway, the freedom of the communitarian exigence. To claim that the happening of community is free does not mean that it is somehow the embodiment of freedom. One cannot decide for the freedom of a community; it comes, if it does so, from without. If one must use the vocabulary of decision at all, it

is a decision that is taken in one's place and reveals its effects only subsequently.

Towards the end of *The Writing of the Disaster* Blanchot writes, 'learn to think with pain [*Apprends à penser avec douleur*]'.[31] But is it not in this claim that one might free oneself from pain, in the hope that one might turn to a future that is not the recollection of the past? One must also dare to learn to *think with joy*, which is to say to keep a place open for worklessness. The happening of community 'does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, and what we call worklessness'.[32] One must lose interest in the present time; vigilance is necessary if one is to be watchful for the return of the terrible events of 1943. But it is also necessary to keep watch for the advent of the new – for the 'spaces of freedom' that are free because they cannot be determined, because they bear witness to an indetermination that must be witnessed in turn. One keeps watch *joyfully*, which is to say in the hope that the future will not be entirely determined by the past.

1
The Beast in Me

'General culture', Blanchot observes, 'would like to make *to know* a verb without an object: it is a matter of knowing in a way that is absolute and substantial, not of learning what one does not yet know'.[1] The notion of the work of art allows us to draw the old and the new into the horizon of culture: we know what it is and we know, for this reason, what any work of art can be. Our capacity to know outpaces everything; the avant-garde is, for us, only the outward edge of a movement whose origins and inner dynamics are already familiar. Likewise, no artwork is too old, too obscure or too unfamiliar to be recognized as what it is and thereafter restored to its place within culture. What matters above all else is culture *as a whole*, the totality or the continuity of the knowable. We recognize the artwork, we know in advance what it is and how it binds itself to a particular history, a particular institutionalisation. We know but we do so in a manner that is docile; we acquiesce to the substantiality of the gallery, to the absoluteness of the museum.

Everything is ours – artworks have been freed from their subjection to religious, mythic or civic purposes. The bleached, broken columns of the Greek temple are no longer an integral component of a place of worship, but realize and exemplify a style that would come to influence church architecture. Everything is ours: the tourists who admire the spectacle of the Shinto temple are right to understand this experience in the same way as they might the Auriga of Delphi, the Royal Portal of Chartres, Khmerian heads, Wei and Tang Bodhisatvas, that is, as the distant forerunners of contemporary art.

But is it not because art is *already dead* that the individual work of art seems to offer itself so completely to a certain history, a certain monumentalisation? This is why, perhaps, the crushed face of Saint Elizabeth

of Baberg and the Praxiteles' adolescent smiles seem strangely complete, for they regard us from the immobility of the tomb. The extraordinary attempts of the Surrealists to supersede art, to transfigure it into a practice of *existence*, are only simulations of life, like the ants crawling in a dead snake's skin. Likewise, appeals to return artworks to their original contexts, their worlds, are another attempts to reanimate a corpse, to return it to life only to recall the disappointment that the stench is overwhelming, for it is not like the cadaver of the saint whose flesh remains on his bones long after his death and who, one might imagine, would rise again and walk one day among us.

It may seem as if Saint Elizabeth of Baberg waited for her face to be crushed or that the poem was long rotten before it was placed between the covers of the critical edition: that the work of art always existed in the way it reveals itself to us in the museum. But what we call art, Blanchot reminds us, is real and it is fragile; it belongs to history and is marked by its adventures. The crushed face and the fading cavewalls are a figure for a certain event that does not befall the artwork from without as a kind of empirical accident that is easily erased, but would attest to a reserve that supplements and disturbs historiographical and evolutionary accounts of the origin of the human being. Blanchot would confront us anew with the artwork in its materiality, its ineradicable historicity. In wresting art from historiography and, thereby, from discourses on the history of art and art criticism, he also invites a reconception of the step into humanity – the step into history.

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'At its birth', Blanchot writes in his discussion of Bataille's book on the cave paintings at Lascaux, 'art is revealed to be such that it can change infinitely and can ceaselessly renew itself, but cannot improve'.[2] The subterranean beauty of the huge aurochs, the unicorn, the red deer, oxen, horses and stag, the breadth and scope of the paintings is remarkable. The techniques that allowed our ancestors to exaggerate the contours of the cave walls and augment them with pigment, the chance that preserved and revealed their work: all this is extraordinary. What, we might ask ourselves, about the function of the Lascaux paintings – were the caves the focus of rituals, of secret ceremonies? One can read about 'prehistoric art' and admire reproductions, but what incites our 'wonder [*merveille*]', according to Blanchot, is 'a space almost intentionally devoted to the brilliance and marvel of painted things' – the self-affirming presence of a *great work of art*. Ours would be the simple,

awe-struck response that captivated the first spectators of the paintings. What we confront is already a great work; it is 'the place from which art shines forth and whose radiance is that of a first ray – first and yet complete'; at Lascaux, we discover that the cave paintings that are the birth of art reveal a profound truth about art and its historicity.[3] The cave paintings would be both ancient and contemporaneous, since they appear to awaken the same wonder in us as they would in any spectator. Art can always and already be said to be complete; Blanchot seems to suggest that art can be said to happen or indeed be *reborn* in its wondrousness, *re*-originating for the first spectators at Lascaux just as it will be born again for all subsequent spectators.

Yet Blanchot is not touchingly invoking the innocence of a simple, unchanged mood, suggesting the work of art offers itself us as unbreached experience, a primal non-contradiction, a unity that preserves itself over millennia. He follows Bataille in seeing more than beauty in the cave paintings – and, indeed, in all art, and in linking this unease, this fear and trembling, to the emergence of the human being. But why does Blanchot make these claims in a commentary on Bataille? Blanchot would give us Bataille's work anew, like the repetition [*Gjentagelse*] through which Job receives the world after his trials in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. And in presenting Blanchot's conversation [*entretien*][4] with Bataille here, it will be necessary to retrace patterns of filiation and inheritance in order to attend to the Hegelian–Kojèvean context from which their work emerged (but in terms of which their work cannot be accounted for).

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How, then, does it begin? How does the human being step into history? Everything begins, for Bataille, as for Kojève, with death. As Kojève explains, death permits the leap above 'mere animal sentiment of self [*Selbstgefühl*]' in order for the human being to attain properly human 'self-consciousness [*Selbstsbewußtsein*]', which is to say, 'conceptual and discursive consciousness in general' – 'the risk of life accepted without any necessity', death as a sheer leap into the unknown. Everything begins with death. 'The death of a human being is essentially different from the 'end' of an animal or plant'; the latter is merely imposed from without.[5] The animal cannot assume its end, but merely unfolds innate possibilities, actualising only what it has been given by virtue of its biology. Nothing begins anew with the birth of the animal; it does not bring itself into the origin – it does not *leap*.

The flies that circle blindly around my room this year are the same as the flies that circled last year, but the human being who struggles into birth inherits an understanding of the world, a culture, and is able to transform and to transmit this inheritance in turn. The birth of the human being is a leap. But it is so because to understand, for the human being, is also to *die*. For Kojève, it is death that lifts the human being from nature and grants it freedom. The human being, unlike the animal, is able to watch itself die; it is *self-conscious*.

How should one understand this? The human being irrupts into the field of Nature, which, for Kojève, is always merely 'static given-Being [*Sein*]', self-identical and mute.[6] The human being undoes given-Being, by introducing 'Other-Being [*Anderssein*]', that is, 'negation of itself as given and creation of itself as other than this given'.[7] This is why Kojève differentiates his *phenomenological* anthropology, which 'describes human existence as it "appears" [*erscheint*] or "manifests" itself to the very one who experiences it',[8] from a *scientific* one, like Gall's phrenology. The animal merely lives, but the living human being *acts*. True, plants and animals *develop*, but that development is itself determined by what is given beforehand. As Bataille comments, the animal 'is itself lost in nature (and in the totality of all that is)'.[9] Freedom, by contrast, is the negation of human 'nature', which is to say, for Kojève, 'of the "possibilities" which he has already realized'.[10] Negation is an overcoming of what has already been received as a possibility and to that extent is always a leap, always the realisation of a hitherto unforeseen possibility. Action, negativity, is the overcoming of the given. It is by violently asserting autonomy with respect to nature, by making war against what is merely innate or inherited, that the dimension of history opens, understood as the 'appearings' of the human being and its world and hence the topic of phenomenology.

This capacity to negate, this freedom, governs the human being from the very beginning. To begin, with the human being inherits the body, a natural being. As Bataille comments, 'Man is first of all an animal, that is to say the very thing he negates'; 'to negate nature is to negate the animal which props up man's negativity'.[11] Thus the body is itself negated through action. But how does the human being survive the own destruction of the body? The human being is reborn from the ashes of its natural being because it is self-conscious, because it can watch itself die. The human being is a dialectical being, which means, for Kojève, that it preserves that which is originally given. Although negation is always a negation of a determined and specific identity, it simultaneously *preserves* this same identity. In its continuity and its

progression, history always presumes the negation of the real and its preservation. As Kojève writes, 'to describe Man as a *dialectical* entity is to describe him as a negating *Action* that negates the given within which is born, and as a *Product* created by that very negation, on the basis of the given which was negated'.[12] Thus, the human being can preserve itself in the negation of its own natural being. The death of the body, is, in this sense, assumed by the human being such that it becomes the product of human action, of freedom. The fruits of activity, of dying, are preserved in and through the transmission of history.

Death, for Kojève, is the negation through which the human being '"goes beyond" or "transcends" the given-being which he himself is'.[13] It is because it risks death that the human being is a dialectical being. For the animal, death is suffered as an end – it merely befalls the animal to the extent that Kojève claims 'death does not actually exist *for* it'.[14] The animal lives out its possibilities without negating them. As Bataille comments, 'no doubt the individual fly dies, but today's flies are the same as those of last year. Last year's have died? … Perhaps, but nothing has disappeared. The flies remain, equal to themselves like the waves of the sea'.[15] Kojève's animal cannot watch itself die. It is not even finite, in the sense that it possesses a sense of its division from other animals. It belongs to what Bataille calls an 'undifferentiated continuity'.[16] Animal desire, Kojève grants, destroys what is given as nature – the animal 'realises and reveals its *superiority* to plants by eating them'; and yet, by the same stroke, 'by feeding on plants, the animal *depends* on them and hence does not manage fully to go beyond them'.[17] Animal desire is filled by a '*natural*, biological content'.[18] The animal falls back into the natural domain from which it appeared, briefly, to liberate itself. This is why the animal does not enter into becoming, time and history. No animal, even the strongest, can be more than a wave in the movement of the waters of this animality; all of them belong to the continuity as water does to water. The animal lives, but the human being acts, which is to say, dies. Death drives the human being out of the continuity of animal life. The human being, by contrast, does not enjoy a simple subsistence, but dies, and for this reason is always and already beyond the situation in which it finds itself. It runs up against the fact that it will die. Thus, Kojève writes, 'man is mortal *for himself*'; only the human being 'can *die* in the proper sense of the word'.[19] The human being can die, and death can become what he calls a '*dialectical finiteness*' because the human being always dies prematurely, that is, because there are always more possibilities that it could negate.[20] Whilst the offspring of the

animal inherit nothing, repeating the same movement, the human being has the chance of giving birth to an inheritor, to the child who can take up the work of negation and prolong history.

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Are we are too old and too wise to experience the caves in simple wonder? Has the power of reflection torn us from innocence? The wrenching movement of human desire tears us from beauty, which would, as Bataille writes, 'like to remain the sign of an accord of the real with itself';[21] it appears, then, that the cave paintings are, like beautiful natural things, simply given; 'beauty does not have the power to respond to the request of the Understanding, which wants to uphold and preserve the work of *human* death'.[22] The cave paintings are mute. As Bataille understands, 'in order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it by living – watching himself ceasing to be'.[23] But here, there is nothing to be seen; they reveal nothing to the spectator, everything has been learnt from them; they might move us for a moment, but they do no more than that.

To what, then, have we returned in confronting the paintings? What have we regained in fear and trembling? We have not simply returned to animality – for Bataille, this return is impossible. And yet to claim it is impossible is not, for Bataille, as Blanchot will emphasise, to make a claim about the obstacle against which it would run up within what is possible in a given field. But to understand this claim requires a discussion of Bataille's own account of the complex transition from the animal to the human. For Bataille, as we will see, action is not enough; creation through negation is not sufficient to permit the leap into humanity. There are, Blanchot emphasises, *two leaps* through which the human being appears to come to itself.

The *first* leap occurs with the incipient human being, who is able to work and thereby to begin to transform the world.[24] Work commences, for Bataille, with *tool use*. Tools have no value in themselves but only in an anticipated *result*. They posit the very distinction between ends and means, permitting the definition of 'a sphere of objects, a world, a plane …'[25] This positing enables a subject to counterpose itself to these objects. The tool thus changes nature and the human being at the same time; as Bataille writes, 'it subjugates nature to man, who makes it and uses it, but it ties man to a subjugated nature'.[26] Nature becomes, in principle, the property of the human being, but only insofar as it is

available as an object for a subject: 'the grain of wheat *is* a unit of agricultural production; the cow is a head of livestock, and the one who cultivates the wheat is a farmer; the one who raises the steer is a stock raiser'.[27]

Here, there are clear resonances with Kojève. Animality is subordinated by the human being. Henceforward, he writes, it is no longer a question of dealing with animality 'as it "appears" in nature', but with 'Animality *in Man*, that is, his (originally animal) nature given as dialectically overcome or preserved as sublimated in the totality of human existence'.[28] Tool use permits the negation of nature and of the animal 'innate nature', allowing the incipient human being to exist humanly insofar as it can transform the natural world and its own animality through negating action. Through tool use, the incipient human being becomes the dialectical being who can exist for itself. But even as they make tools and are thereby posited as subjects over against a dimension that would be henceforward closed to them, these proto-humans became aware of an 'essential lack' or a 'weakness' that stemmed from their finitude. The plane is always 'uncertain, precarious and unevenly realized'; there remain certain *insecurities* in the plane upon which subjects and objects stand opposed to one another since the human being is never just a subject and nature cannot be objectified.

One might understand finitude in the sense Kant indicates in making the distinction between the *intuitus originarius* of God, an 'original' intuition [*Anschauung*] that creates its own objects, and the *intuitus derivativus* of the human being who does not create objects but receives intuitions from them.[29] As Heidegger comments of Kant, 'finite intuition of the being cannot give the object from out of itself. It must allow the object to be given'.[30] The finite human being exists in the midst of beings that existed before it. On this account, the finitude of the human being is to be thought in terms of its openness and receptivity to what it does not create, that is, its capacity to be affected. The Bataillean subject who stands opposed to objects did not create them. The creation of tools, that is the condition of possibility of laying out a plane of subjects and objects, does not hold back a certain explosive festivity in which nature would be revealed in its peculiar proximity to the human being. It is because he understands the claim of finitude in another sense, dissolving the insecurity of the plane by mobilising death, that Kojève circumscribes the affect of the affect. One might say that he turns one experience of finitude against another, and, in so doing, passes over both. Death, experienced now in

terms of a capacity, of what is possible for me, permits the overcoming of the insecurities Bataille invokes. The human being dies, for Kojève, but it is still able to integrate its adventures, reclaiming them by subordinating them to the measure of identity. Yet for Bataille and Blanchot, insecurities remain, which means, in this context, that there are certain experiences that cannot be so integrated, suggesting a kind of weakness or lack relative to the automatic movement of identification.

Is it through a dim awareness of this weakness that led incipient human beings to erect prohibitions 'to draw', as Blanchot suggests, 'a circle around human possibility from the very beginning'?[31] But this is not sufficient for truly human existence. Our ancestors, the ones who are not yet human, were already enclosed by such prohibitions. Whilst these incipient human beings may be hard workers, the masters of tools and weapons, they had yet to step into fully human existence since they remain bound by the prohibitions that keep them from what cannot be put to work. They are not yet human, since, as Blanchot comments, they are not capable 'of knowing the law by sovereign infraction',[32] and it is only by deliberately defying the prohibitions they erect around themselves that they can become human. This is the *second* leap, the leap into humanity.

There are thus, as Blanchot writes, 'two leaps, two essential moments of transgression' that allow pre-human beings to become human beings.[33] In the first, pre-humans depart from the natural world; in the second, they are drawn to re-cross the line that demarcates them from the closed world of nature, violating the prohibitions that their ancestors set against the dimension from which they emerged. But these two moments belong together. The pre-human being, the worker, is inseparable from the human being insofar as the irruption of the being who works is already the irruption of the being who is exposed to the chance of transgression. To work is already to be aware of finitude and its concomitant dangers. It is to know that the human being is not everything, that to emerge from the field in which animal is with animal as water is within water is to have been set apart not only from others and the world, but from oneself, too.

This is why, Blanchot comments, the return to what is variously called 'anterior reality', 'animal reality' and 'the first immensity' is 'a return that is always more than a return'.[34] Although this movement may seem to allow the incipient human being to enter these primeval, prehistoric realms once again, the transgressor 'also becomes tumultuously conscious of this impossible return, becomes conscious of the limits and the unique force that allows him to break these limits'.[35]

The transgressor cannot simply regain his lost animality; he does not, as Blanchot observes, 'simply lose himself in the dream of total existence', but 'affirms himself as that which is added to this existence'.[36] Transgression, then, depends on the awareness of what one *cannot* transgress, upon the awareness of the impossibility of the return to nature, to the 'first immensity', which is to say, of the impossibility of ever overcoming work through work.

But the desire on the part of the incipient human being to enact a transgression *as* a transgression is not conscious; it attests, rather, to a dissension in the movement to complete any particular task. Transgression is not *voluntary* defiance because it already entails the interruption of the will. Transgression is not a task *I* can set out to accomplish; it attests to the very inability to establish a relation to the future of a project. If it happens, it does so in the chance that surprises the subject and suspends the order of experienced temporality. It is this suspense Blanchot indicates when he invokes 'the time of difference', which is to say, the point of disjunction between the movement to complete a transgression and the prohibitive force that defeats this movement, rendering the transgression incomplete.[37]

How should one understand this? The Bataillean subject has lost its grip on the future – it no longer experiences its finitude, its mortality in the same way. For Kojève, the human being enters becoming and history because it can negate. For Bataille, the order of history is not the history of the human being as a dialectical being. The human being is always more than a being who acts and negates. But this means the gap between the animal and the human being cannot be sustained. For Bataille, the human being might be said to *die like an animal*. But is the human being not defined, precisely, by the capacity to die? In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot follows Kojève in determining suicide as the defining feature of human existence. Paraphrasing Kojève's claim that the human being differs from the animal in being mortal for itself, Blanchot writes, 'Suicide is an absolute right, the only one which is not the corollary of a duty'.[38] Yet Blanchot argues that the decision of suicide is interrupted at a crucial point – suicide may appear to be a right, but 'it is a right which no real power reinforces. It would seem to arch like a delicate and endless bridge which at the decisive moment is cut and becomes as unreal as a dream, over which nevertheless it is necessary really to pass'.[39] According to Kojève, only the human being can die, but for Blanchot, this means that only the human being can fall from the height of the bridge that spans moment to moment in the dialectical order of time. Human existence begins

with death, according to Kojève, insofar as death is the ground and wellspring of freedom. Death is the decision by which the human being chooses to affirm negativity – to be without being. As he writes, 'in going beyond or transcending given-Being [*Sein*], one creates the Concept [*Begriff*], which is Being minus the being of Being. The negation therefore *preserves* the "content" of Being (as the concept "Being"), and *sublimates* it by causing it to subsist in "ideal" and not "real" form'.[40] He also argues, 'A being that could not escape from Being, therefore, could not evade its destiny, and would be fixed once and for all in and by the place which it occupies in the Cosmos'.[41] Human existence is predicated upon the escape from being, that occurs through the mobilisation of death. For Kojève, 'my death is certainly mine; it is not the death of an other. But it is mine only in the future; for one can say: "I am going to die", but not "I am dead" '.[42] This is what he claims makes human death different from animal death, since the animal 'can only *suffer* its end without ever being able to prepare it: death does not actually exist *for* it, and one cannot say of it: '*it is dying*'.[43]

But, according to Blanchot, human existence also implies the *suspension* of this movement. For Kojève, this might appear as a strange return to animality, since he can only understand difference as a lapse from proper human existence. For Blanchot, however, the human being is no longer defined solely as the dialectical entity who is capable of the negation of the given and, simultaneously, as a product created by and through that negation. It cannot rise to the decision of which Kojève believes it to be capable, that is, of being *without* being. Nothingness cannot be brought about through an act of will. Bataille presents this experience in terms of an encounter with a certain *animality*. Kojève, as we have seen, insists upon differentiating animality as such from the sublimated animality implicit in human existence. But there is always a remainder; Bataille argues that sublimation can never be completed once and for all. A non-negatable animality remains – a beast 'in' me that is the locus of an experience which has already and always turned me from myself. For Blanchot, as we shall see, to invoke friendship with the animal is likewise to allow an abyssal kinship between animal and human.

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There is always a remainder, a reserve of animality, a beast 'in' me who is the locus of an experience too strong for me to undergo and remain

intact. As Blanchot makes clear in commenting on Bataille's notion of the impossible, that one should not think that the experience which contests the power or the capacity of the self to remain itself is isolated or even rare:

> When Georges Bataille responds to these questions in speaking of *the impossible*, one of the last words he made public, he must be rigorously understood; it must be understood that possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence, and that it is perhaps given to us to 'live' each of the events that is ours by way of a double relation. We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master (even if we do so painfully and with difficulty) by relating it to some good or to some value, that is to say, finally, by relating it to Unity; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape. Yes, as though impossibility, that by which we are no longer able to be able [*nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir*], were waiting for us behind all that we live, think and say – if only we have been once at the end of this waiting, without ever falling short of what this surplus or addition, this surplus of emptiness, of 'negativity', demanded of us and that is in us the infinite heart of the passion of thought.[44]

As I have claimed, Blanchot *repeats* Bataille's work, giving it to us anew. In foregrounding the word 'impossibility', he is not selecting the master word or concept that would unlock the secrets of Bataille's work once and for all. It is a word, rather, which resonates with other words Blanchot found necessary to put into play in *The Infinite Conversation*. It is the correspondences at play within this enormous text that grants it a kind of unity – not, the unity, it is true, of a classically ordered philosophical system, but one which indicates the way in which any such system already outbids its systematicity. This is also the case, for Blanchot, with the word 'impossibility' in Bataille's work.

The possible is usually understood in terms of a formal claim about what can occur without logical impediment within a given horizon. It is in accordance with what is conceivable. But Blanchot argues that possibility is linked to the power in the sense of a capacity or an ability-to-be, and indeed in connection with force [*puissance*]. Death, for Kojève, is a power or capacity; it is the very ground of my ability to

act. It is in this sense, too, my *power* – in Blanchot's words, 'dying, I can still die [*mourant, je puis encore mourir*]'; I can appropriate death as a force.[45] The ability to comprehend, bear, master, but fundamentally, *the ability to be able*, depends upon the 'I can', upon the modality of possibility which enables the opening to the future. Kojève argues that history proceeds through the determinate negation of nature, which is remembered and passed down from generation to generation. He writes,

> Man could be defined as an error that is preserved in existence, that *endures* within reality. Now since *error* means *disagreement* with the real; since what is *other* than what is, is *false*, one can also say that the man who errs is a Nothingness that nihilates in Being, or an 'ideal' that is present in the real.[46]

But for Kojève, despite this errancy, despite risk (he claims that it is the fact that the human being 'goes to his death without being forced to it' is the 'risk of life' that defines human existence), the progression and continuity of the dialectic is still possible. This erring or nothingness is the chance of the progression and continuity of the human being.[47] History is realised, he writes 'in spite of, or rather, because of, death', the knowledge that I am going to die is what encourages me to educate my children so that they can complete what I have been unable to complete. Their children, in turn, will act 'in terms of the memory of ancestors who have passed away'.[48]

For Kojève, negativity is the ground of becoming because it allows an ostensibly self-identical being to overcome its self-identity. Blanchotian becoming is a surplus of negativity which suspends the movement of history. Errancy, risk and death can be overcome; but this means movement and becoming, erring and nothingness, remain within the iron collar of Kojèvean negativity. But Blanchotian becoming and Blanchotian dying are no longer subordinated to the progression and continuity of dialectical history. This is what, according to Blanchot, Bataille affirms under the heading of 'inner experience':

> One might well say that man has at his disposal for dying that greatly and in a sense infinitely surpasses what he must have to enter into death, and that out of this excess of death he has admirably known how to make for himself a power. Through this

> power, denying nature, has constructed the world, he has put himself to work, he has become a producer, a self-producer [*auto-producteur*]. Nonetheless, a strange thing, this is not enough: at every moment he is left as it were with a part of dying that he has been unable to invest in activity. Most often he does not known this, he hasn't the time. But should he come to sense this surplus of nothingness, this unemployable vacancy [*vacance inutilisable*], should he discover himself to be bound to the movement that causes him, each time a man dies, to die infinitely, should he allow himself to be seized by the infinity of the end, then he must respond to another exigency – no longer that of producing but that of spending, no longer that of succeeding but of failing, no longer that of turning out work and speaking usefully but speaking in vain and reducing himself to worklessness: an exigency whose limit is given in the 'inner experience' [*l'expérience intérieure*].[49]

The words 'inner' and 'experience' may seem inappropriate; the experience being described here, and we will return to this, is no longer related to the power of the 'I can', of what is possible for me in the first person. The capacity to mobilise death which, for Kojève, define me as a human being, fails me. I undergo this experience in the manner, Bataille writes, of a child or a fly ('The subject preserves on the margin of its ecstasy the role of a child in a drama: surpassed, its presence persists, incapable of more than vaguely and distractedly sensing – a profoundly absent presence; it remains off in the wings, occupied as with toys').[50] And, writing again of the subject in experience, Bataille writes 'I am child in the drama, a fly on one's nose', and even 'the ancient chorus, the witness …'[51] I 'die', in the Bataillean-Blanchotian sense, not as a human being, but as an animal or a child. But this means that the step into fully human existence, into the non-natural being who can endure death, can never be complete. I will die – or rather, death will occur in me such that I am no longer able to be able, no longer, that is, capable of assuming my death as power or as possibility. This is not merely to acknowledge that each of us is deathbound, but that there is something left over, something fleshy, affective and incarnate that cannot be transmitted to the next generation. It is untransmittable singularity, the traumatic experience of nothingness, of becoming or dying as sheer exposition. Indeed, because it is traumatic, I cannot even transmit it to myself through an act of will.

It may appear that the impossible is merely a pocket of heterogeneity which cannot be reinvested in production – an obsolescent sign of something left behind like an appendix. What difference does it make? In the famous letter to Kojève of 1937, Bataille presents himself as the man of 'unemployed negativity':

> If action ('doing') is (as Hegel says) negativity, then there is still the problem of knowing whether the negativity of someone who 'doesn't have anything more to do' disappears or remains in a state of 'unemployed negativity'. As for me, I can only decide in one way, since I am exactly this 'unemployed negativity' [...] I think of my life – or better yet, its abortive condition, the open wound that my life is – as itself constituting a refutation of a closed System.[52]

Unemployed negativity is not simply a forgotten or left over piece of nature – a pocket of heterogeneity that had somehow escaped its integration into the system. Bataille's life would attest to an excessiveness of death over the possibility of its mobilisation, remaining a workless, idle leftover, unaccounted for in the onroll of the dialectic. What, then, is to be done? What difference does unemployed negativity make? Bataille notes, 'Most often, negativity, being impotent, makes itself into a work of art'.[53] He argues that the work of art fails to provide an answer to the man of unemployed negativity at the end of history. 'A work of art answers by evading or, to the extent that it gives a lasting answer, it answers no specific situation. It answers worst of all to the end situation, when evading is no longer possible (when the *moment of truth* arrives)'.[54] Bataille calls art a *temptation*.

How does it tempt us? The author can take refuge in the power and the glory of literary renown, laying claim to the greatness of the artwork; the reader confirms this renown by celebrating that greatness as the greatness of human creativity. This is the temptation, according to Bataille, to which the Surrealists succumbed, when the dream of a creative revolution that would restore the totality of human existence yielded only works of art that disappeared into the museum. Bataille struggled to resist this temptation in his own literary practice. Recalling the publication of book he would come to call *The Impossible*, Bataille writes, 'I first published this book fifteen years ago, giving it an obscure title: *The Hatred of Poetry*. It seemed to me that true poetry was reached only by hatred. Poetry had no powerful meaning except in the violence of revolt. But poetry attains this violence only by evoking the impossible'.[55] *To answer to the impossible* – is this the chance art offers

the man of unemployed negativity? Bataille does not admit the existence of 'true' poetry in his letter to Kojève. But for Blanchot, and later, too, for Bataille, art is dead in a more profound sense, a non-dialectical death linked to a non-dialectical becoming – not an evasion or a lure, nor even an answer, but a deeper experience of unemployable negativity. Art gives itself to be experienced as becoming, as a traumatising and singularising reserve.

A response to finitude – here it is no longer a question of action or production understood in the Kojèvean sense. The artwork is no longer determinable; it is not posited by its creator such that it is delimitable. One cannot leap over to the hither side of the limit into the indeterminable field that has not yet been objectified. Yet that leap is itself impossible, for to *plan* to leap, preparing to vault over the limit, is already to seek to realise a possibility, or to accomplish a work. The experience of finitude implies, for Blanchot, the chance of a 'limit-experience', which is to say, an experience of the limit in its indeterminability.

The Kojèvean dialectic is, from a Bataillean–Blanchotian perspective, premised upon bad conscience. The articulation of the limit is a determination of reserve in the faith that the reserve is, in fact, determinable. It reveals the desire to believe that nature can be objectified in the work of negation. Yet as we have seen, the very opening of the plane of subjects and objects, the articulation of the limit, implies a risk. There is another experience of the limit that escapes the relation to unity and refuses to relate itself to comprehension and mastery. This is not the outcome of a project; one cannot set out to bring oneself into a limit-experience since that would be, always and already, to have lived it as something that can be mastered and comprehended. It cannot be, here, a question of a *technique* through which one might bring oneself into an experience of the indeterminable. For technique already answers to the project, it is already practised in view of mastery and comprehension. If the limit-experience happens, it does so not from what Kojève calls freedom or death, but from a Bataillean–Blanchotian happening of transgressive *dying*.

Dying is, in Blanchot's terms, a 'becoming without end'. This becoming might be said to be *impossible* in the Bataillean–Blanchotian sense insofar as it names an indefinite, ateleological suspension. It would be non-sense 'itself': a deferral that occupies the very structure of temporality that inhabits the economy of the possible. But how does this help us understand art at the point which Kojève calls the end of history? The artwork, for Blanchot, is the very incarnation of excessive

negativity. It is never actualisable through a technique, through a method. It leaps beyond its creator; it is no longer possible for the artist in the first person. The work is, to this extent, impossible. The relation to death, for Kojève, opens up the realm of what is possible for the human being, granting it a specifically human freedom. But the artwork, according to Bataille and Blanchot, shows the way in which this freedom, this death, is riven from within.

The point at which the work of art appears to have vanished into the gallery, relinquishing all historical significance, is the moment when it can appear most clearly as what it is. Art is no longer edifying, obedient, the repository of lessons; it is no longer at the service of court or church, yet it is not totally disobedient either. The movement of Spirit, according to Kojève and Hegel, traces a circle. But art escapes the circulation or the circle; it is exorbitant to the extent that it will never yield its secret to the dialectic. Art has returned us to the experience to which we must always return, and it has done so at every moment since it was liberated from court and church. In so doing, it joins more ancient forms of transgression, settling itself into a genealogy of what Bataille calls the sacred or the impossible.

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Blanchot does not affirm an unbreached, innocent beauty when writing on the cave paintings. The painters bring beasts vividly to life, restoring them to a joyous and unambiguous presence – one 'full of an innocent truth without equivocation'.[56] But there is great equivocalness in the depictions of human beings in the prehistoric cave paintings of this period. When human beings appear, they are depicted with extreme crudity. In the same cave complex as the paintings of the beasts at Lascaux, an enigmatic tableau can be found hidden at the bottom of a crevasse. It portrays a recumbent man with a bird's head and an erect penis who appears to have speared a wounded bison. For Bataille, this peculiar addition to the cave-paintings at Lascaux 'strangely and […] perfectly corresponds to the fundamental enigma', the question of 'the coming into the world, the advent, of man'.[57] As Blanchot writes, 'it is striking that with the figuration of man, an enigmatic element enters into this work, a work otherwise without secret; a scene also enters it as a narrative [*récit*], an impure historical dramatization'.[58]

This portrayal introduces a dimension previously absent since the presence of this intriguing individual is not of the same unambiguous

order as that of the great beasts. We do not, Blanchot argues, welcome this image with the same spontaneous pleasure as we do the wondrous beasts on the cave wall, or, better, the signature recalls us to our unease, revealing something that is obscured by the sheer beauty of the art on the cavewalls. The naivety of this depiction is surprising, as is the place of this figure within the tableau of which he is part. One might ask whether this individual is asleep or dead, or inquire as to the sense of the fragmentary narrative to which he seems to belong, but Blanchot seems confident that he understands the meaning of this obscure drawing. It is, he writes,

> the first signature of the first painting, the mark left modestly in a corner, the furtive, fearful [*furtive, craintive*], indelible [*ineffaçable*] trace of man who is for the first time born of his work, but who also feels seriously threatened [*gravement menacé*] by this work and perhaps already struck with death [*frappé de mort*].[59]

Blanchot goes further than the Bataille of *Lascaux* in attributing a meaning to what he calls the 'signature'. In *Lascaux*, Bataille provides a brief survey of some of the secondary literature on the enigma of the cave. As Bataille recalls, Breuil argues that it commemorates a fatal accident that befell a hunting expedition. Windels, Brodick and Lechner follow his interpretation; but in so doing, they do not take account of what, Bataille notes, is the strangest part of this scene: the bird and the bird mask. For Kirchner, by contrast, the tableau does not present a hunting incident; the prostrate man is not dead, but is a shaman in an ecstatic trance, recalling Sierozewski's discussion of the sacrifice of a cow by the Yakuts. For Sierozewski, the nudity and erect penis of the medicine man would be part of this ritual, but Bataille complains that this view overlooks the bison and his wound. What, then, are we to conclude about this scene? Bataille delivers no final judgement in *Lascaux*, although in *The Tears of Eros*, published a few years later, he follows Blanchot in discovering an 'essential and paradoxical accord [...] between death and eroticism' that he finds 'signed' in the enigmatic painting at the bottom of the pit.[60] For Bataille, as for Blanchot, the fear and tentativeness of this first step into humanity is revealed in the act that renders Lascaux ambiguous: the signature of the first artist.[61]

How, then, to understand the primacy of 'first' here with respect to both art and the human being? Although the origin has the apparent result of demarcating humans from pre-humans, it is, in itself 'always a

lacuna'; it is as if the origin, Blanchot writes, 'instead of showing itself and expressing itself in what emerges from the origin, were always veiled and hidden by what it produces, and perhaps then destroyed or consumed as origin, pushed back and always further removed and distant, as originally deferred'; one cannot lay bare the source or witness the 'springing forth [*jaillissement*]' as such, but only 'what is outside the source, the source become reality external to itself and always again without source or far from the source'.[62] There is never a simple, undivided experience of origination, understood as a discreet, pristine beginning that leads to a work, since there is no stable point from which either the birth of art or the birth of humanity can begin. One cannot discover an assignable origin to a process that is marked, in advance, by a dissension of mastery. There is *an originary interruption of the originating function* – the interruption of any plan, project or work in the instant it commences. In this sense, the origin itself is interrupted, or, better, an interruption accompanies and divides the origin in the movement of origination.

This interruption gives nothing to be experienced by a conscious subject. As Blanchot writes of Bataille's 'inner experience', 'it is pure affirmation and it does nothing but affirm. It does not even affirm itself, for then it would be subordinate to itself; it rather affirms affirmation'.[63] The ultimate source of prohibition is the desire to maintain the unity and identity of the self and the order of mastery, power and possibility to which it would answer. Transgression is always a transgression of this ultimate prohibition. This prohibition is necessary because of the finitude that exposes the human being to the chance of an unanticipated, and hence, in Bataillean terms, *impossible* affect. Desire is divided to the extent that it cannot be directed solely towards unity and identity. I also seek the experience in which I am contested. It is this secret desire, this secret dissension of the desire to which the play of prohibition and transgression attests. This is what reveals itself in *the trembling of the signature*.

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For Blanchot, the signature bears witness to a transgression that redoubles the ambiguous origin of the human being. As the testimony to affirmation, expression and communication, art remained foreign to the pre-humans. It took the arrival of the transgressor – the finite being who was no longer simply himself, whose being was not *assured* – to bestow its possibility. The first human being is the one who is drawn

into a transgression that contests the power and the authority of the taboo in the experience of the work of art. It is through the creation of the cave paintings, through an act of sovereign infraction, that the addresses of the work are born as human beings.

This signature is ostensibly a way of allowing the artist to stand back from what he as accomplished as the work of art and proclaim his mastery. It is the artist's work; he has exhibited power over the materials at hand in order to render something beautiful, and he has every right to be proud of his virtuosity. But for Blanchot, the signature attests to a struggle inherent to artistry between a bold self-affirmation and a certain *fearfulness* linked to a suffering or affliction, on the part of the painter. The work of art does not, he claims, emerge out of the creative activity of the artist as a free human being. There is no agent or subject to carry through the creative process in the time of difference – no one, that is, who is present to realize the work in its real existence, laying claim to it as an author. There is only the presubjectivated dying or becoming that interrupts the temporality in which productivity would be possible.

It is this traumatic experience that Blanchot writes when he claims to discern evidence in the 'signature' of the work that the artist of this first painting is 'seriously threatened' by the artwork and 'struck with death'.[64] The signature is an attempt on the part of the author *to reclaim what is not his*, reaffirming authorial sovereignty over the happening of the work of art insofar as it escapes the usual measure of experience and, therefore, the processes of memorization. The artist who laboured at Lascaux gives a sign of his traumatic memory in his depiction of the figure stretched out between a bison and a rhino. In this 'signature', Blanchot discerns the fearful mark of the one who has struggled through becoming his participation in the working of the work. The one who signs, whose identity as an artist is granted by an experience he is not present to experience, does so because he fears an experience that resists his power and his mastery.

The artist signs because he is afraid that his signature will be provisional.

But the dialectic of the work is still more complex. For just as the motivations behind the act of signing are opaque to the artist and his experience of himself as an artist is divided, the addressee, too, might miss the constitutive role that receptivity plays in determining the work of art. To bear witness to the happening of the work of art, to answer to the signature that is inscribed there, is to give oneself over to a reciprocal act of signing: to the signature that writes itself insofar as

that work renders itself up to be experienced, each time singularly. How should one understand this? To read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is to struggle with the work. I am free to imagine Kafka's insect, but the work itself escapes me not because it is Kafka and Kafka alone who understands the truth of the text, but because all of us are readers, including Kafka, meaning the work is never actualised once and for all. The *Metamorphosis*, in this sense, is never complete.[65]

The reader metamorphoses the work – but does the book not metamorphose the reader, too? We are all familiar with accounts of the anxieties of the author, but what of *the anxiety of reading*? Who, Blanchot asks, would write, 'always anxious each time I go to read'? I read – but no one is capable of reading the work, laying it bare. I read – but *who* reads? The work eludes me; it reaches something in me I cannot regulate or marshal. I say I am *moved* by the artwork – that it *speaks to me*. But there is a more profound relation between audience and artwork – a struggle with what Blanchot calls becoming or dying. Just as the author need remember nothing of the obscure struggle with the indeterminable, the reader will not be able to bring the encounter to memory. Indeed, the reader will not even experience the troubled ignorance of his or her own part in the happening of the work: of the repetition of the contentless affirmation without meaning that the work 'is'. Whence the temptation to account for the happening of the work through an appeal to the conventional thematics of inspiration or to a trivialising story about the vicissitudes of the artist.

