Very Little . . . Almost Nothing

Death, Philosophy, Literature

Second Edition

Simon Critchley

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In memory of William James Critchley
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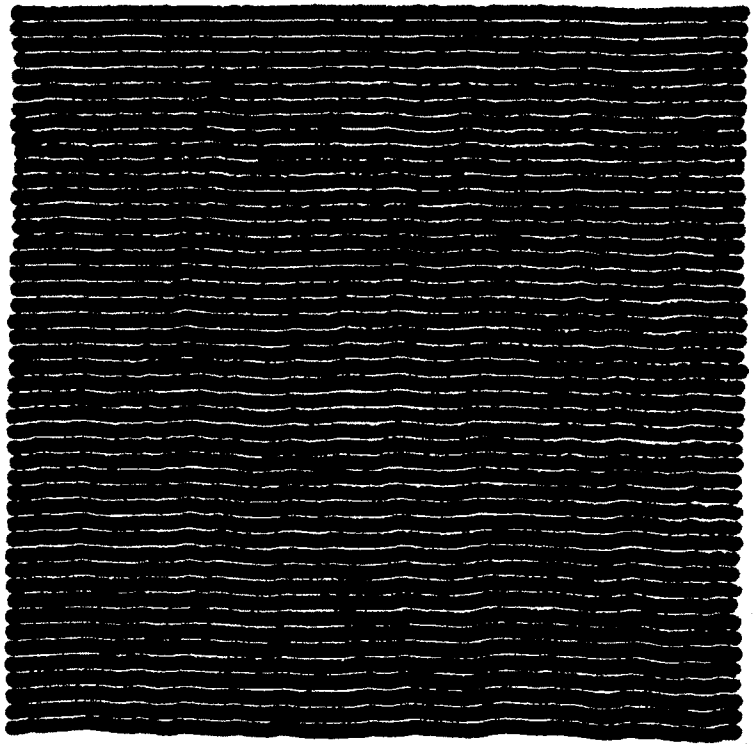

Images: Five Drawings – Very Little . . . Almost Nothing – David Connearn 2003

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Abbreviations

AE Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974).

AF Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäum Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 18–93.

AL Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire* (Seuil, Paris, 1978).

AST Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984).

AT Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften Bd.* 7 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970).

BF Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 'Brief an Fichte' in *Appelation an das Publikum. Dokumente zum Atheismusstreit Jena 1798/99* (Reclam, Leipzig, 1987), pp. 153–67.

CF Friedrich Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 1–16.

CP Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (Faber, London, 1955).

CPP Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1987).

CR Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979).

DEE Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existent*, 3rd edition (Vrin, Paris, 1986).

DQVI Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 2nd edition (Vrin, Paris, 1986).

ED Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Gallimard, Paris, 1980).

EE Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978).

EeI Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Fayard/France Culture, Paris, 1982).

EI Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Gallimard, Paris, 1969).

EL Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Gallimard, Paris, 1955 (Collection Idées, 1968)).

FP Maurice Blanchot, *Faux pas* (Gallimard, Paris, 1943).

GO Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (Station Hill, New York, 1981).

HAH Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1972 (livre de poche edition)).

HO Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 6th edition (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1980).

IC Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993).

ID Friedrich Schlegel, 'Ideas' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 94–109.

IQO Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988).

KA *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, Vol. II, ed. H. Eichner (Ferdinand Schöningh, Munich, 1967).

LA Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. P. Barnard and C. Lester (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988).

LF Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 'Open Letter to Fichte', trans. D. I. Behler in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. E. Behler (Continuum, New York, 1987).

LV Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Gallimard, Paris, 1959 (livre de poche edition)).

MWM Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976).

NA Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (Faber, London, 1960).

ND Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1966).

NDS Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Continuum, New York, 1973).

NL Theodor Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur* (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, Frankfurt am Main, 1981).

NTL Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, trans. S. Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991).

NTL2 Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, trans. S. W. Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, New York, 1992).

NYUA Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Living Batch, Albuquerque, 1989).

OB Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1981).

PF Maurice Blanchot, *La part du feu* (Gallimard, Paris, 1949).

QB Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. W. Kluback and J.T. Wilde (Twayne, New York, 1958).

QT Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. W. Lovitt (Garland, New York, 1977).

RP Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1992).

SL Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982).

T *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (Picador, London, 1979).

TA Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989).

Tel Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1961).

TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969).

TO Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987).

WE Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 2nd edition (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1978).

WM Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht* (Kröner, Leipzig, 1930).

WP Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, New York, 1968).

Preface to Second Edition

As my father, I have already died

If one spends much of one's time writing, or – as is sadly more often the case – thinking about writing, then it is often difficult to know whether work follows life or whether it is the other way round. In memory, life and work tend to merge deceptively. That said, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* belongs to a troubled period in my life. I won't go into too much detail, but events circled around my father's illness with lung cancer which resulted in his death a couple of days after Christmas 1994. I remember taking breaks from nursing him by sitting downstairs and reading Beckett's *Malone Dies* – an act that didn't seem to make much sense at the time. Nietzsche somewhere speaks of an author's life as not just the womb or soil, but more often the dung or manure out of which the work sprouts. Let's just say that I had heaps of manure lying around in the years *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* was being written. But, as every gardener knows, manure is excellent fertilizing material and the book bears some blooms that I still find attractive, even if I find my prose prolix and the whole thing horribly overwritten. In this Preface to the Second Edition, I'd like to provide a little context for *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, and spell out some of its ideas that I still value and, more importantly perhaps, still use.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing is thus an act of mourning. It is dedicated to my father, and my memory of his death's head is the perhaps ultimately senseless source of the book's attempted sense-making. My father's last days were long and agonizing, where my mother, sister and I took turns to sit sleepless watching him drift in and out of awareness surrounded by the death-rattle of oxygen cylinders through which he kept trying to catch hold of the breath that was slowly leaving him. Having survived Christmas, as was his stubbornly-held wish, he was taken into the local hospice for respite care so that we could all take a break and get some sleep. As he was being lifted into the ambulance, he caught my eye and extended his hand. He held my hand in his for a few seconds and nodded without speaking. There was something definitive in this gesture. I drove back home, some 70 miles away, thinking of how bony and small his hand felt and how changed it was from the large and warm hands that I remembered from childhood. During that night, his condition worsened and early next morning my sister called me to say that he was dying. Driving like a *fou*, I missed his death by twenty minutes and found everyone gathered silently in the hospice waiting room. A nurse took me in to see him and then left me alone. The room was unlit and sparsely furnished. In the pale winter light, he lay with a single sheet covering his corpse: tiny, withered and ravaged by cancer. I spent no more than five minutes alone with him, initially standing petrified, then sitting, and finally summoning up the courage to touch his cheek and nose and caress his forehead. It felt cool. So, this is what death looks like, I thought. This is what my death will look like. The kernel of this book is an attempt to make sense of those few minutes, of the death that I saw in my father, an attempted sense-making that doubtless fails, but where what matters is the attempt.

