Very Little . . . Almost Nothing
Death, Philosophy, Literature

Second Edition

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Preamble

Travels in Nihilon

Under a vast grey sky, on a vast and dusty plain without paths, without grass, without a nettle or a thistle, I met several men bent double as they walked.

Each one of them carried on his back an enormous Chimera as heavy as a sack of flour or coal or the paraphernalia of a Roman infantryman.

But the monstrous beast was no inanimate weight; on the contrary, it enveloped and oppressed the man with its elastic and powerful muscles; it clutched at the breast of its mount with two vast claws; and its fabulous head overhung the man’s forehead like one of those horrible helmets with which ancient warriors hoped to add to the terror of their enemy.

I questioned one of these men and asked him where they were going like that. He replied that he did not know and that none of them knew, but that they were evidently going somewhere since they were driven by an invincible need to go on.

A curious thing to note: none of these travellers seemed irritated by the ferocious beast hanging around his neck and glued to his back; one might have said that they considered it part of themselves. All these tired and serious faces showed not the least sign of despair; under the spleenful dome of the sky, their feet deep in the dust of the earth as
desolate as the sky, they continued along with the resigned physiognomy of those who are condemned to hope forever [SC’s emphasis].

And the cortège passed by me and disappeared in the atmosphere of the horizon, where the rounded surface of the planet is concealed from the curiosity of the human gaze.

And for a few moments I persisted in trying to comprehend this mystery; but soon irresistible Indifference descended upon me and I was more heavily overwhelmed than they were by their crushing Chimeras.


(a) Philosophy begins in disappointment

Where does philosophy begin? It begins, I believe, in an experience of disappointment, that is both religious and political. That is to say, philosophy might be said to begin with two problems: (i) religious disappointment provokes the problem of meaning, namely, what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief?; and (ii) political disappointment provokes the problem of justice, namely, ‘what is justice’ and how might justice become effective in a violently unjust world? In most of my previous work, I have sought to address, more or less directly, the problem of political disappointment in terms of an ethical injunction that might at least permit one to face critically the experience of injustice and domination. However, the focus of this book is religious disappointment, the problem of meaning, which will nonetheless continually broach ethical and political issues, but in a more oblique way.

Religious disappointment is born from the realization that religion is no longer (presuming it ever was) capable of providing a meaning for human life. The great metaphysical comfort of religion, its existential balm, surely resides in its claim that the meaning of human life lies outside of life and outside humanity and, even if this
outside is beyond our limited cognitive powers, we can still turn our faith in this direction. For me, philosophizing begins from the recognition of the literal incredibility of this claim, that the possibility of a belief in God or some God-equivalent, whether vindicable through faith or reason, has decisively broken down.

Of course, the proper name for this breakdown is modernity, and the task of philosophical modernity, at least in its peak experiences – Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger – is a thinking through of the death of God in terms of the problem of finitude. Such a thinking through does not only entail the death of the God of the Judaeo–Christian tradition, but also the death of all those ideals, norms, principles, rules, ends and values that are set above humanity in order to provide human beings with a meaning to life. Such is the twilight of the idols. As Heidegger notes in a striking remark from 1925, thinking of Nietzsche, ‘Philosophical research is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself “the arrogance of thinking”’.

Philosophy is nothing if not arrogant, and furthermore it should be arrogant, a continual arrogation of the human voice. But the source of philosophical arrogance, its undoubted hubris, is a disappointment that flows from the dissolution of meaning, the frailty that accompanies the recognition of the all-too-human character of the human. So, in my view, philosophy – at least under modern conditions – is atheism, and to have an experience of faith would mean stopping doing philosophy . . . stopping immediately . . . right away.

If atheism produced contentment, then philosophy would be at an end. Contented atheists have no reason to bother themselves with philosophy, other than as a cultural distraction or a technical means of sharpening their common sense. However, in my view, atheism does not provide contentment, but rather unease. It is from this mood of unease that philosophy begins its anxious and aphoretic dialectics, its tail-biting paradoxes, ‘Not to esteem what we know, and not to be allowed to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves’ (WM 11/WP 10). Those familiar with the landscape of philosophical modernity will recognize this situation as a description of the
problem of nihilism, and it is to this problem that I would like to turn in detail as a way of framing the argument of the following lectures.

(b) Pre-Nietzschean nihilism

What is nihilism? Although the pre-Nietzschean history of the concept of nihilism is an area of much contestation, the first philosophical employment of the concept occurs in Jacobi’s 1799 ‘Letter to Fichte’. For Jacobi, Fichtean idealism is nihilism. What he means by this must be understood with reference to the deflationary effects of the Kantian critique of metaphysics, which not only denies human beings cognitive access to the speculative objects of classical metaphysics (God and the soul), but also removes the possibility of knowing both things-in-themselves and the ground of the self. Jacobi’s basic thesis is that Fichte’s reworking of Kantian transcendental idealism leads to an impoverished egoism which has no knowledge of objects or subjects in themselves. It is nihilistic because it allows the existence of nothing outside or apart from the ego and the ego is itself nothing but a product of the ‘free power of imagination’. Jacobi protests, in an extraordinary passage:

If the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate, is my empty and pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom: then rational self-contemplation, then rationality is for me a curse – I deplore my existence.

(BF 164/LF 135)

Against what he sees as the monism of Fichtean idealism, which he calls ‘an inverted Spinozism’ (recalling the Pantheist-debate with Herder in the 1780s), Jacobi argues for a form of philosophical dualism, or more precisely what he calls his ‘Unphilosophie’, where beyond the philosophical or scientific preoccupation with truth (die Wahrheit) lies the sphere of the true (das Wahre), which is only accessible to faith or the heart. In many respects, Jacobi’s critique of Fichte is strongly reminiscent of Pascal’s critique of Descartes, where
nihilism is the accusation levelled by a Christian world-view at a secularizing rationalism. Thus, the existential choice that faces us, which cannot be rationally proved but upon which we must wager, is between Fichtean idealism, which is nihilism because it offers knowledge of nothing outside of the ego’s projections, and Jacobian dualism, which he describes self-mockingly as ‘chimerism’ because it claims that God is the essence of reason without being able to demonstrate this rationally. Jacobi concludes:

But the human being has such a choice, this single one: Nothingness or a God. Choosing Nothingness, he makes himself into a God; that is, he makes an apparition into God because if there is no God, it is impossible that man and everything which surrounds him is not merely an apparition.

I repeat: God is, and is outside of me, a living being, existing in itself, or I am God. There is no third.

(BF 168/LF 138)

If nihilism is the accusation of philosophical egoism, where all that was solid in the pre-Kantian world-view melts into air, then one finds a bizarre confirmation of Jacobi’s critique in the egoism of Max Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* (1844). What is denigrated by Jacobi as nihilism is celebrated by Stirner as liberation. If I am nothing, Stirner argues, then ‘I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing (schöpferische Nichts), the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything’. As the perverse consequence of his attempt to show that Hegel’s and Feuerbach’s critiques of religion are still fatally entangled with religious modes of thinking, Stirner answers the question ‘What is man?’ by transforming the ego into a replica of the *causa sui* conception of God. To anticipate Sartre, this is perhaps why man is a useless passion.

One finds an echo of Jacobi’s Pascalian logic in Dostoevsky’s depiction of Kirilov the nihilist in *The Devils* (1871):

Everyone who desires supreme freedom must dare to kill himself. He who dares to kill himself has learnt the secret of the deception. Beyond that there is no freedom; that’s all, and
beyond it there is nothing. He who dares to kill himself is a god. Now every one can make it so that there shall be no God and there shall be nothing. But no one has done so yet. 7

Such is the position that Dostoevsky describes as ‘logical suicide’. That is, as he puts it in his Diaries, once human beings have lifted themselves above the level of cattle, then the ‘basic’, ‘loftiest’ and most ‘sublime’ idea of human existence becomes absolutely essential: belief in the immortality of the soul. 8 Once this belief breaks down, as Dostoevsky saw in the nihilism or indifferentialism of the Russian educated classes of the 1860s, then suicide is the only logical conclusion. Hence, Kirilov who has lost belief in the immortality of the soul is trying to write a book investigating the reasons why people do not kill themselves.

Staying with the Russian context of what Nietzsche called ‘nihilism à la Petersburg’, 9 what distinguishes it from the German context is that in the latter nihilism is largely a metaphysical or epistemological issue, whereas in the former it has a more obviously socio-political range of meanings. Beginning with Chernyshevsky’s attempt to ‘nihilize’ traditional aesthetic values by arguing that art is not the expression of some absolute conception of beauty but rather represents the interests of a certain class at a certain point in history, one could construct a trajectory of Russian nihilism that would include Bakunin’s anarchistic critique of the state, Nechaev’s Jacobinism and foreshadow Lenin’s Promethean Bolshevism. 10

In this sense, nihilizm is the expression of a radically sceptical, anti-aesthetic, utilitarian, and scientific world-view. Such a view is subjected to a genteel but devastating liberal critique in Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons through the fate of the composite nihilist figure of Bazarov. The central dramatic conflict here is between two opposed world-views: the romanticism, liberalism, reformism and Europhilia of the fathers (Nickolai and Pavel) and the positivism, utilitarianism, radicalism and Russian nationalism of the sons (Arkady and Bazarov). In the central scene of the novel, amid vague intimations of nihilism as a force of violent insurrection, Bazarov sneers:
'We base our conduct on what we recognize as useful . . . In these days the most useful thing we can do is to repudiate – and so we repudiate.'

'Everything?'

'Everything.'

'What? Not only art, poetry . . . but also . . . I am afraid to say it . . .'

'Everything’, Bazarov repeated with indescribable composure.11

The dramatic conflict between liberalism and nihilism is classically, if unconvincingly, resolved by Turgenev, where, after falling powerfully, irrationally and unrequitedly in love with Madame Odintsov – both an aristocrat and a romantic – Bazarov returns home to life as a country doctor like his father. In what amounts to an act of (logical) suicide, Bazarov contracts typhoid from the infected corpse of a peasant and confesses his love for Madame Odintsov on his deathbed. Thus, nihilism is overcome through the power of love and the novel ends with a Christian *apologia* for ‘everlasting reconciliation and of life which has no end’.12

In its pre-Nietzschean phase and across these different contexts, we can perhaps already note a peculiar internal dialectic of nihilism. The Kantian critique of metaphysical dogmatism, a limitation of cognition that was intended to produce epistemological certainty and make room for the primacy of practical reason, seems instead to give rise to a Promethean egoism allied to positivism and moral indifferentism where the only criterion of social and political life is utility. This is why Bazarov can at once view himself as a Stirneresque egoist, a utilitarian in ethics and politics, a positivist in science and a philistine in art. Thus, there would seem to be some secret path from the ‘nihilism’ of the Kantian critique of metaphysics to the universalistic deployment of what Adorno and Horkheimer would call instrumental rationality. Such is perhaps the path from enlightenment to ideology.
Nietzschean nihilism

However, under the influence of Turgenev (read in French translation), Prosper Mérimée and Paul Bourget, nihilism receives its full philosophical statement and definitive articulation in Nietzsche’s posthumously assembled miscellany *The Will to Power*. For Nietzsche, nihilism means that the highest values devalue themselves [dass die obersten Werte sich entwerten]. The aim is lacking; ‘why’ finds no answer.

(WM 10/WP 9)

Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value becomes null and void, where there are no skyhooks upon which to hang a meaning for life. All transcendent claims for a meaning to life have been reduced to mere values and those values have become incredible, standing in need of what Nietzsche calls ‘transvaluation’ or ‘revaluation’.

Beyond any influence exerted from the Russian and German contexts, what must be emphasized is the sheer audacity and originality of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism. For Nietzsche, the cause of nihilism cannot be explained socially, politically, epistemologically, or even physiologically (i.e. decline of the species), but is rather rooted in a specific interpretation of the world: *Christianity*. For Nietzsche, the ‘Christian–Moral’ interpretation of the world had the distinct advantage of being an antidote to nihilism by granting the world meaning, granting human beings value, and preventing despair (WM 10–11/WP 9–10). However, for Nietzsche — and this is decisive — there is an antinomy or antagonism within nihilism, namely that the Christian–Moral interpretation of the world is driven by a will to truthfulness, but that this very will to truth eventually turns against the Christian interpretation of the world by finding it untrue. That is to say, Christian metaphysics turns on the belief in a true world that is opposed to the false world of becoming that we inhabit here below. However, with the consciousness of the death of God, the true world is revealed to be a fable. Thus, and this is the antinomy,
the will for a moral interpretation or valuation of the world now appears to be a will to untruth. Christianity, like ancient tragedy, does not so much die as commit suicide. And yet – here’s the rub – a belief in a world of truth is required simply in order to live because we cannot endure this world of becoming. Nietzsche writes:

But as soon as man finds out how that world [of truth, SC] is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a true world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities – but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it.

(WM 14–15/WP 13)

This explains the central antagonism of nihilism for Nietzsche, cited above, namely that we are not to esteem what we know, and we are not allowed to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves. We can no longer believe in a world of truth beyond this world of becoming and yet we cannot endure this world of becoming. Or, to put this in terms that recall Jacobi’s critique of Fichte, ‘everything egoistic has come to disgust us (even though we realize the impossibility of the unegoistic); what is necessary has come to disgust us’ (WM 12/WP 11). This vicious antagonism results in what Nietzsche calls ‘a process of dissolution’ (WM 11/WP 10), namely that when we realize the shabby origin of our moral values and how the Christian–Moral interpretation of the world is driven by a will to untruth, our reactive response is to declare that existence is meaningless. It is this declaration of meaninglessness that Nietzsche identifies as nihilism and which he detects in various nascent forms: (i) Schopenhauerian pessimism or ‘passive nihilism’, that Nietzsche often identifies as European Buddhism; (ii) Russian anarchism or ‘active nihilism’, which is merely the ‘expression of physiological decadence’ (WM 30/WP 24); (iii) a general cultural mood of
weariness, exhaustion and fatigue summarized in the memorable formula, ‘Modern society . . . no longer has the strength to excrete’ (WM 39/WP 32). The essential point to grasp here, against the entire pre-Nietzschean history sketched above, is that nihilism is not simply the negation of the Christian–Moral interpretation of the world, but is the consequence of that interpretation; that is to say, it is the consequence of moral valuation.

For Nietzsche, nihilism as a psychological state is attained when we realize that the categories by means of which we had tried to give meaning to the universe are meaningless. This does not at all mean that the universe is meaningless, but rather that ‘the faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism’ (WM 15/WP 13). We therefore require new categories and new values that will permit us to endure the world of becoming. As I see it, this is the function of the seemingly enigmatic doctrine of eternal return, namely ‘existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness’ (WM 44/WP 35). Nietzsche emphasizes that what is being attempted with the thought of eternal return is an antithesis to pantheism; that is, if pantheism is the presence of God in all things, then eternal return is the attempt to think the universe consistently without God (WM 44/WP 36). What might this mean? Perhaps the following: recalling the theme of endurance discussed above, namely the knowledge that there is nothing beyond this world of becoming and the inability to endure this world, we might link this to a later fragment from The Will to Power where Nietzsche/Zarathustra speaks of the type of his disciples:

To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities – I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not – that one endures [SC’s emphasis].

(WM 613/WP 481)
Might not the doctrine of eternal return be approached simply as that thought which enables one to endure the world of becoming without resenting it or seeking to construct some hinter-world? As I see it, and for reasons that will hopefully become obvious, this does not so much entail an overcoming of nihilism as an overcoming of the desire to overcome.

(d)

Responding to nihilism: five possibilities

To speak at a level of undoubted historical banality, we might say that modernity can be defined as a process of secularization or humanization which is post-religious or post-traditional, and where processes of societal and cultural rationalization and economic capitalization lead to an irreversible breakdown of traditional practices and the fragile web of the life-world. However, although modernity may be post-religious, it is not post-metaphysical, and it is witness to a series of attempts to secure a non-theological metaphysical basis for human activity through what Nietzsche calls ‘the big words’ (WM 61/WP 50). That is to say, for example, the positing of a transcendent reason, the declaration of the libertarian and egalitarian values of republicanism, the codification of human rights, the belief in human happiness and its calculability, in social justice, in revolutionary love, or even a vision of positive annihilation.

The historical pathology of which nihilism is the diagnosis consists in the recognition of a double failure:

i That the values of modernity or Enlightenment do not connect with the fabric of moral and social relations, with the stuff of everyday life, failing to produce a new mythic or rational totality, what the authors of the ‘Earliest System-programme of German Idealism’ in 1796 referred to as the need for a mythology of reason. The moral values of Enlightenment, and this is the core of Hegel’s critique of Kant which is inherited by the young Marx (where Enlightenment values become
bourgeois values), lack any effectivity, any connection to social praxis.

ii However, not only do the moral values of Enlightenment fail to connect with the fabric of moral and social relations, but – worse still – they lead instead to the progressive degradation of those relations through processes that we might call, with Weber, rationalization, with Marx, capitalization, with Adorno and Horkheimer, instrumental rationality, and with Heidegger, the oblivion of Being. Such is Enlightenment’s fateful and paradoxical dialectic.

Thus, the problem of philosophical modernity, on this crude thumbnail sketch, is how to confront the problem of nihilism after one has seen how the values of Enlightenment not only fail to get a grip on everyday life, but lead instead to its progressive dissolution. Of course, the further difficulty here is that such a confrontation with nihilism cannot simply take place in philosophy, if it is granted – as it is by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno in quite different registers – that philosophy has conspired with the very forces that produce nihilism. Philosophy is nihilistic: it is shot through, for Nietzsche, with the Christian–Moral interpretation of the world, for Heidegger, it wants to know nothing of the nothing at the heart of its principle of sufficient reason (nihil est sine ratione), and for Adorno, it is an ideological discourse of abstraction that conspires with the abstraction of reified, commodified society.

How, then, does one respond to nihilism? As I see it, four initial possibilities present themselves:

i First, one can refuse to see the problem of nihilism at all and continue as a pre-nihilist metaphysician which may – if one has read some Kierkegaard – or may not have been forged in some dialogue with philosophical modernity. Such is the temptation of both religious fundamentalism – Christian, Judaic, Islamic, or whatever – and anti-metaphysical quietism that wants to delineate the limits of philosophy in order to clear a space of non-cognitive religious awaiting.
ii Second, one can claim not to be bothered one way or the other, to have no metaphysical commitments and not to be concerned by not having them. This – very English – form of agnostic, hateful cheerfulness would refuse to see the problem of nihilism as an actual problem, but simply as a symptom of the malaise of the nineteenth-century central European liberal bourgeoisie. A more sophisticated analogue to this position would simply claim that the philosophy of history presupposed by nihilism gives a false and overly pessimistic picture of the modern world.

iii Third, one can react passively to nihilism, accepting it as a diagnosis of modernity, knowing the world to be absurd, but also knowing that nothing one can do will change matters: don’t worry, be happy. Such an experience of spiritual recession and decline – what might be called ‘Oblomovism’ – is, as Raoul Vaneigem rightly points out, ‘merely an overture to conformism’.  

iv Fourth, there is active nihilism, a violent force of destruction that Nietzsche associates with Russian anarchism and which imagines itself as the propaedeutic to a revolution of everyday life. Such a longing for total revolution can take many guises: the romantic and neo-romantic transformation of modernity through the production of a great work of art, Marxist revolution, fascist revolution, Ernst Jünger’s total mobilization, apocalyptic Heideggerianism (there are other Heideggerianisms), the neo-Nietzschean obliteration of ‘Man’, or that unsubtle blend of Fichtean spontaneity and Fourieresque utopianism that one finds in the Situationist International and its various progeny: terrorism, angry brigades, punk and libidino-cyber revolution. This version of active nihilism is best expressed in Vaneigem’s slogan: ‘creativity plus a machine gun is an unstoppable combination’.  

The difficulty here is that if one rejects the first three responses to nihilism as either (i) refusing the problem through a return to religion, (ii) rejecting nihilism as a pseudo-problem with a fallacious philosophy of history, or (iii) failing to respond to the problem
in passive acceptance, then the fourth response simply appears implausible (albeit wonderfully so). In our somewhat chastening contemporary circumstances, what I analyse in these lectures as our dürftiger Zeit (time of dearth), what might be referred to as the epoch of ‘hurrah capitalism’, I find the prospect of a revolution of everyday life or the achievement of theory in revolutionary praxis a little unlikely. Of course, such a revolution would also be socially and politically disastrous for reasons I detail in Lecture 2 through a discussion of Hegel’s and Carl Schmitt’s critiques of romanticism. Paradoxically, there is something too reactive in Nietzsche’s sense about the very activity of active nihilism, it is too negatively obsessed with what it seeks to oppose and risks failing to comprehend the phenomenon of nihilism in its manic desire to overcome it.

