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Maurice Blanchot: Art and Technology

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Declaration

I confirm that the material in this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), writer of fiction, literary critic, political journalist and thinker, is one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century literature and thought. The relationship between art and technology is a largely unexplored aspect of Blanchot's writing; this thesis examines his engagement with the question of *techne* in criticism and fiction over a fifty-year period and demonstrates that he is far from subscribing to the technophobia of probably the most influential thinker of technology, Martin Heidegger. It is argued that writing for Blanchot is a mode of *techne* which destabilises the opposition between nature and culture, or nature and technology, or nature and history, and provides a means of thinking other than the *anthropos*. The chronological approach of this thesis stresses how a thinking of writing as *techne* radicalises over time and indicates the enduring influence of Blanchot.

The first chapter considers the treatment of the division, often taken for granted by critics, between literary and everyday language; focussing on Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé in essays dating from 1940 to 1952, this chapter reveals a shift in his thinking of literature from autonomy to radical non-essentiality. The second chapter examines Blanchot's critical engagement with Heidegger in essays written in 1953 and shows how we might reconcile Blanchot's work with ecological thought. A third chapter focuses on the discussion of modern technologies in essays from the 1950s and 1960s and the coincidental emergence of the non-concept of the neuter in literature and criticism; it listens to various apocalyptic tones in work from this period to reveal a continuity between the experience of the technological and of the imaginary. The final chapter explores how 'technique' is everywhere implied once the term disappears from Blanchot's idiom; it argues that fragmentary writing is that *techne* which outplays the human.

Introduction

‘En quelque sorte, j’ai toujours eu une certaine passion politique. La chose publique me provoque souvent.’¹ These words, written in a letter to Roger Laporte in 1984, show that Blanchot, contrary to rumour or reputation, was no isolated hermit but someone deeply immersed in the events and debates of his time. A newspaper article from 1996 describing Blanchot’s protest when Bruno Roy, director of Fata Morgana, refused to withdraw a text by founder of the New Right Alain de Benoist from the publishing house’s catalogue perpetuates the view of Blanchot as, ‘depuis de nombreuses années à l’écart de la vie publique, sortant difficilement de sa réserve; ses rares interventions sont donc très remarquées.’² But his regular pre-war journalism from 1932 to 1940, his resistance to Nazi Occupation and the Vichy regime during the Second World War, which culminated in a near-death experience before a firing squad in June 1944 (recounted fifty years later in *L’Instant de ma mort*), his anti-Gaullism, his opposition to the Algerian war, his involvement in the events of May 1968 and his sustained interest in international affairs, particularly concerning Russia,³ attest to a political

¹ Maurice Blanchot, letter to Roger Laporte [22 December 1984], in *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique, lettre-récit de 1984 suivie d’une lettre de Dionys Mascolo*, by Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Galilée, 2011), p. 62. This letter was initially intended to be published in the abortive *Cahiers de l’Herne* that Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe were due to edit in 1984/5.

² Nicholas Weill, ‘Maurice Blanchot et le débat sur la “nouvelle droite”’, *Le Monde*, 15 November 1996, p. 28. See also Laurent Perez, ‘Maurice Blanchot: la rhétorique du déni’ [review of *L’Autre Blanchot*, by Michel Surya], *Artpress*, 422 (May 2015), 76. Perez writes of Blanchot: ‘Son ultime “retrait” — dont il n’est pas interdit de supposer qu’il répond autant aux premières découvertes sur son passé qu’à l’échec de mai 68 —, s’il prend bien vite la forme d’une conversion inconditionnelle à un “judaïsme imaginaire”, s’effectue en effet d’abord sur le mode de l’amertume et de la dépression.’

³ This is noted by the editor of the volume of correspondence between Blanchot and Vadim Kozovoï; see Denis Aucouturier, ‘Introduction’, in *Lettres à Vadim Kozovoï*, by Maurice Blanchot, ed. by Denis Aucouturier (Houilles: Manucius, 2009), p. 9.

engagement that runs counter to the myth of the solitary writer.⁴ Nevertheless, '[l]a chose publique' better encompasses the broader scope of Blanchot's interest than 'politics' in the limited sense of the word.

For much of the 1930s and 1940s Blanchot was employed as journalist and book reviewer: writing for periodicals about anything topical he acquired an ingrained habit of responding immediately to everyday events and new publications. This habit would persist throughout his career and continued to shape essays published in later volumes such as *L'Entretien infini* [1969] and *L'Amitié* [1971]. 'Le Tout Dernier Mot', an essay on Kafka's correspondence with Felice Bauer, was simultaneously the very last word on Kafka's life, the very last word by Blanchot on Kafka, and the very last piece Blanchot published in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1968; and all this by virtue of the fact that the volume of correspondence had just appeared in German and Blanchot was responding directly to it, while also reflecting on longer-lasting issues of his own.⁵ Similarly, almost all references in *La Communauté inavouable* [1983] are to texts that had only just appeared by Derrida, Duras, Enriquez, Kofman, Nancy and the Rilke-Pasternak-Tsvetayeva letters.⁶ Finally, two essays by Blanchot concerned with nuclear weapons, 'Entretien sur un changement d'époque' [April 1960] and 'L'Apocalypse déçoit' [March 1964], appeared a month or so after the first nuclear weapons test by the French on 13 February 1960 in Reggane, a district in Algeria, and after these weapons became available for use in January 1964.⁷ This demonstrates how essential it is to view everything that

⁴ Blanchot makes this point himself in *Pour l'amitié* (Paris: Fourbis, 1996) (first publ. in *À la recherche d'un communisme de pensée*, by Dionys Mascolo (Paris: Fourbis, 1993), pp. 5-16). For biographical details see Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998).

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, 'Le Tout Dernier Mot', *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 185 (May 1968), 780-808. This was later published in Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard 1971), pp. 300-25; and in Maurice Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, Idées, 453 (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp. 219-48.

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983). Texts cited include: Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (February 1983); Jean-Luc Nancy, 'La Communauté désœuvrée' (published in *Aléa*, February 1983); Marguerite Duras, *La Maladie de la mort* (in bookshops at the beginning of January 1983); Eugène Enriquez, *De la horde à l'État: essai de psychanalyse du lien social* (February 1983); the French translation of the three-handed volume of correspondence between Rilke, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva (February 1983); and Sarah Kofman, *Comment s'en sortir* (January 1983).

⁷ See, for instance, 'Le Général de Gaulle: hurra pour la France', *Le Monde*, 15 February 1960; 'Un décret confie officiellement au président de la République la responsabilité d'engager la force de frappe', *Le Monde*, 21 January 1964.

Blanchot writes within a very specific intellectual and historical context, a methodology which informs the chronological and contextual approach of this thesis.

One of the most important thinkers Blanchot engages with is Martin Heidegger, whose influence on French philosophy cannot be underestimated: his ideas have left their mark on Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Levinas, Lyotard and Stiegler, among others. Blanchot is certainly a name to include on this list. Introduced to Heidegger's work in 1927 or 1928 by his close friend Emmanuel Levinas, he describes the experience of reading *Sein und Zeit* for the first time as 'un véritable choc intellectuel'.⁸ Accessing Heidegger's work as it was published in German meant that Blanchot could respond immediately to texts whose translation into French was often delayed: 'Die Frage nach der Technik' [1953] appeared in *Essais et conférences* [1958] five years after its initial publication; *Holzwege* [1950], the volume containing 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes' and 'Wozu Dichter?', did not appear in French until 1962; and *Sein und Zeit* [1927] was not translated in its entirety until 1986.⁹

A number of translations of sections of Heidegger's texts have been found in Blanchot's personal archive. They were never intended for publication so one may speculate that Blanchot found translation a means of exploring how Heidegger's idiom might work in another language, of testing that it is possible to think in languages other than German and Greek, or of verifying that he had understood the German texts. The following, probably incomplete, list demonstrates the sustained significance of Heidegger for Blanchot, if this was still in doubt, and provides useful confirmation that Blanchot had read, at the very least, the following texts, given here in the order that they appear in the *Gesamtausgabe*: *Sein und Zeit*; *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*; *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*; essays collected in *Holzwege*: 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes', 'Wozu Dichter?', 'Nietzsches Wort: "Gott ist tot"', 'Die Zeit des Weltbildes', 'Der Spruch des Anaximander'; essays collected in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*: 'Die Frage nach der Technik', 'Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?', 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', 'Das Ding', 'Moira', 'Logos', 'Aletheia', 'Dichterisch wohnet der

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'Penser l'apocalypse' [letter to Catherine David, 10 November 1987], in *Écrits politiques: 1953-1993*, ed. by Éric Hoppenot (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), pp. 225-32 (p. 231) (first publ. in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 22 January 1988, pp. 77-79).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Essais et conférences*, trans. by André Préau (Paris: Gallimard, 1958); *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*, trans. by Wolfgang Brokmeier, ed. by François Fédier (Paris: Gallimard, 1962); *Être et temps*, trans. by François Vezin (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

Mensch', 'Überwindung der Metaphysik', 'Wissenschaft und Besinnung'; *Was heißt Denken?*; essays collected in *Wegmarken*: 'Vom Wesen der Wahrheit', 'Zur Seinsfrage' (with its original title 'Über die Linie' in Blanchot's notes); *Der Satz vom Grund*; essays collected in *Identität und Differenz*: 'Der Satz der Identität', 'Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik'; essays collected in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*: 'Die Sprache', 'Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache', 'Das Wesen der Sprache', 'Das Wort', 'Der Weg zur Sprache'; essays collected in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*: 'Hebel – der Hausfreund', 'Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit'; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*.¹⁰

Translation is of no small significance to Blanchot who will later vehemently rebuke Heidegger for putting his philosophical language in the service of National Socialism: 'Cela du moins, rappelle à quel niveau d'abord se situe notre responsabilité de "philosophe": au niveau de son langage.'¹¹

Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger is clearly extensive and sustained. Many recognisably Blanchotian motifs develop from his reading of Heidegger: an interest in Hölderlin and therefore the relationship between poetry and philosophy; the question of death and dying; the relationship between the artwork and truth; and more generally a desire to extricate thinking from metaphysics. In a 1938 review of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, he responds to the philosophical dimension of the novel; implied here is the recognition of a reader familiar with phenomenology whose project is similar to his as yet unfinished *Thomas l'obscur*: 'Il porte le roman là où il n'y a plus d'incidents, plus d'intrigues, plus de personnes particulières, dans ce site où l'esprit ne se soutient qu'en se berçant de notions philosophiques, comme l'existence et l'être.'¹² A later review from 1945 of Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté* will recognise in this series of novels not the purity of thought

¹⁰ List of titles made available by Éric Hoppenot in private correspondence with Leslie Hill. The translation of 'Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch' [L'Homme habite en poète] is included in *Blanchot*, ed. by Éric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté, Cahiers de l'Herne, 107 (Paris: Herne, 2014), pp. 34-37.

¹¹ Blanchot, 'Le Cours du monde', in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 119-23 (p. 123).

¹² Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Ébauche d'un roman', *Aux écoutes*, 30 July 1938, p. 31. Leslie Hill speculates that Blanchot attended Husserl's lectures in Strasbourg in 1929 in *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 95 n. 111. Sartre, on the other hand, did not attend the lectures given by Husserl earlier that year at the Sorbonne and, prior to a meeting with Raymond Aron in 1933, had not studied the work of the German philosopher. Simone de Beauvoir remarks that Sartre's enthusiasm for Husserl was sparked after this meeting: 'Aron le convainquit que la phénoménologie répondait exactement à ses préoccupations: dépasser l'opposition de l'idéalisme et du réalisme, affirmer à la fois la souveraineté de la conscience et la présence du monde, tel qu'il se donne à nous.' After reading Levinas' book on Husserl, Sartre was prompted to follow in the footsteps of Aron and spent a year studying phenomenology at the French Institute in Berlin. See Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), pp. 141-42.

but a consciousness haunted and overwhelmed by things, signalling a distinctive shift in Blanchot's engagement with phenomenology.¹³

In his weekly column for the *Journal des débats* between April 1941 and August 1944 Blanchot makes frequent references to the Heideggerian notion of a founding poetic language, distinguished from secondary instrumental language, but avoids mentioning the name Heidegger during the Occupation. The only explicit reference to Heidegger in this period appears in 1942 in an essay on Camus:

De Husserl à Heidegger, de Kierkegaard à Jaspers et à Chestov, [Camus] distingue toute une famille d'esprits dont l'influence sur notre temps est évidente et qui tous ont fait apparaître quelque visage de la réflexion absurde. Il serait trop peu de dire que ces philosophes ont barré la route à la raison; ce n'est pas seulement l'univers raisonnable qu'ils ont changé en ruines; ils ont pris pour domaine ces ruines mêmes, pour patrie l'exil et, dans la contradiction, le paradoxe, le vide, l'angoisse, ils ont engagé la réalité de l'homme dans une aventure où elle ne peut se trouver que comme énigme et comme question.¹⁴

Heidegger is important for Blanchot in these early years because of his engagement with Hölderlin, the official German war poet celebrated on the centenary of his death in 1943. Interest in Hölderlin was a delicate issue during the Occupation and this explains why Blanchot chooses to avoid naming Heidegger other than via Camus.¹⁵ The event of poetry in Heidegger's account precedes world, time,

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, 'Le Roman de Jean-Paul Sartre', in *La Condition critique: articles 1945-1998*, ed. by Christophe Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 27-30 (p. 29) (first publ. in *Paysage Dimanche*, 21 October 1945, p. 5).

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'Le Mythe de Sisyphe', in *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 65-71 (pp. 67-68) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 25 November 1942, p. 3).

¹⁵ A commemorative volume containing, among other articles, Heidegger's first essay on Hölderlin was published for the Institut Allemand in Paris in 1943: *Friedrich Hölderlin, en commémoration du centenaire de sa mort le 7 juin 1843*, ed. by Johannes Hoffmeister and Hans Fegers on behalf of the Institut allemand (Paris: Sorlot, 1943). The 'Avant-propos' describes how German soldiers carried copies of Hölderlin's poetry onto the battlefield and an essay by Kurt Hildebrandt entitled 'L'Esprit allemand et l'esprit européen' (pp. 85-108), which is a commentary on Hölderlin's 'Archipelagus', ends with the words: 'En dépit de toutes les destructions, c'est à nous que s'applique l'espoir consolateur de voir surgir, si le génie survit, une civilisation encore plus grande et plus belle que celle dont nous chérissons tant les restes. Mais c'est surtout à nous qu'incombe la

history, and in this sense marks the limit of philosophy. *Dichtung* cannot be conceptualised without being eclipsed; a Heideggerian reading of a poem by Hölderlin cannot come to any conclusions in the manner of representational thought and it is this necessity of eschewing all metalanguage which is apparent in the ‘bizarre stylistic innovations’ of Heidegger’s work according to Timothy Clark.¹⁶

Blanchot largely adheres to Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin in essays before 1946 and, even in later years when there is a marked distance from Heideggerian thought, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is a motif that runs throughout his work, leading Gerald Bruns to argue that poetry for Blanchot is the resistance of language to our projects and systems, or the refusal of philosophy.¹⁷

Heidegger’s name crops up in several essays collected in *La Part du feu* [1949] that were originally published between 1945 and 1948, around the time that his association with National Socialism was under scrutiny in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*;¹⁸ but this is not to say that this was Blanchot fervently adhering to fundamental ontology. These essays reveal the early displacement of Heidegger’s thought in Blanchot’s writing. His most visible departure from a view of poetry as foundation, to which he had previously more or less subscribed, occurs in ‘La Parole “sacrée” de Hölderlin’ [1946]. Here Blanchot criticises Heidegger’s etymological approach to Hölderlin’s poetry as well as his neglect of the flight and rhythm of this poetic language; but more importantly, he problematizes the relation between poetry and being: ‘Interroger Hölderlin, c’est interroger une existence poétique si forte que, son essence une fois dévoilée, elle a pu faire elle-même la preuve qu’elle était impossibilité et se prolonger dans le néant et dans le vide, sans cesser de s’accomplir.’¹⁹ Poetic existence is aporetic because it enables that which necessarily precedes it; Blanchot reveals the

grande mission d’achever la guerre et de réaliser l’ordre européen dans le noble bonheur d’une telle action créatrice, c’est-à-dire dans le sens du poème de Hölderlin’ (p. 108).

¹⁶ Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida’s Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 41.

¹⁷ Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ On the reception of Heidegger in France, see Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, 2 vols (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001); and Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘La Parole “sacrée” de Hölderlin’, in *La Part du feu*, 6th edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 118-36 (p. 121) (first publ. in *Critique*, 7 (December 1946), 579-96).

impossible foundations of poetry in a displacement of Heidegger's thought that continues throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.²⁰

This displacement comes to the fore in the treatment of the question of death and dying: compare Blanchot on Rilke in 1943 with Blanchot on Baudelaire in 1947. Anxiety, according to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, is the mood experienced in the face of nothingness: a moment of meaningless confusion when specific entities and their meanings seem irrelevant and life appears futile. Through anxiety we face up to our own mortality and achieve a being-toward-death which is an authentic existence.²¹ The failing of Malte Laurids Brigge according to Blanchot in 1943, following Heidegger, is to have fled from such anxiety and to have sought refuge in the meaning conveyed by instrumental language:

C'est là le sort de Malte Laurids Brigge: au moment de s'enfoncer dans l'aventure irréparable, il doit se défendre et survivre; il repousse le temps de l'explication qui rend toutes choses vaines, il écarte les mots qui se dénouent et les significations qui se défont et il dit, souhaits pleins de tendresse humaine, mais qui éternisent sa vie et l'empêchent d'aimer sa mort: 'J'aimerais tant demeurer parmi les significations qui me sont devenues chères!'²²

Four years later, in a review of Sartre's monograph *Baudelaire* [1947], achieving authentic existence via an angst-ridden confrontation with mortality is no longer possible:

'L'être-pour-la-mort' de Heidegger, loin de caractériser la possibilité authentique, ne représenterait donc pour Baudelaire qu'une imposture de plus. Nous n'avons pas devant nous la mort, mais l'existence qui, si loin que j'avance, est toujours devant et, si bas que je

²⁰ See Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 77-91.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1962] 1988), pp. 228-35, 304-11; *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976-), II: *Sein und Zeit* (1977), 244-53, 345-54. Simon Critchley provides a reading of anxiety according to Blanchot in 'De l'angoisse au langage', the essay which opens *Faux pas*, in *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 35-41.