By virtue of my profession and passion, the way in which I attempt to make sense of my father's death and the events that surround it is philosophically, that is to say, theoretically and indirectly. If I had the ability, then I might have hoped that my existential manure would flower into a story, novel or poem. But I don't and it didn't. What it

became instead is a book that attempts to understand the significance of death for philosophy, that is, for the way in which human beings reflect upon questions and problems of the most general, imponderable and burningly important kind. There is an ancient Ciceronian wisdom that says to philosophize is to learn how to die, but learning how to die also tells us something about philosophizing.

Let me say a few words about how I see philosophy. The book opens with the statement that philosophy begins in disappointment. That is to say, philosophy begins not, as ancient tradition relates, in an experience of wonder at the fact that things (nature, the world, the universe) are, but rather with an indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. One feels that things are *not*, or at least not the way we expected or hoped they might be. Although there might well be precursors, I see this as a specifically modern conception of philosophy. To give it a name and date, one could say that it is a conception of philosophy that follows from Kant's Copernican turn, namely that the great metaphysical dream of the soul moving frictionlessly towards knowledge of itself, things-in-themselves and God is just that, a dream. Absolute knowledge of things as they are is decisively beyond the ken of fallible, finite creatures such as ourselves. An insistent theme of *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, which also resounds through much of my other work, is that human beings are exceedingly limited creatures, a mere vapour or virus can destroy us. As Pascal said, we are the weakest reed in nature and this fact requires an acknowledgement that is very reluctantly given. Our culture is endlessly beset with Promethean myths of the overcoming of the human condition, whether through the fantasy of artificial intelligence or contemporary delusions about cloning and genetic manipulation. We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness, and this failure is a cause, in my view, of much tragedy.

One could, and perhaps should, give an entire taxonomy of disappointment, and I am trying to think about epistemological disappointment in some work I am preparing. However, the two forms of disappointment that concern me most urgently are religious

and political. These forms of disappointment are not entirely separable and continually leak into one another. *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* is overwhelmingly concerned with religious disappointment, but one can find ethical and political themes touched on in each of the Lectures, in particular in my talk of an 'ethics of finitude'.

With political disappointment, the sense of something lacking or failing arises from the realization that we inhabit a violently unjust world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne. I take no solace from the fact that this sense of political disappointment is much more tangible with today's unending war against terror than it was when I wrote the Preamble in 1996. But the consequence is the same: the experience of political disappointment provokes the question of justice and, to my mind, the need for an ethics or what others might call normative principles that might enable us to face and face down the present political situation. Although much of my previous work has been on ethical and political issues, I am currently writing a short, systematic account of my views in this area; I hope to publish in 2004 or 2005.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing is about religious disappointment: disappointment that what I desire but lack is an experience of faith, namely faith in some transcendent God, God-equivalent or, indeed, gods. As I say at the beginning of the book, the great metaphysical comfort of religion, its existential balm, is the idea that the answer to the question of the meaning of life lies outside of life and outside of humanity. We can hear this answer by turning ourselves, converting ourselves, towards some divine source, some theistic alpha and omega. Now, much as I would very often like to have faith and am sometimes deeply envious of people who have it, I simply am not soothed by this balm. In fact, it irritates my skin, bringing me out in a nasty rash. The experience of religious disappointment entails that philosophy is atheism and an experience of faith would mean that one could no longer do philosophy in a way that I recognize. This is an extreme view and I have been criticized for holding it, but unless one is capable of the most subtle psychological bicameralism, I simply do

not understand how one can be a philosopher and have religious faith. To be a philosopher means that all questions have to be open, that there has to be an experience of utter intellectual freedom, and, of course, there is nothing more vertiginously disappointing than such freedom.

Such an atheism is, I trust, far from being triumphalistic. I have little sympathy for the tendency that one can find in philosophers like Russell and Ayer that is simply dismissive of religion. This can be an invitation to the worst philistinism. On the contrary, I think that the religious tradition with which I am most familiar, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is a powerful way of articulating questions of the ultimate meaning and value of human life. Whilst I genuinely prize the way in which thinkers such as Augustine or Pascal raise these questions, I cannot accept their answers. If I had an experience of faith – and who knows, it might happen – then everything about philosophy would change for me and I wouldn't be writing the Preface to this book. I would be penning my *retractio*.

The experience of religious disappointment provokes the following, potentially abyssal question: if the legitimating theological structures and religious belief systems in which people like us believed are no longer believable, if, to coin a phrase, God is dead, then what becomes of the question of the meaning of life?[1] It is this question that provokes the problem with which I frame the book, Nietzsche's uncanniest of guests: *nihilism*. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that we previously imagined as a divine, transcendent basis for moral valuation has become meaningless. Nihilism *is* this declaration of meaninglessness, a sense of indifference, directionlessness or, at its worst, despair that can flood into all areas of life. For some, this is the defining experience of youth, for others it lasts a whole lifetime. The philosophical task set by Nietzsche and followed, as I try to show below, by Heidegger and Adorno in distinct but related ways, is how to respond to nihilism, or better, how to *resist* nihilism. For me, philosophical activity, the free movement of thought and critical reflection, is defined by the militant resistance to nihilism. That is, philosophy is defined by the thinking

through of the fact that the basis of meaning has become meaningless. Our devalued values require what Nietzsche calls revaluation or transvaluation. The difficulty consists in thinking through the meaninglessness of meaning without bewitching ourselves with new and exotic forms of meaning, with imported brands of existential balm.