In this connection, and in order to consolidate a critique of active nihilism that does not passively fail to respond to the problem, I would like to try and delineate a fifth response to nihilism, that borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger and Adorno. With this fifth response, it is not a question of overcoming nihilism in an act of the will or joyful destruction, because such an act would only imprison us all the more firmly in the very nihilistic logic we are trying to leave behind. Rather than overcoming nihilism, it is a question of delineating it. What will be at stake is a liminal experience, a deconstructive experience of the limit – deconstruction as an experience of the limit – that separates the inside from the outside of nihilism and which forbids us both the gesture of transgression and restoration. On such a view, neither philosophy, nor art, nor politics alone can be relied upon to redeem the world, but the task of thinking consists in a historical confrontation with nihilism that does not give up on the demand that things might be otherwise. As we will see, such is the essential, but essentially disappointing, logic of redemption.

So, the question to which these lectures will be a minor contribution is the following: given the aporiae into which the problem of nihilism and its overcoming seems driven, what might count as a response to nihilism, given the pervasiveness of the experience of disappointment? What form(s) of imaginative resistance is (are)
still possible, both philosophically, aesthetically and politically? Once one has accepted the disappointment that, in Adorno’s words, ‘philosophy . . . lives on because the moment to realize it was missed’ (ND 13/NDS 3) – in 1848, 1871, 1917, or whenever – then how does one refuse the passive nihilist diagnosis of the end of philosophy one finds, say, in Rorty, where philosophy is reduced to the status of a private activity concerned with the cultivation of one’s autonomy – should one be so disposed – but which has no public function? To put the question even more boldly, I am trying to formulate a response to the question: How does one go on? That is, how does one continue in thought?

(e)
Heidegger’s transformation of Nietzschean nihilism

In order to understand the concept of nihilism in Heidegger, it is necessary to show how it arises in his long meditation on Nietzsche. Although Heidegger develops his interpretation of Nietzsche in a series of lecture courses given between 1936 and 1940, for brevity’s sake I will look at his 1943 text, ‘The Word of Nietzsche: “God is Dead”’. Although this text betrays a rigidity of reading and a hermeneutic violence that only emerges in the course of the Nietzsche Lectures, it offers an effective and brilliant précis of Heidegger’s Nietzsche interpretation (HO 205–63/QT 53–112).18

How, then, does Heidegger understand Nietzsche’s words ‘God is Dead’? A number of steps in Heidegger’s argument can be delineated:

1 Heidegger understands God metaphysically as the name for the supersensory realm of ideas and ideals, the ‘true world’ of Platonism.

2 Heidegger understands Nietzsche to have divested metaphysics of its essential possibility by showing how the supersensory world of metaphysics is a product of the sensory world; the true world has become a fable. Metaphysically understood, the declaration of
the death of God is the acknowledgement that the supersensory no longer has any effective power.

3 If metaphysics is Platonism and Nietzsche understands his own thinking as the overturning of Platonism, then Nietzsche’s thinking is a counter-movement to metaphysics.

4 However, and this is the core of Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche, this counter-movement to metaphysics is held fast to the essence of that which it opposes. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche believes that the overturning (Umkehrung) of Platonism is an overcoming (Überwindung) of metaphysics. However, every overturning of this kind is but a self-deluding entanglement within the logic of that which it opposes, and therefore the Nietzschean Umkehrung is simply a Verkehrung, a reversal. Thus, Nietzsche’s thought remains internal to the very Platonist, metaphysical logic it seeks to oppose.

5 Thus, Nietzsche’s thinking is a metaphysics. Heidegger writes:

Despite all his overturnings and revaluings of metaphysics, Nietzsche remains in the unbroken line of the metaphysical tradition when he calls that which is established and made fast in the will to power for its own preservation purely and simply Being, or what is in being, or truth.

In his determination of the will to power as the Being of all beings, as that in which all entities participate, Nietzsche rejoins the metaphysical tradition, even if his work represents the final phase of that tradition.

(HO 235/QT 84)

The telling consequence of this argumentation is that if Nietzsche’s thinking is grounded in the metaphysics of the will to power, then his interpretation of both nihilism and the counter-movement to nihilism (the devaluing and revaluing of values) is metaphysical. Although Heidegger acknowledges that, for Nietzsche, nihilism is ambiguous insofar as it is both negative (devaluing) and positive (revaluing), his essential claim is that both the diagnosis of nihilism and the attempted overcoming of nihilism through the revaluation of values
remain positions internal to metaphysics. Towards the end of the essay, Heidegger asks:

What is now, in the age when the unconditional dominion of the will to power is openly dawning, and this openness and its public character are themselves becoming a function of this will?

(HO 253/QT 102)

Although the meditation on Nietzsche is inseparable from Heidegger’s thinking of technology and his pathology of the modern world in terms of the unconditional dominion of the will-to-will and the devastation of the earth, the essential philosophical point here is that insofar as Nietzsche determines Being as will to power, he does not think Being (or the question of Being) as such, and thus the attempted overcoming of nihilism which considers itself an overturning of metaphysics remains metaphysical and nihilistic. Hence, the supposed overcoming (Überwindung) of metaphysics is merely its completion or fulfilment (Vollendung), and Nietzsche is the thinker who begins the final phase of metaphysics, a phase which, as Heidegger suggests in his more bleakly prophetic moments, might last longer than the previous history of metaphysics.19

Thus, on Heidegger’s interpretation, Nietzsche’s thinking remains in the oblivion of Being. But is this only true of Nietzsche’s thinking? Not at all. Heidegger’s more general historico-philosophical thesis is that ‘Nowhere do we find such experiencing of Being itself’, not even amongst the pre-Socratics (HO 259/QT 108). The history of Being begins with the nihilation of Being, and metaphysics wants to know nothing of this nihilation, this nothing. For Heidegger, then, the essence of nihilism lies in history, in the manner in which Being has fallen into nothing. However, if the hypothesis that the essence of nihilism lies in history can be sustained, then this enables Heidegger to draw a vast consequence. He writes, with a typical totalization of metaphysical categories downloaded directly into history:

If the essence of nihilism lies in history . . . then metaphysics as the history of the truth of beings as such is, in its essence,
nihilism. If, finally, metaphysics is the historical ground of the world history that is being determined by Europe and the West, then that world history is, in an entirely different sense, nihilistic.

(HO 260/QT 109)

Thus, for Heidegger, nihilism thought in its essence is a history that runs its course with the history of Being, and this history is determinative for world history thought in terms of the planetary domination by technology. Nihilism is not only a history, it is a destiny.

(f)

**Heidegger contra Jünger**

However, if we now have a reasonably clear view of Heidegger’s concept of nihilism, then what is much less clear is the precise nature of his response to nihilism. I think this response emerges most powerfully in Heidegger’s 1955 contribution to a *Festschrift* for Ernst Jünger, ‘Über “Die Linie”’.  

Let me try and briefly sketch the general structure of Heidegger’s argumentation. In what appears to be an attempt to disguise a basic philosophical disagreement, Heidegger very politely chides and qualifies Jünger’s active nihilism by making a distinction between the Nietzschean position of trying to think how to cross the line (*trans lineam*) separating nihilism from its overcoming, and suggests in its place a discussion (*de linea*), where it is not so much a question of overcoming as *delineating* nihilism. Teasing out the connotative differences in his and Jünger’s titles, Heidegger distinguishes between *über* as *trans* or *meta* to describe Jünger’s attempt to transcend nihilism, and *über* as *de* or *peri* which treats the line as such. For Heidegger, in a characteristic move, it is a question of thinking the essence of nihilism, which is nothing necessarily nihilistic (in fact, it is the opposite) and which is equiprimordial with thinking the essence of metaphysics. A thinking of the essence of nihilism will lead us into the thinking of Being as that unthought ground of all
metaphysical thinking. Thus, the question of an overcoming of nihilism must always be linked to a reappropriation of nihilism in its essence as the unthought essence of metaphysics, ‘Worin beruht dann die Überwindung der Nihilismus? In der Verwindung der Metaphysik’ (WE 408/QB 87).

Any discussion de linea of the essence of nihilism in terms of the forgetting of Being cannot hope to leave nihilism or metaphysics behind in an act of wilful overcoming. As we have already seen in Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche, this would be a reactive gesture of reversal that would leave us trapped within the very logic from which we are trying to twist free and behind which stands an uninterrogated metaphysics of the will. For Heidegger, any desire for a simple overcoming of nihilism must meditate the essence of nihilism, and with such a meditation the will to overcome becomes untenable (‘das Überwindenwollen hinfällig wird’ – WE 418/QB 105–7). For Heidegger, Jünger’s aspiration to cross the line and overcome nihilism belongs to the domain of the forgetting of Being. This is why Jünger employs metaphysical concepts like Gestalt, Wert and Transzendenz (WE 415/QB 101).

This point can be made more strongly by considering the problematic of language that runs like a red thread through Heidegger’s essay on Jünger. Heidegger asks: How can nihilism be overcome if our language remains the same, that is, remains the same metaphysical language of nihilism? Might not the very language of metaphysics be the barrier to any crossing of the line and hence the obstacle to any overcoming of nihilism? For Heidegger, a thinking of the essence of nihilism in non-metaphysical terms demands a transformation of language (Verwandlung des Sagens). Although it is not quite clear in what this transformation would consist, it clearly implies a dissatisfaction with propositional language and an attempt to articulate a pre-propositional vocabulary of basic words (Grundworte – WE 396/QB 67) that constitutes, as Heidegger already announced in Being and Time, ‘the ultimate business of philosophy’. However, as Heidegger was only too painfully aware, the language of his text on Jünger and his other texts remains propositional, and is therefore condemned
to betray that which it was intended to express: *traduttore, traditore*. This betrayal extends to the very word *Sein* and Heidegger writes, ‘A thoughtful forward glance into the realm of “Being” can only be written in the following way: *Being*’ (WE 404–5/QB 81). What this crossing out suggests is that, *contra* Jünger, the line separating nihilism from its overcoming is not something to be crossed, but rather the line should be meditated in this crossing out, an attempt to render Being invisible that simply makes it more visible. Of course, what is being anticipated here is the logic of the *sous rature*, which Derrida initially formulates with explicit reference to Heidegger’s text on Jünger. For Derrida, the fact that Heidegger writes Being under erasure testifies to the fact that it is not simply a transcendental signified, but rather ‘under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible’. This explains why, despite Heidegger’s undoubted political and hermeneutic myopia, Derrida’s meditation on the trace ‘must therefore *go by way of* the question of being as it is directed by Heidegger and by him alone’.

Thus, in lieu of any attempt to cross the line and overcome nihilism in a Promethean act of will, an act that would only imprison us all the more securely in the very nihilistic logic we are trying to leave behind, Heidegger suggests a much more minimal task, which he describes with great caution, using his customary metaphorics:

Thinking and poeticizing must in a certain way go back to where they have always already been and at the same time have still never built. However, we can only prepare such a dwelling in that place through building. Such a building may scarcely have in mind the erection of the house for the God or the dwelling places for the mortals. It must be content to build the *Way* that leads back into the place of the *Verwindung* of metaphysics and which in this way lets us wander through the destinal character of an overcoming of metaphysics.

(WE 417/QB 103–5)

What is envisaged by Heidegger, as I see it, is a delineation of nihilism, a deconstructive experience of the line or limit that
separates the inside from the outside of nihilism and which forbids us both the gesture of transgression and restoration. Such a way has in mind neither the building of the house of God, nor the erection of monuments to the false gods of active nihilism. In the final lines of the text on Jünger, Heidegger returns once more to the question of the essence of nihilism:

The question has not become any easier for us. That’s why it must limit itself to the preparatory: to reflect on old, venerable words, whose saying promises us the essential realm of nihilism and its Verwindung.

(WE 419/QB 107–9)

He then adds, untranslatably:

Gibt es eine bemühtere Rettung des uns Geschickten und in Geschick Überlieferten als solches Andenken?

That is to say, is it only in a commemorative thinking of that which is destined to us and destinally handed down historically that the redemption we have striven for might take place? But what sort of redemption is implied here? If nihilism is not to be overcome but delineated, then how might one even speak of redemption? It is with these questions in mind that I would like to turn to Adorno.

(g)

Impossible redemption: Adorno on nihilism

In the much quoted and much misunderstood finale to Minima Moralia, Adorno writes:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.23

After Auschwitz, philosophy must attempt (and the word Versuch should be emphasized here) to view things from the standpoint of redemption (Erlösung not Rettung). In this attempt, Adorno goes on,
perspectives must be fashioned that reveal the world as it will appear in the messianic light, as needy and deformed, ‘as indigent and distorted’ (‘bedürftig und entstellt’). The task of thought is to gain such messianic perspectives entirely from ‘felt contact with objects’, and to achieve this contact without capriciousness or violence.

So far, so good. However, Adorno then goes on to add two contradictory qualifications to this description of philosophy: ‘It is the simplest of all things . . . but it is also the utterly impossible thing’ (SC’s emphasis). It is simple because, according to Adorno’s broader social analysis, the historical situation out of which philosophy arises demands that we look at things from a messianic standpoint. Moreover, ‘consummate negativity (vollendete Negativität), once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite’. That is to say, the sheer negativity of Adornian dialectic expresses its reflection of consummate positivity by refusing it direct expression. However simple philosophy might be, it is also impossible because it implies a redemptive standpoint, ‘removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence’. Why is this impossible? I take it that Adorno is making a simple logical point here – namely, that if philosophical knowledge is to be possible there has to be a correspondence between concepts and intuitions, otherwise it is either blind or empty. Thus, ‘any possible knowledge must . . . be wrested from what is, if it shall hold good’. However, the problem here is that if the condition of possibility for philosophy is correspondence to that which is, then philosophy is always already going to be contaminated by the very ‘distortion and indigence’ of the world that the messianic perspective is seeking to escape. This is why Adorno writes:

The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world.

There would seem to be only one possible conclusion to draw from Adorno’s argumentation: if the only philosophy that can be responsibly practised is to contemplate things from the standpoint
of redemption, then this standpoint is impossible and therefore philosophy cannot be responsibly practised. Yet, Adorno invites us to take one further step:

Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

Despite the strict impossibility of practising philosophy from the standpoint of redemption, what is essential for Adorno is the demand (Forderung) placed on thinking by imagining itself capable of assuming that standpoint. This is why the reality or unreality of redemption hardly matters. What is important is the messianic demand and not whether this demand is underwritten by some guarantee of redemption. I think this is why the impossibility of the redemptive standpoint must be comprehended ‘for the sake of the possible’. In its very impossibility, the demand leaves open the horizon of the possible understood, I think, as the realm of future action.

But perhaps one can detect an even deeper logic at work in this passage. It might be asked: what if it were indeed possible to practise philosophy from the standpoint of redemption? What if we could fashion messianic perspectives entirely from felt contact with objects? What if we had some guarantee of salvation? I take it that even if the standpoint of redemption were possible, it would have to be refused because, at this historical point (I will come back to this), it would offer a false image of reconciliation. Even if redemption were possible, it would have to be denied in the name of a higher impossibility which takes place for the sake of the possible. As I see it, such a position is not a recipe for resignation and despair, but a preparation for action in the world, however minimal.

But what has this got to do with nihilism? Adorno is clearly suspicious of the entire post-Nietzschean problematic of nihilism because of its complicity with the reactionary modernism of Spengler, Jünger and the early Heidegger, and their anti-Marxist tendency to download metaphysical categories directly into social analysis. As such, nihilism
is a key concept in ‘the jargon of authenticity’. This jargon or ‘German ideology’ gives an ontological analysis of phenomena that would be better analysed in sociological and economic terms. Nonetheless, there is a powerful response to nihilism in Adorno, and it is at least arguable to view his work as a Marxist or, more properly, Weberian reworking of the problem of meaning.24 This response emerges most clearly in a few pages from the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’ (ND 367 72/NDS 376–81).25

After Auschwitz, the Kantian epistemological question ‘How is metaphysics possible?’ yields to a historical question ‘Is it still possible to have a metaphysical experience?’ (ND 362–63/NDS 372). For Adorno, this is because actual events – the Holocaust – have shattered the basis upon which metaphysical speculation might be reconciled with experience. He writes, in what might have been a motto for these lectures, ‘Enlightenment leaves practically nothing of the metaphysical content of truth – *presque rien*’ (ND 397/NDS 407). In this sense, metaphysics is only possible as what Adorno calls ‘micrology’, as a ‘legible constellation of beings’ (*lesbare Konstellation von Seiendem*). Only with this practice of micrology, this restless movement of dialectical analysis, does thinking find a haven from totality and a glimmer of hope, ‘only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope’.

For Adorno, the categories of metaphysics live on in a secularized and vulgar form in the question of the meaning of life, the very question that propels the problem of nihilism and which he considers largely meaningless. If one has to ask the question of the meaning of life, then one has somehow missed the point. Adorno suspects that philosophy does not want to give up on the concept of nihilism, because it provides it with a straw man of meaninglessness that can easily be knocked down so that meaning can be restored. For good Hegelian reasons, the statement that ‘everything is Nothing’ is as meaningless as the concept of Being, and ‘Faith in Nothing would be as insipid as would faith in Being’ (ND 370/NDS 379). However, Adorno rightly suspects that the cultural indignation at nihilism is not
a worry about some quasi-Buddhistic affirmation of the void, but is rather a concern about alleged moral decline and the refusal of the positivity and ‘universal good cheer’ of the Western heritage. In this regard, Adorno criticizes two features of what he calls ‘the same subaltern language sphere’: firstly, the talk about Wertnihilismus that desires a restoration of a Christian-Moral interpretation of the world; and secondly, the neo-Nietzschean talk of an Überwinding of nihilism that we have already examined in detail. With regard to this second feature, Adorno makes the oddly Burkean pronouncement:

Acts of overcoming, even that of nihilism, together with the Nietzschean one that was otherwise intended but which still provided fascism with slogans, are always worse than what they overcome.

(ND 371/NDS 380)

What Adorno is objecting to here (which Heidegger objected to in Jünger) is the active nihilist attempt to cross the line separating nihilism from its overcoming and to produce new values, new men and a new order. Such attempts at overcoming are symptomatic of a reactionary modernism whose ontologization of the social and facile positivity lead ineluctably to fascism. In this sense, the vocabulary of nothingness and despair becomes part of a masculinist philosophical jargon of resoluteness, decisiveness and hardness that ends up functioning as an apologia for immoral intolerance and political barbarism. By contrast, in an allusive swipe at Heidegger:

Those to whom despair is not mere terminology may ask whether it would be better if there was nothing rather than something.

(ND 371/NDS 380)

Thus, a victim of political intolerance, for example a person in a concentration camp, might legitimately apply the wisdom of Silenus and ask whether it would have been better not to be born. But if, as Adorno insinuates, the problem of nihilism and its overcoming conspires with the very intellectual and political forces that led to the
death camps, then what might constitute a response to Auschwitz that takes account of the presque rien of our metaphysical faculties and how might matters then stand with the problem of nihilism?

Adorno continues:

Beckett has given the only appropriate reaction to the situation of the concentration camp, that he never names, as if it lay under an image ban (Bilderverbot). What is, is like a concentration camp.

(ND 371/NDS 380)

At first sight this seems a paradoxical claim, for the most common and banal accusation levelled at Beckett’s work is that it is apolitical and nihilistic because it lacks any of the critical social content evident, say, in the theatre of Brecht or Sartre. Yet, Adorno shockingly suggests that Beckett’s work is the only appropriate response to the Holocaust, more so than direct witness accounts, precisely because it is not part of the manifest content of Beckett’s work, as if it were subject to a Bilderverbot. What is being alluded to here – and this will be discussed in more critical detail in Lecture 3 – is Adorno’s belief that the best modernist artworks, like Beckett’s, in their aesthetic autonomy and their refusal of meaning (hence the superficial accusation of nihilism) function as determinate negations of contemporary society and can give the formal semblance of a society free from domination. Beckett’s work successfully negotiates the dialectic between the necessary autonomy of modernist art and the function of social criticism not by raising its voice against society or protesting against the obvious injustice of the Holocaust, but rather by elevating social criticism to the level of form. This means that Beckett’s work, in its steadfast refusal to mean something – a refusal of meaning that is still achieved by way of dramatic or novelistic form – exhibits an autonomy that, far from conspiring with apolitical decadence or ‘nihilism’, gives an indication of the transformative political praxis from which it abstains, namely ‘the production of a right or just life’ (‘die Herstellung rightigen Lebens’ – NL 429/NTL2 93). Thus, it is because Beckett’s Endgame refuses any claim to meaning or positivity,
because he balks at ‘squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim’s fate’, that it constitutes the only appropriate response to Auschwitz (ND 352/NDS 361).