²² Blanchot, 'Rilke', in *Faux pas*, pp. 59-64 (p. 64) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 10 March 1943, p. 3).

m'enfoncé, est toujours plus bas et, si irréallement que je m'affirme (par exemple dans l'art), infeste cette irréalité d'une absence de réalité qui est encore l'existence.²³

Death becomes the limitless experience of finitude, the elusive inevitable or unattainable certainty, in this modification of Heidegger's thought. The ontological status of the poetic saying which provides the foundation for Being is undermined by this view of impossible death. Also challenged in the background is the Sartrean idea that literature can be a vehicle for authentic *bonne foi* and the possibility of a committed literature.

Sartre defines the human being in terms of freedom: human consciousness in *L'Être et le néant* is considered independent of its surroundings and the human is wholly free; the implication is that freedom entails a responsibility to choose and authentic choice accepts this responsibility. For Sartre, to write is to name and unveil the world and to project an image of being in the world; the writer is therefore committed to the extent of being conscious of involvement in the world. The writer is also under the moral imperative to disclose a reality to the reader in which the individual is a historically-situated being who is committed to a quest for authentic freedom. *Mauvaise foi* is a denial of human freedom through self-deception and inauthenticity.²⁴ But for Blanchot literature can never be authentic since it is by definition *mauvaise foi*:

le roman n'a rien à craindre d'une thèse, à condition que la thèse accepte de n'être rien sans le roman. Car le roman a sa morale propre, qui est l'ambiguïté et l'équivoque. Il a sa réalité propre, qui est le pouvoir de découvrir le monde dans l'irréel et l'imaginaire. Et, enfin, il a sa vérité, qui l'oblige à ne rien affirmer sans chercher à le reprendre et à ne rien faire réussir sans

²³ Blanchot, 'L'Échec de Baudelaire', in *La Part du feu*, pp. 137-56 (p. 153) (first publ. in *L'Arche*, 24 (February 1947), 80-91; 25 (March 1947), 97-107).

²⁴ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); and *Les Chemins de la liberté*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1945-1949), I: *L'Âge de la raison*, II: *Le Sursis* (1945), III: *La Mort dans l'âme*.

en préparer l'échec, de sorte que toute thèse qui dans un roman triomphe, cesse aussitôt d'être vraie.²⁵

In a distortion of Sartre's account of morality, freedom and existence, Blanchot argues that the 'truth' of the work cannot correspond to any worldly truth or political project. Writing reveals the imaginary rather than the world and the writer cannot therefore be committed because he or she is not involved in the world as such. The worldly action of literature, the possibility of an engaged literature such as that described by Sartre, is undermined. The work is revolutionary in itself and, thanks to the worklessness of the neuter, this extends beyond its borders; but this never begins in the real world of work, objects and political parties. The only commitment can be to writing for Blanchot. The important emphasis is that 'literature' or art is not a putting into work of truth as Sartre and Heidegger would argue.

The stress shifts from this moment onwards in Blanchot's writing from grounding and unity to rootlessness and dispersion through the development of the non-concept of the neuter and later a fragmentary idiom which seeks to respond to what lies beyond the limits of this existence. By 1956, Levinas perceives a decisive split from Heidegger: 'Blanchot ne prête-t-il pas à l'art la fonction de déraciner l'univers heideggérien?'²⁶ This critique of Heidegger is so powerful because it emerges from within the parameters of his thought: the notion that in language beings are founded and Being takes hold of us is displaced by a mode of writing associated with anonymity and rootlessness. Dominique Janicaud, in his comprehensive study of the reception of Heidegger in France, confirms the crucial and unbridgeable gap between the neuter and *Sein*: 'anonyme, sans raison, sans visage, sans valeur définitive, le Neutre se dérobe à tout enracinement, à toute réappropriation, fût-elle celle d'un événement originaire.'²⁷ The world is undone by the worklessness of the neuter rather than

²⁵ Blanchot, 'Les Romans de Sartre', in *La Part du feu*, pp. 195-211 (pp. 210-11) (first publ. in *L'Arche*, 10 (October 1945), 121-34). See also the thinly veiled critique of Sartre in Blanchot's review of Jean Pouillon's *Le Temps et le roman*, 'Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi', in *La Condition critique*, pp. 100-15 (first publ. in *Les Temps modernes*, 19 (April 1947), 1304-17).

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Le Regard du poète', in *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), pp. 9-26 (p. 25) (first publ. in *Monde Nouveau*, 98 (1956), 6-19).

²⁷ Janicaud, I, 206.

produced in an act of poetic foundation. Marlène Zarader's misreading of the neuter as the ontological soil for phenomena unexplained by Heideggerian ontology — night, outside, impersonality — stresses the action of the neuter as a lived experience compatible with phenomenology.²⁸ But the neuter is first and foremost the force of the imaginary, not something experienced in the world by an independent consciousness with the freedom to choose, but a limit-experience which challenges world from a position irreducible to world.

Blanchot's intellectual engagement with the contemporary world is often overshadowed by the polemics surrounding his politics. There are many diverse views of Blanchot's politics prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Jeffrey Mehlman in 1980 claimed to have discovered Blanchot's 'anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, and pro-terrorist' past and argued for the centrality of the 1930s journalism to any understanding of Blanchot.²⁹ Christophe Bident, Leslie Hill and Kevin Hart have each argued that Blanchot's antidemocratic, anticommunist, anti-League of Nations, nationalist stance in the 1930s never translates into anti-Semitism or fascism: 'On the far right wing though he surely was, at no time was Blanchot attracted to fascism. His nonconformism was absolute.'³⁰ More recently Jean-Luc Nancy and Michel Surya have challenged Blanchot's later work in light of his earlier politics, questioning both the meaning and the extent of what Blanchot, in the letter to Laporte, calls 'une sorte de conversion'³¹ and consequently how far he broke with his earlier views.

Surya sees this conversion in purely religious terms, arguing that the shift from extreme right to extreme left is an inversion of the same thought and that if there is a 'conversion' it comes later in Blanchot's work, following the 'failure' of May 1968, as he moves from politics to Levinasian ethics and an idealised or theorised Judaism. He seems to read Blanchot through a Sartrean lens, arguing that the ideal is the writer as part of a mass movement: May 1968 was the fusion of the popular will of

²⁸ Marlène Zarader, *L'Être et le neutre: à partir de Maurice Blanchot* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001), p. 183.

²⁹ See Jeffrey Mehlman, 'Blanchot at Combat: Of Literature and Terror', *MLN*, 95: 4 (May 1980), 808-29; *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); and *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Kevin Hart, 'Foreword: The Friendship of the No', in *Political Writings*, by Maurice Blanchot, trans. by Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. xi-xxx (p. xiii). See also Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, pp. 110-13; and Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 21-44.

³¹ Blanchot, letter to Roger Laporte, in *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, by Nancy, p. 61.

the people and the intellectual.³² Surya is scathing about Blanchot's political writings from the 1930s, accusing him of fascism and anti-Semitism which persist beyond the 'conversion'. He draws broad comparisons between Blanchot and Heidegger and demands that Blanchot's criticism of the German philosopher, after he became aware of the extent of his adherence to National Socialism in 1962, must be applied in turn to Blanchot himself: 'c'est longtemps que Blanchot a été ce que Heidegger fut aussi au même moment (un temps long, sans aucun doute, mais dont tout le monde dispute de la longueur); et c'est aussi longtemps que l'un et l'autre le dissimulèrent (autant que chacun le put, Heidegger moins que Blanchot) ou ne le reconnurent pas (ou pas sans réticence ni atténuation).'³³ The comparison between the two seems unjustifiable, given that Blanchot was not employed by the Nazi state, that he never supported any regime and that Surya provides little, if any, compelling evidence of anti-Semitism.

Nancy differs from Surya in that he sees this conversion within the bounds of Catholicism, whose influence, it is claimed, is discernible in early texts and throughout Blanchot's work.³⁴ Focussing largely on Blanchot's response to his 'La Communauté désœuvrée', he argues that *La Communauté inavouable* is addressed to Levinas to contest the idea that the relation to the other is defined purely by ethical responsibility; this relation can also be one of passion or one in which the other disappears into the absolute elsewhere or in which the other is only recognisable as other: Duras' woman as she is discussed in *La Communauté inavouable* is, according to Nancy, comparable to Christ.³⁵

³² See the radio interview led by Alain Finkielkraut with Surya and Nancy, 'Politiques de Maurice Blanchot', *Répliques*, France Culture, 23 May 2015 <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/repliques/politiques-de-maurice-blanchot>> [accessed: 7 February 2017]. Surya is referring to Blanchot's *Les Intellectuels en question: ébauche d'une réflexion* (Paris: Fourbis, 1996; Tours: Farrago, 2000) (first publ. in *Le Débat*, 29 (March 1984), 3-24).

³³ Michel Surya, *L'Autre Blanchot: l'écriture de jour, l'écriture de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), p. 24. The first two sections of this text first appeared in *Les Politiques de Maurice Blanchot: 1930-1993*, ed. by Michel Surya, *Revue Lignes*, 43 (Paris: Lignes, 2014), pp. 9-62. Other articles in this volume also address Blanchot's political writings of the 1930s; each of them accuses Blanchot of fascism: François Brémonty, 'Enquête historique et réflexions critiques sur l'itinéraire politique de Maurice Blanchot' (pp. 63-121); David Uhrig, 'Blanchot, du "non-conformisme" au maréchalisme' (pp. 122-39); and David Amar, 'D'une politique impossible' (pp. 140-52).

³⁴ Nancy begins to develop this argument in *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, pp. 35-40.

³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée* (Paris: Galilée, 2014), pp. 106-12.

In that letter to Laporte Blanchot writes that this ‘sort of conversion’ was hastened by the sharing of the writing of the day and the writing of the night.³⁶ Nancy and Surya misunderstand this *sort of* conversion when they think it in religious terms. The conversion, transformation, metamorphosis, slippage involves a shift from the world of work and objects toward literature and the unreal, prompted by the experience of writing his first novel *Thomas l’obscur*. The ‘conversion’ is ambiguous because Blanchot wants to signal a more fluid and incessant, because unachievable, transformation for which the term ‘metamorphosis’ might be more appropriate. He writes in the review of the first two volumes of Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la liberté* in 1945:

Il est indéniable que l’art de Sartre atteint son plus grand pouvoir lorsqu’il décrit l’engloutissement des consciences par les choses qui les hantent et les débordent. Le monde qu’il sent est celui d’une métamorphose, et cette métamorphose n’est pas un simple changement de forme, ni la transformation d’un être en un autre être, fût-ce d’un homme en une vermine; elle va plus loin, elle est irrémédiable, car c’est la conscience elle-même qui se matérialise, c’est la pensée qui se fige en une substance gluante, sans contour, sans apparence, un dehors triste et vague que nous ne pouvons saisir et qui, pourtant, comme tel, continue désespérément à penser.³⁷

Surya suggests that this cannot be deemed a true conversion because it is not a sudden, brutal break from the past,³⁸ but the point is that the writing of the day is implicated in the writing of the night in an unachievable metamorphosis. In an essay on Rilke from 1953, what Blanchot might understand by conversion is further clarified: “*Veuille la métamorphose*”, “*Wolle die Wandlung*”. Il ne faut pas rester, mais passer. “*Nulle part il n’est demeurer*.” “*Bleiben ist nirgends*.” “*Ce qui s’enferme dans le fait de demeurer déjà est pétrifié*.” Vivre, c’est toujours déjà prendre congé, être congédié et

³⁶ Blanchot, letter to Roger Laporte, in *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, by Nancy, p. 61.

³⁷ Blanchot, ‘Le Roman de Jean-Paul Sartre’, in *La Condition critique*, p. 29.

³⁸ Surya, *L’Autre Blanchot*, pp. 50-56.

congédier ce qui est.’³⁹ Nancy might read the German ‘Wandlung’ as transubstantiation; but the setting of Rilke’s original German alongside its French translation allows Blanchot to clarify that ‘Wandlung’ is here to be understood in terms of metamorphosis while also revealing the differences within language. Is this a command to will metamorphosis or the assertion that metamorphosis wills? Is remaining nowhere or is there nowhere to remain? If living is to take leave, to be dismissed and to dismiss what is, then we are left with only amorphous forms which are simultaneously active subject, passive subject and object of this absence. This echoes the sort of metamorphosis described by Blanchot in relation to, but not in the spirit of, Sartre’s novels in 1945.



The question of technology is the major question of modern times: modern technology in various guises enabled the Holocaust,⁴⁰ drove the Cold War through the development of nuclear weapons (and to a lesser extent the space race), is changing the nature of warfare through the use of unmanned drones, allows governments unprecedented access to our personal information through mass data collection, and continues to cause rapid climate change in an age recently labelled the Anthropocene (to list only a handful of the most pressing issues).⁴¹ Heidegger has been described as the single most influential twentieth-century philosopher of technology,⁴² for whom modern technology threatens to transform everything into a calculable resource to be exploited and art is the saving power which will provide the foundation for a new beginning. ‘Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst | Das Rettende auch’ [Where however there is danger, grows | Too that which saves].⁴³ This famous quotation from

³⁹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, Folios essais, 89 (Paris: Gallimard, [1955] 1988), pp. 151-209 (p. 181) (first publ. in *Critique*, 71 (April 1953), 291-304; 72 (May 1953), 387-99).

⁴⁰ Heidegger does not quite see it like this, since the Holocaust as such is notoriously never addressed in his thinking.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Damian Carrington, ‘The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age’, *Guardian*, 29 August 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth> [accessed 18 January 2017].

⁴² Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 17.

⁴³ Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Patmos’, in *Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 462-77 (pp. 462-63), translation modified.

Hölderlin leads Heidegger to conclude that where technology rules, so too *techne* as art has a chance and a role to counteract it.

The essence of technology, Heidegger famously argues, is nothing technological and modern technology should be distinguished from its Greek root *techne*: the latter is a bringing-forth which allows Being to come into unconcealment, while modern technology is a challenging-forth which transforms everything, including Being, into standing reserve or resource (technology is a continuation of metaphysics by other means). The will that wills everything as standing reserve wills sheer power. The world no longer appears as mysterious in modernity when everything, including the human, is revealed as ordered and calculable resource to be exploited. The danger is that we will have lost our openness to Being and to the possibility of historical transformation and it is for this reason that Heidegger turns to poetry as the saying through which we can once again think Being. *Techne* is a mode of *poiesis*, writes Heidegger, and the essence of art is poetry because it is in language that beings are founded and Being takes hold of us.⁴⁴ The reduction of nature to an object for metaphysical calculating rationality was perhaps the reason why, in the aftermath of the Second World War and despite his politics, so many readers in France considered Heidegger to be the crucial contemporary thinker. Though Blanchot was profoundly influenced by this claim, explaining in part his interest in Heidegger's Hölderlin, he did not subscribe to it wholeheartedly or even at all: his engagement with Martin Heidegger was close and detailed but also tense and adversarial.

Tom Rockmore, in his study of the reception of Heidegger in French philosophy, forcefully argues that one must take a contextualist approach to his philosophy, which should not be isolated from his politics.⁴⁵ Blanchot revealed in a letter published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1988 that he only became aware of the extent of Heidegger's politics in 1962.⁴⁶ Public discussion of these revelations is delayed until the publication of *L'Entretien infini* in 1969, where he adds a lengthy

⁴⁴ See Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. by William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 311-41; 'Die Frage nach der Technik', in *Gesamtausgabe*, VII: *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (2000), 7-36.

⁴⁵ Rockmore, pp. xiii-xv.

⁴⁶ Blanchot, 'Penser l'apocalypse', in *Écrits politiques*, p. 231. There is evidence for this in the preparatory notes for the *Revue internationale* dating from this time; see Blanchot, 'Le Cours du monde', in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 122-23.

footnote to an essay written some eleven years earlier, apropos of Heidegger's two volumes on Nietzsche which had been published in German in 1961: 'destiné à recommander un vote décisif en faveur du national-socialisme, [Heidegger] a mis au service de Hitler le langage *même* et l'écriture *même* par lesquels, en un grand moment de l'histoire de la pensée, nous avons été invités à l'interrogation désignée comme la plus haute, celle qui pouvait nous venir de l'Être et du Temps.'⁴⁷ He makes a similar point in the letter from 1988:

Discours aussi effrayants par leur forme que par leur contenu, car c'est la même écriture et le langage même par lesquels, en un grand moment de la pensée, nous avons été invités à l'interrogation la plus haute, celle qui pouvait nous venir de l'être et du temps, que Heidegger retrouvait pour appeler à voter en faveur de Hitler, pour justifier la rupture de l'Allemagne nazie s'éloignant de la Société des nations ou pour faire l'éloge de Schlageter. Oui, le même langage sacré, peut-être un peu plus grossier, un peu plus emphatique, mais qui désormais se fera entendre jusque dans les commentaires sur Hölderlin et altérera ceux-ci, mais pour d'autres raisons encore.⁴⁸

The same philosophical system used to interrogate being, history and the poetry of Hölderlin was employed by Heidegger in support of Hitler and the Nazi party. Surya and others have read this as a guilty admission, on Blanchot's part, of his own compromised past; but Blanchot never committed his language to any political party, nor is there any concrete evidence of anti-Semitism. He was, as Bident, Hill and Hart have noted, radically nonconformist as opposed to fascist.