However, if things weren't bad enough, then they become even trickier for the following reason. If one accepts the premises of Nietzsche's, Heidegger's or Adorno's treatment of the problem of nihilism as discussed below, then philosophy is nihilistic. That is, for Nietzsche, philosophy conspires with the Judaeo-Christian moral interpretation of the world; for Heidegger, it is driven by a wilfulness that misses the phenomenon of the world and leads instead to its technological devastation; for Adorno, it conspires with the dialectic where enlightenment becomes an ideology of domination whose nadir is Auschwitz.

What, therefore, is to be done? Beyond its philosophical diagnosis, the resistance to nihilism consists in the cultivation of new, non- or para-philosophical discourses: tragic thinking for Nietzsche, meditative thinking or *Gelassenheit* for Heidegger, aesthetic experience for Adorno. In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, the anti-nihilist discourse in relation to which I attempt to think through religious disappointment is *literature*. A major preoccupation of the book is the relation between philosophy and literature, or better, what might philosophy be and do when faced with the experience of literature. The conviction that ties together my fascination in each part of the book is that literature is the name of that place where the issue of religious disappointment is thought through. After the death of God, it is in and as literature that the issue of life's possible redemption is played out. Of course, as some of my reviewers reminded me, although I think it is clear from the book itself, this is an essentially modern conception of literature that works in the wake of the Copernican turn. In Lecture 1, I follow Blanchot's attempt in his fictional and critical writing (where his distinction between fiction and criticism

eventually fruitfully collapses) both to describe and enact the enigmatic source of the artwork. This is what he calls the 'other' or 'essential' night that retreats from philosophical rationality and which I attempt to illuminate with Levinas's notion of the *il y a*, a light which casts a broad and troubling shadow across the rest of Levinas's work. In Lecture 2, after having described the predicament of post-Kantian philosophy, I try and show how the Jena romantics respond to this predicament by cultivating the fragment, that is, a self-undoing theoretical practice. This is what I call 'unworked romanticism', which I then try to show to be continuous with certain preoccupations of Cavell's work, in particular with what I call his tragic wisdom, that is, his concern with the acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite. Although I omitted to cite them in the book, the words of Cavell that were really on my mind are those with which he ends *The Claim of Reason*, 'Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?' (CR 496). To which the answer might be, 'yes' and 'no': yes, philosophy *can* become literature and still know itself, but not *as* philosophy.

However, the issue of how the experience of religious disappointment is thought through in a way that lets us get a hold on the relation of philosophy to literature becomes clearest in my reading of Beckett. I spoke about the indirection involved in writing about death philosophically. Although my father's death's head is the experiential kernel to the book, I do not philosophize about it. Truth to tell, I do not think I am capable of philosophizing about it and would feel a terrible *mauvaise foi* if I did. There is much more in this Preface about my father's death than the couple of clumsy passing references given in the book itself. If that which articulates this experiential kernel is literature, then Beckett's work is literature par excellence, becoming the place-holder for the experience of death in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*. I mentioned how I was reading Beckett while nursing my father. Although I couldn't have articulated what was going on at the time, and still find it difficult to explain what I was up to, there is no doubt that something crucial was taking place in and as this experience of literature. So Beckett is very much the hero of *Very Little . . .*

Almost Nothing and one of my major self-criticisms is that I do not think it is clear enough what I am about in my discussion of Beckett. As some reviewers pointed out, I spend a little too much time agonizing over the secondary literature on Beckett. Let me try and restate my concerns more clearly.

My initial concern in the discussion of Beckett is with the way in which his writing trips up the activity of philosophical interpretation by littering the text with various red herrings that lead philosophers off the track and allow them to ascend from the experience of Beckett's language into the cool stratosphere of a conceptual metalanguage. In short, the acute philosophical self-consciousness of Beckett's writing makes philosophers look stupid when they try to interpret it – the herrings have the better of the philosophers. Beckett's writing is a defining test-case for the relation between philosophy and literature: philosophical interpretations of Beckett either lag behind the text or overshoot it, either saying too little or saying too much, or saying too little in saying too much. The issue, then, is how we might avoid the platitudes of academic metalanguage and actually undergo an experience of Beckett's language, how we might let his language 'language', as it were.

This brings me to the question of meaning. Namely, what philosophical interpretations of Beckett do (and by 'philosophical' here I include the many literary critical interpretations of Beckett that tend to be fatuously stratospheric) is to transform the work into a meaning, whether it is some twaddle about the Cartesian or Kantian subject, the tragic state of the modern man, the authentic relation to being, or whatever. This is where the lessons of Adorno's readings of Beckett remain, to my mind, definitive and unsurpassed. Adorno's overwhelming concern is how one responds to the fact of Auschwitz and his initially perplexing conviction is that Beckett's *Endgame* gives the only appropriate reaction to the situation of the death camps. What he means is that by refusing to name the Holocaust, that is, by deliberately abstaining from dredging meaning out of the suffering of victims in the manner of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and much of the Holocaust industry, Beckett gives us the only appropriate response

to it. As such, Beckett's work is an index for the best of aesthetic modernism, that is, artworks whose autonomy provides a determinate negation of contemporary society and which, in so doing, give the formal semblance of a society free from domination. Thus, by steadfastly refusing to mean something, Beckett's work refuses nihilism and gives an indication of the transformative ethical and political practice from which it abstains.

If what should be avoided in the interpretation of Beckett is the construction of philosophical meaning, of some new, abstract positivity, then is one to conclude that Beckett's works mean nothing at all? Should the philosopher simply give up and go fishing? Not at all. It simply means doing philosophy in a different way. If what has to be respected in Beckett's work is its steadfast refusal to mean something, then the task of interpretation consists in the concrete reconstruction of the meaning of this meaninglessness. That is, making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs, or conceptually communicating that which refuses conceptuality and communication. In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, I call this a necessary and impossible task. It is a task that gives the book its peculiar and seemingly quirky form. It is a book that points at something which it cannot discuss or fully comprehend, from which it refuses to dredge meaning and towards which it edges: the finiteness of the finite itself.