Such is the necessarily weak messianic power of Beckett’s work, a weakness necessitated by the strictures placed above on the concept of redemption. Adorn sees this weak power at work in Beckett’s use of language and its ‘fissure of inconsistency’. He writes:

Once he speaks of a lifelong death penalty. The only dawning hope is that nothing more will be. This also he rejects.

(ND 371/NDS 380)

As we will see in Lecture 3, Beckett’s language is an endlessly proliferating series of non sequiturs, of planned inconsistencies and contradictory sayings and unsayings, a syntax of weakness. For example:

I shall have to speak of things, of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter.

(T 267)

Beckett’s sentences are a series of weak intensities, sequences of antithetical inabilities: unable to go on, unable not to go on. And yet, as Adorno astutely points out, what seems like Stoicism on Beckett’s part (‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’) is ‘a legacy of action’ that ‘silently screams that things should be otherwise. Such nihilism implies the opposite of an identification with the Nothing’ (ND 371–72/NDS 381). Thus, Beckett’s ‘nihilism’ is not an affirmation of the Nothing, for there is no affirmation in his work. Rather this ‘nihilism’ is redemptive in the specific sense discussed above – namely, the only philosophy that can be responsibly practised after Auschwitz is the attempt to view things from the standpoint of redemption, which is impossible, and yet this impossibility must be comprehended for the sake of the possible.

Adorno finds an analogue to Beckett in the Gnostic belief in the radical evil of the created world, or in the vocabulary of Minima
Moralia, the world as ‘indigent and distorted’. However, the Gnostic negation of this world would be ‘the possibility of another world, not yet in being’ (ND 372/NDS 381). It is precisely this negation that Adorno finds at work in Beckett, which means that his work takes the impossible standpoint of redemption, impossible because it is removed – ‘by a hair’s breadth’ – from the standpoint of existence. Therefore, ‘for so long as the world is as it is’, and we have absolutely no reason to expect that it might change on Adorno’s account, ‘all images of reconciliation, peace and quiet resemble death’. To offer a picture of a reconciled and peaceful world at this point in history would be to offer something that can simply be recuperated by the culture industry and reproduced as ideology. That is to say, it would conspire with the very forces that resulted in the death camps. This is why Adorno insists that the real nihilists are not writers like Beckett, but are those active nihilists

Who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, and through this conspire with all extant meanness and finally with the destructive principle.

(ND 372/NDS 381)

Thus, the very worst nihilism would be to offer a positive vision of a reconciled future world that would follow the overcoming of nihilism. This is why acts of overcoming are always worse than what they overcome. This is also why authentic artworks must ‘efface any memory-trace of reconciliation – in the interest of reconciliation’ (AT 348/AST 333). In order to preserve the impossible possibility of the messianic perspective, the demand that we view the world from the standpoint of how things might be otherwise, it is not a question of an Überwinding of nihilism but of getting consciousness to wrest or extricate (entwinden) from nihilism what is lost sight of in the desire for overcoming. This is why Adorno concludes by saying that ‘Thought has its honour by defending what is condemned as nihilism’.

Although the Enlightenment project might have left us with presque rien, Adorno does not leave us with nothing. On the contrary, the task of thinking is to keep open the slightest difference between things as
they are and things as they might otherwise be, an otherwise that is persistently but obliquely offered by Beckett. It is only with this contradictory imperative that we look at things from the standpoint of redemption together with the knowledge that it is because such a standpoint is impossible that we are permitted the possibility of hope. Hope against hope. Austere messianism. Very little.

(h)

Learning how to die – the argument

Having now outlined a fifth response to nihilism through discussions of Heidegger and Adorno, thinkers who maintain philosophical proximities despite their deep political antipathies, I would like to take a broad sideways step before beginning Lecture 1.

To accept the diagnosis of modernity in terms of nihilism is to accept the ubiquity of the finite. That is, if God is bracketed out as the possible source of a response to the question of the meaning of life, then the response to that question must be sought within life, conceived as a finite temporal stretch between birth and death. So, under the nihilistic conditions of modernity, the question of the meaning of life becomes a matter of finding a meaning to human finitude. In this way, we rejoin Cicero’s question, restated by Montaigne, ‘That to Philosophie is to Learne How to Die’.27 Our difference with antiquity, for good or ill, is that there is little sense of philosophy as a calmative or consoling influence that prepares the individual stoically for his passage on to either nothingness or eternal bliss. Beckett’s Murphy strapped into his chair has replaced the Garden of Epicurus as an image of the philosopher in late modernity. To philosophize in the time of nihilism is to learn how to die this death, my death, knowing that there is nothing else after this death – chacun sa chimère.

Now, if (and this is a vast qualification) death is not just going to have the character of a brute fact, then one’s mortality is something in which one has to find a meaning. In the vocabulary of Being and Time, death is something that one has to project freely in a resolute decision. The acceptance of the ubiquity of the finite is not simply expressed in
the fact that human beings are mortal, rather the human being must become mortal – ‘werde was du bist’! For the early Heidegger, death is something to be achieved, it is the fundamental possibility which permits us to get the totality of existence, and hence authenticity, into our grasp – the possibility of impossibility. The human being is death in the process of becoming. A possible active response to nihilism, which I will describe and criticize in Lecture 1, and which stalks Heidegger up to the period of his National Socialist political commitment, is to see the collapse of theological and metaphysical certainty as the occasion for an explosion of creative energy where death becomes my work and nihilism is overcome in an affirmation of finitude. In the face of a Godless world, individual authenticity produces itself through acts of self-invention and self-creation, where death becomes my work and suicide becomes the ultimate possibility – ergo the logical suicide of Kirilov. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why the soil of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is so scattered with the bodies of young writers and artists, from Kleist to Kurt Cobain.

However, if the response to nihilism in philosophical modernity centres on the question of finding a meaning to human finitude and making sense of the brute facticity of death, then – and this is the key to Lectures 1 and 3 – is life something for which one can and should find a meaning? Can I assume my finitude affirmatively as a source of meaning in the absence of God? Is death possible? Can I die? Can I say ‘I can’ with respect to death? Can I? The response given in the following lectures is that ‘I cannot’.

A personal anecdote might shed light on matters here. Throughout the writing of these lectures, I have been haunted by an image: it is a death’s head, or rather the head of a dying man, mumbling incessantly, gradually disappearing into a mute dullness. His hand scribbles almost noiselessly in a child’s exercise book, his eyes stare blankly out of the window onto a featureless cityscape. I am obviously thinking of the figure who calls himself Malone in Beckett’s Trilogy, but most of all of my father dying of cancer, rambling obliquely under his oxygen mask, his pain masked by morphine. What this composite
figure, this spectre, suggests to me – I will present the argument for this below – is the radical ungraspability of finitude, our inability to lay hold of death and make of it a work and to make that work the basis for an affirmation of life. The event of our death is always too late for us. As Blanchot has recently expressed it in a confessional text, ‘l’instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance’. 29

In phenomenological terms, death is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act; it is not the noema of a noesis. Death is ungraspable and exceeds both intentionality and the correlative structures of phenomenology, whether the latter is understood in its Hegelian, Husserlian or Heideggerian senses. Thus, and this is the basis for my extended engagement with Blanchot in Lecture 1, there can be no phenomenology of death because it is a state of affairs about which I can find neither an adequate intention nor intuitive fulfilment. Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is best conveyed by the figure of prosopopeia, the trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it. The representation of death is always a mask – a memento mori – behind which nothing stands, rather like the way in which the face of Tadzio appears to Von Aschenbach as he dies on the beach at the end of Mann’s Death in Venice.

Thus, if there can be no phenomenology or representation of death because it is a state of affairs about which I can find neither an adequate intention nor intuitive fulfilment, then the ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. In this specific sense, death is meaningless and the work of mourning is infinite. Of course, this is also to say that mourning is not a work, for our relation to the death of the other does not permit any adequation with the dead other such that I might eventually detach myself from the other and work through their memory, becoming ‘free and uninhibited’, as Freud puts it. 30 This book is part of a process
of mourning where the unquestionable need for a work is continually outstripped by an inordinate desire that is workless.

To return briefly, in closing, to the problem of nihilism, the difficulty here is that if one accepts, as I hope to show, that one cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite, if death (and consequently life) is meaningless, then how does one avoid moving from this claim into the cynical conformism and sheer resignation of passive nihilism?

A response to nihilism and its crisis of meaning will not consist in the restoration of a new totality of meaning derived from the datum of finitude; a new thesis on Being, the creation of new values, the achievement of philosophy as revolutionary praxis, or whatever. Such would be the ‘more and more faded positivities’ of the true nihilists with their active desire for overcoming. Rather than restoring meaning, a response to nihilism will lie, I believe, in meaninglessness as an achievement, as a task or quest, what I describe in Lecture 2 as the achievement of the ordinary or the everyday without the rose-tinted spectacles of any narrative of redemption. This is why Beckett’s work is so crucial for the argument of this book – he is, as Heidegger would say, the hero I have chosen. On the interpretation I develop in Lecture 3, Beckett is not a nihilist, that is, he is not flatly stating that life is meaningless or celebrating the meaninglessness of existence, rather he indicates how meaninglessness can be seen as an achievement. Here the task, the labour of interpretation – of interpretation respecting the determinate negation of meaning enacted by Beckett’s work – is the concrete reconstruction of the meaning of meaninglessness. The world is all too easily stuffed with meaning and we risk suffocating under the combined weight of competing narratives of redemption – whether religious, socio-economic, scientific, technological, political, aesthetic or philosophical – and hence miss the problem of nihilism in our manic desire to overcome it. What Beckett’s work offers, I think, is a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, an approach to meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary, a redemption from redemption.

The recognition of meaninglessness as an achievement leads to a deeper recognition of the profound limitedness of the human
condition, of our frailty and separateness from one another. In relation to Beckett, I claim that his use of language – the syntax of weakness – is a comic evocation of the painful stiffening of the body, the experience of crispation, abjection and senescence. As we will see, ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that’, and I will claim – contra Adorno – that the experience of laughter in Beckett is a node of uncolonizable non-identity in the life-world.  

In Lectures 1 and 2, this recognition of limitedness, finiteness and weakness leads to the sketching of a fairly minimal ethics of finitude, based on a critical reconstruction of the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Stanley Cavell. Such an ethics – minimal, fragile, refusable – does not open onto the glory of the Infinite or the trace of God, but only onto the night of what Levinas calls the il y a (the central topic of Lecture 1), the infinite time of our dying, our breath panting on in the darkness, a murmur in the mud, the experience of what I call atheist transcendence. And yet, into this night comes a voice, a weakly messianic injunction that resounds through many of Beckett’s writings: imagine! This injunction is the core of my interest in the theory of the romantic fragment, and in the various more contemporary inheritors of Jena Romanticism. In Lecture 2, I outline what I call an unworked romanticism which has an essential but essentially limited role for the imagination, an imagination that goes on imagining in the knowledge that imagination has come to an end; in Beckett’s typically antithetical formulation, imagination Dead Imagine. It is with this minimal resistance of the imagination to the pressure of reality, born out of a deep sense of the ungraspability of finitude, that I would like to fashion a response to nihilism in terms of an affirmation of the ordinary, an extraordinary ordinary, what Wallace Stevens calls a return to the plain sense of things.

Of course, this conclusion is disappointing. Moreover, it must be disappointing for this is where I began and to offer anything more would be to exacerbate the very nihilism I am seeking to confront. This is very little . . . almost nothing. Yet, the entirety of the effort here must be directed towards keeping open this ‘almost’.
Lecture 1

Il y a

Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave.

(Thomas the Obscure, revised version)

(a)

Reading Blanchot

Reading Blanchot is, in a sense, the easiest of tasks. His French is limpid and clear, it is daylight itself; almost the French of the Discours de la méthode. And yet, as nearly everyone who writes on Blanchot points out, his work seems to defy any possible approach, it seems to evade being drawn into the circle of interpretation. The utter clarity of Blanchot’s prose would appear to be somehow premised upon a refusal of the moment of comprehension and the consequent labour of interpretation and judgement. Absolutely clear at the level of reading, yet fundamentally opaque at the level of comprehension; a vague fore-understanding that somehow resists being drawn up into an active comprehension.
Reading Blanchot, and this will be my only hypothesis in what follows, one is drawn from daylight into an experience of the night. An experience of the night which is not the sleep which blots out and masters the night, preparing the body for the next day’s activity – the sleep of Dasein, of heroes and warriors, that allows the night to disappear and transforms it into a reserve of possibility. The latter is what Blanchot calls the first night, the night in which one can go unto death, a death one dies each time sleep comes – sleep as mastery, as virility unto death.

Reading Blanchot one is led rather into an experience of the other or essential night, the night which does not permit the evasion of sleep, the night in which one cannot find a position, where the body refuses to lie still – this is the spectral night of dreams, of phantoms, of ghosts. In the other night, one can neither go to sleep nor unto death, for there is something stronger than death, namely the simple facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit, what Blanchot calls le mourir in opposition to la mort: the impossibility of death (ED 81). In the other night, one is not permitted the fantasy of suicide, that controlled and virile leap into the void that believes the moment of death is a possibility that can be mastered; a perverse version of the belief that one can die content, in one’s bed, with one’s boots on. In place of the mastered leap into the void, all the suicide feels is the rope tightening around his neck, binding him ever tighter to the existence he wanted to leave. This condition of being riveted to existence is also the experience of insomnia, a reluctant vigilance in the night, the night that slowly exhausts and sickens the body, thereby preventing sleep the following night and thus engaging insomnia’s vicious circle. This is the bodily recollection of the night that one carries around during the day like a thousand invisible aching scars – eyes quietly burning beneath closed lids. Blanchot’s original insight, obsessively reiterated in his work, is that the desire that governs writing has for its (impossible) origin this experience of the night, which is the experience of a dying stronger than death, what Levinas will call, and I will keep coming back to this, the il y a. Writing is not a desire for the beautiful artwork but for the origin of the artwork, its
nocturnal source; which is why Blanchot defines the writer as ‘the insomniac of the day’ (ED 185).

Reading Blanchot in terms of a prose of daylight that is governed by nocturnal desire, an impossible and insatiable desire for that which is by definition denied to the movement of comprehension, it should be noted that reading Blanchot is not reading philosophy. If — with, after and against Hegel, or at least a certain Kojèvian Hegel of the Phenomenology of Spirit, the cartoon or comic Hegel of ‘Les trois Hs’, the Hegel who causes Bataille such mirth: the system as a comedy itself premised upon the Aufhebung of tragedy (and let it be noted that there are other, more interesting and more tragic readings of Hegel) — philosophy is fundamentally bound up with the movement of the Begriff, which is the movement of comprehension itself, a bipolar movement of negation whereby the Subject comes to Spirit and Spirit to the Subject, a dialectic that is always governed by the horizon of recognition, reconciliation, daylight and the production of the work, then Blanchot’s work is not philosophy. To paraphrase a passage from the Phenomenology of Spirit to be discussed below, if philosophy means that power of the Subject, that absolute and magical power of the negative that ensures its life by enduring death and maintaining itself unto death — that self-consciousness that constitutes itself through a right to death (which is also a right to sleep), and a right to experience itself, the production of Erfahrung in the dialectical movement from the in-itself to the for-itself — then the desire that governs Blanchot’s work has its source elsewhere.

Reading Blanchot’s work is, paradoxically, not the reading of a Work; that is, it does not have its horizon in the Subject’s constitution of a Work that will allow it a presentation (Darstellung) of the Absolute (which, incidentally, is always the desire for the presentation of community: Absolute Knowing as the presentation of Spirit in the form of community). Blanchot’s writing is the scattering of the work (and of community) in a movement of worklessness. To express this in historical figures anticipating the analyses of Lecture 2, Blanchot’s work perhaps retrieves a certain moment of worklessness that can be glimpsed in the fragmentary writing of the Jena romantics against the
dialectical Aufhebung of the fragment: Schlegel contra Hegel. As a Blanchot-inspired reading of Jena Romanticism points out, there is an alteration or oscillation within romanticism, where the systematic intentions of the Work, the desire for the Gesamtkunstwerk – for Schlegel, the great novel of the modern world – are interrupted and disseminated in the Work itself, producing instead incomplete chains of fragments.1 This is what Blanchot identifies as ‘the non-romantic essence of romanticism’ (EI 524/IC 357). Both Schlegel and Blanchot engage in the production of ‘a work of the absence of the work’ (EI 517/IC 353), namely literature, or, more precisely, writing outside philosophy. Writing interrupts the dialectical labour of the negative, introducing into the Subject a certain impotence and passivity that escapes the movement of comprehension, of philosophy’s obsession with meaning: the desire to master death and find a fulfilment for human finitude. Writing outside philosophy means ceasing to be fascinated with the circular figure of the Book, the en-cyclo-paedia of philosophical science, itself dominated by the figures of unity and totality, which would attempt to master death and complete meaning by letting nothing fall outside of its closure. In writing, one is no longer attracted by the Book, but rather by the energy of exteriority that cannot be reduced to either the exteriority of Law – even the written Torah – or to the Aufhebung of the exteriority of Law in Christianity or dialectics: neither the Book of God nor the Book of Man. Writing is the experience of language unworking itself in an irreducible ambiguity that points towards an exteriority that would scatter meaning – a dizzying absence, the space of dying itself. The question that I will persistently raise is whether such an exteriority can be tolerated by the human organism, or rather whether there must be a moment of bad faith in the experience of writing in order to protect us from its truth.

Reading Blanchot, one notes a quite determinate and progressive mirroring of what I will call, from force of habit, ‘form’ and ‘content’.2 Within Blanchot’s critical writing, one could mark a ‘progression’ from the relatively stable subject position of the early essays and L’espace littéraire through the polylogue of L’attente, l’oubli and
parts of L’entretien infini, to the complete formal fragmentation of L’écriture du désastre. A different progression would have to be noted for Blanchot’s fiction, noting the movement from roman to récit with the two versions of Thomas l’obscur to the refinement and eventual disappearance of the récit; what is called, in La folie du jour, the pas de récit (the one step more/no more of the tale), when Blanchot stops writing ‘fiction’ altogether (or so it seems). It is interesting to note how Blanchot’s fiction and criticism reach a point where both undergo fragmentation and pass into one another, something that can be seen particularly acutely in L’écriture du désastre. One way to read Blanchot’s work would be in terms of a movement towards a writing that would result in a certain Aufhebung of the distinction between fiction and criticism and the conceptions of form and content implicit in both genres. This allows us to avoid some of the rather tedious debates that can arise with questions like ‘is Blanchot’s fiction superior to his criticism?’ Whilst it is certainly true that at times Blanchot’s criticism is best read as a commentary on his fiction, and that Blanchot is perhaps the best, and possibly, with Kafka, the only example of a writer whose practice comes close to the views expressed in his criticism, it is once again perhaps helpful to place Blanchot’s work in the wake of Jena Romanticism, which would have as its central project the production of literature as its own theory, and whose genre of expression is the fragment. Form and content somehow conspire in Blanchot’s work to produce, beyond the criticism/fiction divide, a fragmentary writing, an Aufhebung of the Aufhebung of the fragment. As we will see in Lecture 2, writing produces itself ironically and wittily as a refusal of comprehension, an enactment of a field of fragmentation that produces an alterity irreducible to presentation or cognition, an alterity that can variously be named with the words absence, exteriority, the night, the neuter, the outside, dying, and, as we will see, the il y a.