The recent publication of the *Schwarze Hefte* has reignited debates surrounding Heidegger's politics. According to their editor Peter Trawny, these notebooks demonstrate that even at a time when Heidegger was particularly critical of National Socialism a specific anti-Semitism was emerging

⁴⁷ Maurice Blanchot, 'Nietzsche, aujourd'hui', in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 201-15 (p. 210 n. 1) (first publ., without this footnote, in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 68 (August 1958), 284-95).

⁴⁸ Blanchot, 'Penser l'apocalypse', in *Écrits politiques*, p. 231. Blanchot also comments on Heidegger's politics in *Les Intellectuels en question*, pp. 9-11; and 'N'oubliez pas!', in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 237-45 (first publ. in *L'Arche*, 373 (May 1988), 68-71).

in his thought inscribed in the history of Being. Heidegger is critical of National Socialism for its ideology in these notebooks, but still perceives it as the necessary last form of Western metaphysics, the fulfilment of metaphysics which could enable the other beginning. Trawny writes: ‘Certes, Heidegger ne voulait pas la guerre. Mais quand elle fut là, il l’a tenue pour un pas inévitable à accomplir sur le chemin du “dépassement de la métaphysique”’.⁴⁹ Heidegger perceives modernity as a threat to German rootedness and Jewish people belong to this threat in their uprooted, mathematical, technicized state; they have forgotten what only the German people can remember: Being.

Nancy has suggested that Blanchot in the 1930s shares with Catholicism a hatred of modernity which is a symptom of malaise in and of civilisation: ‘si la démocratie n’est que l’habillage à peine politique — gestionnaire — de la modernité comme attente perpétuelle et aveugle d’un lendemain dont on n’attend que l’indéfini même (plus de fins toujours multipliées, plus de valeurs toujours plus marchandes, bref: technique et capitale), alors la démocratie s’avère incapable de l’“extrême”’.⁵⁰ Such criticism invariably invites comparisons between Blanchot and Heidegger. The former explains in 1984, when trying to understand the appeal of fascism in Europe in the 1930s, that democracy seemed bloodless in the years following the Great War: ‘La démocratie est comme usée, elle ne rayonne plus, elle est la médiocrité quotidienne dont les difficultés économiques, créées par la guerre, mettent en évidence les faiblesses désastreuses.’⁵¹ In his political writings of the 1930s Blanchot saw France weakened by bad government and failing democracy and called for a spiritual, national revolution. There is such a plea at the end of a review from 1932 of Daniel-Rops’ *Le Monde sans âme*, where Blanchot also clarifies that the fault with the modern decadent world does not lie with the machine: we see the machine as characteristic of our time and we deem it responsible for all progress, wonder and disorder, but it is vain to think that the machine is the cause of our ruin. What is much more menacing, writes Blanchot following Daniel-Rops, is that the materialism responsible for our current disarray is nothing new.⁵²

⁴⁹ Peter Trawny, *Heidegger et l’antisémitisme: sur les ‘Cahiers noirs’*, trans. by Julia Christ and Jean-Claude Monod (Paris: Seuil, 2014), p. 154.

⁵⁰ Nancy, *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, p. 40.

⁵¹ Blanchot, *Les Intellectuels en question*, p. 47.

⁵² Maurice Blanchot, ‘Le Monde sans âme’, *La Revue Française*, n.s., 3 (August 1932), 460-70 (p. 464).

Blanchot is critical of Daniel-Rops for not having recognised the importance of Soviet Russia in his study: ‘A un monde sans âme, la Russie soviétique, en faisant appel aux instincts les plus matérialistes de l’homme, s’est proposé de rendre un simulacre de spiritualité. L’entreprise n’est pas sans intérêt.’⁵³ Both capitalism and communism offer material happiness, according to Blanchot, but the latter promises it universally so that it becomes a sort of faith lacking in spiritualism. We must see in this imitation of the spiritual the principle of an incalculable disorder: ‘Le communisme exige de l’homme, en face des choses et pour la poursuite de valeurs infiniment relatives, la même attitude absolue qui se conçoit hors de tout hasard et de tout accident, par l’attrait de ce que l’esprit offre de plus pur.’⁵⁴ The association of the machine with order, precision and uniformity aligns the technological with the possibility of the genuine revolution that denies the incalculable disorder of materialism perpetuated by Marxism and Stalinism.

Ce qui est redoutable dans la machine, c’est donc sa perfection même, la rigueur de l’ordre matériel auquel elle se prête et où ne subsiste aucun défaut. Mais on hésite à la condamner, parce qu’elle exclut l’à peu près et l’inexact, qu’elle n’a pas de faiblesse, qu’enfin elle ne laisse point subsister de désordre dont l’esprit puisse espérer profiter pour s’en rendre maître.⁵⁵

Christophe Bident has noted the ordered manner of Blanchot’s writing style in this essay: ‘Les périodes sont ordonnées, les adjectifs équilibrés, l’exophore et l’anaphore classiquement dosées, avec une pointe retenue de lyrisme culminant dans un alexandrin parfaitement anapestique.’⁵⁶ The style of this essay echoes his resistance to Stalinism and the suggestion, although never explicitly formulated, is that the machine also bears the traits of this resistance. This is a striking rejection of any attempt to blame the machine for the troubles of modern times; it is evidence that, from a very early stage in his career as journalist, Blanchot did not condemn modernity or mechanisation, as Nancy suggests, and

⁵³ Ibid., p. 465.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 468.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 464.

⁵⁶ Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, p. 62.

saw in it the potential for change. Blanchot is thus very far from Heidegger's condemnation of modern technology, associated with Judaism, as the final phase of Western metaphysics.

Blanchot is not often seen as a thinker of technology and this is a largely unexplored aspect of his work; much of his engagement with Heidegger does, however, turn on the relationship between art and technology and there is evidence that his thought influenced Bernard Stiegler.⁵⁷ The question of literature or writing is for Blanchot a question of *techne* or technology, but one related to the impossibility of dying rather than fundamental ontology. In 1953, the year that Heidegger published 'The Question Concerning Technology', Blanchot claimed that writing was one technique among others and, in another essay, returned to Heidegger's critique of Rilke from 1946 which contains one of the most explicit early denunciations of the ruinous effects of modern technology.⁵⁸ In this year the *Nouvelle Revue française* was relaunched as *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* and Blanchot was able, as regular contributor, to confidently set out his own critical stall and, while still being a topical book reviewer, reach beyond the immediate present to broaden the scope of his essays. This year therefore marks a moment when Blanchot begins to articulate his ideas concerning literature more confidently and at which point he seems to be closely engaging with a philosophy of technology. Arthur Bradley argues that Heidegger presupposes that our technological condition must remain thinkable from some implied pre-technological vantage point.⁵⁹ This thesis will show that the technical is always already implied in Blanchot's conception of language.



⁵⁷ See Calum Watt, 'The Uses of Maurice Blanchot in Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time*', *Paragraph*, 39: 3 (2016), 305-18. Ian James briefly notes that writing for Blanchot is one mode of technique amongst others and asks what other forms of technique, technicity, art or technology might 'allow the totality of community to be both affirmed and at the same time maintained as absence or as absent essence?' He argues that this question takes on greater urgency if Bernard Stiegler is correct and we are passing from an epoch of the experience of history shaped by writing to an epoch shaped by numerical and digital communications technologies. See Ian James 'The Narrow Margin', in *Blanchot Romantique: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by John McKeane and Hannes Opelz (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 263-74 (pp. 273-74). Michael Holland argues that for Blanchot the question of technology [*technique*], to be distinguished from the question posed by the atom bomb, is a question of language in *Avant dire: essais sur Blanchot* (Paris: Herman, 2015), pp. 297-306. So far, this is the extent of critical engagement with the question of technology in Blanchot.

⁵⁸ See Maurice Blanchot, 'La Bête de Lascaux', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 4 (April 1953), 684-93 (p. 684); and 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 151-209.

⁵⁹ Bradley, p. 92.

This thesis does not endeavour to provide an exhaustive account of Blanchot's critical work or narratives; it instead examines discrete moments when there is a shift in his thought in which a thinking of technology is implied. The analysis of *techne* offered by Heidegger shows that the relationship between art and the utilitarian warrants further scrutiny. The first chapter of this thesis traces the division between poetic and everyday language in work by Stéphane Mallarmé, the Jena Romantics, the Russian Formalists, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, who, despite their vastly different concerns, all remain committed to a dual state of language, before considering the treatment of this division by Blanchot in essays on Mallarmé dating from 1940 to 1952. Blanchot initially commits to a distinction between the poetic and the everyday, but there is evidence of a shift from as early as 1941, which becomes more pronounced by 1946, with implications for his reading of Heidegger and Husserl. The conversion of which Blanchot writes in the letter to Roger Laporte is something like the phenomenological reduction, a bracketing off of world, rather than an exchange of one set of religious beliefs for another, but not one that provides ontological foundation or rediscovers the transcendental ego. This chapter demonstrates the radical non-essentiality of literature, associated with ambiguity and rootlessness, once the limits of art are challenged.

Chapter Two considers Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger in the early 1950s, in particular his response to the reading of Rilke in 'Wozu Dichter?' [1946]. Heideggerian thought, although displaced by Blanchot from the mid-1940s onwards, remains a fundamental starting point from which to understand the impossibility of dying and the neuter. As has been noted, 'Wozu Dichter?' contains one of the earliest denunciations of technology by Heidegger; Blanchot chooses not to respond to this dimension of the essay, but rejects the possibility of the redemptive turn away from metaphysics so closely associated with technological dominance. Through a comparison of their readings of Rilke, this chapter demonstrates that Blanchot engages with the Heideggerian concept of world in order to reveal its cracks. The appearance of animals in *Thomas l'obscur* and *L'Arrêt de mort* signals the disruption of the hierarchy established by Heidegger between human, animal and stone; meanwhile, the motif of unruly hands in essays and fiction from this time reveals a disobedient technology which challenges the limit of the human. This chapter reconciles Blanchot's writing with

ecological thought and demonstrates that in work from this period the technical is found to be always already inhabiting the natural.

Chapter Three considers essays from the 1950s and 1960s with an explicit focus on ‘la technique’, tracing the development of a thinking of technology in the years following the publication in German of ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ and at a time of political upheaval and sweeping social change in France, thanks in part to developing technologies. In 1953 Blanchot states that the impersonal knowledge of writing is linked to ‘la technique’ in all of its forms. Later discussion of radio, cinema, nuclear weapons, spaceflight and the printing press should be considered in light of this statement. At stake here is the question of whether we can hear in modern technology something other than the foretelling of the end of history or world; this chapter distances Blanchot from the technophobia of Heidegger, who in 1966 confessed that ‘only a God can save us now’. The relationship between writing and modern technology, particular the role of the non-concept of the neuter, is examined to explore how we may hear in all forms of *techne* something new and unexpected. The chapter culminates in a reading of *Le Dernier Homme* informed by Blanchot’s reading of Kafka; it demonstrates that writing for Blanchot cannot be enclosed within anthropocentric or anthropological mastery, which it challenges in the name of the other to which it gives voice.

The final chapter focuses on the development of a fragmentary writing from 1958 onwards and the role a thinking of technology plays in this. Between 1965 and 1980 there is no mention of the term ‘technique’ in Blanchot’s writing; this chapter shows that rather than a condemnation of technology the suppression of the term reveals that technology is everywhere implied. Fragmentary writing, it will be argued, is a sort of powerless power which is a mode of resistance to techniques of what Michel Foucault called disciplinary power; it is a wayward inorganic proliferation which outplays the human. This chapter considers the role an affirmative refusal plays in resistance and in the undoing of the subject, and the various forms this refusal takes in Blanchot’s work, from stag beetle to mounds of rubble. Throughout this thesis the stress is placed on the development of a thinking of technology which shifts over time. The conclusion considers the relevance of Blanchot in the twenty first century, how he has set the agenda for thinkers such as Bernard Stiegler, and how we are still to grasp the full significance of his work.

1

Blanchot and Mallarmé: *Le double état de la parole*

As we have seen, Greek *techne* refers to both what is understood today by technology and what we call art, poetry, or literature. Any division imposed between art and the utilitarian implies that there is a language unlike artistic, poetic, or literary expression that follows a contrasting logic, economy, or convention and falls into the same category as modern technology. Some literary critics or theorists take it for granted that literature is distinguishable from the language employed in everyday life. Ordinary language is commonly considered the norm and defined as that sort of verbal or written instrument that communicates information clearly and logically, privileging content over form or stressing referent over sign. Examples may include dictionaries, encyclopaedia, telephone books, car manuals, journalism. Artistic, poetic, or literary language, in contrast, is often treated as an estrangement of ordinary language that privileges sign over referent or that is preoccupied with form over content. As Heidegger shows in his analysis of the essence of technology, the relationship between art and the utilitarian warrants further scrutiny. Such questioning has consequences for our definition of literature and the distinction we perceive between the literary and the everyday. What is literature? This question is one that has underscored much, if not the whole, of modern literary theory and it is one, this chapter will show, to which Maurice Blanchot brings a distinctive and decisive inflection of his own.

Blanchot is often seen to have committed to a double state of language in his earlier work. The misconception that Blanchot was a solitary hermit contributes to the idea that he is a writer

committed to a version of literary autonomy.¹ This may be the case in the late 1930s, but this chapter will demonstrate that as early as 1941 there is evidence of a shift in Blanchot's thought and that by 1952 the division between the two modes of language is unsustainable: 'Cette distinction est elle-même brutale, pourtant difficile à saisir, car, à ce qu'il distingue si absolument, Mallarmé donne la même substance, rencontre, pour le définir, le même mot, qui est le silence.'² It is too simple, Blanchot writes in this essay from 1952, to claim that art is the reversal of the utilitarian movement from object to image: 'on ne s'élève jamais du "monde" à l'art [...], mais l'on va toujours de l'art vers ce qui paraît être les apparences neutralisées du monde — et qui, en réalité, n'apparaît tel que sous le regard domestiqué qui est généralement le nôtre, ce regard du spectateur insuffisant, rivé au monde des fins et tout au plus capable d'aller du monde au tableau.'³ The relationship between art and the utilitarian becomes one of slippage rather than opposition by 1952.

This chapter will present the conceptual history of what Stéphane Mallarmé termed 'le double état de la parole', outlining significant interpretations of the distinction between poetic and everyday language by Mallarmé, the Jena Romantics, the Russian Formalists, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, before considering a selection of Blanchot's essays from the 1940s with a focus on Mallarmé and this division within language. There is near-unanimity amongst those named above that a double state of language exists, which, given their vastly different concerns ranging from the philosophical pursuit of truth to the scientific analysis of language and the promotion of a committed literature, is perhaps surprising. This chapter will show that this division of language begins to disintegrate for Blanchot as early as 1941, as the autonomous status of literature and the foundational view of art in modernity collapse. It is very clear from Heidegger's early lectures on Hölderlin, delivered in 1934, that the opposition between *Dichtung* and ordinary language maps onto the difference between the

¹ See, for instance, the opening remarks of Hadrien Buclin, *Maurice Blanchot ou l'autonomie littéraire* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2011), pp. 9-16. The question as to whether Blanchot continues to commit to a clear distinction between poetic and ordinary language has provoked much discussion among critics; of those who argue that he does so, in addition to Buclin, I will be referring to: Mark Hewson, *Blanchot and Literary Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2011); Antoine Compagnon, *La Démon de la théorie: littérature et sens commun* (Paris: Seuil, 1998); and Yun Sun Limet, *Maurice Blanchot critique: essai* (Paris: La Différence, 2010).

² Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 37-52 (p. 38) (first publ. as 'Mallarmé et l'expérience littéraire', *Critique*, 62 (July 1952) 579-91).

³ Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 50-51.

authentic and the inauthentic as it is articulated in *Being and Time*.⁴ The shift in emphasis or understanding in Blanchot therefore has significant implications for his relationship with Heideggerian fundamental ontology and the possibility or impossibility of an ‘authentic’ relation to death and dying.

‘Le double état de la parole’

At the end of the nineteenth century Mallarmé, prompted by the crisis of poetry represented by free verse and the prose poem, famously identifies a difference between essential and immediate language: put simply, the former is characterised by a necessity that shields it from the contingency of the everyday. Poetry was no longer restricted to verse following the advent of the prose poem and so the traditional formal distinction was undermined. Mallarmé therefore sought to find more essential characteristics to distinguish between the two. The extent to which he perceives an uncomplicated distinction between essential and immediate language is, however, up for debate: ‘Un désir indéniable à mon temps est de séparer comme en vue d’attributions différentes le double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel.’⁵ This view is seemingly attributed to the Symbolist poets of his time and the use of ‘comme’ renders this statement somewhat hypothetical; Blanchot will later pick up on this hesitancy.