Returning to the problem of religious disappointment, Beckett's work challenges its readers and spectators because it refuses to offer up a simple and determinate meaning that might be used as a guide for redemption. On the contrary, insofar as Beckett's works claim us in eluding us, they *de-create* narratives of redemption, they strip away the resources and comforts of story, fable and narration. Reading Beckett's *Trilogy* from beginning to end is an experience of literary atrophy. This is what I mean when I talk about Beckett as offering us a redemption from redemption. His work continually frustrates our desire to ascend from the flatlands of language and ordinary experience into the stratosphere of meaning. As is all too easily seen in both contemporary New Age sophism, crude scientism, and the return to increasingly reactionary forms of religious fundamentalism,

there is an almost irresistible desire to stuff the world full of meaning and sign up to one or more salvific narratives of redemption. Beckett's work, in my view, is absolutely exemplary in redeeming us from the temptations of redemption. My claim is that in doing this it returns us to the ordinary or the everyday, which I discuss in relation to Beckett, but also Cavell and especially Wallace Stevens in Lecture 2. However, the ordinary is not something we can simply turn to by taking a walk in the street or a break from our work. On the contrary, the ordinary is an achievement, the goal of a quest, which is what Cavell means when he opposes the common-sense notion of the everyday with what he calls the 'eventual everyday'. I think this is what Cavell means when he talks about meaninglessness, emptiness and silence not as the givens of Beckett's work, but as its goal, its heroic undertaking.

This brings me to a major motif of *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, what I call meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary. The thought here is that if what has to be avoided in philosophical interpretation is the construction of a redemptive narrative of meaning, then what is achieved in this avoidance is the meaninglessness of the ordinary. Such is Beckett's materialism, namely that his universe is not one of being, the *cogito* or the absurd tragedy of western civilization, but of forlorn particulars: refrigerators, bicycles, tape recorders, dustbins and pap. It is to these particulars that his work points. This is something that I link in Lecture 2 with Stevens's late concern with what he calls 'the plain sense of things': pond, leaf, tree, rat, mud, water. Or again, with Rilke's counsel in the *Duino Elegies* about what one should say to an angel, what might astonish and interest such a being, which would be to speak not of infinity and the nature of God, but rather of house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug. What each of these authors is concerned with, and what continues to fascinate me, is what we might call the sheer mereness of things. In other words, when we learn to shake off the delusions of meaning and achieve meaninglessness, then we might see that things merely are and we are things too.

This is not much, very little in fact, but not nothing. The key word

in my title is *almost*. Namely, if we are, as Stevens writes, natives of a dwindled sphere, then this is still a sphere, still a world, with a climate, cluttered with particulars. A poet might write poems appropriate to this climate, to the variousness of things scattered around: to cities, towns and villages; to buildings and houses; to birds, plants and trees; to transport systems, the subtleties of trade and the speed of commerce; to weather, heavy weather and slight, to the movement that clouds make over a wet landscape on an afternoon in late November; to a time of war and what passes for peace; to wine, water and the sensation of eating oysters; to air, light and the joy of having a body; to your mother and your lovers, who should not be confused; to the sea: cold, salt, dark, clear, utterly free; to quail, sweet berries and casual flocks of pigeons; to the yellow moon; to the whole voluptuousness of looking. The point is that one resists nihilism in giving up the wilfulness of the desire to overcome it, by learning to cultivate what Emerson calls 'the low, the common, the near'.

At the centre of my reading of Beckett is a head, eyes shut, talking incessantly but almost inaudibly, eyes open, pausing, talking again, flayed alive by memory. The head sits atop a body, propped up in a bed in the dark. For reasons that I hope are a little clearer now, this figure both is and cannot be my father. The movement that I follow in Beckett is the reduction of experience to this talking head panting on in the darkness. This head listens to a buzzing, a ringing, what Beckett calls variously a dull roar in the skull like falls, an unqualifiable murmur, the vibration in the tympanum. This is what I call the tinnitus of existence, the background noise of the world that underlies the diurnal hubbub, returning at nightfall as the body tries to rest. Tinnitus is no fun, I can assure you. In Lecture 1, I describe it as the experience of the night in Blanchot that I try to analyse with Levinas's concept of the *il y a*, which he also describes as the murmur of silence. This night is not the starry heaven that frames Kant's moral law or the night into which the romantic poet sings, but is rather the night of our dying, the vertiginous knowledge of our finitude that we keep close to us, as if it were a secret. What this suggests to me, and

it is a major idea that rather comes and goes in the book, is the experience of atheist transcendence, a transcendence without God, God-equivalents or gods, but simply the ringing void at the heart of what there is and who we are. Perhaps this is what Nietzsche meant in the words I have borrowed from *Ecce Homo* for the title of this Preface.[2]

None of this exactly sounds like fun. If philosophy begins in disappointment, then does it end in disappointment? *Au contraire*. It is my belief that acknowledging that there is very little, almost nothing can also be the entrance ticket to the world of humour, which is – as many of its best practitioners can attest – a rather dark world. *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* has its comic flipside in my 2002 book, *On Humour* (Routledge), where the careful reader will observe that quite different sounding conclusions are generated from very similar philosophical premisses. The shape of the thought here can be traced to my criticisms of Adorno's reading of Beckett in Lecture 3, where I try to show how Adorno singularly failed to understand the nature and force of Beckett's humour. If what defines Beckett's use of language is what I call below 'the syntax of weakness', of language endlessly undoing and undermining itself, then this is also a comic syntax, witness Groucho Marx with his hand on Chico's pulse: 'either this man is dead, or my watch has stopped'. I would claim that the sardonic laughter that resounds within the ribs of the reader of Beckett escapes the totalizing bleakness of Adorno's description of life after Auschwitz. At its best, humour is a practice of resistance to nihilism that deflates the pretensions of human beings. Humour also reconciles us to the fact there is very little, almost nothing, and this is perhaps even a happy recollection. Several years ago, in Oslo, I was asked during a seminar on the book what I thought about human happiness. To which I replied: it is all very nice, but not for us. I think that was a little flippant. When we have been redeemed from redemption and learnt to see meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary, the realization can bring a calm of sorts, perhaps even a happiness. At least this is the way I would now choose to interpret the frankly peculiar final line of the book: 'No happiness? No? No. Know'. But,