There is the danger that the work allows itself to be used and to confirm a whole system of values. But there is also the danger of consecrating the work of art in answering to its aesthetic value, its beauty, maintaining it as the disinterested object that would stand outside history. This immobile monument is always ready to be welcomed as an edifying work, enduring over the ages. But, for Blanchot, it is constituted in this way because readers fear its indeterminability. The audience abhor a vacuum, which is expressed 'in the need to fill it up with a judgment of value'.[66] The work, in turn, is 'judged to be rich or poor with respect to culture, which compares it to other works, which does or does not draw from it an increase in knowledge, which adds it to the national, to the human treasury or yet again sees in it only a pretext to talk or to teach'.[67] And yet, at the same time, it is necessary to determine and to judge. Just as the work itself needs to be determined by its author in order to become a work of art, a reading must be determined in turn. The reader must *countersign* the work,

determining the work in turn. This countersignature, indeed, permits the work to come into being, according to Blanchot. But even as it does so, even as it delimits a work, it annuls the indeterminability of the work itself. To that extent, the materiality of the work disappears as soon as it appears. If it is, it is only so in an interruption of being, in a transgression of an order that depends on stability and perdurance.

The countersignature of the addressee, like the signature of the artist, trembles. The addressee signs because the determination of the work is impossible.

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Lascaux is the name of an inaugural scene that already attests to a dissension of the origin – to a division that turns this classical scene of origination against itself. This dissension opens in any such origin – any time, indeed, that an artwork can be said to originate, dividing the artist and addressees from themselves and thereby frustrating the historian who would tell us a tale about the origin and development of art or the anthropologist who tell us a story about the origin and development of the human being. Historiographical recounting depends upon an ascription of authorial agency, upon a conception of biography that would retrace the origin of the work of art to a creator. Whilst such an ascription is possible, it is unable to take account of the fact that the origin of a particular artwork is not the artist; likewise, the origin of the human being does not occur as a conventionally datable occurrence.

If there is no origin of art, but only an originary dissension that tears the origin from its originating function, then no artwork can be more than an example. By allowing his memory to be disturbed by the interruption of the origin that always and already disturbs the traditional recounting of the beginning of art, Blanchot draws attention to the inadequacy of the language of origin and beginning, history and historiography, as they pertain to the birth of art as it is canonically defined. Lascaux is exemplary for Bataille and Blanchot only insofar as the birth of art is the figure of an experience that outstrips historiographical reckoning. The antiquity of Lascaux, the marvellous chance that preserved the paintings on the cavewalls and the enigma of the figure of the pit, are only a figure for the surprise that the cavewalls present the same enigma as any work of art, ancient or modern. Does this entail the claim that art is ahistorical? Or rather, does it allow us to understand that what we call art, freed from church and state, permits the revelation of the play of worklessness within work? Crucially, it

allows this worklessness to have occurred in times without an explicit notion of art. Is the altarpiece not beautiful? Is the palace not glorious whatever else it once was? This might tempt us to believe that we are, by comparison to those who belonged to its world, in possession of the truth of the work. But this is not the demystification of art so much as the revelation that occurs with the absence of myth the work embodies. It is what we gain only when we understand the depths of our desolation, our finitude. We are not triumphant, then, but *bereft*.

The addressees at Lascaux might be said to be our contemporaries, because what we call their work of art attests to the opening of what will forever remain out of joint.

The origin in question, the new upsurge of the origin, happens as the very articulation of the work as a work. But it is not just the happening of the work of art that is at issue here. For the very step into humanity is accomplished through transgression. It happens by and through the work of art as it transgresses the prohibitions that structure human existence. At the same time, it confirms these same prohibitions: it is *le pas au-delà*, a step that is and is not a step beyond. The step into humanity is a step in which the movement of the step, the experience of stepping itself, is paralysed. The Kojèvean determination of the animal and, in particular, his account of the relationship between the animal and human being is too simple. For is it not the beast or the child in me who is the locus of the experience of which Bataille and Blanchot write? And is this not already witnessed in the cave paintings themselves? Blanchot invokes the 'friendship [...] between the human hunters and the flourishing of the animal kingdom' – and here we already see friendship accorded to the animal – to the animals represented on the cave wall, and also to the animal who painted them.[68]

In retrieving the hidden conditions of the genesis of the work from the tradition of art history, Blanchovian commentary subjects its categories to a rigorous interrogation. The stakes of this practice are formidable: the overturning of a tradition of a certain critical commentary and a tradition of a certain self-appraisal of the artist. But Blanchot does not argue simply that the work of art is autonomous, that it would exist unto itself, outside all institutions. For the signature does not merely obtrude into the space of the artwork, but opens that space itself, determining the artwork and rendering it experienceable. The opening of the artwork depends upon the countersignature that would call it into being. In this sense, the work of art both offers itself to the grip of culture and escapes it. The artwork is always too new, too

enigmatic and too unfamiliar to bind itself to the substantiality of the gallery, to the absoluteness of the museum. Yet it is always old enough to offer itself to the same galleries and the same museums, calling for sociological, ethnographical and anthropological analyses. It calls for art historians and critics even as it escapes them. The artwork opens itself to the museum, but, by the same stroke, it withdraws itself. Works of art surprise us, but then, gradually, they become familiar; we know them from reproductions, we learn about their creators and the periods to which they belong. The damaged work is no longer damaged; fragmented remains appear complete in their fragmentation. The commentator appears in order to celebrate the artwork; the curator to classify it. According to Blanchot's beautiful image, the angels' outstretched wings open and enclose the work. Here, it is a question of showing how the artwork escapes the embrace of those wings and answering thereby to the transgressiveness of artwork. Blanchovian commentary must attest to what escapes it, to the reserve in the articulation of the work of art. How, then, to attest to the happening of the work of art? How is it possible to keep memory of the way in which the work of art offers itself to *and* refuses the grip of culture?

In a sense, the task of commentary is frustrated in this aspiration, for to speak of the impossible, taking account of the secret desideratum that, in advance, gathers both commentator and artist to their vocation, exceeds the possibility of commentary. Whence the countertemptation to have done with the materiality of the work of art, to attempt to secure the artwork in a particular account of its history. This is also an attempt to reach back into the origin and ground of commentary itself, determining a discourse, adding a firm and resolute countersignature to the signature of the work. But this attempt must fail, since commentary is always made of language, and as such, cannot purge itself of its own materiality – its situatedness in a place and time, its use of a certain vocabulary and a certain idiom. Nor is it possible to take up a position outside commentary, dreaming of a discourse that could give voice to the impossible, leaping over language itself, understood as that which separates commentary from its desideratum.

Commentary can be distinguished from scientific and phenomenological anthropology in this respect because it would *bear the marks of its failure*. It can attest to what happens as the work of art because it is ruined in advance; it can only succeed in keeping fidelity with what happens as the work of art insofar as it will allow itself to fail. All that commentary might accomplish, but this is also its paradoxical

achievement, is a discourse that keeps fidelity with an 'object' that demands failure. This is a strange achievement indeed: from the perspective of the interests of culture as a whole, commentary is an entirely futile gesture, a supplementing of an artwork that is already sufficient to itself. But commentary is required because of the very opacity and resistance of its object. Commentary is an attempt to restore the object in question to a kind of life – to indicate what, in the work of art, resists its recipients. In one sense, it mediates the materiality of the work of art and the world, saving the artwork from disappearance. But this is not a dialectical mediation; the distance in question cannot be resolved as if language could ever reconcile the movement towards obscurity with the movement towards transparency. Commentary keeps memory of matter itself: of the weight of words, of the timbres and nuances of music and the colours of the painter. It does so to the extent that it prevents this weight or this nuance or colour from becoming conceptual. The work of art does not involve the imposition of form upon chaos. But nor is it this chaos itself. It is neither *pure* form or *absolute* matter. There is a struggle between what can be provisionally called matter and form, between the work of art and both artist and audience. The artwork happens in the struggle between the Furies and the angels, between determination and indetermination.

It is through this struggle that the artwork *happens*. And it is in the *repetition* of this struggle that the chance of commentary lies. To comment is to respond to the opacity of the work of art. But one cannot do this in the language of the philosopher or the anthropologist. For the commentator cannot treat language, the 'matter' of thought, as the outward form of a content that can be articulated in other forms. To do so would be, once again, to determine the artwork from without. The 'object' of commentary resists negation; it will not allow its singularity to be converted into a particular and hence to subordinate itself to a universal. How might one countersign the singularity of the happening of the work? By allowing the words of commentary to become heavy, denying, in their very materiality, the chance of assimilating a reserve that belongs to any artistic medium. It is here that the commentator repeats the creative gesture of the literary writer, the artist or the musician in seeking to resist idealisation and conceptualisation. The work of commentary does not ignore the weight of language, its sonority and nuances; to comment is to acknowledge in an unprecedented way that one thinks *from* a language, to essay a response in a language and an idiom.

To approach the singularity of the happening of the work in the singularity of the essay; to welcome the work in its indeterminability, affirming in turn the affirmation that the work 'is': Blanchot writes out of failure but he does not fear failure; this is why he is able to write of the 'other' of *anamnesis*, the traumatism that precedes, founds and ruins the dream of a univocity of a critical language.

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The signature attached to the particular work of art is, then, an extrinsic sign of the dynamics of origination. But its significance, as well as the significance of Blanchot's discussion of the work of art, is more profound. The happening of art exposes the prior imbrication of working and worklessness and hence a certain disjuncture of time that holds sway over productivity as such. But for Blanchot, the signature marks itself in another form of creativity. At issue here is not the negation that would open up a world with its institutions of government, but a practice that indicates the prior ruin of those same institutions, where the effective actions that issue from the 'I can' of the human being are *reversed*. It is not, here, a question of a technique, but of the affirmation of the chance that allows work to be marked by the movement of what turns work aside from itself.

As I have argued, the artwork differs from other products because the signature does not merely obtrude into the space of the artwork but opens it. The practice in question indicates the way in which all bodies of work are marked, the way, that is, the signature is legible on the most imposing monuments of our age. But it also indicates how the signature signs each of us: how it is libidinally marked across the bodies that we take to be our own.

For Blanchot those at the Events were bound in a relationship to one another that allowed each person to recognise themselves 'in the anonymous words inscribed on the walls and which, in the end, even when on occasion they were the result of a collective effort, never declared themselves the words of an author, being of all and for all, in their contradictory formulation'.[69] The question concerning the authorship of these words cannot be resolved by tracing them back to an individual or a group. The writings inscribed on the walls are a figure for the trembling of signature that signs itself in any work. Let us read them: 'Imagination has seized power', 'Run comrade, the old world is behind you!', 'We are reassured, two and two no longer make four', 'The revolution is incredible because it is real', 'Under the paving

stones, the beach', 'Dream is reality', 'The walls have ears. Your ears have walls', 'Poetry is in the street', 'It is forbidden to forbid', 'My desires are reality', 'To exaggerate is to begin to invent', 'Speak to your neighbours', 'To live for the moment', 'A cop sleeps inside every one of us, we must kill him', 'Alone, we can do nothing', 'We are all undesirables', 'Action must not be a reaction but a creation', 'Politics is happening in the street', 'To be free in 1968 means to take part,' 'The barricade blocks the street but opens the way'.[70]

It is not in order to translate such proclamations into a substantive political programme that Blanchot writes of the wall writings. Indeed, it would be better to recall the graffiti that would indicate its own ephemerality: 'I have something to say but I don't know what' or, more simply: 'I have nothing to say', 'I'm playing', 'Quick!': slogans that like specks of foam splash up from the wave that crashed anonymously, impersonally and collectively through the streets of Paris: foams, specks, traces, but nothing more.[71] Like the signature hidden in the crevasse at Lascaux, the wall writings are an extrinsic figure of the movement of transgression.

The signature on the cavewalls seems to attest, in its clandestinity, to an experience that was mysterious and difficult of access. Nevertheless, insofar as it is always at play at every level of production, including the work of the subject to maintain itself as itself over time, the worklessness that turns all works against themselves can never be preserved as the object of an esoteric knowledge. The writings bear the traces of the movement of transgression in which incipient human beings were caught even as they stepped into humanity. What they experienced then, and what the spectator of the work of art would experience now, is the eruption, the transgression of the prohibitions that permit the explication of the plane of subjects and objects. In Paris, in May 1968, the enigma of the pit is brought into daylight; the wall writings are there for anyone to see; they are the exoteric counterpart of the enigma of the pit.

This does not mean that the Events can form the blueprint for a future revolution: that one would have merely to imitate such a programme in order to reveal the play of the signature. Although the Events were exceptional, Blanchot emphasises they provide 'no solution'; this happening 'is sufficient unto itself'. Perhaps they could be said to provide us with 'an idea of a revolution that does not need to succeed or achieve a fixed goal', but the Events can do no more than this.[72] The feast is spontaneous; the explosive generosity of celebration that interrupts the time of work re-opens the natural overabundance,

the first immensity that floods over the prohibitions that would hold it at bay.

The festivity of the Events echoes the fear and trembling of those who first celebrated as they crossed the threshold into humanity. But the Events are also a threshold; what happens there is a transgression that permits the step into humanity even as it reveals the impossibility of ever completing this step once and for all. The participants repeat what happened in the first upsurge of the human being into the world. In the signature of the pit, as in the wall writings of the Events of 1968, which are themselves a kind of signing, one discovers the trace of the human being who is born through the interruption of worklessness onto the plane of transcendence. In contradistinction to the threat that the work exerts over the one who is born of his work – as well as the community who emerge into history when they view it, the Events give evidence that what was once feared need not always be an object of fear. It is in an exuberant joy that the Events affirm what was feared. The mystery is not hidden; the enigma is no longer buried in the pit or left modestly in a corner. In the daylight, affirmed, is the experience that is figured in the writings on the wall: the spontaneity of a movement that is not moved by in view of a project or a task. Who are the raggle-taggle, the *chienlit* – the ones who share nothing but their festivity, least of all a political programme recognisable to the 'men of power' they oppose only through their 'absence of reaction'? There is no secret; it is written on the walls, just as it was written thousands of years ago by the ones who stepped in joy and fearful trembling into humanity. Who were they? Let us ask instead who *we* are, the ones who tremble as we step, each of us, into our humanity.

2
The Temple of Night

To write on art is always to appear to write on something that is too safe. In a sense, the struggles of the avant-gardes, of the modern against the classical, have been forgotten, the battle has been won, the artwork is a wise investment and commands a high price; it is sought for the collection of the film star and the businessman; the work is commissioned by left-leaning governments to restore a lost sense of community to 'culturally deprived' areas. Yes, the latest work is provocative, but provocation is to be expected because the audience is always a little too slow on the uptake. The great guardians of culture, men and women of the university, journalists and art critics in the newspapers, the intellectuals of radio and television prepare the audience for the work. Prizes reward young talent and old masters and, if the work is too difficult, documentaries will be made and experts will give talks making sure that all participate and everyone learns. Above all, today, the artwork *edifies*; it is part of an industry of edification.

The mission of art is secure. But this is because art is now to be endlessly what it is. It seems that one can expect nothing but the same; art will not change. Is it possible to return art to its lost vivacity, to seize anew upon the origin of the work, plunging it back into its historicity? This is not simply a matter of good historiography; what is at issue here is not the good reputation of art. The question of the origin of art is a *political* question. One might object that art changes nothing in the world outside the safety of the gallery or the library. But an opening occurs when a community of respondents is born with the work who each countersign the work, and are each implicated in its unfolding.

In this sense, the work is still ahead of us, waiting for us. But who does it await? The work refuses itself to those who believe the value of the work lies in what it will teach them. It likewise refuses itself to the

artist for whom its value lies in its capacity to provoke, as if shocking art critics and museum goers would be sufficient to maintain a good political conscience. Measured against other political acts, the work will always seem impotent. The critic who is ready to add the work to the totality of culture, rescuing the work from obscurity, championing the difficult writer, and defending the moral relevance of the scandalous book is impressive, but there is the risk that the cultural order is merely confirmed in these actions, that the work, in its singularity, its measurelessness, is thereby measured and commodified. If the work announces a kind of politics, it is beyond both the radicality of the engaged artist and the conservatism of culture.

But there are other ways in which one might be claimed by the work. It may appear that art remains the same – that crises in art are never profound enough to tear art itself apart. But to write 'art itself' is disingenuous, for art has no 'itself'; it is the place in which essence and self-identity are placed at stake. To this extent, art's battle, the battle of the modern against the classical, the furies against the angels, can neither be won nor lost. It maintains the struggle against the great reductive forces of culture, against the guardians and the radicals who would prepare us, in advance, for the happening of the work.

The commentator knows this. No longer, in the work of commentary, is it a matter of mending the tears in the fabric of culture. But neither is there a shrill and finally unconvincing insistence on the radicality of the work. The commentator's essay *repeats* the struggle between angels and furies that happens in the event of the work as it permits a community to be born. Granted, this is not much of a vocation. But the work of commentary, on the margins of culture, keeps the future open because it understands the way art claims us singularly. To stand guard over the indeterminability of the work is, perhaps, to keep watch for the community to come which unfolds with the unfolding of the work. The commentator knows the work will not come, that its community will never arrive as a determinate political group. But is it, nonetheless, the birth of a kind of politics that the commentator discovers in the work? The commentator answers the opening of the political, of the space between the community and itself as it is adumbrated in the 'I will not serve' of the work that undoes any determination of politics, of the social space.

Commentary may seem a poor affair; it is secondary, derivative, and if it is beautiful or profound, it is only with the borrowed light of the work, which illuminates the work of commentary as the sun does the moon. Perhaps one might maintain the alibi that the work of art is

never sufficient unto itself – that the great painting threatens to disappear even as it hung alongside others in the gallery. For, as Blanchot has said, are we not, when confronted by famous paintings, gripped by a 'museum sickness [le *mal du musée*]'?[1] The dazzled commentator returns to the museum after the crowds have left, concentrating on a single artwork in the darkness, like Van Gogh who went out in the darkness to paint with a halo of candles attached to his hat. Commentary can thus appear as a private gesture, as a secret shared between the commentator and the reader. But the dignity of commentary cannot be maintained by this alibi, for the work of art must offer itself to the universal spectator whose gaze glides over the artworks in the museum. Yes, it is possible to have a favourite artwork; the judgement of culture, in a sense, can never close the artwork from us, but the artwork can never be secret – this is its treachery: the book that seeks me out seeks others, too. What is painful is the fact that the name of our favourite book, or of the artist who made our treasured artwork, is on everyone's lips. My favourite artwork, any artwork, is essentially public and open for public scrutiny; it awaits the gaze of the spectator and, in the end, it will find repose as a work among other works. What is unbearable is, perhaps, not the obscurity of our favourite artwork, the fact that the movement of culture passes over it in ignorance, but the way it offers itself to a comprehension that is always too universal and benevolent. Whence the desire to lend shelter to the artwork, to proclaim its poverty whilst knowing that this poverty is its chance and its richness, for it is in its poverty that there lies the chance of a suspension of the forces of culture.

What is left to the commentator apart from this protective desire to build an ark around the work, to keep it safe? The commentator cannot excavate the origin of the work, to retrieve the original *mise en scene* as a kind of first cause, since this is already too impatient, as if one could lay claim to the origin once and for all. What matters is to bear witness to that repetition, to respond to the event of the work by repeating the same disruption of our conscious faculties in the text of the commentary in the manner, perhaps, of Bolieau, for whom, as Lyotard writes, 'the sublime could only be discussed in sublime style'.[2] Here, it is not a question of self-consciously adopting an avant-garde style, as if it would be sufficient, in answering the work, to experiment with the conventions of academic or theoretical discourse. Commentary does not occur as an act of willed transgression, but in an intensification of a certain materiality of discourse which suspends the movement of theorisation, the desire to say it all, to have the last

word. For the commentator is bound by a secret connection to the work, to a reserve behind everything, not to Plato's ideal sun, but to a counter-sun, a black hole that draws all light into itself.

Here, as the commentator knows, the audience of the artwork are drawn into the work and enfolded by it. But this means the commentator is like Plato's *eros*, born of poverty and plenitude, wandering without abode. The doors of the museum and the university are closed to the one who writes of the riddle of the work. The commentator is the Sphinx who asks the riddle Oedipus appears to solve. The Sphinx dies, for it appears her secret is out, but, as Jean-Joseph Goux argues, Oedipus's cleverness is part of a hubris that will not go unpunished.[3] Goux argues that Sophocles's drama stages the execution of the Sphinx by the philosopher. Yet the philosopher, like Oedipus, will be punished in turn; the riddle returns as the 'I will not serve' at the heart of the work.

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Hegel is on the side of the philosophers: it was the ancient Greeks, bound together in a pre-reflective *Sittlichkeit*, ethical life, who solved the riddle of art. With the Greeks, art is no longer, as it was, according to Hegel, for the Egyptians, the mute presentation of the strange or the monstrous. 'The works of Egyptian art in their mysterious symbolism are […] riddles', Hegel declares. The meaning of pre-Greek art is incarcerated in vague evocations and symbols, in mystery and obscurity; its content remains too indeterminate to be rendered formally. The Sphinx, a hybrid creature with a lion's claws and a human face, is the most telling example of Egyptian art – he is 'the objective riddle *par excellence*'.[4] Spirit, here, is unable to break free from its animal form; it has not attained the self-consciousness that will permit it to know itself, and, in so doing, banish darkness and equivocation. As Hegel comments, 'Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself'.[5]

The great period of Greek *Sittlichkeit*, for Hegel, was inaugurated when Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx. In a famous gesture, Oedipus *points to himself* in response to the Sphinx's question. The Greeks called a halt to the enigma. 'The explanation of the symbol lies in the absolute meaning, in the spirit, just as the famous Greek inscription calls to man: Know yourself'.[6] With Hegel's Greeks, the meaning

of the world, obscured by the hustle-bustle of the everyday, is revealed in the artwork. In this time, art answers to what Hegel calls the Absolute, to the unified, all-encompassing, self-consistent whole, allowing the idea to be brought to expression in sensuous form, presenting it for intuition. Spirit knows itself; it is freed from its incarceration in matter; the idea is rendered adequately and the Greek artwork shines forth in its beauty, in the fit of form and content.

But what is it that is known? The beauty of the work answers to the life and practices of the community [*Sittlichkeit*], and to the gods who are more closely intermeshed with human life than the Christian God will be. It attests to the practices of a community, to the established customs, the festivals and revels, the unquestioned and pre-reflective understanding of the world into which each of its members is born. Myths and heroes, feasts and rituals, belong to the same folk-religion the artwork incarnates. Communal values, folk religion: classical Greek art expresses the sense of what is right and what is fitting in a community for which the virtue of its members must be understood in terms of the needs of the group.

Art was adequate to Greek *Sittlichkeit*; sculptures celebrated the human form and the poets allowed the gods to speak. The poets sang of the deeds of heroes and the fate of humans. And yet, from Hegel's perspective, from the other end of history, the Greek world also reveals the deficiency of art understood as the embodiment of the absolute. Yes, the work shines forth in beauty; the message has achieved an exemplary harmony with medium. But it is the sensuous medium that is required to embody the idea that still emburdens it. There will come a time when truth is no longer expressed in a sensuous medium, when it calls for a reflective, conceptual language, when, that is, art is no longer adequate to the Absolute. In Kojève's terms, history will come to an end; everything will be understood.

Is art still a riddle? Hegel, reflecting on art in a time when it is only the universal language of the philosopher that incarnates truth, claims that the proximity to Greek *Sittlichkeit*, to the life lived in the happy presence of beauty, was shattered long ago. The more complex religious spirit of Christianity that supersedes the Greek world is no longer amenable to sensuous embodiment with its emphasis on the inward. Later still, the age of modest, effective prose opens. Artists will continue to bend inspiration to the creative will, architect and sculptor will work stone and rock, and the poet enrich natural languages, but it is the conceptual thinker who takes on the mantle of the poet from whom the world has turned. Art, Hegel acknowledges, will continue to

perfect itself. But art and its audience are too reflective; the artwork becomes too self-conscious, its audience too self-aware and ironical. Art would have failed to measure up to the whole of which it was once the highest expression.

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Is art still a riddle? Heidegger asks the question anew:

> The question remains: Is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so. The truth of Hegel's judgement has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, which thought corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgement will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of what is. Until then the judgement remains in force. But for that very reason the question is necessary whether the truth that the judgement declares is final and conclusive and what follows if it is.[7]

Hegel's judgement is the starting point not only for Heidegger's meditation on the work of art, but Blanchot's, too. Heidegger, it is true, is no mere commentator – 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is written by an academic who is already famous and already notorious. It is surprising that this great figure feels the need to descend to the poverty of the artwork. Does he, like the Blanchotian commentator, seek to protect the guttering flame of art by cupping it in his hands like Gorchakov in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*? 'The Origin of the Work of Art' was not published until 1950, but it was delivered several times in the 1930s, and Blanchot may well have been familiar with its arguments at second hand. Blanchot was certainly acquainted with this essay by the time he wrote *The Space of Literature*, sections of which can read like a paraphrase of Heidegger's writings.

Blanchot will repeat Heidegger's charge that Hegel is simply reading back a conception of truth and adequation, materiality and beauty that his own work has brought to expression back into the Greeks. And he will insist, by linking the work of art, like Heidegger, to a certain notion of community, that the work of art is still a riddle. But Blanchot vehemently distinguishes his work from Heidegger's. If

Hegel, for Heidegger, has failed to take account of the way in which he takes over a certain understanding of beings, Heidegger, for Blanchot, has failed to reach deeply enough into the ground of his inquiry. The riddle of art is, for Heidegger, a riddle about truth, about disclosure, about the way in which things come into appearance. 'The Origin of the Work of Art' intensifies that riddle by confronting us with the Greek temple, a work from a time when art that answered to an 'absolute need' – a time which, according to Heidegger, did not need to develop a branch of philosophy called aesthetics. For Blanchot, the riddle of art is bound to a certain errancy and withdrawal which demands another understanding of 'absolute need' and another account of our relationship to the work of art in the wake of its supposed death.

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It is not by chance that Heidegger foregrounds the most material of artworks, architecture, in his account of the Greek temple. For Hegel, it is the Egyptians who have not yet solved the riddle of art because they were unable to subordinate materiality to formal determination. For Heidegger, the Greeks do not solve this riddle, but grant it a new profundity by allowing the temple not merely to exceed its formal determination, but to struggle against it, knowing that this struggle, the dynamism of the great work of art, is the very life of that artwork, its work or origination.

Physis, the Greek word for what Heidegger calls being, cannot be brought to light in the work of art, answering to the Absolute in the beauty of the artwork. It withdraws, but the temple renders this withdrawal experienceable for a people. What is singular about the temple is the way in which this upsurge or origination [*Ursprung*] of the artwork is also the origin of a people:

> the temple-work [*Tempel-Werk*], in setting up [*aufstellt*] a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth [*hervorkommen*] for the very first time and to come into the open region [*Offenen*] of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock, metals come to glitter and shimmer, colours to glow, tones to sing, the word to say. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back [*sich zurückstellt*] into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and lustre of metal, into the brightening of

> colour, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power [*Nennkraft*] of the word.[8]

The Greek artwork, for Hegel, is the embodiment of the Absolute, articulating a sense of the whole. But the happening of the artwork, for Heidegger, is more complex, since it brings forward a non-actualisable reserve. As they are made to obtrude by the work, the massive and heaviness of stone, the firmness and pliancy of wood, are no longer to be regarded as deficient because they weigh down the artwork. That materiality enacts the *double* experience of what the Greeks experience of the temple as *physis*. For Hegel, the work of art shines forth; the Greek world is bound in the harmonious whole of *Sittlichkeit*. But for Heidegger, the movement of appearing, the shining forth of the beautiful in the work is accompanied by a counter-movement, a plunge into darkness or invisibility; the brightness of the world also bears witness to a reserve 'beneath' or 'before' the visible world. This reserve, which belongs to the Greek experience of *physis*, allows itself to be illuminated in its darkness and in its withdrawal. The bulky materiality of the temple sets off the surge of the waves, the roughness of the sea and the space of the air – the physicality of the world of the people of the temple. The world of the people of the Heideggerian temple does not fail to attest to an abyssal opacity; *physis* refuses to yield itself up in its entirety to the happy presence of the life lived in the light of the temple. Restraint and giving, obscurity and illumination fold in upon one another in the opening of the Greek world such that the non-availability of *phusis* presents itself in its withdrawal even as what the Greeks called world, *kosmos*, opens. The breadth of the sky and the depths of the sea, the bull and the eagle, the tree and the grass, are never wholly enclosed within what is present and available for the people of the temple; they are never entirely appropriable or domesticable. The sonority of sound, the tone of colours and the power of the word are not yet understood as measurable quanta; *physis* can be ever wholly forgotten or wholly cast outside their world.

Yet this does not imply a simple division between nature and culture. Not only the materiality or earthiness of the world, but shared practise and values, notions of destiny and fate, the unity of what one might call culture, is disclosed to this people. 'It is the temple-work that first fits together [*Bezüge*] and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for a human being'.[9] But this is not the

tranquil happiness of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. 'In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this strife'; 'the work-being of the work consists in the instigation of strife between world and earth'.[10] What does this mean? World is the space of meaning which defines the self-understanding of the human being and its understanding of other beings. But this givenness of sense is neither transparent nor stable; it does not increase over time, but leaps, through sudden new founding actions which bestow a new sense of beings, a new world. One such leap is the creation of the temple.

These leaps are possible because *physis* does not disclose itself all at once. *Physis* is not a substrate that would yield itself up to meaning and intelligibility. Whilst it grants the relational contexture of beings that is the world of a historical people, it cannot be understood for itself; whilst it bestows the sense of the world, it withdraws from the light of meaning. Beings cannot come into appearance once and for all; they can only offer themselves to the understanding of the sense of the world that unites a particular people. Likewise, beings cannot hold themselves back from appearing altogether, but must offer themselves to be experienced. Even a divine intuition could not grasp the truth of being *as such*, for there is no *as such*, but only particular worlds in which disclosure happens. Each world is specific; it opens for a particular people. Each world is finite; it opens and it will close. But whilst it exists, a people have a *past*, the instigation of strife in the work opens up a disclosure within which agents can take particular decisions, and a *future*, which is allotted from the founding act of creation [*Schaffen*] or institution [*Stiftung*]. And they have a space, too, a world or *kosmos* understood as the unity of interrelationships, a contexture in which their life is lived.

Earth, for Heidegger, names the primordial and ineradicable reserve of non-sense which can never be illuminated and yet bestows the possibility of an always finite illumination of the world for a historical people. Yet this does not mean that earth is like the infinite deity who would withdraw in order to allow the finite world to be born. Earth is disclosed *with* the coming into appearance of the world, and this disclosure, too, is finite. Earth, too, *appears*, but it does so only as what reserves itself from the measure of sense and intelligibility. The life of a people depends upon the struggle which preserves earth from obliterating world and vice versa, upon the struggle which means beings can never be understood on the basis of the originary intelligibility of the world nor indeed in terms of the originary non-intelligibility of the earth. Earth threatens to overwhelm the decisions undertaken by

particular members of a people, but world likewise threatens to obliterate the very depth and profundity of earth. There is only the play of what one might call *worlding* and *earthing* – or, better, only an event of disclosure, which Heidegger, to which there belongs a certain withdrawal. A struggle happens – a polemics in which neither earth nor world can gain the upper hand. This struggle is set into motion through specific acts of institution, through the leap or upsurge in which a new sense of beings is won through struggle.

Truth, on Heidegger's account, is set into work in this institution. How should one understand this? For Hegel, truth is embodied in the artwork for the Greeks insofar as beauty is the highest incarnation of Spirit. Hegel claims that the history of Spirit will reveal that the equation of truth with beauty that occurs with the Greeks is provisional. But Hegel overlooks the unhiddenness or uncovering [*Entbergung*] that happens in the double movement of *physis*. The Greek conception of truth, *aletheia*, as Heidegger argues in the *Contributions*, is a fundamental feature of *physis* whose double structure is given in the relationship between earth and world.[11] *Aletheia*, truth, like *physis*, is twofold and must be understood in terms of the double movement of concealment and unconcealment. Just as world is accompanied by earth in the movement of *physis*, truth is accompanied by a movement of *untruth*, understood not as falsity, but as hiding or concealing [*Verbergung*]. Heraclitus has already hinted at this when he claims that *physis* loves to hide. He also anticipates what the essential 'strife' [*Streit*] between world and earth when he writes, 'war [*polemos*] is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods and others men; some he has made slaves, others free'.[12]

Aletheia, was not, even for Heidegger's Greeks, the simple luminosity out of which things come into appearance. It maintains a relation to the concealed or the hidden, which is to say, to the struggle that cannot be resolved through the dematerialisation that Hegel seeks. World can never suppress earth together; materiality can never be transcended. But what divides us from the artwork such as that the nature of this setting-into-work conceals itself? What allows Hegel to declare that the sun of art has set?

Modern actuality, for Hegel, entails the identity of the worker and work. Nothing is left over: substance has been taken up into spirit, the actual is the rational and the rational is real. The world is what has been disclosed. But Heidegger argues that a difference remains, that a more profound struggle conditions both the rational and the real. Far from answering to the harmonious life of *Sittlichkeit*, the

Greek work of art happens as an act of institution or creation which escapes the Hegelian determination of productivity and actualisation. Hegel has not reached deeply enough into the ground of historicity; he does not understand that his own thought takes over the occlusion of *physis* set into motion, according to Heidegger, by Plato and Aristotle. This is why, for Heidegger, it is necessary to recount anew the way in which the being of beings is decided for human beings, such that worlds open and succeed one another, and beings become experienceable.

Hegel is right, for Heidegger, in the sense that he thinks from history, and from absolute need: history is indeed epochal. But the history of being is not, for Heidegger, guided by an inner *necessity*; the relation of epoch to epoch remains free. But this does not mean the movement from one epoch to another is entirely *contingent*, as if basic, instituting decisions lie either in the free choice of the human being or the blindness of events. The decision occurs in the way being is given. It happens as an act of creation or institution beyond that which would be brought about through an act of will. The temple, the great work of art, is just such an institution, setting truth to work.

This is why Heidegger's question, 'Is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence?' retains, for him, its interrogative force. Hegel might claim to have answered this question, but as Heidegger notes, 'The truth of Hegel's judgement has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, which corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgement will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of what is'.[13] Hegel decided the answer, but the way he received the question of art, as well as the way he sought to answer it, was decided in advance.

Western thought, understood, for Heidegger, as the occlusion of the play of *physis*, stands behind our epoch. Hegel's account of actuality, *Wirklichkeit* answers to this occlusion, bringing it a culmination. In our age, yet further from the Greeks, 'art is merely the object of *aesthesis*', of sense perception, of the form of experience Heidegger calls *Erlebnis*. 'Everything is an *Erlebnis*. Yet perhaps *Erlebnis* is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries'.[14] Art may seem to be dying, but this is not, for Heidegger, because art is anachronistic with respect to our 'absolute need', pointing beyond itself to religion and philosophy, but because it is no longer experienced as the locus of the setting into work of truth. That is to say, it is

merely the object of *Erlebnis*, and not the bestowal of a world as it was in the temple-work.

What, then, has happened? Worlds are finite. The strife of decision can be forgotten; a particular world can fall into ruin. The world of the temple has itself disappeared. This is why we have come to have such an impoverished notion of art, and such a diminished sense of production. Setting-into-truth, for Heidegger, is to be understood as the leap through which anything comes to appear, as the springing forth of the world, its origin. Yet today, creativity risks being understood as sheer efficiency: as a process that occurs as the result of determinable causes, which ultimately depends upon the decisions of a particular person. But to understand creativity in this way, positioning the human being as the origin of decision, is already to pass over an earlier decision that has already occurred with regard to the essence of productivity. Behind Hegel's judgement there remains the whole of Western metaphysics; but is there another experience of art that would allow us to understand, more profoundly that Hegel, which is to say, more profoundly than Western metaphysics as it stands behind Hegel, determining his thought, the way in which the work of art might set truth to work?

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The whole of Western metaphysics: is this the terrible burden the Blanchotian commentator bears? If this is the case, then far from being minor or secondary, the practice of commentary concerns questions of the highest philosophical import. The game is up: the modesty of commentary conceals its enormous ambition. But if one does indeed find the same complex of terms in Blanchot's text, decision, truth and error, setting into work, world and earth, beginning and origin, etc., this is not an attempt to rival Heidegger with a counter-philosophy, however much occasional remarks in *The Infinite Conversation* appear to give expression to the contrary.[15]

It is not a question here of trumping Heidegger with a deeper and more profound question than that of the truth or the meaning of being, nor indeed of even launching a philosophical discourse. Delicately, slowly, with immense precision, Blanchot's essays accrete into a body of work not composed sequentially, progressively, but as a selection of events, of essays as events. It is always, with Blanchot, a matter of unbinding a particular image of thought, a philosophy, drawing it towards what, in the complex of philosophemes, pulls it back into a reserve or opacity which refuses to come to light. This is

the case, as we shall see, with respect to Blanchot's reflections on both Hegel and Heidegger.

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Blanchot glosses Hegel's judgement concerning the supersession of art as follows: 'since the day when the absolute consciously became the active process which is history, art has no longer been able to satisfy the need for an absolute; relegated within us, it has lost its reality and its necessity; everything that was authentically true and alive in it now belongs to the world and to real, purposeful activity in the world'.[16] Art, then is dead; it appears to have outlived its time; it is merely the source of pleasure and pastime and is consigned, in the lobby or the boardroom, to represent us to ourselves, reminding us of what we are, as human beings, capable of realising: of the power and the glory of human endeavour. And yet, at the same time, art is not simply the object of *Erlebnis*: 'It is, however, "within us" that art has sought to regain its sovereignty'.[17] 'Within us': Blanchot does not refer to the power of the will, of the creative ingenuity of the human being. Beyond 'the realm of measured undertakings and limited tasks', the sovereignty of art is linked to 'the empty point of existence', to the 'superabundance of refusal'.[18] Crucially, the artwork affirms itself in its refusal to become an effective work. Yet at the same time, a product is realised; art is dependent upon the world even as it appears to invert it. A work of art, a finished book or a painting, is never an incarnation of *pure* non-actuality. It is a question of attending to the play of the non-actualisable reserve which Blanchot calls *désoeuvrement* or worklessness as it leaves its trace, its signature, in the unfolding of the work of art. Yet, through refusal, it suspends the movement of negativity upon which the articulation of actuality depends. It affirms a difference, a stubborn materiality that refuses to disappear in the movement of identity.

This is how one might understand Blanchot's suggestion that death of art reveals the dying with which it has always been in league, revealing that modernity which gives us art and the death of art is, in one sense, right, since modern art is always in league with death. Yet there is a difference between death [*mort*] and dying [*mourir*]. To claim that the work of art is linked with dying is a way of indicating that it is not wholly actualisable, that its coming into appearance is also marked by a movement of withdrawal. Whence the enigmaticness of what Blanchot calls work, *l'oeuvre*, tears itself from the will of its author,

turning him or her into a reader along with other readers. As we have seen, the artwork that brings the real [*wirklich*] into relation with the non-real [*unwirklich*], show that there was never anything purely real and that all human works are infested by worklessness [*désoeuvrement*], that each of us is also an idler [*désoeuvré(e)*].

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Let us examine the argument more closely. 'The singular property of reading demonstrates the singular sense of the verb "to make" in the expression "it makes the work become a work" ["*elle fait que l'oeuvre devient oeuvre*"]'; here, the verb 'to make', Blanchot comments, 'does not designate a productive activity; 'reading does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what it is'; 'It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can only say yes, and, in the space opened by this yes, lets the work's overwhelming decisiveness affirm, lets be its affirmation that it is itself [*laisse s'affirmer la décision bouleversante de l'oeuvre, l'affirmation qu'elle est*] – and nothing more'.[19] Reading, for Blanchot, affirms the work as the work by tearing it away from the intentions of its author; it only becomes what it is in the singular encounter. The work of art only happens insofar as it is experienced singularly singly, each time by a different addressee. In this sense, the materiality of the work of art is never exhausted: it is enacted in a new way each time it is encountered. The work is remade in the reader; it gives itself anew. The indeterminability of the work is now determined in the course of the reading: 'In the course of the book's genesis this "void" marked the work's unfinished quality' now, it 'changes its sign'.[20] 'The reading is born', Blanchot writes, 'at the moment when the distance of the work with respect to itself no longer indicates incompletion but perfection, no longer signifies that the work is not yet done, but that it never needed to be done'.[21] The work is finished in the reading, and yet, reading can never have the last word. Other encounters are possible; the work in its worklessness, maintaining what Blanchot calls 'the void' or 'distance'. This gaping void is affirmed in the act of reading. This affirmation, attested in the superfluity the reader feels with respect to the existence of the work, is what seems to keep the work 'pure'.