In ‘Crise de vers’ Mallarmé demonstrates that free verse has unsettled traditional expectations of poetry and that the effects of this new form are the fragmentation of language and a violent rupture within language. This ‘crisis’ within poetry may be seen as symptomatic of the broader crisis of modernity; it is akin to a revolution, but one much more subtle than that of 1789: ‘on assiste, comme finale d’un siècle, pas ainsi que ce fut dans le dernier, à des bouleversements; mais, hors de la place publique, à une inquiétude du voile dans le temple avec des plis significatifs et un peu sa déchirure.’⁶ This revolution will not take place on the streets but in literature, which has become a temple,

⁴ See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns ‘Germania’ and ‘The Rhine’*, trans. by William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 59-58; *Gesamtausgabe*, XXXIX: *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’* (1980), 62-65.

⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Crise de vers’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1998-2003), II, 204-13 (p. 212).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-05.

inheriting a quasi-holy function following the failure of religion. In a godless world and in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, this was a time of crisis but also a time of hope for Mallarmé, who believed that literature could fill the void left by modernity with its own idea: ‘À quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n’est pour qu’en émane, sans la gêne d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.’⁷ Literature will not replace like for like; it will not provide man with a concept by which to understand the world as would be the case in immediate language. Instead literature will provide man with an indeterminate idea, one which is difficult to grasp, sets itself apart from the world and is based in the non-realistic: ‘la notion pure’.

Replacing what had been lost in modernity required a structure that would unite the fragmentary in a time of transition and crisis. Roger Pearson stresses Mallarmé’s desire throughout his work to ‘lay a verbal pattern over the void of a godless universe’.⁸ Free verse is evidently not as free as some of Mallarmé’s contemporaries may have wished it to be:

Similitude entre les vers, et vieilles proportions, une régularité durera parce que l’acte poétique consiste à voir soudain qu’une idée se fractionne en un nombre de motifs égaux par valeur et à les grouper; ils riment: pour sceau extérieur, leur commune mesure qu’apparente le coup final.

Au traitement, si intéressant, par la versification subi, de repos et d’interrègne, gît, moins que dans nos circonstances mentales vierges, la crise.⁹

Mallarmé, in the above extract and throughout ‘Crise de vers’, points to the benefits of this form but also to its limitations, arguing that free verse is descended from other more structured and traditional forms of poetry.¹⁰ The underlying structure that persists in free verse unifies the fragmented idea and

⁷ Ibid., p. 213.

⁸ Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 8.

⁹ Mallarmé, ‘Crise de vers’, in *Œuvres complètes*, II, 209.

¹⁰ Rosemary Lloyd presents the correspondence between Mallarmé and his peers on these issues and their articulation in ‘Crise de vers’, in *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 189-95.

gives the poem orderliness. This structure and basis in the non-realistic are characteristics of the modern myth as deployed by writers such as James Joyce in *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Guillaume Apollinaire in 'Zone'. Myth provides ahistorical order when there is no order and when history has failed, a state observed by Stephen Dedalus: 'history [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.'¹¹

The pure idea which sets essential language apart from ordinary language is a meticulously structured linguistic construction without reference to the world of things. 'Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.'¹² Mallarmé is not referring to a particular flower or a knowable bunch of flowers; this idea is detached from the primroses, tulips, or daffodils and all the associations with, for instance, springtime that might be evoked in the day-to-day usage of the word by a musicality, a system of references between words that exist in isolation of the world of objects. Roger Pearson notes how in the French word 'fleur' there is an echo of 'l'heure' and 'leurre', and so the idea that arises musically from this word might include temporality and unreliability rather than a flower's traditional value as a symbol of transient beauty associated with the object in the world.¹³ It is the syntax of poetry, its rigorous construction, even in free verse, that renders the most utilitarian words rich and strange: 'Au contraire d'une fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif, comme le traite d'abord la foule, le dire, avant tout, rêve et chant, retrouve chez le Poète, par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions, sa virtualité.'¹⁴

While some may argue that Mallarmé's reference to 'la foule' here and elsewhere in this essay introduces a political dimension that demonstrates disdain for common vulgar mass society, it should be noted that the masses to whom Mallarmé refers are most likely the nouveau-riche middle class who deal with numbers and currency ('une fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif') rather

¹¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 34. An unsigned typescript of a work entitled *Le Mythe d'Ulysse* has recently been found in the archive held by Blanchot's niece. The authors of the catalogue advertising this 47-page typescript for sale write that it seems to be the thematic mould or fictional origin of what would become Blanchot's first novel *Thomas l'obscur*.

¹² Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', in *Œuvres complètes*, II, 213.

¹³ Roger Pearson, *Stéphane Mallarmé* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), pp. 141-42.

¹⁴ Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', in *Œuvres complètes*, II, 213.

than the illiterate working class. His politics were anarchistic rather than aristocratic: 'Je ne sais pas d'autre bombe, qu'un livre.'¹⁵ He gave the work of art a political effectiveness but in doing so distanced the work from the real, rendering it not useful. He writes elsewhere that the poet will, 'Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu'.¹⁶ There is hope for Mallarmé that poetry will be the vehicle for revolution.

In the extract quoted above, Mallarmé recognises that the language of the poet is characterised by a necessity which sets it apart from the real ('par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions'). The struggle between necessity and contingency is a central concern of the modern novel and this is perhaps why Blanchot will later use Mallarmé as a reference point when reading Melville, Joyce and Lautréamont. This struggle is famously played out in *Un Coup de dés*, an extraordinary work that resists scrutiny and interpretation. Here Mallarmé includes the image of a shipwreck hanging over an abyss and the motif of metaphysical gaming as he paints a picture of contingency and risk which the mind tries to control by finding pattern and purpose in this experience. Malcolm Bowie describes this as 'a splendidly organised and overspilling portrait of contingency'. He continues: 'The "impossible" chance-abolishing thought is present as a permanent temptation to which minds are subject and, in the final, culminating pages, as the only hope worth retaining amid chaos and dissolution.'¹⁷ This poem reveals that thought necessitates chance and so the divide in language between order and chaos, mind and world, necessity and contingency, the essential and the immediate, does not appear quite so impermeable. This might be said to be reflected more broadly in Mallarmé's work which, according to Pearson, tested the boundaries between poetry and narrative prose, as well as traditional genres such as lyric and drama: his 'lifelong exploration of the possibilities of prose had led him to devise a new form of writing which occupies a confident "mi-

¹⁵ Mallarmé, 'Sur l'explosion à la chambre des députés', in *Œuvres complètes*, II, 660. Blanchot, loosely quoting Mallarmé in 1978 ('*Il n'est d'explosion qu'un livre*'), relates the book as explosion to a fragmentary writing which contests everything, including itself. The explosion simultaneously unveils and destroys; it is the book to come which never arrives: '[le livre] s'indique comme sa propre violence d'exclusion, le refus fulgurant du plausible: le dehors en son devenir d'éclat.' Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), pp. 190-91 (this extract first publ. in *Misère de la littérature*, by Mathieu Bénézet and others (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1978), pp. 9-12).

¹⁶ Mallarmé, 'Hommage [à Edgar Allan Poe]', in *Œuvres complètes*, I, 98.

¹⁷ Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 133, 128.

lieu” between verse and journalism.’¹⁸ The divide between the essential and the immediate is not as clear-cut as it may first appear for Mallarmé and this chapter will reveal how this similarly manifests itself in Blanchot’s literary criticism.

Mallarmé was not the first to have perceived a division within language. At the end of the eighteenth century the question ‘What is literature?’ preoccupied the Jena Romantics, who moved away from a classicist understanding of literature as representation toward an understanding of the literary work as self-expression. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy set the agenda for a discussion of early Romanticism, for which there is no homogenous body of theory, limiting their analysis to the group involved with the six issues of the *Athenaeum* journal published between 1798 and 1800 in the university town of Jena. This group included August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Novalis. In their study, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy state that, ‘du romantisme, et comme le romantisme, date la littérature comme son infinie mise en cause et la position perpétuelle de sa propre question.’¹⁹ From this moment onwards literature, no longer subservient to reality or norms, concerned only with its own self-expression or production, is absolute and infinite.

There are three hallmarks of Jena Romanticism according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. The first is the fragment, which is the embodiment of the absolute and the search for infinity: ‘La totalité fragmentaire, conformément à ce qu’il faudrait plutôt se risquer à nommer la logique du hérisson, ne peut être située en aucun point: elle est simultanément dans le tout et dans chaque partie. Chaque fragment vaut par lui-même et pour ce dont il se détache. [...] Les fragments sont au fragment ses définitions, et c’est ce qui installe sa totalité comme pluralité, et son achèvement comme inachèvement de son infinité.’ Second, the Jena Romantics stress the inclusiveness of literature; consequently, their writing is characterised by a mixture of genres and the distinction between thought, philosophy and literature is subsumed under the more inclusive grasp of literature in general. The novel for the Jena Romantics, insofar as it potentially included all other genres, is the absolute

¹⁸ Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, pp. 27-41 (pp. 31-32).

¹⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 266.

manifestation of literature in general. Finally, literature has become the embodiment of the human subject which is infinite and absolute because, like the fragment, turned on itself like a hedgehog: ‘sous ce rapport, il n’y a donc pas non plus le moindre écart entre romantisme et idéalisme. Cependant, la vie impliquée ici est la vie *belle* et l’organisme où elle a lieu et qu’elle anime [...] est, essentiellement, l’*œuvre d’art*. Et bien entendu, cela change tout — ou presque tout.’²⁰ The point is that the subject of early German Romanticism differs from the Kantian subject because it is conscious of itself.

Blanchot undoubtedly shares many of these concerns and the account of the Jena Romantics offered by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy owes much to his essay from 1964 entitled ‘L’Athenaeum’.²¹ The association by some critics of Blanchot with literary autonomy derives in part from the view that he is wedded to the intransitive poetic language espoused by the Romantics. This chapter, while not focussing on his engagement with Romanticism in particular, will demonstrate that direct parallels drawn between Blanchot and early German Romanticism are unfounded because, among other reasons, Blanchot becomes increasingly sceptical of the possibility that such autonomy can be achieved and of the role of the human subject in this creative process.

More recently, the distinction between literary language and so-called ordinary or instrumental language was first articulated in a scientific manner by the Russian Formalists, whose influence on modern literary theory, especially in France, is difficult to overestimate. This school of thought emerged in the mid-1910s and is marked by the desire to move away from the metaphysical aspirations of Russian Symbolism and free the study of verse from religious and philosophical tendencies.²² Writing at a time when Western culture was going through a crisis of belief — loss of faith in the face of the rationalism of science and philosophy, with the development of technology and in the aftermath of the First World War — literature was called upon to replace what had been lost with its own concept. Mallarmé had already attempted to lay his own pattern over the godless void exposed in modernity; the work of the Russian Formalists might be considered a kind of systematising

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 64, 276-77, 49.

²¹ Blanchot, ‘L’Athenaeum’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 515-27 (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 140 (August 1964), 301-13). There is a more detailed discussion of this essay in Chapter Four.

²² Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History — Doctrine*, 4th edn (The Hague: Mouton, 1980), pp. 70-73.

of Mallarmé's experience of language. Literature renews our perception of the world through linguistic dislocation for these theorists, who were the first to identify the concept of literarity (the property which makes a text a work of literature) and express the independence of the poetic word in a scientific manner. Through the development of this meta-language, Russian Formalism paved the way for modern literary theory as it is practised today, spreading beyond the Russian border thanks to the migration of the influential Roman Jakobson to Prague, where he founded the Prague Linguistic Circle from which Structuralism later developed, and subsequently America. His work was purveyed in France by Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes.²³ While Blanchot was most likely unaware of the Russian Formalists in the 1940s, their thinking of the autonomy of the literary word is fundamental to the conceptual history from which he is working and continued to impact literary theory, especially in the figure of Valéry, later in the twentieth century.

The work of Roman Jakobson spans the period of transition from the Russian Formalism of the 1920s and '30s to the Structuralism of the 1950s and '60s. The subject of literary scholarship, according to Jakobson in 1921, is not literature in its totality but what constitutes literary or poetic writing as having an end in itself and following distinctive rules and procedures: literariness. Jakobson later wrote in 1933 that the function of poetry is to highlight that the sign is not identical with its referent; this is important, he argued, because without an awareness of this inadequacy the connection between sign and object becomes automatized and our perception of reality withers away. For Jakobson, the problem lies not between subject and object but sign and referent.²⁴ The 'literariness' that in 1921 he deemed ought to be the subject of literary scholarship was to be located in the way the poet uses his or her medium and so, Victor Erlich writes, 'the task of locating the differentia of imaginative literature became fundamentally a matter of delimiting "poetic speech" from other modes of discourse.'²⁵

²³ See *Théorie de la littérature: textes des formalistes russes*, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965); Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); and Roland Barthes, 'Écrivains et écrivains', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), II: 1962-1967, 403-10. Blanchot shares the reference to Mallarmé with Kristeva and Barthes.

²⁴ Erlich, pp. 171-91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

While Jakobson distinguishes between poetic and other forms of language, he refrains from stating that poetic language ceases to be a form of communication. What he terms the ‘poetic function’ is not restricted to poetry, but simply operates best in this medium: ‘La fonction poétique n’est pas la seule fonction de l’art du langage, elle en est seulement la fonction dominante, déterminante, cependant que dans les autres activités verbales elle ne joue qu’une rôle subsidiaire, accessoire. Cette fonction, qui met en évidence le côté palpable des signes, approfondit par là même la dichotomie fondamentale des signes et des objets.’²⁶ The ‘poetic function’ may intensify the division between sign and referent, but it equally remains a form of communication comprised of six elements — sender, context, message, channel, code, receiver — like the other five ‘functions’ of language identified by Jakobson: ‘toute conduite verbale est orientée vers un but, mais les objectifs varient — ce problème, de la conformité entre les moyens employés et l’effet visé, préoccupe de plus en plus les chercheurs qui travaillent dans les différents domaines de la communication verbale.’²⁷ Put simply, the poetic function is one of six functions of language all of which aim to convey information. What distinguishes the poetic from other functions is the stress on the ‘message’ component, which is not the referent but the word itself. Jakobson therefore offers a scientific consideration of ‘literariness’ which refrains from identifying a clear rupture between poetic and other forms of language.

This focus on the sign was a key feature of Formalist readings of avant-garde poems. For instance, Jakobson’s 1962 essay on Baudelaire’s ‘Les Chats’, co-authored with Claude Lévi-Strauss, is a linguistic interpretation of the poem where the sign is autonomous:

La maison, circonscrivant les chats dans le premier quatrain, s’abolit dans le premier tercet où règnent les solitudes désertiques, véritable maison à l’envers des chats-sphinx. A son tour, cette ‘non-maison’ fait place à la multitude cosmique des chats (ceux-ci, comme tous les personnages du sonnet, sont traités comme des *pluralia tantum*). Ils deviennent, si l’on peut

²⁶ Roman Jakobson, ‘Linguistique et poétique’, in *Essais de linguistique générale*, trans. by Nicolas Ruwet, Arguments, 14 (Paris: Minuit, 1963), pp. 209-48 (p. 218).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 211.

dire, la maison de la non-maison, puisqu'ils renferment, dans leurs prunelles, le sable des déserts et la lumière des étoiles.²⁸

Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss take the sign as liberated from the referent in poetic language: 'les chats', the subject of Baudelaire's poem, refers not to the animals as it would do in everyday language, but has a meaning developed independently of this referent over the course of the poem: 'la maison de la non-maison'. This 1962 essay is relevant to this study of Blanchot writing in the 1940s because it marks the development of a meta-language — a theoretical language which treats language itself as an object — and the foundation, by Jakobson and others, of literary theory in the form of Structuralism.

The main tenets of Russian Formalism were therefore an emphasis on the literary work, rather than the external circumstances surrounding its creation, and an insistence on the autonomy of literary scholarship. The scientific ambitions of Russian Formalism and its close relation to avant-garde practices of literature distinguished this school from others; but the appeal to science did not always prove unanimous. Blanchot, like others, including several contemporaries, was sceptical of an approach which attempted to develop a theory of literature and later questioned if there was any difference between writing and theoretical writing, and therefore the possibility of a meta-language. The back cover of *L'Espace littéraire* indicates that Blanchot's text owes as much to literature in its own right as it does to saying something about literature; to write about writing is to experience the same 'descent' as any other writer:

Le livre de Maurice Blanchot n'est pas seulement un essai d'élucidation de la création littéraire et artistique, mais encore une recherche précise de ce qui est en jeu pour l'homme d'aujourd'hui, par le fait que 'quelque chose comme l'art ou la littérature existe': descente vers la profondeur, approche de l'obscurité, expérience de la solitude et de la mort.²⁹

²⁸ Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, "'Les Chats" de Charles Baudelaire', in *Questions de poétique*, by Roman Jakobson, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 401-19 (p. 413).

²⁹ Texte de présentation, *L'Espace littéraire*. The quotation included in the blurb is taken from an essay in *L'Espace littéraire*, but it is also a paraphrase of Heidegger. The author of this blurb is not indicated; while the style of the first paragraph (from which this extract is taken) may suggest that it was written by Blanchot,

Blanchot's refusal of a meta-linguistic hierarchy in 1955 is clear; however, his departure from a view of language similar to that of the Russian Formalists, one which aligned itself with the avant-garde and identified a hierarchy within language, has its roots in essays written more than a decade earlier to be examined later in this chapter.