then again, you might disagree. After all, it's only human. A herring couldn't do it.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing was, for the most part, kindly received and reviewed. Unlike anything I'd written before or (more worryingly) since, the book seemed to hit a nerve with some people and over the years I have had some fascinating and detailed reactions from friends and from strangers, some of whom have become friends through the book. Paradoxically, given its topic, some readers seemed to find in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* something lived, something felt and experienced. It was a particular pleasure to see how one of the book's objects, Stanley Cavell, objected to my objections to him.[3] Other readers, like Jane Bennett, took issue with my entire approach in ways that quite stopped me in my tracks and I am still thinking about the best way to respond.[4] Some reviewers, such as Andrew Bowie, helpfully pointed out inaccuracies in my scholarship on the history of nihilism and romanticism as well as raising the question of why music did not play a significant role for me, particularly in my discussion of romanticism.[5] However, some people really hated it. In that connection, let me tell you about the worst review I have ever had, a twenty-page broadside by Robert Grant that appeared in *Inquiry*.[6] Although Grant does grant reluctantly that some things in the book are 'moderately interesting', he goes on to add that 'much verges (or so it seems to me) on sheer blather and name-dropping, a mere random spraying-about, for rhetorical effect, of inchoate, ill-defined terms'. Believe me, Grant is still only warming up. What follows are pages and pages of vitriol and speculation written in a rambling, unclear and highly mannerist style. Writing from an arch-conservative viewpoint, Grant has a huge problem with what he (not I) calls 'Theory' and keeps confusing my approach with all sorts of bogeymen like structuralism (which I confess I have never really understood), post-structuralism (which is a term I neither use nor recognize) or postmodernism (which is a term I am on record in numerous places as disapproving for both philosophical and sociological reasons). That said, Grant's piece is so cranky and so wide of

the mark, that it is difficult to get cross with it. Indeed, there is almost something likeable in his energetic tilting. Grant's closing advice to me, having listened to a radio programme that I recorded for the BBC in 1998, is the following:

> As for Dr Critchley, he should model his future work on his radio scripts. Radio is the most taxing of all expository media, and a wonderful intellectual discipline for anyone who thinks he has something to say. It will soon tell him whether he has or not.

I would sincerely like to thank Dr Grant for his career advice. My advice to him, given the windy incoherence of his review is: don't give up the day job.

Books are fragile blooms, often flowering unseen in the desert air of the book market and quickly returning to the authorial dung from which they sprang. I am very grateful that this one is still around and would like to thank my friend and editor at Routledge, Tony Bruce, for his faith in this book over the years and Julia Rebaudo for her extremely helpful work in preparing the Second Edition. I have reread the text as carefully as possible, correcting typographical errors and made a number of changes, none of which will affect the substance of what is said, but might improve the style. I am adding a new Lecture to this Second Edition which was originally drafted as part of Lecture 2, but which was separately developed and published as 'The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (On Wallace Stevens)', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1996, pp. 1–23.

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 profond 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

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.'[8]

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.[9] 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.[10] 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'.[11] 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*.[12] 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.[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 *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 *language*, the very *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.
>
> (PF 325/GO 41)

Blanchot is here alluding to a passage from Mallarmé's *Crise de vers*, but where the latter writes 'Je dis: une fleur',[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 *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.
>
> (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.[15] 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'existent* 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[18] – 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*.[19]

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 insomnia, 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

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 aïeux./Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale!/Mais que dis-je? Mon père y tient l'urne fatale.
>
> (DEE 102/EE 62)[20]

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

> 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.[21]

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, hélas!, 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'.[22] 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.[23] 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?

(iii)
Ambiguity – Blanchot's secret

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).[24] 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 'toi (e(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.)[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 any thing 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.[26] 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).[27]

> (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'existent*, 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').[28] 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'.[29] 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]

(f)
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.'[31] 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.[32] 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.'[33] 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?*[34]

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 *Jetztpunkt*. 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'[35] – 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 *désoeuvrement*, 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'.[36] 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[37]

(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.[38] 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.[39] 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.'[40] 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*.[41] 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,[42] 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 désoeuvrée*, 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 *différence*. 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 *Seins-frage*), 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',[47] 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.[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*.[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*.[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 ineffaceable 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?[51] 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'.[52] 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 alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or anethical or neutral?[53]

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 *causa sui* demonstration for the existence of God.[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 *Totality and Infinity* in *The Infinite Conversation* (EI 70–105/IC 49–74).[55] In the latter work, Blanchot gives his first extended critical attention to a theme central to his *récits*, the question of *autrui* and the nature of the relation to *autrui*.[56] What fascinates Blanchot in his discussion of Levinas is the notion of an absolute relation – *le rapport sans rapport* – that monstrous contradiction (that refuses to recognize the principle of non-contradiction) at the theoretical core of *Totality and Infinity*, where the terms of the relation simultaneously absolve

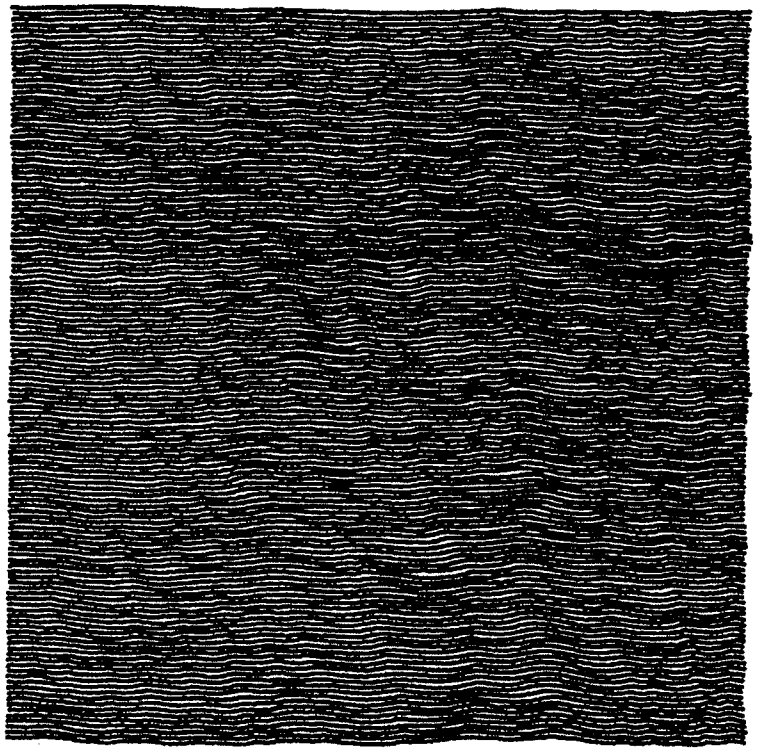
themselves from the relation. For Blanchot, the absolute relation offers a *non-dialectical account of intersubjectivity* (EI 100–1/IC 70–71), that is, a picture of the relation between humans which is not – *contra* Kojève's Hegel – founded in the struggle for recognition where the self is dependent 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.*