The author experiences the same distance or void from another perspective. This time, it is not marked by the same feeling of superfluity. An entire literary industry is predicated upon the notion that the

author feels in a better position to judge the contents of a book than its readers. Nevertheless, the author is prevented from reading his or her work with any more competence than the reader: 'Through him, the work comes into being; it constitutes the resolute solidity of a beginning', but the author himself 'belongs to a time ruled by the indecisiveness inherent in beginning over again';[22] the author appends his signature to the work, but power over the published and hence perfect work itself now escapes him. On the one hand, it has resolved itself into a book; on the other, however, it escapes the book; the author has not realised the work and must begin anew. The book, the particular book, disappoints the author because it is not the work the author aimed at realising. The work remains pure for the author for as long as it remains unrealised and unrealisable. This is what Blanchot means when he affirms the 'essential solitude' of the work.

Both reader and author, as I argued in chapter 1, remain on the hither side of the work. But, as I have shown, it is difficult to maintain the distance that is maintained in this unfolding. There is always a risk that the book will be judged according to the values or morality, law and aesthetics. Yet the work must offer itself to this risk because it can never incarnate pure non-actuality. It 'is', but the way it 'is', the way in which, writing of it, one must put the word *is* in inverted commas, outbids not only the literary institution, but has profound ontological implications. 'The work is without any proof, just as it is without any use. It cannot be verified. Truth can appropriate it, renown draws attention to it, but the existence it thus acquires doesn't concern it. This demonstrability renders it neither certain nor real – does not make it manifest'.[23] When Blanchot writes of the 'dialectic of the work' he knows that the work does not pass from author to reader, and thereby into actuality.[24] He knows that the work does not rest or subsist in itself, that the work 'is' the 'torn unity' or 'torn intimacy' between author and readers, that it is 'always in struggle, never pacified'.[25] Is this a simple recasting of what Heidegger calls strife?

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Dying, for Blanchot, is a way of naming a dislocation or disidentification – not of the leap *outside* death or negation, but of a becoming in which that dialectics is suspended. What is it that is contested? The notions of artwork and artist, certainly, along with the notions of audience and critic, but above all, an aestheticisation which allows the work to become the object of culture, to eradicate its temporality, its

advent. And yet dying *happens*; there is an event of materiality, or, better, a division in the temporalisation of matter itself which is analogous, but not identical, to the split that occurs with *physis*. For Heidegger, the Hegelian conception of truth is based on a specific account of the being of beings, on a notion of being as *actualitas*. Heidegger sets out the history of being in which terms of which we are to understand the successive decisions regarding truth, including Hegel's own. Heidegger's claim, then, is not so different from Blanchot's: the work of art, as a creative institution, does not make itself available as just another being within a world. If it happens, it happens irruptively. But where Heidegger differs from Blanchot is in the claim that the decision in question is able to decide the existence of a historical humanity. This becomes visible in the notion that a great artwork to come which would be linked to the dawning of a new epoch, a new beginning [*Anfang*] which is visible in the *Contributions*.

The encounter with the Greeks, which is itself what Heidegger would call the *Auseinandersetzung*, the *polemos*, not only allows him to question Hegel's judgement concerning the passing away of art, but to look forward to the possibility of a new form of being together.[26] For Hegel, modern *Sittlichkeit* will supplement Greek structures of family and state with civil society which recognises the rights of its members and opens a new realm of economic activity. *Sittlichkeit* will be harmonised anew, overcoming the individualistic morality of *Moralität*, which is rooted in individual conscience. And yet it is not, when it is re-harmonised thus, united in the same unquestioning, pre-reflective acceptance of societal norms. Heidegger also seeks a repetition of sorts. He holds out for the repetition of the 'first' beginning of the Greeks in the 'other' beginning that may remain possible for a historical people. The ' "retrieving" question' Heidegger would ask in the *Contributions* 'begins more originarily' than any simple classicism, since it refuses to console itself with a nostalgia for what is absent in our time.[27] His 'mindfulness [*Besinnung*][9] of the first beginning' is a response to what he argues is 'the pressing need for preparing for the other beginning'.[28] The possibility of the 'other' beginning, here, is completely separate from the 'first' beginning in its 'origin-character'; nevertheless, he would discern 'a necessary and intimate but hidden relation' between them, such that the hope of a future radically different from our present is maintained.[29]

Thus to invoke the 'first' beginning is to prepare for the 'new' beginning; likewise, to look back to an age without an explicit concept of art is also to hold out hope for an artwork to come. The 'other' beginning

is possible because there was a 'first' beginning. The great work of art that is capable of gathering a people is conceivable because there was once an artwork that set truth into work. It is in this way that the inner homogeneity of the 'first' and the 'other' beginning permits the dream of an artwork to come that, whilst not identical with the temple-work, would also set truth into work, renewing the struggle of earth and world. It is true that 'the truth of Hegel's judgement has not yet been decided'; this is not a decision a philosopher could make.[30] But, for Heidegger, it is also true that such a decision remains possible; it is this hope for which he holds out. He does not look to the work that would be the outcome of the creative act of a genius, but to the chance of a decision regarding setting-into-truth: to an event that would happen as a new turn in the history of being.

The question as to whether art has ended can still be asked, according to Heidegger, because it seems that the artwork is joined to the extraordinary happening of the temple-work and other great instantiations. His example of the Greek temple, the temple of antiquity, provides him with a pre-artistic sense of the artwork, before aestheticians and historians of art, before the culture industry, before works of art were 'shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest'.[31] But is this not to make the temple into what art never was and never could be? Art is what it is because of those same critics, aestheticians and historians; it emerges with its own light at the same time as museums in which it has become national property, held in trust for the good of the people, its cultural, economic and aesthetic value completely assured. Art, in other words, is quintessentially modern.

Is this what Blanchot indicates in his reflections on reading? There are always conditions under which a particular reading is undertaken, delineating the way in which one ought to approach the text, yet at the same time, the encounter with the work of art is different from an encounter with either a 'natural' being or a 'produced' artefact. Heidegger, no doubt, would agree. But the artwork does not arrive from nowhere and without precedent; it depends upon a tradition that has determined in advance what art 'is'. The encounter with the artwork as an artwork depends upon its prior recognition and legitimation *as* an artwork. This is what is always affirmed whenever reading begins. But as Blanchot writes, the 'light innocent yes of reading' is accompanied by the 'no' of a refusal.[32] The book is always more than its cultural determination because it is linked with the work. The work, for Blanchot, precedes 'the truth attributed to it'; it is, in this sense, 'always the nontrue, the no in which the true originates'.[33] Neither

reader nor author can raise the work to the truth, understood as that which would express the whole, the Absolute. The work emerges from non-truth, from errancy. Or, better, the work draws non-truth and errancy into relation with truth. What is important here is the *sovereignty* of this refusal.

Art, for Blanchot, is always more than a plain refusal of cultural forces. It is not the lion of Zarathustra's 'Three Metamorphoses' who would roar a great 'no' to the institutions of art, as if one could do art without the institution – as if there were a pure outside of art, – but the child that would cry a sovereign 'yes' to the same institution, not because it has the capacity to reflect the world back to itself, or to answer to the power and glory of literary achievement, but because it repeats what, in the work, escapes determination. It is to this repetition that Blanchot draws attention. The happening of art is the experience of being caught by the work in the singular experience of the respondent. What catches us is the rhythm and sonority of words that reach us before meaning, the sounds and colours that reverberate in us before their timbres or nuances become gradable or comparable. What arrests us is a certain experience of *materiality*, which Heidegger and Blanchot both call, in their own way, earth, understood in terms of an unrepresentable materiality, that is, an affect that slips beneath the outstretched nets of conscious awareness. The work strikes us in the particular artwork; we are caught, arrested by the work, where the work is no longer a hollowed out form of past glories, where art is no longer part of the great discourse which linked creation to divine inspiration and then to the romantic genius. A difference emerges in Blanchot's claims of the sovereignty of art, which becomes clear in their respective discussions of Van Gogh.

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Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes evokes, for Heidegger, the world of a peasant woman – 'the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind', 'the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls', 'the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fall desolation of the wintry field', 'the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death'. In summary, 'this equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman.

From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself arises to its resting-within-itself'.[34]

One knows these images are not fortuitous. They belong alongside a cluster of images from Heidegger's later work, in which he argues, without yielding to a simple nostalgia, that earth does not reveal itself when it made to yield energy like the hydroelectric dam which, in contrast to the sawmill, submits the river to its rule, compelling its movement, expediting it as a source of energy. If it is a matter of retreating to a more ancient sense of the cultivation of the nature, to a peasantry that would respect the limits of the world, this must be understood in terms of the great claims Heidegger makes for the Greeks. 'This painting spoke', Heidegger writes, 'in the nearness of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be'.[35] The painting allows us to grasp something of the earthiness of the world of the peasant, allowing, in Heidegger's words, 'the equipmental quality of equipment [*Zeugsein des Zeuges*]' to be discovered.[36] Heidegger discerns the play of earth and world in the painting, and it is thus that Van Gogh's painting is made to resonate with the Greek temple. But can one make the claim, as Heidegger did of the temple, that Van Gogh's painting opens a world? Does it draw together a people? Heidegger is perfectly aware that it conceals itself in the corner of the museum. Commenting on the allusion to the painting in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bernasconi notes, 'It seems that Heidegger would have liked the painting to have been not just an expression of a culture which had had its time. He wanted it to be a still untimely work of great art, one whose preservers were awaited'.[37] The phrase, 'would have liked' is, perhaps, disingenuous; Heidegger knows what Van Gogh's painting is not. And yet by allowing it to attest to the non-actual, to the hidden *energeia*, the working of the work, he reveals its hidden kinship with the Greek temple. Blanchot, by contrast, writes of the worklessness of the work, invoking the non-actual, another experience of *energeia*, in a different way. This distinction can already be seen in Bataille's discussion of Van Gogh.

Bataille celebrates Van Gogh's painting of the sunflower, commenting 'he *had a little of the sunflower*'.[38] Reminding us that, in French, the word for sunflower is 'the sun [*le soleil*]', Bataille writes of a 'double bond uniting the sun-star, the sun-flower and Van Gogh'.[39] *A little of the flower*: Van Gogh's fiery signature meets the fiery countersignature of his respondent. On this account, the sun on Van Gogh's canvas is not 'reliable' [*Verlässlich*], in the way Heidegger understands this word. It does not grant us the truth of the world. It is nothing

beyond a blazing canvas, an ecstatic affirmation of the work as the work sets itself apart from artist and audience. It refuses us. Was Van Gogh's oeuvre an attempt to reach this sun? Did it consume his life? In the great works of Van Gogh, Blanchot writes, 'it is as if an ultimate source of existence made itself momentarily visible, as if hidden reasons for our being were here immediately and fully in force';[40] 'It is overwhelming, beyond all measure, but it is not our world: a call arises from it, calling into question, calling to existence, acting upon us productively by pressing us to transform ourselves in the vicinity of what is still the inaccessible'.[41]

One might say that, for Blanchot, the sun that blazes from Van Gogh's canvasses *is* the work that turns itself from artist and audience alike calling for the critical commentator to affirm it in its transgressiveness – an affirmation that requires, at the same time, the suspension of the determination of the work of art. The work of art exceeds the decisions of both artist and audience. The commentator, knowing this, does not seek to resolve the decision. But this means the commentator is a minor figure compared to the Heideggerian thinker, who would insert the decision into account of the struggle between being and beings, which itself belongs to the history of being. The commentator is content only to indicate the way in which the work refuses to be determined.

What *is* the work? 'Is' it at all? Is it joined to the history of art as Heidegger would sketch it? We have seen that Blanchot does indeed link it to the art of the cavewalls of Lascaux. Yet this is not a history of art, understood in terms of the progressive degeneration of the play of what the Greeks called *physis*. For the work gives itself to be experienced as it did then: it is only a contentless repetition of contestation, of sovereign, affirmatory refusal, that happens newly each time by breaking into a context. But this repetition is enough; what was won once is won over again; the beasts on the cave wall, like Van Gogh's sun, continue to blaze. This does not require us to sever Van Gogh's painting from the history or tradition to which it belongs, as well as from the event through which it happens for each of its spectators. Yes, the work of art is public; it offers itself to be experienced – that is its condition, but *the encounter with artwork is singular*; the work calls responses singularly into existence at the same stroke by which it is rendered public. What is discernible, still, is the blazing singularity of the work: The 'signature' of the figure in the pit happens anew. Likewise with Van Gogh's painting: the bond that unites sun, sunflower and the painter also enfolds its viewer.

The work sets me aflame; Van Gogh's fiery signature meets my own countersignature.

'Above all', Bataille writes in his essay on Van Gogh, 'human existence requires stability, the permanence of things'; but this leads to an ambivalence about the 'great and violent expenditure of strength' that resists stability, which 'represents the strongest possible threat' because it calls forth 'feelings of admiration and of ecstasy'.[42] We attempt to preserve ourselves by admiring artists like Van Gogh from afar. The sun, in its radiance, in its flaming explosion, is 'remote from men, who can enjoy in safety and quiet the fruits of this great cataclysm'.[43] But Van Gogh's painting shows how the stable world across which we pass rests on an earth which conceals 'the incandescence of lava'.[44]

Is it this to which Heidegger points when he invokes the earth? Or, in allowing earth to become lava, does Bataille attest to what prevents us from preserving ourselves and even the ground beneath our feet from the work? Art was never able to bring together a community; it is, today, all it ever was. The pre-modern order to which what we call art was linked allowed us to think otherwise, but only now can we witness the *nudity* of art. Van Gogh's painting, in the museum, expresses the *truth* of art. But what does this mean?

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There is always an audience for the artwork in which I find my place. Even before I begin to read, I am already part of the community that encloses all the books like angels with intertwined wings. I keep watch with this community over what I, as one of its members, read, maintaining a norm of reading that maintains a certain notion of the work of art and, in so doing, forecloses the possibility of a reading that would be absolutely new, absolutely inaugural. Yet each encounter with the work *is* new in the sense that it brings about a singular opening of an inexhaustible reserve. The work is always more than a mesh of stable meanings in a language and an idiom; in Blanchot's words, it 'is absent, perhaps, radically so; in any case it is concealed, obfuscated by the evident presence of the book'.[45] The actuality of the work conceals an absence. Reading, on his account, requires a certain *assumption* of this absence, exhibiting an act of welcoming and affirmation that can be said to *decide* what the book is to become.

Everything depends upon the way in which this decision is understood to inaugurate a community. On the one hand, the community of

Blanchotian readers seem to form a unity in the same way as the members of Hegel's Greek *Sittlichkeit*. The readers might appear to be drawn together in a manner analogous to the *Volk* of Heidegger's Greek temple. But the community whose wings gathers readers disperses them. Those who are sure what the work of art is are sure because they have decided against the indeterminability of the work as it was disclosed to them; it is a reactive gesture. They experienced that indeterminability such that, in advance, they were dispersed by what cannot be gathered. The community is always and already de-instituted or, better, *destituted*. The work of art gives itself to be experienced such that the horizon of any community of respondents, even the world of a Heideggerian historical people, trembles as it attests to a division beyond what Heidegger calls strife in the experience of the work.

Even what Heidegger calls the origin, the *Ursprung*, is a subordination of the relationship between work and worklessness. The origin of the work of art, the origination upon which the disclosure of the world of a people depends, happens when earth and world come into interrelation such that neither is able to swallow the other. They struggle, but their struggle is regulated; it achieves a certain homeostasis, and opens a world. The world revealed itself to Heidegger's Greeks in a luminous and wondrous self-presence, yet the opening of the world also implies a kind of reserve or concealment beyond what Heidegger calls the withdrawal of earth. Granted, the unconcealed cannot appear as such; the structure of what the Greeks called *aletheia*, the bringing into relation of concealment and unconcealment, earth and world, cannot occur as an event in history. It takes those who come after, those, like Heidegger, who would maintain an extraordinary power to remember, to cast the retrospective glance over what is subsequently revealed as the history of being to understand that 'alethic' truth is the milieu from which the life of a particular historical people unfolds. Yet, reading *The Space of Literature*, one might be persuaded that Heidegger's memory is not profound enough, that a deeper question awaits the one who claims the Greeks determined the course of the experience of *aletheia* for the West. True, Heidegger does not mean he presents himself as the custodian of the truth of the work of art – as he acknowledges, the truth of Hegel's judgement has not been decided. But a more covert decision has already occurred regarding art as the possible locus of a decision.

Blanchot, by contrast, attends to the reserve or the unconcealment insofar as it overwhelms any retrospective claim that a particular people was able, unbeknownst to themselves, to achieve an exemplary

relationship to *aletheia*. The stability of a disclosure, life lived in the light of a work, *truth*, can never endure for a particular group; there is always the excessiveness of earth over world. What does this mean? From this perspective, the Greeks never solved the riddle of art; their art remains what Hegel would deem too 'Egyptian' – it is cryptic and incarcerating rather than enabling and life-giving.

Erlebnis is the element in which art dies, according to Heidegger. But does he know the *depths* of the death of art? Van Gogh knows them. True, the sun of the painting is nothing other than a painted sun, but the role of the artwork is no longer to represent or signify; the modern work of art does not serve values external to it – it is no longer part of a world, no longer remembers gods or great battles and is no longer tied to the memory of the hero. The painting *is*, and that is sufficient. But the fact that it 'is', that, as event, as work, as production, as origination, it affirms itself as itself, means that it must offer itself to a certain institutionalisation. But the same fact means that the art will never be frozen in a permanency without life, conserved, preserved, rendered secure for culture, for aesthetics, for the university, for knowledge. The artwork attains itself by happening as a singular event that marvellously but intolerably breaks into the world. As such, we are 'the heirs, the creators and conquerors of all possible works',[46] the inheritors of an absence at the heart of the temple that no god could fill.

From this perspective, in sheltering a certain notion of art from its subsequent contamination, Heidegger has *decided what the artwork is and what it will be*, welcoming and thus determining it in accordance with a whole thematics of the ontological difference, epochality and strife. But this depends upon a prior decision regarding what the artwork is, determining its genealogy. But to determine the essence of art in this way is to confront the problem of thinking the origin as such, since the artwork is welcomed only when we intertwine our wings around its advent, deciding what it is even as we affirm it as a work of art. For Blanchot, the artwork 'is', but the happening of the artwork does not refer to the strife that would allow it to bloom into the opening of a world for a historical people. The artwork 'is', but it happens as a strife or a striving that refuses to settle itself into a beginning.

Heidegger inquires into the essence of art in order to leap beyond the modern determination of the work of art. But in so, he dissimulates his very act of decision to keep a certain pre-artistic domain *safe from harm*, preserving it from its modern determination. Art is defined and constituted, Blanchot writes, 'by its distance in relation to the world,

by the *absence* of world.'[47] Hegel did not know the extent to which he was right: art is infinitely dead, refusing itself to determination, to dialectics, to the work of death or the work of mourning. To lament the fact that art is no longer world-disclosive is to mourn the fact that art never was alive, never fully present, but it is also, ultimately, to mourn the refusal of art to offer itself to the non-historiographical history of art with which Heidegger would provide us. It is to mourn the fact that the Greek morning hides a non-Greek night, that even the Greeks were never at home in their homeland and that the memory of the temple in the valley in the Greek dawn is a kind of screen-memory for a deeper and more terrifying origin.

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Is it this terrible origin Blanchot invokes in his recasting of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*?

> Never again will the Eumenides speak to the Greeks, and we will never know what was said in that language. This is true. But it also true that the Eumenides have still never spoken, and that each time they speak it is the unique birth of their language that they announce. Long ago they spoke as enraged and appeased divinities before withdrawing into the temple of night – and this is unknown to us and will forever remain foreign. Later they spoke as symbols of the dark forces that must be combated in order for there to be justice and culture – and this is only too well known to us. Finally, one day, perhaps they will speak as the work in which language is always original, in which it is the language of the origin. And this is unknown to us, but not foreign. And notwithstanding all this, reading and vision each time recollect, from the weight of a given content and along the ramifications of an evolving world, the unique intimacy of the work, the astonishment [*la surprise*] of its constant genesis and the swell of its unfurling.[48]

The Erinyes or Furies are avenging spirits who are the daughters of the Nyx, the night. Aeschylus describes them as 'black' and 'repulsive'; their 'heavy, rasping breathing' makes the temple goddess cringe.[49] These avengers or correctors of unnatural deeds awaken only after Orestes escapes from the temple where we first meet them, returning to accuse Orestes after he is marched to Athens, where he is placed on trial. When the jury's vote is split evenly between Apollo and the

Erinyes, Athena casts the deciding vote for Orestes. Angry, the Erinyes threaten to sack Athens, but are quelled by Athena, who grants them a shrine in the caves beneath the Acropolis and a cult. The Erinyes, who embody the old order of blood-vengeance, become the Eumenides, the 'kindly ones', who are honoured in all homes. But this new name does not prevent them from withdrawing into the darkness of what Blanchot calls the 'temple of night'. In time, they would speak 'as symbols of the dark forces that must be combated in order for there to be justice and culture'.

It is inevitable that the Eumenides will become the Erinyes once again, violently opposing the customs, practices and rules of conduct that bind the reconciled Athenians. They would speak with the power of evil, tempting the unfaithful towards death and destruction, but no exorcisms could expel them. Their vengeful return threatens even when religion begins to loose its binding force in societies of the West. They come to play a still more shadowy role, affirming their unbridled force in the artwork. The Erinyes speak 'as the work in which language is always original, in which it is the language of the origin'. But Blanchot's invocation of the 'origin' here is deeply paradoxical, since he is not writing of a determinate point at which art begins that can be left behind, but of what happens as the work of art. When we read or regard the work of art, we experience 'the astonishment [*surprise*] of its constant genesis and the swell of its unfurling' – an origin that does not cease originating even thought it dissimulates itself almost immediately.[50] But this marvel harbours the dark affirmation of the Erinyes in their refusal to relinquish their vengeful rage, which reveals itself in the power and the extent of this 'no'.

Heidegger, like Athena, would *cast the deciding vote* in order to confine the Eumenides, policing them, placing them under house arrest, holding their rage back just enough so as to allow a work of art to inaugurate a historical people. But the Eumenides will not serve a people in this way and the 'no' that Heidegger would permit to become a 'yes', the acquiescence that opens a world in its truth, cannot finish and determine the deeper working of the work that, for Blanchot, belongs to art's errancy.

The temple of night does not open a world, but exposes what lies beneath it. For Heidegger, of course, it is *physis*, earth that withholds itself; but for Blanchot, the 'no' that withdraws the work of art from any world also withdraws it from the artwork in its real existence that brings earth to world. The artwork does not open or illuminate the world so much as disclose its fragility and impermanence. The work of

art, for Blanchot, attests to a constitutive *de*worlding of any particular world – to a distance that, in advance, prevents any contextualisation of the work of art, any act of truth or inauguration, any setting up of the world of a historical people. This distance cannot be assumed or put to work; what happened as the work of art withheld itself for the Greeks just as it does now.

Granted, the possibility of another beginning is remote for Heidegger, barely graspable; it cannot be calculated or willed. But a decision remains possible – a decision that is proper to humanity. The *polemos* with the 'first' beginning he enacts in his invocation of the temple is not in any simple sense the attempt to bring this beginning about, that is, to set up a new temple in the holy night. Nevertheless, it belongs to the attempt to prepare to entertain the possibility of the 'other' beginning. And as such, it depends upon a certain account of the work of art and its relation to a people.

Might one not discover in the steadfastness of the Heideggerian temple, in the lustre and gleam of its stone, in the statue that lets the god be present, a more originary testimony – a witnessing of a worklessness within work, a more abysmal productivity, a deeper materiality? This is the worklessness that is figured in the phantasmal temple of night that opens in its depths, the temple to which the Erinyes were ostensibly confined but in which they can never be contained. From this perspective, the privilege Heidegger accords to the Greek work of art is only a figure for an interpretation of the originary that helps itself to a certain power and possibility, folding its angelic wings around the event and attempting to protect it by bringing within the horizons of the possible. Even as it lends itself to a Heideggerian reading, allowing itself thereby to answer to a certain hope, to a dream of what it could be, the work of art remains undecided and undecidable, returning with the cries of Erinyes in the depths of the real.

3
The Sphinx's Gaze

In 'Our Clandestine Companion', Blanchot recalls that the first opening of friendship between himself and Emmanuel Levinas bore witness to an extraordinary relation to philosophy itself. A deliberate *pact*, early on, sealed this friendship, binding each friend to the other and, in turn, to philosophy.[1] Their youth did not belie the seriousness of this pact. Blanchot, who studied alongside Levinas at the University of Strasbourg, learnt 'that philosophy was life itself, youth itself, in its unbridled – yet nonetheless reasonable – passion, renewing itself continually and suddenly by an explosion of new and enigmatic thoughts or by still unknown names, who would later shine forth as prodigious figures'.[2] *Life itself*: philosophy, the fount of the new, unbridled passion, was reaffirmed in a passionate and youthful friendship; it became, for Blanchot and Levinas, their constant companion in their friendship for one another. Philosophy became the *third term* in their friendship – a term through which passes and issues an uncanny and profound relation between these friends.

The importance of this friendship, and the reason why it might demand our friendship in turn, lies in the reading of Heidegger that would develop from their early enthusiasm for *Being and Time*. Blanchot recalls the 'veritable intellectual shock' of reading Heidegger; the rebirth of philosophy in *Being and Time* was one form the 'difficult friendship' of Blanchot and Levinas would take.[3] Heidegger was, for the young companions, the prodigy of philosophy, his thought bridled philosophy itself. The new and enigmatic thoughts of *Being and Time* were, for the young men of the University of Strasbourg, the extraordinary reaffirmation of philosophy through which their friendship passed and from which it issued. It is through an account of the friendship between Blanchot and Levinas as it is revealed in their

negotiation with the thought of Heidegger that the question of philosophy and friendship – of the relationship between philosophy, friendship and Blanchot's own practice of commentary – raises itself anew.

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Reading Levinas's first *magnum opus*, published more than thirty years after the two friends met, Blanchot allows a conversationalist in one of the dialogues he wrote to welcome this renewal of philosophy to proclaim that it enacts 'a new departure in philosophy and a leap that it, and we ourselves, were urged to accomplish'.[4] With *Totality and Infinity*, Blanchot's friend is no longer a relatively unknown name; he has accomplished a renewal of philosophy that is as prodigious as that accomplished by *Being and Time*.

Blanchot's essays on *Totality and Infinity*, written in the form of conversations, bear witness to this renewal. At the outset of one of these dialogues, one conversationalist poses what the other conversationalist calls an 'anachronistic question': 'what is a philosopher?' The philosopher, the other voice responds, 'is someone who is afraid'; he is frightened of 'what is entirely outside us and other than us: the outside itself'.[5] He flees both from the 'outside' which is the ultimate 'object' of his fear and from the experience of fear itself. He is not only afraid, but he is afraid of fear and was afraid from the outset. According to one of the conversationalists, Levinas has allowed us to understand in what sense the feared outside can be said to escape us and has continued to escape. *Totality and Infinity* is extraordinary because it does not exhibit a fear of fear. It attends to the outside by entertaining 'the idea of the Other [*l'idée de l'Autre*] in all its radiance and in the infinite exigency that are proper to it, that is to say, the relation with the Other [*autrui*]'.[6] Levinas can be said to have renewed philosophy because he responds to the relationship that opens the individual to the Other [*autrui*], explaining how the experience (although this is always a more equivocal word for Levinas than for Blanchot) of the Other insinuates itself in advance into the sphere of the ego. In demanding we attend to the relation to the other person, he shows us that philosophy itself has been predicated upon just such an egology. We are urged in the name of philosophy to open ourselves to an exteriority, to expose philosophy itself to the trans-ontological relation to the other person. Heideggerian philosophy, ontology in its greatest but also its most invidious form, is exploded from within because it is shown, on

Levinas's account, to have harboured a frightening exteriority (an exteriority that is feared because it cannot be enclosed) of which it did not dream. We, too, as readers of Levinas and as readers of Blanchot, are also asked to undertake in a leap towards what we most fear – a leap away from our own egology, the egology of philosophy and egology of our civilisation.

It is the place and role Levinas assigns the work of his friend in this renewal of philosophy that is my topic here.

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Towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas invokes Blanchot's writings in a curious remark: 'We have thus the conviction of having broken with the philosophy of the Neuter: with the Heideggerian being of the existent [*l'être de l'étant*] whose impersonal neutrality the critical work of Blanchot has so much contributed to bring out'.[7] For Levinas, Blanchot merely *prepared us* for the thought of the Other, for the infinite; he waits as a kind of nomadic prophet among the sedentary peoples who possess and build their habitations upon the earth for the author of *Totality and Infinity*, who will tell us how that horizon is breached by the encounter with the Other.[8] Blanchot would have exposed Heidegger, and, in so doing, the whole of Western culture, to a critique that Levinas would complete and reveal in its true significance by indicating the play of the infinite in the 'impersonal fecundity' of being.[9] The neutrality of the being of beings in its Heideggerian formulation invites a new reflection of being, a new metaphysics, a new *philosophy* that would make good on the prophetic writings of Blanchot, bringing us the news of the Good beyond being. The Blanchovian notion of the neuter, linked, in his writings before *The Infinite Conversation* with impersonality and anonymity, is merely *preparatory*; it awaits Levinas, the philosopher who would reveal the relation to the Other beyond being and beyond impersonality, to bring out its true meaning.

How then are we to interpret a comment a conversationalist makes in a dialogue to the effect that the neuter is, for him, 'never the impersonal' – that 'all the mystery of the neuter passes, perhaps, by way of the other [*autrui*], and sends us back to him …'.[10] These challenging sentences should remind us that the writings on art offered a different kind of prophecy than the one Levinas seems to suppose: subtly, discreetly, Blanchot invites a re-negotiation of *Totality and Infinity*, pointing us towards a thought of the Other that brings it much closer to

what Blanchot calls the neuter than Levinas might prefer. The friendship between Blanchot and Levinas – and, crucially, their friendship with philosophy, with the philosophical – is more complex than Levinas's remarks in *Totality and Infinity* would suggest.

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Blanchot has a conversationalist write:

> every relation in the world is established by means of the world [*par le moyen du monde*]: we meet around a table, we gather together around a task, we find one another around truths and values. Companions are not face to face [*face à face*]; they have in common the bread that they earn, share, and eat in common.[11]

Our relations to others are constructed in terms of the pre-determined categories that would define us as clients or service providers, teachers and pupils, employers and employees. We are united and our relationships mediated by shared norms and standards. But the encounter with the other person resists neighbourly, familial, national, political or linguistic determination. The companions of these groups are not, as Blanchot writes, 'face to face'; they dissimulate the 'radical experience' of the other person to which Levinas would attest.[12] In so doing, they would be predicated upon the same exclusion of the Other that has always characterised theoretical thought – philosophy, on this account, would always have had sought to affirm the experience of the Other as the intermediary of the 'I', unifying and reducing it to an implicitly egological or subjective measure. For Blanchot, however, Levinas would show how the other person breaches the horizon, permitting the 'I' neither to form a symmetrical duality with the other person nor to fuse with it into a unity. This is why the experience of the other person is precisely the object of fear – it resists the measure of the 'I', thereby presenting it with an experience that cannot be assimilated to the monism of philosophy and selfhood *qua* the ego or the subject.

Commenting on the immediacy of the relation to other person, a conversationalist says, 'the density of things is no longer between us. The walls have fallen: those that separate us, those too that permit us to communicate, and those, that, finally, protect us by keeping us at a distance'.[13] The 'face [*visage*]' of the other may be called 'immediate' because the face is experienced as a thing that is simultaneously a *fact* and a *command* that *elects* the 'I'. The 'expression' of the face understood as the

way in which it breaks through the horizon of the 'I', is experienced as a kind of *address*. As Blanchot permits one of his conversationalists to say, 'the Other speaks to me [….] the Other expresses himself, and in this speaking proposes himself as other'. When I respond to this address, calling out to him and addressing the Other in turn, I 'appeal' to him, asking the unknown one 'to turn toward me, and stranger, to hear me. In speech, it is the outside that speaks in giving rise to speech, and permitting me to speak'.[14] Language, one of the conversationalists explains, always refers back to the original scene in which the 'I' addresses the other person – to the interruption from without that causes the 'I' in turn to be enfolded by the outside in responding. All language can be said to be *in the gift of the other person* insofar as the other person enters into a relation to the 'I' with whom he holds nothing in common. Language recalls the extraordinary moment that does not offer itself to subsequent thematisation. Discourse originates in an experience that renews the 'I' – in what Blanchot allows a conversationalist tellingly and importantly to call an 'experience of language'.[15] *Totality and Infinity* would recall us to this opening of language – to the experience against which discourse would protect us. Philosophy, henceforward, must become a kind of *witnessing*, pointing towards an experience to which, unbeknown to itself, all discourse attests. Levinasian philosophy attests to its own attestation, to the address of the other person that simultaneously permits discourse and is dissimulated by it, thereby rendering explicit its debt to an experience that cannot be retrospectively mastered. It renews philosophy by exposing it to what it fears and has always feared – a relation to which all interpersonal relationships, all friendships (including the friendship between Blanchot and Levinas) already testify.

The pact between Levinas and Blanchot is a figure for another kind of pact, a unilateral relation that is upstream of the usual notion of responsibility or ethics. Philosophy as such is to be rethought out of the experience that permits no horizon of expectation to inscribe itself around it, no fore-understanding to prepare us for it, no method or programme that would lead us to it – the experience of renewal itself. Lucidly, reasonably, *Totality and Infinity* would urge us to recall passion itself, to the experience that is not merely new, but the renewal of the new, the very fount of novelty.

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For the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*, Blanchot's writings would remain in the darkness before the dawn; their patience is infinite.

Literature and art, Blanchot would tell us, remind us to wait and tell us that we can only wait – the advent of renewal is still unthinkable. Careful to demarcate the properly new from what merely *appears* new – what, indeed, waits in darkness for the new dawn, *Totality and Infinity* implacably marks out proper from improper happenings of alterity.[16] In responding to the relation to the other person at the opening of language, *Totality and Infinity* revolves around an experience that has been invisible to philosophy, like an astral body around the point of singularity at its centre. But the Levinasian galaxy is not made of light, just as the singularity at its centre is not dark. It is not the Platonic Sun, but its renewal, the *good beyond being*, that blazes through its sentences.

How, then, is one to understand the role of the texts Blanchot published up until *Totality and Infinity*? Can they – a galaxy of their own, a swarm of points gathered around their own darkness that point in turn towards an absence of stars, a blank, dark night – be drawn into the orbit of the Levinasian system? Levinas would have revealed that the 'is' and the 'ought' are intertwined: the practical is not distinguishable from the theoretical; Blanchot's writings would remain valuable, in a way that only he, Levinas, could gauge – that is, insofar as they are bathed in the light of what, unbeknownst to them, would come to succeed them. Likewise, the friendship of Blanchot and Levinas would be something that could be understood as part of the whole thematics of the other person, that is, as a derivation, even a *dissimulation* of the relation to the other person – an ultimately *comfortable* relation that is *not quite* or *not yet* the relation at stake in *Totality and Infinity*. The pact they made at Strasbourg is not the pre-voluntary pledge to the other person but must remain, from Levinas's perspective, fundamentally symmetrical, mutual and reciprocal. Levinas refuses to let either the pledge of friendship (a friendship with philosophy, with the philosophical – friendship, indeed, *as* the philosophical) or the Blanchovian notion of friendship itself disturb his thought. Are Blanchot's writings on the work of art merely a negative propadeutic for *Totality and Infinity*?

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To name, Blanchot explains in 'Literature and the Right of Death', is to take up the nominated thing into the universal, and thereby to leave behind that thing in its existing particularity. When Blanchot writes of the 'wonderful power' of speech in the following sentence, he cites Hegel: 'In speech what dies is what gives life to speech: speech is the

life that death, it is "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it"'.[17] The life of speech is enabled by its relation to death. This does not mean that things are actually killed; when I say, 'this woman', I do not kill the woman in her real presence before me. Blanchot alludes to the possibility of language functioning after the death of that of which it speaks or even, in the case of a written note, after the death of its author. 'When I speak', Blanchot claims, 'death speaks in me'; death, he explains, constitutes relationality itself, mediating the relation between the speaker and that of which he speaks. As he writes, it opens the relation between 'me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding'.[18] Death, albeit a death becomes abstract, becomes recuperable negativity, measures out all possible relations, ultimately determining and allowing a mediation to close the distance between related terms.

Language, of course, kills no one. But its *sine qua non* is to function in the absence of its referent. However, whilst death is the condition of possibility of language and meaning, it also reserves itself from manifestation. Literary language is unique for Blanchot because it attempts to arrest the movement of death as such, arresting the dialectic that allows language to mean. In this sense, as Blanchot comments, 'the language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature'.[19] Literature seeks to grasp the movement of negation or dying that is its condition of possibility by means of the way in which it would use words. It seeks to nominate in a way that is disorientating and singular, in which the allusion to the singularity of what has been subsumed under the name is preserved. Blanchot explains how the author resorts to the materiality of the word, foregrounding its sonorous qualities in order to grant the name a concrete existence, in which it is not simply that which delegates for the thing in its absence. For the poet, Blanchot writes, 'everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book'.[20] The name, which usually simply stands in for a thing in its absence, here takes on a 'thingly' existence of its own. It is no longer *secondary*, simply *representing* a thing in its absence, transporting it between the moment in which it was first encountered and the moment when it will be encountered in its idealised form. The name attempts to assume a singularity and particularity commensurable with what it would negate, becoming thereby the most proper of proper names. But language, of course, is not a list of proper names.

Literary language is thus, Blanchot explains, 'made of contradictions',[21] because it is condemned on the one hand to make sense and thereby let beings emerge as such, and on the other, to *contend* this comprehension of death as pure negation, that is, the death that permits language to unfold. The double bind in which literature is caught maintains an opening hitherto concealed through the mandate of ordinary, prosaic language to limit such equivocation.

What sets apart the work of art is, for Blanchot, the attempt to affirm, to remember and thereby attest to the other that escapes mediation. The literary work bears a memory of what must always have disappeared, which is to say, the other that offered itself before it was mediated by language. It also attests to an experience that the author undergoes in realising the work – one that is always at issue in the use of language.

In realising the work of art, the author has to undergo an experience that is not under his control. 'Whoever devotes himself to the work is drawn by it toward the point where it undergoes impossibility [*L'oeuvre attire celui qui s'y consacre vers le point où elle est à l'épreuve de l'impossibilité*]'[22]: the realisation of the work of art, as we have seen, is and is not possible in the same sense as the completion of other tasks; it is not the author as a free being who is in charge of bringing the work of art into the world. In one sense, the individual who sets out to write is creative and capable; in another, Blanchot insists, 'he who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed'.[23] Nevertheless, 'what he is to write delivers the one who has to write to an affirmation over which he has no authority' [*celui qui écrit l'oeuvre est mis à part, celui qui l'a écrite est congédié*]; to write, Blanchot insists, is to 'withdraw language from the world [*retirer le langage du cours du monde*] to detach it from what makes it a power according to which, when I speak, it is the world that declares itself [*si je parle c'est le monde qui se parle*], the clear light of day that develops [*s'édifie*] through tasks undertaken, through action and time'.[24]

This is why Blanchot argues that the author does not write in the *first* but in the *third* person. The writer as the third person 'is myself become no one [*c'est moi-même devenu personne*]'; it is an 'I' without 'I', an anonymous, desubjectivated space.[25] 'I' am not there to accomplish anything; the neuter, understood as a neutralisation of possibility itself, affirms itself in my stead, interrupting the work of self-mediation.[26] Literature's word, the experience of language to which literature attests, is no one's word; it is as if, rather, the word declares itself as itself in lieu of a speaker or a writer.