Which brings me to my suggestion for a route through the labyrinth of Blanchot’s work (and when writing on Blanchot, I confess that I feel very much in the dark, fumbling here and there for a thread). My lecture will be in six parts: I will begin by trying to
establish a framework for Blanchot’s work by looking at what he means by ‘literature’ in the early 1943 essay, ‘De l’angoisse au langage’. Extending the parameters of this framework, I will then give two close readings of ‘Le regard d’Orphée’ from L’espace littéraire (1955) and ‘L’absence du livre’ which closes the monumental L’entretien infini (1969). This will be followed by an extended commentary on ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort’, the crucially important essay that concludes Blanchot’s second collection of essays, La part du feu, in 1949. The discussion of the latter essay will allow me, first, to show how Levinas’s notion of the il y a can be understood as the origin of the artwork for Blanchot, and secondly to introduce the thesis of the impossibility of death, of the interminability of le mourir which is stronger than la mort. This will be followed by a consideration of Blanchot’s reading of Kafka in L’espace littéraire, which focuses on the theme of ‘the double death’ and brings out the relation of writing to the interminability of dying and criticizes a certain romanticization of suicide as the ecstasy of annihilation. The long, final section of the lecture draws together the insights we have gleaned from the reading of Blanchot into a more thematic discussion of death, which then provides the basis for a critical discussion of Levinas’s work. I attempt to show what I think can be defended in Levinas’s work – roughly and readily, his quasi-phenomenology of the relation between myself and the other – and what cannot be defended in his work – crudely stated, the words ‘God’ and ‘ethics’. I attempt to redescribe the human relation in terms of what might be called an atheistic ‘ethics’ of finitude. For me, what opens in the relation to the other is not, as Levinas would have it, the trace of the divine, but rather the trauma of the il y a, the night without stars, the scene of immemorial disaster, what I am tempted to call the experience of atheist transcendence.

(b)

How is literature possible?

In ‘De l’angoisse au langage’, Blanchot is trying to tease out the ambiguities of the writer’s situation in order to address the question
that heads his 1942 pamphlet on Jean Paulhan’s _Les, fleurs de tarbes:_ ‘Comment la littérature est-elle possible?’ This strangely transcendent question – What are the conditions of possibility for literature? – can, at least in this essay, be equated with the question, ‘How is language possible?’, where language is understood as the more or less rule-governed production of meaningful sentences, the possibility of communication. At its simplest, and in a way whose tone will never change but only deepen in the entire destiny of Blanchot’s work, the response to the question of the possibility of literature is paradoxically that literature is only possible insofar as it is impossible. That is, the possibility of literature is found in the impossibility of what Blanchot here calls ‘aesthetic consciousness’ (FP 26/GO 19). Although left undefined by Blanchot, we might think of aesthetic consciousness as the total realization of meaning in an artwork, the comprehension of what Blanchot calls the work in a book, the sensuous presentation of the Absolute in Hegelian terms. For Blanchot, the possibility of literature is found in the radical impossibility of creating a complete work. That is to say, it is the impossibility of literature that preserves literature as possibility. Higher than actuality, echoing Heidegger’s definition of phenomenology in _Sein und Zeit,_ literature is the preservation of possibility as possibility. Thus, in one sense, it is the radical incompletion of the artwork that preserves the possibility of literature as possibility, and it is this incompletion that prevents the writer or painter standing back from their work and saying ‘at last it is finished, at last there is nothing’ (FP 26/GO 20).

However, if the possibility of literature is conditioned by the impossibility of completing the work, then this is still only a superficial, and indeed rather circular, response to the question, ‘How is literature possible?’ (i.e. literature is the possibility of literature). The title of the essay is ‘De l’angoisse au langage’; what about _angoiise_ or dread? Does not the title of the essay suggest a movement from dread to language, implying that dread renders both language and literature possible? To express this provisionally, one could say that literature is the non-literal and ever-incomplete ‘translation’ of dread into language, a ‘translation’ that does not provide a representation or intuitive
fulfilment of dread, but rather that literature is dread at work in language. Blanchot writes (incidentally – and insistently – against a tendency in surrealism, if not against surrealism as such), ‘The opposite of automatic writing is a dread-filled desire (la volonté angoissé – my emphasis) to transform the gifts of chance into deliberate initiatives’ (FP 24/GO 18). A dread-filled desire, and we have yet to define these terms, is somehow the source of literature and literature is dread’s failed expression in language.

Blanchot begins his meditation on literature, as he will do in L’espace littéraire, with the theme of solitude (although, as we will see presently, solitude in Blanchot’s later work is the essential solitude of the work and not, as in this early essay, the solitude of the artist). Is there not a performative contradiction at the heart of literature insofar as its use of language is premised upon the generality of meaning and communication, but where what is expressed in language is the writer’s solitude? Blanchot takes as axiomatic for the experience of literature – and one might well want to criticize this silent substitution of a highly determinate conception of literature arising at a particular historical moment (i.e. aesthetic modernism) for literature as such – Rimbaud’s statement ‘je suis seul’; that is, the condition of the writer is solitude and the function of literature is the articulation of this solitude. But how can a person be alone, if he confides to us that he is alone? ‘Is the writer only half sincere’ (FP 9/GO 3)? No, Blanchot insists, the writer is caught in a double bind, where he ‘is not free to be alone without expressing the fact that he is alone’ (FP 10/GO 4). That is to say, solitude can only be expressed by means of that which precisely denies solitude: language. But solitude is only solitude with respect to its other, it only has meaning as a privation whose absence is the rule. The writer is thus caught in a vicious circle, ‘a person who writes is committed to writing by the silence and the privation of language that have stricken him’ (FP 11/GO 5). Note here that the condition of possibility for literature is a certain silence, the silence of solitude. Silence is then equated by Blanchot with the theme of the nothing (le rien), the silent essence of solitude is a nothingness. Nothing, then, is the material of
the writer and the writer has nothing to express: a statement that must be read in the same way as Heidegger reads Leibniz’s Principle of Sufficient Reason, with the emphasis on nothing and express. The writer has an obligation to say or to bring to language, to literature, the nothing or silent solitude that is the source of literature. Such is the tragic-comic situation of the writer (one is reminded of Beckett), ‘having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it’ (FP 11/GO 5).

The solitude of the writer that literature seeks to bring to language is then equated by Blanchot – drawing discreetly on a whole network of allusions to the theme of dread in Kierkegaard and Heidegger – with dread or anguish: ‘it sometimes seems, in a strange way, as though dread characterized the writer’s function’ (FP 12/GO 6). For Blanchot, and here we find a refinement of Heidegger’s analysis in Sein und Zeit, the Grund-Stimmung of Angst that discloses the human being to itself for the first time, that wrenches Dasein from the gravitational pull of das Man, that allows freedom to surge up as the vertiginous nothingness of possibility, is something essentially linked to the experience of writing: ‘dread, which opens and closes the sky, needs the activity of a man sitting at his table and forming letters on a piece of paper’ (FP 12/GO 6). In the previous paragraph, Blanchot tells us that it does not occur to anyone that the same dread would characterize a man who repairs shoes. Writers are not cobblers; and writers, unlike cobblers or all non-writing humans, have a privileged access to the Grund-Stimmung of dread. Although it is not my purpose in this lecture, one might want to press Blanchot’s work quite hard at this point and see, first, whether and to what extent he is giving an ontological privilege to the writer – the writer is the only being capable of authentic Dasein – and second, whether he is justified in making this move. What does it mean to make quite general ontological claims for a highly specific and determined – culturally, socially, historically – form of activity, like literary writing?

Nevertheless, for the writer – and only for the writer, the experience is different again not only for the cobbler but even for the reader,
where reading is a kind of second order writing (FP 25/GO 19) – literature is the attempt to attain the emptiness that, in the medium of art, will be the response to the dread that fills the writer’s life. Writing engages a movement towards the nothingness opened by the experience of dread. Literature is an attempt at saying nothing. Such an attempt calls on the writer – in terms that reappear in The Gaze of Orpheus – to sacrifice himself. Blanchot writes, in words redolent of Bataille:

The writer is called upon by his dread to perform a genuine sacrifice of himself. He must spend (dépense), he must consume, the forces that make him a writer. The spending must also be genuine. Either to be content with not writing any more, or to write a work in which all the values that the mind held in potential reappear in the form of effects, is to prevent the sacrifice from being made or to replace it by an exchange.

(FP 14/GO 7–8)

Without remuneration or return, writing must be a pure sacrifice or pure gift that does not collapse back into the restricted economy of exchange. Writing must be an excessive gift in a general economy, like the potlatch that so intrigued Mauss and Bataille. The above quote has one devastating consequence whose force will never change in Blanchot’s later work, namely what has to be sacrificed by the writer in writing is the work itself, a work that is exceeded by desire. Like Empedocles (to stay with the cobbler motif – that pair of sandals left on the rim of Mount Etna), the writer must sacrifice himself and his wish for a work out of a fidelity to the source from which the work comes. Blanchot writes, in an anticipation of the notion of désoeuvrement, ‘The work he makes signifies that there is no work made’ (FP 14/GO 8). The writer’s loyalty to the dread that characterizes his life demands a work that must sacrifice itself and become workless. The goal of writing is not the work, the production of meaning and beauty, rather the writer writes out of a desire for the origin of the work, which means that the work must be sacrificed in fidelity to the pursuit of its origin. It is this origin that calls the writer in the Grund-Stimmung of dread.
For Blanchot, there is no adequation between the source of literature and its response, the writer cannot express in writing the dread that haunts him. ‘Man cannot describe his torment’ (FP 22/GO 15): dread is incommunicable, unrealizable and unrepresentable. If this were not the case, then literature would be some form of therapy for coming to terms with or overcoming dread; recall that Blanchot writes, alluding to the unhappy consciousness in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, ‘L’art est d’abord la conscience du malheur, non pas sa compensation’ (EL 85/SL 75). Blanchot wants to aggravate and not appease the ambiguous situation of the writer and show the necessity that governs this ambiguity: dread is nothing that can be expressed and yet the only thing that causes me to desire expression, writing is useless and yet nothing is more serious. The writer full of dread is bound to a necessity that cannot be governed by the simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ of reality.

One of Blanchot’s most insistent themes in these pages is the steadfast refusal of any practice of writing based upon chance as an appropriate response to dread (both Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* and the automatic writing of the Surrealists are major reference points here). For Blanchot, the very difficulty of writing entails working with necessity, that is, the necessity of employing the traditional rules of writing – form, genre, etc. – in order to show the inadequacy of those rules. Traditional forms must be observed in order to show the limitations of such forms. One can try, in the manner of automatic writing, to escape rules by subjecting oneself to pure chance, and it would seem to the writer that by proceeding in this way, ‘he is closer to his nocturnal passion’. ‘But’, Blanchot continues, ‘the point is that for him, the day is still there next to the night [SC’s emphasis], and he needs to betray himself through fidelity to the norms of clarity, for the sake of what is without form and without law’ (FP 24/GO 17–18). As well as being an interesting self-description of Blanchot’s practice as a writer, one sees introduced here the metaphors of day and night that are constantly present in Blanchot’s work: it is not a matter of giving oneself the illusion of merging with the night in some sort of ecstatic loss of consciousness. Such an option is easily enough
achieved with the use of the right hallucinogenic drugs, a congenial climate and adequate leisure time. For Blanchot, however, such an aesthetic practice is an evasion of the essential night, which is the experience of being riveted to existence without exit. As we will see presently, the fundamental experience of the night is insomniac vigilance, a passive watching that extends the day into the night, drawing the laws of lucidity into the nocturnal space where they are transformed and made to serve that which exceeds all law.

Thus, Blanchot is not exhorting the writer to blind obedience to the traditional rules that govern literary production, for rules can easily become habits and lose their force, ‘most of the time to give oneself to language is to abandon oneself’ (FP 24/GO 18). And herein lies the problem with automatic writing for Blanchot: ‘True automatic writing is the habitual form of writing, writing that has used the mind’s deliberate efforts and its erasures to create automatisms’ (FP 24/GO 18). That is to say, automatic writing risks slipping into the very Gerede it seeks to subvert. In opposition to this, Blanchot is proposing a form of writing governed by a dread-filled desire and obedient to the necessity of following the traditional laws of literary production, experiencing their limitations and then going on to posit a new law in which the writer can believe.

At this early stage of Blanchot’s critical development, his account of writing indeed resembles an existentialist account of Kantian autonomy (which is one possible – if somewhat partial – reading of what Heidegger is proposing in Sein und Zeit). He writes:

The instinct that leads us, in dread, to flee from the rules . . . comes, then, from the need to pursue these rules as true rules, as an exacting kind of coherence, and no longer as the conventions and means of a traditional commodity. I try to give myself a new law . . . because its novelty is the guarantee that it is really a law, for me, a law that imposes itself with a rigour I am aware of and that impresses more heavily upon me the feeling that it has no more meaning than the toss of the dice.

(FP 24–25/GO 18)
Thus, chance is not an adequate aesthetic response to dread because it reduces writing to the toss of a dice and freedom to the experience of arbitrariness. I must find for myself a law that imposes itself upon me with a necessity and which I feel to be the law I give to myself, a law to which I freely submit. Thus the task of writing becomes one of ‘setting words free’ and freeing words ‘from a rule one no longer submits to, in order to subject them to a law one really feels’ (FP 25/GO 18). In this early essay, writing seems to move within the horizon of individual autonomy, of giving myself a law I freely submit to, even though it is clear that autonomy can never achieve complete self-identity through the alterity of the artwork; aesthetic consciousness must always remain structurally incomplete.

Turning to Blanchot’s more mature criticism, any residual claims to individual autonomy would seem to evaporate. For example, in an Appendix to *L’espace littéraire*, Blanchot makes the distinction between essential solitude and solitude in the world (EL 341–44/SL 251–53). Essential solitude is not the worldly, artistic solitude of Rimbaud’s ‘je suis seul’ or that of Rilke’s isolation during the composition of the *Duino Elegies*. Such solitude is the existential solipsism that, in Heideggerian terms, *Dasein* undergoes in the *Grund-Stimmung of Angst*, which is always, essentially, self-communion or self-relation. Rather, the essential solitude is that of the Work, a solitude upon which the writer is dependent but to which he necessarily has a self-deceptive relationship, mistaking the Work for the book that he writes, or, like Valéry, misunderstanding the interminability of the Work for the infinity of the Spirit (EL 10/SL 21–22). For the Blanchot of *L’espace littéraire*, the solitude of the Work is expressed by the ‘word’ être (EL 10–11/SL 22–23). This transformation in the meaning of solitude should perhaps be read in terms of the influence of the later Heidegger on Blanchot, and one feels the continual presence of ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in *L’espace littéraire* – where Heidegger turns from the alleged anthropologism of the *Dasein*-analytic to the thinking of the truth of Being as that event of self-occultation disclosed and sheltered in and as language, and which emerges when worldly solitude slips away. However, if it is plausible to follow
Blanchot’s development in terms of shadowing Heidegger’s *Kehre*, then this in no way discredits the insights of ‘De l’angoisse au langage’, just as Heidegger’s work after the *Kehre* is not a refutation but a deepening of the claims of fundamental ontology. The analyses of dread-filled desire, the necessary incompleteness of the work, writing as dread at work(lessness) in language, the gift and sacrifice, are already on the way to *L’espace littéraire*, to which I should now like to turn.

(c)

**Orpheus, or the law of desire**

Every book has a centre, even if it is only an imagined one. The writer writes the book out of a desire for this centre and in the hope that one will achieve identification with this centre and with oneself through the creation of an artwork. In Hegelian terms, the beauty of art is born of the Spirit and then born again from the Spirit in being recognized in objective form, standing over against self-consciousness: beautiful art exemplifies the dialectical formula of self-recognition in absolute otherness. However, and this is an insistent theme in Blanchot, the writer is in a profound sense ignorant of the centre towards which his work tends and the feeling of having attained it is always illusory. The writer can only exist in bad faith, mistaking the published book for the work of which the book is but the failed instantiation. In *L’espace littéraire*, the paradigm example employed to illustrate the writer’s fate is the gaze of Orpheus, which also, as Blanchot points out in the untitled *avertissement au lecteur*, provides the (imagined) centre for that book (EL 227–34/GO 99–104). Of course, this raises Paul de Man’s question about the circularity of Blanchot’s claims about bad faith, and I shall come back to this.

There is a law that governs the artwork, a prohibition imposed upon Orpheus by Pluto and Persephone, that, if obeyed, will permit Orpheus to complete his work, that is to say, to bring Eurydice into the daylight. Eurydice is Orpheus’ Work, and his work – the
production of beauty – will be achieved when she escapes from Hades and comes to stand in the daylight. Orpheus must submit to the law of the underworld in order to produce the artwork. Thus, the presentation or unconcealment of the beautiful form in the daylight – what one can call, with Heidegger, ‘world’ – can only be achieved by submitting to the prohibition against looking Eurydice in the face, by recognizing that she can only be approached by turning away. That is to say, there is a law of concealment, the dark ascent out of Hades, which is necessary to the production of the work – we might think of this concealment as ‘earth’ for Heidegger, the nocturnal material substratum of the artwork. Thus the law that governs the production of the artwork demands an obedience to the creative strife of world and earth, of unconcealment and concealment: alētheia.

However, Orpheus’ gaze – the moment when he turns around to look at Eurydice in the night, as the night – transgresses the law through the movement of desire. Desire, for Blanchot, is always in excess of the law. Orpheus’ desire is not to see Eurydice in the daylight, in the beauty of a completed aesthetic form that has submitted to the passage by way of the law of concealment, but rather to see her in the night, as the heart of the night prior to daylight, ‘her body closed, her face sealed’ (almost like a fetish – EL 228/GO 100). Orpheus does not want to make the invisible visible, but rather (and impossibly) to see the invisible as invisible. Orpheus’ ‘mistake’, as it were, lies in the nature of his desire, which desires to see Eurydice when he is only destined to sing about her – parler ce n’est pas voir. He loses her through his desire and is forced to forgo both his art – his song – and his dream of a happy life.

Yet, the paradox of Orpheus’ situation is that if he did not turn his gaze on Eurydice he would be betraying his desire and thus would cease to be an artist. Thus, the desire which destroys his art is also its source. Such is the ambiguous double bind of inspiration for Blanchot. Inspiration is precisely this irresistible and impatient desire that transgresses the law that governs the artwork. Inspiration, far from completing the artwork, and bringing it to formal perfection, destroys the possibility of the artwork by transgressing its law in an
act of impatience. Orpheus’ gaze sends Eurydice back to Hades and destroys the possibility of the artwork. Blanchot asks rhetorically:

Does this mean that inspiration changes the beauty of the night into the unreality of the void, makes Eurydice into a shade and Orpheus into someone infinitely dead? Does it mean that inspiration is therefore that problematic moment when the essence of the night becomes something inessential and the welcoming intimacy of the first night becomes the deceptive trap of the other night? That is exactly the way it is.

(EL 231/GO 102)

Inspiration is both the source of the artwork and its ruination, it leads us through the comforting experience of the first night, the night to which Novalis addressed his hymns, to the other night, the unwelcoming night in which one can neither sleep nor die. To the night of Novalis, one might oppose the nocturnal Angst of Bonaventura’s Nachtwachen, the nadir of poetic nihilism.³ Orpheus’ gaze is the realization of failure as the destiny of art, an essential inessentiality that, Blanchot suggests — in a curious remark commented on by Levinas when he is desperately trying to prise apart Blanchot and Heidegger — ‘could reveal itself as the source of all authenticity’ (EL 231/GO 102).