Images: Five Drawings – Very Little . . . Almost Nothing – David Connearn 2003

Notes

Preface: As my father, I have already died

1 Recent years have witnessed a pleasing resurgence of interest in the question of the meaning of life. Two interesting recent examples, which contrast with my own views, are John Cottingham's *The Meaning of Life* (Routledge, London and New York, 2002) and Julian Young's *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (Routledge, London and New York, 2003).

2 *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, London, 1979), p. 38.

3 Cavell's response to me will be published in *Stanley Cavell – The Philosopher Responds to his Critics*, ed. Russell Goodman (Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming).

4 See Jane Bennett, 'An Ethics of Finitude by Simon Critchley', from *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2001), pp. 75–80.

5 Andrew Bowie, 'The Extraordinariness of the Ordinary', *Radical Philosophy*, No. 90 (July/August 1998), pp. 45–7. For my thoughts about music, see 'Sounding Desire – On Tricky', in *Glossalalia – An Alphabet of Critical Keywords* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 189–200.

6 Robert Grant, 'Not Enough, or Thinking Degree Zero', *Inquiry*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (December 1998), pp. 477–96.

Preamble: Travels in Nihilon

1 See *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992). The line of argument initiated in the latter book has been

21 *Being and Time*, trans. J. MacQuarrie and E. Robinson (Blackwell, Oxford, 1962), p. 220.
22 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976), p. 23.
23 *Minima Moralia, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 4 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1980), p. 281; trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Verso, London, 1974), p. 247.
24 For a reading of Adorno that emphasizes his relation to the problem of nihilism, see Jay Bernstein's 'Critical Theory – The Very Idea. Reflections on Nihilism and Domination', in *Recovering Ethical Life* (Routledge, London and New York, 1994), pp. 10–34.
25 All passages from this rather unfortunate translation have been checked and, where necessary, revised.
26 The final line from Benjamin's 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', *Illuminationen* (Surhkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1955), p. 135. Cited in *Negative Dialectics* (ND 369/NDS 378).
27 Montaigne, *Essays*, Vol. 1, trans. John Florio (Dent, London, 1910), p. 73.
28 A key text here is Heidegger's utterly distasteful eulogy to Albert Leo Schlageter, delivered on 26 May 1933 (in 'Martin Heidegger and Politics: A Dossier', ed. Richard Wolin, *New German Critique*, No. 45, 1988, pp. 96–97). Schlageter's 'hardness of will' allowed him to endure the 'most difficult' and 'greatest' death of all:

> As he stood defenceless facing the rifles, the hero's inner gaze soared above the muzzles to the daylight and mountains of his home that he might die for the German people and its Reich with the Alemannic countryside before his eyes.

29 'The moment of my death henceforth always pending', *L'instant de ma mort* (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1994), p. 20.
30 Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 11, Penguin Freud Library (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 253.
31 See *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 437.
32 Beckett, *Endgame* (Faber, London, 1958), p. 20.

Lecture 1: *Il y a*

1 Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire* (AL 79–80/LA 57–58).
2 On the difficult question of the development of Blanchot's work, see Michael Holland, 'Towards a method', in *SubStance*, No. 14 (1976),

pp. 7–17. Holland has given a richly detailed and decisive account of Blanchot's development in his Introduction and editorial commentaries in *The Blanchot Reader* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995), which appeared after this lecture had been written. On this question, see Foucault's remark in 'La pensée du dehors', *Critique*, No. 229 (June 1966), p. 530; trans. J. Mehlman, in *Foucault/Blanchot* (Zone Books, New York, 1990), p. 26: 'the distinction between "novels", "narratives", and "criticism" is progressively weakened in Blanchot until, in *L'attente, l'oubli*, language alone is allowed to speak'.
3 Bonaventura, *Nachtwachen* (Reclam, Stuttgart, 1964).
4 Levinas, 'Maurice Blanchot et le regard du poète', *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1975), p. 20.
5 Hélène Cixous, 'Blanchot, the writing of disaster: nothing is what there is', in *Readings* (Harvester, Hemel Hempstead, 1992), pp. 19–27.
6 Susan Hanson also makes the connection between this passage and the double plus and minus sign in the Foreword to her excellent translation of *L'entretien infini* (IC xxviii and xxxii, note 3).
7 For a reading of Blanchot's 'Literature and the Right to Death', that does not exploit the connection to the *il y a*, see Rodolphe Gasché's 'The felicities of paradox. Blanchot on the null-space of literature', in *Blanchot*, ed. C. Gill (Routledge, London and New York, 1996), pp. 34–69.
8 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), p. 360.
9 'Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public', *Combat*, No.7 (July 1936), p. 147. The texts, contexts and issues relating to Blanchot's politics since the 1930s have now been discussed, with particular emphasis on the contested memory of Vichy France, by Steven Ungar in *Scandal and Aftereffect. Blanchot and France Since 1930* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995). Ungar discusses 'Literature and the Right to Death' on pp. 121–24. For an illuminating discussion of the context for political engagement in France in the 1930s – using the figure of Georges Bataille as an emblem – see Jean-Michel Besnier's *La politique de l'impossible* (La découverte, Paris, 1988).
10 On this question of the relation between solitude and perversion, I refer to Sara Arrhenius and Cecilia Sjöholm, *Ensam och Pervers* (Bonnier Alba, Stockholm, 1995).
11 *Saint Genet*, trans. B. Frechtman (Heinemann, London, 1988), p. 448.
12 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 19.
13 Ibid., p. 26. Interestingly, this quotation from Hegel also appears, approvingly it would seem, as the epigraph to Bataille's *Madame Edwarda* (*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. III (Gallimard, Paris, 1971), p. 9), a text that

would be fascinating to read on both of Blanchot's slopes of literature, for its evocation of the relation of transgressive sexuality to God, and also for its presentiment of horror in sexual ecstasy (cf. Bataille's 'Preface', p. 11).