If literature appears to take refuge in the glories heaped upon it this is only because we have not learnt to ask what it is, to ask 'what is at stake if something like art or literature exists?' To do so would link the work of art as it must be linked to the failure of strength, the triumph of sterility and fatigue – the defeat that turns back questions as to the essence of literature or the being of the work of art on the questioner. The strength of the artist lies is in the extent of its weakness, of the fatal susceptibility that reveals itself in the artwork. As Blanchot insists:

> the work requires of the writer that he lose everything that he might construe as his own 'nature' – that is, that he lose all character and, ceasing to be linked to others and to himself by the decision which makes him an 'I', he becomes the empty place where the impersonal affirmation emerges.[27]

The work of art opens the paradoxical space where the very capacity to persist as an identifiable entity is contested. As we have seen, what is here written of the author also applies to the reader.

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In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot argues that a similar relation to that which would exist between the work and its readers reveals itself in the relation to the other person. Both the literary work and the relation to the other person reveal how I lose my capacity to express myself freely and spontaneously in language. This loss reveals a movement from the 'I' to the '*il*', from the 'I' who can put death to work and the nonsubjectivated space of dying. A conversationalist writes:

> The face – here is the essential, it seems to me – is that experience I have when, facing the face that offers itself to me without resistance, I see 'arise out of the depths of the defenceless eyes', out of this weakness, this powerlessness, what puts itself radically in my power and at the same time refuses it absolutely, turning my higher power into im-possibility [*ce qui à la fois se livre radicalement à mon pouvoir et le récuse absolument, renversant mon plus haut pouvoir en impossibilité*]. In front of the face, Levinas emphasises, *I am no longer able* [*je ne puis plus pouvoir*]. And the face is that before which the impossibility of killing – the 'thou shalt not kill' – is decided on the very basis of what exposes itself completely to my power to bring death [*de donner la mort*].[28]

Confronting the face, I come up against what both does and does not resist my powers. The emergence of the other person in his vulnerability tempts me, because he threatens to tear open the world, to deny the very 'ethical resistance' of the face. But he commands me to take on responsibility for the relation that opens in the interruption of 'worldly' relationality. It is thus both possible *and* impossible to 'kill' the bearer of the face. I want to obey the prohibition that prevents me from denying hospitality to the other person, but I also want to *de*face the other person, stripping him of the nudity and vulnerability that calls my freedom into question. I both *heed* the command of the other person, opening myself to the experience that precedes the origin of the enunciating subject, and *refuse* to heed him, denying his address.

Just as the work is conceived insofar as it exceeds the capacity of language to make death into a work, that is, to transparently render what we would have it refer to in such a way as to make language perfectly comprehensible, the face of the other person seems to be linked for Blanchot to a certain 'dying' that can be said to be *stronger* than death.[29] In the *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot argues that the other person exposes me to a nonmobilisable or workless 'dying', that is, to the impossibility of perduring as a subject. Confronted by the Other, I am no longer *able to be able*; I cannot take up the possibilities that open to me and thereby open the world, or relate to others as a subject among subjects.

Levinas insists that it is the *defencelessness* of the face that surprises me: I confront someone who is absolutely in my power, with whose existence I am entrusted. However, the fact that the other person refuses to be assimilated, defeating the power implicit in the 'I', means that I can never have done with the other person once and for all – I can never measure out and thereby *reduce* the infinite distance that separates us. I am *emburdened* with the other person; he is close enough to summon me and no other, but he is far enough to prevent me having done with his demand. The presence of the other person does not merely hollow out a response in my 'I', leaving my subjectivity intact, but inserts itself, as it were, into the heart of my self-sufficiency.

The question as to how we can read the following lines, that Blanchot puts in the mouth of a conversationalist is paramount:

> every notion of alterity already implies man as the other and not the inverse. Only, it follows from this that the Other man who is '*autrui*' also risks being always Other than man, close to what cannot be close to me: close to death, close to the night, and cer-

> tainly as repulsive as anything that comes to me from these regions without horizon.[30]

The other person is not encountered as just another subject, a subject among other subjects. He is also 'non-man' – close, as a conversationalist writes, to death and the night, confronting and threatening me with what I cannot accommodate. What repels me in this encounter is the fact that I am unbearably close to the experience that I have linked to both the other person and the work. Does this mean that these experiences can be said to *parallel* one another – that they are both a way in which a certain neutrality and impersonality contest the individual who would stand forth secure 'in the liberty of the "I am"'[31]?

One might remember Blanchot's categorical statement in *The Space of Literature*, referring to the desire on the part of the poet to realise a 'poem-thing': 'Language, at this point, is not a power; it is not the power to tell [*de dire*]. It is not at our disposal; there is in it nothing we can use. It is never the language I speak [*je parle*]. I never express myself with it, I never address you, and I never invite your answer [*jamais je ne t'interpelle*]'.[32] With the phase, 'I never address you', Blanchot seems to confirm Levinas's claims about the *impersonality* of the neuter, that is, that the experience at stake in the literary work of art is *not yet* the thought of the relation to the Other. On the other hand, one might ask whether it does not point towards the fact that I never address the Other as a sovereign 'I' – that, as Blanchot reminds us, the 'I' becomes an '*il*' in this very address. 'I do not address you': this is true, since the one who speaks in response to the face of the other person does so only whilst undergoing an experience that contests the freedom and the sovereignty of the 'I'. I do not respond in the first person; *someone* responds – the 'he' at the level of neutrality and impersonality. In the words addressed to the other, *no one* speaks; the 'I' no longer says or writes anything in the first person. It is as if language declares itself in this address; the initiative to speak rests with language itself as it is enunciated in the vocative. Language is not obligated to serve the intentions of a subject who would communicate with another subject.

For Blanchot, the words that greet the other person are not at our disposal, they never allow themselves to express a thought, to articulate an idea. Language speaks and it does so as, precisely, an experience that befalls the 'I' when it withstands its own impossibility. I speak only when I have been, as it were, cast out of myself – when I have no power to begin or to cease speaking, when, that is, I cannot even represent this impotence to myself. The power of the 'I' to take up or to

complete a task is contested at its most basic level. 'I' address the other person only when the possible is, as it were, no longer possible for me. 'I' respond as 'no one', as the '*il*' without determination, without ipseity, as any anonymous 'presence': as the impersonal affirmation of a presubjectivated space.

Would this interpretation reconcile the words of *The Space of Literature* with those of the conversationalist in *The Infinite Conversation*? Would it permit a rejection of the place to which Levinas would assign Blanchot's writings? This is what Blanchot seems to confirm when he permits another conversationalist to say:

> When I speak to the Other, the speech that relates me to him 'accomplishes' and 'measures' that distance beyond measure that is the infinite movement of dying, where dying puts impossibility into play [*le mouvement infini de mourir, là où mourir met en jeu l'impossibilité*]. And, in speaking to him, I myself speak rather than die, which means also that I speak in the place where there is a place for dying.[33]

I cannot negate and thereby be done with the other person – indeed, I can be said to speak to him or her insofar as I am struck by dying, understood as the excessiveness of death over the possibility of its mobilisation. I do not respond to the other person as an intact and sovereign subject; I am not free to maintain myself *as* myself but speak in the third person when it is no longer possible for me *to* speak.

At the very least, Blanchot's arguments in *The Space of Literature* does not *contradict*, in any essential sense, his claims in *The Infinite Conversation*. The experience of the other person can be said to be close to death, understood in terms of the death that is no longer personal or proper to me. The other person is close to the 'other' or essential night – to the night that does not welcome me by allowing me to sleep, but that awakens in and, indeed, *as* the '*il*', the 'he' or the 'it', which is vigilant in my place, the insomniac who speaks or writes in the third person. I am prevented from sleeping; I cannot mobilise death or put it to work. I undergo an experience that deprives me of myself, of all I take to be mine, which repels me because it is a threat to what might be supposed to be the essence of the 'I': freedom, the capacity to enter into tasks, to work in the broad daylight of the world and to sleep after a good day's work. This experience brings me close to the dying stronger than death, to the impersonal vigilance the 'other' night demands, close to repulsiveness of what demands that I

yield up not only my powers but the very power *of* power, to the other person.

But what, on this account, can be made of the striking claim that 'every notion of alterity already implies man as the other and not the inverse'? If we turn to the difficult pages where Blanchot allows his conversationalists to discuss the relationship between *le neutre*, *l'Autre* and *autrui*, we can read the following sentence: '*l'Autre* is in the neuter, even when it speaks to us as *autrui* [*s'il nous parle comme autrui*] then speaking by way of the strangeness that makes it impossible to situate and always exterior to whatever would identify it'.[34] The other person speaks to us as *autrui*: this sentence does not preclude the possibility that there are other voices, other ways in which the other person is experienceable. Nevertheless, does this not suggest, contra *The Space of Literature*, that the neuter as it 'appears' in the literary work of art is always secondary to the experience of the neuter as it is revealed in the face of the other person?

The words of the other conversationalist earlier in the dialogue reaffirm a certain priority of the otherness of the other in a way that *disturbs* the rapprochement I have suggested exists between Blanchot's account of the experience of literature and the encounter with the other person:

> All the mystery of the neuter passes, perhaps, by way of the other, and sends us back to him; passes, that is to say, through this experience of language in which the relation of the third kind, a non-unitary relation, escapes the question of being as it does that of the whole, leaving us exposed to 'the most profound question', that questioning of the detour through which the neuter – which is never the impersonal [*qui n'est jamais encore l'impersonnel*] – comes into question.[35]

The neuter, the conversationalist insists, is *never the impersonal*. Blanchot seems to agree with Levinas's argument in *Totality and Infinity* that language is found in the 'face to face' – that literary language, like all language, refers back to my response to the other person whose face is said by Levinas to 'express' itself in a primordial signification. All language, including the language of literature, would be, first and foremost, a response to the fact and the command of the experience of the Other. Does this mean that Blanchot tacitly *accedes* to Levinas's argument that his writings on the work of art prepare the way for the renewal of philosophy in *Totality and Infinity*?

As I have argued, the experience of language is attested to in the work of art *and* in the relation to the other person. Blanchot explains in the writings that lead up to *The Infinite Conversation*, indicating that language can never become a transparent medium of communication, pointing to the excessiveness of death over the possibility of its mobilisation. If there is a turn in Blanchot's writings from the publication of *Totality and Infinity* onwards, it is in the opening up of this relation to the other person [*autrui*] at a level as primordial as the relation to the Other [*l'Autre*] that is at stake in literature.

But the supposed 'turn' in Blanchot's writings is not a turn *to* Levinasian philosophy. The encounter with the other person does not reveal the 'true', aboriginal experience of language as it reveals itself as expression. Crucial differences between Blanchot and Levinas remain – differences that Blanchot allows the conversationalists in the dialogues concerning *Totality and Infinity* to negotiate at some length. Subtly, patiently, Blanchot has his conversationalists reject key Levinasian terms – the words, God, the Good and even *autrui* as inappropriate for answering to what he calls elsewhere in *The Infinite Conversation*, the most profound question, which Blanchot explores in his restaging of Oedipus's encounter with the Sphinx.

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The Sphinx, a female creature with the body of a lion and a human head, terrorised the people of Thebes by demanding the answer to a question that was said to have been taught to her by the Muses. Oedipus was able to solve her riddle, putting an end to terror. It is, as Oedipus correctly discerns, *man* who first crawls as a baby, learns to walk as a child, and finally leans on a cane in old age. Upon hearing this answer, the Sphinx took her own life. We would be wrong to assume, Blanchot argues, that Oedipus stands before the Sphinx as a representative of man before an inhuman creature. 'Before the Sphinx, non-man, he is already before himself'[36]: in the female, non-human form of the Sphinx *he sees himself*. The encounter with the Sphinx reveals 'man as Sphinx; that dangerous, inhuman, and sacred part [*la part dangereuse, inhumaine et sacrée*] that, in the face to face confrontation of an instant, arrests and holds arrested before it the man who with simplicity and self-satisfaction calls himself simply man'.[37] It is only after the instant in which Oedipus faces his own inhumanity that he is able to answer, 'man'.

Responding to the Sphinx's question, Oedipus appears to be able to solve this riddle, that is, to find an answer adequate to it; it is this deed that makes him admirable. However, as Blanchot claims, 'the most profound question', the ostensible theme of the essay in which he retells Sophocles's story, 'is such that it does not allow one to understand it'[38]: it does not permit an adequate answer that would allow us to arrest its interrogative force. Oedipus cannot find an answer that would allow him, as an answerer, as Oedipus the wise or the wily, to remain intact as a subject or a human being before the Sphinx. He is implicated in the interrogative movement of a question that dissolves the positions where question and answer, and indeed, questioner and answerer are usually to be found.

In one sense, Blanchot's restaging of this myth re-presents both the relation to the other person and the process of literary creativity. The Sphinx does not merely *ask* a riddle but *embodies* one in revealing a certain non-human share of the human being in the experience in which the other person implicates the 'I'. She reveals, indeed, she *is*, insofar as she interrupts what we take her to be, the opening to a certain 'outside'. To respond with the word, 'man', is to shield oneself against the force of the question the Sphinx opens, but it is also to reveal the limits of the subjectivism or egology upon which is based not only the life of the subject or the ego but the practice of philosophy and discourse itself. However, I would also suggest that Blanchot uncovers a *trembling* in the elaborate structure of *Totality and Infinity* that reveals its limits and its systematicity, opening up certain experiences that reconstitute Levinasian ethics. Blanchot would reveal a certain determination that occurs in Levinas's writings with regard to the relation to the Other. Indeed, Blanchot might be said to be *Levinas's Sphinx* insofar as he opens a question about *autrui* that Levinas cannot predict or control.

Writing in his own voice earlier in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot claims that the question of God, like the question of being, is entertained by man only insofar as he turns away from himself as a profound question – 'above all', he writes, 'when he has endeavoured to seize this as an ultimate question [*question ultime*]'.[39] The 'ultimate question', for example, the question of man, the question of being, and the question of God is a way of turning aside what is most uncanny about the bearer of the question. Levinas never uses Biblical authority to justify a philosophical argument, nor does he produce what might in any ordinary sense be called a theology; nevertheless, commenting on the name, God and the notion of the face, Blanchot's

conversationalists suggest that a certain context *is* discernible in Levinasian philosophy. More importantly, Blanchot allows one of his conversationalists to say:

> Perhaps [...] it is time to withdraw [*retirer*] this term *autrui*, while retaining what it has to say to us: that the Other is always what calls upon 'man' (even if only to put him between parentheses or between quotation marks), not the other as God or other as nature but, as 'man' more Other than all that is other [*à l'homme', non pas autre comme Dieu ou autre comme nature, mais, en tant qu''homme', plus Autre que tout ce qu'il y a d'autre*].[40]

Blanchot privileges *l'autre* above *autrui*, indicating a reservation about the parameters within which the other person would be encounterable. Despite his ostensible *renewal* of philosophy, is it not the case that Levinas *flees* the most profound question, fearing it, and in so doing, bringing the relation to the other person within programmable parameters – within a *context*? In expecting or counting upon a certain determination of *l'autre* as *autrui*, does Levinas not attempt to escape an experience that precedes and outstrips the formation of the Levinasian system? By keeping the relation to the other person open, Blanchot exposes the secret desideratum, close to death, to the night and to the outside that organises *Totality and Infinity*. In so doing, he could be said to keep fidelity with what he calls the philosophical in a way that Levinas does not, for is it not a certain 'outside', the 'outside' that the philosopher would *most fear*, to which Blanchot responds in his unbridled, difficult friendship with the philosophical?

Blanchot is not the prophet who would await the good news of *Totality and Infinity*; he is, instead, the prophet who *stays on the move*, refusing to enclose his thought in a philosophy. Blanchot retains a hope to which he refuses to give content, opening his writings to the absolutely new. In writing of God and *autrui* (and perhaps in writing as a philosopher) Levinas would be *too impatient*, determining the form in which the other person, renewal itself, is to be welcomed. The other person, and this would be the metaprescription that Blanchot would uncover, should be affirmed in whatever form it is encountered prior to any kind of contextualisation, anticipation or identification.[41] This *pre-ethical* affirmation, upstream of any ethics, would open the ethical field to the chance of the experience of the other person who is other than the human being. Blanchot calls for an unsettling of an anthropomorphic and, as we will see, *theomorphic* image of the Levinasian

Autrui, pointing towards a receptivity on the part of the human being and, indeed, of Levinas, to the experience of the other. Blanchot can be said to be Levinas's Sphinx in the sense that he is the other person who has breached the horizons, surprised his fore-understanding, slipped beneath the outstretched nets of *Totality and Infinity*. The death of the Sphinx does not prevent her from returning, but this terrifying repetition which is the opening of the most profound question, of the *philosophical*, always brings with it the possibility of an experience that may open any determination of the relation to *autrui* to a dying that exceeds all measure. The good beyond being does not dazzle the one who discerns a darkness at its heart, the night at the heart of the day, the night that has put out the sun.

4
Weary Truth

It is to a *murmur* to which Blanchot's massive *The Infinite Conversation* would bear witness. The murmur, Blanchot tells us in a programmatic essay, is experienced as a cry – a 'cry of needs and protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry – or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls'.[1] One finds the cry of protest inscribed on the walls during the Events of May 1968, but there is also the written cry borne by literary works. For example, writing of Sarraute's *Tropisms*, Blanchot invokes 'the speech of thoughts that are not developed' that nonetheless permits the interruption 'of the interminable that comes to be heard beneath all literature'.[2] He discovers a 'murmur close to monotony' in Beckett's *How it is* and an 'impossible voice' in *Texts For Nothing* that continues to murmur when everything else has been said.[3] We can hear this murmuring cry, if we have ears for it, if we will allow ourselves to listen, in the most ordinary conversation. The conversations, fragmentary writings and extended meditations on various themes that comprise *The Infinite Conversation*, as well as the tale [*récit*] that opens this volume, are all attempts to respond to the singular murmurs that refuse to be subsumed as particulars under some concept, to a *plurality* of cries that, as I will explain, alter the very notion of response. To attend to them, indeed to think them and to think *from* them as Blanchot does in *The Infinite Conversation*, demands, for him, that we refuse to grant an absolute priority to the prevailing conception of the proper development of thinking. The variety of discursive modes and genres in this text would attest to the alteration of notions of language, thinking and responsibility in response to a murmuring cry.

The task of thinking is, Blanchot tells us, to allow all discourse to answer to the non-continuous experience that occurs as thought. He

allows a conversationalist to affirm Alain's claim that 'true thoughts are not developed [*les varies pensées ne se développent pas*]'; the art of thinking would not depend on proof, reasoning or logical sequence since these simply reflect the way in which things are here and now, in a particular culture or society.[4] To learn not to develop thought is, therefore, 'to unmask the cultural and social constraint that is expressed in an indirect yet authoritarian manner through the rules of discursive development: the art of thinking is an art of refusal of the way in which thinking is assumed to operate – a refusal, therefore, of the political, legal and economic order that imposes itself like a second nature'.[5] To think, to have 'true thoughts', does not indicate a simple anti-intellectualism since all spontaneous thinking would still be determined by habits that themselves have to be resisted; our 'second nature' would continue to hold sway.[6] Non-developed thought must allow itself to answer to a certain *demand*.

One might assume that it would be the admirable activity of the intellectual who would speak for all of us in combating the ills of society and decrying the prevailing cultural and social constraints that is the model of Blanchotian thinking. The Blanchotian intellectual does not hold onto speech in order to keep the right of uttering a word beyond the last word, one that would contest the demands that structure the prevailing political, legal and economic order. The word beyond the last one, powerful as it is, is still a *last* word; it still accedes to the demands of a monologue from which Blanchot would break. 'True thoughts question, and to question is to think by interrupting oneself',[7] one of his conversationalists affirms; the ruses of the intellectual to master language, to use it against those who are enfranchised to maintain the social and cultural order and even to turn it upon them is still not to refuse. To allow oneself to be interrupted would mean more than maintaining vigilance over the language one uses in order to resist the ways of thinking that are encoded within it, although such vigilance is also necessary. Indeed, one would not so much interrupt oneself as to allow oneself to be interrupted, that is, to renounce having the last word and, indeed, the very possibility of having last words. To think of or from what cannot be developed is to be surprised, to be opened, exposed, to an experience that cannot be anticipated. To think, to speak, is to be surprised by thought or speech, to respond to what is extraordinary in the very operation of thinking and speaking, that is, reaffirming an event that refuses to allow itself to be thought in terms of the prevailing determinations of our second nature.

It is a question of remembering that to which one has *already* responded and assuming a responsibility in maintaining the singularity of that to which one has responded, which is to say, to thought as discontinuity, as interruption. It is the burden of *The Infinite Conversation* to show how developed thought can answer to a non-developed thought that is the original scene of thinking. It is to do so in the name of a 'plural speech' and an 'advent' of communism. Theory would no longer have the last word and the logic of developed argumentation would reveal its ultimately *political* sanction. The intellectual who aims to debunk theories by offering theories in turn, who would contest the views of those who govern and would advocate the rights of the oppressed and the excluded in view of a developing a political theory, risks confirming the order of discourse so long as he or she fails to attend to thought as discontinuity.

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The Infinite Conversation may appear to evidence, in Blanchot's thought, a turn to the philosophy of Levinas. But in the conversations on *Totality and Infinity*, as we have seen, Blanchot allows his account of the arguments of Levinas's book to be drawn towards his broader concern in *The Infinite Conversation* with the notions of interruption and discontinuity.[8] To think by interrupting oneself, or better, by allowing the play of interruption: Blanchot attends to this experience of thinking in his writings on Levinas insofar as *Totality and Infinity* attests to a suspension of the freedom, agency and independence of the solitary individual. To think *from* the experience of language would be to respond to the situation in which the other person is revealed in my place, that is, to allow a decision to occur which is never in my power to assume as my own. The decision in question is taken as it were in my place by dint of the passivity or capacity to be affected through which I receive the other person. It is as though the other person, the singular *Autrui*, had hollowed out a place in me in advance; as if my encounter with the other person had inscribed itself in me before it happened. All language would attest to a structural receptivity, an opening that renders me vulnerable to the Other.

Yes, but there is also the conception of language and community to which a certain *literature* attests. And there is also Blanchot's reflection on his conversations with Bataille. Recalling his conversations with Bataille, Blanchot remembers neither were free of what he calls the shame implicit in continuous speech, but they were able 'to

offer it another direction [*à un mouvement différent*]'; it was 'through a decision each time renewed' that they were able to maintain the opening that exposes the play of language as such.[9] What does this mean? Blanchot writes that this experience of speech has eluded thinkers until now because they have never attended to the way in which the 'decision' in question affirms itself; indeed, they have 'decided' against this act of attention insofar as they resort to 'the violence of reason that wants to give proof and be right' or 'the violence of the possessive self that wants to extend itself and prevail'.[10] This was a decision against the turn to which his friendship with Bataille bore witness. But how might one affirm the 'decision' in question? Is *conversation, l'entretien*, the model of the speech that would escape the violence of reason as it belongs to the violence of the self as possessor?

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To use language is always and already to have negated the given in order to speak about things, identifying difference, classifying and subsuming the singular under the universality of a word. 'We speak in names', Hegel writes, 'we understand the name lion without requiring the actual vision of the animal, not its image even'; 'the name alone, if we understand it, is the simple and unimaged representation'.[11] Language has already, so to speak, *interiorised* the world; it's sense is predicated upon the negation of things in their empiricity and immediacy, upon a transcendence of the facticity of the world and likewise of the factic particularity of the speaker.

To name the real, the forgettable, the corruptible is to lift it out of corruption, preserving, in the eternal present, the mark and seal of its being; yet it is also to lose what is named in its singularity, its vulnerability, recalling not its object but a simulacrum. Rewriting the famous scene in Plato's *Sophist*, Blanchot imagines an assemblage of sages gathered around the decomposing corpse of Lazarus, squabbling over the question of what death is in its truth. In one sense, death gives us the world again as language: it is 'the gift forever courageous', that would permit us to comprehend what we name, calling *Lazarus venture forth* in order to make death do our bidding. But Blanchot allows another voice to complain that a rotten Lazarus remains in his tomb, untouched by the call. This Lazarus is the figure for the death that cannot be comprehended and thereby deprived of itself; it refuses to become pure negation or to affirm itself 'as a power of being [*un pouvoir*

d'être]' – as that through which 'everything is determined' and 'everything unfolds as a possibility'.[12]

Language seems to promise to give us everything, to grant us infinite power over what we would name, but it also entails the loss of that of which I would speak. This is 'the eternal torment of our language', in which the words I would speak in the first person are turned away from what I would say, in which the now itself, *this* now, has disappeared as soon as I say the word 'now', granting me instead the generality of a 'now' that makes a particular of the unique and thereby dissolves it in its uniqueness.[13] 'There cannot be an immediate grasp of the immediate', Blanchot writes; to speak is to mediate, to exercise force [*puissance*], which means language presupposes a violence, an unmobilisable reserve, figured in the Lazarus who refuses to rise from the dead.[14] To this extent, language is always violent, but it keeps this violence hidden, permitting those who use it to dream of revealing a discourse without violence. It is the *ruse* of language to offer itself up as a transparent medium of communication, to function and order, pretending to lend itself in its entirety to the power of the 'I' when the 'I' is itself an effect of language.

From one perspective, as Hegel understands, it is the 'I' that unifies language as 'a multiplicity of names' with 'multiple connections among them'; the 'I' is 'their universal being, their power, their connection'.[15] But Blanchot argues that it is language that grants the existence of the 'I' who believes language is in his or her power. Language would have attested in advance to a dispersal of the enunciator. The figure for this resistance, for language as it reserves itself in order to allow us to speak in the first person, is the 'other' Lazarus who refuses to heed the command 'Lazarus come forth' that would bring him back to life. This rotten and corrupted Lazarus is a figure for what is lost when language is understood simply as a transparent medium. He is not like his pure and uncorrupted double who has returned *from* the dead because he is alive *in* his death and as such is the figure for a reserve implicit to language, for the death or violence that does not do away with itself in order to grant us the illusion that language is ours.

It would be by reading these remarks on death that one might understand the way in which Blanchot is able to respond to Levinas in *The Infinite Conversation*. Implicit in his account of language is another staging of the relationship between speaking individuals and, in particular, the dissymmetrical, unilateral relation to the other person. This is what allows Blanchot to bring together reflections on Hölderlin's declamations from his window, the suffering of which Artaud writes in

his *Correspondence* with Jacques Rivère and the 'hole word' ['*mot trou*'] of Duras with his lengthy conversations on Levinas. It is by reading and reflecting upon the opening *récit* of *The Infinite Conversation* that one might witness a practice of a writing that would attest and take responsibility for a certain happening of community.

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In 'The Infinite Conversation', the tale that opens the book of the same name, narrates an encounter between two weary men, a host and a guest, who are frustrated in their apparent desire to learn something from this weariness.[16] Both men, the narrator tells us, are *weary* [*fatigué*], and yet 'the weariness common to both of them does not bring them together [*ne les rapproche pas*]'.[17] It is as if, one of them says, 'weariness were to hold up to us the pre-eminent form of truth, the one we have pursued without pause all our lives, but that we necessarily miss on the day it offers itself, precisely because we are too weary'.[18] Weariness would seem to promise something to those who are weary together, that is, a certain exposition of the truth of weariness that would happen as the result of their encounter, but the conversationalists are prevented from grasping what has been opened to them. As the host admits, 'I even took the liberty of calling you […] because of this weariness, because it seemed to me that it would facilitate the conversation'.[19] But the ambition of coming together in order to explore what their common weariness would reveal is frustrated: 'I had not realised that what weariness makes possible, weariness makes difficult'.[20] Weariness opens a space, but prevents this very opening from revealing any truth about weariness.

The conversationalists ask each other what they might have said if they were not quite as weary as they were: if, that is, they were just weary enough to grasp the truth of weariness but not weary enough to grasp hold of this truth, to seize it. It is weariness in its twists and turns – 'I believe we know them all. It keeps us alive' one of them says, but is weariness not another name for life, for survival itself – that brings them together, giving them life and permitting them to speak?[21] But it does so without ever revealing itself as such because it is not something that happens to me as to an intact 'I'. Weariness, one conversationalist tells the other, is 'nothing that has happened to me'[22]: nothing, that is, that has happened to him *in the first person*. Even as the conversationalists attempt to think from and allow their thoughts to answer to weariness, as they continue their fragmentary, hesitant conversation, they

are said to hear a 'background' behind words, that is, the re-echoing of a murmuring that interrupts the words they use to express themselves.[23] It is their weariness that permits this other, plural speech to occur insofar as it precedes the words that are enunciated in the first person.

To what does the narrator refer? The words that would permit the conversationalists to express their thoughts or feelings are interrupted as each speaker in turn is affected by the Other. To speak, for Blanchot, is always to respond to the other person who comes into our world; it is because I cannot help but respond to the other person, because, there is a passivity or receptivity that precedes me, that I am linked to him or her. It is in terms of this passivity that one should understand the difficulty that faces the conversationalists in discussing their weariness. 'I do not reflect, I simulate reflection, and perhaps this matter of dissimulating belongs to weariness'[24]: this sentence, that would seem to refer to a thought of one of the conversationalists, reaffirms the paradox that weariness would be both *revelatory* and *dissimulatory* – the former because it discloses what is at stake in the relation to the other person that obtains as conversation and the latter because the relation in question is never simply available *as* an experience.

When I respond to the other person it is not the content of my speech, that is, *what I say* that is important. As one of the conversationalists notices: 'I do not really speak, I repeat'[25]; it is not a question here of seeking a new way in which weariness might be called to account, yielding up its secrets. In writing of 'a wearing away of every beginning', he indicates the murmur that never as it were *has time* to form itself into a word, that is, to the simple experience that always returns as a refusal of the *subjectivisation* of language, its subordination to the power of the 'I'. Blanchot would have us attend to 'an inconsequential murmur' and no more, to the gap or pause as it refuses to permit language to be reduced simply into a means of expression.[26] The conversationalist cannot express the truth of weariness that arises out of weariness itself, however, what he does bring to expression is a certain interruption that happens *as* weariness.

As the narrator writes of this conversationalist, 'he believes now and then that he has gained the power to express himself intermittently, and even the power to give expression to intermittence'.[27] This speech of intermittence can only be affirmed *through* continual, universal discourse, but it interrupts discourse insofar as the last word is deprived to reason, to the order of continuous speech. These intermittences are not simply contingent interruptions of discourse but expose its condition.

This is why the narrator refers to 'a certain obligatory character' that interposes itself in as an intermittence he would preserve in order to deny the last word to reason: the gap, that is, that permits reason to constitute itself *as* reason through a transcendence of its original situation.[28] Language always refers back to a scene of exposition. The conversation of the weary men recalls us to this intermittence insofar as weariness permits the vulnerability, the *finitude* that language always recalls.

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One might be reminded here of Heidegger's analyses of mood [*Stimmung*], which permit *Dasein* from coming face to face with the null ground of its existence. One cannot bring oneself into this confrontation through an act of will; one is brought before the nothing in anxiety. This analysis is reinscribed in Levinas' early work, but with a difference. Levinas's books are about physical pain, which is why he had *Existence and Existents* bound in a slip which declared that this was not a book about anxiety. But the relationship between mood and disclosure, and what is disclosed is present. How should one understand this difference? This is a book about pain, about the waves of pain which recall cosmogonic accounts of the emergence of the human being from undifferentiated matter. I am not born from the *il y a* as from a primordial pain, but from the suffocating, distanceless proximity to things from which the Other saves me. Pain is the way in which I am reminded of the darkness without repose from which I arose.

This is not, as Levinas emphasises, the generosity of what Heidegger calls the *es gibt*. 'For me the *il y a* has the sense of desolation, of being that is anonymous. There is [*il y a*] being in the same way that it rains [*il pleut*]. In Heidegger *es gibt* signifies a gift. There is a kind of generosity of being. Being is the initial generosity'.[29] Of course, the *es gibt* is never, for Heidegger, totally, unequivocally given. Something is withheld in this giving and withdraws, never permitting the security of a dwelling place unless that dwelling keeps memory of withdrawal. This is what Heidegger remembers when he writes of the *polos* around the Greek hearth that was gathered.[30] What, then, is Levinas getting at?

Where Levinas appears to differ from Heidegger is in his claim that there is neither a subject who experiences the *il y a*, nor any substantives who occupy the void itself. There is no one who can *possess* this empty field of existence. One should recognise possession as

Levinas's word for *Jemeinigkeit*. Indeed Levinas comments, discussing the difference between being and beings in Heidegger, 'Existing is always grasped [*saisi*] in the existent, and for the existent that is a human being. The Heideggerian term *Jemeinigkeit* precisely expresses the fact that existing is always possessed by someone'.[31]

What does this mean? Heidegger explains how the things themselves are bound up with the way in which they are encountered and used in the everyday, familiar environment [*Umwelt*] that forms the context of *Dasein*'s existence. Understanding is therefore automatic and tacit, involving a grasp of a given situation that allows *Dasein* to know what to do there. Things are first experienced within a pre-conceptual contexture, making sense in terms of the possibilities they offer for manipulation or deployment. Thus, *Dasein* has a certain *interest* with that with which it engages. More precisely, 'understanding' must be understood on the basis of *Sein-können*, the 'to-be-able-to-be' of *Dasein*.[32] For *Dasein* understands things in view of certain possibilities that it can fulfil. 'As understanding', Heidegger writes, '*Dasein* projects its being upon possibilities'.[33] *Dasein* understands things as part of an understanding of specific projects and, more generally, as part of a general *self*-understanding. The understanding-of-being is part of a 'being towards oneself' that, Heidegger argues, 'constitutes the being of *Dasein*'.[34] In Heidegger's expression, *Dasein* always and already *transcends* the given and projects itself towards the future. *Dasein*'s activities must always be grasped in terms of its overall concern for itself. *Dasein* is a worldly being, whose self-understanding is part of its understanding of being.

Levinas acknowledges that existing is, for Heidegger, always 'possessed' by someone. Such 'possession' does not refer to something that belongs to one in the sense of having something as one's own or in one's control; I do not own being as I would a piece of property. Nor does it mean that beings only exist when *Dasein* is around to perceive them. To avoid idealising or anthropomorphising the expression 'mineness', it is necessary to think the double relation that runs from being to *Dasein* and from *Dasein* to being – the relation that cannot be reduced to the epistemological distinction between subject and object since it cannot be polarised into an abstract opposition. The difference between being and *Dasein* as it opens in this originally determinative relation that Heidegger calls mineness substantialises neither term. *Dasein* is not privileged as the foundation of being in the way that Heidegger will argue the Cartesian *subiectum* assumes the place of the Greek *hypokeimenon*.[35] But nor, on the other hand, is being privileged

in such a way that *Dasein* is simply a moment of the unfolding of being. There is, as Levinas writes, a distinction between being and *Dasein* and not a separation: they must be thought together. Without this distinction, Heidegger cannot begin his attempt to broach the question of the truth of being.

Levinas introduces the notion of the *il y a* by inviting us to entertain the following thought experiment:

> let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [*il y a*]. The absence of everything returns as presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal 'field of forces' of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive.[36]

The imaginary destruction of every being is, analogous to a reversal of those cosmologies which trace the emergence of a world out of the differentiation of primal matter. Beneath such beings and things, Levinas argues we can discover the original form of the given, the desolation of the *il y a*, understood as the paradoxical 'presence' of existence itself, free from all reference to existents.

Where Levinas appears to differ from Heidegger in the claim that there is neither a subject who experiences the *il y a*, nor any substantives who occupy the void itself. There is no one present who can *possess* this empty field of existence. From this perspective, the notion of mineness is but a resurgence of the old idea of the ego, whose unity would synthesise the pell-mell of chaos into the unity of a world. Heidegger's *Dasein* would be but the last in a long line of conceptions of the human being as a unitary 'subject' that stands over against an 'objective' realm. He has not reached far enough in order to lay bare the original milieu in which the idealised realms of 'subject' and 'object' are first formed and into which they dissolve.

As Levinas writes, 'the fact of existence […] is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself. It is impersonal like "it is raining" or "it is hot"'.[37] Levinas compares the fact that there is, *il y a*, with phrases like *il pleut* [it is raining], *il fait nuit* [it is dark] or *il fait chaud* [it is hot], in which the *il* [the *it*] does not refer to a personal subject. All that remains, according to Levinas is 'the very work of being', that is, the field of existence that 'is never attached

to an *object that is*'.[38] On this account, existence is but the surge and flow of the void, the work of the '*il*' before discrete existents come into existence.

Now Heidegger would agree with Levinas that being can be possessed neither by a subject nor a substantive, but he would disagree with the claim that being could be completely detached from *Dasein*. As he writes, 'only so long as *Dasein is* (that is, only as long as an understanding of being is ontically possible), "is there" being ["*gibt es*" *Sein*]'.[39] Hence, as Heidegger argues, being 'is', which is to say, is only given in the donation of the 'there is' [*es gibt*], insofar as *Dasein* exists. Levinas asks us to hear both sense of the German phrase, *es gibt*, that is, 'it gives' and 'there is' in the French *il y a*. As for Levinas, the '*es*' or 'it' of this phrase is, for Heidegger, impersonal, in the sense that it does not refer to anything substantive. But for Heidegger, such an originary giving of being is unthinkable without the being who understands being as such and in general.

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas compares his notion of existence to Cratylus's version of the Heraclitean flux, wherein one cannot step into this river even *once*, since 'the very fixity of unity, the form of every existent, cannot be constituted'.[40] For Heidegger, by contrast, there would be no 'river' at all if *Dasein* was not there in advance. Whilst Levinas' notion of the *il y a* appears to refer to a plenum that does not permit existents to retain their determinate existence, Heidegger's notion of the *es gibt* refers to a primary unity or wholeness, that is, the structure of *Dasein*'s mineness, without which being could not be. From Heidegger's perspective, Levinas's notion of the *il y a* presupposes a donation that has already occurred as the *es gibt*. Both the being of Cratylus's river and the being of the thinker who would step into this river are always and already in the gift of the Heideggerian *es gibt*. On this account, the *il y a*, the Cratylean river itself, has a deeper source than Levinas suspects, since it flows only because *Dasein* is *there*, as it were, to understand it. Yet whilst, for Levinas, it is at least *possible* to imagine the *il y a* that is 'beneath' or 'before' everything, the notion of the *il y a* remains inconceivable in the framework of the philosophy of Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Levinas is aware of this, acknowledging that for Heidegger, he writes, 'existing is always grasped in the existent' and the notion of an existing without existents would remain 'absurd'.[41] How, then, should one understand it?

Perhaps one might use another passage from Levinas to illuminate this, in which he discusses what Heidegger calls *Geworfenheit*, thrownness, that is the fact that *Dasein's* existence is pre-given such that it is

always 'there' in a particular situation, understanding and thereby taking a stand on what exists in its vicinity. Levinas writes:

> there is a notion – *Geworfenheit* […] that is usually translated 'dereliction' [*déréliction*] or 'desertion' [*délaissement*]. One then stresses a consequence of *Geworfenheit*. One must understand *Geworfenheit* as the 'fact-of-being-thrown-in' … existence. It is as if [*comme si*] the existent appeared only in an existence that precedes it, as if existence were independent of the existent, and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence. It is precisely because of this that there is desertion and abandonment [*abandon*]. Thus dawns the idea of an existing that occurs without us, without a subject, an existing without existents.[42]

What is striking about this passage is the apparent equivocation indicated in the use of the phrase, 'as if'. It appears that for Levinas, the notion of thrownness is particularly important because it allows an intimation of what can be *taken* to be, and thus what is not necessarily, an existence without existents. Thus, it is simply *as if* existents first come to being within a general field of existence that precedes them, *as if* thrown *Dasein* has been subject to abandonment or desertion. What is Levinas indicating here? *Dasein* does not throw itself, it *is thrown*. *Dasein* cannot, as it were, leap back behind its thrownness. So why does Levinas use the locution 'as if'? He is not making the strong claim that *Dasein* existed *before* it was thrown, that there is an experience which precedes and withholds itself from the understanding-of-being. But the understanding-of-being also includes an opening to a reserve which does not appear as such. It would be easy to show the injustice done to Heidegger, but it is more important to understand what Levinas indicates when he claims 'for me the *il y a* has the sense of desolation, being that is anonymous'.