The assertion that there is a dual state of language is not limited to literary theory. Martin Heidegger, for whom the poetry of Hölderlin offers the possibility of salvation in modernity and who greatly influenced what Blanchot had to say about language throughout his career, identifies a clear division between instrumental language and poetic saying:

To speak language is totally different from employing language. Common speech merely employs language. This relation to language is just what constitutes its commonness. But because thought and, in a different way poesy [*Dichten*], do not employ terms [*Wörter*] but speak words [*die Worte*], therefore we are compelled, as soon as we set out upon a way of thought, to give specific attention to what the word says [*das Sagen des Wortes*].³⁰

Instrumental language is associated with the technical domination characteristic of modernity which increasingly renders the world a calculable resource to be exploited. The version of truth offered in common speech, truth as correspondence between language and world, is derivative because it takes the world for granted. The work of art, on the other hand, gives truth as *aletheia*, a mode of revealing that brings beings forth in a manner that does not objectify. Poetry is privileged because it offers the human the possibility of turning away from the metaphysical era. Some critics have noted the proximity of Heideggerian *Dichtung* and the version of literature elaborated by the German

comments made in the final paragraph cast some doubt over this: 'il n'existe peut-être pas de méditation aussi rigoureuse, aussi riche, sur les conduites créatrices dans toute l'histoire de la critique.'

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. by J. Glenn Grey (New York: Perennial Library, [1976] 2004), p. 128; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII: *Was heißt Denken?* (2002), 133.

Romantics, as both understand poetry in terms of its relation to the creative processes that brought it forth.³¹

The last name to mention in this overview of interpretations of the dual status of language is Jean-Paul Sartre, who would soon be an important, if often implicit, interlocutor for Blanchot, as the latter's contributions to Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* (notably on the topic of bad faith) duly indicate.³² In the years following the Liberation, Sartre draws a clear line between the function of poetry and prose. He writes that the only thing that the poet and the writer of prose have in common is the movement of the hand tracing letters on the page.³³

Coulée dans le mot, absorbée par sa sonorité ou par son aspect visuel, épaissie, dégradée, [la signification] est chose, elle aussi, créée, éternelle; pour le poète, le langage est une structure du monde extérieur. Le parleur est *en situation* dans le langage, investi par les mots; ce sont les prolongements de ses sens, ses pinces, ses antennes, ses lunettes; il les manœuvre du dedans, il les sent comme son corps, il est entouré d'un corps verbal dont il prend à peine conscience et qui étend son action sur le monde. Le poète est hors du langage, il voit les mots à l'envers, comme s'il n'appartenait pas à la condition humaine et que, venant vers les hommes, il rencontrât d'abord la parole comme une barrière.³⁴

For Sartre, the writer of prose is committed to the extent of being lucidly conscious of his or her involvement in the world and has a duty to reveal to the reader a reality in which the individual is historically-situated and committed to the pursuit of authentic freedom. Poetry, in contrast, is compared to painting, sculpture and music and the poet is the person who refuses to use language as instrument. The poet experiences language from without as thing. The speaker, or writer of prose, is within language, here conceived as a sort of prosthesis forming an extension of his or her body and

³¹ See, for instance, Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 164-92.

³² See, for instance, Blanchot, 'Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi', in *La Condition critique*, pp. 100-15.

³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

senses. Words are not objects but designations of objects for the writer of prose; they are tools which name the world with a view to effecting change. The realisation that the human being has the freedom, within their particular social and historical situation, to choose what they will become leads Sartre to argue that those who take refuge behind determinism of any sort are acting in bad faith.³⁵

These writers and thinkers share a concern with literature or poetry as a response to modernity, be this in the form of salvation from the technical domination characteristic of the era, as a means of renewing our perception of the world, or as the vehicle for revolution. Literature or poetry is legitimated in modernity as a sort of aesthetic religion; existing autonomously it reveals a truth when it becomes aware of itself. Blanchot briefly shares and then diverges from these concerns. That something like literature exists and can be neatly distinguished from everyday uses of language is questioned by Blanchot from the mid-1940s. Writing in *Les Temps modernes* in 1952, he considers the sort of art that would be a reversal of the world in modernity:

L'art est cette passion subjective qui ne veut plus avoir de part au monde. Ici, dans le monde, règne la subordination à des fins, la mesure, le sérieux, l'ordre, — ici la science, la technique, l'État, — ici la signification, la certitude des valeurs, l'Idéal du Bien et du Vrai. L'art est 'le monde renversé': l'insubordination, la démesure, la frivolité, l'ignorance, le mal, le non-sens, tout cela lui appartient, domaine étendu.³⁶

Direct insubordination to the modern world is not, as some have understood it, what Blanchot understands by art.³⁷ Art set in opposition to technology, science and State only further supports worldly powers. Blanchot continues:

³⁵ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, [1946] 1968).

³⁶ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et l'expérience originelle', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 277-333 (p. 287) (first publ. as 'L'Art, la littérature et l'expérience originelle', *Les Temps modernes*, 79 (May 1952), 1921-51; 80 (June 1952), 2195-212).

³⁷ 'Just so, insubordination is the form that Blanchot's modernism takes.' This is Gerald Bruns' response to this extract in a review of *Blanchot and Literary Criticism*, by Mark Hewson, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (February 2012) <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/blanchot-and-literary-criticism/>> [accessed 3 May 2017]. Buclin also argues that autonomy preserves the authority of literature over the world (p. 106).

L'artiste qui croit s'opposer souverainement aux valeurs et protéger en soi, par son art, la source de la toute-puissante négation, ne se soumet pas moins au destin général que l'artiste qui fait 'œuvre utile', — peut-être davantage encore. Il est déjà frappant qu'il ne puisse définir l'art qu'à partir du monde. Il est le monde renversé. Mais ce renversement n'est aussi rien de plus que le moyen 'rusé' dont le monde se sert pour se rendre plus stable et plus réel.³⁸

Art made aware of itself sees its own deception rather than any truth, because it suspends the world of familiar assumptions and offers the other of any world.

Literary Autonomy

Working as literary critic for the pro-Vichy *Journal des débats* between 1941 and 1944, Blanchot was not at liberty to comment directly on the war or the state of occupied France and the Vichy regime. In stark contrast to material written up to 1937, literature was the sole focus of essays written for the *Journal des débats* during the Occupation. These essays nevertheless reveal a writer and literary critic profoundly changed by the events of the late 1930s and the end of the Third Republic. Blanchot later wrote to Roger Laporte that he was present for the surrender of the Assemblée nationale which marked the illegal end of the Third Republic: 'Ma décision fut alors immédiatement prise. C'était le refus. Refus naturellement face à l'occupant, mais refus non moins obstiné à l'égard de Vichy qui représentait à mes yeux ce qu'il y avait de plus dégradant.'³⁹ He goes on to explain that his life at this time was divided into writing of the day and writing of the night: a dichotomy was imposed between journalism and literature (he completed his first novel *Thomas l'obscur* in May 1940 and *Aminadab* was published in 1942) and so the latter was, at the start of the 1940s, a refusal of world.

This is not to say that there is a sudden and total shift in his position at the end of the 1930s. One of his earliest essays for the *Journal des débats*, 'La France et la civilisation contemporaine', provides evidence of a residual nationalism and a continued emphasis on spiritualism and order with

³⁸ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et l'expérience originelle', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 288. This is also a rebuttal of Sartre's committed literature.

³⁹ Blanchot, letter to Roger Laporte, in *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, by Nancy, p. 59.

its roots in his political articles of the 1930s. The task of the artist, writes Blanchot, is something akin to the creation of a world: everything depends on an internal order, a network of necessities that are all submitted to the force of invention. This is a universe where men obey the law of poetic order.⁴⁰ This other world or universe exists autonomously beyond the boundaries of the everyday where Blanchot works as journalist and it is achieved primarily in French literature. The French language is *the* language of poetic expression and Mallarmé is the French poet *par excellence* who purifies language of all but its essential traits: ‘Quand on songe à l’auteur du *Coup de dés*, on se dit que l’orgueil littéraire, si caractéristique de notre esprit, est un phénomène dont on n’a pas à rougir, puisqu’il y a dans notre littérature quelques textes qui ont demandé et dans une certaine mesure réussi à tenir la place de la création universelle.’⁴¹

For Blanchot in 1941, the name Mallarmé represents poetic perfection. His first article to appear after a yearlong hiatus in April 1941 signals the mastery associated with this name: ‘un homme qui dans une complète et obscure solitude sut dominer le monde par l’exercice pur d’un pouvoir d’expression absolu.’⁴² And an article later that year responding to the publication of Henri Mondor’s *La Vie de Mallarmé* praises Mondor for presenting an intellectual biography of Mallarmé, the poet whose vision distanced his life from world and exposed him to the greatest (poetic) dangers: ‘Et [Mallarmé] est surtout le seul qui ait éveillé cette profonde assemblée nocturne, non pas par une ivresse et une fascination verbales, mais par un arrangement méthodique de mots, par une intelligence toute particulière des mouvements et des rythmes, par un acte intellectuel pur, capable de tout créer en n’exprimant presque rien.’⁴³ Other writers may come close, but Mallarmé is the name Blanchot employs to signal the most glorious creative ambition that achieves the independence of poetry from world. The art of Lautréamont, for instance, is described in the same year as striking down all work

⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, ‘La France et la civilisation contemporaine’, in *Chroniques littéraires du Journal des débats: avril 1941 – août 1944*, ed. by Christophe Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 28-33 (p. 32) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 26-27 May 1941, p. 3).

⁴¹ Blanchot, ‘La France et la civilisation contemporaine’, in *Chroniques littéraires*, p. 33.

⁴² Blanchot, [‘Les peuples meurtris...’], in *Chroniques littéraires*, pp. 11-15 (p. 14) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 16 April 1941, p. 3).

⁴³ Blanchot, ‘Le Silence de Mallarmé’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 117-25 (p. 120) (first publ. as two essays: ‘La Biographie connaît le génie et ignore l’homme’, *Journal des débats*, 23 April 1941, p. 3; ‘Le Silence de Mallarmé’, *Journal des débats*, 1 April 1942, p. 3).

content with the imitation of reality; we are in the presence of a world that no usual experience allows us to approach. For the first time in the French novel, ‘la recherche des métaphores aboutit à la production de métamorphoses dont l’étrangeté s’explique par la destruction de toute image de passage, de tout intermédiaire, par le saut brusque de la pensée ou du sentiment le plus simple dans une réalité stupéfiante qui en est le lointain aboutissement.’⁴⁴ The greatest merit of Lautréamont is the distinct division between the real and the non-real; his project is similar to that of Mallarmé, but the language employed by Blanchot in this review is never quite as superlative.

The struggle between the everyday and the poetic also defines Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* according to a review from the same year of Jean Giono’s French translation. This review lays bare what Blanchot understands by myth and how writers such as Melville, Mallarmé and Lautréamont achieve the mythic. The structure of the novel — its perpetual abstract digressions that interrupt and distract the reader from the story — and its basis in the non-realistic — a world of tempests and foam rather than solid visible objects — ensure its status as myth; in all his early criticism the reference to ‘myth’ is a coded rejection of literary realism. This is a struggle, Blanchot argues, not against the whale but against the everyday world which is destined to succumb to mythic force:

Parfois, ses officiers essayent de le retenir sur la pente où tous se sentent glisser; ils lui disent: arrêtons-nous, revenons en arrière, mettons fin à cette croisière insensée, et goûtons le repos et les plaisirs de la terre; mais, naturellement, personne ne croit à ces paroles de la vie banale. Achab n’est plus que le témoin d’un ordre invisible où il subit les commandements d’une chose sans nom, insondable, surnaturelle, du terrible roi sans remords dont il est le misérable et tragique serviteur dans la lutte même qu’il croit lui livrer.⁴⁵

The officers on board speak of earthly pleasures but this world is disappearing from beneath their feet as, alongside their captain, they are delivered to another invisible place. The comparison is made to

⁴⁴ Blanchot, ‘Lautréamont’, in *Faux Pas*, pp. 197-202 (p. 201) (first publ. in *Revue française des idées et des œuvres*, 1 (April 1940), 67-72).

⁴⁵ Blanchot, ‘Le Secret de Melville’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 273-77 (p. 276) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 1-2 September 1941, p. 3).

Les Chants de Maldoror where language says everything in place of the world, attracting the reader, akin to these sailors, into its wake and obliging total obedience.⁴⁶ *Moby Dick* therefore enacts a struggle between the literary and the everyday and the name of Mallarmé, cited at the beginning of the essay, overshadows this literary project.

Blanchot is committing himself in these essays from 1941 on Mallarmé, Melville and Lautréamont to a version of literary autonomy which is vastly different from that conceived by the Russian Formalists and Sartre. The overview of literary theory earlier in this chapter revealed that literary autonomy can take on various guises. In Blanchot's reading of *Moby Dick* there is no close analysis of language or privileging of sign over referent in the scientific style of the Russian Formalists, nor does he set the novelist apart from the poet by identifying different approaches to language as Sartre will do after the Liberation. This version of literary autonomy is distinctly Mallarméan, which is to say characterised by a structure and basis in unreality that is not confined to poetry or prose.

Il semble en effet que ce qui fait de *Moby Dick* un des grands livres de la littérature universelle, c'est qu'il cherche à être un livre total, exprimant non seulement une expérience humaine complète mais se donnant comme l'équivalent écrit de l'univers. C'est, d'une certaine manière, un de ces livres qui aident à comprendre l'ambition suprême de Mallarmé lorsqu'il voulait 'élever une page à la puissance du ciel étoilé'. L'impression de défi, lancé à la réalité du monde par ces œuvres orgueilleuses, ne vient naturellement pas de leurs dimensions. On éprouve la même impression devant les contes d'Edgar Poe que devant *Ulysse* de Joyce, devant les sonnets de Gérard de Nerval que devant *Maldoror* de Lautréamont. Il s'agit d'un mode d'écrire qui essaye de rendre au mot création, par une prétention vertigineuse, le sens qu'il peut avoir dans l'expression, la création du monde. C'est une tentative pour attirer dans la trame de l'ouvrage, grâce à un emploi rigoureux des valeurs littéraires, les puissances inconcevables dont nous nous rapprochons par l'intermédiaire des mythes.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Blanchot, 'Le Secret de Melville', in *Faux pas*, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 273-74.

A line is traced from the Romantics — Poe and Nerval — to the Modernists — Joyce — in this extract; at the heart of this literary genealogy is Stéphane Mallarmé whose work acts as a passage between the two movements and exemplifies the defiance toward reality and the structured unity which lends these other works their mythic quality. The work may be fragmented, as is the nature of the artwork in modernity, but a union in the non-realistic endures thanks to this overarching structure: ‘L’attention est soulevée et détournée de son objet par l’irruption d’anecdotes interminables au-dessus desquelles surgit de temps en temps, comme un nuage, la réminiscence d’un dessein éternel.’⁴⁸

It is clear that Blanchot’s interpretation of literary autonomy is largely informed by his reading of Mallarmé; this discussion of the distinction between the literary and the everyday will be centred on those essays with a focus on the poet: ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’ [1942], ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’ [1943], ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’ [1946], ‘La Littérature et le droit à la mort’ [1947/8] and ‘L’Expérience de Mallarmé’ [1952]. Writing in 1941, three months after the chief editorship of the once independent *Nouvelle Revue française* (*NRF*) had been transferred from Jean Paulhan to Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, we can speculate that Blanchot sought to shield the literary domain from collaboration. The circumstances in which Blanchot promotes literary autonomy during the war are very different to those in which Sartre was writing directly after the Liberation and these changing political circumstances provide some explanation for the considerable shift in Blanchot’s thought during this decade, which is not to say that he moved from literary autonomy to a committed literature, but that this led him to question the very possibility of literature.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 277.

⁴⁹ Buclin charts the rise of the Comité national des écrivains (CNE) — founded in June 1943 and strengthened by its association with the Resistance — and its review *Les Lettres françaises* following the Liberation and the group’s close ties with the Parti communiste français (PCF). He considers how the political right, devalued because implicated in Vichy, became associated with literary autonomy, advocates of which were equally suspected because perceived to be seeking to clear their name after the collaboration of organisations such as the Académie française and the *NRF* during the war. He shows that it was in this climate that, opposed to the notion of a ‘pure literature’, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Les Temps modernes* and Albert Camus in editorials for *Combat* called for a committed literature (pp. 17-32). The call for literary autonomy was not, however, the prerogative of the collaborationist right. One of the main opponents of this politicisation of the literary and defenders of ‘autonomy’ was Jean Paulhan, the pre- and post-war editor of the *NRF*, founding member of the CNE and of *Les Lettres françaises*, a member of the Resistance, and a close associate of Maurice Blanchot.

Antoine Compagnon views Blanchot as a theorist who never strayed from an autonomous view of literature: ‘selon la tradition moderne et la théorie littéraire, la référence est une illusion, et la littérature ne parle pas d’autre chose que de la littérature. Mallarmé l’annonçait: “Parler n’a trait à la réalité des choses que commercialement: en littérature, cela se contente d’y faire une allusion ou de distraire leur qualité qu’incorporera quelque idée”. Puis Blanchot enfonça le clou.’⁵⁰ While it is reasonable to argue that Blanchot was committed to this view up to 1941, the presentation of Blanchot as a theorist who maintained this uncompromising stance throughout his career disregards the subtleties of the writer’s conception of literature from this point onwards. Compagnon is not the only critic to simplify Blanchot’s poetics with such a broad generalisation. Mark Hewson dedicates a chapter of his study of Blanchot to the Mallarmé essays — from those collected in *Faux pas* to ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’ and ‘L’Expérience de Mallarmé’ — and claims that, although his style may differ, there is a sustained analysis of language that distinguishes between the poetic and the everyday.⁵¹ This chapter will show that by the 1950s it is impossible to view Blanchot as a critic and writer who sustains a view of literary autonomy and a clear divide in language. In this decade, when literary theory in the form of Structuralism began to emerge from Russian Formalism, the conceptual ground alters for Blanchot, the distinction is less easily grasped and a meta-linguistic hierarchy becomes impossible.