One can here draw together the double bind of inspiration with what Blanchot writes about fascination earlier in L’espace littéraire. ‘The undecided moment of fascination’ (EL 15/GO 67) describes that experience when we are caught by something that we can neither grasp fully nor relinquish. Fascination is preoccupied, claims Blanchot, with the image. It is the image which becomes perceptible through the mediation of the writer in a manner which can neither be seized nor refused — in this case the vanishing face of Eurydice. Orpheus’ gaze is fascinated by something which its desire cannot resist and over which it has no power: ‘Fascination is the gaze . . . in which blindness is still vision, vision that is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing’ (EL 26/GO 75). The fascinated gaze does not perceive any real object or form, it is like
seeing with eyes open in the insomniac night, when familiar objects take on strange and terrible contours in the darkness, where they seem to attract the gaze to the extent that they continue to evade it—the experience of the uncanny. This is the night when the inanimate becomes animate, where toys come to life and terrify the sleepless child. Indeed, Blanchot goes on to link fascination to the experience of childhood and to the figure of the mother, who, Blanchot claims, is the first figure of fascination (EL 26–27/GO 76). We might ask, with Hélène Cixous, what is the gender of the child fascinated by the mother: is it a boy or a girl? Is the experience of the artist or the writer gendered or gender specific in Blanchot’s work? Is the regard of the poet a male gaze on female alterity, and is this not the most traditional and pernicious of aesthetic conventions?5

Orpheus’ gaze is fascinated by that which exceeds the law that governs the artwork, and thus his desire brings about its destruction. Blanchot insists—and this reintroduces themes we saw above—that Orpheus sacrifices the artwork and makes of it a radical and excessive gift, for which there will be no remuneration or exchange (EL 232–34/GP 103–4). But to whom or to what is this sacrifice made and this gift given? It is now clear that the Work is sacrificed and made a gift out of a desire for the source or origin (Blanchot’s words—EL 232/GO 103) of the Work. Thus, and the Heideggerian resonances of these formulations should be noted, the artwork is sacrificed because of the desire for the origin of the artwork, and the origin of the artwork is not a work, it is the betrayal, failure and scattering of the Work before its origin in worklessness. The source of the artwork, its workless origin, is the experience of the other night—‘the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death and the night all seem to lead’ (EL 227/GO 99)—an experience which introduces not death, but the interminable facticity of dying. After the failure of his work in Hades, Orpheus is finally torn to pieces by a band of Thracian women. Workless, his remains are scattered and his body thrown into the River Hebrus where it still mutters ‘Eurydice, Eurydice’.
(d) Blanchot’s genealogy of morals: exteriority as desire, exteriority as law

This conception of writing as the sacrifice of the Work to its workless origin is continued in different terms in ‘The Absence of the Book’, the difficult concluding text from *L’entretien infini*. As Blanchot repeatedly emphasizes, the act of writing does not find its fulfilment in the Book, whether the Book of God (the Bible), or the Book of Man (Hegel and Mallarmé are the examples given – EI 621/IC 423). Rather, writing is related to and directed towards the absence of the Book, that is, the production of worklessness in the Work. Thus, writing passes through the Book, but the Book is not the destiny of writing. Furthermore, Blanchot also insinuates that writing must pass through the Book, insofar as occidental culture is a civilization of the Book. That is to say, in terms similar to the opening theses of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, occidental civilization is founded upon the Book as the condition of possibility for meaning, knowledge, totality, presence, memory and systematicity. It matters little which transcendental signified – God, the Subject, History, the Proletariat, the Nation, the American Family – is claimed as the origin of meaning; what is essential here is that the Book is a strategy for evading the radical absence at the heart of language and culture. Blanchot writes, ‘The book: a ruse by which writing goes towards the absence of the book’ (EI 623/IC 424). The book is a ruse, an act of cunning, whereby what Blanchot calls the energy (EI 624/IC 425) of writing, what we described above as desire or inspiration, is displaced into the Book: logocentrism is bibliocentrism.

However, what summons us when we write, Blanchot claims, using the safety curtain of parenthesis, is ‘The attraction of (pure) exteriority’ (EI 625/IC 426). The law of the Book, what we saw above as the prohibition that governs the possibility of the artwork, is the displacement of pure exteriority into an order of meaning. A distinction is here established between the law of the Book, what Blanchot also calls the exteriority of the Law, and the pure exteriority
of writing, whereby the former is the slackening of the latter’s energy. The energy and desire of writing always work against the law, and the law of desire is lawlessness itself.

Behind these seemingly baroque distinctions, Blanchot is intimating a genealogical critique of morality in terms of a discreet account of the origin of Judaism; because the moment when exteriority slackens, it appears as the exteriority of the Law, or written Torah, which takes the form of the Book – the Bible – and provides the condition of possibility for monotheism and a universalistic morality. Thus, the institution of a covenant based upon the written Law and the establishment of a people of the Book, is, for Blanchot, the substitution of a limited exteriority for the unlimited exteriority of writing. The law as the written Torah replaces and displaces the lawlessness of the writing of desire. Blanchot writes:

In other words, the breaking of the first tablets is not a break with a first state of unitary harmony; on the contrary, what the break inaugurates is the substitution of a limited exteriority (where the possibility of a limit announces itself) for an exteriority without limitation – the substitution of a lack for an absence, a break for a gap, an infraction for the pure–impure fraction of the fragmentary.

(EI 633/IC 432)

Once this substitution has been made and a moral and religious order has been grounded in the Book and the Law, then the pure exteriority of writing – ‘the primordiality of difference’ – is thrust aside as ‘impious’ (EI 635/IC 433), and the postulation of a writing of desire outside the Law is made to appear as ‘an irresponsible gesture, an immoral game’ (EI 636/IC 434).

With more than a little hermeneutic violence, one can delineate a threefold structure in Blanchot’s implied genealogy of morals: in the beginning, there was writing – the pure exteriority, worklessness and absence towards which inspiration and desire tend. Second, this pure exteriority slackens and is displaced into the exteriority of the Law, which is the moment of Judaism. However, I would claim, and
the many references to Hegel in ‘The Absence of the Book’ could be used to buttress my argument here, that a third step is implied when Blanchot writes, ‘the law in its turn will dissolve’ (EI 633/IC 432). Christianity, or at least Hegel’s understanding of it, is the Aufhebung of Judaism, that is, the dissolution of the exteriority of Law as exterior and its translation into the interiority of love, the Grund-Stimmung of Christianity. This dissolution and translation are achieved through the person of Christ, in whom the abstraction of the Law becomes incarnated into a living divine subjectivity with whom human self-consciousness can enter into a reciprocal, loving intersubjectivity: the form of Spirit itself. Of course, within Hegel’s (a)theoteleo-logical schema even the exteriority of Christ is aufgehoben insofar as our relation with him remains in the sphere of Vorstellung, picture thinking. After religion comes philosophy, self-consciousness of the Absolute or Spirit become Subject in and as community. Beneath the Aufhebung of religion by philosophy – as Feuerbach and the young Marx clearly perceived – the stench from the decay of God’s corpse is already nauseating.

Despite the violence of this genealogy, it can be seen that Blanchot’s work is an attempt at a retrieval of the origin of desire – energy itself – as a (pure) exteriority of writing prior to its slackening into Law. Yet, Blanchot continues, perhaps this slackening is necessary, perhaps the expenditure of energy in pure exteriority would be intolerable to the human organism (EI 632/IC 431), like the pure energy of the Dionysian without the redemptive Schein of the Apollonian. Our feet are still very firmly stuck in the epoch of the Book and the transition to what Blanchot means by writing would demand a transformation of historical–social–cultural–economic conditions that, to say the very least, would not seem to be likely at the present time. To recall the enigmatic prefatory ‘Note’ to L’entretien infini, the advent of writing, in Blanchot’s sense, would presuppose a radical transformation of the epoch, ‘an end of history’, and the establishment of communism: ‘a communism being always still beyond communism’ (EI vii–viii/IC xi–xii). Such remarks could lead to what one might call an apocalyptic reading of Blanchot, that
is, an interpretation that would emphasize the interdependence of writing and revolution – writing as the enabling of revolutionary action and revolution as the transformation of the epoch of the Book into the epoch of Writing (with a capital ‘W’).

However, such an interpretation is extremely limited and risks reducing what I believe to be the fundamental lesson of Blanchot’s work, namely, the irreducibility of ambiguity or equivocity. In the concluding lines of ‘The Absence of the Book’, Blanchot writes, ‘One cannot go back (remonter) from exteriority as law to exteriority as writing’ (EI 636/IC 434). That is to say, one must accept the fall into Law and the epoch of the Book: ‘The law is the summit, there is no other. Writing remains outside the arbitration between high and low.’ Reading Blanchot apocalyptically would risk positing the achieved revolution as a Work, and construing post-revolutionary forms of community in terms of the very unity and totality that Blanchot’s writing seeks to undermine. In the terms introduced above, it would be to read Blanchot in terms of the first night and not the other, essential night. It would escape the interminable facticity of dying through some virile, revolutionary death fantasy – the fantasy of automatic writing, of creation by sheer chance without regard for rules and aesthetic criteria. Such a reading would posit a successful end to desire – and it should have been established by now that ‘success’ and ‘end’ are words that contradict what Blanchot means by desire – and participate in the therapeutic fantasy of the cure.

The reading of Blanchot that I would like to develop places emphasis on the ambiguity of our (historical–political–cultural–economic) situation, that is, of being in the epoch of the Book but without a belief in the Book. We must accept our fall within the epoch of the Book and the Law and begin to negotiate our position critically; that is to say, through writing, speaking, thinking and acting. Modernity, for Blanchot, is perhaps this fundamental experience of equivocity, of the kind that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy find in their reading of Jena Romanticism (AL 419–25/LA 121–27) – what was called above the alteration between the desire for the Work and the worklessness that leaves the Work in fragments. Perhaps Blanchot’s
writing participates in and deepens the aporias of this romanticism, returning us to the margins of a modernity we are unable to leave and in which we are unable to believe: ‘The Athenäum is our birthplace’ (AL 17W/LA 8).

(e)

Il y a – the origin of the artwork

In L’entretien infini, Blanchot often employs a double plus and minus sign (± ±) to indicate that someone is speaking, in place of the single dash (−) that is customary in French. What does this simultaneity of the positive and the negative signify? An oblique response to this question can be found in the concluding pages of ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, where Blanchot makes the following remark about the power or force of literature:

Then where is literature’s power? It plays at working in the world and the world regards its work as a worthless or dangerous game. It opens a path for itself towards the obscurity of existence and does not succeed in pronouncing the ‘Never more’ which would suspend its curse. Then why would a man like Kafka decide that if he has to fall short of his destiny, being a writer was the only way to fall short of it truthfully? Perhaps this is an unintelligible enigma, but if it is, the source of the mystery is literature’s right to affix a negative or positive sign indiscriminately to each of its results. A strange right – one linked to the question of ambiguity in general [SC’s emphasis]. Why is there ambiguity in the world? Ambiguity is its own answer. We can’t answer it except by rediscovering it in the ambiguity of our answer, and an ambiguous answer is a question about ambiguity.

(PF 342/GO 58–59)⁶

Literature, Blanchot goes on to write, is language turning into ambiguity; or again, literature is the form in which the original double meaning at the heart of meaning has chosen to show itself (PF 345/GO 62). My hypothesis here is that the above sign – the
simultaneity of the positive and the negative – provides a formula for the linguistic ambiguity expressed in and as literature. The power of literature is located in the irreducibility of ambiguity and the maintenance of this ambiguity is literature’s right. Literature always has the right to mean something other than what one thought it meant; this is, for Blanchot, both literature’s treachery and its cunning version of the truth (‘sa vérité retorse’).

In order to elucidate this ambiguity I would like to sketch in some detail the two differing conceptions or, to use Blanchot’s word, ‘slopes’ (pentes or versants) of literature that constitute the poles of this ambiguity – two slopes of literature that also entail two conceptions of death and two voices often heard in the background of ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, those of Hegel and Levinas. It should be noted at the outset that these two slopes, two conceptions of death and two names cannot be divided and continually risk passing into one another in the experience of literature.7

(i)

First slope: Hegel avec Sade

For Blanchot, the ambiguity of literature is indissolubly linked to the maintenance of the question of literature as a question. Although Blanchot is prepared to concede that one can write without asking why one writes, he begins ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ with the hypothesis, ‘Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question’ (PF 305/GO 21). The essay is thus going to be concerned with literature questioning itself or contemplating itself. However, the question is: what is literature’s question? How and when does literature contemplate itself? To begin to find a response to these questions and ascend the first slope of literature, we have to understand what, for Blanchot, is the ultimate temptation of the writer and introduce the themes of revolution and terror.

The influence of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit can be felt at many points in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ and indeed the first half
of the essay was initially published in the November 1947 number of *Critique* – which also included a double review of Hyppolite’s and Kojève’s commentaries on Hegel – under the very Hegelian title, ‘The Animal Kingdom of the Spirit’ (*Le règne animal de l’esprit*). P. Adams Sitney calls Blanchot’s essay a ‘near parody’ or ‘ironic aestheticization’ of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (GO 175), and whilst this is not implausible, I feel that a stronger word than ‘parody’ would be required to convey the extent of Blanchot’s proximity to Hegel. Blanchot *mimics* the dialectical procedure of the *Phenomenology*, insofar as one cannot read ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ as defending a particular position, as much as letting truth unfold in the totality of possible positions. Blanchot works in the spirit, if not the letter, of Hegel (and incidentally reads Hegel as literature, which means – as was so common in France at this time – privileging the *Phenomenology* over the *Logic* or the *Encyclopaedia*) by engaging in a phenomenology of the various temptations available to the writer and articulating them in terms of the categories of the *Phenomenology*. Blanchot writes, as if this were self-evident:

As we know, a writer’s main temptations are called stoicism, scepticism and the unhappy consciousness.

(PF 321/GO 37)

If the stoic views writing as the exercise of absolute freedom, and the sceptic sees literature as the total negation of all certitude, then the unhappy consciousness – the truth of stoicism and scepticism – best describes the situation of the writer, ‘ce malheur est son plus proffond talent’ (PF 320/GO 37). The writer’s consciousness is unhappily divided against itself by an array of irreconcilable temptations which are as justifiable as they are contradictory.

‘But’, Blanchot adds, ‘there is another temptation.’ This ultimate temptation, that outstrips all the others, is articulated through a series of allusions to the ‘Absolute Freedom and Terror’ chapter of the *Phenomenology*, which, of course, is Hegel’s discussion of the French Revolution. In this temptation, literature is the passage from nothing to everything, that is to say, the writer is no longer

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satisfied with the aesthetic pleasure of manipulating mere words, but wishes to realize writing in the world by negating something real, by annulling *everything* hitherto considered real: the state, the law, institutions, religion. Thus, writing comes to see itself in the mirror of *revolution*, where the latter is understood as both the absolute negation of previously existing reality, and the exercise of absolute freedom. Thus, revolution is the realization of *absolute freedom* in the world, and the writer succumbs to the temptation to become a revolutionary. Therefore, the choice facing the writer, according to this temptation, is either absolute freedom or death, because anything less than freedom would be a concession to the established order. This choice of freedom or death soon becomes an identification of freedom *with* death, with a certain *right* to death, whereby death becomes the perfection of one’s free existence. Hegel is thinking of the fates of revolutionaries like Robespierre or Saint-Just (but one might also think here of David’s painting of the death of Danton, or of photographs of Che Guevara’s Christ-like corpse). But a second identification is also at work here: if death is the expression or realization of one’s freedom, then this is only an abstract, insubstantial and one-sided freedom, where death no longer has any real importance. This devaluation of death leads Hegel to identify absolute freedom with the Terror, where individuals are slaughtered meaninglessly, in Hegel’s famous words, ‘It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.’

The writer who succumbs to this ultimate temptation becomes a revolutionary and a terrorist, ‘The terrorists are those who, desiring absolute freedom, know that in this way they desire their own death’ (PF 323/GO 39). If one had the expertise and the inclination, one might read these remarks autobiographically, because Blanchot had, in 1936, as the frenzied culmination of his political activism, advocated terrorism as a means of public salvation. However, in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, as elsewhere in Blanchot’s work, the writer *par excellence* is the Marquis de Sade, or ‘Citoyen Sade’, as
he later called himself: held captive in the Bastille and calling out (through a urine funnel) to the revolutionary crowds that prisoners were being massacred inside the prison. Sade’s writing is the exercise of absolute freedom as total negation: the denial of God, of other people, of nature. A negation that is driven to blood, cruelty and terror as the most faithful expression of absolute freedom.

He writes, all he does is write, and it doesn’t matter that freedom puts him back into the Bastille after having brought him out, he is the one who understands freedom the best, because he understands that it is a moment when the most aberrant passions that turn into political reality, have a right to be seen, are the law.

(PF 324/GO 40)

Sadism is a perversion of the Hegelian dialectic of intersubjectivity, where recognition is forced through sexual domination, and where identification with the other is obtained through their humiliation. Literature here becomes a bacchanal of absolute sovereignty, and writing becomes a solitary masturbation that negates reality and posits a fantasized reality in its place. The perversion of the dialectic of intersubjectivity takes place in solitude, as solitude. Indeed, Sade’s writing begins after his imprisonment, when his only sexual gratifications are solitary and where writing – as was also the case for Rousseau, another confessed masturbator – is a supplement for something lacking in reality. One is also reminded here of Genet’s Notre dame des Fleurs and Sartre’s description of the latter as ‘the epic of masturbation’. Both Sade and Genet are obsessed with a rape fantasy, which is – surprise, surprise – deeply misogynist, and centred on a scene of anal penetration, whether the desire is to penetrate (in Sade) or to be penetrated (in Genet), a scene itself banalized through endless repetition and the prolix cataloguing of sexual exploits – think also of the enumeration of sexual conquests in Mozart’s Don Giovanni. The final crucial element in this mini-psychopathology of the literary terrorist is that although the writer loudly and repeatedly negates God, events culminate in the elevation of the writer to
an identification with the Messiah, or, even better, the Crucified, an identification made by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* with the kind of self-lacerating irony all too lacking in his imitators.

We are here ascending the first slope of literature, and as a response to the initial questions raised above – What is the question of literature? What is the question that literature poses itself? How and at what moment does literature question itself? – it is by now clear that the question that literature contemplates is presented in revolution and terror:

> Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that historical moment when ‘life endures death and maintains itself in death’ in order to gain from death the possibility and the truth of speech. This is the ‘question’ that seeks to pose itself in literature, the ‘question’ that is its being.

(PF 324/GO 41)

I want to pick up on the sentence in quotation marks, the ‘life [that] endures death and maintains itself in death’, which is repeated at least four times in Blanchot’s essay, and is taken from the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Hegel is discussing the power and work of the Understanding (*die Kraft und Arbeit des Verstandes*), the absolute power, which is also identified with the Subject. The Subject, for Hegel, is the power of the negative, in Sartrean terms a nothingness set free in the world, which is able to dissolve that which stands over against it as an object in-itself and translate it into something for-itself, to mediate the immediate. Dialectical thought – the active dynamic of *Erfahrung* and the movement of the *Begriff* – consists in the emergence of new, true objects for consciousness through the labour of negation. What Hegel calls the Life of the Spirit (*das Leben des Geistes*) is this magical power (*Zauberkraft*) to live through the negative, to produce experience out of a labour of negation. This work of negation whereby the in-itself becomes for-itself and the immediate mediated is then likened, by Hegel, to death:
Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the fearful, and to hold fast to what is dead demands the greatest power.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, the Subject produces itself through a relation with death; the Life of the Spirit endures death and maintains itself in death.

Thus, on Blanchot’s reading of Hegel, dialectics is a form of murder that kills things \textit{qua} things-in-themselves and translates them into things-for-consciousness. Dialectics is a conceptual Sadism, which forces recognition on things through domination. Furthermore, the murder weapon that dialectical thought employs is \textit{language}, the very \textit{Dasein} of Spirit for Hegel. Thus, the life of language is the death of things as things:

When we speak we gain control over things with satisfying ease. I say, ‘This woman’, and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be.

\textsuperscript{(PF 325/GO 41)}

Blanchot is here alluding to a passage from Mallarmé’s \textit{Crise de vers}, but where the latter writes ‘Je dis: une fleur’,\textsuperscript{14} Blanchot strangely and perhaps (to be extremely generous) only to force the connection between dialectics and Sadism, substitutes ‘woman’ for ‘flower’. However, Blanchot would here seem to be advancing the proposition that language is murder, that is, the act of naming things, of substituting a name for the sensation, gives things to us, but in a form that deprives those things of their being. Human speech is thus the annihilation of things \textit{qua} things, and their articulation through language is truly their death-rattle: Adam is the first serial killer. ‘Therefore’, Blanchot continues:

It is accurate to say that when I speak death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has brusquely arisen between me, as I speak, and the being I address.

\textsuperscript{(PF 43/GO 326)}
There is a paradox here: namely that the condition of possibility for the magical power of the understanding to grasp things as such entails that those things must be dead on arrival in the understanding. In speaking, I separate myself from things and I separate myself from myself: ‘I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge’ (PF 326–27/GO 43). What speaks, then, when I speak? In a sense, and this returns us to our earlier analysis of ‘From Dread to Language’, nothing speaks. Negation is the very work of language and thus when I speak a nothing comes to speak in me. Thus, for Blanchot, the work of literature could be seen as having nothing to express, of having no means of expressing it and being forced by an extreme necessity to keep expressing it. Literature’s right to death — its absolute freedom, its terrifying revolutionary power — is a Hegelian–Sadistic right to the total negation of reality taking place in and as language, ‘a strange right’ (PF 325/GO 42).