14 'Crise de vers' in *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dès* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), p. 251.

15 Blanchot discusses Ponge in PF 336–37/GO 52–53.

16 'A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas', in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (Routledge, London and New York, 1990), p. 42.

17 *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1978), p. 103.

18 *Time and Being*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Harper and Row, New York, 1972), pp. 38–40.

19 It would be extremely interesting to compare Levinas's account of horror and its relation to literature with that of Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (trans. L. S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, New York, 1982)), where horror is analysed in terms of abjection understood as that condition of the disintegration of the relation between self and other.

20 The passage is also cited by Blanchot in EI 29/IC 22.

21 Cited in Christopher Ricks's *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993), p. 93.

22 In *Les temps modernes*, No. 38 (1948), p. 786; trans. A. Lingis in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1987), p. 11.

23 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 350–59.

24 The English translation here, 'literature has two slopes', is misleading.

25 I have attempted to discuss the question of community in Nancy in 'Re-tracing the political: politics and community in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy', in *The Political Subject of Violence*, eds. D. Campbell and M. Dillon (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993), pp. 73–93. See especially pp. 87–89.

26 On fatigue as an access to the neuter, see the opening untitled dialogue to *L'entretien infini* (EI xxii/IC xx–xxi).

27 See also ED 176–79 and 191–96. This passage is the focus for several interesting discussions of Blanchot, notably J. Hillis Miller, 'Death mask: Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort*', in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1990), pp. 179–210 (see especially pp. 179–80); Françoise Collin, 'La peur. Emmanuel Levinas et Maurice Blanchot', *Emmanuel Levinas, Cahier de l'Herne* (Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1991),

pp. 313–27 (see especially p. 320); and Hélène Cixous, 'Blanchot, The Writing of Disaster: Nothing Is What There Is', op. cit., see especially p. 19.

28 Of course, a lot more needs to be said here about the relation of the *il y a*, as the origin of the artwork, to the primal scene of childhood. In particular, and in addition to my cursory remarks on the above passage, it would be necessary to put Blanchot's primitive scene in the context of his comments on Serge Leclaire's book *On tue un enfant* (Seuil, Paris, 1975), which is interestingly discussed in the pages immediately prior to the above passage (*L'écriture du désastre*, pp. 110–17). Leclaire identifies the practice of psychoanalysis with the death of the child, 'Sa majesté l'enfant', the terrifying, all-powerful *infans* who Leclaire understands as the representant of primary narcissism.

29 Blanchot, *L'instant de ma mort* (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1994); see especially pp. 10, 11, 20.

30 I am freely borrowing here from Derrida's 'Remarks on deconstruction and pragmatism', trans. S. Critchley, in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. 77–88.

31 Dostoevsky, *The Devils*, trans. D. Magarshack (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 126.

32 Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. B. Brasol (George Braziller, New York, 1954), pp. 538–42.

33 *Le Spleen de Paris* (Armand Collin, Paris, 1958), p. 110.

34 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 13 (de Gruyter, Berlin, 1988), p. 146, note 11. Cited as the epigraph to Jill Marsden's *Ecstasy and Annihilation in Nietzsche's Philosophy of Eternal Return* (PhD thesis, University of Essex, 1992).

35 Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Tale*, in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957), p. 152; Donne, 'Holy Sonnets', in *Selected Poems*, ed. J. Hayward (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950), p. 170.

36 In *Critique*, No. 229 (June 1966), pp. 547–60; the English version of this essay appeared with added introductory paragraphs under the title 'Impersonality in the criticism of Maurice Blanchot', in *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd edition (Methuen, London, 1983), pp. 60–78.

37 I owe my title here to Gerald Bruns, whose extremely thoughtful remarks greatly aided the revision of this lecture. I also owe a great deal to Donna Brody, former research student at the University of Essex, who first brought the radicality of the *il y a* to my attention and whose work has been invaluable in thinking through these issues.

38 In this regard, see Elisabeth Bronfen's and Sarah Webster Goodwin's

interesting introduction to *Death and Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993), pp. 3–25, see especially pp. 7 and 20.

39 This idea is borrowed from J. Hillis Miller's *Versions of Pygmalion* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1990).

40 *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W Kaufmann (Vintage, New York, 1967), p. 42.

41 *Being and Time*, trans. J. MacQuarrie and E. Robinson (Blackwell, Oxford, 1962), p. 284. For Levinas's most sustained critique of Heidegger on death, see 'La mort et le temps', in *Emmanuel Levinas. Cahier de l'Herne* (Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1991), pp. 21–75. My opposition between death as possibility and impossibility as a way of organizing the difference between Heidegger, on the one hand, and Levinas and Blanchot, on the other, does not tell the whole story and matters are rarely univocal in relation to Heidegger, particularly on the question of death and the entire thematic of authenticity and inauthenticity. For a more nuanced account of Heidegger on death, see Christopher Fynsk, *Thought and Historicity* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1986), and Françoise Dastur, *La mort. Essai sur la finitude* (Hatier, Paris, 1994).

42 'Prolegomena to any Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity', in *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, eds S. Critchley and P. Dews (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996), pp. 13–45.

43 'Paix et Proximité', *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, No. 3 (Verdier, Lagrasse, 1984), p. 344.

44 *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994), p. 12. A question left unresolved here concerns the relation of death to femininity in Levinas, particularly in *Time and the Other*, that is, between the *mystery* of death and the *mystery* of the feminine, and whether, in the light of Elizabeth Bronfen's work, this repeats a persistent masculinist trope (see *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992)). This also entails the related point as to what extent the Levinasian account of plurality is dependent upon his notion of fecundity and hence upon his account of the child, that is to say, the son, and therefore entails a male lineage of community that fails to acknowledge mother–daughter relations.