A shift in Blanchot’s conception of literature begins as early as 1941 in a review of Jean Paulhan’s *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. Paulhan writes that since the French Revolution linguistic commonplaces have been treated as a threat to original thought and purged from poetic expression. This attitude is named the Terror and is associated with Romanticism because, as well as the link to the French Revolution, it abandons accepted literary forms of expression in search of a more authentic, original expressiveness. The Terror is a belief in the purity of thought and a mistrust of language. Rhetoric, in contrast, is the classical view of the relationship between language and thought that held that commonplaces were a necessary part of all communication and that prioritised language over thought. In his study Paulhan reveals the futility of the Terrorists’ project, demonstrating their

⁵⁰ Compagnon, p. 120.

⁵¹ Hewson, pp. 37-65.

preoccupation with their own language even as they seek to affirm the precedence of thought.

Through the metaphor of the garden in Tarbes — where visitors prohibited from taking flowers from the garden find ways around this interdiction by claiming to have brought their own flowers in — Paulhan questions how we are to tell whether authors intended their words to be read as commonplaces or as original thoughts. His solution is to turn back to Rhetoric, arguing that we must submit to the authority of commonplaces if we are to free ourselves from such a preoccupation with language — visitors to the garden are now forbidden from entering without carrying flowers.⁵²

Blanchot demonstrates how Terror flips to Rhetoric and vice versa as both try to express authentic thought; literature cannot be deemed Terror or Rhetoric with any certainty, as the two share a common goal. The Rhetoricians aim to express thought in a manner that does not draw attention to discourse, writes Blanchot, so that the words vanish as they are pronounced. The Terrorists, he continues, aim to express original thought by chasing from language all that could make it resemble everyday language; they seek to express themselves in a language that is not an instrument of expression and where expression does not bring along the wear and tear and ambiguity of banal life. ‘La mission de l’écrivain, dans les deux cas, est donc de faire connaître une pensée authentique — secret ou vérité — qu’une attention trop grande aux mots, surtout aux mots usés de tous les jours, ne saurait que mettre en péril.’⁵³

While heavily paradoxical, Paulhan’s account of literary language is nonetheless controllable; the ambiguity at the heart of the relationship is resolved as the writer seeks mastery of words by accepting commonplaces.⁵⁴ Blanchot’s move in his review is to radicalise this account to reveal that literature escapes everything that one can say about it. He draws attention to the closing lines of

⁵² Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes: ou, la terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941). An earlier version of this text appeared in 1936.

⁵³ Blanchot, ‘Comment la littérature est-elle possible?’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 92-101 (pp. 95-96) (first publ. as two essays in *Journal des débats*, 25 November 1941, p. 3; 2 December 1941, p. 3). This had earlier appeared as a small volume *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* (Paris: José Corti, 1942), which included a third essay on Paulhan first publ. as ‘La Terreur dans les lettres’, *Journal des débats*, 21 October 1941, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Blanchot, ‘Comment la littérature est-elle possible?’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 99-100. Michael Syrotinski provides an overview of the arguments of Paulhan and Blanchot in ‘How is Literature Possible?’, in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 953-58. See also Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 72-76.

Paulhan's study: 'Mettons enfin que je n'ai rien dit.'⁵⁵ This is not a throwaway remark to be ignored because it reveals, according to Blanchot, the secret of Paulhan's text, which is the impossibility of saying anything about literature. Terror rejects all commonplaces in the search for authentic expression, but any such expression, once expressed, becomes a commonplace like any other: 'Il suffit de concevoir que les *vrais* lieux communs sont des paroles déchirées par l'éclair et que les rigueurs des lois fondent le monde absolu de l'expression hors duquel le hasard n'est que sommeil.'⁵⁶

Jeffrey Mehlman reads this essay as an 'encoded farewell to plans for French fascism' — in his view this is evidence of a withdrawal of literature from political engagement.⁵⁷ Gerald Bruns considers this 'politics of refusal' in slightly different terms: this is less a renunciation of violence than a relocation of it within the ongoing currents of Blanchot's thinking; terror, violence and anti-rationalism remain basic features of Blanchot's poetics. Working from Zeev Sternhell's understanding of fascism as an ideological revolt against modernity that had substantial appeal in France in the 1930s, Bruns situates Blanchot within this tradition, without labelling him a fascist as such.⁵⁸ Blanchot is a 'last Romantic', perhaps someone 'who has just never been modern'.⁵⁹ Elsewhere in this study, quoting the following passage from 1964 up to '[...] c'est rendre possible une parole non transitive qui n'a pas pour tâche de dire les choses', Bruns claims that Jena Romanticism is the tradition in which Blanchot would most likely situate himself.⁶⁰

On peut bien dire que, dans ces textes, nous trouvons exprimées l'essence non romantique du romantisme et toutes les principales questions que la nuit du langage va contribuer à produire au jour: qu'écrire, c'est faire œuvre de la parole, mais que cette œuvre est désœuvrement; que parler poétiquement, c'est rendre possible une parole non transitive qui n'a pas pour tâche de dire les choses (de disparaître dans ce qu'elle signifie), mais de (se) dire en (se) laissant dire,

⁵⁵ Paulhan, p. 177.

⁵⁶ Blanchot, 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible?', in *Faux pas*, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Mehlman, *Genealogies of the Text*, p. 92.

⁵⁸ Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*, pp. 23-33. See also Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France*, new edn, Historiques, 35 (Brussels: Complexe, 1987), pp. 29-63 (p. 59).

⁵⁹ Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*, p. xv.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.

sans toutefois faire d'elle-même le nouvel objet de ce langage sans objet (si la poésie est simplement la parole qui prétend exprimer l'essence de la parole et de la poésie, on retourne, à peine plus subtilement, à l'emploi du langage transitif — difficulté majeure par laquelle on en viendra à cerner, à l'intérieur du langage littéraire, l'étrange lacune qui est sa propre différence et comme sa nuit, nuit quelque peu terrifiante, analogue à celle que Hegel crut voir en regardant dans les yeux des hommes).⁶¹

The omission by Bruns of the concluding lines of this passage produces a distorted reading of Blanchot as a writer for whom literature is characterised by self-reflexive autonomy. In the lines that follow, Blanchot shows that transitive and intransitive language are one and the same once they adopt a fundamental teleology, such as the expression of authentic thought, and this exposure to the lacuna at the heart of literary language, the nothing of which Paulhan writes, turns writing endlessly outwards. This is night not as Hegel understood it — the pre-subjective and impersonal basis for self-conscious subjectivity and historical time: 'C'est cette nuit qu'on aperçoit lorsqu'on regarde un homme dans les yeux: [on plonge alors ses regards] en une nuit qui devient *terrible* (furchtbar); c'est la nuit du monde qui se présente (hängt entgegen) [alors] à nous'⁶² — but that other night which is irreducible to the day/night binary because it puts history and world in parentheses.⁶³ The aporetic logic is Mallarméan: necessity necessitates chance, depriving literature of any secure and stable foundation. Rather than a coded farewell to fascism or a revolt against modernity, the early review of Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* reveals that literature, contesting its own limits, is never autonomous.

⁶¹ Blanchot, 'L'Athenaeum', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 524.

⁶² G. W. F. Hegel as quoted in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la 'Phénoménologie de l'esprit' professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études*, ed. by Raymond Queneau, Collection Tel, 45 (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 674.

⁶³ For a discussion of the impossible experience of the other night in Blanchot, see Herschel Farbman, *The Other Night: Dreaming, Writing and Restlessness in Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Fordham, 2008), pp. 48-68.

Literary Foundations

Blanchot writes that Paulhan's Copernican revolution is to reverse the primacy of thought over language so that thought turns around language, 'pour retrouver sa nature authentique'.⁶⁴ The term 'authentic' and the relationship between thought and language outlined here echoes the conversation enacted by Heidegger between philosophy and poetry in his reading of Hölderlin. Robert Savage writes that for Heidegger philosophy has failed to recognise poetry as a partner of equal standing, seeing in it at best an inferior version of itself or at worst an indulgence in private feelings. 'Heidegger's task, as he understands it, is to put an end to this regrettable state of affairs by drawing philosophy into conversation with poetry, thereby causing it to metamorphose into something else, what he variously calls "incipient", "poetic", or "original"'.⁶⁵ At the end of his review, Blanchot paraphrases Paulhan who proposes something similar: if false and arbitrary, impure and conventional, consciousness is submitted to the rules of rhetoric, '[l]a pensée redeviendra pure, contact vierge et innocent, non point à l'écart des mots mais dans l'intimité de la parole, par l'opération des clichés, seuls capables de la reprendre aux anamorphoses de la réflexion'.⁶⁶ Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger on Hölderlin will, from the late 1930s onwards, significantly inform his reading of Mallarmé and others.

In 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', a lecture delivered in 1936 and published in French translation in 1937, Heidegger considers why Hölderlin describes poesy [*Dichten*] on separate occasions as the most innocent of all occupations but also the most dangerous of goods. 'Indeed, the pursuit of poetry often looks like little more than *play*. Without responsibility [*Ungebunden*], it invents a world of images; lost in thought, it remains within an imaginary realm'.⁶⁷ Poesy is innocent because detached from world. This is, however, a view which overlooks the essence of poetry according to Heidegger. The task of language is to reveal the human world of time and history and so

⁶⁴ Blanchot, 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible?', in *Faux pas*, pp. 99-100.

⁶⁵ Robert Savage, *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), p. 37.

⁶⁶ Blanchot, 'Comment la littérature est-elle possible?', in *Faux pas*, p. 101.

⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. by Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 51-65 (p. 53); 'Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung', in *Gesamtausgabe*, IV: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (1981), 33-48 (pp. 34-35).

it is, as Hölderlin famously writes, poetically that man dwells on the earth.⁶⁸ Poetry is the originary event when the ontological ground is laid for the disclosure of beings and when language gives us the horizon against which we appear as beings-in-the-world. Language therefore serves comprehension only because poetry is foundational: ‘a naming of being and of the essence of all things — not just any saying, but that whereby everything first steps out into the open, which we then discuss and talk about in everyday language. Hence poetry never takes language as a material at its disposal [vorhandenen Werkstoff]; rather, poetry itself first makes language possible.’⁶⁹

Large sections of Blanchot’s 1942 review of Charles Mauron’s study of Mallarmé are heavily indebted to ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’. There is a clear divide between the poetic and the everyday in this essay, as Blanchot criticises Mauron for a biographical approach which neglects the language of Mallarmé’s poetry; the poetic recalls language to its essence and is not to be thought as simply a tool for the expression of ideas. ‘[La signification poétique] est non seulement ce qui dépend essentiellement du langage, mais ce qui rappelle le langage à son essence et l’empêche de se confondre avec ses buts.’⁷⁰ Edits made to this review for its publication in *Faux pas* demonstrate that Blanchot continued to engage closely with, and to clarify his own critical stance in relation to, Heidegger: ‘[Les phénoménologues diraient / On pourrait dire] que la signification poétique se rapporte à l’existence, qu’elle est compréhension [d’une situation / de la situation de l’homme], qu’elle [a une valeur existentielle / met en cause ce qu’il est].’⁷¹ The first alternative given in each set of square brackets is replaced with the second when the essay is published one year later in *Faux pas*.

⁶⁸ ‘Ist unbekannt Gott? Ist er offenbar wie der Himmel? dieses glaub’ ich eher. Des Menschen Maaß ist’s. Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde. Doch reiner ist nicht der Schatten der Nacht mit den Sternen, wenn ich so sagen könnte, als der Mensch, der heißet ein Bild der Gottheit.’ Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘In lieblicher Bläue...’ [In lovely blueness...] in German and English translation in *Poems and Fragments*, pp. 600-05 (p. 600), my emphasis.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, in *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, p. 60; *Gesamtausgabe*, IV, 43.

⁷⁰ Blanchot, ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’, in *Faux pas*, p. 128 (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 24 February 1942, p. 3 <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k510265t/f3.item>> [accessed 26 May 2017]).

⁷¹ Blanchot, ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’, in *Journal des débats*; and in *Faux pas*, p. 129. Other small edits to the essay stress the primacy of poetry over instrumental language: in 1943 poetry no longer tries to flee discursive reason in order to give verse another *mode of being*; reason now tries to elucidate verse in order to give it another *form* (*Faux pas*, p. 128, my emphasis).

Blanchot seems more willing to associate this interpretation of poetic meaning with his own critical position by 1943, when he also clarifies the small print of Heideggerian *Dichtung*.

The account of language outlined one year later in ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’ is largely unchanged, remaining committed to the Heideggerian view of poetry as foundation:

Le langage est ce qui fonde la réalité humaine et l’univers. L’homme qui se révèle dans un dialogue où il trouve son événement fondamental, le monde qui se met en paroles par un acte qui est sa profonde origine, expriment la nature et la dignité du langage. L’erreur est de croire que le langage soit un instrument dont l’homme dispose pour agir ou pour se manifester dans le monde; le langage, en réalité, dispose de l’homme en ce qu’il lui garantit l’existence du monde et son existence dans le monde. Nommer les dieux, faire que l’univers devienne discours, cela seul fonde le dialogue authentique qu’est la réalité humaine et cela aussi fournit la trame de ce discours, sa brillante et mystérieuse figure, sa forme et sa constellation, loin des vocables et des règles en usage dans la vie pratique.⁷²

The use of the expression ‘la réalité humaine’ — the controversial French translation of *Dasein* introduced by Henry Corbin in the 1930s — demonstrates that Blanchot is reading Mallarmé through the lens of Heidegger on Hölderlin.⁷³ One noticeable divergence from the account of language offered by Heidegger is the broader definition of literature which does not exclude prose: the focus of the essay is a letter by Mallarmé in which there is, ‘une conception si profonde du langage, une vue tellement étendue de la vocation des mots, une explication si universelle de la littérature que nul genre de création ne peut s’en trouver exclu.’⁷⁴ The writer of prose is similarly obliged to maintain the

⁷² Blanchot, ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 189-96 (p. 191) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 27 October 1943, p. 3). Leslie Hill notes that there is a subtle shift between ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’ and ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’ as Blanchot argues that the belief that language can be reduced to instrument is an illusion and an error in the later essay (‘Blanchot and Mallarmé’, *MLN*, 105: 5 (December 1990), 889-913 (pp. 897-98)).

⁷³ See Martin Heidegger, ‘Hölderlin et l’essence de la poésie’, trans. by Henry Corbin, in *L’Approche de Hölderlin*, trans. by Henry Corbin and others, Collection Tel, 269 (Paris: Gallimard, [1963] 1973), pp. 39-61. Jacques Derrida describes this rendering into French of *Dasein*, later adopted by Sartre, as a ‘traduction monstrueuse’ in ‘Les Fins de l’homme’, in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 129-84 (p. 136).

⁷⁴ Blanchot, ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’, in *Faux pas*, p. 190.

linguistic hierarchy and the necessity of the artwork in modernity. Blanchot references Novalis, Hölderlin and Joyce as examples of this struggle; but one could also cite Flaubert and Gide, for whom it was an unavoidable aporia.

Myth, the motif which dominates Blanchot's discussion of *Moby Dick*, remains a central concern of this essay because it is one way of resolving the struggle between necessity and contingency. In the opening paragraphs Blanchot quotes from a letter in which Mallarmé discusses a structured and calculated book shielded from the everyday that fulfils the duty of the poet by providing an Orphic explanation of the earth.⁷⁵ The only meaning such an act of foundation, bound up in the rigorous and necessary structure of prose, can have in everyday language is that it exists in isolation.⁷⁶ The task of the novelist, as it is laid out in this essay, is to found a world by granting the text its own law and containing the text within itself so that it does not lapse into the hazardous everyday, perceived as a constant threat to the strict limits of the novel: 'Tout lui sera aisé, s'il veut bien rompre avec la plupart de ses habitudes et accepter un instant d'aller, avec Mallarmé, jusqu'aux principes du langage.'⁷⁷ Nonetheless, we saw in the analysis of Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* that any founding law cannot belong to the text itself.⁷⁸ In this essay from 1943, chance plays a larger role in our encounter with Mallarmé than it had done one year earlier in 'La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?' — Blanchot writes that we are reminded by chance of the letter written by the poet; that we arbitrarily think of the art of the novel; and that asking the novelist the meaning of his or her work is an accident — so that the task of the novelist echoes the task of Paulhan. Having established that the Mallarméan poet aims for an incorruptible work devoid of all impure or inauthentic form and

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 189. Ian Maclachlan clarifies that for Blanchot the 'descent of Orpheus, by analogy with the literary work, is the quest for the obscure domain which precedes and secretly subsists in the language of literature [...]: the brute reality of things which escapes nomination, or the materiality of words which exceeds the interval of language and reality, in other words, that silent remainder in language which is neither the latter's affirmation of ideality nor its negation of materiality' (Ian Maclachlan, *Roger Laporte: The Orphic Text* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), p. 27). This is an impossible search for an inaccessible origin for the Blanchot of *L'Espace littéraire*, indicating a shift since 1943 when this task, although difficult, remains achievable.

⁷⁶ Blanchot, 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman', in *Faux pas*, pp. 194-95.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 191.