(ii)

Second slope — a fate worse than death

Such is the first slope of literature and the first right to death. However, literature does not stop here, for it simultaneously works on a second slope, where it attempts to recall the moments leading up to the murder of the first moment, and where literature becomes ‘a search for this moment which precedes literature’ (PF 329/GO 46) — the trembling, pre-linguistic darkness of things, the universe before the creation of the human being. If, in the experience of the first slope of literature, ultimately in Sade, literature’s right to death results in the death of God and the identification of the writer with God, then the second slope of literature seeks God qua God. To express this differently, literature seeks that moment of existence or Being prior to the advent of the Subject and its work of negation. If consciousness is nothing but this work of negation, then the second slope of literature wants to attain that point of unconsciousness, where it can somehow merge with the reality of things. Literature here
consists, in the words of Francis Ponge, in *Le parti pris des choses*, that is, in seeking to recover the silence and materiality of things as things before the act of naming where they are murdered by language and translated into literature. Using the Mallarméan example, literature no longer wants to say ‘a flower’, but desires this flower as a thing prior to its fatal act of naming. In relation to Blanchot’s use of the Orpheus myth, this second slope is not satisfied with bringing Eurydice into the daylight, negating the night, but rather by wanting to gaze at her in the night, as the heart of the essential night. Literature here becomes concerned with the presence of things before consciousness and the writer exist; it seeks to retrieve the reality and anonymity of existence prior to the dialectico-Sadistic death drive of the writer.

The occasion that prompts Blanchot’s account of the second slope of literature is the publication of Emmanuel Levinas’s *De l’existence à l’existent*, in 1947. The second half of ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ was originally published, under the same title, two months after the first half, in the January 1948 number of *Critique*. As can be clearly seen from two of Blanchot’s infrequent footnotes, he appropriates two ideas from Levinas’s book: first the *il y a* (PF 334/GO 51), which I shall discuss presently, and, second, the related anti-Heideggerian thought that dread is not dread in the face of death – *Seinzum-Tode* – but rather that dread is had in the face of existence itself, of being riveted to existence, *the impossibility of death* (PF 338/GO 55).

What is the *il y a*? In the 1978 Preface to the Second Edition of *De l’existence à l’existent*, Levinas calls the *il y a* ‘le morceau de résistance’ of that work (DEE 10). In his Introduction, Levinas notes that his reflections find their source in Heidegger’s renewal of philosophy as a fundamental ontology centred on the relation that the human being maintains with Being, in Levinas’s (questionable) terms the relation of the existent to existence. However, if Levinas’s initial philosophical position is Heideggerian, something that can be more clearly seen in his 1930 Doctoral thesis and his essays prior to 1933 (this is a very decisive ‘prior’), then it is also, and with an ever increasing insistence,
‘governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy’ (DEE 19/EE 19). As Paul Davies points out, ‘The *il y a* is a contribution to ontology that ruins ontology’.16 The concept (if it is one) of the *il y a* is Levinas’s response to Heidegger, and what he is trying to describe with this concept is the event of Being in general. He asks, ‘What is the event of Being, Being in general, detached from the “beings” which dominate it?’ (DEE 17/EE 18). In other words, what does the generality, impersonality or, most importantly, neutrality of Being mean?

For Levinas, such neutrality – and here we begin to touch upon the essential difference between Levinas and Blanchot – must be surmounted through the advent of the subject in the event of what Levinas calls *hypostasis*, an event that will culminate in the establishment of the ethical relation as the basis of sociality. As the title of *De l’existence à l’existant* indicates, Levinas’s path of thinking follows a counter-Heideggerian trajectory from existence to the existent, or in Heidegger’s terms, from *Sein* to *Dasein*, a trajectory that ultimately comes to question the fundamentality of ontology as first philosophy. Blanchot’s thought – at least on the picture given above, that is to say, prior to the emergence of the ‘Levinasian’ problematic of *autrui* that comes to dominate *L’entretien infini* and which haunts all of Blanchot’s *récits* – remains dominated by the thought of neutrality (*le neutre*) and wants to block the passage beyond neutrality into the hypostasis of the subject. In this connection, we should note the highly ambiguous compliment that Levinas pays Blanchot in *Totality and Infinity*, namely, ‘The Heideggerian Being of the existent whose impersonal neutrality the critical work of Blanchot has so much contributed to bring out’ (Tel 274/TI 298). The ambiguity of this remark would seem to be equalled by Blanchot in *L’entretien infini* when he places question marks around Levinas’s notions of ‘ethics’ and ‘God’ at the same time as trying to maintain the radicality of the absolute relation to the Other. Blanchot (or, more precisely, the interlocutors in his *entretien*) writes (or speak), ‘– Would you fear the shaking that can come to thought by way of morality? – I fear the shaking when it is provoked by some Unshakable’ (EI 83/IC 58). And again, ‘Is the general name
“ethics” in keeping with the impossible relation that is revealed in the revelation of autrui? (EI 78/IC 55).

Are we here on the point of recognizing the limit of any rapprochement between Levinas and Blanchot, a rapprochement that they generously and repeatedly offer one another in a series of texts extending over five decades? Does their work, as Derrida suggests in ‘Violence et métaphysique’, only have an affinity in its critical or negative moment – the critique of the Same, of Unity, the suspicion of the generosity and luminosity of Heidegger’s thought – which ceases when Levinas asserts the ethical positivity of the relation to the Other?17 Or is the relation between Blanchot and Levinas perhaps to be understood as the paradigm of a philosophical friendship, a pattern for any future entretien? I would like to leave these questions open for the moment and return to them in the conclusion to this lecture.

With the il y a, Levinas asks us to undertake a thought-experiment, ‘Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness’ (DEE 93/EE 57). Such a situation would be the complete annihilation of all existents, all Seienden. But what would remain after this annihilation? Nothing? Levinas claims that this very nothingness of all existents would itself be experienced as a kind of presence: an impersonal, neutral and indeterminate feeling that ‘quelque chose se passe’, what he calls in Le temps et l’autre, ‘An atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence’ (TA 26/TO 46). This indeterminate sense of something happening in the absence of all beings can be expressed, Levinas claims, with the neutral or impersonal third person pronoun, that designates an action when the author of that action is unknown or unimportant, for example, when one says ‘il pleut’ or ‘il fait nuit’. This impersonality or neutrality is then designated by Levinas as the il y a and equated with the notion of Being in general (DEE 94/EE 57). In Heideggerian terms, the il y a is Levinas’s word for Being, even if he insists that it must not be assimilated to Heidegger’s es gibt, whose full elaboration it precedes. For Levinas, Heidegger’s interpretation of the es gibt, as with Rimbaud’s use of the il y a in Les illuminations – itself discussed by
Heidegger – emphasizes the generosity and joyfulness of the *il y a* as an event of donation (*Gegebenheit*), of the gift of *Ereignis*, or the opening of a world to the poet, and hence misses the fundamental *Stimmung* of the *il y a* for Levinas: *horror*.  

To illustrate phenomenologically the experience of the *il y a*, Levinas writes, ‘We could say that the night is the very experience of the *il y a*’ (DEE 94/EE 58). As I have already discussed earlier in this lecture, the essential or other night for Blanchot is that experience towards which the desire of the artist tends. In the night, all familiar objects disappear, something is there but nothing is visible; the experience of darkness is the presence of absence, the peculiar density of the void, where the things of the day disappear into an uncanny ‘swarming of points’ (DEE 96/EE 59). This is the night of insomnìa, the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we no longer regard things, but where they seem to regard us:

La veille est anonyme. Il n’y a pas ma vigilance à la nuit, c’est la nuit elle-même qui veille. Ça veille.

(DEE 111/EE 66)

This is particularly difficult to translate because *la veille* denotes wakefulness, watchfulness, a vigil, staying up in the night or watching over the night, the state of being on the brink or verge, as well as meaning ‘eve’ or ‘preceding day’. It is difficult to find one expression in English that combines both wakefulness and watchfulness. However, in the experience of *la veille*, the subject is no longer able to achieve cognitive mastery over objects, to exercise its strange right to death. In a formulation that Blanchot seems to take up, the *il y a* is the experience of consciousness without a subject (DEE 98/EE 60), or my consciousness without me (PF 330/GO 47). In the *il y a*, I am neither myself nor an other, and this is precisely the abject experience of horror, ‘the rustling of the *il y a* is horror . . . horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very “subjectivity” ’ (DEE 98/EE 60). In order to reinforce his analysis, Levinas calls upon the whole genre of horror literature, citing classical examples from

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Shakespeare’s tragedies – *Hamlet, Macbeth* – and Racine’s *Phaedra*, and modern examples from Poe and Maupassant.

Parenthetically, what is fascinating here with regard to Levinas’s relation to Blanchot, is that the moment of the *il y a*, the neutrality that has to be faced and surmounted, is the moment of literature in Levinas’s work. Insofar as Blanchot employs the *il y a* to describe the experience of literature, there would seem to be perfect accord between them. Indeed, the pattern of assimilation and cross-addressing is yet more complex as, in the only footnote to Levinas’s discussion, he cites Blanchot’s *Thomas l’obscur* as an example of the *il y a* (DEE 103/EE 63). Thomas’s world could indeed be described as a world of reversed intentionality, where things – the sea, the night, words and language itself – regard us, where the Subject dissolves into its objects, becoming ‘the radiant passivity of mineral substances, the lucidity of the depths of torpor’ (PF 330/GO 47).

A further provisional way of articulating the difference between Levinas and Blanchot would be to say that, for the former, literature, as the experience of neutrality par excellence, is something to be overcome – and overcome, moreover, through a certain retrieval of philosophy, ultimately of ethics as first philosophy – whereas for the latter there is a quasi-phenomenological fundamentality to the experience of literature or writing, whose overcoming would only constitute a strategy of evasion, motivated by fear. Blanchot asks us at the beginning of his discussion of Levinas in *L’entretien infini* – and this is not intended as a criticism, but as a restatement of the Grund-Stimmung that begins philosophy – ‘What is a philosopher?’, responding with Bataille that ‘It is someone who experiences fear’ (EI 70/IC 49). Thus, the debate between Levinas and Blanchot would seem, at a profound level, to repeat the ancient Platonic quarrel between philosophy and literature. However, the substantive question here is: Can philosophy overcome literature? Can it reduce (does it seek to reduce) the moment of writing, rhetoric and ambiguity that is necessary to its constitution? Is this the lesson of Platonic dialogue? Is Socrates serious in privileging living speech over dead writing, a privilege piously invoked in the trembling language of *Totality and
Infinity? This is another way of asking: Can Levinas surmount the neutrality of the *il y a*? Or is not Levinas’s depiction of the ethical relation dependent at each step upon an experience of writing understood as the enigmatic ambiguity of the Saying and the Said? Is it not rather the case that Levinas’s work requires the moment of the *il y a*—the ghost of writing—as its condition of possibility and perhaps impossibility? (But we are already getting ahead of ourselves.)

What is the nature of the horror undergone in the *il y a*? What does Levinas mean by calling it tragic? As is often the case, Levinas is using Heidegger as a lever to open his own thought; for the latter, *Angst* is a basic mood had in face of nothingness, it is the anxiety for my Being experienced in being-towards-death. Therefore, the most horrible thought, for Heidegger, would be that of conceiving of the possibility of my own death, of that moment when I pass over into nothingness. Against this, Levinas claims that ‘horror is in no way an anxiety about death’, and that what is most horrible is not the possibility of my own death, but, much worse, the *impossibility of my death*. Levinas produces two classical examples to back up this claim: first, the apparition of Banquo’s ghost to Macbeth after his murder, as the haunting return of the spectre or phantom after death:

> The times have been that when the Brains were out, the man would dye, and there an end; but now they rise again . . . and push us from our stools. This is more strange than such a murder is.

(DEE 101/EE 62)

Second, Phaedra’s desperate cry that there is no place in which she can hide to escape her fate, not even in death:

> Le ciel, tout l’univers est plein de mes âieux./Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale!/Mais que dis-je? Mon père y tient l’urne fatale.

(DEE 102/EE 62)

A third example might be added to this list, in Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera’s poem, translated by Samuel Beckett as ‘To Be’:

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Life is pain. And life persists, obscure, but life for all that, even in the tomb . . . Suicide is unavailing. The form is changed, the indestructible being endures . . . There is no death. In vain you clamour for death, souls destitute of hope.  

Thus, horror is not the consequence of anxiety about death, rather it flows from the impossibility of death in an existence that has no exits and no escape, ‘Demain, hêlas!, il faudra vivre encore’ (DEE 102/EE 63). The world of horror is that of existence beyond death, of awakening underground in a coffin with nobody to hear your sobbing or your fingers scratching on the wood. Horror is possession by that which will not die and which cannot be killed – something beautifully exploited by Maupassant in ‘The Horla’ and ‘The Hand’. Such is the spectral logic of ghosts and phantoms, the world of the undead, where, as Levinas points out in a stunning passage from ‘Reality and its Shadow’, ‘It is as though death were never dead enough’. Even the final act of brutal penetration, where the stake pierces the Vampyre’s heart, fails to assuage us and we await the next instalment in the tale.

For Levinas, as for Edgar Allan Poe – I am thinking in particular of ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ – there is a fate worse than death. Therefore dread, or anxiety, is not fear of nothingness; rather dread is dread of existence itself, the facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit. What is truly horrible is not death but the irremissibility of existence, immortality within life, as Jonathan Swift perfectly understood in his description of the Struldbruggs or ImmORTals in *Gulliver’s Travels*. In this regard, the possibility of death – or death as possibility – would be a civilizing power or a metaphysical comfort, the possibility of achieving dignity, of rising up in the face of existence, of dying content in one’s bath like a good Roman after a bad day. But what if tomorrow does not bring death, but only the infinity of today, the irremissibility of an existence one is unable to leave? What if the rope with which the suicide leaps into the void only binds him tighter to the existence he is unable to leave? What if there is something stronger than death, namely dying itself?
We are now in a position to understand what Blanchot means when he writes that ‘From a certain point of view, literature is divided (partagée) between two slopes’ (PF 332/GO 48). On the one hand, literature is that Sadistic-dialectical labour of negation that defines the Subject itself, whereby things are killed in order to enter the daylight of language and cognition. The first slope is that of meaningful prose, which attempts to express things in a transparent language that designates them according to a human order of meaning (PF 334–35/GO 51). (Incidentally, might this not go some way to explaining what is most shocking about Sade’s writing, namely its prosaic reasonableness?) On the other hand, literature is that concern for things prior to their negation by language, an attempt to evoke the reality of things – the opacity of the night, the dim radiance of materiality. For Blanchot, doubtless thinking of Rilke and Ponge (I would think of Wallace Stevens and Seamus Heaney), this is the task of poetry.

Blanchot’s very Hegelian purpose in delineating these two slopes of literature is that they both represent irresistible temptations for the writer and yet each of them is a tragic endeavour. The first, Sadeian temptation of literature as the revolutionary imperative of absolute negation results in either the cruelty and vacuity of terrorism – Blanchot produces the stunning, if apocryphal, image of Robespierre and his ministers reading a few passages from Sade’s Justine when they had grown weary of murders and condemnations and needed a break (EI 338/IC 227) – or, more likely, masturbatory writing in a prison cell or suburban bedroom. The second temptation of literature as the desire to reveal that which exists prior to all revelation – which revelation destroys – is destined to fail because each poem is a revelation and hence conceals that which it meant to reveal. The writer, even the most delicate of poets, always has the Midas touch, which simultaneously renders things precious and kills them. This is why literature is divided or shared between these two slopes; it is the space of a certain partage, an experience of both sharing and division.

(It would be extremely interesting to connect this understanding...
of literature as *partage* with Jean-Luc Nancy’s discussion of community as *partage*, expressed in the polysemic, near-dialectical formula ‘to(ie)s(t) (tout autre que) moi’, which expresses both the sharing or commonality of community, in the relation between you and me (*toi et moi*), where you are me (*toi est moi*), but where this sharing is itself sustained by the recognition of division, where you are wholly other than me (*toi est tout autre que moi*). Perhaps this link between Blanchot and Nancy goes some way to explaining the latter’s use of the notion of *communisme littéraire*, a notion that can be traced to Bataille’s attempts to think an anti-fascist and anti-aestheticist conception of community.\(^\text{25}\)

The *partage* of literature is its treachery. Literature cannot simply be divided up and one’s location is always uncertain. If you write, believing yourself to know where you are and what slope you are going to follow, then literature will insidiously cause you to pass from one slope to the other:

> if you convince yourself that you are indeed there where you wanted to be, you are exposed to the greatest confusion because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into what you were not before.

*(PF 335/GO 52)*

The situation of the writer is thus always caught between the two slopes. For example, one could be a writer who believed, like Flaubert, in the absolute transparency of prose, but whose entire work, Blanchot claims, evokes the horror of existence deprived of a world (PF 335/GO 52). Alternatively, one could desire, like Ponge or Heaney, to write poetry faithful to the intangible grain of things and only produce gobbets of utter transparency that reduce the elusive to the banal.

For Blanchot, the situation of literature, the experience of this *partage* between its two slopes, is *ambiguity*, which is the secret to ‘Literature and the Right to Death’. Which is why, when Blanchot writes of literature’s treachery, he also adds that this very ambiguity
is ‘sa vérité retorse’ — its devious, wily, crafty, cunning, twisted truth. To put this in the form of a hypothesis, we can say that for Blanchot ambiguity is the truth of literature, and perhaps also the truth of truth, which is to say that truth is something duplicitous and bivalent – like physis, it loves to hide.

With this thought of literature as ambiguity, one can begin to see, I would claim, the deeper function that the il y a plays in Blanchot’s work, because, as Levinas points out, the il y a is the very experience of ambiguity:

There is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In the equivocation, the threat of the pure and simple presence of the il y a takes form.

(DEB 96/EE 59)

Thus, the il y a is not, as it might seem at first glance, simply placed on the side of the second slope of literature. If the first slope of literature wants to reduce all reality to consciousness – pure daylight – through a labour of negation, then the second slope of literature wants to achieve a total unconsciousness – pure night – and fuse with the reality and materiality of things. The fact that literature can achieve neither total consciousness nor total unconsciousness, leads, Blanchot claims, to a fundamental discovery:

By negating the day, literature reconstructs the day as fatality; by affirming the night, it finds the night as the impossibility of the night. This is its discovery.

(PF 331/GO 48)

One can approach this discovery through Levinas’s account of insomnia. The second slope of literature desires the night, the first or pure night of Novalis’s hymns, but discovers only the impossibility of the night. Instead of some rapturous merging or ecstatic fusion with the night of unconsciousness, one is unable to sleep, and hence the essential night is discovered as the fatality or necessity of that which cannot be evaded, a consciousness without subjectivity, but a consciousness, nonetheless, that draws out diurnal activity to the
point where it turns over into the utter neutrality of fatigue and sleepless exhaustion. On the other hand, the first slope of literature desires a total grasp of the day, as a world of absolute freedom, but discovers the day not as freedom but as fatality. This is the insomniac’s experience of the day: the day stupefied by lack of sleep, the day as something to which one is riveted, what Blanchot calls the madness of the day. Literature is thus the discovery of the world of the insomniac, as the double impossibility and double necessity of the day and the night. This is why, in L’écriture du désastre, Blanchot defines the writer as ‘l’insomniaque du jour’ (ED 185). The experience of the writer, this insomniac of the day, is divided/shared between two slopes of literature that are simultaneously necessary and impossible. Ambiguity – the truth of literature – consists in the experience of being suspended between day and night, of watching with eyes open in the night, of eyes stupefied by the spectre of insomnia in the day. The fundamental experience towards which literature tends is the ambiguity of the il y a.

Thus my claim here is that the il y a is a kind of primal or primitive scene in Blanchot’s work, something to which it keeps returning as its secret, its unstable point of origin, as the origin of the artwork. This claim can be supported anecdotally with reference to Ethique et infini, where Levinas says that although Blanchot prefers to speak of ‘the neuter’ or ‘the outside’, the il y a is ‘probablement là le vrai sujet de ses romans et de ses récits’ (EeI 40). However, it can be more interestingly illuminated by looking at a much-discussed and highly significant passage – a kind of parable – from L’écriture du désastre, entitled ‘Une scène primitive?’ (ED 117).