It is the anonymity and impersonality of being Blanchot's work foregrounds, according to Levinas. To recall: 'in Blanchot, *the work [of art] uncovers, in an uncovering that is not truth*, a darkness'. Yet in the *récit* that opens *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot breaks, as we will see, from both Levinas and Heidegger, by invoking the impossible *truth of weariness*, arguing that the neuter, understood as the 'I' that yields its place to the 'he' or the 'it', the '*il*', in the response to the Other, reveals itself in the experience of weariness. As he has one of his conversationalists say: 'It is weariness that makes me speak; it is, at the very most, the truth of weariness. The truth of weariness, a weary

truth'.[43] Weariness would show us as truth what is involved in being with others, that is, in the experience of language that happens as conversation.

How should one understand this? Truth, for Levinas, institutes the ethical order. As we have seen, the horror of the *il y a*, for Levinas, is that the 'I' who appears to be able to master objects, to leap beyond beings, maintaining its opening to the future, is *unable to be able*, that is, to draw upon its own powers, indeed, the power of its own capacity to be, that appears to render the world experienceable and separated out as a subject from an object of experience. One should not, according to Levinas, understand the opening to the Other as belonging either to the opening of the subject to the world or the opening of the world to the subject. It is a break in that double opening, an absolute surprise. Whilst the chance of the experience in which the trembling of the being of the world, the *il y a*, gives itself to be experienced, it is inscribed in the very opening of the subject to the world; the chance of the encounter with the Other happens as an *absolute* interruption. But it happens such that it appears to reach 'behind' being, and can no longer be understood in terms of the origin, of the springing forth of the world. This is what Levinas calls its 'anterior posteriority'[44] or the 'posteriority of the anterior'.[45] The opening to the Other does not just suspend the movement of time like the *il y a*, but *dephases* it. But this dephasure is, in some sense, the condition of possibility for the separation of subject and object such that the world grants itself to an experiencing subject. This is difficult indeed. The *a posteriori* encounter seems to situate itself with respect to the field of experience as its condition, as if it were *a priori*. It is as though the subject, encountering the Other, has encountered what rendered this encounter possible. Levinas is not, as in his account of the opening to the Other, trying to indicate something implicit to my experience of things, but drawing out attention towards an eminent relation that as it were gives the world to me anew, analogous in some ways to the great repetition through which Job, after his tribulations, receives the world in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. But this analogy is perhaps misleading, since what was given was already present, revealing itself subsequently as the hidden condition of experience. However, to realise that the opening to the Other recalls the opening of the world, that I can experience myself as distinct from the world around me because of the wonder of the face, is indeed to have received the world anew. One might say that there is a *bad* repetition of the order of enjoyment, the *il y a*, and a *good* one, that reveals itself in the opening to the Other, but these are not, for Levinas, recto

and verso of the same page. The latter, though it also interrupts my powers and the very field of what would be possible for me is not endured as horror but as *wonder*, as the 'traumatism of astonishment'.[46] It is not experienced as the disruption of my relationship to things and to the world, but as a kind of *reinvestment* of that relationship. It is not, finally, the dissolution of the 'I' into impersonality, but the summons for the 'I' to take responsibility for the Other, assuming itself insofar as it assumes this responsibility.

The opening to the Other, to the face, is the wonder in which the world is illumined – the same wonder, for Levinas, to which the Greeks traced the origin of philosophy. Philosophy, the search for truth, is possible because of this opening. The sciences, likewise, receive their momentum, in Levinas's words, from the *sincerity* of the face. And yet science cannot conceptualise the ethical *mise en scene*; it cannot keep memory of the investiture of truth that allows a world to become experienceable. It is philosophy which keeps memory of the wondrous opening, who understands that the light of phenomena is not solely the light of the appearing of phenomena. That light shines from the face, from the wonder of the face.

For Blanchot, the opening to the Other must be understood in proximity to the *il y a*. This opening is not a dephasing of time, but the suspension or elongation of the instant when I no longer 'have time' in which to enjoy the world. It would be *bad* repetition, for Levinas, since it brings only what returns at the heart of every relation I have with the world, the horror that waits at the heart of enjoyment. All is vanity: pleasures and pomp, wisdom and justice are as nothing not because time is short but because there is too much time.

One might remember Levinas's positioning of Blanchot as a thinker of a certain *errancy*, or, better, who emphasises a certain errancy over what Heidegger would call the truth of being: 'in Heidegger's view, truth – a primordial disclosure – conditions all wanderings, and that is why all that is human can be said, in the final analysis, in terms of truth – be described as 'disclosure of being'. In Blanchot, *the work [of art] uncovers, in an uncovering that is not truth,* a darkness'.[47] I have already indicated the role Levinas accords Blanchot's own work: it would dethrone the happy presence of disclosure by emphasising what withholds itself in that disclosure. But was Heidegger not aware of this self-withholding? Is it not the enclosed, the withdrawn, the *lethe* of which his notion of truth would keep memory? Levinas suggests that one would understand Blanchot's position as an adjustment of the

relationship between world and earth so that what Heidegger would call creation or institution would no longer be possible. Earth does not overwhelm world altogether, but, as it were, obtrudes more violently in the very coming to presence of the world, shattering any city that would rise from the plain.

Errancy, exile: these are words Blanchot affirms, which seem to answer to the wandering Israelites of the Old Testament, who caused the walls of Jericho to tumble. It is as if what Levinas calls the Heideggerian city were defeated not by another great city, but by a band of wanderers.[48] Here, one might remember the lines in *The Unavowable Community* where, when writing of the 'people of Paris' who gathered in memory of those killed at the Charonne Metro, Blanchot claims they are 'the bastardised imitation of God's people', who are 'rather similar to what could have been the gathering of the children of Israel in view of the Exodus if they had gathered while at the same time forgetting to leave'.[49] Here, he does more than claim that the *il y a* occurs as an interruption of subjective agency. Is it possible to assert that truth, for Blanchot, happens in a communal event that, as for Levinas, must be thought in terms of the play of unilateral, dissymmetrical and traumatic openings to the Other? Here, this opening is no longer thinkable as an opening beyond being or as the opening of the ethical. Truth, on this account, would be understood in terms of an event in which being gives itself to be thought not by a self-present, intact thinker, but in a traumatic experience such that the thinker is unable to retrieve such an experience as a foundation. Such, perhaps, would be the play or game of thinking. For Levinas, who claims to find no trace of the ethical in Blanchot, and therefore no sign of what he would call truth, this would be to accede to meaninglessness, to a suffering without sense, depriving the world of the source of its illumination. Blanchot's work does not await the dawning of Levinasian philosophy in order to understand itself.

Levinas's claim that the dissymmetrical relation between the 'I' and the other person is a relation of *language* is subjected, by Blanchot, to a subtle but profound alteration. Literature, for him, bears witness to another experience of language, which renders this witnessing more equivocal than Levinas would like. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot argues that literature enacts a certain *non-developed* and *interruptive thinking* which has its own relationship with truth. The experience of weariness permits Blanchot to indicate a difference in language, showing how every pause in the course of the give and take of what one ordinarily calls a conversation is a figure of a more

abysmal intermittency. Is this not to dissolve meaning and truth back into the pell-mell of the *il y a*? As we have seen, even as he refuses to follow Levinas in calling the opening to the Other the opening of the good, Blanchot can still present the opening as a kind of greeting which interrupts social relations. For Levinas, this opening institutes the ethical order, orientating me towards truth; philosophy can begin because the face is the original source of what the Greeks called wonder. For Blanchot, the opening institutes nothing. The Other is the interruption which occurs only as what Levinas would claim is an errancy that cannot be brought to truth.

There is no Blanchotian truth that would occur in the coming into relation of being and thinking. Truth, for him, whether understood as the adequation of being and thinking, as the disclosure of the truth of being, or as the wondrous encounter with the Other, is always out of reach. It is not truth that happens when I pass from the first to the third person, but the event which, as it were, sets truth astray. As I have said, Blanchot is not attempting to counter the thought of either Heidegger or Levinas with a philosophy of his own, trumping the question of the meaning of being or the opening of the ethical with a great question of equal gravity. The most profound question is not the ultimate question: it does not demand the composition of another great philosophical work but indicates, rather, the way in which such works are themselves unworked. I will return to this point. But it remains to explore what it means to invoke a communal event, the advent of communism.

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The *récit* discloses what Blanchot allows a conversationalist to call in another essay 'a tangling of relations', a 'redoubling of irreciprocity', a double 'distortion', 'discontinuity' or 'dissymmetry'.[50] The weariness of the conversationalists is a sign of their receptivity or passivity before the experience of the other person as the other person, but since either of them can be *Autrui* for the other, an exchange of places is always possible, in which both might be exposed in their selfhood in the unilateral experience of *Autrui*. The interrelation is complex: the other person is, for himself, never a self, just as I am, for him, never an identifiable 'I'. When I am *Autrui* for him, he, likewise, never retains a tranquil self-identity; he meets *Autrui*, the Other I have become for him, in an experience that he never undergoes as an intact 'I'. This is why Blanchot does not content himself with retaining the model of

dialogue which would remain, for him, a *conversation of equals*; what is important is not the reciprocity or mutuality of speaking 'I's or the give or take of what we usually call conversation, but a relation that is dissymmetrical on both sides.

The interruption of the separation of conversationalists does not indicate, as it might for Levinas, the irruption of the good into the closed order of being. If there is a wavering of separation, it is the suspension of the *temporalisation* of being. The emphasis on double dissymmetry in Blanchot no doubt takes up the passages that suggest a double *a*symmetry in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.[51]

A space opens between us, but this space can also open for the other person. It is the investiture of truth, providing meaning and orientation. But for Blanchot, this is not the opening of truth but a kind of suffocation which reveals the field of forces in which I am unable to take up a position. Of course, for Levinas, the opening to the Other bestows place. The place where I am is already the usurpation of the place of the Other. For Blanchot, the relation to the Other reveals not my usurpation, but the usurpation of *all* places. This, for Levinas, is to dissolve everything back the chaos of the *il y a* from which the relation to the Other saves us by granting us the distance from things such that world is experienceable. For Blanchot, however, the *il y a* is indissociable from the address of the Other. The disclosure of the Other is closer to what Bataille calls communication.

Perhaps one can understand this by reading 'God and Philosophy' in which Levinas precisely leaves a place open for Blanchot the atheist to find the *il y a* in the Other and not *illeity*, Levinas's word for the glory of God. Levinas coins the word illeity in order to indicate the way in which God is transcendent. Illeity refers to the coming to pass of the infinite: to infinitude as 'the only positive predicate of God'.[52] It is this infinitude that, he writes, 'remains a third person, the *he* in the depth of the You'.[53] But what, then, of the relation between illeity, the 'he' or '*il*' of God as it is revealed in the face of the Other, and the *il y a*, the impersonal '*il*' of existence? What is particularly generous about Levinas's work, opening it to re-readings and re-negotiations, is the way in which he does not shelter his texts from the ambiguity of transcendence:

> God is not simply the "first other", the other par excellence, or the "absolutely other", but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical

> bond with the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *il y a*.[54]

Levinas's God, the '*il*' who passes in illeity, might be confused with another '*il*', that is, the '*il*' of the *il y a*. It is to Levinas's sentences from "God and Philosophy" to which Blanchot draws attention: 'he gives us a presentiment that, without being another name for the Other (always other than the Other, "other otherwise"), the infinite transcendence, the transcendence of the infinite, to which we try to subject God, will always be ready to veer off "to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *il y a*"'.[55] A few lines later, he adds: 'the "*il y a*" is one of Levinas's most fascinating propositions. It is his temptation, too, since as the reverse of transcendence it is not distinct from it either'.[56] Blanchot *is* tempted; illeity, for him, is confusable for the *il y a*, transcendence with the reverse of transcendence.

What does this mean? As we have seen, both Levinas and Blanchot present the opening to the Other as a kind of *address*. For Levinas, my response to this address institutes the ethical order, orienting me towards truth. Philosophy can begin; the face is the opening of wonder, *thaumazein*. For Blanchot, the encounter institutes nothing. Communication is sheer exposure. Here, weariness or fatigue does not disclose, as for Heidegger, the temporal transcendence of *Dasein*, which would hold it out into the nothing. No such transcendence can occur for Blanchot, who understands the temporality of the exposure to the Other in terms of a wearying repetition. In place of Heidegger's temporal transcendence and Levinas's ethical transcendence there is the repetition of a communal event, which Blanchot calls variously the communitarian exigence, the advent of communism and, as we will see, friendship.

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How, then, has Blanchot transformed Levinas's philosophy? One might turn to a passage in which Blanchot allows a conversationalist to introduce the question of *community* in place of Levinas's *Autrui*:

> if the question 'Who is *autrui*?' has no direct meaning, it is because it must be replaced by another: 'What of the human "community", when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man – a relation without common measure, an exorbitant

> relation – that the experience of language [*l'expérience du langage*] leads one to sense?'[57]

The emphasis here is no longer on the unilateral relation from the 'I' to the Other, but upon the criss-crossing of doubly dissymmetrical relations in what Blanchot calls community or friendship. Community happens in the contentless repetition of the *il y a*, in the play that undoes each participant as an intact subject.

In his anonymous writings circulated during the Events, Blanchot presents communism in terms of the call of or from a certain exteriority, paraphrasing Marx: 'the end of alienation can only begin if man agrees to go out from himself (from everything that constitutes him as interiority): out from religion, the family and the State'.[58] Blanchot suggests that this exodus, this communism, might be understood in terms of a response to the other person. This is how one might read the claim in the preface to *The Infinite Conversation* that this book affirms a communism insofar as it is called upon 'to undo the discourse in which, however unhappy we believe ourselves to be, who have it at our disposal remain comfortably installed'.[59]

Writing of his conversations with Bataille and, more broadly, reflecting on conversation in general, Blanchot avers, 'one could say of these two speaking men that one of them is necessarily the obscure "*Autrui*"; but who, he asks, is *Autrui*?'[60] The answer comes: 'the one who, in the greatest human simplicity, is always close to that which cannot be close to "me": close to death, close to the night [*proche de ce qui ne peut 'm''être proche: proche de lar mort, proche de la nuit*]'.[61] The one, that is, to whom I am bound in an experience of language that is always shared, that takes place in and indeed *as a community*, so long as the notions of sharing and community are transformed along with our notion of language.

When Bataille and Blanchot speak, the 'other' Lazarus also affirms his presence and his demand – the conversationalists are never bound to one other as two intact, unaltered individuals who share a conversation but are co-implicated by its movement. Blanchot tells us such conversations allow an essential 'accord' that set him and Bataille apart that cannot be reduced to something held in common by two individuals.[62] Rather, a certain experience of language is affirmed in such a way that neither conversationalist could be said to be present to himself as an intact, self-present 'I'. The encounter with the other person takes place in the continuity of the world by interrupting this continuity, introducing an essential discordance between the 'I' and

Autrui as they come face to face. The experience of language that surprises and turns me aside in the encounter with the other person withdraws even as it seems to promise to emerge into the open once and for all. Addressing the other person, the "I" has already been turned from itself by the depth of strangeness, of inertia, irregularity and worklessness to which Blanchot refers. *One cannot but respond* – but one does so not as an agent, a self-present 'I', but as 'no one', as an '*il*' without personal attributes. The 'I' responds to a murmuring cry.

However, the fact that the relation to the other person is unilateral and dissymmetrical means that there can never be any guarantee that this relation is reciprocated. A double dissymmetry happens only by happy chance; it can never be programmed in advance. Blanchot is aware of this, describing the conversations he shared with Bataille as a *game of thought*, whose partners play by letting an opening be affirmed in their place. The identity, the biography or personality of the participants is not at issue; each player is staked in his identity and the relationship between them can no longer be determined according to any ordinary category of social relation. Upstream of their will, of their conscious intentions, each player is affirmed, which is to say, an affirmation opens in their place, in their opening to the unknown that is their response to the other person. In this sense, the conversationalist is not free to decide whether to play or not to play. Blanchotian conversation is an open-ended play with no aim other than playing; it is not the outcome of a fixed will, a decision that can be voluntarily undertaken. *It happens* and it has always happened. Determinations of sociality, of what is held in common, *come too late* to attend to the stirring of an opening that interrupts all familiar relations.

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One might say Blanchot has subjected Levinas's thought to a repetition which alters its course, that *Totality and Infinity*, is turned over to the play of thought in the give and take of the conversations of *The Infinite Conversation*. In that same text, Blanchot allows a conversationalist to invoke an occasion where one man appears simply to *repeat* what another man said:

> I recall being present at a conversation between two men who were very different from one another. One would say in simple and profound sentences some truth had taken to heart; the other would listen in silence, then when reflection had done its work he would

> in turn express some proposition, sometimes in almost the same words, albeit slightly differently (more rigorously, more loosely or more strangely). This redoubling of the same affirmation constituted the strongest of dialogues. Nothing was developed, opposed or modified; and it was manifest that the first conversationalist learned a great deal, and even infinitely, from his own thoughts repeated – not because they were adhered to and agreed with, but, on the contrary, through the infinite difference. For it as though what he said in the first person as an "I" had been expressed anew by him as "other" [*autrui*] and as though he had thus been carried into the very unknown of his thought: where his thought, without being altered, became absolutely other [*l'autre*].[63]

This is not the sterile repetition that would show us all is vanity, that there can be nothing new under the sun, but a repetition which permits a difference to appear, that is, the play of the non-actualisable within the actual, the absent within the present. Is this what one can discern in the play of conversation between Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*? Blanchot goes further. To repeat what is said, to say it again, is already to have altered what is said insofar as these words are said by another. The play of relations in which language is caught always makes a difference in what in said.

Let us take another example. Writing of his clashes with the examining magistrate who sought to prosecute him in the wake of the publication of the *Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War* (also known as the *Manifesto of the 121*), written to support the right of French convicts to refuse to serve during the Algerian War, Blanchot recalls:

> After I had finished giving my statement, the examining magistrate wanted to dictate it to the clerk of the court: 'No, no', I said, 'you will not substitute your words for my own. I do not wish to question your good faith, but you have a manner of speaking that I cannot accept'. He insisted. 'I will not sign'. – 'We will do without your signature then, and the inquiry will resume in some other place'. Eventually he gave in and allowed me to restate the exact same words I had uttered earlier.[64]

When Blanchot, the accused, speaks, what he says is different from what the examining magistrate would dictate to the clerk of the court not because of a difference in the content of what was said, but

because of the place of each speaker within certain networks of power. We believe we are able to speak and to write, to listen and to read in our own name. And yet, as Blanchot shows, none of us can be said to *possess* language, making it do our bidding, allowing us to subordinate it as a vehicle for the transportation of meaning. We are each possessed by the field of forces and powers with which language is always associated. Whence the ironic gesture of the torturer who would, through violence, demand his victim speak in the name of truth. 'This violence, perfected or camouflaged by technique, wants one to speak, wants speech. Which speech? Not the speech of violence – unspeaking, false through and through, logically the only one it can hope to obtain – but a true speech, free and pure of all violence'.[65]

It is not only the clarity of truth to which one should strive in the name of an ethics or a politics, but also towards an awareness of the way in which truth is already missed, that it is in preserving the place of a certain errancy, in remembering that such places open, that the intellectual finds the opening of responsibility to which it is necessary to respond. It is necessary to pay close attention to those moments in which power no longer attempts to dissimulate its play. But it is also necessary to attend to those moments when I am dispossessed, when I am no longer a node in existing networks of power. This is what the response to the work of art reveals, according to Blanchot. Before the work, I am no longer able to master myself, to gather myself up. I am overwhelmed.

Is this a simple accession to nihilism, that is, the reduction of the glories of culture to the ash pile on which we weep like Job? But Blanchot gives us the world anew because he allows a space for the future to breathe in the world. It is the play of this futurity which breaks each instant from the deathly repetition of the past. One might remember a piece of Graffiti from May 1968 which, Blanchot reminds us, originated in the Talmud: 'It is forbidden to grow old'.[66] Do not grow old. Heed the repetition in which the world is given to us anew when we are reminded that the place from which we speak is already an act of usurpation. One might remember, here, the lines in which Blanchot invokes a 'muffled call', a call that is 'nevertheless joyful' – 'the cry of children playing in the garden: 'who is me today?', 'who holds the place of me?' and the answer, joyful, infinite: *il, il, il*'.[67]

What does this allow us to understand concerning the repetition of certain propositions of *Totality and Infinity* in the play of the conversations of *The Infinite Conversation*? One might note that Blanchot's conversationalists claim to prefer the word *the stranger* to *the Other*,[68]

interruption to *distance*[69] and reject the word *the ethical* altogether.[70] More profoundly, by affirming *Totality and Infinity* in the body of *The Infinite Conversation*, the conversationalists have already ripped Levinas's text from its moorings. This is not because Blanchot, here, is simply wielding his authority over *Totality and Infinity*, revealing the weaknesses of Levinas's position or the shortcomings of his approach, but because he is showing how the organisation of this text already supposes an act of authority on the part of its author.

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The conversations on *Totality and Infinity* occur in the vicinity of a more general concern with the murmur to which literature would bear witness. One must understand the demand of what Blanchot calls communism as it joins the relation to the Other which obtains as community, to the experience of language to which literature attests.

Invoking the notion of a 'literary communism', in order to characterise Bataille's affirmation of his writing as an attempt to answer from the call of community, Blanchot writes:

> it is necessary to recall that the reader *is not a simple reader*, free in regard to what he reads. He is desired, loved, and perhaps intolerable. He cannot know what he knows, and he knows more than he knows. He is a companion who gives himself over to abandonment [*s'abandone à l'abandon*], who is himself lost and who at the same time remains at the edge of the road the better to disentangle what is happening and which therefore escapes him.[71]

This passage recalls the discussion of reading in *The Space of Literature*, where, as we have seen, Blanchot argues that the literary work is structurally open insofar as it is exposed, as a mesh of text, to an infinitude of possible readings. Bataille's attitude to his writing is singular since he would bear what is so difficult for the writer to bear, that is, his estrangement from the work as soon as it is written. The text plays itself out of the hands of any particular reader, including its writer. It is the possibility of being read that would allow the work of art to exist, to complete itself, but it is the structural impossibility of determining the text through this reading that prevents this completion. Bataille would allow his work to be exposed to a community of unknown readers whom he desires or loves *because* they would alter his work by reading it, granting it a new direction.

In a foreword to two republished tales written in the same year as the publication of *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot recalls his horror in learning that Bataille was to republish his own tale *Madame Edwarda*, which had at that time been published in a limited edition under a pseudonym, with a sequel. 'I blurted out: "It's impossible. I beg of you, don't touch it"'.[72] Bataille did not prevent himself from publishing a preface to the tale. But more generally, as Blanchot emphasises, Bataille always embraced the incompletability of his work, dreaming of the 'impossible community [*l'impossible communanté*]' that would exist between him and any possible reader.[73] The advent of communism happens in a writing that tears itself away from any tradition of reception, which shares nothing with the institution we call literature even as it must, in accordance with its structure, permit itself to be welcomed *as* literature. This is why, according to Blanchot, when Bataille added an introduction under his own name to the pseudonymously published *Madame Edwarda*, he did not compromise the 'absolute nature' of this text. It remains a text that refuses admiration, reflection, or comparison with other works; it refuses itself to 'literature' understood as an institution in which writing is made to bear a certain cultural weight. What remains, according to Blanchot, 'is the nakedness of the word "writing", a word no less powerful than the feverish revelation of what for one night, and forever after that, was *Madame Edwarda*'.[74]

These remarks can also be applied to the tale that opens *The Infinite Conversation* since no amount of commentary can absolutely determine its sense. The equivocal revelation of truth as weariness, of weary truth, in Blanchot's own tale is a figure of the reader's encounter with this tale in its enigmatic self-giving and self-withdrawal. This tale is not to be read as an allegory about what Blanchot calls conversation since it happens *just as* conversation, maintaining the *entretien*, the happening of community, even as the conversationalists discuss the doubly dissymmetrical relation to the Other. In this sense, like the conversations themselves, it both lends and withdraws itself from my reading, escaping any commentator. It is his *awareness* of the resistance of the artwork to reading that distinguishes Blanchot's critical practice and allows him to recognise an echo of this practice in Bataille's writing.

The struggle between reader and work repeats the double gesture of welcoming and abandonment that characterise the encounter with the Other. Just as one can read and relate what one reads to an item of cultural prestige, one can relate to the other person by classifying him or her, for example, as a priest or an untouchable, as a worker or a

boss, a teacher or a pupil. But the structural lability inherent in both the receptivity of the reader to the work and the receptivity of the 'I' to the other person runs up against the alterity of the work and the other person. The relation to this alterity is at stake in *both* kinds of experience.

Blanchot's essays on literature do not advocate a kind of *mutism* – an *apoliticism* or *atheoreticism* that would manifest itself by opting out of speech, of society. *Not* to speak would be to confirm, albeit in silence, the predominance of the monological discourse that cannot interrupt itself and refuses interruption, determining what mutism is and can be, tolerating it without allowing it to alter speech and the social and cultural conditions to which it answers. *One has to speak*; this is why the eyewitness journalist is admirable, why documentaries are essential; it is why those who are denied a voice should be given one, why speech is a need, even a *right* and we have to listen out for other voices and assume the responsibility of speaking for others who cannot speak, to write on local and specific issues, to engage in discussion in view of particular injustices. Yes, one has to speak, but the 'has to' of this prescription should be located upstream of a normative rule.

Blanchot argues that speech itself, developed thought, is already linked to a meta-prescription insofar as it responds to a prior and conditioning event. This would be the responsibility of thought which, for him, no longer recalls an internal or external demand that would direct us towards responsible action. Each of us, Blanchot claims, is *originarily* responsive; I have always and already given way; I am responsible when the other is revealed '*in place* of me [*au* lieu *de moi*]', that is, in place of myself as a subject who can resolve to act.[75] I am responsible in the Blanchotian sense to the extent that I attend to the response that occurs as a function of my *structural* receptivity, my passivity or susceptibility to certain experiences. This is why Blanchot argues that speech always implies a betrayal or irresponsibility; speaking is shameful or irresponsible through and through insofar as each of us speaks without acknowledging the response that has already taken place in our place. It is to address this shame and recall language to its responsibility that Blanchot would attempt to answer to the demand of non-developed thought.

One has to speak; as Blanchot writes, 'in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent'.[76] But what does this mean with respect to the communitarian exigence? With what words might we meet it? At the end of *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot entrusts this question to his readers. But he has already given them part of the response

in his own practice of writing. For one must meet this demand with words that do not disavow the fact that they are words; with a practice of writing which does not disavow its own textuality. One must meet it by allowing oneself to be turned to an indeterminable experience that vouchsafes itself in the work and the encounter of the other person alike. To converse with Blanchot in turn would mean to maintain and prolong the demand to which its pages bear witness: to write and to talk, yes, but to do so by keeping memory of the responsibility that bears thought without keeping it safe. But how does one think the encounter with the work and with the other person together, as Blanchot demands?

5
Philosophy Unbound

> Philosophy would henceforth be our companion day and night, even by losing its name, by becoming literature, scholarship, the lack thereof, or by standing aside. It would be the clandestine friend we always respect, loved, which meant we were not bound to it – all the while giving us to believe that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, not due to our difficult friendship. Philosophy or love. But philosophy is precisely not an allegory.[1]

I will not pretend to give an exegesis of these difficult lines from Blanchot's 'Our Clandestine Companion' concerning his friendship with Levinas, and the relationship to philosophy that was at issue for them in their friendship. I would simply like to ask what it means to suggest with Blanchot that philosophy becomes literature. I will argue that the question of friendship arises with respect to the singularity that is at issue when, with Blanchot, philosophy is claimed by a becoming-literature, or, better, when the philosophical text reveals the way in which it is bound to an experience of language that is foregrounded in an exemplary sense in literature. Philosophy, in this experience, is wagered by its own discursive procedures. It can no longer maintain the alibi of desiring the transparency of discourse for its own sake, but reveals the play of another desire in the philosophical text. One might follow Blanchot in calling this desire *l'amitié*, friendship, showing how the *philein* to which the word philosophy is etymologically linked leads it not towards *sophon*, allowing it to dream of the completion of knowledge, but towards another practice, which no longer pretends to leap over its own textuality as over its shadow. This permits a rereading of philosophical texts, exposing the play of *philein*,

or what Blanchot might call the impossibility of *philein*, designating by this the suspension of the movement towards wisdom to which this desire is bound in philosophy. But it also allows us to understand Blanchotian commentary as a way of attesting to the becoming-literature of philosophy, to a practice of thinking unbound from the subordination of medium to message.

This is what becomes visible in the cluster of essays Blanchot writes on the occasion of Bataille's death, where he meditates upon the relationship between friendship and the play of thought.

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'Friendship', the essay we find at the end of the book that bears the same name as this short text, is as enigmatic as any of Blanchot's essays. Clearly, it does not readily accommodate itself to the genre of the memorial essay. Rather than granting his readers certain confidences about the particularities of his relation to this friend, no details of this friendship appear. Blanchot reflects on what the death of the friend reveals about friendship itself.

The text commences:

> How could one agree to speak of this friend? Neither in praise nor in the interest of some truth. The traits of his character, the forms of his existence, the episodes of his life, even in keeping with the search for which he felt himself responsible to the point of irresponsibility, belong to no one [*n'appartiennent à personne*].[2]

Blanchot immediately sets aside that which we might expect would recall us to a friend, that is, his character, the story that could be recounted of his life. Here, where the friend in question has been engaged on a certain search, where the friend is an author, a writer, speaking of him is doubly difficult. To speak of this friend would require that one invoke 'no one', a placeholder for a person, who, in a sense I will specify, underlies the idiosyncrasies, the anecdotes that would recall the dead friend to us.

This is why, as Blanchot goes on to reflect, there are 'no witnesses' to the life of this friend, since those close to the deceased speak only of what is close to them: they speak of *their* memories. They remember what they shared with the deceased. What they do not affirm, according to Blanchot, is the distance that is at play in their former proximity to the dead friend. Whilst they seek to speak of the deceased, to

testify, that is, to the presence of the one no longer with us, these mourners 'are only looking to fill a void',[3] that is, to speak or write, to remember but also to *forget*, thereby distancing themselves from the shock that the deceased is no more. The memories we speak or write about are merely memories of the modes of our closeness to the deceased; what we do not remember is the trauma we seek to forget by and through the act of memorising. We cannot, Blanchot claims, keep a memory of 'an insignificance so enormous [*démesurée*] that we do not have a memory capable of containing it and such that we ourselves must already slip [*glisser*] into forgetting in order to sustain it'.[4] How can we can keep a memory of the deceased if memorialising is not, as Blanchot avers, simply a matter of recalling his character traits or the episodes from his life or intellectual career? How can we attempt to remain loyal to this 'insignificance', to the 'no one' that my friend nevertheless was?

Everything one says at the funeral oration or writes in obituaries or memoirs, Blanchot continues, 'tends to veil over the one affirmation: that everything must fade and that we can remain loyal only so long as we watch over this self-effacing movement, to which something in us that rejects all memory already belongs'.[5] The task of remembering requires something ostensibly impossible, that is, the keeping of a memory of what cannot be remembered. But even as we might try, and fail, to keep this memory, our uncanny belonging to the self-effacing movement which binds us to the other whether or not we remember it, remains. Does this mean that we are aware at some level of the affirmation in question without being able to realise it, that despite our speeches, our tributes to the deceased and the fidelity to what we take to be the particularity of the friend, this strange awareness is marked in us? If this is the case, and the knowledge in question is *traumatic*, then the relation Blanchot calls 'proximity' is a complex, even paradoxical phenomenon, since it names a closeness to the other who has died that is belied by everything we say and do to attest to this closeness. It refers to a prior attestation, a bearing witness without witnesses, which reveals itself in the kind of knowledge that disappears as soon as we attempt to keep it. To remember, to speak of one's memory of the dead already betrays the proximity with the deceased. For it always presumes that I am linked to the deceased by something that would make us fundamentally *akin* – that the one who died, the friend, was closer to me than to others. But to speak of my friendship with the deceased, to recall its joys and its vicissitudes, is still, for Blanchot, to attempt refer to keep

a memory of a proximity that bears a more equivocal relation to memorisation. Thus, he writes,

> we must give up trying to know [*renouncer à connaître*] those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement [*nous devons les accueillir dans le rapport avec l'inconnu où ils nous accueillent, nous aussi, dans notre éloignement*].[6]

To be bound in friendship to another is not just to know that person well. What I know of this friend and allows me to speak so movingly of him at the funeral oration does not capture the enigma of the relationship, or, better, the doubly dissymmetrical criss-crossing of relations, that opens *as* friendship. For Blanchot, friendship 'passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them'.[7] I must not speak of the dead friend without remembering that my relation to him escapes what we normally call friendship. As such, I cannot make this relation a topic of conversations or memoirs, but am bound, instead, to a discretion beyond the laudable refusal to gossip about my friend.

What is it that this discretion answers? It is only when the friend dies that I might become conscious of what I already '*knew*'. I sense discretion is necessary. The obituaries I write about my dead friend, the oration I deliver at his funeral and the reminiscences I share about him with the others who still keep his memory, are outstripped by *another* kind of memorising. What my friend and I had 'in common' is not primarily a shared affection or an interest in common pursuits, but, first of all, a redoubled relation to the Other as the unknown. Although I speak or write of my dead friend in a memorial essay or an obituary, I can never write enough to answer what remained strange in our friendship. When my friend dies and her close, living presence cannot be remembered even through the travail of the deepest mourning, something else is revealed that was at play in our friendship all along. It is not only the strangeness of the friend that is revealed, but the strangeness of friendship as it implicates us both.

Who am I, as a friend? Who am I, bound in friendship to my friend? When we inquire who the subject of the extraordinary 'experience' of friendship is, Blanchot writes,

> this question is perhaps an answer if, even to him who led it, the experience asserted itself in this interrogative form, by substituting

> the openness of a 'Who?' without answer for the closed and singular 'I'; not that this means that he had simply to ask himself 'What is this I that I am [*Quel est ce moi que je suis*]?' but much more radically to recover himself without reprieve, no longer as 'I' but as a 'Who?', the unknown and slippery [*glissent*] being of an indefinite 'Who?'[8]

We have met this 'indefinite "who"' before. It is the one to whom the most profound question is addressed, who is faced by the Sphinx. It is the one for whom the 'other' Lazarus fails to come forth, who is menaced by the Erinyes. It is the one who knows the signature of the wall-writings for what it is, and who greets the other participants in the Events. I, the friend, am questioned. But this does not mean I can simply ask and resolve this question for myself. I am questioned; a question is asked in a way that implicates me. But there is no longer anyone present who could respond to the question that has been put to them. Who am I? In my place, taking my place, or rather, revealing that the place I took to be mine was already usurped, there is only the locus of a traumatic experience, the place kept in me by what I have called with Bataille the beast or the child, which retreats from the powers of memorisation.

One finds the same structure in *The Writing of the Disaster*, where Blanchot comments on Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*. There, Blanchot writes of a friendship that opens in and as responsibility: 'And yet, to the proximity of the most distant, to the pressure of the most weightless, to the contact of what does not reach us – it is in *friendship* that I can respond, a friendship unshared, without reciprocity, friendship for that which has passed leaving no trace, This is passivity's response to the un-presence of the unknown'.[9] Or, once again, 'when the other is related to me in such a way that the utter stranger in me answers him in my stead, this answer is the immemorial friendship which cannot be chosen, nor can it be lived in the present. It is an offering; it offers a share of the passivity that has no subject. It is dying, dying outside of the self – the body which belongs to no one, in non-narcissistic suffering, and joy'[10] (I will return to the question of joy, such an unexpected word for those who think Blanchot as a tragic thinker, in chapter 7). Here, to write of the stranger who answers the Other is but another way of invoking the trauma of friendship, of the way in which the relation to the Other enfolds me. Likewise, to write of a dying outside the self, of a locus of experience which belongs to no one, is to provide a figure for an experience I cannot undergo in the first person.

But here, it is already clear that friendship, for Blanchot, is not a way of describing our relationship with those who we take to be close to us. Friendship is no longer something I can simply declare for another who is linked to me by ties of mutual affection and esteem. Rather, friendship asks itself in me; it is a *pre-voluntary* response that arises independently of my intentions. But why, then, is the death of the friend revelatory? Why is it permitted, with Blanchot, to provide a figure for what is already at issue in friendship itself, understood, now, not simply as relationship to those who I deem close to me, but as the opening to the other person in what Bataille would call communication?

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot remembers an incident related by Bataille, where he listened aloud to a drunken companion 'X' read aloud a passage from a book. Too drunk at the time to recall in retrospect the passage that was being read, Bataille remembers just the 'hard-edged simplicity' and 'passionate grandeur' of 'X''s reading, and adds:

> It would be a mistake to think that such a reading given by men intoxicated with drink is but a provocative paradox … I believe we are united in this, that we are both open, defenceless – through temptation – to forces of destruction, but not like the reckless, rather like children whom a cowardly naiveté [*lâche naïveté*] never abandons.[11]

The two men are not united by what they read, nor is their drunkenness such that it draws them into a deeper intimacy. Rather, they unloosen the bonds that would bind them together in a shared project. This unloosening separates them from the shared project of reading even as it allows them to enter into proximity with one another. Of course, this unloosening or worklessness can never be given as such; friendship does not precede the origin of the subject, but originates with it. As Blanchot maintains, work and worklessness are intertwined; the relation that opens to the other person resists the measure of 'I' because the 'I' is brought into worklessness in the relation to the friend.

This is how we might understand what Blanchot calls the play of thought, where friendship is presented, once again in tribute to Bataille, as that which would sustain a doubly dissymmetrical criss-crossing of relations. In another essay Blanchot also notes that Bataille is a thinker of *l'amitie*, 'the most tender of names' – a friendship 'for

the impossible that is man, and because we receive from it this gift of friendship as a sign of the exigency that relates us infinitely and sovereignly to ourselves'.[12]

Does this draw Bataille close to Levinas? Friendship, for Bataille, does not name simply the opening to the Other. In *On Nietzsche*, Bataille presents his work as existing in community with Nietzsche's thought ('my life with Nietzsche as a companion is a community. My book is this community').[13] As I have maintained, the texts grouped under the general heading, *The Atheological Summa*, reflect Bataille's withdrawal from the political activism, but they also evidence Blanchotian communism, albeit in another key. As Blanchot emphasises, these texts are not, as it might appear, a haphazard compendium of personal confessions, fragmentary poems, notes from unrealised projects and other disparate material. They achieve a unity by and through the movement that attests to the experience that disrupts the supposed unity of the narrating 'I'. The events that Bataille relates do not constitute an autobiography, but interrupt the movement of auto-affection itself. As Blanchot comments, Bataille's work is not just the story of certain extraordinary encounters, *but is itself an act of friendship*. In Blanchot's words, it is a '*friendship for the unknown [one] without friends*' [*amitié pour l'inconnu sans amis*].[14] Bataille refuses to identify the companion of the drunken reading scene, Blanchot claims, not so much in order to preserve 'X''s identity but because the anonymity of 'X' 'represents friendship as much as the friend'.[15]

What does this mean? In *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes:

> My conduct with my friends is motivated: each being is, I believe, incapable on his own, of going to the end of being. If he tries, he is submerged within a 'private being' which has meaning only for himself, affirming 'if I wish my life to have meaning for me, it is necessary that it have meaning *for others*: no one would dare give to life a meaning which he alone would perceive, from which life in its entirety would escape, except within himself'.[16]

Friendship demands one expose oneself, or better, that one allow oneself to be *exposed* in the *ecstasis* that does not permit us to remain mired in tautology. This is why the reader – 'the *third*, the companion, the reader who acts upon me' is so important to the author of *Inner Experience*:

> The self in no way matters. For a reader, I am any individual: name, identity, the historical don't change anything. He (the reader) is any

> one and I (the author) am also anyone. He and I, having emerged without name from … without name, are for this … without name, just as two grains of sand are for the desert, or rather two waves losing themselves in two adjacent waves are for a sea.[17]

Writing *Inner Experience* is, Bataille admits, a 'job',[18] which he always 'drags along',[19] but his is not a text which will not content itself merely in transmitting a message, in conveying a body of knowledge and then taking its place alongside other books in the universal library. In its fragmentariness, its refusal to find rest in results or conclusions, in the constant worry it evinces about the limits of discursivity, but, above all, in the way it opens itself to its readers, Bataille's text attests to the movement from the narrating 'I' who would recount his experiences to his audience to what he calls the *ipse*, which is to say, that which remains itself [*ipse*] the minimal subject of an experience too overwhelming to undergo in the first person. Stripped of particularity, Bataille appeals to readers likewise stripped of particularity: ('He (the reader) is anyone and I (the author) am also anyone'). But what is it that permits this?