⁷⁸ The same applies to genre, as Jacques Derrida shows in 'La Loi du genre', in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 249-87. Derrida argues that in order for art to declare itself as art, there has to be something in its presentation that was not part of the genre: 'ce trait supplémentaire et distinctif, marque de l'appartenance ou de l'inclusion, ne relève, lui, d'aucun genre et d'aucune classe. La re-marque d'appartenance n'appartient pas' (p. 264).

questioned why this model of perfection should be accessible only to the poet, Blanchot writes: ‘Le romancier qui réfléchit sur l’œuvre qu’il a à composer, se trouve immédiatement aux prises avec des problèmes si graves et si épuisants qu’ils ne peuvent que lui sembler impossibles. Cette impossibilité doit être l’âme secrète de son travail. Elle lui apporte les exigences auxquelles il se peut qu’il succombe, mais qui, dans sa défaite même, le rendent conscient de ce qu’il désire.’⁷⁹

Writing ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’ soon after the publication of *Thomas l’obscur* and *Aminadab*, the essay can be read as a reflection on Blanchot’s own novelistic practice.⁸⁰ In the opening pages of *Thomas l’obscur* the main character Thomas is portrayed swimming in the sea and struggling to come to terms with his alienation from himself as he is cast into a strange world separated from the real, the everyday and his own body:

Puis il s’aperçut que ses membres, soit à cause de la fatigue, soit pour une raison inconnue, lui donnaient la même sensation d’étrangeté que l’eau dans laquelle ils roulaient. Chaque fois qu’il réfléchissait sur la manière dont ses mains disparaissaient puis reparaissaient dans un état d’indifférence totale à l’égard de l’avenir, avec une sorte d’irréalité dont il n’avait pas le droit de prendre conscience, il était tout prêt à croire qu’il éprouverait bien des difficultés impossibles à prévoir pour se tirer d’affaire. Il ne se découragea pas; le sentiment du danger était même tout à fait écarté du malaise que lui causait cette situation. Qu’avait-il à craindre? Mais son cas n’en était pas meilleur, car bien qu’il pût se maintenir indéfiniment dans l’eau ou dans cet élément bizarre qui en avait pris la place, il y avait quelque chose d’insupportable à nager ainsi à l’aventure avec un corps qui lui servait uniquement — il s’en rendait compte maintenant — à penser qu’il nageait.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Blanchot, ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’, in *Faux pas*, p. 193.

⁸⁰ Hill makes this point in *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, p. 71.

⁸¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l’obscur* (Paris: Gallimard, [1941] 2005), p. 26. Jean Starobinski provides a reading of this opening chapter in ‘*Thomas l’obscur*: chapitre premier’, *Critique*, 229: *Maurice Blanchot* (June 1966), 499-513.

Thomas exists in this other world marked by its unreality and foreignness; the water is a strange element where he swims only in his imagination. In this other world Thomas is pure consciousness, his own body is alien to him and seems to melt into the surrounding water or whatever strange element — the language of Blanchot's writing perhaps — has replaced that water. His ability to remain in this state indefinitely and the fact that his hands are totally indifferent to the future suggests a suspension of time which is indicative of the phenomenological epoché. Edmund Husserl sought to break with unfounded but deep-rooted assumptions about the structure and meaning of experience. He did this by placing the world within parentheses, by taking nothing for granted, not even the existence or non-existence of the world presupposed in metaphysics, and by progressing from the certainty of the transcendental phenomenological Ego to establish certainties via a rigorous scientific method which worked from the intuited-real and not the mathematical-ideal, an error of the sciences since Galileo according to Husserl.⁸² The stress on certainty found in Husserl is not, however, reflected in the passage from *Thomas l'obscur* quoted above, where the narrator hangs above a watery abyss and comments that there is something unbearable about this state in which he is estranged from himself.

Thirty two years later, in *Le Pas au-delà*, Blanchot reflects on the process of writing his first novel (he quotes the opening lines of *Thomas l'obscur*: 'il — la mer'). In the first of two fragments which focus on the experience of writing, he refers to this first inscription as 'cette puissance d'arrachement, de destruction ou de changement'. Literature is here an uprooting force and what results is disunity and fragmentation rather than any unified structure. The second fragment continues this reflection on the process of writing:

◆ Écrire comme question d'écrire, question qui porte l'écriture qui porte la question, ne te permet plus ce rapport à l'être — entendu d'abord comme tradition, ordre, certitude, vérité,

⁸² See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). For an introduction to Husserl's philosophy see Dermot Moran, *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For Husserl's influence on Blanchot, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 51-60.

toute forme d'enracinement — que tu as reçu un jour du passé du monde, domaine que tu étais appelé à gérer afin d'en fortifier ton 'Moi', bien que celui-ci fût comme fissuré, dès le jour où le ciel s'ouvrit sur son vide.

J'essaierai en vain de me le représenter, celui que je n'étais pas et qui, sans le vouloir, commençait d'écrire, écrivant (et alors le sachant) de telle manière que par là le pur produit de ne rien faire s'introduisait dans le monde et dans son monde. Cela se passait 'la nuit'. Le jour, il y avait les actes du jour, les paroles quotidiennes, l'écriture quotidienne, des affirmations, des valeurs, des habitudes, rien qui comptât et pourtant quelque chose qu'il fallait confusément nommer la vie. La certitude qu'en écrivant il mettait précisément entre parenthèses cette certitude, y compris la certitude de lui-même comme sujet d'écrire, le conduisit lentement, cependant aussitôt, dans un espace vide dont le vide (le zéro barré, héraldique) n'empêchait nullement les tours et les détours d'un cheminement très long.⁸³

Blanchot pushes the logic behind the phenomenological epoché to the limit in this fragment, as brackets open onto brackets, which open onto further brackets, in a movement that endlessly undermines the possibility of certitude. In suspending the everyday world in this way the writer becomes unfamiliar to him- or herself and so the certainty of the night, the certainty that he or she writes, is undone. The words of Blanchot writing in 1952, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, seem significant: we are insufficient spectators; bound to the world of tasks and ends we move from art to the world 'neutralised' or suspended (and we are significantly more capable of moving from world to tableau). The same workless logic evident in the early review of Paulhan which interrogates the distinction between Terror and Rhetoric here undoes the possibility of writing. Foundation gives way to suspension in the development of Blanchot's thought over this period, which is not to say that the stress returns to pure consciousness, because the subject who writes is effaced in this process.

⁸³ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 9.

Literature as Deception

In 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', Heidegger warns that language can be deceptive because it deals in both the essential and the inessential. Language may express the essential, but it also preserves beings as such in the work and so equally expresses the common or the everyday.

Heidegger argues that this dual occupation of language means that an essential word can seem unessential and vice-versa:

The word as word never offers any immediate guarantee as to whether it is an essential word or a deception [*Blendwerk*]. On the contrary — an essential word, in its simplicity, often looks like an inessential one. And on the other hand, what shows itself in its finery in the appearance of the essential is often merely something recited and repeated by rote. Thus language must constantly place itself into the illusion which it engenders by itself, and so endanger what is most its own, genuine utterance.⁸⁴

In the first edit to 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman' Blanchot notes the risk posed by language as it is identified by Heidegger, adding a lengthy paragraph toward the start of the essay in which he highlights the potential for such deception: 'Simplicité et clarté dont l'innocence finit par ressembler à un piège. On ne sait que penser de cette main qui offre, comme en passant, la clé de toute création. On se demande si elle ne retire pas ce qu'elle donne, en donnant dans sa réserve infiniment plus qu'elle ne promet.'⁸⁵ Blanchot agrees with Heidegger: the essential literary word can act as a trap because it can appear simple, clear and innocent when it is in fact concerned with the founding of all being. Later in the 1940s, Blanchot will accuse literature of deception because it claims to offer up some truth but does not engage in work in the world and so cannot respond to worldly criteria. The epigraph to *Le Très-Haut*, published in 1948, says as much: 'Je suis un piège pour vous. J'aurai beau tout vous dire; plus je serai loyal, plus je vous tromperai: c'est ma franchise qui vous attrapera.' 'Je

⁸⁴ Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 55; *Gesamtausgabe*, IV, 37. 'Blendwerk', translated as 'deception' in the English edition, is given in Corbin's French translation as 'vide sonore' (p. 47).

⁸⁵ Blanchot, 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman', in *Faux pas*, p. 190.

vous supplie de le comprendre, tout ce qui vous vient de moi n'est pour vous que mensonge, parce que je suis la vérité.⁸⁶ The trap set by language in 1943 will become innate trickery by the end of the decade, rendering any hierarchy between the literary and the everyday impossible for Blanchot.

A second paragraph added to 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman' for its publication in *Faux pas* indicates how Blanchot will turn to this view of literature as 'imposture'. In this addition, the consequences of the literary trap are articulated as it threatens to cause a slippage between the essential and the inessential, or between Being and beings:

Le poème, comme tout ouvrage de l'esprit, ne peut que dénoncer le péril que le langage représente pour l'homme; c'est le danger des dangers; c'est l'éclair qui lui révèle, au risque de l'aveugler et de le foudroyer, qu'il est perdu dans la banalité des mots usuels, dans la communauté de la langue sociale, dans la quiétude des métaphores apprivoisées. Le langage essentiel brille soudain au cœur de la nue, et son éclat attaque, consume, dévore le langage historique qui est compromis, mais non remplacé.⁸⁷

The phrase 'c'est le danger des dangers' is borrowed from Heidegger's essay on Hölderlin:

[Language] is the danger of all dangers because it first creates the possibility of a danger. Danger is the threat that beings pose to being itself. But it is only by virtue of language at all that man is exposed to something manifest: *beings* which press upon him and inflame him in his existence [*Dasein*], or *nonbeings* which deceive and disappoint him. Language first creates the manifest place of this threat to being, and the confusion and thus the possibility even of the loss of being, that is — danger.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Très-Haut*, L'Imaginaire, 203 (Paris: Gallimard, [1948] 1988), p. 7.

⁸⁷ Blanchot, 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman', in *Faux pas*, p. 192.

⁸⁸ Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 55; *Gesamtausgabe*, IV, 36-37.

According to Heidegger, the ‘danger of all dangers’ is the slippage in ontological difference, the slippage from Being to beings, and the subsequent forgetting or loss of Being which is characteristic of modernity. Like Heidegger, Blanchot recognises that the essential may lie in the simplest of phrases; he writes that it is the task of the novelist (and of the poet) to ensure that the essential does not lapse into the banal by maintaining this ontological hierarchy. This task seems achievable for Blanchot writing in 1943, but only a few years later in 1946, with the realisation that literature will always deceive and never give up any truth, this hierarchy becomes unstable and impossible to maintain. There are implications for the possibility of an authentic relation to death and dying (and Blanchot’s engagement with Heidegger) which are manifest by 1946: ‘le poète, comme tout homme qui parle et qui écrit, meurt toujours avant d’avoir atteint le silence et c’est pourquoi, toujours, sa mort nous apparaît prématurée, mensonge qui couronne un édifice de mensonges.’⁸⁹

The inherent danger of the literary work is clear in the *Prière d’insérer* of the original 1943 edition of *Faux pas*. The task of the critic is fraught with difficulties as he or she attempts to expose the secret of the work (what Heidegger calls ‘das Verborgenste’) without falling foul of the literary trap:

Chaque livre, un peu important, cache un secret qui le rend supérieur à ce qu’il peut être. C’est vers ce secret que le critique se dirige et c’est de lui qu’il s’éloigne, entraîné par le devoir de faire connaître à des lecteurs les ouvrages qui paraissent. Aussi sa marche est-elle piétinement et lourdeur. Et si elle se rapproche quelquefois du but, ce n’est que par un faux pas.⁹⁰

The critic may appear to approach the essential concealed in the work, but this is never truly the case; he or she is bound by his or her duty to communicate the appearance of new works to the public, to articulate these useful facts in everyday language, and so the possibility of a meta-language becomes

⁸⁹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’, in *La Part du feu*, pp. 35-48 (p. 48) (first publ. as ‘Mallarmé et le langage’, *L’Arche*, 14 (March-April 1946), 134-46). In Chapter Two, I will show that the hierarchy between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ dying similarly becomes impossible to maintain.

⁹⁰ *Prière d’insérer*, *Faux pas*; the author of this passage is not indicated, although the style suggests that it may have been written by Blanchot.

increasingly complicated by the contradictory aims of this task. An essay from 1944 develops this point further when Blanchot, reviewing Paulhan's study of Félix Fénéon, claims that criticism is even more out of reach than the novel or poetry. It is, Blanchot writes, not at all certain that criticism exists; a discussion then proceeds from a consideration of the double state of language. Literature protests the abuse of words in daily language by destroying discourse, ruining practical words to render them useless. In literature, language is the victim of a sort of sacrifice; the writer hopes that this destruction will raise banal language to the status of the sacred. Blanchot argues that the critic should be no different in his or her treatment of language and that his or her status as critic should be perpetually in doubt. Paulhan is, after all, able to identify only one 'critic' from the last one hundred years! 'Le critique habituel est un souverain qui échappe à l'immolation, prétend exercer l'autorité sans l'expier et se veut maître d'un royaume dont il dispose sans risque. Aussi n'y a-t-il guère de souverain plus misérable et, pour n'avoir pas refusé d'être quelque chose, plus près de n'être rien.'⁹¹ There is a secret or mystery within criticism which requires that the critic's language and status as critic is contested. The critic should not deal in understandable simplifications, but must work within the same destructive medium as the poet or novelist.⁹²

The difficulties facing the literary critic are the focus in 1946 of 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', which critiques Paul Valéry's reading of Mallarmé. Valéry had benefitted from a close relationship with Mallarmé in his later years and became known as the main purveyor of the poet's work. Following Mallarmé's death he aspired to build on his understanding of poetic language and attempted to rearticulate his views in a more lucid and logical manner. What transpires is a depiction of Mallarmé as master of language: 'Mallarmé a compris le langage comme s'il l'eût inventé. Cet écrivain si obscur a compris l'instrument de compréhension et de coordination au point de substituer au désir et au dessein naïfs et toujours particuliers des auteurs, l'ambition extraordinaire de concevoir

⁹¹ Blanchot, 'Le Mystère de la critique', in *Chroniques littéraires*, pp. 533-36 (p. 536) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 6 January 1944, p. 3).

⁹² Roger Laporte notes that Blanchot never ceased to ponder the problem of how to 'approach the obscure, allow the obscure to approach, but without making the same mistake as Orpheus?' Roger Laporte, 'Maurice Blanchot Today', trans. by Ian Maclachlan, in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. by Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 25-33 (p. 32).

et de dominer le système entier de l'expression verbale.⁹³ In Valéry's account, Mallarmé has displayed conscious mastery over the entire system of verbal expression and poetic language is an instrument to be manipulated by this master. Valéry sought to build on the work of his predecessor by transforming what some took to be an obscure and fragmented account of the poetic into a clear and unified doctrine, one which simplified the distinction between the poetic and the everyday to a distinction between poetry and prose, likened respectively to dancing and walking, or two forms of language that follow different rules:

Prose et poésie se servent des mêmes mots, de la même syntaxe, des mêmes formes et des mêmes sons ou timbres, mais autrement coordonnés et autrement excités. La prose et la poésie se distinguent donc par la différence de certaines liaisons et associations qui se font et se défont dans notre organisme psychique et nerveux, cependant que les éléments de ces modes de fonctionnement sont identiques. C'est pourquoi il faut se garder de raisonner de la poésie comme on fait de la prose.⁹⁴

The tone of this extract demonstrates the rational approach adopted by Valéry, who writes in a manner comparable to Jakobson's analysis of Baudelaire's 'Les Chats', stating elsewhere: 'Le principe essentiel de la mécanique poétique — c'est-à-dire des conditions de production de l'état poétique par la parole — est à mes yeux cet échange harmonique entre l'expression et l'impression.'⁹⁵ While the Mallarméan poets 'proclamèrent très haut le sortilège bu', Valéry's poet is engaged in 'la mécanique poétique', 'conditions de production' and an 'échange harmonique'.

Blanchot will object to Valéry's interpretation of Mallarmé for several reasons. Firstly, the attempt to expand on Mallarmé's conception of language, transforming the poet's view into a clearly articulated doctrine, is incompatible with this fragmentary and enigmatic thought: 'Le manque de cohérence des textes, un souci tout autre que logique, l'éclat de certaines formules qui n'expliquent

⁹³ Paul Valéry, 'Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé', in *Œuvres*, ed. by Jean Hytier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1957-1960), I, 644-60 (p. 658).

⁹⁴ Valéry, 'Poésie et pensée abstraite', in *Œuvres*, I, 1314-39 (p. 1331).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1332.

pas mais qui montrent, rendent les méditations de Mallarmé peu réductibles à l'unité et à la simplicité d'une doctrine.'⁹⁶ Valéry erases the remarkable in Mallarmé through clarification. Secondly, the view that poetic language is an instrument that can be mastered by a conscious subject disregards the original founding role of language which precedes human existence, as well as the experience of dispossession documented by Mallarmé as the condition of writing the poetic. It seems that Valéry has fallen into the trap identified by Blanchot in 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman', looking to clarify Mallarmé he has allowed the simple essential word to lapse into the banal.

The reduction of the distinction between poetic and everyday language to the distinction between poetry and prose is also denied by Blanchot, who argued in 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman' that the novelist faces the same task as the poet and maintains that view here: 'le langage essentiel qui n'exclut pas la prose [...] est poésie et suppose le vers.'⁹⁷ Blanchot provides a more nuanced account of language where the distinction between essential and everyday language is no longer black and white; indeed, he seems to distance himself from this position: 'Mallarmé croit à l'existence de deux langages, l'un essentiel, l'autre brut et immédiat. C'est là une certitude qu'assurera Valéry et qui depuis nous est devenue très familière. Pourquoi? Cela est moins évident.'⁹⁸ It is Mallarmé who believes in the existence of two languages, as Blanchot questions why this distinction should be so obvious. While 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman' is replete with statements regarding perfection, necessity, purity and a silent absolute to which the text must aspire, in this later essay what is essential is hazier, clouded by irregularities and with more intricate boundaries:

nous voici à nouveau en contact avec la réalité mais une réalité plus évasive, qui se présente et s'évapore, qui s'entend et s'évanouit, faite de réminiscences, d'allusions, de sorte que si d'un côté elle est abolie, de l'autre elle réapparaît dans sa forme la plus sensible, comme une suite de nuances fugitives et instables, au lieu même du sens abstrait dont elle prétend combler le vide.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Blanchot, 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', in *La Part du feu*, p. 37. On Blanchot's criticism of Valéry in this essay, see Hill, 'Blanchot and Mallarmé', pp. 898-901.