(A primitive scene?) You who live later, close to a heart that no longer beats, suppose, suppose this: the child — is he perhaps seven or eight — standing, drawing the curtain and looking through the window. What he sees, the garden, the winter trees, the wall of a house: whilst he is looking, in the way a child does, at his playing space, he gets bored and slowly looks up towards the ordinary sky, with clouds, the grey light, the drab and distance-less day.
What happens next, the sky, the same sky, suddenly open, absolutely black, revealing (as through a broken window) such an absence that everything has been lost since always and for ever, to the point where the vertiginous knowledge is affirmed and dissipated that nothing is what there is and above all nothing beyond. The unexpectedness of this scene (its interminable trait) is the feeling of happiness that immediately overwhelms the child, the ravaging joy to which he can only testify through tears, an endless streaming of tears. They think that the child is sad, they try to console him. He says nothing. He will henceforth live in the secret. He will weep no more.

(ED 117)

So, in this passage, a seven- or eight-year-old child – is it a boy or a girl? Cixous argues that it is the former and places the masculinity of the child and its consequent relation to the law of the phallus at the centre of her reading – looking out of the window on its familiar playing space and letting its eyes wander upwards, is suddenly presented with the openness and absolute blackness of the sky, with the vertiginous knowledge of utter absence, namely that ‘rien est ce qu’il y a, et d’abord rien au-delà’. In his oblique commentary on ‘Une scène primitive’, which appears some sixty pages later in L’écriture du désastre, and which reads as if the text had been written by somebody else, Blanchot writes:

For my part, I hear the irrevocability of the il y a that being and nothingness roll like a great wave, unfurling it and folding it back under, inscribing and effacing it, to the rhythm of the anonymous rustling.

(ED 178)

This link between the il y a and the primal scene of childhood is hinted at in the 1978 Preface to De l’existence à l’existant, where Levinas remarks that the il y a ‘goes back to one of those strange obsessions that one keeps from childhood and which reappear in insomnia when the silence resounds and the voids remain full’ (DEE 11). In the insomniac horror that defines the experience of
writing for Blanchot, the claim is that we have a vague memory of this primal scene of childhood, a dim reminiscence of being alone at night in one’s cot, lying frightened in the murmuring darkness, undergoing the agony of separation, what Levinas calls ‘le remue-ménage de l’être’ (‘the bustle or hubbub of being’). The primal scene of the il y a is the experience of disaster, of the night without stars, the night that is not the starry heaven that frames the Moral Law, but the absence, blackness and pure energy of the night that is beyond law. In Blanchot’s parable, what is unexpected is the child’s feeling of happiness, the ravaging joy that follows the disclosure or the il y a, this vertiginous knowledge of finitude. We might connect this sentiment de bonheur with another more recently disclosed primitive scene, namely that described in Blanchot’s tantalizingly brief 1994 text L’instant de ma mort, where the protagonist in this seemingly autobiographical, confessional narrative describes ‘un sentiment de légèreté extra-ordinaire, une sorte de béatitude’ felt at the point of being executed by soldiers believed to be German (who turn out to be Russian). The protagonist then describes this feeling as ‘the happiness of being neither immortal nor eternal’, the vertiginous knowledge of finitude which opens onto ‘the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity’. Returning to the passage from L’écriture du désastre, Blanchot concludes that the child testifies to the knowledge of finitude in an endless stream of tears, at which point they (on – presumably his parents) try to console him, believing him to be sad. The child says nothing, ‘he will henceforth live in the secret. He will weep no more.’

My claim has been that the il y a – this vertiginous knowledge of finitude – is the secret of Blanchot’s work. To write is to learn to live in this secret. Literature is the life of the secret, a secret which must be and cannot be told. The secret, in order to remain a secret, cannot be revealed; that is, literature cannot be reduced to the public realm, to the daylight of publicity and politicization, which is not at all to say that literature is reducible to the private realm. Rather, literature is essentially heterogeneous to the public realm, essentially secretive, which is paradoxically to claim that it is the depoliticizing condition
for politicization, the precondition for a space of the political based on the vertiginous knowledge of finitude, a space that remains open and, dare one add, democratic.30

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The (im)possibility of death – or, how would Blanchot read Blanchot if he were not Blanchot?

If ambiguity is to become the truth of literature, then we have to begin with death. Blanchot writes:

If we want to bring back literature to the movement which allows all its ambiguities to be grasped, that movement is here: literature, like ordinary speech, begins with the end, which is the only thing that allows us to understand. In order to speak, we must see death, we must see it behind us.

(PF 338/GO 55)

We have already seen how each of the two slopes of literature entails a certain right to death. On the first slope, the life of the Subject is produced through a work of negation which is equated with death; it is ‘The life that endures death and maintains itself in death’. Death is therefore the most fundamental possibility of the Subject, which enables consciousness to assume its freedom. This is why Blanchot writes that ‘death is the greatest hope of human beings, their only hope of being human’ (PF 338/GO 55). Death is a civilizing power and the condition of possibility for freedom, projection and authentic existence. With the second slope of literature, and the notion of the il y a, we introduced the idea of a fate worse than death, namely the interminability of existence where I lose the ability to die and where the dead seem to rise up from their graves. Dread, on this second slope, cannot be characterized as Being-towards-death, but is rather dread in the face of the irremissibility of Being itself. In the il y a, death is impossible, which is the most horrible of thoughts. Ambiguity, therefore, is ultimately an ambiguity about death, where the writer is suspended between two rights to
death, *death as possibility and death as impossibility*. The writer, like the narrator in Maupassant’s ‘The Horla’, senses that ‘he is the prey of an impersonal power that does not let him either live or die’ (PF 341/GO 58), a situation that Blanchot baptizes with the phrase ‘the double death’ (EL 126/SL 103).

I would now like to analyse this notion of the double death as it appears in *L’espace littéraire* and tease out certain of its important consequences. As is so often the case in Blanchot, the writer who best exemplifies the ambiguous situation of the writer is Kafka (who is surely the implied subject of much of ‘Literature and the Right to Death’). Blanchot cites a passage from Kafka’s *Diaries*, where he reports a conversation with Max Brod: Kafka writes that on his deathbed he will be very content, and, moreover, that all the good passages in his writing, where someone is undergoing an agonizing or unjust death (Kafka seems to be thinking of ‘In the Penal Colony’ and *The Trial*), might well be very moving for the reader, ‘But’, he continues, ‘for me, since I think I can be content on my deathbed, such descriptions are secretly a game. I even enjoy dying in the character who is dying’ (EL 106/SL 90). This passage, precisely because of its ‘irritating insincerity’ (EL 106/SL 91), is revealing for Blanchot. It reveals an economy of death at work in the writer: on the one hand, Kafka’s heroes inhabit a space – *une espace littéraire* – where death is not possible and is not my project. One thinks here of the dog-like death of Josef K; of the vast writing machine that executes the inhabitants of the penal colony by inscribing their punishment into their flesh; of Gregor Samsa, who does not die, but who is reborn as a giant insect; of K’s vain struggle for death, that great unattainable castle; of ‘Die Sorge des Hausvaters’, where the spectral figure of Odradek is unable to die. Yet, on the other hand, although Kafka’s characters inhabit what Blanchot calls ‘(le) temps indéfini du “mourir”’ (EL 108/GO 92), Kafka himself claims that his art is a means to attain mastery over death, to die content, to have death as a possibility. With a pathos that comes close to the Hegelian position discussed above – indeed, in these pages Blanchot once again cites Hegel’s phrase on the life that endures death and maintains itself in death (EL 122/SL 101)
– Kafka judges that the goal of his art is a certain mastery of death, and that, in writing, he is death’s equal, ‘I do not separate myself from men in order to live in peace, but in order to be able to die in peace’ (EL 110/SL 93). The wages of art are a peaceful death. The writer here enters a circular relation with death, what we might think of as a thanatological circle, that is premised upon the belief that death is a possibility. The writer, in this case Kafka, writes in order to be able to die, and the power to write comes from an anticipated relation with death. Writing is what permits one to master death – to die content – and yet death is what provokes one to write: ‘Write to be able to die – Die to be able to write’ (EL 111/SL 94).

For all systems of thought that take the question of finitude seriously, that is to say, for all non-religious systems of thought, which do not have an escape route from death (and ressentiment against life) through the postulates of God and immortality (let me just state polemically that I agree with Sade when he writes that ‘The idea of God is the one fault that I cannot forgive man’ – EI 340/IC 229), the fundamental question is that of finding a meaning to human finitude. If death is not just going to have the contingent character of a brute fact, then one’s mortality is something that one has to project freely as the product of a resolute decision. As Blanchot reminds us:

Three systems of thought – Hegel’s, Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s – which attempt to account for this decision and which therefore seem, however much they may oppose each other, to shed the greatest light on the destiny of modern man, are all attempts at making death possible.

(EL 115/SL 96)

The acceptance of the ubiquity of the finite is not simply expressed in the fact that the human being is mortal; rather the human being must become mortal. Death, therefore, is something to be achieved; it is, for Heidegger, a possibility of Dasein, the most fundamental possibility (of impossibility) which allows us to get the totality of our existence in our grasp. However, the question here must be: Is death possible? Can I die? Can I say, ‘I can’, with respect to death?
Blanchot approaches this question by considering the problem of suicide. Surely the test-case as to whether death is a possibility and is therefore something of which I am able, is suicide. If I can say ‘I can’ with respect to death, then I can kill myself. The act of suicide would be the perfection or highest realization of death as a possibility, a possibility which, Blanchot writes, is like a supply of oxygen close at hand without which we would smother. Can I kill myself? Have I the power to die? Can I go to my death resolutely, maintaining death, in Heideggerian terms, as the possibility of impossibility? Or is death more truly the experience of not being able to die, of not being able to be able, in Levinasian terms the impossibility of possibility?

Cruelly and crudely, there is an almost logical contradiction at the heart of suicide, namely that if death is my ownmost possibility, then it is precisely the moment when the ‘I’ and its possibilities disappear. In suicide, the ‘I’ wants to give itself the power to control the disappearance of its power. If the resolute decision of the suicide is to say, ‘I withdraw from the world, I will act no longer’, then he or she wants to make death an act, a final and absolute assertion of the power of the ‘I’. Can death be an object of the will? Blanchot writes:

The weakness of suicide lies in the fact that whoever commits it is still too strong. He is demonstrating a strength suitable only for a citizen of the world. Whoever kills himself could, then, go on living: whoever kills himself is linked to hope, the hope of finishing it all.

(EL 125/SL 103)

The desire of the suicide is too strong and too hopeful because it conceives of death as the action of an ‘I’ in the realm where the ‘I’ and its action no longer pertain. The contradiction of the suicide is analogous to that of the insomniac, who cannot will him or herself to sleep because sleep is not an exercise of the will – sleep will not come to the person who wills it.

Paradoxically, the suicide, in desiring to rid him or herself of the world, acts with an affirmativeness that would equal the most resolute, heroic and Creon-like of worldly citizens. Blanchot continues:
He who kills himself is the great affirmer of the present. I want to kill myself in an ‘absolute’ instant, the only one which will not pass and will not be surpassed. Death, if it arrived at the time we choose, would be an apotheosis of the instant; the instant in it would be that very flash of brilliance which mystics speak of, and surely because of this, suicide retains the power of an exceptional affirmation.

(EL 126/SL 103)

Suicide is the fantasy of total affirmation, an ecstatic assertion of the absolute freedom of the Subject in its union with nature or the divine, a mystical sense of death as the scintilla dei, the spark of God. Obviously, one finds this line of thought in Dostoevsky’s depiction of Kirilov in The Devils, where the latter says, ‘He who dares to kill himself is a god. Now everyone can make it so that there shall be no God and there shall be nothing. But no one has done so yet.’ In his Diary, Dostoevsky calls Kirilov’s position ‘logical suicide’ that necessarily follows the loss of belief in the ‘loftiest’ ‘sublime’ idea: the immortality of the soul. However, one can find analogies in Hölderlin’s fascination with the death of Empedocles or more widely in the Jena romantics, where Friedrich Schlegel writes of ‘the enthusiasm of annihilation’, where ‘the meaning of divine creation is revealed for the first time. Only in the midst of death does the lightning bolt of eternal life explode’ (ID 106). The moment of annihilation is the becoming-enthused, possession by and identification with the god – rapture, fervour, intensity. The moment of the controlled extinction of the Subject is also paradoxically the moment when the Subject swells to fill the entire cosmos, becoming, like Walt Whitman, a cosmos, and the uncreated creator of the cosmos. The death of the self confirms its deathlessness. As Baudelaire defines pantheism in his ‘Fusées’, ‘Panthéisme. Moi, c’est tous; tous c’est moi.’ Such is also the death ecstasy of eternal return in Nietzsche, expressed in a stunning fragment from the Nachlass:

Five, six seconds and no more: then you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony. Man, in his mortal frame cannot
bear it; he must either physically transform himself or die . . . In these five seconds I would live the whole of human existence, I would give my whole life for it, the price would not be too high. In order to endure this any longer one would have to transform oneself physically. I believe man would cease to beget. Why have children when the goal is reached? 

The romantic and post-romantic affirmation of annihilation is an attempt at the appropriation of time, to gather time into the living present of eternity at the moment of death. By contrast, the person who actually lives in despair, that quiet resignation that makes up so much of the untheorized content of everyday life, dwells in the interminable temporality of dying, in le temps mort, where time is experienced as passing, as slipping away – the wrinkling of the skin, the murmuring of senescence, crispation. Such a person has no time and, in a wonderful image, ‘no present upon which to brace himself in order to die’ (EL 126/SL 103).

As we will see in detail in Lecture 3, this temporality of dying is evoked in Beckett’s Malone Dies. The ‘I’ that speaks in Beckett’s books has no time and yet has all the time in the world, ‘I could die today, if I wished, merely by making a little effort. But it is as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things’ (T 166). The point here can be made with reference to the theme of laughter. On the one hand, there is the laughter of eternal return, laughter as eternal return, the golden Nietzschean laughter of affirmation, which laughs in the face of death; a laughter that I always suspect of emanating from the mountain tops, a neurotic laughter: solitary, hysterical, verging on sobbing. On the other hand, there is Beckett’s laughter, which is more sardonic and sarcastic, and which arises out of a palpable sense of impotence, of impossibility. But, for me, it is Beckett’s laughter that is more joyful (not to mention being a lot funnier), ‘If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought’ (T 201).

To want to commit suicide is to want to die now, in the living/dying present of the Jetzpunkt. As such, within suicide, there is an
attempt to abolish both the mystery of the future and the mystery of death. Suicide – or euthanasia for that matter – wishes to eliminate death as the prospect of a contingent future that I will not be able to control, to avoid the utter misery of dying alone or in pain. ‘But’, as Blanchot points out, ‘this tactic is vain’ (EL 127/SL 104). The ultimate (but perhaps necessary) bad faith of suicide is the belief that death can be achieved – and eliminated, that in Chaucer’s words ‘deeth shal be deed’, or Donne’s ‘death, thou shalt die’ – through a controlled leap into the void. However, once this heroic leap is taken, all the suicide feels is the tightening of the rope that binds him more closely than ever to the existence he would like to leave, the horror of the irremissibility of Being which we discussed above. Death is not an object of the will, the noema of a noesis, and one cannot, truly speaking, want to die. To die means losing the will to die and losing the will itself as the motor that drives the deception of suicide. This means no longer conceiving of death as possibility and attempting to accept the harder lesson of the impossibility of death, which will open the time of an infinite future and the space of the other night. Through its very weakness, the thought of le mourir proves itself stronger than la mort.

But is it possible to face up to the impossibility of death, this most horrible of thoughts?

To respond to this question, we must introduce Blanchot’s notion of ‘the double death’. Blanchot writes:

There is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the power to take mortal risks – and there is its double, which is ungraspable, it is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to me by any relation of any sort, that never comes and toward which I do not direct myself.

(EL 126/SL 104)

The experience of death is double, and the most extreme exposure to the first slope of death as possibility in suicide, opens onto the second slope of the impossibility of death. In believing that death is something that can be grasped – in placing the noose around my neck
or the gun in my mouth – I expose myself to the radical ungraspability of death; in believing myself able to die, I lose my ability to be able.

And yet, is one to conclude from this that the second conception of death as impossibility is the truth of death for the writer? If so, what has happened to the irreducibility of ambiguity as the truth of literature that was insisted upon above? To illuminate these problems, Blanchot proposes an analogy between the suicide and the artist that will return us once more to the problem of the writer’s bad faith or self-deception. The suicide’s self-deception is to mistake the second conception of death for the first and hence to believe that death is a possibility. This bad faith is analogous to that of the writer, who always mistakes the book that is completed and published for the work that is written. The writer undergoes an unacknowledged form of désœuvrement, where ‘The writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is the book’ (EL 12/SL 23). The writer is a priori ignorant of the nature of his work, as is revealed by Kafka in his Diaries, and will have recourse to the journal or diary form as a way of arresting the worklessness of literature in literature. In the journal, the writer desires to remember himself as the person he is when he is not writing, ‘when he is alive and real, and not dying and without truth’ (EL 20/SL 29). Therefore, both the artist and the suicide are deceived by forms of possibility, both want to have a power in the realms where power slips away and becomes impossible: in writing and dying.

Thus, there would seem to be a two-fold claim being made by Blanchot’s work: first, writing has its unattainable source in an experience of worklessness and a movement of infinite dying; this has variously been described as the desire of Orpheus’ gaze, the energy of pure exteriority prior to law, the experience of the other night and the impossibility of death. And yet, second, the extremity of this experience cannot be faced, it would be intolerable to the human organism, and the writer is therefore necessarily blind to the guiding insights of his or her work, requiring, in Nietzschean terms to be developed below, the metaphysical comfort of the Apollonian to save them from the tragic truth of the Dionysian. The writer necessarily experiences bad faith with regard to what takes place in writing, and
is therefore maintained in an ambiguous relation, divided between two slopes, and drawn by two opposing temptations. Perhaps the task of the reader, however, is to see this ambiguity as ambiguity and to point towards its source.

In his justly celebrated essay on Blanchot, and in what would appear to be intended as a criticism, Paul de Man argues that Blanchot’s critical writings are ultimately directed towards an impossible act of self-reading, where his work seeks an ontological impersonality that is self-defeating, because it cannot eliminate the self, because the self cannot be defeated. Hence, Blanchot is caught in an unavoidable circularity, which is more clearly signalled in the original title of de Man’s essay, ‘La circularité de l’interprétation dans l’œuvre critique de Maurice Blanchot’. However, on my reading of Blanchot, which has sought to emphasize the irreducibility of ambiguity, bad faith and the impossibility of self-reading in the writer’s experience, Blanchot would seem to have predicted these criticisms and, indeed, made them the cornerstone of his approach to literature. Which raises the fascinating speculative question: how would Blanchot read Blanchot if he were not Blanchot?

(g)

Holding Levinas’s hand to Blanchot’s fire

(i)

A dying future

Death is not the noema of a noesis. It is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act. Death, or, rather, dying, is by definition ungraspable; it is that which exceeds intentionality and the noetico-noematic correlative structures of phenomenology. There can thus be no phenomenology of dying, because it is a state of affairs about which one could neither have an adequate intention nor find intuitive fulfilment. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. In this sense, dying is meaningless and, consequently, the work of mourning is infinite.
Since direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact, the only relation that the living can maintain with death is through a representation, an image, a picture of death, whether visual or verbal. And yet, we immediately confront a paradox: namely, that the representation of death is not the representation of a presence, an object of perception or intuition – we cannot draw a likeness of death, a portrait, a still life, or whatever. Thus, representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather they are representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is perhaps best conveyed by the figure of prosopopeia, that is, the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting. Etymologically, prosopopeia means to make a face (prosopon + poien); in this sense we might think of a death mask or memento mori, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it. In a manner analogous to what Nietzsche writes about the function of Schein in The Birth of Tragedy, such a prosopopeic image allows us both to glimpse the interminability of dying in the Apollonian mask of the tragic hero, and redeems us from the nauseating contact with the truth of tragedy, the abyss of the Dionysian, the wisdom of Silenus: ‘What is best of all is . . . not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is – to die soon.’ I believe that many of the haunting images – or death masks – in Blanchot’s récits (I am thinking of the various death scenes in Thomas l’obscur, L’arrêt de mort and Le dernier homme, but also of the figures of Eurydice or the Sirens) have a prosopopeic function, they are a face for that which has no face, and they show the necessary inadequacy of our relation to death. To anticipate myself a little, my question to Levinas will be: must the face of the other always be a death mask?