'Poetic existence in me addresses itself to poetic existence in others'[20]: Bataille's words, given the concerns he expresses about poetry on other occasions (the original title of *The Impossible* was, indeed, *The Hatred of Poetry*) are perhaps surprising. But poetry, here, no longer exhibits the poetic facility which allows the poet to work always in anticipation of what the literary establishment wants. *Inner Experience* calls for *the imitation of Bataille* to the extent that he has passed from the 'I' to the *ipse* through the intoxication of the text and he calls for this repetition in his readers, too. This is why Bataille's poetry, like Blanchot's fiction, and the work of the other authors Blanchot celebrates, is marked by a distance with respect to the institutions of literature and art. It is always a question of a *minor* practice in Deleuze and Guattari's sense.[21] The reading for which the minor work calls is not the activity of understanding and interpretation, it will not allow itself win awards, and resists incorporation into the movement of culture.

For the author of *Inner Experience*, it is possible to stage the relinquishment of the personal 'I' because its author knows his writing will communicate, reaching an unknown audience, or, better, reaching an audience who are unknown because the text awakens in them the *ipse* that is the locus of the experience of Bataillean poetry. True, the members of this extraordinary symposium are not present to one another. Each of us, before the work, passes from the 'I' to the

Bataillean *ipse* or the Blanchotian '*il*'; we each lose our grip in our singular response. Each of us, then, is 'X', the reader without particularity exposed to the movement of questioning Bataille's text allows itself to affirm.

But is this not an appeal to a poetic drunkenness or revelry that threatens to dissolve the responsibilities of theoretical discourse? 'I write for the one who, entering my book, would fall into it as into a hole, who would never again get out', Bataille writes.[22] Does this not forgo what Levinas would claim is the *ethical* charge of philosophy as it is bestowed in the wonder of the face? The emphasis on writing divides Bataille and Blanchot from the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*.[23]

L'éthique (ethics, the ethical) is, for Levinas, as we have seen, no longer a branch of philosophy but recalls the original site of thinking in and as the response to the Other; the turn to the ethical accomplishes of philosophy as metaphysics whilst breaking with the entirety of philosophical history which is directed towards the unfolding of the truth of being. For Levinas, the relation to the other person is not part of this unfolding. Above all, I cannot speak of or about the Other, without taking the risk of obfuscating the *address* of the Other from which discourse springs. With Levinas's claim that the original scene of language is an address *to* the Other, the difficulty of relating this speaking or saying to the order of discourse moves to the heart of his thought. Levinas confronts anew the ancient difficulty that faces the philosopher who has to express him- or herself in a natural language, for how can the philosopher become a writer when to write is to betray the 'object' of discourse? In the order of theoretical discourse, he maintains, we are able to speak or write about the Other because we believe we belong to the same order of space and time. In the originary event of discourse, by contrast, this order is interrupted and simultaneity is no longer possible – a lapse of time marks itself and the 'I' and the 'Other' do not inhabit the same plane. Nothing allows the 'I' and the 'Other' equality or reciprocity; the face of the Other is not that of anyone I know; it is irreducible to a collection of features. It *expresses* itself and thereby resists any cultural determination. It is Levinas's task to attest to this inequality, that is, to reinvent philosophical language as it would answer to the opening of language.

Philosophy, with Levinas, would respond to a response that would allow it to assume responsibility not only for itself but for all humankind *and yet* philosophy is written – is this not a problem? In the context of a discussion of fecundity, by which the subject might be said to break up the tautology of being in the relation to the son,

Levinas allows that philosophy, too, is able to break, through writing, with the inhuman and the neutral dimension of being. This may seem a surprising claim. To have a son, he explains, is to transsubstantiate the father's existence, insofar as the son might be said to be of his substance, leaping beyond him. Being, according to Levinas, is, through fecundity, 'produced as multiple and as split into same and other'; it is thus that we 'leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being'.[24] But philosophy, Levinas claims, already outplays Parmenidean monism. It is at this point that he draws attention to his own discourse: 'Philosophy itself constitutes a moment of this temporal accomplishment, a discourse always addressed to another. What we are now exposing is addressed to those who shall wish to read it'.[25] How should one understand this? *Those who shall wish to read it*: Levinas writes for the reader who will allow the text to turn him or her towards the wondrous opening to the Other, gaining a new sense of philosophy and philosophising, and receiving the tradition of thinkers, among them Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bergson and Heidegger as just so many intimations of what the author of *Totality and Infinity* has, finally, has brought to light.

Levinas guards against what he calls the 'tedium of repetition', that is, the senescence that is opposed to the 'good' repetition of fecundity, which permits the transubstantiation and multiplication of being, inexhaustible youth.[26] Like the birth of the child, a work of genuine philosophy is able to renew and transubstantiate the present. It is capable of being received in the manner of an inheritance, like a gift from one's forefathers. Genuine philosophy is able to transmit the message about the ethical opening to the Other without interference. But this implies a circularity, for it would demand that the reader, that is, Levinas's ideal reader, the proto-Levinas in each of us, would have been prepared for the contents of *Totality and Infinity* in advance. Are we all sons of Levinas, claimed by the wondrous message received in the good repetition of his book? Are we like the chain of fathers and sons, who would carry the message of the book unto infinity, or does the book reverberate for us in another sense? *Totality and Infinity* is 'true' in its own terms only to the one who accepts Levinas's account of truth, in which language is bestowed in the opening to the Other, and as such, witnesses the good. But what happens when the relation to the Other is dissevered from what he calls the good and the true? What occurs when, with Blanchot, one claims that the event of truth cannot be reached, and hence, as the face, no longer shines wondrously through the pages of *Totality and Infinity*? Levinas's text risks

drawing together another community of readers who are insufficiently philosophical, for whom signification is never pure enough. The work of philosophy always risks being less than a work of philosophy. Levinas's text gives birth in an unexpected way – not to the good son, the faithful reader of the letter its text, but, against its author's intentions, to the reader claimed by the *il y a* as it reverberates through *Totality and Infinity*.

A book, of course, cannot determine the experience of its readers. There is always the chance that, because it is made of language, the book will summon the *ipse* forward in its readers. This, as Bataille understands, is the chance of communication and friendship:

> a true state of friendship requires being abandoned by friends, since a free friendship isn't hampered by confining ties. Far beyond the failings of friends and readers I'm close to, I'm now seeking friends and readers a dead person might encounter, and I see them up ahead of me already: innumerable, silent, always true like stars in the heavens. O stars revealed by laughter and folly, my death will join you![27]

To write in what Bataille and Blanchot call friendship is to allow one's work to be caught up in the play of friendship itself. The ecstatic dying or becoming of the author staged in the work solicits our own ecstatic movement. Writing enables the opening of a relation beyond the text, which is why Blanchot can dedicate his *On Friendship* to 'all my friends known and unknown, close and distant'.[28]

Does Levinas write in Blanchotian or Bataillean friendship when he permits equivocations and ambiguities to open in his work? But this would mean Blanchot's work would, according to this secret current in Levinas's text, escape the *critical* function allocated to it in *Totality and Infinity*. This, indeed, is what is revealed when Blanchot evinces friendship for Levinas's work in turn, and in a different sense. When the conversationalists in *The Infinite Conversation* raise the question of writing with respect to *Totality and Infinity*, this is more than a call for the acknowledgement of the *textuality* of philosophy, that is, the way it is embedded in a natural language. It is a claim about the way in which the locus of truth retreats from the philosopher's grasp.

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There is, according to Blanchot, an opacity in things and in the world. But what withdraws in the coming to the presence of the world is

attested in the materiality of language. Blanchot would answer to the secret alliance between the being of the world and the being of language. He does not, in so doing, claim with Levinas that being is ultimately too impersonal and anonymous to admit of the opening of the ethical or the political, but allows that there is a lapse in the movement of auto-affection and identification that occurs in the work of art and events. This is why, indeed, he links the neuter to writing and exposes Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* to a repetition that allows something else to reverberate in its sentences. This, in turn allows one to discern the outlines of another way in which the history of philosophy gives itself to be experienced, whether one would wish this or not, granting a new way of reading Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and others, but also of Levinas himself.[29]

For Levinas, non-philosophical writing is risky because it is unaccountable and unattached, threatening to make the relation to the Other into a theme and allowing one to write about the Other without remembering that discourse itself is originarily bestowed by the Other. Non-philosophical writing thereby risks defacing the face, unbinding discourse from its origin and substituting, in place of the opening which singularises me, an experience I am not present to experience. But is this risk not borne by the written text of *Totality and Infinity*? The great renewal of philosophy this text would accomplish is exposed to the risk of a slippage within language, an impersonal murmuring which cannot be separated from the address of the Other. There is the chance of a reading which dissevers it from the wondrous opening to which it seeks to address. Is this an invitation to hermeneutic anarchy, dissolving a great work of philosophy into hubbub and gossip?

Blanchot's remarks on Heidegger are particularly interesting in this context.

> I have always been struck by the willing and eager approbation that has been universally given Heidegger when he condemns inauthentic speech under the pretext of analysis and with the sobering vigour that is characteristic of him. Speech scorned, which is never that of the resolute 'I', laconic and heroic, but the non-speech of the irresponsible 'One' ['*On*'].[30]

How should one understand Blanchot's remarks? For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, language is not to be understood on the model of a propositional utterance, but through an articulation of the way in which *Dasein* is practically engaged with the world. The analyses of the

logician or the grammarian cannot, for Heidegger, uncover the *Rede* or talk which permits our communication. *Rede*, here, is to be rigorously distinguished from *Gerede*, chatter or idle speech. *Gerede* is the language of Heidegger's *Das Man*, translated by Blanchot as the '*On*', the 'One'. The 'One', is each of us, any of us when our attention slackens, when our thoughts become interchangeable, when we are each substitutable for any other, when we shop alongside others in the supermarket, read magazines or when, tired, we allow our attention to be engulfed by the television. It is from the 'One', each of us, any of us, that we hear or read what detaches us from the world. Does Blanchot invite us to forget all seriousness and join those for whom which everything is known and everything forgotten, who are always too curious and eager, who might be said to have known and forgotten everything in advance?

It is striking that when Heidegger presents what he calls the call of conscience, he understands it as the friend who would summon *Dasein*, to take responsibility for its existence. But the friend is, surprisingly, *Dasein* itself, and no one other than *Dasein*. I call myself; I summon myself to bear witness to my responsibility. But there is another experience of friendship in Blanchot. Idle speech, for him, is no longer rooted in the firm and resolute 'I' and friendship is, primarily, a matter of an openness to others, even in gossip and chatter. Yes, there is a risk in opening oneself to those who are too superficial, amorphous, and unfinished, who are willing to change their allegiances too readily like the swing voters who, as the dark matter of the social universe, secretly determine the fate of elections. But the chance of dispersal is the life of the work. When Bataille invokes friendship, it is as a call to dispersal. To be abandoned by those one thinks of as one's friends: no longer to seek what is personal, familiar and comforting, but to expose oneself to the risk of a chance encounter. Writing can no longer be deployed as a means of transporting ideas safely from one head to another, but must answer to an experience that risks both writer and reader. Bataille the writer is undone in the text which carries him beyond his 'concern' or 'worry' with the 'laudable project of writing a book'.[31] This is why his works are so strongly marked by weariness. It is not by chance that the author of the intense sentences I have quoted also writes in *Inner Experience*, 'Almost every time, if I tried to write a book, fatigue would come before the end. I slowly became a stranger to the project I had formulated. I would forget what enflamed me the day before, changing from one hour to the next with a drowsy slowness'; 'I escape

from my book and my book escapes me; it becomes almost completely like a forgotten name: I am too lazy to look for it, but the obscure feeling of forgetting anguishes me'.[32]

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To open oneself in friendship to a text or to a body of work is to allow oneself to be seized by what, happening as the work, affirms the most profound question, preventing us from yielding it up to the great reductive forces of culture. One is seized not only by artworks, but by theoretical texts insofar as they acknowledge explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or inadvertently, that one might be seized thus. It is not that *Inner Experience* is a text that would give itself to be experienced in friendship and *Totality and Infinity* is not, since there is also a way of being claimed in what Bataille and Blanchot call friendship by Levinas's text. It would mean, in this instance, that one no longer reads it as it is intended to be read, troubling the careful distinctions Levinas makes between the Other and the *il y a*, the masculine Other and the feminine Other of the erotic night, speech and writing, philosophy and poetry, religion and atheism etc., and, above all, the appeals to certain notions of the 'third' in the text are outplayed by a rumbling or trembling which reverberates through its sentences.

Blanchot's practice of commentary is not bound, as Levinas might claim, to the deathly repetition of the past, to the *il y a* roiling in itself. Yes, the *il y a*, in this repetition, draws the good and the true into itself as into a black hole, but this does not indicate that all is vanity, that there can be nothing new under the sun. In its desolation and destitution, the way it returns at the heart of every negation, the *il y a* carries an ethical or political charge insofar as it shows that there can be no determination of the future. The *il y a* is not pure ruination, the end of the world, but is a name for the play of being as it outplays any possible determination of what there is. It is also a name for what, for Blanchot, is at play in the literary text because it no longer seeks to respond in the language of power to what is expected from discourse. And here one also understands why it can also be called a voice that is the voice of Bataillean poetry, and why, indeed, Blanchot feels that it is appropriate to invoke a 'literary communism'. The neuter, the impersonal, understood as it refers to a voice that belongs to no one in particular, to a murmuring voice without particularity, answers to the chance of an usurpation which is built into the unity of the 'I'. Friendship, understood in terms of the opening to the Other or the

opening to the work, is always also a friendship with the indeterminability of the future.

This is why Bataille's text might be said to be more generous than Levinas's. One might remember how he undertook to read *Inner Experience* at two discussion groups, to which he would come to give the name the Socratic College, at which Blanchot was present. This group would not issue in any work – would not, that is, situate itself with respect to a common goal. What the participants would share is a concern for what Bataille calls inner experience. At the same time, they share what cannot be endured by each participant in the first person. This is why the College would bear the name of the Socrates of the early dialogues – the Socrates whom the Oracle recognises knows only that he knows nothing and yet, at the same time, proclaims: *know yourself*. Know yourself, but know what you cannot know, what reveals itself only according to the logic of what Freud would called deferred action [*Nachträglichkeit*], know that an unmasterable experience of the other person as the strange, as the unknown, will return. Know yourself, but know also that this repetition is also at stake in the work of art and in the sacred; know what you cannot grasp according to the measure of knowledge; know the 'truth', the 'weary truth' that will not allow us to lay hold of it once and for all. The College was a project, that, as Blanchot comments, 'could only fail' as the last gasp of 'a communitarian experience incapable of realising itself'.[33] This is because it would still attempt to put community to work, devoting it to a shared end, and, in so doing, submit chance to the iron collar of the project. Yet the drunken reading scene, in which neither author intends to realise a project, in which the reading itself does not form part of a project of edification, slips this collar. What becomes visible there is the way in which friendship, the chance of a unilateral opening, outplays the group who would devote themselves to a particular end.

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But how might the commentator respond to this chance? How is it possible to keep memory of friendship? After the death of Bataille, Blanchot acknowledges that 'we will still be able to follow the same paths' as the thinker who for many years devoted himself to an exigency without reserve.[34] But in following these paths without Bataille, Blanchot cannot let himself yield to the deceptive consolation that he can reduce the distance that separates him from his dead friend. The eulogy concludes: 'thought knows that one does not remember:

without memory, without thought, it already struggles in the invisible where everything sinks back into indifference. This is thought's profound grief [*douleur*]. It must accompany friendship into forgetting'.[35] Here, one confronts the paradox at the heart of Blanchot's thought of friendship. He writes of a thinking that *knows,* that has somehow gainsaid the knowledge of what cannot be remembered. And yet to think with Blanchot is never to be able to reach the event of truth. To this extent, Blanchotian thinking is already bound up with what he calls 'grief', that is, to the vanishing point of an indeterminacy. Like the experience of friendship itself, the attempt to *think* friendship, to answer it discursively, requires us to overturn a certain image of thought and thinker. One thinks as the Bataillean *ipse* or as the Blanchotian *il*; it is the beast 'in' me who is the subject of thought. Perhaps this is what Blanchot means when he suggests that one would have to evince a certain friendship *for* this thought, since the model of the thinker is no longer understood in accordance with the classical image of the philosopher.

It is this that the death of the friend so forcibly recalls. In attesting to Blanchot's own friendship with Bataille, 'Friendship' indicates the *mise en scene* of thinking, but it can do so only because it is marked by failure, because the articulation of discourse is interrupted in its movement. The text 'Friendship' is thus implicated in friendship. To write *of* friendship, to make it a theme, would be as impossible as writing *in the place of* the deceased friend. I cannot speak in his place just as I cannot write of what at once solicits writing and escapes its measure. But I cannot assume *my own place* in order to recount my experience, since friendship has already revealed the insecurity of that place. I can write neither in the name of the friend nor in my own name. But nor can I write assured of *my* name and *my* place. 'X' marks the spot.

But is this not to renounce the rigour and seriousness of philosophy? 'Friendship' addresses itself to an experience of the impossible, an impossible experience that is dissimulated in what theorisation, and, classically, philosophy seeks. But Blanchot indicates the ultra- or superlatively philosophical testimony of a friendship *for* friendship, because it would tell us to what philosophy, unknown to itself, is already bound. This obscure 'object' of desire leads philosophy astray before the desire for *sophia* awakens. As we have seen, Bataille claims there is a desire beyond the desire for knowledge and understanding which opens us to the possibility of a chance encounter, a communication. Levinas will also make the claim that there is a desire beyond the desire for *sophia*, writing of the metaphysical Desire for the Other

insofar the Other always escapes my needs. Levinas, unlike Bataille, would reclaim this desire in the name of philosophy. Recalling his friendship with Levinas in a text published in 1980, Blanchot notes that from the first it was always a friendship with philosophy. The importance of friendship to Levinas is clear insofar as he appeals to a certain fraternity to characterise the relations between each of us insofar as we opened to the Other. In order to become what it takes itself to be, philosophy must assume the task of producing wisdom, truth, as knowledge or understanding that would answer to the demands of *philein*. In so doing, one might say, philosophy has left behind its friendship *for* friendship. Levinas might be said to rejoin philosophy with its condition, its originary friendship *for* friendship, that is, for a desire that was thereafter disavowed. But is it not precisely in the name of the same friendship that Bataille the writer would enact a sacrifice that must *escape* philosophy? Is this why Blanchot will begin his conversations on Levinas's work in *The Infinite Conversation* by remembering Bataille's claim that to be a philosopher today is to be afraid?

Blanchot, too, would rejoin thinking itself to what he calls its 'grief', that is, the fact that it is bound up with the impossibility of thinking what is to be thought *as* friendship. But in attesting to his grief for his lost friend, is Blanchot hinting that philosophy cannot recall its unconditioned condition, what it must experience, since it seeks the security of a foundation, as its *grief*? Is he claiming, with Bataille, that just as no work of mourning could ever successfully interiorise this lost friend, no philosophical activity could ever recover what exceeds the measure of work itself? On this account, he would uncover a previously hidden grief in the gift and guardianship of friendship, showing that it is the ultimate condition of philosophy itself, whilst at the same time allowing it to escape philosophy, even a renewed Levinasian philosophy, anew. By seeking to answer the call of friendship, Blanchot would reveal the play of the desire as it outplays what Levinas calls Desire, opening a future for thinking beyond the horizon of philosophy. This is what is possible when friendship is pledged *for* friendship. Blanchot would suggest to us that philosophy is born and answers to an experience that reveals itself in dying. Philosophy is done and undone, bound and unbound, born and killed in the arhythmical movement that prevents it from ever stabilising a place in which it might begin. Is it possible to affirm this dispossession – to experience it in terms of something other than grief?

6
Mortal Substitution

One cannot say of Blanchot's affirmation of the advent of communism what Adorno said of philosophy – that it has outlived the moment when it could actualise itself because it cannot actualise itself. It does not lead to the utopia of free and equal individuals living together in a fraternity unalloyed with subjugation and exploitation. Perhaps Blanchot's position might be understood by analogy to a comment Bataille makes in an interview with Duras: 'I am not even a communist'.[1] But the communism to which Blanchot signals his allegiance is not deficient; it is all it can be since it must maintain itself in an *aporia* or tension between work and worklessness, actuality and the non-actual. The great temptation is to dissolve the *aporia*. But it is necessary to keep memory of moments in which actualisation is suspended, when the effort must be directed to witnessing the non-actualisable. And it is also necessary to look out for outbreaks of worklessness, witnessing them in turn. Yet actualisation continues apace. The desert grows: what is deemed non-actualisable is deemed for this reason not to exist. This would be our nihilism: precisely, as Heidegger said, the abolition of the sense of the nothing, the abolition of earth, of the null ground, *der nichtige Grund*, of *Dasein's* being. But the temptation is to make this null ground into a ground. Perhaps this is the temptation to which Heidegger succumbed to in 1934. Did Bataille, too, give in to this temptation? To explore this question with Blanchot, following the argument of *The Unavowable Community*, is to understand better the claim of communism, as it awaits us in our relations to Others and in works of art.

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How do we retrieve this sense of the nothing? Of our groundless ground? This is Bataille's question in his 'Letter to X'. As he writes, 'If

action ('doing') is (as Hegel says) negativity, then there is still the problem of knowing whether the negativity of someone who "doesn't have anything more to do" disappears or remains in a state of "unemployed negativity"'.[2] Unemployed negativity is not simply a forgotten or left over piece of nature – a pocket of heterogeneity that had somehow escaped its integration into the system through the work of death. 'I think of my life – or better yet, its abortive condition, the open wound that my life is – as itself constituting a refutation of a closed System'.[3] Here, Bataille's 'life', his incarnate existence, is not a workless, idle leftover, but would attest to an excessiveness of death over the possibility of its mobilisation, of what I have called a dying, a becoming, that cannot be reabsorbed into discourse. But Bataille, of course, is not alone. For it is precisely this dying or becoming that reveals its play in the redoubling of irreciprocity that exposed the participants of the Events each to one another.

Is it too late to affirm unemployed negativity in a time when, as Kojève claims, the historical process is carrying us towards a universal, homogeneous state, where all are bound in equality before the law, when all, that is, are recognised and therefore satisfied, to the extent that there is nothing more that can be done? To respond to this question, it is necessary to examine the notions of recognition and satisfaction upon which Kojève's judgement is based.

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The story from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is familiar enough: Hegel describes the shocking discovery of the Other by the solipsistic and egotistic 'I' that precipitates a crisis in its very self-identity. Indeed, the 'I' could be said to lose itself in this encounter because it learns that it is what it is what it is only in its exclusion of the other. The 'I' is altered and estranged from itself; its reaction to the discovery of the fact that it is not absolutely independent and universal is to embark upon a self-seeking that would exclude the Other as something inessential and of lesser value to the preservation of its own self-identity. The Other is to be cancelled [*aufgehoben*] insofar as it reveals the particularity of the 'I', but this cannot be accomplished by simply eliminating the Other because Hegel also maintains that the recognition of the Other is essential for the 'I'.

For Hegel, it is essential to the achievement of the selfhood that we are recognised, that is, positively valued by the Other. Our conduct is, as Inwood comments, 'conspicuous' insofar as it is 'motivated less by

the intrinsic value to us of the conduct than by a desire to be seen heaving in a certain way and thus to acquire unilateral recognition'.[4] To achieve personhood or self-consciousness [*Selbstbewusstsein*], one has to be recognised from without not as an instrument or as an instance to be absorbed, but by a free individual on the same level as oneself.

In order to overcome one's alteration by the Other, that is, the sundering of the 'I' such that it encounters the other as an affront to its egoism, the 'I' must enter into a different relation with the Other. The 'I' cannot simply kill the Other in order to regain its innocence, its natural egoism, because it has learned, tragically but ineluctably, that it is not universal. Since it is henceforward dependent on the Other for recognition, the freedom and the autonomy of the Other must therefore be preserved; a new kind of interrelation must be sought. This also holds for the Other in its relation to the 'I': both have to let the other person be, allowing them freedom enough to proffer recognition of their own accord. The 'We' of this reciprocally bound up individuals accomplishes a transition from a solipsistic 'I' to a corporate 'We' in which individual difference is preserved. Hegel's account of ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] and the structure of *Geist* depend upon the mutuality and reciprocity of recognition.

For Hegel, of course, the result of the earliest struggle for recognition is only a preliminary stage in the development of institutions that will permit recognition. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* the loser prefers to live rather than die, recognising the sovereignty of the master. Death is thereby suspended [*aufgehalten*]; desire is restrained [*gehemmt*]. The feudal world of masters, the victors in the battle, and slaves, the losers, is inaugurated. Here, the master receives recognition from the slave and from others as a slave owner. The slave works at the master's behest, transforming nature in order to produce commodities the master can consume or trade. This means the master is denied a direct mastery of nature. It is the slave, fearing the master's wrath, or more exactly, fearing the dreadful non-actuality [*furchtbare Unwirklichkeit*] of death, who does the work. I work, as a slave, to escape death. But as I do so, I dream of transforming my lot, of becoming something other than a slave; by contrast, mastery is all the master knows. Yet even as I am forced to work, I exhibit a certain mastery over the natural dimension. True, I work under duress, but the immediate world is transformed, being actualised through the labour of the slave. But whereas I aim to achieve freedom through concrete labour, the master's desire is defined more abstractly, since he only knows nature by proxy and at a

distance. The master actualises nothing; he is neither agent nor worker; unlike the slave, he can never transcend the given through direct action. But nor, for all his mastery, can he ever be said to exhibit true self-possession either, since he does not understand, unlike the slave, that he is defined as a human being to the extent that he can negate, that is, act and transform the world through his action, enriching his self-consciousness.

The history of the human being is the history of the mediated desire of the slave, and not the master. It is a history of the one for whom real death is suspended; 'labour is the action of the man who, rather than *die* free, chooses to live in servitude', Bataille writes.[5] This servitude is the condition of possibility of Kojèvean history. Is it not precisely the fear of death and the desire for freedom that lead to the development of compensating ideology of religion, whereby the slaves conjure up a dream of an afterworld in which they will be recognised by God? For Dastur, the 'absolute magnitude of the dimension of the divine borrows everything from the absolute magnitude and total impenetrability of death'.[6] Is art, then, just another compensating ideology, a way of coming to terms with the transience of life? These ideologies will eventually give way to the desire to create heaven on earth, the universal and homogeneous state in which all are recognised as equal citizens. History, which began with the eruption into self-consciousness, will end. The project that began with the appearance of the human being in the violent struggle of master and slave will draw to a close with the final institution of universal recognition in the state, which delivers the long sought freedom to the slave. All will be recognised; negativity itself will be negated; the end of work will reveal itself when all the necessities of life are secured. Work, then, leads to freedom.

But is satisfaction all the human being as the human being wants? Are harmony and completeness enough? For Kojève, the dialectic, predicated upon a deferral of death, is drawing to a close. But this means, for him, that the human being, the being capable of working, of transforming the world, dies. There is no longer any negativity to be invested in work. But unemployed and unemployable negativity remains. The game is up: compensating ideologies are revealed for what they are. And yet this means, as we have seen, that in a certain sense it is only now that art can reveal itself as art, that it can come into its own, which is to say, affirm its peculiar materiality. The community that art once brought together is scattered; the great communities of reception that lent art a kind of classicism have dispersed. The

rise of mass culture permits new classicisms to emerge – one thinks of the similarity of one Hollywood thriller to another, or the template of the latest bestseller, written to resemble other bestsellers, but these are quickly dissolved and reformed, rendering yesterday's work obsolete. This new community of reception is not secure enough to sustain a particular classicism. What is striking is the turnover of the new, where, with increasing rapidity, pop bands form and break up and young writers are heralded and then disappear. There are, it is true, reactionary groups who, anchoring themselves in the review sections of newspapers and securing comfortable positions at the edges of the publishing industry, prop up some outmoded literary form. None of this, however, prevents the outbreak of the artwork that, *de-stitutes* rather than *institutes* a community or confirms a cultural order. Doubtless art is answering as never before to the dictates of the market, to culture, to what is expected from the institutions that train artists as well as those that market and purchase their work. And yet, the proliferation of new media art attests to the way in which these dictates do not reach the work itself, which continue to give themselves in an inexhaustible profusion.

Might one make an analogous claim about social relations? Could the truth of social relations be said to be emerging in its nudity at a time when human activity is subordinated to the production of useful goods and services to the extent that the worker, too, comes to see his or her life solely in terms of specific results? Is it possible to dream with Marx of the proletariat who only now realise the truth of the unjust relations of power, holding out for a hope for a communism to come beyond the mere adjustment of the system of global capitalism? And yet, the faith in the revolutionary potential of those united by shared interests, who take as their task the elimination of private property and the establishment of a community of property, is not sufficient whilst it fails to attend to what Blanchot calls the advent of communism.

The gathering of the community of finite individuals, the community of finitudes, means that there can be no final resolution of the conflict between human beings in the communist society to come, which is to say, in the supersession of private property and sordid self-interest. One cannot wait for the outbreak of a communism that would unite us in non-alienated labour, for to work even for the common good, placing capital in the control of the community as a whole, risks foreclosing the non-working idling, the active unloosening of the bonds that bind each of us to our labours. The distinction between alienated and non-alienated labour does not reach deeply enough.

Work must be understood in the broader sense of the movement of identification, and above all, of auto-identification, in which experiences are reclaimed and reintegrated according to the measure of the 'I'. The advent of communism attests to a dissension in this movement which cannot be marshalled or put to work in view of a shared project.

Here, the community that draws around the modern work of art that is undone or unbound by the 'object' of the unsettling experience shared by its members is instructive, although it is not paradigmatic. As Blanchot retraces it in *The Unavowable Community*, Bataille's experience of community as it passes from the tumult and fervour of Surrealism through Counter-Attack, Acéphale and the College of Sociology and towards the literary communication of the *Atheological Summa*, does not evidence the failure of a project. The turn to 'inner experience', above all, is not a retreat from ethical and political reflections, but allows him to focus intensely upon the relationship between author and reader as a community of finitudes. It is significant, then, just how strongly Blanchot's presence in the discussions of the groups Bataille would later attempt to unite under the heading of the 'Socratic College' is marked in *Inner Experience*. As we have already seen, the criss-crossing of unilateral relations at play in the friendship between Bataille and Blanchot, as it is marked in their texts and animates their reflections, is not reducible to the mutual admiration of men of letters. *The Unavowable Community* is written in the spirit of friendship for Bataille, which is to say, as it responds to what is urgent in his work with respect to our experience here and now, today, insofar as it disrupts the appropriation of Bataille as a cultural commodity.

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Blanchot organises his reading of Bataille around a certain 'principle of insufficiency' that is to be understood in terms of a susceptibility, vulnerability or passivity. It would be this insufficiency, understood as existence itself, which would drive the human being to breach its self-identity. 'The sufficiency of each being', Bataille comments, 'is endlessly contested by every other'.[7] Blanchot comments,

> A being does not want to be recognised, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of its consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting as its *ipse*, or, if you will, as itself as a

> separate individual: this way it will perhaps ex-ist, experiencing itself as an always prior exteriority, or as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence.[8]

Bataille rewrites Kojève's account of the master-slave dialectic in claiming that the self-loss of the solipsistic consciousness, the 'I', cannot be overcome by rediscovering itself in an intersubjective, mutually recognising 'We'. The difference of the other person opens with the step into self-consciousness, permitting neither recognition nor reciprocity; it remains dissymmetrical and unilateral and to this extent, foreign to our ordinary conceptions of love as well as to Hegel's account of *Sittlichkeit*. For Hegel and Kojève, this would entail precisely the breakdown of relationality and being-in-common; indeed, they would not even allow that the relation in question is a relation since it remains unilateral. Community without reciprocity is not a community. Likewise, on this account, there can be no immediate opening to the other person for relations are always mediated.

And yet there is communication. How should one understand this? For Bataille, the dialectic is predicated upon the suspension of real death. We are all slaves to the extent that we work to avoid the *aporia* to which Bataille draws attention. We work as if towards a final cessation of work. And yet we are always before it and it is to this extent it is as though we are always at the end of history. And yet this is too simple. Perhaps one might understand this end in terms of the closure of any outlet of unemployed negativity. This is why, precisely, it is unemployed. Deprived of any outlet for negativity, what we, unbeknownst to ourselves, desire, according to Bataille, is the *dying* that dialectics suspends even as it is the condition for its movement. We want to suspend the dialectical movement of sense that occurs through negativity and death.

For Bataille, we are slaves and remain slaves to the extent that our desire is restrained and death, real death, is suspended. Our desire to work is born of the fear of the dreadful non-actuality of death. But there is the desire for communication, too – a desire that has grown more and more subterranean, that has hidden itself in darker and darker recesses because there are fewer and fewer permissible ways of answering it. This is why communication, for Bataille, is now linked to what we call *evil*. The Other, now, at Bataille's end of history, is the 'other' Lazarus, rotten and putrid, who refuses resurrection. Yet this is not to welcome diabolism, to refuse responsibility, but to accept it

must pass by way of a risky affirmation – of an opening to the Other as the indeterminable, as one of the *chienlits*, the ragtag, the morass, as the demonstrators were known at the Events.

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It is, perhaps, this communication Blanchot invokes when he writes, paraphrasing Bataille, in *The Unavowable Community*:

> to remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another's death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community.[9]

These lines form an obstacle to the understanding of Blanchot unless one recalls the resonance the word *dying* gains in his work. The work of art, Bataille's presence as an author, and finally, the opening to the other person are given to me such that I experience them in *dying*. This, indeed, is what friendship and community mean for Blanchot: to undergo dying is to pass from the first to the third person, to give up my place to the beast or the child, such that an impersonal 'who' opens in me as the locus of experience.

But one must also understand, at the heart of Blanchot's work and at the heart of the present work, that this notion of dying can also be called the advent of communism – the opening of what brings us together such that we are no longer able to experience ourselves as holding something in common. We are brought together only to be set apart. The Events permit 'the presentiment that with authority overthrown or, rather, neglected, a sort of *communism* declared itself, a communism of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or reclaim'.[10] Invoking the writing that occurs outside the unity of what he calls the Book, Blanchot allows that it passes insofar as it 'supposes a radical change of epoch: interruption, death itself – or, to speak hyperbolically "the end of history"' to the extent that it 'passes through the advent of communism, recognised as the ultimate affirmation, communism being still always beyond communism'.[11] Here, one recognises the affirmation that affirms nothing but itself which Blanchot invokes when commenting on Bataille (but this only reiterates conversations between these friends recorded in *Inner Experience* itself), as well as the practice of

writing of which the works that were at one time to be gathered under the name *Atheological Summa* are exemplary. The words 'the end of history' invoke the disappearance of the non-actual, of the impossible, of the play of relations that interrupt the cultural determination of others and events. To call the affirmation in question the advent of communism is not to subordinate it to a programme, nor indeed to retrospectively and opportunistically radicalise it in view of Blanchot's political commitments. The commitment in question arises out of the experience of art and literature and, more broadly, what Blanchot would, in the 1960s, join Derrida in calling *writing*. This is to say, and we have made this point in numerous forms, the artwork, insofar as it incarnates worklessness, understood as the non-actual or the non-real, as what withdraws in a manner analogous to what Heidegger calls earth, calls a community into being, which maintains an opening to a reserve that disperses its members even as it seems to bring them together: an impossible community, then, a community of those who are united in what Blanchot calls dying which no longer maintains of necessity a reference to the one who dies before me or to the corpse, but to an experience of a negativity that cannot be recuperated, of a becoming that cannot be brought to illumination. This is what gives *The Unavowable Community* its focus and coherence, even as it tempts the reader to assume that the claim concerns only those very restricted circumstances in which I confront the other person as he or she dies. Perhaps it is this temptation which accounts for the comparative neglect of Blanchot in milieus which lack an awareness of the Hegelian legacy his work inherits. Without this awareness, one might be baffled at the way in which Blanchot can bring together the work of art with the relation to the other person by arguing that both are experienced in terms of a dying or by becoming creator and audience.

We witness this in the Events: at play between the participants was a dying in which the demand for recognition no longer determines the opening to the Other. As Blanchot remembers in a text published in memory of Foucault, 'Whatever the detractors of May might say, 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'.[12] This is why Blanchot emphasizes that he had no 'personal relations' with Foucault, even though they were both participants of the Events in which 'anyone could speak to anyone else, anonymously, impersonally, welcomed with no other justification than that of being another person'.[13] Blanchot, whose writings meant

so much to Foucault, greeted him without identifying himself – not as another famous man of letters, but as, simply, a co-participant.

The participants were not unified by a determinate project, that is, by a set of reforms they had in mind to accomplish. They did not seek to constitute a political group, choosing leaders from amongst their number to coordinate their activity. How then should one understand their interrelation? At several points in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot invokes a 'plural speech' [*la parole plurielle*], an affirmation that permits the community neither to unify itself by common work, by a shared attempt to determine an essence, nor to allow itself to be unified.[14] What did the participants say? They repeat only the address that affirms a relation that escapes unity. But in this repetition, it is no longer a matter of an exchange of words between intact and unaltered subjects. Writing of his friendship with Bataille, Blanchot observes 'One could say of these two speaking men that one of them is necessarily the obscure "Other" that is *Autrui*'.[15] In the Events, the other person might also be the obscure 'Other' whom one acknowledges; each participant might also be acknowledged as the Other in turn.

The Events quickly yielded works: books of all kinds written by participants and non–participants, which risked passing over the workless community that manifested itself there. In this way, the opening of discourse is buried in a discourse that is always too prolix, too assimilatory, in short, too *developed*. But the happening of this community was witnessed in the wall writings in which the participants recognized testimony to their own disarray. It is in this recognition, in the absence of reaction to the 'men of power', that the participants of the Events liberated themselves from the reactionary forces who would declare the Events a failure because they had not succeeded in storming a Bastille, or seizing a Winter Palace.

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Community, then, does not occur as the result of deliberative effort or result from the conscious will; if it happens, it does so by chance. This may imply that it is linked more obscurely to an unconscious desire of which dialectics is unable to account. The happening in question is disruptive precisely because it breaks with the exigencies that govern our social sphere, which devolve ultimately the preservation of a sense of the whole, of a governing *telos* or *eschaton*. To this extent, it may be called impossible, which is to be understood, as we have seen, as an occurrence that could not have been envisaged, that takes place by

shattering a horizon of expectation. This impossible community is not as the result of shared work, but of worklessness, here understood in an affirmative, ecstatic sense. Bataille claims that the post-historical humans retain a dim awareness of a worklessness that is more profound than mere idleness – this is why, for Bataille, unlike Kojève, slave ideologies, specifically, the belief in God, persist. And yet the outbreak of community itself depends upon the overcoming of the non-actuality of *dying*. For Bataille, despite everything Kojève claims to the contrary, we are still slaves because we are still afraid of death, and indeed we are more slavish than ever, because our secular world is the world of the project, in which any outlet for unemployed negativity appears anachronistic.