45 I borrow this formulation from Paul Davies. In this regard, see the following passage from 'Meaning and Sense':

> To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to envisage this triumph in a *time without me*, to aim at this world below without me, to aim at a time beyond the horizon of my time, in an eschatology without hope for oneself, or in a liberation from my time.
>
> To be *for* a time that would be without me, *for* a time after my time, over and beyond the celebrated 'being for death', is not a banal thought which is extrapolating from my own duration; it is the passage to the time of the other.
>
> (HAH 45/CPP 92)

46 In this connection, see Luce Irigaray, 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas. On the divinity of love', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. M. Whitford (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991), pp. 178–89. Irigaray rightly questions Levinas as to whether the alterity of the child as the future for the father that is not the father's future, does not still remain within the sphere of the *pour soi*, where the child is *for* the father, a project beyond his powers of projection, but still *his* project (see especially p. 181).

47 Paul Davies, 'A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas', in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (Routledge, London and New York, 1990), pp. 37–69.

48 A point of clarification here: in lectures given on Levinas at Essex University in November 1994, Rudi Visker spoke of an 'ethicization of the *il y a*' in Levinas's work. The claim here is that the overcoming or surmounting of the *il y a* in the move to the hypostasis of the subject that characterized Levinas's earlier analyses is abandoned in the later work, where the *il y a* is accorded an ethical significance previously denied to it. Now, there is some truth to this claim, and it would be a question of giving (which we cannot give here) a detailed periodization of the *il y a* across Levinas's work, noting differences of nuance in different texts written at different periods. It is certainly true to say, as Levinas says himself in *Ethique et infini*, that in his later work, although he scarcely speaks of the *il y a* as a theme, 'the shadow of the *il y a* and non-sense still appeared to me necessary as the very ordeal of dis-inter-estedness' (EeI 42). The *il y a* is the shadow or spectre of nonsense that haunts ethical sense *but* – and this is crucial – for Levinas ethical sense cannot, in the final instance, be confused or conflated with an-ethical nonsense. The *il y a* is a threat, but it is a threat that must and can be repelled. This would seem to be confirmed by the 1978 Preface to *De l'existence à l'existent*, where, after writing that the *il y a* is the 'morceau de résistance' of the book, he goes on to describe the *il y a* in terms of 'inhuman neutrality' and 'a neutrality to be surmounted' (DEE 10–11). Thus, Levinas's basic philosophical *intention* does not alter, but whether his *text* is saying something at odds with his intention is another matter.

49 DQVI 115/CPP 165–66: 'And this implies that God is not simply the "first other", the "other par excellence", or the "absolutely other", other than the other (*autrui*), other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other (*autrui*), prior to the ethical bond with the other (*autrui*) and different from every neighbour, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *il y a*.'

50 *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1984), p. 29; trans. S. Critchley and T. Wright in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1996), p. 159, 'But perhaps this theology already announces itself in the very wakefulness of insomnia, in the vigil and troubled vigilance of the psyche before the moment when the finitude of being, wounded by the infinite, is prompted to gather itself into the hegemonic and atheist Ego of knowledge.'

51 Levinas goes some way to discussing this question in 'Transcendence and Evil' (DQVI 189–207/CPP 175–86), where, although Levinas recognizes the 'non-integratability' or excess of evil, the horror of evil is understood by Levinas as the horror of evil in the other man and, hence, as the breakthrough of the Good and the 'approach of the infinite God' (DQVI 207/CPP 186).

52 Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. L. Forestier (Gallimard, Paris, 1979), pp. 913–38 (see especially p. 938); *Selected Short Stories*, trans R. Colet (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 313–44, see especially p. 344.

53 Several years ago, I corresponded with Michel Haar after some discussions we had at the *Collegium Phaenomenologicum* in Perugia, where I had tried to explain my fascination with Levinas. He wrote, and I recall from a memory long troubled by his words, 'je ne vois pas qu'il y a éthique dès qu'il y a altérité' ('I don't see why there is ethics since there is alterity'). For Haar's powerful critique of Levinas, see 'L'obsession de l'autre. L'éthique comme traumatisme', *Emmanuel Levinas. Cahier de l'Herne* (Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1991), pp. 444–53.

54 I owe this analogy to a conversation with Jay Bernstein.

55 In this context I will have to pass over the interesting and difficult question of whether Blanchot's relation to Levinas alters in the later book, *L'écriture du désastre*, which might justifiably be approached as a deeply sympathetic but subtly reconstructive reading of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*.

56 Although it should be noted that when Blanchot edited the texts on Levinas that appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* for republication in *L'entretien infini*, he moved some pages dealing with the question of the

autrui, devoted to a discussion of Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine*, into the essay 'The indestructible' (EI 191–200/IC 130–35). These pages, where the *autrui* is approached as the indestructible who is nonetheless destroyed in the Holocaust, might be read as offering some critical qualifications to Levinas's account of the relation to the *autrui*. Is this why they were moved when Blanchot was editing *L'entretien infini*? Michael Holland has pursued this hypothesis in 'Let's leave God out of this', a paper presented at The Institute for Romance Studies, University College London, May 1995. A brief discussion of the issues surrounding Blanchot's editing and rewriting of his pieces on Levinas in *L'entretien infini* can be found in Holland's *The Blanchot Reader*, op. cit., pp. 191–94.

57 Cf. *Ordnung in Zwielicht* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

58 After the thoughts contained in the final section of this lecture were already formulated, I made the happy discovery that many of my claims are similar to those proposed by John D. Caputo in his attempt to think obligation without reference to any substantive ethics. See his *Against Ethics* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993).

Lecture 2: Unworking romanticism

1 For ease of reference, Schlegel fragments will be referred to by their number as this is identical in the German and English editions.

2 From an earlier version of AF 116, to be found in KA 182.

3 Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1973), p. 9.

4 More speculatively, it might be asked: Does George Eliot's *Middlemarch* count as a romantic novel? I am following an interesting, if untestable, hypothesis offered by Ken Newton ('Historical Prototypes in *Middlemarch*', *English Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 5, October 1975, pp. 403–8), where he claims that Eliot's hero and heroine, Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, are based on the prototypes of Dorothea Veit and Friedrich Schlegel.

5 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W Kaufmann (Vintage, New York, 1967), p. 91.

6 A reliable English translation can be found as an appendix to Andrew Bowie's *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990), pp. 265–67.

7 See Part One of Benjamin's *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, op. cit., especially pp. 14–35.

8 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B. 135.

9 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W Beck (Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1956), p. 31.