However, as I show above with reference to Blanchot’s reading of Kafka’s Diaries, the writer’s (and philosopher’s) relation with death is necessarily self-deceptive; it is a relation with what is believed to be a possibility, containing the possibility of meaningful fulfilment, but which is revealed to be an impossibility. The infinite time of dying evades the writer’s grasp and he or she mistakes le mourir for la mort,
dying for death. Death is disclosed upon the horizon of possibility and thus remains within the bounds of phenomenology, or what Levinas would call ‘the economy of the Same’. To conceive of death as possibility is to conceive of it as my possibility; that is, the relation with death is always a relation with my death. As Heidegger famously points out in *Sein und Zeit*, my relation to the death of others cannot substitute for my relation with my own death, death is in each case mine. In this sense, death is a self-relation or even self-reflection that permits the totality of *Dasein* to be grasped. Death is like a mirror in which I allegedly achieve narcissistic self-communion; it is the event in relation to which I am constituted as a Subject. Being-towards-death permits the achievement of authentic selfhood, which, I have elsewhere argued, repeats the traditional structure of autarchy or autonomy, allowing the self to assume its fate and the community to assume its destiny. One might say that the community briefly but decisively envisaged in paragraph 74 of *Being and Time* is a community of death, where commonality is found in a sharing of finitude, where individual fates are taken up into a common destiny, where death is the Work of the community.

The radicality of the thought of dying in Blanchot is that death becomes impossible and ungraspable. It is meta-phenomenological. In Levinas’s terms, dying belongs to the order of the enigma rather than the phenomenon (which, of course, passes over the complex question as to whether there can be a phenomenology of the enigmatic or the inapparent). Dying transgresses the boundary of the self’s jurisdiction. This is why suicide is impossible for Blanchot: I cannot want to die, death is not an object of the will. Thus, the thought of the impossibility of death introduces the possibility of an encounter with some aspect of experience or some state of affairs that is not reducible to the self and which does not relate or return to self; that is to say, something other. The ungraspable facticity of dying establishes an opening onto a meta-phenomenological alterity, irreducible to the power of the Subject, the will or *Dasein* (as I see it, this is the central argument of *Time and the Other*). Dying is the impossibility of possibility and thus undermines the residual heroism, virility and potency
of Being-towards-death. In the infinite time of dying, all possibility becomes impossible, and I am left passive and impotent. Dying is the sensible passivity of senescence, the wrinkling of the skin – crispation: the helplessly ageing face looking back at you in the mirror. In this way, perhaps (and this is a significant ‘perhaps’) the guiding intention of Levinas’s work is achieved; namely that if death is not a self-relation, if it does not result in self-communion and the achievement of a meaning to finitude, then this means that a certain plurality has insinuated itself at the heart of the self. The facticity of dying structures the self as Being-for-the-other, as substitution, which also means that death is not revealed in a relation to my death but rather in the alterity of death or the death of the other. As Levinas writes in a late text, it is ‘As if the invisible death which the face of the other faces were my affair, as if this death regarded me’.43

This relation between dying and plurality allows us to raise the question of what vision of community could be derived from this anti-Heideggerian account of dying, from this fundamental axiom of heteronomy. If, as Levinas suggests, the social ideal has been conceived from Plato to Heidegger in terms of fusion, a collectivity that says ‘we’ and feels the solidarity of the other at its side, what Nancy calls ‘immanentism’, then a Levinasian vision of community would be ‘a collectivity that is not a communion’ (TA 89/TO 94), une communauté désœuvrée, a community unworked through the irreducibility of plurality that opens in the relation to death. This is a point made by Alphonso Lingis:

Community forms when one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one. One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one’s forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice.44

To conceive of death as possibility is to project onto a future as the fundamental dimension of freedom and, with Heidegger, to establish the future as the basic phenomenon of time. Yet, such a future is always my future and my possibility, a future ultimately grasped from within the solitary fate of the Subject or the shared destiny of the
community. I would claim that such a future is never future enough for the time of dying, which is a temporality of infinite delay, patience, senescence or difference. Dying thus opens a relation with the future which is always ungraspable, impossible and enigmatic; that is to say, it opens the possibility of a future without me, an infinite future, a future which is not my future.45

What is a future that is not my future? It is another future or the future of an other, that is, the future that is always ahead of me and my projective freedom, that is always to come and from where the basic phenomenon of time arises, what Levinas calls dia-chrony. But what or who is the other? Does the word ‘other’ translate the impersonal autre or the personal autrui? For Blanchot, writing establishes a relation with alterity that would appear to be strictly impersonal: a relation with the exteriority of le neutre. It would seem that the latter must be rigorously distinguished from the personal alterity sought by Levinas, the alterity of autrui, which is ultimately the alterity of the child, that is, of the son, and the alterity of illeity, of a (personal) God.46 It would seem that although the experience of alterity in Blanchot and Levinas opens with the impossibility of death, that is, with their critique of Heidegger’s Being-towards-death, one might conclude that there is only a formal or structural similarity between the alterity of the relation of the neuter and the alterity of autrui and that it is here that one can draw the line between Levinas and Blanchot. However, in opposition to this, I would like to muddy the distinction between Blanchot and Levinas by tracking an alternative destiny for the il y a in Levinas’s work and indicating the direction that could be taken by a Blanchot-inspired rereading of Levinas.

(ii)
Atheist transcendence

I have shown above that the experience of literature has its source in ‘the primal scene’ of what Blanchot variously calls ‘the other night’, ‘the energy of exteriority prior to law’ or ‘the impossibility of death’, and that this experience can be understood with reference to
Levinas’s notion of the *il y a*. However, although Levinas’s thinking begins with the *il y a*, which is his deformation of the Heideggerian understanding of Being (an appropriation and ruination of the *Seinsfrage*), his entire subsequent work would seem, on a first reading, to be premised upon the necessity to surmount the *il y a* in order to move on to the hypostasis of the Subject and ultimately the ethical relation to the other, a relation whose alterity is underwritten by the trace of illeity. In order to establish that ethics is first philosophy (i.e. that philosophy is *first*), Levinas must overcome the neutrality of the *il y a*, the ambiguous instance of literature.

Now, to read Levinas in this way would be to adopt ‘a linear narrative’, that would begin with one (‘bad’) experience of neutrality in the *il y a* and end up with another (‘good’) experience of neutrality in illeity, after having passed through the mediating moments of the Subject and *Autrui* (roughly, Sections II and III of *Totality and Infinity*). To read Levinas in this way would be to follow a line from the *il y a* to the Subject, to *Autrui*, to illeity. However, the question that must be asked is: can or, indeed, *should* one read Levinas in a linear fashion, as if the claim to ethics as first philosophy were a linear ascent to a new metaphysical summit, as if *Totality and Infinity* were an anti-Hegelian rewriting of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (which might yet be true at the level of Levinas’s intentions)? Is the neutrality of the *il y a* ever decisively surmounted in Levinas’s work? And if this is so, why does the *il y a* keep on returning like the proverbial repressed, relentlessly disturbing the linearity of the exposition? As I show above, this is also to ask: Is literature ever overcome in the establishment of first philosophy? Is the moment of writing, the instance of the literary, of rhetoric and ambiguity, in any way reducible or controllable in Levinas’s work? Or might one track an alternative destiny of the *il y a*, where it is not decisively surmounted but where it returns to interrupt that work at certain critical moments? Might this not plot a different itinerary for reading Levinas, where the name of Blanchot would function as a clue or key for the entire problematic of literature, writing, neutrality and ambiguity in the articulation of ethics as first philosophy? Let me give a couple of
instances of this tracking of the *il y a* before provisionally sketching what I see as the hugely important consequences of such a reading.\textsuperscript{48}

The problem with the *il y a* is that it stubbornly refuses to disappear and that Levinas keeps on reintroducing it at crucial moments in the analysis. It functions like a standing reserve of non-sense from which Levinas will repeatedly draw the possibility of ethical significance, like an incessant buzzing in the ears that returns once the day falls silent and one tries to sleep. To pick a few examples, almost at random: (i) in the ‘Phenomenology of Eros’, the night of the *il y a* appears alongside the night of the erotic, where ‘the face fades and the relation to the other becomes a neutral, ambiguous, animal play’ (Tel 241/TI 263). In *eros*, we move beyond the face and risk entering the twilight zone of the *il y a*, where the relation to the other becomes profane and language becomes lascivious and wanton, like the speeches of the witches in *Macbeth*. But, as is well known, the moment of eros, of sexual difference, cannot be reduced or bypassed in Levinas’s work, where it functions as what Levinas calls in *Time and the Other* an ‘alterity content’ (TA 14/TO 36) that ensures the possibility of fecundity, plurality within Being and consequently the break with Parmenides. (ii) More curious is the way in which Levinas will emphasize the possible ambivalence between the impersonal alterity of the *il y a* and the personal alterity of the ethical relation, claiming in ‘God and Philosophy’ that the transcendence of the neighbour is transcendent almost to the point of possible confusion with the *il y a*.\textsuperscript{49} (iii) Or, again, in the concluding lines of ‘Transcendence and Intelligibility’, where, at the end of a very conservative and measured restatement of his main lines of argumentation, Levinas notes that the account of subjectivity affected by the unpresentable alterity of the infinite could be said to announce itself in insomnia, that is to say, in the troubled vigilance of the psyche in the *il y a*.\textsuperscript{50} It would appear that Levinas wants to emphasize the sheer radicality of the alterity revealed in the ethical relation by stressing the possible confusion that the subject might have in distinguishing between the alterity of the *il y a* and that of illeity, a confusion emphasized by the homophony and linked etymology of the two terms.
In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas recounts the Russian folk tale of Little John the Simpleton who throws his father’s lunch to his shadow in order to try and slip away from it, only to discover that his shadow still clings to him, like an inalienable companion (DEE 38/EE 28). Is not the place of the *il y a* in Levinas’s work like Little John’s shadow, stretching mockingly beneath the feet of the philosopher who proclaims ethics as first philosophy? Is not the *il y a* like a shadow or ghost that haunts Levinas’s work, a revenant that returns it again and again to the moment of nonsense, neutrality and ambiguity, like Banquo’s ghost returns Macbeth to the scene of his crime, or like the ghostly return of scepticism after its refutation by reason? Thus, if the *il y a* is the first step on Levinas’s itinerary of thought, a neutrality that must be surmounted in the advent of the Subject and *Autrui*, then might one not wonder why he keeps stumbling on the first step of a ladder that he sometimes claims to have thrown away? Or, more curiously – and more interestingly – *must* Levinas’s thought keep stumbling on this first step in order to preserve the possibility of ethical sense? Might one not wonder whether the ambiguity of the relation between the *il y a* and illeity is essential to the articulation of the ethical in a manner that is analogous to the model of scepticism and its refutation, where the ghost of scepticism returns to haunt reason after each refutation? Isn’t this what Levinas means in ‘God and Philosophy’ (but other examples could be cited) when he insists that the alternating rhythm of the Saying and the Said must be substituted for the unity of discourse in the articulation of the relation to the other (DQVI 127/CPP 173)?

Which brings me to a hypothesis in the form of a question: might not the *fascination* (in Blanchot’s sense) that Levinas’s writing continues to exert, the way that it captivates us without us ever feeling that we have captured it, be found in the way it keeps open the question of ambiguity, the ambiguity that defines the experience of language and literature itself for Blanchot, the ambiguity of the Saying and the Said, of scepticism and reason, of the *il y a* and illeity, that is also to say – perhaps – of evil and goodness?

(Let us note in passing that there is a certain thematization,
perhaps even a staging, of ambiguity in Levinas’s later texts. For example, when he speaks in *Otherwise than Being* of the beyond of being ‘returning and not returning to ontology . . . becoming and not becoming the meaning of being’ (AE 23/OB 19). Or again, in the discussion of testimony in Chapter Five of the same text, ‘Transcendence, the beyond essence which is also being-in-the-world, needs ambiguity, a blinking of meaning which is not only a chance certainty, but a frontier both inefaceable and finer than the outline (*le tracé*) of an ideal line’ (AE 194/OB 152). Transcendence needs ambiguity in order for transcendence to ‘be’ transcendence. But is not this thematization of ambiguity by Levinas an attempt to *control* ambiguity? My query concerns the possibility of such control: might not ambiguity be out of control in Levinas’s text?)

What is the place of evil in Levinas’s work? If I am right in my suggestion that the *il y a* is never simply left behind or surmounted and that Levinas’s work always retains a memory of the *il y a* which could possibly provoke confusion on the part of the subject between the alterity of the *il y a* and the alterity of illeity, then one consequence of such confusion is the felt ambiguity between the transcendence of evil and that of goodness. On a Levinasian account, what is there to choose experientially between the transcendence of evil and the transcendence of goodness? This is not such a strange question as it sounds, particularly if one recalls the way in which ethical subjectivity is described in *Otherwise than Being* . . . in terms of trauma, possession, madness and even psychosis, predicates that are not so distant from the horror of the *il y a*. How and in virtue of what – what criterion, as Wittgenstein would say, or what evidence as Husserl would say – is one to decide between possession by the good and possession by evil in the way Levinas describes it?

(Of course, the paradox is that there can be no criterion or evidence for Levinas for this would presume the thematizability or phenomenologizability of transcendence. But this still begs the question as to how Levinas convinces his readers: is it through demonstration or persuasion, argumentation or edification, philosophy or rhetoric? Of course, Levinas is critical of rhetoric in conventionally
Platonic terms, which commits him, like Plato, to an antirhetorical rhetoric, a writing against writing.) Let me pursue this question of evil by taking a literary example of possession mentioned in passing by Levinas in his discussion of the *il y a*, when he speaks of ‘the smiling horror of Maupassant’s tales’ (DEE 97/EE 60). In Maupassant, as in Poe, it is as though death were never dead enough and there is always the terrifying possibility of the dead coming back to life to haunt us. In particular, I am thinking of the impossibility of murdering the eponymous Horla in Maupassant’s famous tale. The Horla is a being that will not die and which cannot be killed, and, as such, it exceeds the limit of the human. The Horla is a form of overman, ‘After man, the Horla’. What takes place in the tale – suspending the temptation to psychoanalyse – is a case of possession by the other, an invisible other with whom I am in relation but who continually absolves itself (incidentally, the Horla is always described using the neutral, third person pronoun – the *il*) from the relation, producing a trauma within the self and an irreducible responsibility. What interests me here is that in Maupassant the possession is clearly intended as a description of possession by evil, but does not this structure of possession by an alterity that can neither be comprehended nor refused not closely resemble the structure of ethical subjectivity found in substitution? That is to say, does not the trauma occasioned in the subject possessed by evil more adequately describe the ethical subject than possession by the good? Is it not in the excessive experience of evil and horror – the insurmountable memory of the *il y a* – that the ethical subject first assumes its shape? Does this not begin to explain why the royal road to ethical metaphysics must begin by making Levinas a master of the literature of horror? But if this is the case, why is radical otherness goodness? Why is it not rather evil or anethical or neutral?

Let us suppose – as I indeed believe – that Levinas offers a convincing account of the primacy of radical alterity, whether it is the alterity of *autrui* in *Totality and Infinity* or the alterity within the subject described in *Otherwise than Being* . . . Now, how can one conclude from the ‘evidence’ (given that there can be no evidence)
for radical alterity that such alterity is goodness? In virtue of what further ‘evidence’ can one predicate goodness of alterity? Is this not, as I suspect, to smuggle a metaphysical presupposition into a quasi-phenomenological description? Such a claim is, interestingly, analogous to possible criticisms of the 
\textit{causa sui} demonstration for the existence of God.\textsuperscript{54} Let us suppose that I am convinced that in order to avoid the vertigo of infinite regress (although one might wonder why such regress must be avoided; why is infinite regress bad?) there must be an uncaused cause, but in virtue of what is one then permitted to go on and claim that this uncaused cause is God (who is, moreover, infinitely good)? Where is the argument for the move from an uncaused cause to God as the uncaused cause? What necessitates the substantialization of an uncaused cause into a being that one can then predicate with various other metaphysical or divine attributes? Returning the analogy to Levinas, I can see why there has to be a radical alterity in the relation to the other and at the heart of the subject in order to avoid the philosophies of totality, but, to play devil’s advocate, I do not see why such alterity then receives the predicate ‘goodness’. Why does radical otherness have to be determined as good or evil in an absolute metaphysical sense? Could one – and this is the question motivating this critique – accept Levinas’s quasi-phenomenological descriptions of radical alterity whilst suspending or bracketing out their ethico-metaphysical consequences? If one followed this through, then what sort of picture of Levinas would emerge? The picture that emerges, and which I offer in closing as one possible reading of Levinas, as one way of arguing with him, is broadly consistent with that given by Blanchot in his three conversations on \textit{Totality and Infinity} in \textit{The Infinite Conversation} (EI 70–105/IC 49–74).\textsuperscript{55} In the latter work, Blanchot gives his first extended critical attention to a theme central to his \textit{récits}, the question of \textit{autrui} and the nature of the relation to \textit{autrui}.\textsuperscript{56} What fascinates Blanchot in his discussion of Levinas is the notion of an absolute relation – \textit{le rapport sans rapport} – that monstrous contradiction (that refuses to recognize the principle of non-contradiction) at the theoretical core of \textit{Totality and Infinity}, where the terms of the relation simultaneously absolve
themselves from the relation. For Blanchot, the absolute relation offers a non-dialectical account of intersubjectivity (EI 100–1/IC 70–71), that is, a picture of the relation between humans which is not — contra Kojève’s Hegel — founded in the struggle for recognition where the self is dependent upon the other for its constitution as a Subject. For Levinas, the interhuman relation is an event of radical asymmetry which resists the symmetry and reciprocity of Hegelian and post-Hegelian models of intersubjectivity (in Sartre and Lacan, for example) through what Levinas calls, in a favourite formulation, ‘the curvature of intersubjective space’ (Tel 267/TI 291).

For Blanchot, Levinas restores the strangeness and terror of the interhuman relation as the central concern of philosophy and shows how transcendence can be understood in terms of a social relation. But, and here we move onto Blanchot’s discreet critique of Levinas, the absolute relation can only be understood socially and Blanchot carefully holds back from two Levinasian affirmations: first, that the relation to alterity can be understood ethically in some novel metaphysical sense and, second, that the relation has ‘theological’ implications (i.e. the trace of illeity). So, in embracing Levinas’s account of the relation to autrui (in a way which is not itself without problems), Blanchot places brackets around the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘God’ and hence holds back from the metaphysical affirmation of the Good beyond Being. Blanchot holds to the ambiguity or tension in the relation to autrui that cannot be reduced either through the affirmation of the positivity of the Good or the negativity of Evil. The relation to the Other is neither positive nor negative in any absolute metaphysical sense; it is rather neutral, an experience of neutrality that — importantly — is not impersonal and which opens in and as that ambiguous form of language that Blanchot calls literature. (If I had the space and competence, it is here that one could begin a reading of Blanchot’s récits in terms of the absolute relation to the autrui.)

Where does this leave us? For me, Levinas’s essential teaching is the primacy of the human relation as that which can neither be refused nor comprehended and his account of a subjectivity disposed towards responsibility, or better, responsivity (Responsivität rather
than Verantwortung, following Bernhard Waldenfels’s distinction). 57
Prior to any metaphysical affirmation of the transcendence of the
Good or of the God that arises in this relation, and to which I have to
confess myself quite deaf (I have tried hard to listen for many years),
what continues to grip me in Levinas is the attention to the other, to
the other’s claim on me and how that claim changes and challenges
my self-conception. 58 Now, how is this claim made? Returning to my
starting point with the question of death, I would like to emphasize
something broached early in Levinas’s work, in Time and the Other, but
not satisfactorily pursued to my mind, where the first experience of
an alterity that cannot be reduced to the self occurs in the relation to
death, to the ungraspable facticity of dying (TA 51–69/TO 67–79).
Staying with this thought, I would want to claim, with Blanchot, that
what opens up in the relation to the alterity of death, of my dying and
the other’s dying, is not the transcendence of the Good beyond Being
or the trace of God, but is the neutral alterity of the il y a, the primal
scene of emptiness, absence and disaster, what I am tempted to call,
rather awkwardly, atheist transcendence.

We are mortals, you and I. There is only my dying and your dying and
nothing beyond. You will die and there is nothing beyond. I shall slowly
disappear until my heart stops its soft padding against the lining of my
chest. Until then, the drive to speak continues, incessantly. Until then,
we carry on. After that there is nothing.