As Bataille explains, with this exacerbation of slavishness comes the greatest danger:

> Man's disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way.... Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.... No doubt these ends and this movement may not be entirely irreconcilable; but if these two terms are to be reconciled we must cease to ignore one of them; otherwise our works quickly turn to catastrophe.[16]

Bataille's practice is exemplary for Blanchot because he maintains the tension between the possible and the impossible, work and worklessness, in his great communal experiments of the 1930s. This is evidenced in Bataille's participation in the controversial movement Counter-Attack, which was to mobilise the energies of the workers during the turbulent period of 1935–36, when, following widespread strikes, it seemed the French workers' movement might collapse like its German and Austrian counterparts into fascism. In 'Intellectuals Under Scrutiny', Blanchot counters Boris Souvarine's claim that Georges Bataille's alleged admiration of Hitler would have seen him switch allegiance to the Occupant after the final defeat of the Allies. In the same year, in *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot claims Counter-Attack anticipates the Events of May 1968: 'It exists, in a way, only in the streets (a prefiguration of what happened in May '68), that is, outside. It affirms itself through tracts that blow right away, leaving no trace'. Here, once again, Blanchot reveals his concern to accelerate what is urgent in Bataille, refusing to allow his researches to be reduced to a matter of a delusional quest for a vanished form of community, of

being together, that would confirm us, the spectators, in our good taste and sobriety. Blanchot would deprive us of our good conscience with respect to the thinker who, by his own admission, was drawn too close to the methods of the fascists whose power he was attempting to circumvent. But above all, and it is this way that it still answers to what Blanchot calls responsibility despite the idiocies of some of its members, who were quick to invoke a *sur*fascism, as if it were possible to redeem the fascist cult of the leader or the nation state, Counter-Attack was to resist the reduction of human beings to creatures ruled by goals and projects. This attempt to assume responsibility for the total human being allows one to understand why Blanchot will make the claim that 'Acéphale is the only group that counted for Georges Bataille'.[17]

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The formation of Acéphale was not an attempt to incite a mass movement, but to found a religion. Was this a turn from politics or its intensification? One should remember the quotation from Kierkegaard which Bataille uses as an epigraph of one of his articles in this period: 'What looked like politics, and imagined itself to be politics, will one day be unmasked as religious'.[18]

This is why Acéphale, which also gave its name to a journal, four issues of which appeared between 1936 and 1939, was committed to the overturning the 'world of the civilised'.[19] What does this mean? In the preface to the first issue of the journal, Bataille argues that it is too late to be 'reasonable and educated' in the response to the civilised world.[20] The world rewards 'only self-interest and the obligation to work'; this 'life without appeal' instils a morbid guiltiness in those who would attempt to transform it.[21] Bataille's group, of whom there were never more than a handful of members, aimed to suspend this guilt, lifting the curse of the demands of work through certain secret rites and practices. Members of the group would be able to 'participate in the destruction of the world as it presently exists, with eyes open wide to the world which is yet to be'.[22] This destruction would have done with the ordering principle that provides an ultimate ground of reasons and rationality: it is God, the Bataillean 'God', who stands in as the desire for an ultimate *telos*, who would die at Acéphale. The plan to sacrifice a human victim was intended to allow all the members of the group to participate in this death. This participation would be the opening of community – a '*cum*' that is no longer determined by the

demand to work or self-interest. By decapitating themselves through their exposure to a human sacrifice they would communicate in the instant, giving birth in that instant to a scattered community of sovereign beings, of non-slaves released from the work and who are no longer dependent for recognition upon others. But God did not die in the forest where the members of the group met; neither a willing victim nor a willing executioner could be found. The group disbanded in September 1939, when all of its members withdrew.[23]

No doubt Nancy is right to charge the Acéphale group with *nostalgia*. For Nancy, Acéphale led Bataille to realise that it is not through a project that the project as such – 'God' – can be destroyed; Bataille sought to revive a 'modern, feverish kind of "Rousseauism"' in which sacrificial death allows absence – nothingness *par excellence* – to be reintegrated into the life of a community.[24] Acéphale, for Nancy, is transitional. True, in his experiences in the 1930s, Bataille resists the dream of a community that would posit a collective 'essence' allowing its members to participate in a fusion or mystical participation. But this resistance was difficult; Acéphale might be understood as an attempt to circumvent the crisis of community that allow fascism to exert a fascination, and yet, in this attempt, still exhibited nostalgia for the notion of being-together. Thus, Nancy writes, 'aside from the scorn immediately aroused in him by the foulness of the fascist ringleaders and their methods, Bataille went through the experience of realising that the nostalgia for a communal being was at the same time the desire for a work of death.'[25]

Nancy's phrase 'work of death' is telling. For Hegel, the unfolding of Spirit depends on death, upon 'looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it'; the life of Spirit 'is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it'.[26] The progress of the dialectic depends upon the capacity of consciousness to distinguish itself from what is immediately at hand, but at the same time to appropriate it in its immediacy. This, of course, is the burden of the slave, who labours to transform nature. The deeds of the slaves are remembered, and assume, in the transmission of memory, the *Bildungsroman* of the development of Spirit. Nancy argues that the members of Acéphale sought to mobilise death in a manner analogous to Hegel. At Acéphale, however, this desire to be contested is harnessed and put to work in the attempt to sacrifice a willing victim. To expose the group to the murder of one of their members is an attempt to have done with 'God', understood as the principle of what Bataille calls 'the civilised world'.

However, this exposure remains implicated in the world from which the members of Acéphale would have attempted to escape.

This argument is anticipated by Blanchot in an essay written on the occasion of Bataille's death in 1961, where he argues Acéphale was trapped within the logic of the 'civilised world' from which they sought exit. As Blanchot acknowledges, the 'act of supreme negation' that its members wanted to accomplish did not permit the decapitation that they sought; Acéphale remains a project, albeit one that would undertake to overcome the domain of the project. The sacrifice would be simply a manifestation of the same power by which the human being is able to negate nature and negate its own animality, labouring to produce a world, and, in so doing, produce itself as the master of the world. As such, the fundamental project of Acéphale is governed, like any project, by the demand to negate negation, to act, to answer to freedom, and to have done with everything which resists it. But this means that it endlessly defers the experience of dissatisfaction, of unemployable negativity, claiming that the meaning of suffering would be revealed at the other end of the dialectic. The sacrifice belongs to the more general project of the 'civilised world' and, for that reason, would continue to forestall the moment when the human being would run up against what Blanchot calls 'the decisive contestation'.[27] It does not give vent to an excess of negativity, the reserve of death which fails to exhaust itself in action and will not permit itself to be transformed into a power.

But in 1983, replying to Nancy's essay in his own *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot argues that Acéphale already attests to the play of unemployed negativity. The question as to the reserve or withdrawal to which Acéphale would attest is one that Blanchot takes up in the wake of Nancy's essay, reflecting on the paradoxes of the communitarian exigence. Acéphale, it is clear, fails in its own terms as well as the terms of those who would measure success in terms of intended results, but Blanchot draws a lesson from its failure, showing how the attempt to make death work conceals an accompanying and unanticipated worklessness, that is, the play of unemployed negativity which falls outside any avowed project. The call of or from community, Blanchot maintains, becomes visible in 'my presence for another who absents himself by dying'; it reveals itself when I 'remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another's death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community'.[28] I do

not voluntarily *seek* this proximity, nor do I *choose* to open myself to this encounter; I am 'put beside myself' upstream of my volition, my intentionality or my will.

How should one understand this? Here, the 'other' Lazarus can serve once again as a figure for the work of art and the relation to the other person. But what does it mean to invoke this figure in the context of a discussion of sacrifice? There are important indications in an appendix to *The Space of Literature*, in which Blanchot presents what one might too quickly assume to be a straightforward phenomenology of the corpse.

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In an admirable book, Françoise Dastur has speculated that one might 'first define man in terms of these public practices of mourning instead of in terms of the purely private knowledge he has of himself as mortal.'[29] Human existence is distinctive because 'human life is a life "with" the dead'; it follows then that the origin of the community can be found in mourning, where mourning means coming to terms with an absence.[30] The work of mourning allows this absence to be integrated into the practices of a community.

In this way, Dastur writes, 'death's deep caesura must be assumed – that is to say, *at one and the same time* accepted and denied.'[31] Death can not only be said to be accepted by a community, but can also be said to have been *assumed* by it – the rites that surround death not only help to integrate death into the life of the community, but strengthen the community itself. At the same time, however, death can never be entirely integrated or assumed; to keep a memory of the dead, to observe rites, to allocate a space and a time for mourning makes death no less strange or disruptive. 'The dead are not good company', Blanchot writes, 'but are at once reclaimed by the rites: the great funeral ceremonies, the minute rules of protocol, mourning always collective and always public, establishes them in a social site, even if it is set apart: cemetery, myth, family or legendary history, religion of the dead'.[32] And yet, according to his argument in *The Space of Literature*, it is impossible to set the corpse apart.

Blanchot writes of the enigmatic presence of the corpse, 'something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else'.[33] The cadaver no longer resembles the one who was alive, revealing the material presence of

that other. Here, materiality should be understood as non-actuality, which gives itself to be experienced in its resistance to the projects through which our relation to things and to others is predicated. The inanimate body does not simply lack presence, but affirms its over-abundance over any particular determination of spatially or temporality. The corpse robs what is present of the assurance of its presence. This does not mean the corpse transforms presence into absence, but that it brings what is present into relation with absence. It is the uneasy awareness of the difficulty of fitting the corpse into the category of place that leads to myths of reanimation ('The corpse is not in its place. Where is it? It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But then nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere').[34] This myth also indicates the difficult temporality of the corpse which is no longer understood simply to temporally succeed the living body, resembling the one who was still alive as copy does original, but indicates what was always equivocal in the presence of the living Other. It is not the *copy* of the living body, but what always and already exceeds its cultural determination. The corpse, here, can no longer be fixed in a network of social relations; it is no longer obedient; it no longer dissimulates its material presence, its weight, its opacity, its density.

We are back once again before the battle of sages, before the 'other' Lazarus, rotten and putrid, who refuses to come towards us. How should one understand this? As we have seen, literature suspends the movement of sense in attending to the singular, the concrete, such that the singular is never 'in' the literary work, never simply the particular that awaits subsumption under a universal. The articulation of sense, which depends upon the smooth operation of negativity, in which language lifts itself from the immediate, is interrupted. According to Blanchot, the poet foregrounds certain seemingly marginal, inessential aspects of language – rhythm and sonority – in order to witness the singular. This means that poetry might be said to gesture towards a non-dialectical, non-philosophical *thinking*. Poetry attests to a movement in language that allows the being of the singular to shine forth. To write poetically about a thing, any thing, is to allow another side of that thing to emerge. It is to invoke what Blanchot calls the *image* of the thing, its shadow. It makes things mysterious to the extent that it detaches them from their formerly unobtrusive place in the contexture of relationships in which they were embedded.

One might think here of the items in Blanchot's fiction: the glass of water that overflows itself, not just the water, but the glass; the cor-

ridor that appears to open to encompass everything; the walls of the room, which, whilst drawing closer to its inhabitants, simultaneously attests to the whole space of being that has become, paradoxically, claustrophobic because of its very infinitude. But one should think, also of the image of the characters of these narratives, who are no longer human beings like ones we pass in the street, but are made to confront us in an extraordinary materiality, a heaviness, manifesting an inquietude without determination, worklessness no longer yoked to work, nothingness untethered to any specific act of negation.

This is what is marked, according to Blanchot, not only in his own fiction, but in the work of literature and, more generally, in the artwork. The work of art is no longer to be understood in terms of the imitation of the actual, but indicates what one might understand as the play of the non-actual within the actual, the reserve that does not reveal itself when, for Hegel, the real becomes rational and the rational becomes real. The work of art has come to bear upon the profundity of the real; the image is no longer a copy, but the incarnation of the unbearable weight of being. Art has discovered its peculiar vocation: it is not the mirror of the world that the world will fall in love with, but the pool in which Narcissus is made to confront not the reflection of his beautiful body, but his body as it is joined with the body of everything, whose massive and opaque presence he tumbles into as into a black hole. This is a terrible vocation. In the eyes of the world, which deems the non-actualisable the non-existent, this passion is for nothing. In the eyes of the author, it is the task before which it is impossible to situate oneself. But in the commentator's eyes? The commentator is the one who stands guard before the non-actual and the non-actualisable, before the secret heart of the work, knowing that this is one way to preserve us all from the nihilism that declares that the value of everything and keeps no place for absence. The commentator's work resounds with that absence, testifying to it and protecting it, allowing it to resound in its reader. Volumes like *The Work of Fire* or *The Book to Come* are like arks closed around the darkness of the non-real which protect it, for that reason, from the bright world of the real. Books like *Death Sentence* and *Waiting for Oblivion* ask for protection. It is never a question here of solving the mystery of work once and for all, but of standing guard before it, like the doorman of Kafka's story, allowing the man from the country, that is, each of us, any of us, to encounter the work only in dying. (Are there occasions in which one might say the same of the encounter with the living Other as one says of the encounter with the corpse – when, that is, the image of the

human being is revealed in one who is still alive? In a way that points towards my investigations in the final chapter. Blanchot writes, 'In those rare instances when a living person shows similitude with himself, he only seems to us more remote, closer to a dangerous neutral region, *astray* in *himself* and like his own ghost already: he seems to return no longer having any but an echo of life').[35] Friendship for the corpse, for the dying Other, for the artwork or the oeuvre, friendship, even, for the animal, albeit insofar as the beast is always the beast 'in' me – Blanchotian friendship is directed at the Other who is always, in the words of a conversationalist, close to death and close to the night, the Other which can never be actualised, be brought into the order of the real.

Here, the non-actual is not like a hole in being, but a kind of suspension, what Blanchot would call dying or becoming. The participants during May 1968 were not protesting about anything in particular. It was not a question of a political project, only a general dissatisfaction with a world that does not permit the extraordinary criss-crossing of relations at play amongst the participants. Remembering the turbulent Events of May 1968, Blanchot notes, 'the initiative admittedly did not come from us, nor even from those who gave the impetus and appeared to take the lead. It was like a trail of fire, an effervescence that carried us along in its wake; we were constantly together, but in a new way'.[36] I experience the excessiveness of the relation to the Other over any cultural determination of that relation. This is not because the relation opens to what is otherwise than being, but because it binds me to what is non-actual and non-actualisable 'within' being (which is to say, revealing an exteriority, the outside, in and as being). These are the openings *The Unavowable Community* would keep safe – openings that each attest to the advent of communism, which is to say, to a space of freedom which opens insofar as I am no longer, in each situation, able to separate myself from the Other I encounter. I do not *fuse* with the Other, but am brought into a relation of proximity or neighbourhood such that I cannot distance myself from the Other. Am I suffocated? I am, Blanchot would say, dying, which is to say, unable to assemble myself as an 'I' who enjoys the stability of self-presence.

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What I, as a member of Acéphale, might be said to witness is the *image* of the victim. We not modes of the same substance; we share nothing. The victim would be, in the moment of sacrifice, the Other of us all.

This is, perhaps, what Bataille already indicates in the essay, 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice':

> In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-)consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being. In a sense, this is what takes place (what at least is on the point of taking place, or which takes place in a fugitive, ungraspable manner) by means of a subterfuge. In the sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die, and even, in a certain way, by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon.[37]

Each of the members is implicated by the sacrifice of the victim, seeing themselves die. This is not to be understood as an identification with the victim, but as a disidentification that occurs because of what I cannot undergo in the first person. Death, for Kojève, is the motor of the dialectic, transforming the world into a work, granting a distance from things that allows the human being, born to itself through this distancing, to negate them. The work of death begins, according to Kojève, in the separation of master and slave. But this separation collapses in sacrifice. I am fascinated; my gaze is no longer tied to the project. I do not seek what is good for me, what will consolidate my identity. I can no longer grasp and identify what comes up against me. I do not fuse with the victim, but I am dispersed. But in this dispersal, I am no longer a slave, but, in Bataille's word, sovereign; I exist sovereignly.

It is this to which Bataille refers to when he quotes the famous sentence from Hegel 'Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment. It does not attain that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from the Negative … no, Spirit is that power only in the degree to which it contemplates the Negative face to face [and] dwells with it …', and writes in a beautiful passage: 'The excitement of which I speak is well-known, is definable; it is *sacred* horror: the richest and most agonising experience, which does not limit itself to dismemberment but which, on the contrary, opens itself, like a theatre curtain, onto a realm beyond this world, where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning'.[38] *Sacred horror*: one finds the return of the Erniyes, of the Sphinx, of the 'other' Lazarus or the 'other' Narcissus – of the gift that

does not bring together the community by communion, but, like the Blanchotian work, disperses it.

Thus, as Blanchot comments:

> The existence of every being thus summons the other or a plurality of others (this summoning resembles a chain reaction which needs a certain number of elements to be triggered, though it would risk losing itself in the infinite if that number were not determined, just as the universe composes itself only by unlimiting itself in an infinity of universes). It therefore summons a community: a finite community [*communauté finie*], for it in turn has its principle in the *finitude* of the beings which form it and which would not tolerate that it (the community) forget to carry the *finitude* constituting those beings to a higher degree of tension.[39]

The experience would leap from member to member like a contagion is another way of coming face to face with negativity, only here, it is not the act of murder that would permit the development of the dialectic, but the confrontation which reveals the impossibility of overcoming finitude, which is to say, the insufficiency that always wants to be contested. 'Insufficiency', Blanchot maintains, 'cannot be derived from a model of sufficiency'; what is desired here does not put an end to the experience of the limit, of one's finitude, but *intensifies* it. Blanchot maintains that the contestation sought here can only arrive from without, it is 'always exposure to some other (or to the other) [*à un autre (ou à l'autre)*] who is alone able – because of his very *position* – to bring me into play'.[40] Whence the paradox: if I seek contestation, how can I bring myself into relation with the Other such that I am brought into question? How, in a civilisation in which I work as a slave, can I bring myself into an encounter where I am no longer beholden to the master? This, of course, is the aim of Acéphale, which Bataille claims to have understood as an attempt to awaken an anti-political religiosity, whose emblem is the acéphalous deity. Blanchot says:

> What purpose does [the community] serve? None, unless it would be to make present the service to others unto/in death, so that the other does not get lost all alone, but is filled in for [*suppleé*] just as he brings to someone else that supplementing [*suppléance*] accorded to himself. Mortal substitution is what replaces communion.[41]

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A secret society gathers by the lightning struck tree in the forest of Saint-Nom-la-Bretèche. Bataille is present with his lover Laure; Pierre Klossowski, Jacques Lacan and Patrick and Isabelle Waldberg are there too. What is it they hope to achieve? Is Acéphale the last communal gesture of a thinker whose work remains largely unknown and who has not been able to produce a book that would set out his thought in his own name, who has been able to gather a few friends for ceremonies in the woods? Does Bataille not acknowledge the dismal failure of a group brought together in the futile aim to found a religion? Is Acéphale not anachronism itself, playing into Kojève's hands, who would see, here, only the outbreak of a private passion, an act without dignity and without importance, that attests to the futility of political action at time when history is all but finished? Worse – for Acéphale is not even political; by Bataille's admission, it is no more than a spasm of religiosity, that most outmoded of slave ideologies, a violent gesture borrowed from the childhood of human existence. Yet Blanchot insists that it signifies more than this, that this gesture remains exemplary in that 'each member of the group was no longer responsible for the group but for the total existence of humanity':

> each member of the community is not only the whole community, but the violent, disparate, exploded, powerless incarnation of the totality of beings who, tending to exist integrally, have as corollary the nothingness they have already, and in advance, fallen into. Each member makes a group only through the absoluteness of the separation that needs to affirm itself in order to break off so as to become relation, a paradoxical, even senseless relation, if it is an absolute relation with the other absolutes that exclude all relation.[42]

Here, the 'totality of beings' is bound together in an existence that falls short of preserving its relation to the communitarian exigence. It remains slavish, which is to say, it constitutes the integrity of society *and* the integrity of the individuals who ostensibly make up such a society. Each member of Acéphale is bound both by this tendency and by a movement or lability towards what he calls a 'nothingness', that is, the impossible reserve that retreats from human power and possibility. The movement towards integrity and identity and the movement towards nothingness are co-implicated; existence is the endurance of

this paradox. This equivocalness can also be found organising the so-called 'totality of beings', that is, the civilised world as such and in general. Each member of Acéphale can be said to incarnate the same exigencies that govern the social body as a whole. Certain 'paradoxical' and even 'senseless' relations to others endanger the integrity and cohesion of 'human society'; a certain violence, explosion and powerlessness *happen* as the openness to community. Yet these relations are already a suspension of dialectical relationality to the extent that each of the members can be called absolute.

At issue is an affirmation that no longer depends upon a comparison with others or a negation of something else, that no longer seeks recognition. Above all, by implicating its members in the sacrifice, Acéphale liberates its members from servility. The participants are dedicated to a destruction which would allow the rekindling of the desire that was excluded from the guilt, self-interest and work of the civilised world. To grant this desire its full, destructive force would, for an instant, detach the body of the world from the 'head', thereby decapitating 'God' through the sacrifice of a willing victim. The participants hoped, through this sacrifice, to overthrow the demands that structure the civilised world for a blazing instant. It would circumvent the feeling of guilt, as well as the self-interest and devotion to work on the part of the participants, allowing them to break from whole of the civilised world and its societies and ultimately from the primacy of reason. Locally, temporarily, and in a 'fugitive, ungraspable manner', sacrifice would destroy what symbolically holds 'reason' in place, that is, 'God', understood as the 'head' who caps and thereby incarnates the desire to bind death to work.

In one sense, Nancy is right: the co-implication of the movement towards impossible loss with the movement to realise projects, that is, to work, means that the Acéphale group is caught up immediately in the general project that 'God' implicitly sanctions. As Blanchot acknowledges in *The Unavowable Community*, reconfirming his earlier account of Acéphale in *The Infinite Conversation* and the arguments of Nancy's essay, 'the community, by organising and by giving itself as project the execution of a sacrificial death, would have renounced its renunciation of creating a *work*, be it a work of death, or even the simulation of death'.[43] The project of Acéphale remains a project; the attempt to perform a human sacrifice is still an attempt to put death to work. But Blanchot continues:

> The impossibility of death in its most naked possibility (the knife meant to cut the victim's throat and which, with the same move-

> ment, would cut off the head of the 'executioner'), suspended until the end of time the illicit action in which the exaltation of the most passive passivity would have been affirmed.[44]

The Acéphale group attempted to bring about an event that, in turn, would Open each participant to what, for Blanchot, is the happening of community. But whilst there is no doubt that Bataille intended the sacrifice to occur, Blanchot argues that the attempt to put death to work is contested by dying itself, that is, by the 'other' Lazarus who refuses to rise and come towards us. No member of the group could kill a co-member since he or she would not be able to accomplish this sacrifice in the same way as they might complete other projects in the world. The intention to carry out a sacrifice, to make death work, whether or not the group actually realised their ambition, dooms their project to failure. Acéphale is unable to reaffirm its mastery over death in the sacrifice that is supposed to accomplish the liberation of its members from 'God'. The intention to cut the throat of the victim in order to actualise the 'work' or the 'project' of the group would be subject to a reversal even as the ostensible executioner would bring the knife to the victim's throat. The intended action is suspended indefinitely, according to Blanchot's phrase, 'until the end of time', since it paralyses the movement of what Kojève would call death or freedom, upon which the relation to end that would justify the means, the freedom at the end of work, is predicated.

The failure of Acéphale is instructive for Blanchot because it is a figure for the happening of community in the suspension of the ordinary course of time in which volition and will are possible. The community opens *as* the suspension of time in which death *fails to happen*. This is why, indeed, Blanchot writes of 'the sacrifice that founds the community by undoing it, by handing it over to time the dispenser, time that does not allow the community nor those who give themselves to it any form of presence'.[45] The community does indeed 'happen', but not through the assumption of the death of the Other. Death cannot be 'taken on' by the members of Acéphale because at the very moment when they would 'make good' upon that death, and, thereby, upon the principle of insufficiency, their *finitude*, there is no longer anyone present to *be* resolute. In organising Acéphale around the impossible project of a sacrificial death, its members make death into something that 'works', ironically indicating its affinity with the civilised world from which the group would separate itself. On this account, Bataille *would not have been patient enough*. By interrupting the

exposure that opens as the 'happening' of community, and thereby interrupting interruption itself by suspending the suspension of time, by refusing to heed the communitarian exigence, he would attempt to break with the exigencies that structure and restrict the civilised world in a manner that is analogous to other works or projects. And yet the advent of communism opens which precedes, founds and ruins all positive social forms, Acéphale included. That is to say, Bataille's Acéphale fails to endure the equivocalness which is necessary to maintain.

7
We Take Their Place

Blanchot: 'The suffering of our time: "A wasted man, bent head, bowed shoulders, unthinking, gaze extinguished"; "our gaze was turned to the ground".[1] Suffering in our time is not distinguishable from the great sufferings of the past. But there is the disappointment that astonishing leaps in technology have not prevented the omnipresence of war. The increased capacity to work, to alter the world, has not delivered a commensurate freedom. Is one compelled to resign oneself to the failure of the political, to understand politics as an economic administration? Perhaps it is necessary to resign oneself to the ceaseless recollection of genocides, nationalisms and feudalisms. This resignation is a sign of the withering of theodicy and its secular variants. The sufferer – the prisoner of the Gulag, the deportee in the concentration camp – does not look up to the sky as to the city of God. It hardly seems possible to assign a meaning to suffering in terms of a freedom to come, a reward at the end of the labour of the dialectic. In particular, the equation of work and freedom that characterizes the great discourses of political modernity seems to be no longer tenable. It is not by chance that one reads the words, *work liberates*, on the gates of the concentration camp. The sufferer, if not immediately executed, is put to work, and with bent head, bowed shoulders, gaze turned to the ground, labours to the point of death.

Is it possible to undertake a politics that would construct, protect and maintain a kind of lacuna in memory? How, whilst acknowledging that it is impossible to finish mourning, might we act nonetheless without setting politics completely adrift? Does communism provide the beginnings of a political response to a burden heavier than we can bear? Diogenes thought it was sufficient to take a few steps to refute the Eleatics who denied motion; but it seems this freedom to move is not

ours – or rather, that we distrust the spontaneity, simplicity, and voluntarism of his gesture. Remembering Diogenes, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms asks whether a true movement, a repetition [*Gjentagelse*, literally a re-taking] is possible.[2] Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*, reminds us that we are not condemned to make the same mistakes as we have in the past since the past is contingent; whilst it is immutable, it is not necessary. It is because philosophers do not understand repetition that, Constantius reflects, philosophy itself 'makes no movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion, and if it makes any movement at all, it is always within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence'.[3] Transcendence can occur only when we own up to the past, answering to it, as part of the resoluteness that would permit each of us to take responsibility for our existence. Would this resoluteness allow us to raise our heads, to look towards the horizon, to have faith in a future that would not be the deadening recollection of the past? But this notion of repetition might seem as voluntaristic as Diogenes's. Can transcendence be a matter of an *act of will* – a simple *will to move*?

One might discover another kind of transcendence in the demonstrators during the Paris Events of 1968 who let loose the cry: 'we are all German Jews [*Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands*]'. The cry expressed their solidarity with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the leaders of the student movement and the son of a Jew who escaped Germany in 1933, who was barred entry into his native France after a trip overseas and subject to anti-Semitic slurs by the authorities. But it also expresses fraternity with the victims of the Nazis. I would like to suggest with Blanchot that the Events evidence the play of communism, understood in terms of the repetition of the suffering endured by the deportees in the camps.

The comparison might seem inappropriate. After all, as Blanchot recalls, the participants of the Events greeted and welcomed one another regardless of age or renown, writing on the walls and tearing up the paving stones from the street, forming committees locally, provisionally, and dispersing them without plan or project. How might one claim that the bodies of the participants *repeat* the labouring bodies, the executed bodies, the frozen bodies, the marching bodies of the deportees? For Levinas, speaking in an interview in 1984, the Events were but a pseudo-revolution: 'In 1968, I had the feeling that all values were being contested as bourgeois – this was quite impressive – all except for one: the other.'[4] He continues 'Nobody ever said that the right of the other man – despite all the liberation of the spontaneous

ego, despite all the license of language and contempt for the other as other – remained unpronounceable.'[5] The fraternity of the participants is specious; the Events themselves, for all their turbulence, are a *false* movement, a re-circulation of the same in the same, without any real alteration. If it appears to move, it manifests only what he calls in *Otherwise than Being* the 'mobility of the immobile'; if it appears to constitute a revolution, it ultimately changes nothing, because it was not undertaken in the name of *Autrui*.[6] A Levinasian revolution would be above all an affirmation of fraternity, an opening of a relation to the Other. Levinas would unfreeze the order of the same in this affirmation, setting it in motion, attesting to a relation that occurs 'as grace, in the passage from the one to other: transcendence'.[7]

Blanchot, by contrast, discovers just such a grace and transcendence in the fraternity of the demonstrators.[8] The Events should not be understood according to the model of the modern revolution that would aim at reform, at a determined outcome, but *a revolution of revolution itself*, a burning wheel, a rebellion with no particular end, or set of reforms to accomplish, an affirmation of fraternity with those who can never have power. Yes, the cry of the demonstrators might seem inappropriate. But I will argue that it is another way of *bearing witness*, of taking on the unbearable not to be crushed by its weight, but to open a future despite all that has happened. This is why Blanchot brings together his reflections on Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, which relates its author's experiences as a political prisoner at Buchenwald, Gandersheim and Dachau during the Second World War, with an account of the cry of the demonstrators during the Events. The cry in question can, I will suggest, be said to *repeat* what Blanchot calls the *speech* of the prisoners in a way that suggests another way of understanding *our* condition.

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I testify when I tell of an occurrence that happened to me and to me alone – to an experience I have traversed or that has traversed me. To testify is to share this experience, to make it public; but is the singular happening of an experience not impossible to share? An experience is always unique; it befalls me and I can only speak thereafter of what I lose even as I would render it communicable. This is why Derrida observes that testimony is always *autobiographical* since it would relate 'the sharable and unsharable secret of what happened to me, to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see,

hear, touch, sense and feel'.[9] Any autobiographical recounting is compromised by that very recounting; to retell is to lose what happened in its singularity. Testimony, always public, has, as its condition, an event that cannot be rendered communicable. The possibility of testimony, if this word is understood as a literal recounting of what happened, has been stifled in advance. Yes, I can speak, I am capable of writing, of relating what has happened to me, but in so doing, I have also lost the 'object' of my testimony. I speak, I testify, but the capacity to do so retreats from me; it is not mine, or rather it would attest the reserve 'in' me is not in my power to bring forward. This is not to say simply that time and language divide us from our past – that there is a distance between what happened, the attempt to recall it, and the attempt to speak or write about what occurred. Nor is it here a matter of the epistemological indignity of a knowledge that is imperfect because it is bound to the vagaries of individual memory. The testimony in question leaves a mark that I will never be able to bring to presence. The 'secret' in question does not offer itself to inspection; it does not grant itself to recollection.

The paradoxes of testimony become an essential matter for reflection when it is a question of how we testify to the unbelievable. The notes buried near the crematoriums warn us of this. Lewental, cited by Blanchot: 'the truth was always more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it'.[10] The 'truth' cannot be approached; the experiences of those who underwent the worst cannot be appeased. How can we receive the testimonies of those who bring us this undignified knowledge, this fragmented and heterogeneous knowledge of the unbearable? How might one bring them into community without threatening the sense that the community might have of the justice of its collective labour towards freedom, equality and fraternity? These are the questions that Blanchot brings to his conversation on Antelme's testimony in *The Human Race*.

Antelme returned from Dachau weighing eighty-two pounds, his skin as thin as cigarette paper and his backbone visible through his neck. After he wrote *The Human Race*, Duras tells us, 'he never spoke of the German concentration camps again. Never uttered the words again. Never again. Nor the title of the book'.[11] And yet, during the first days, when he was nursed by a doctor experienced in treating famine victims, he would do nothing but talk. As he writes, 'Two years ago, during the first days of our return, I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium. We wanted at last to speak, to be heard'.[12] 'As of those first days, however, we saw that it was impossible to bridge the

gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies'.[13] 'No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it. And then, even to us, what we had to tell would start to seem *unimaginable*'.[14]

It is certainly not Antelme's aim, one of Blanchot's conversationalists observes, to take refuge in 'telling one's story [*se raconter*]'.[15] Yes, Antelme's book is a narrative, it is written in the first person, it recounts certain events – but it does not present an abstract knowledge, affirming the calm order of truth and knowledge as if everything were a matter of adequation and sufficiency. It witnesses the unimaginable, which is to say, an experience that does not offer itself to ready expression. *The Human Race* keeps memory of 'barbarism itself', according to the etymological sense of this word, neither sense nor non-sense but a kind of stammering that hovers on the edge of significance – a kind of speaking [*parler*] that hollows out a gap between addressor and addressee. The survivor cannot find the right words; the experience remains trapped in a body that can never narrate and thereby synthesize what happened. It is not a question of retrieving a memory, but of bearing witness to a trauma that was borne in common by the survivors.

Yet what is held in common is not an experience that could be shared by several fully present individuals. If Antelme writes 'we' rather than 'I' in recalling his experiences, it is to recall the anonymous community to which he and the other deportees might be said to belong. As *The Human Race* progresses, camaraderie and fellow feeling threaten to disappear altogether, until, at the end, there are only bodies too weak to move, starving bodies, broken bodies, including many, like Antelme's sister, the dedicatee of his book, who would die just after their liberation. Antelme's book relates the flickering awareness on the part of this anonymous group that their number was too great for the SS to murder or to work to death. 'They have burned men, and tons of ashes exist, they can weigh out that neutral substance by the ton. Thou shalt not be: but, in the man's stead who shall soon be ashes, they cannot decide that he not be'.[16] The executioner's power is finite; it is defeated by the sheer number of the others, by the human beings who remain outside their determination.

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For the SS, the prisoners placed in their charge have no particularity, no existence; they are without face or, it would seem, speech. As

Antelme recounts, it was ill-advisable for the deportees to allow their faces to be distinguished. 'A face was not only useless but also, in spite of itself, rather dangerous'; to wear spectacles, for example, was to risk an individuation that might mark one out for punishment.[17] This is why the deportees attempted to negate their faces themselves, to bear, each of them, a 'collective, anonymous face' that would allow none of them to be singled out.[18] In their identical outfits, with the same shaved heads and exhibiting the same starvation by degrees, they would disappear into the magma. This was not an extermination camp – prisoners were not systematically murdered in their thousands, but they were systematically deprived of food; anonymously, collectively, they were starved and worked to death.

Who are they? A dregs and a muddle, a jumble of vulnerable and starving bodies placed in the charge of those who would permit them to starve to death by degrees. Antelme evokes this magma in writing of thin, bloodied limbs, protruding ribs, chattering teeth, moans and cries from intestinal pain, paralysing exhaustion, empty bellies sunk inward, clothes filthy with nits and lice, chests covered in bites. 'We have become untouchables', he observes; 'just cries and kicks in the dark', shitting and pissing with dead bodies among bodies that are barely alive, hungry bodies alongside those who died of hunger, heels kicking into wounds.[19]

However, from time to time, the deportees were able to communicate to one another despite this night, catching glimpses of one another, seeing faces. Relationships existed among the deportees which allowed one to feel oneself 'momentarily a self vis-à-vis someone in particular'.[20] There were snatched communications between those who worked, moments when the prisoners broke their anonymity to signal to one another – extending a hand, speaking a word to tell others to slow down the work. Antelme evokes 'Jo's silent fraternity: my head against his back, in the car; the seeds in his hand, now his arm that I lean on'[21]; he also remembers the old Catalan and his son: 'Father and son covered with lice, the two of them no longer looking their true age, coming to look alike. Both hungry, offering their bread to each other, with loving eyes'.[22] There were human signs to be sure, but ones that flashed intermittently between those who were without bond, the entanglement or morass whose every member can be substituted for any other. 'The SS believe that in the portion of mankind that they have chosen love which must rot, because it cannot be anything but an aping of the love between real men, because it cannot really exist'.[23] Antelme's

testimony does not permit us to doubt the existence of love, witnessing, for example, the love of the son for the father whose wrinkled yellow face looks upward from the floor of the train car. Yet it also forces us to accept that no words were exchanged between the SS and those who refused to become *kapos*.[24]

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As Blanchot allows a conversationalist to acknowledge, 'no language is possible'[25] between the SS and the deportees. The deportees were addressed as brutally as they treated them, barking orders, speaking, shouting and receiving acquiescence in turn. It is from out of this magma that each deportee appears briefly, instantaneously, when his name resounds in the roll-call:

> Laughter when my name is called, and I reply "Present". It sounded so outlandish in my ear; but I'd recognised it. And so for one brief instant I had been directly designated here, I and no other had been addressed, I had been specially solicited – I, myself, irreplaceable! And there I was. Someone turned up to say yes to this sound, which was at least as much my name as I was myself, in this place. And you had to say yes in order to return into the night, into the stone that bore the nameless face.[26]

The SS are the masters of speech; they alone retain the power of naming, summoning the deportees as from non-existence like the Adam of Hegel's draft of the *Phenomenology*, who names and brings what is named into existence.[27] Antelme's name, butchered in the mouth of the SS, summons him from a dark indeterminacy in order to say 'present'. The unnoticed stone in the night, the skull without face or name is brought into the world; for a moment, dangerously, he is noticed. 'Laughter when my name is called': it is not the laughter of Robert Antelme *in the first person*, but the laughter of the deportee whose name can only be spoken by those who tear him from a safe anonymity. Antelme's name is no longer a name, but an *order*, a summons to be present before those who hold the power of life and death. *There is laughter*: how might he respond but with laughter, instantly suppressed, at the irony of the danger the pronunciation of his own name announces, exposing him, making him vulnerable until he can reply to his name and return into the morass, relieved because he is once again substitutable.

No, speech is not possible. To be addressed at all is a risk. The deportee can only assent to authority, he can cringe and apologise in the hope of functioning perfectly and disappearing into his function like the perfect tool. But there is another kind of speech, a kind of signification that presents itself in the abject silence of the deportee – a speech of affliction, the still-living accusation of the starving and bedraggled deportee in his hunger and his filth. The SS were confronted with the fact that these fatigued, beaten, frozen and famished bodies were bodies just like their own. This is what the bodies continue to 'say' in the murmuring 'speech' that continued to move forward in them, escaping the measure of their oppressors' power. For a German *Meister*, walking by briskly, the deportees should simply '"*Weg!*" – Get the hell out of the way!'[28] The deportee hears 'I don't want you to exist' in the citizen's dismissal; but each deportee exists as an infinitely substitutable individual, a blank face among other blank faces, as a living refusal of this dismissal, because, as Antelme emphasises, each knows that the magma endures, that 'we are still there' and in their survival, address their captors.[29] All they say, but this is enough, is *here we are, behold us, we survive despite everything*.

No doubt it was this infinite disruption of their powers that drove the SS to desire to destroy the prisoners. As the conversationalists of Blanchot's essay repeatedly insist, 'man is the indestructible that can be destroyed [*l'homme est l'indestructible qui peut être détruit*]'[30]: one can destroy the deportees one by one, but how might the SS rid themselves of every deportee and every potential deportee? Whence the madness of the camps, diverting essential resources to destroy the ultimate object of fear: the indeterminable morass that would have eventually included every human being.

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Blanchot's essay on Antelme was originally joined to a reflection on Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.[31] The separation that occurred with its republication does not make this link any less apparent; it is clear, indeed, from its opening lines: 'Each time the question: Who is "*Autrui*"? emerges in our words I think of the book by Robert Antelme'.[32] Blanchot's reading of Antelme does more than draw his reader's attention to *The Human Race*, underlining the general lessons that its author draws from the camps. Blanchot would account for Antelme's experiences by appealing to the kind of account Levinas provides of the suffering and the relation to the other person. In particu-

lar, he follows Levinas's distinction between two kinds of suffering, implied in *Totality and Infinity*, but rendered explicit in the later essay, 'Useless Suffering':

> there is a radical difference between *the suffering in the Other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else.[33]

Suffering is *useless*, that is, good for nothing, because it binds the sufferer to the present. The sufferer is aware only of the pain from which he or she would distance him or herself. Suffering is claimed to gain meaning, however, in a relation to the Other. Such a relation does not occur voluntarily, that is, through the act of will that would allow one to take on what has happened. Suffering achieves meaning in the prevoluntary assumption of the relation to the Other as it is woven into the constitution of the subject. As such, one's own suffering occurs in a kind of restricted economy. To concern oneself with oneself is to belie the opening that has already occurred. But the apparent freedom to determine oneself for oneself dissimulates the suffering for the Other that Levinas elevates to the status of a 'supreme ethical principle'.[34] Yet this dissimulation always comes *after the fact*; the opening to the Other always and already permits the 'I' to escape the evil of its own suffering. This is why Levinas can link time and the Other, as he does in the title of an early book, showing that the relation to the Other grants a future to the self that would otherwise be mired in immanence.[35] It is in this way that he links time to goodness and the transcendence and fraternity of the opening of the Other to genuine movement, which is always a movement in response to an 'other' law, to a heteronymous encounter.

As I have shown, the prisoners barely exist for themselves, except in rare moments of camaraderie or communication. They endure the horror of an existence without end, mired in what Blanchot calls a 'base impersonality [*l'impersonnalité basse*]' or a 'base eternity [*l'éternité basse*]', an empty perpetuity where nothing can happen.[36] As in Levinas's account of suffering, one finds here an experience that cannot be brought into the grasp of the subject. As one of the conversationalists writes,

> it is precisely in affliction that man has always already disappeared: the nature of affliction is such that there is no longer anyone either

> 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; for as a situation of affliction, it tends incessantly to de-situate itself, to dissolve in the void of a nowhere without foundation [*null par sans fondement*].[37]

But the relation to the Other for Blanchot is, as we have seen, always presented in a way that is more equivocal and disturbing than for Levinas, being linked to an indeterminable experience that can no longer be called good or offer itself as the bestowal of the ethical. It is to be understood as an interruption of the economy of the self, of a certain measure of power. 'It is truly as though there were no Self other than the self of those who dominate', one of Blanchot's conversationalists comments of the camps. The deportee is left 'to an anonymous presence without speech and without dignity'.[38] And yet, the force of the SS has a limit: 'he who literally can no longer do anything still affirms himself at the limit where possibility ceases: in the poverty, the simplicity of a presence that is the infinite of human presence'.[39] An opening occurs, despite everything; the SS endure an inability to alter the prisoner into something other than a human being. It is in this way that Blanchot would attempt to account for Antelme's experiences.

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One might understand the horror of Nazism as its attempt to overcome the inability to abolish speech, to surmount finitude. And indeed, Blanchot follows Nancy in thinking totalitarianism as the movement that would posit a total order that must be produced and maintained through work, as an immanentisation of relations that begins in the movement to identify. Indeed, as Blanchot comments, 'the immanence of man to man also points to man as the absolutely immanent being because he is or has to become such that he might entirely be a work, his work, and in the end, the work of *everything*'; this, he notes, is 'the seemingly healthy origin of the sickest totalitarianism'.[40] Yet the work of death, the movement towards total immanentisation, is phantasmic; it is impossible to achieve a total mobilization since worklessness, understandable here as the movement of transcendence, as transgression, always refuses to be put to work. It reaches us from a place we are unable to determine. This is evident in

Antelme's understanding of the camps: the non-voluntary opening to the deportee, to the Other, entails a displacement of the structure of the identity of the SS, opening it up, or rather, revealing the opening that was there from the start. It is therefore impossible for the SS to maintain the organisation of an inside that would be symmetrical and commensurable with an outside (the Jew, the other person).

It is true that the deportees say nothing, but they do not retain an ability to be silent – pausing to think, refusing to answer, and thereby participating as conversationalists at the same level of discourse. They say nothing, but Blanchot hears a cry in their speech, a depersonalised murmuring, which might, like the horns of Jericho, ruin the walls that enclose them, or, rather, have shown that these walls were already ruined. The deportees are preserved in a distance and a difference that remains infinite. Their separation from their oppressors is neither symmetrical nor commensurable. One cannot cross this distance through the interposition of an impersonal term that would allow one to *know* the Other. Indeed, there is no longer an addressor and addressee who could be said to remain as the terms of the relation in question. One might invoke only an experience of *exposition*, in which the individual SS or the German *Meister* of Antelme's example is exposed to a speech that cannot be synthesized or incorporated.

To claim that there is no longer a threshold, an indivisible line or frontier between the SS and the deportee is not to collapse the situation of the SS into that of the deportees. A distinction between kinds of suffering is maintained. The SS are the locus of a response even as they would exert their authority. To receive the speech of the Other means to acknowledge that they belong to the same race as the Other; that there is indeed only one race. Each of the SS is displaced with regard to himself as if his place was the usurpation of the place of his prisoner. In this way, the SS can be said to have been deported. A *reversal* has already occurred, whereby the powerless and dispossessed prisoners wound and exhaust their captors, hunting and tormenting them in turn. They SS are made to experience the prisoners as the workless reserve which, for this reason, undoes or unravels the work to which they would submit them.

Antelme emphasises that the deportees bear a transient awareness of this obscure torment of the SS. The deportee is aware of a certain capacity to call the power of their oppressors into question, to compel the SS to, in a conversationalist's words, 'receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true *speech*'.[41] Is it possible to envisage, as one of Blanchot's conversationalists suggests, that 'the

one who is dispossessed must be received not only as "*autrui*" in the justice of speech, but also placed back into a situation of dialectical struggle so he may once again consider himself as a force, the force that resides in the man of need, and, finally, in the "*proletarian*"'?[42] Would it be possible for the proletariat of Antelme's testimony to enter the dialectic?

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Antelme's reflections often suggest some kind of continuity with the discourse of an official communism. As he observes, the behaviour of the SS is 'a magnification, an extreme caricature – in which nobody wants or is perhaps able to recognize himself – of forms of behaviour and of situations that exist in the world,'[43] but these reflections are rare in a text that sets itself the task of delineating the horror that befell not only its author, but others like him. When Antelme uses the word proletariat, he does not refer to the immediate, unreflective bearer of the universal. Noting that the prisoner who feeds on potato peelings experiences 'one of the ultimate situations of resistance', 'the proletarian's condition in its extreme form,'[44] he discloses a new, terrible figure, which Blanchot's conversationalists call the 'proletariat in rags', 'the man fallen below need, the shadow of the slave exiled from slavery who labours outside a formative relation with work [*qui travaille sans rapport formateur avec le travail*]'.[45] The proletarians in question are not the embryos of a revolutionary subject-position; they are not the ultimate subject of history and cannot look forward to the post-revolutionary community to come. Nor are they the slaves who would constitute an independent and universal absolute from whom the master would seek recognition.

Yet, in their rags, they still possess the flickering awareness of which Antelme writes, that is, what he calls, '*the ultimate feeling of belonging to mankind* [*le sentiment ultime d'appartenance à l'espèce*].[46] Killed in huge numbers, starving to death, forced to work in the harshest conditions, they are aware that they remain an enigma for the SS. They cannot become the perfect tool or the perfect raw material. Even in death, they refuse to become anything other than human corpses. And even if they were ground down to become industrial waste or agricultural slurry, there are still others in this anonymous community who would replace them. There will always be another proletarian in rags who would continue to address the SS

as the absolutely Other [*l'autre*]. One of Blanchot's conversationalists observes of this awareness:

> This is what bears meditation: when through oppression and terror man falls as though outside himself, there where he loses every perspective, every point of reference, and every difference and is thus handed over to a time without respite that he endures as the perpetuity of an indifferent present, he has one last possibility. At this moment, when he becomes the unknown and the foreign, when, that is, he becomes a fate for himself [*destin pour lui-même*], 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.[47]

This is why Blanchot allows his conversationalists to return to the phrase, 'man is the indestructible that can be destroyed': the human being, who can always become proletarian, who is always exposed to the chance of being enclosed in the anonymous community of the starving and bedraggled, and cannot end otherwise than as a human being. The power of the SS remains finite. Doubtless this is why they behaved as if it were infinite – as if they could create a new division in the human race itself. But, as Antelme observes, despite the 'SS fantasy to believe that we have an historical mission to change species […] the distance separating us from another species is still intact. It is not historical'.[48]

Antelme also remarks that the behaviour of the SS is a 'magnification' or 'caricature' of our behaviour.[49] The 'extraordinary sickness' the camps reveal is indeed a 'culminating moment in man's history'; it confirms the behaviour that can always occur as soon as it is decreed that '"they aren't people like us"'.[50] Yet it is also the case that the proletarians, the human race will always outlive this sickness: 'It's because we're men like them that the SS will finally prove powerless before us. It's because they shall have sought to call the unity of this human race into question that they'll finally be crushed'.[51]

For Blanchot, too, the camps retain an emblematic force. As he comments, 'all the distinctive features of a civilization are revealed or laid bare', by which he refers to the ongoing process of exclusion that occurs in the collective work towards freedom.[52] Here, Blanchot is concerned not primarily with those who are exploited and alienated from the products of their labours, that is, the Marxist proletariat, but those who lack a *formative relation to work*, who are entirely excluded from labour and, for that reason, in perpetual danger of being treated like

industrial waste. As Blanchot, drawing close to Levinas, allows a conversationalist to observe, the proletarian 'is always the other', always 'man as *autrui*, always coming from the outside, always without a country in relation to me, strange to all possession, dispossessed and without dwelling place'.[53]

Is this what Blanchot indicates when he allows a conversationalist to claim that the other is always the proletariat? '*Autrui* is not on the same plane as myself. Man as *autrui*, always coming from the outside, always without a country in relation to me, strange to all possession, dispossessed and without dwelling place, he who is as though "by definition" the proletarian (the proletarian is always the other) does not enter into dialogue with me'.[54] Speech, for Blanchot, is not primarily a matter of dialogue. To respond to speech, to invoke the speakers and to address them, as occurs before any conscious or voluntary reaction, is already to have be exposed, turned from oneself because of the dissymmetry that is at play in the relation. The response of the SS, before everything, acknowledges the powerlessness, destitution and the strangeness of the other, that is, of the proletarian or, better, the subproletarian, who escapes the measure of power.

But to claim that true discourse is a response to the Other must also be to acknowledge that the relation between the SS and the deportees in the camps is analogous to the relations *between us*, any of us. We are always enclosed by a whole network of forces, but this does not mean that we cannot become the Other for other human beings around us. Is this why Levinas claims 'the unity of the human race is in fact posterior to fraternity'?[55] Blanchot, following Antelme, proposes a conception of the human race that depends upon a potential relation of substitutability each of us possess with respect to the anonymous community of those who are excluded. This is why the community in question is as large as the human race. The apparent unity of human race dissimulates a constant play of relations, whereby one might expose others in becoming the Other, or might be exposed by the Other in turn.

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They aren't people like us: is it the Jews who have indicated a relation to the Other that cannot be rendered simultaneous or commensurate? Blanchot quotes Levinas's remark: 'Judaism is an essential modality of all that is human'.[56] He follows Levinas in understanding the Jews primarily as a people of the Book, that is, as a people to whom an

awareness of a horizontal transcendence has been vouchsafed through the scriptures. This is the horrible irony: the Nazis persecuted those who were bound by their relation to the Book to answer to the relation to the Other, that is, to speech.[57] The objects of persecution were those who would be able to indicate another experience of God and another rendering of the notion of fraternity.

Blanchot would no doubt follow Lacoue-Labarthe in understanding the persecution of the Jew in terms of this experience, this other God:

> it was not at all by chance that the victims of that annihilation attempt were the witnesses in that West of another origin of the God who was venerated and thought there – if not indeed, perhaps, of another God – one who evaded capture by the Hellenistic and Roman traditions and who thereby stood in the way of the program of accomplishment.[58]

Jewish monotheism retains an important meaning for Blanchot – unlike the God of 'power, promise and salvation, of whose retreat Auschwitz is the mark'.[59] Yet some have been worried by the passage that follows in which Blanchot writes with a self-confessed *brutality* that he understands this monotheism solely in terms of the relation to the Other. After invoking the 'great gift of Israel', that is, 'its teaching of the one God', he remarks:

> I would rather say, brutally, that what we owe to 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. God speaks, and man speaks to him. This is the great feat of Israel.[60]

The Jewish God issues the call from the outside, the call that elects a people to leave their abode. It is God who called Abraham into exile, who allowed the slaves to become a people in the deserts of Egypt, a people without land, hunted, anxious even as they were elected to observe the Law and to preserve the holy. The words heard by Abraham, 'leave your country, your kinsmen, your father's house', take on meaning for Blanchot as a summons to a positive errancy, to a new, nomadic relation to the earth.[61] But in making this claim, does he not erase the specificity of the Jews?

This erasure might seem to be confirmed in the fact that Blanchot privileges Antelme's book in his reflections both on the relation to the Other and of the camps. As Bruns notices, Antelme himself compares the plight of the deportees he describes to that of the Jews, writing, 'around here the SS don't have any Jews to hand. We take their place'.[62] Bruns observes, 'Antelme was not Jewish, although once in his memoir he characterises himself and his fellow prisoners as stand-ins made to substitute for Jews, there being none left, as he imagined, in Buchenwald'.[63] Bruns notes that Antelme is being 'metaphorical': '"being Jewish" is the condition of absolute abjection [...] anyone who suffers *in extremis* is, by transference, Jewish'.[64] Is Blanchot *also* being metaphorical in foregrounding a book by a non-Jew that records its author's experience of a hard labour camp where there were no Jews? By seemingly incorporating Jews to the more general category of the proletariat, denying them their specificity, does he not confirm a tendency that Mole argues characterizes a certain 'poststructuralist discourse', a 'discourse of alterity' that reifies the Jew, thereby 'reducing the very open-endedness it would figure'?[65]

But to claim that Antelme's book witnesses the horizontal transcendence of the Other in a manner analogous to that of Judaism entails no such reduction. To witness the relation in question is not to lay claim over it once and for all. There cannot be an absolute exemplarity with respect to speech. One must understand the peculiar election that would make the Jews a people vulnerable, in Levinas's words, 'to find itself, overnight and without forewarning, in the wretchedness of its exile, its desert, ghetto or concentration camp – all the splendours of life swept away like tinsel, the Temple in flames, the prophets without vision, reduced to an inner morality that is belied by the universe'.[66] But Antelme reminds us that the situation in the camp is a sign of a more general situation, that is, the fact that beyond the colour, class, or the custom of human beings 'there are not several human races, there is one human race'.[67] There is one human race, whose members are all vulnerable to the violence that could force them to become a member of the anonymous community. Levinas argues that the scriptures attest to a relation that escapes this violence. Yet Antelme, too, bears witness to the extraordinary awareness on the part of the prisoners that they, or others like them, are the infinite, indeterminable reserve who would survive the SS. This is to say that, as Blanchot shows, *The Human Race*, like the scriptures and like Levinas's own philosophy, attests to the transcendence that happens as plural speech.

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'In common we have: burdens [*les charges*]. Insupportable, immeasurable, unsharable burdens';[68] but how are we to bear this unbearable burden and to move and open ourselves to a future? This is the question Blanchot would entrust to us: how might we attest to the openings that would allow us to invoke the community to which we are called, even *chosen*, because we belong to the human race? Such belonging, as I have shown, requires that we exist in a relation of displacement with ourselves and with our work and with the '*cum*' of a community that would protect and maintain something shared.

Is this what we witness in the explosive joy of the Events, each of the participants learnt to face one another in a 'camaraderie without preliminaries' because they were present not as persons or subjects 'but as the demonstrators of a movement fraternally anonymous and impersonal'?[69] Is this not analogous to what Constantius would call a *repetition*, that is, the true movement of fraternity that was sometimes permitted between individuals who, on Antelme's account, appeared and disappeared into the magma? And when Blanchot writes that the men of power were confronted by 'a carnivalesque redoubling of their own disarray', is there not a repetition of the disarray of the SS before those over whom they would exert their dominion?[70]

A genuine revolution, according to Levinas and Blanchot, would answer to the pre-voluntary opening to the Other, thus unfreezing those spaces that have allowed themselves to be determined in view of collective work. As Blanchot writes, one must heed the murmuring cry – the 'cry of need or of protest', the 'cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry'; 'the written cry graffiti on the walls' – without synthesising it or reducing to a moment of the unfolding of discourse. It is not simply a matter of reminding oneself of the existence of those beneath the proletariat, of identifying their needs and coming to their aid, but of keeping memory of the instant in which language is pledged in speech. Blanchot's notion of the proletariat and his *communism*, as he signals his allegiance to this word, answers the need to keep memory of those situations when, in the words of 'Humankind', the presence of the Other 'puts the power of the Powerful radically into question'.[71]

Notes

Preface

1. *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xii; *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), viii. Hereafter, references to the original text are given in parentheses after the page number of translation.
2. *Friendship*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83; [*L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 98].
3. *Friendship*, 295 (101).
4. Antelme, *The Human Race*, translated by Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston: Marlboro Press 1992), 74.
5. I regard Leslie Hill's reading of Blanchot's early journalism in *Blanchot – Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) as definitive. As Hill comments, throughout the 1930s, even as he rejects all forms of political or parliamentary representation in the name of the promise of future revolution, Blanchot conceives of that future 'almost exclusively in terms of the self-presence of the nation, that is beyond representation, the nation's self-identity and proximity to itself as political subject and origin' (*Blanchot*, 43).

Introduction: The Claim of Communism

1. 'The Inoperative Community', translated by Peter Connor in *The Inoperative Community*, (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–42, 1. I will translate the title of Nancy's essay as *The Workless Community*, in order to maintain consistency with my rendering of *désoeuvrement*.
2. I draw on the distinction made by Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in documents relating to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political, held on a monthly basis at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in the early 1980s. In their opening address to the Centre, they place emphasis on the phrase 're-treating the political' with the intention of marking a necessity to withdraw the political 'in the sense of its being the 'well-known' and in the sense of the obviousness (the blinding obviousness) of politics', *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 112. This phrase also calls for the re-elaboration of the political, by rendering possible 'a question which refuses to confine itself to the categories ordinarily grouped under "the political"' (*Ibid.*).
3. Nancy's essay, published in *Aléa* in 1983, was later collected in *La communauté désoeuvrée* (Détroits: C. Bourgois, 1990).
4. Nancy, *The Workless Community*, 7.
5. *The Unavowable Community*, translated by Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), 1; *La Communauté Inavouable* (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1983), 9.

6. *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 195; *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 257.
7. See Timothy Clark's 'The Impossible Lightness of Reading: Reading and the Communicational Model of Subjectivity in Blanchot, *Southern Review*, 28 (March 1995), 14.
8. *Friendship*, 48 (59).
9. *The Blanchot Reader*, translated by Michael Holland *et. al.*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 203.
10. *The Blanchot Reader*, 201.
11. *Ibid.*, 201.
12. *Ibid.*, 224.
13. *The Infinite Conversation*, 71 (101).
14. *Autrui* refers to other people or to the neighbour. I translate it here, variously, as the other person and as the Other.
15. *The Infinite Conversation*, 70–71 (101).
16. *Inner Experience* (trans. Leslie-Anne Boldt, Albany: State University, 1988), 92.
17. *The Unavowable Community*, 21 (40).
18. 'Our Responsibility', in Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili eds., *For Nelson Mandela* (Seaver Books, New York, 1988), 249.
19. 'Our Responsibility', 250.
20. *The Blanchot Reader*, 245.
21. *Ibid.*, 225.
22. *The Unavowable Community*, 56 (92).
23. *Lyotard and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6.
24. *Ibid.*, 6.
25. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 6.
26. This is demonstrated convincingly in two excellent recent books on Bataille, Peter Tracey Connor's *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (John Hopkins University Press, 2003) and Christopher Gemerchak's *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille, Reading Hegel* (State University of New York Press, 2003).
27. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 116.
28. *Ibid.*, 111.
29. *The Workless Community*, 1.
30. See *The Blanchot Reader*, 167–173.
31. *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 145; *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 219.
32. *The Unavowable Community*, 56 (92).

Chapter 1 The Beast in Me

1. *Friendship*, 55 (67).
2. *Ibid.*, 1 (9).
3. *Ibid.*
4. One should hear in the French word *entretien*, not only what can be translated as conversation, but a holding, from *tenir*, to hold, between, *entre*. As

Susan Hanson, the translator of *The Infinite Conversation* puts it, *entretien* 'suggests a holding up, a supporting and maintaining, a between that is rigorously held to: a keeping up of speech, that is, a keeping to the rift or opening that both permits and interrupts speech – its gift but also its shadow)' (*The Infinite Conversation*, xxviii).

5. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, edited by Allan Bloom, translated by James H. Nichols (Cornell University Press, 1980), 242.
6. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 200.
7. *Ibid.*, 200.
8. *Ibid.*, 261.
9. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 15.
10. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 250.
11. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 15.
12. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 234.
13. *Ibid.*, 256.
14. *Ibid.*, 255.
15. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 15.
16. *Ibid.*, 29.
17. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 39.
18. *Ibid.*, 39.
19. *Ibid.*, 255.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 17.
22. *Ibid.*, 16.
23. *Ibid.*, 21.
24. Like Bataille in *Theory of Religion*, I pass over the discussion of the way in which human beings might be said to emerge into self-consciousness. Bataille's negotiation of the dialectics of recognition as he inherits it from Kojève and Hegel will form the focus of the penultimate chapter.
25. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 30.
26. *Ibid.*, 41.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 241.
29. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), B72.
30. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, translated by Richard Taft (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997), 18.
31. *Friendship*, 5 (13).
32. *Ibid.*, 5 (14).
33. *Ibid.*, 6 (14).
34. *Ibid.*, 6 (15).
35. *Ibid.* I follow Bataille in assuming the subject of my discussion is male.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *The Space of Literature*, 105 (132).
39. *Ibid.*, 105 (132).
40. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 254.
41. *Ibid.*, 247.

42. *Ibid.*, 247.
43. *Ibid.*, 255.
44. *The Infinite Conversation*, 207 (307–08).
45. *Ibid.*, 42 (60).
46. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 187.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 257.
49. *The Infinite Conversation*, 206 (305).
50. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, translated by Leslie-Anne Boldt (Albany: State University, 1988), 60.
51. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 61.
52. Bataille, *Guilty*, translated by Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), 123.
53. *Ibid.*, 90–91.
54. *Ibid.*, 91.
55. Bataille, *The Impossible*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991), 10.
56. *Friendship*, 11 (20).
57. Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, translated by Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 52, 53.
58. *Friendship*, 11 (20).
59. *Ibid.*
60. Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 52.
61. Blanchot goes further than the Bataille of *Lascaux* in attributing a meaning to what he calls the 'signature'. But in *Tears of Eros* published a few years later, Bataille seems to follow Blanchot in discovering an 'essential and paradoxical accord [...] between death and eroticism' that is 'signed' in the closed space at the bottom of the crevasse (*Ibid.*)
62. *Friendship*, 10 (18–19).
63. *The Infinite Conversation*, 209 (310).
64. *Friendship*, 11 (20).
65. I am indebted to Stephen Mitchelmore for the elaboration of this point.
66. *The Space of Literature*, 201 (268).
67. *Ibid.*, 202 (268).
68. *Friendship*, 3 (11).
69. *The Blanchot Reader*, 224.
70. Marc Rohan, *From Paris '68 – Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers and Poems of the Events of May 1968* (London: Impact Books, 1988), various pages.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *The Blanchot Reader*, 224.

Chapter 2 Two Temples

1. *Friendship*, 41 (21).
2. Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 94.
3. See Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
4. Hegel, *Aesthetics* volume I, translated by T. N. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 360.

5. Hegel, *Aesthetics* volume I, 361.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', translated by David Farrell Krell, in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 80.
8. *Ibid.*, 171.
9. *Ibid.*, 167.
10. *Ibid.*, 175.
11. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy* (*From Enowning*), translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Indiana University Press, 1999), 329.
12. Heraclitus, fragment 53, in *Early Greek Philosophy*, translated and edited by Jonathan Barnes (London: Penguin, 1987).
13. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 80.
14. *Ibid.*, 204.
15. See, for example, *The Infinite Conversation*, 299 (441).
16. *The Space of Literature*, 214 (284).
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 215 (285).
19. *Ibid.*, 194 (255).
20. *Ibid.*, 201 (268)
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 24 (17)
23. *Ibid.*, 22 (15).
24. *Ibid.*, 229 (305).
25. *Ibid.*
26. As Hegel writes, 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past', since it is no longer the absolute mode of expression and self-understanding for European people (*Aesthetics*, volume I, 11).
27. *Ibid.*
28. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 354.
29. *Ibid.*, 354.
30. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 205.
31. *Ibid.*, 145.
32. *The Space of Literature*, 196 (258).
33. *Ibid.*, 229 (305).
34. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 159–160.
35. *Ibid.*, 161.
36. *Ibid.*
37 Bernasconi, 'The Greatness of the Work of Art', in *Heidegger Toward the Turn: Essays on the work of the 1930s* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 95–118), 112.
38. Bataille, 'Van Gogh as Prometheus', *October* 36, Spring 1986 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 63.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *The Blanchot Reader*, 112.
41. *Ibid.*, 113.
42. Bataille, 'Van Gogh as Prometheus', 59.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*

45. *The Space of Literature* 195 (257).
46. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 18.
47. *Friendship* 23 (33).
48. *The Space of Literature*, 206–207 (275).
49. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, trans. Robert Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 233.
50. *The Space of Literature*, 207 (275).

Chapter 3 The Sphinx's Gaze

1. 'Our Clandestine Companion', translated by David Allison, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, l986), 41.
2. *Ibid*.
3. *Ibid*.
4. *The Infinite Conversation*, 51–52 (74).
5. *Ibid*., 49 (70).
6. *Ibid*.
7. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969), 298. As Jacques Derrida writes, commenting on the same remark: 'since the thought of the Neuter, as it continues to be elaborated in the work of Blanchot, can in no way be reduced to what Levinas means here by the Neuter, an enormous and abyssal task remains open' (*Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 140). An enormous task, indeed – and one that I have attempted to begin here.
8. Like Levinas, Blanchot sought from early on to 'leave the climate of Heideggerian philosophy' (*Existence and Existents*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff Levinas, 1978), 19).
9. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
10. *The Infinite Conversation,* 72 (102).
11. *Ibid.,* 60 (85).
12. *Ibid.,* 52 (74).
13. *Ibid.,* 60 (86).
14. *Ibid.,* 79 (55).
15. *Ibid.,* 101 (71).
16. See, for example, Levinas's careful separation of the encounter with the Other in erotic love in the section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled 'Beyond the Face' (254–285).
17. *The Work of Fire*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 327; *La Part du Feu* (Paris, Gallimard, 1949), 316.
18. *Ibid*., 313 (323–234).
19. *Ibid*., 316 (327).
20. *Ibid*., 317 (327).
21. *Ibid*., 325 (315).
22. *The Space of Literature*, 163 (213).
23. *Ibid*., 14 (21).
24. *Ibid*., 21 (26).
25. *Ibid*., 23 (28).

26. See *ibid.*, 27 (31).
27. *Ibid.*, 55 (61).
28. *The Infinite Conversation*, 54 (77–78).
29. I am indebted here to Simon Critchley's formulation in '*Il y a* – A Dying Stronger than Death (Blanchot with Levinas), *Experiencing the Impossible*, *Oxford Literary Review* 15 (2000), 81–132.
30. *The Infinite Conversation*, 72 (103).
31. *The Space of Literature*, 251 (337).
32. *Ibid.*, 51 (55).
33. *The Infinite Conversation*, 72 (103).
34. *Ibid.*, 311 (456).
35. *The Space of Literature*, 72 (102).
36. *The Infinite Conversation*, 17 (21).
37. *Ibid.*, 17 (21-22).
38. *Ibid.*, 18 (22).
39. *Ibid.*, 23 (30).
40. *Ibid.*, 72 (102).
41. In 'Violence and Metaphysics' (*Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1981)), Derrida asks whether Blanchot can indeed think the Other without a theological context – 'independent of its "theological context" [...] does not this entire discourse collapse?' (103). This is a question Derrida seems to have answered for himself in his more recent work.

Chapter 4 Weary Truth

1. *The Infinite Conversation*, 262 (392).
2. *The Infinite Conversation,* 343, 344 (504).
3. *Ibid.*, 329 (428).
4. *Ibid.*, 339 (498).
5. *Ibid.*, 339–340 (499).
6. *Ibid.*, 340 (499).
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 71 (101).
9. *Ibid.*, 212 (314).
10. *Ibid.*
11. Hegel, *Berlin Phenomenology,* edited and translated by Michael John Petry (Kluwer, 1981), § 462.
12. *The Infinite Conversation,* 36 (50).
13. *Ibid.*, 34 (48).
14. *Ibid.*, 38 (54)
15. Hegel, *Berlin Phenomenology*, § 463.
16. This section of *The Infinite Conversation* was originally published as an independent tale ('*L'entretien infini', La Nouvelle Revue Française* 159 (March), 385–401, 1966).
17. *The Infinite Conversation,* xiii (x).
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, xiv (x).
20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.,* xv (xiv).
22. *Ibid.,* xv (xiii).
23. *Ibid.,* xvi (xiv).
24. *Ibid.,* xx (xxii).
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.,* xxi (xxii).
27. *The Infinite Conversation*, xxi (xxiii).
28. *Ibid.,* xxii (xxv).
29. Levinas, *Is it Righteous to be?*, translated and edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 91.
30. See my essay 'The City and the Stars. Politics and Alterity in Heidegger, Levinas and Blanchot'. *Journal of Religious and Cultural Theory*, 3.3 (2002).
31. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 45.
32. Macquarrie and Robinson translate *Sein-können* as potentiality-to-be in *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).
33. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188.
34. Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, translated by Michael Heim (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), 189.
35. Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture' in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by W. Lovitt (New York, Harper & Row, 1977), 115–154.
36. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 46–47.
37. *Ibid.,* 47.
38. *Ibid.,* 48.
39. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 255.
40. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 49.
41. *Ibid.,* 45–46.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *The Infinite Conversation,* xvii (xvi).
44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969), 170.
45. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 54.
46. *Ibid.*, 78.
47. Levinas, *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1996), 136.
48. See *Totality and Infinity,* 46.
49. *The Unavowable Community*, 33 (57).
50. *The Infinite Conversation,* 71 (100).
51. See, in this context, Peperzaak's helpful remarks in his close commentary upon the sixth subsection of Part 3 of section 3 of *Totality and Infinity*, where he finds a 'double asymmetry' similar to what I have presented as the double dissymmetry that one finds in Blanchot. As Peperzaak notes, although Levinas denies the reciprocity of the relation to the Other, 'this rejection seems to rest on al illegitimate identification of the category *reciprocity* with another category that could be called '*double asymmetry*': when A is infinitely obliged by B, B can still be infinitely obliged by A' (*To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1993), 172).

52. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, and New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), 65.
53. Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000), 198.
54. Levinas, 'God and Philosophy', translated by Bettina Bergo, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 141.
55. 'Our Clandestine Companion', 49.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *The Infinite Conversation,* 71 (101).
58. *Blanchot Reader*, 202.
59. *The Infinite Conversation,* xii (viii).
60. *Ibid.,* 215 (320).
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.,* 213 (316).
63. *Ibid.,* 342 (499)
64. *Of Friendship*, 30–31.
65. *The Infinite Conversation*, 43 (61).
66. *Of Friendship*, 33.
67. *The Step Not Beyond*, translated by Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 7; *Le pas au-delà* (Paris, Gallimard, 1974).
68. *The Infinite Conversation,* 52 (74).
69. *Ibid.,* 68 (97).
70. *Ibid.,* 55 (78).
71. *The Unavowable Community*, 23 (43).
72. 'After the Fact' in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, translated by Paul Auster, Robert Lamberton and Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 490.
73. *The Unavowable Community*, 25 (46).
74. 'After the Fact', 490.
75. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 25 (46).
76. *The Unavowable Community*, 56 (92).

Chapter 5 Philosophy Unbound

1. 'Our Clandestine Companion', 42.
2. *Friendship,* 289 (326).
3. *Ibid.,* 289 (327).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.,* 289 (326).
6. *Ibid.,* 291 (328).
7. *Ibid.,*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 27 (47).
10. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 28–29 (50).
11. Cited *The Unavowable Community*, 22–23 (42).
12. *The Infinite Conversation,* 211 (313).
13. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, translated by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Paragon, 1992), 9.

14. *The Unavowable Community* 24 (44).
15. *Ibid.*, 23 (43).
16. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 43.
17. *Ibid.*, 51.
18. *Ibid.*, 38.
19. *Ibid.*, 60.
20. *Ibid.*, 116.
21. See Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
22. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 116.
23. These remarks, and my argument in this and other chapters of the present work do not apply to Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, where his conception of writing undergoes a decisive transformation. I am indebted to William Large's unpublished book manuscript on the question of writing in Levinas for my understanding of this transformation. See, on the relationship between the later Levinas and the later Blanchot, my essays 'The Unbearable. Trauma and Witnessing in Blanchot and Levinas', *Janus Head, Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Continental Philosophy, Literature, Phenomenological Psychology and the Arts*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2003), 37–63 and 'Write! Write! Blanchot, Kofman and Levinas on Witnessing', *Journal of Religious and Cultural Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2003).
24. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 269.
25. *Ibid.*, 269.
26. *Ibid.*, 263.
27. Bataille, *Guilty*, 60.
28. *Of Friendship*, 25.
29. This is what Blanchot indicates when he writes, '[b]y a simplification that is clearly abusive, one can recognise in the entire history of philosophy an effort either to acclimatise or to domesticate the neuter by substituting for it the law of the impersonal and the reign of the universal, or an effort to challenge it by affirming the ethical primacy of the Self-Subject, the mystical aspiration to the singular Unique. The neuter is thus constantly expelled from our languages and our truths' (299). See Zarader's *L'être et le neutre : à partir de Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Verdier, 2001).
30. *Friendship,* 125 (145).
31. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, xxxi.
32. *Ibid.*, 57.
33. *The Unavowable Community*, 18 (35).
34. *Friendship,* 292 (329).
35. *Ibid.*, 292 (330).

Chapter 6 Mortal Substitution

1. Duras, *Outside: Selected Writings*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (London: Flamingo, 1987), 28.
2. Bataille, *Guilty*, 123.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 247.

5. Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vols. II and III: The History of Eroticism/ Sovereignty*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 283.
6. Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, translated by John Llewellyn (London and New York: Athlone Press, 1996), 4.
7. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 172.
8. *The Unavowable Community,* 6 (16).
9. *Ibid.,* 9 (21).
10. *Ibid.*, 30 (53).
11. *The Infinite Conversation,* xii (viii).
12. 'Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him', 63 (9).
13. *Ibid.*
14. *The Infinite Conversation,* 215 (320).
15. *Ibid.*
16. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 21.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 178.
19. *Ibid.*, 181.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes* volume II (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 273.
23. 'Autobiographical Note', translated by Betsy Wing, *The College of Sociology*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 387.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *The Workless Community,* 17.
26. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.
27. *The Infinite Conversation,* 205 (304).
28. *The Unavowable Community*, 9 (21).
29. Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, 7.
30. Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, 8.
31. *Ibid.*, 9.
32. *The Step Not Beyond*, 105 (145).
33. *The Space of Literature*, 256 (344).
34. *Ibid.*, 256 (344).
35. *Ibid.*, 258 (347).
36. *Of Friendship*, 33.
37. Bataille, 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', translated by Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 9–28, 19.
38. *Ibid.*, 21.
39. *The Unavowable Community*, 6 (16–17).
40. *Ibid.*, 8 (20).
41. *Ibid.*, 11 (24).
42. *Ibid.*, 13–14 (28).
43. *Ibid.*, 14 (29).
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 15 (30).

Chapter 7 We Take Their Place

1. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 81 (129).
2. Kierkegaard, *Repetition* in *Fear and Trembling/ Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
3. Kierkegaard*, Repetition,* 186.
4. Levinas, *Is it Righteous to be?*, 99.
5. *Ibid*. Levinas seems to have changed his mind on this point by the interview with Salomon Malka in 1984 from which these remarks are taken. In 'Judaism and Revolution', a commentary on the Tractate Baba Metsia a year after the Events, he writes: 'those who shouted, a few months ago, 'We are all German Jews' in the streets of Paris were after all not making themselves guilty of petit-bourgeois meanness', *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 113.
6. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* translated by Alphonso Lingis, *The* Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 33.
7. Levinas, *Is it Righteous to be?*, 111.
8. As Leslie Hill reminds us, Blanchot comments on the cry 'We are all German Jews' in one of his anonymous writings published in *Comité*. He cites Blanchot as follows: '"Never", he claims, "had this previously been said anywhere, never at any time: it was an inaugural moment of speech, opening and overturning borders, opening, overthrowing the future"' (*Blanchot – Extreme Contemporary*, 219). The text in question, '*Les Actions exemplaires*', *Comité*, 1, October 1968, 17–18, 18, was published anonymously in a short lived journal.
9. Derrida, *Demeure*. *Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 43. I am indebted in the following pages to Derrida's discussion of the problematics of testimony in Blanchot in his *Demeure*.
10. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 82 (131).
11. Duras, *The War: A Memoir,* translated by Barbara Bray (New York: The New Press, 1986), 65.
12. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 3.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*.
15. *The Infinite Conversation,* 134 (198).
16. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 74.
17. *Ibid*., 52.
18. cf. *Ibid*., 52.
19. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 265.
20. *The Infinite Conversation,* 134 (199).
21. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 275.
22. *Ibid*., 262.
23. *Ibid*., 263.
24. The *kapos* consisted of those prisoners, typically German criminals, chosen to administer the day-to-day lives of the deportees.
25. *The Infinite Conversation,* 134 (199).
26. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 21.

27. *Berlin Phenomenology,* Dordrecht: Reidel, 1981, § 462.
28. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 51. The *Meisters* were German civilians who supervised the prisoners who worked in factories.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *The Infinite Conversation,* 130 (192).
31. The essay on Antelme that appears in Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation* has a complex publication history. It was originally published as part of a longer essay '*L'indestructible'* in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 112 (April 1962), 671–80. This longer essay was cut in two by Blanchot and emended. The first half, 'The Relation to the Third Kind: Man without Horizon' appears in the first part of *The Infinite Conversation* and the second, the meditation on Antelme, as the second half of a chapter entitled 'The Indestructible' in the second part of *The Infinite Conversation*. The first half of this chapter is an essay 'Being Jewish', originally published in two parts as '*Être juif*' published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1962. This division of the original long essay for republication is unsurprising: its first half clearly belongs alongside other essays on Levinas in the first part of the three parts of *The Infinite Conversation* and the second alongside essays that provide a more concrete, embedded elaboration of Blanchot's earlier reflections. Yet it has aroused suspicion; the facts surrounding the republication of the essay on Antelme are significant in view of the claims that Blanchot refuses to acknowledge the specificity of being Jewish, an argument which I will take up below.
32. *The Infinite Conversation,* 130 (191).
33. Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Athlone Press, 1998), 94.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard Cohen (Duquesne University Press, 1987).
36. *The Infinite Conversation,* 120 (175).
37. *Ibid.,* 131–132 (194).
38. *Ibid.,* 132 (194).
39. *Ibid.,* 132 (194).
40. *The Unavowable Community*, 2 (11).
41. *The Infinite Conversation,* 134 (197).
42. *Ibid.,* 134 (197–198).
43. Antelm, *The Human Race*, 219.
44. *Ibid.*, 95.
45. *The Infinite Conversation,* 175 (271).
46. *Ibid.,* 131 (195).
47. *Ibid.,* 131 (193–194).
48. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 219.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 81 (129).
53. *The Infinite Conversation,* 56 (81).
54. *Ibid.,* 56 (81).
55. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 166.
56. *Blanchot Reader*, 249.

57. It would be the same understanding of Judaism that might imply the protection of Israel. In a letter from an unidentified author whom one must assume is Blanchot that Levinas reprints in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, one reads of the author's reservations concerning the activities of his new comrades in the *Comité* group who were, he thought, drawn to the brink of anti-Semitism through their support for the Palestinians: 'I have always said that there was a limit beyond which I wouldn't go, but now I'd like to ask myself for a minute … ask myself why these young people who are acting violently but also with generosity, felt they had to make such a choice, why they operated on thoughtlessness, on the usage of empty concepts (imperialism, colonisation) and also on the feeling that it is the Palestinians who are the weakest, and one must be on the side of the weak (as if Israel were not extremely, dreadfully vulnerable)' (*Nine Talmudic Readings*, 115). Blanchot would henceforward retreat from this group.
58. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, translated by Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 37.
59. *Blanchot Reader*, 249.
60. *The Infinite Conversation,* 249 (127).
61. *Cf. ibid.,* 249 (127).
62. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 76. In *Maurice Blanchot – The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), Bruns points us to the *Buchenwald Report*, trans. David A. Hackett (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), which shows that there were four thousand of Jews in the camp, 'submerged' among the political prisoners in order to protect them (*Maurice Blanchot*, 222).
63. *Maurice Blanchot*, 327.
64. *Ibid*.
65. Gary Mole, *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 66.
66. *Proper Names*, 123.
67. Antelme, *The Human Race*, 219.
68. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 87 (138).
69. *The Unavowable Community*, 32 (55).
70. *Ibid.,* 31 (53).
71. *The Infinite Conversation,* 133 (197).

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