⁹⁷ Blanchot, 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', in *La Part du feu*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

The ‘reality’ founded by essential language is unstable — the rigid structure and solid foundations of Mallarmé’s text have disappeared — and unachievable. Blanchot portrays an author working *toward* this goal: ‘Toutes les recherches de Mallarmé tendent à trouver une limite où s’esquisserait, par le moyen de termes pourtant fixes et orientés vers des faits et des choses, une perspective de parenthèses s’ouvrant les unes dans les autres à l’infini et se soustrayant sans cesse à elles-mêmes.’¹⁰⁰ While differences remain between the essential and the everyday, and also between poetry and prose, the two forms are not dialectically opposed to one another; the poetic is instead presented as the radicalisation of the everyday.

The focus in ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’ on the void created by poetic language underscores how the poetic is a more extreme form of everyday language. While everyday language destroys the world by reducing it to an abstraction, poetic language goes one step further and destroys this abstraction by the sensual tracing of the word:

On aperçoit maintenant autour de quel point dangereux tournent les réflexions de Mallarmé.

D’abord, le langage tient dans une contradiction: d’une manière générale, il est ce qui détruit le monde pour le faire renaître à l’état de sens, de valeurs signifiées; mais, sous sa forme créatrice, il se fixe sur le seul aspect négatif de sa tâche et devient pouvoir pur de contestation et de transfiguration. Cela est possible dans la mesure où, prenant une valeur sensible, il devient lui-même une chose, un corps, une puissance incarnée. Présence réelle et affirmation matérielle du langage lui donnent pouvoir de suspendre et de congédier le monde.¹⁰¹

The emphasis in ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’ was on a structured world founded by the poetic; here the stress is on the epochal suspension and dismissal of the world, creating a void and an unreality deprived of solid foundation, resulting in the instability remarked upon earlier: ‘une réalité plus évasive’. In order to create such absence, poetic language calls out to a form of presence which

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 44.

denies the intuition of being, or of anything other than words themselves. The danger of a slippage between the essential and the inessential is clearly stated: ‘la sensualité du langage ici l’emporte et le mot rêve de s’unir aux objets dont il a le poids, la couleur, l’aspect lourd et dormant.’¹⁰² Poetic language threatens to reunite itself with beings as it oscillates between presence and absence; clearly demarcated opposites break down in this shifting in-between state where what matters is neither image nor thing, but this restless movement of becoming.

The opening paragraph of this essay considers how we know more about Mallarmé now, following the publications of Henri Mondor, than ever before.¹⁰³ Blanchot contemplates whether such knowledge detracts from the mystery surrounding this genius and argues that the movement of history no longer allows us to share his faith in art as a sort of aesthetic religion: ‘Seule, la pure violence de cette passion nous retient et étonne encore.’¹⁰⁴ We are far from a historical view of literature as a response to modernity; what matters in Mallarmé is literature as the epochal suspension of world:

[Le langage] est une sorte de conscience sans sujet qui, séparée de l’être, est détachement, contestation, pouvoir infini de créer le vide et de se situer dans un manque. Mais c’est aussi une conscience incarnée, séduite à la forme matérielle des mots, à leur sonorité, à leur vie et donnant à croire que cette réalité nous ouvre on ne sait quelle voie vers le fond obscur des choses. Peut-être est-ce là une imposture. Mais peut-être cette supercherie est-elle la vérité de toute chose écrite.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰³ See Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

¹⁰⁴ Blanchot, ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’, in *La Part du feu*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 48. Paul de Man argues that Blanchot here misreads Mallarmé, in ‘La Circularité d’interprétation dans l’œuvre critique de Maurice Blanchot’, *Critique*, 229: *Maurice Blanchot* (June 1966), 547-60 (pp. 554-55). But De Man reads Blanchot too narrowly through Heidegger, writing that Blanchot translates Mallarmé’s experience into ontological terms and later that the impersonal in Blanchot, or the suppression of the subject, is an attempt to free his consciousness from ‘l’inauthentique’ (pp. 555, 560). He concludes that Blanchot tries to conceive the literary work as an autonomous entity from which are eliminated all elements derived from everyday experience and, with Heideggerian overtones, writes: ‘Il préfère la vérité qui se cache à la vérité qui s’affirme’ (p. 560).

The first aspect of literary language described here is informed by the phenomenological epoché; it remains impersonal and separated from the world. The second is the material form that literature requires in order to create this void. It is this presence which deceives us, leads us to believe that the literary will give up a truth when in fact it only deals in creating a void and does not work in the world. The traditional way of seeing the work of art as giving truth is therefore undermined; any essence or subjective truth is lacking in this language detached from Being. The epochal view of the world presented to us by literature, in which the world is constituted rather than constitutive, implies that there is something beyond world which literature cannot include: ‘Mais “là-haut” ne nous concerne pas’.¹⁰⁶ The literary becomes an experience of its own limits and the relationship between the literary and the everyday appears unstable as dialectical opposites are undermined and any sort of truth becomes inaccessible in literature.

‘Mais quand y a-t-il la littérature?’

Blanchot and Valéry share the view of literature as *poiesis*, or as making. In an earlier essay Blanchot remarks that Valéry is interested in poetics as the study of the mind of the author, ‘en tant qu’il *fait* quelque chose, dans la mesure où il s’exprime, dans une œuvre et dans la création de cette œuvre.’¹⁰⁷ Their disagreement hinges on the outcome of this making. Valéry considers the essential principle of poetics to be ‘cet échange harmonique entre l’expression et l’impression’. Blanchot writes that what literature creates is an emptiness and Valéry is at fault for attempting to fill this void with sensibility: ‘A n’en pas douter, c’est ce que Valéry appelle un sentiment, une pensée à l’état naissant ou, plus exactement, ni pensée ni sentiment, mais une naissance, une éclosion, une intention qui se cherche, une signification qui s’indique, un sens encore suspendu, dont nous tenons que l’ébauche vide.’¹⁰⁸ Valéry is seduced by the material form of words identified by Blanchot as only one aspect of poetic language.

¹⁰⁶ Blanchot, ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’, in *La Part du feu*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Blanchot, ‘La Poétique’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 136-142 (p. 137) (first publ. in *Journal des débats*, 5 August 1942, p. 3).

¹⁰⁸ Blanchot, ‘Le Mythe de Mallarmé’, in *La Part du feu*, p. 47.

One year later, Blanchot's seminal essay 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' similarly portrays the relationship between the poetic and the everyday as one marked by instability. In this essay there is little discussion of a divide within language; literature eludes a single definition and characteristics that may once have been associated with everyday language are now related to one of the 'pentes' or 'versants' of literature identified by Blanchot:

D'un certain point de vue, la littérature est partagée entre deux versants. Elle est tournée vers le mouvement de négation par lequel les choses sont séparées d'elles-mêmes et détruites pour être connues, assujetties, communiquées. [...]

Mais il y a un second versant. La littérature est alors le souci de la réalité des choses, de leur existence inconnue, libre et silencieuse; elle est leur innocence et leur présence interdite, l'être qui se cabre devant la révélation, le défi de ce qui ne veut pas se produire au dehors.¹⁰⁹

The everyday language of communication and literary realism is located on the first slope, the movement of negation by which we destroy things in order to communicate an idea in the world. In the same way that the poetic is the everyday radicalised in 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', the second slope of literature destroys such abstractions to make way for this unknown existence which oscillates between presence and absence. The focus has shifted from an opposition between the necessity of the poetic and the contingency of the everyday to the ambiguity common to all language: 'ce double sens initial, qui est au fond de toute parole'.¹¹⁰

As has been noted by critics, many of the ideas posited by Blanchot in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' originate from his reading of Hegel.¹¹¹ The first section of the essay, originally published in November 1947 as 'Le Règne animal de l'esprit', takes its title from one of the sections

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', in *La Part du feu*, pp. 305-45 (p. 332) (first publ. as two essays: 'Le Règne animal de l'esprit', *Critique*, 18 (November 1947), 387-405; 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', *Critique*, 20 (January 1948), 30-47).

¹¹⁰ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', in *La Part du feu*, p. 331.

¹¹¹ For instance, Rodolphe Gasché 'The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-Space of Literature' (pp. 34-69) and Christopher Fynsk, 'Crossing the Threshold: On "Literature and the Right to Death"' (pp. 70-90), in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. by Gill.

of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*: 'Das geistige Tierreich und der Betrug oder die Sache selbst'. It is often assumed that Blanchot's reading of Hegel was largely influenced by Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, also published in 1947.¹¹² Blanchot does indeed subscribe to Kojève's view that Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of death with little qualification; although it is the focus on the inactive literary intellectual which particularly interests Blanchot. Kojève, interpreting Hegel, states that it is only by working in the everyday world that man realises himself objectively as man.¹¹³

L'Intellectuel, n'agissant pas (donc ne se *créant* pas), ne peut s'intéresser qu'à ce qui *est* en lui, c'est-à-dire à sa 'nature' innée. Elle est humaine, parce qu'il vit en société, a été 'éduqué' (gebildet) par l'*action* créatrice des autres. En parlant de sa 'nature' il parlera donc de l'Homme. Mais ce qu'il en dira sera faux, car il ne comprendra pas que 'l'*être* vrai de l'homme est son *action*'.¹¹⁴

By not engaging in work in the everyday world the intellectual fails to negate and to transcend himself and remains a 'natural being' cut off from society. Any attempt by the intellectual to pit his ideal universe against the world is therefore deception, fraud, 'imposture'. Blanchot agrees in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' that literature is 'imposture', but such fraudulence is what makes it so interesting: 'que la littérature un instant coïncide avec rien, et immédiatement elle est tout, le tout commence d'exister: grande merveille.'¹¹⁵

This view of literature as 'imposture' contradicts the account of literature offered by Sartre, who argued that the writer can have an engaged relationship with the world. In 1947 Sartre stated unequivocally: 'Parler, c'est agir'.¹¹⁶ For Sartre, literature is engagement in the world because

¹¹² Leslie Hill argues that Jean Hyppolite's *Genèse et structure de la Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel* and his translation of Hegel are just as important to Blanchot as Kojève's work, citing quotations used by Blanchot which appear in Hyppolite but not in Kojève. See Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 254-56 n. 9.

¹¹³ Kojève, p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 107-108.

¹¹⁵ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', in *La Part du feu*, p. 306.

¹¹⁶ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, p. 29.

speaking inevitably changes the world through the process of naming and thus revealing. Blanchot and Sartre both take from Hegel the principle that all action is negation; however, unlike Blanchot, Sartre does not distinguish between the negativity of literature and the negativity of work in the world. Blanchot disagrees: literature is not the gradual mediated transformation of the world over a period of time as Sartre claims it is; rather, it is the immediate negation of the world in its totality which results in the unreal, or the epochal suspension of the world. For this reason literature is 'imposture' and it cannot correspond to worldly criteria: 'Du côté de la tâche qu'est le monde, la littérature est maintenant regardée plutôt comme une gêne que comme une aide sérieuse'.¹¹⁷ Literature is what Sartre would deem bad faith; although for Blanchot what distinguishes all literature is the impossibility of avoiding such 'imposture': 'On comprend la méfiance qu'inspirent aux hommes engagés dans un parti, ayant pris parti, les écrivains qui partagent leur vue; car ces derniers ont également pris parti pour la littérature, et la littérature, par son mouvement, nie en fin de compte la substance de ce qu'elle représente. C'est là sa loi et sa vérité. Si elle y renonce pour s'attacher définitivement à une vérité extérieure, alors elle cesse d'être littérature et l'écrivain qui prétend l'être encore, entre dans un autre aspect de la mauvaise foi.'¹¹⁸

Blanchot and Sartre share the reference to ambiguity. For Sartre the poetic attitude considers words as things rather than signs; the treatment of the word as sign in prose ensures that words can be manipulated, mastered and used to act in the world: 'Car l'ambiguïté du signe implique qu'on puisse à son gré le traverser comme une vitre et poursuivre à travers lui la chose signifiée ou tourner son regard vers sa *réalité* et le considérer comme objet'.¹¹⁹ Ambiguity is a way of raising questions in the audience's mind about good and bad courses of action, thereby prompting a dialectical understanding of action in the real world.¹²⁰ For Blanchot, on the other hand, ambiguity is not restricted to prose but is a characteristic of all language:

¹¹⁷ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', in *La Part du feu*, p. 340.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 314.

¹¹⁹ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, pp. 18-19.

¹²⁰ Denis Hollier notes that Sartre's existential heroes are failures, in that they all fall victim to bad faith, thus confirming Blanchot's argument that 'good' faith in art is impossible. See Denis Hollier, *Politique de la prose: Jean-Paul Sartre et l'an quarante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

La littérature est le langage qui se fait ambiguïté. La langue courante n'est pas nécessairement claire, elle ne dit pas toujours ce qu'elle dit, le malentendu est aussi une de ses voies. Cela est inévitable, on ne parle qu'en faisant du mot un monstre à deux faces, réalité qui est présence matérielle et sens qui est absence idéale. Mais la langue courante limite l'équivoque. Elle enferme solidement l'absence dans une présence, elle met *un terme* à l'entente, au mouvement indéfini de la compréhension; l'entente est limitée, mais le malentendu aussi est limité. Dans la littérature, l'ambiguïté est comme livrée à ses excès par les facilités qu'elle trouve et épuisée par l'étendue des abus qu'elle peut commettre.¹²¹

A considerable conceptual shift has taken place for Blanchot over the course of the 1940s. In 'Le Secret de Melville' [1941] the poet turned aside from the everyday to found another world; the everyday was undoubtedly seen as the norm and the literary was the abnormal journey. By 1949 what is normal has been inverted; literary ambiguity is excessive, more inclusive than the limited ambiguity of the everyday, and so literary language becomes the norm. Moreover, the literary cannot have a solid opposing relationship with the everyday now that ambiguity is everywhere and so literature is marked by instability.

Given with language is the possibility of suspending familiar assumptions — Husserl's project was to describe the familiar horizon — and so the epochal worldview of literature, because more inclusive, is treated as the norm by Blanchot in essays on Mallarmé published after the end of the war: 'L'irréalité commence avec le tout. L'imaginaire n'est pas une étrange région située par-delà le monde, il est le monde même, mais le monde comme ensemble, comme tout. C'est pourquoi, il n'est pas dans le monde, car il est le monde, saisi et réalisé dans son ensemble par la négation globale de toutes les réalités particulières qui s'y trouvent'.¹²² Literary language negates the world in an instant and in its entirety; literature stands neither within world nor beyond it, but at its very limit, preceding and constituting worldly limits. While the ambiguity of Sartre is contained within a horizon, within the world in which man can act, Blanchot's ambiguity reflects a state that is prior to

¹²¹ Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', in *La Part du feu*, pp. 342-43.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 319-20.

the world and to the possibility of any horizon. Blanchot looks to Levinas and the force of the *il y a* (citing *De l'existence à l'existant*) to name this state: 'ce courant anonyme et impersonnel de l'être qui précède tout être, l'être qui au sein de la disparition est déjà présent, qui au fond de l'anéantissement retourne encore à l'être, l'être comme la fatalité de l'être, le néant comme existence: quand il n'y a rien, *il y a* de l'être.'¹²³ The *il y a* stands outside history, time, world and the dialectic posited by Hegel and supported by Kojève. It is the lack of foundation from which all beings and things originate, comparable to what Bataille, using an anti-philosophical paradox, had previously referred to as 'négativité sans emploi'.¹²⁴ Literature is a power without foundation as the work of art simulates being while providing only the absence of being; 'ce double sens initial qui est au fond de toute parole' instigates an oscillation between presence and absence at the origin of the work which results in what Blanchot in *L'Espace littéraire* and elsewhere will call 'désœuvrement'. Any truth seemingly offered by the work is a trap: literature deceives first and foremost.

When the conceptual ground has shifted to such an extent that literature is the norm, we move from art to world and not vice-versa, as Ahab did for Blanchot in 1941 aboard his ship. The beginnings of this shift were evident in 'Mallarmé et l'art du roman', when Blanchot declared, in agreement with Heidegger, that the poetic precedes and founds the world and is constitutive of human existence and experience. The danger highlighted in this essay of a slippage in the ontological hierarchy between Being and beings has inevitably been played out: no essence or subjective truth is available in poetic language which is now only imposture.

By 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé' [1952], the double state of language is untenable for Blanchot; what remains is a view of literature as uncertainty, aiming for absence but always attached

¹²³ Ibid., p. 334 n. 1.

¹²⁴ Georges Bataille, 'Lettre à X., chargé d'un cours sur Hegel...', in *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-88), V: *La Somme athéologique*, I (1973), 369-71. From a Hegelian perspective, negativity without employment is a self-contradictory nonsense. Hegel resolves contradictions by subsuming them into dialectical thought. Rodolphe Gasché remarks that paradox is essential in Blanchot, it is a necessary but insufficient condition for the happening or chance of literature, and that none of the contradictions staged by Blanchot in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' is ever resolved because the condition for any such solution must be what makes it impossible. Literature is this solution premised on its own impossibility: 'The opposite pulls between which writer and work find themselves do not lend themselves to a reconciliation. No causal, mechanical, logical or dialectical solution can be conceived. And yet, the work *is*, in its very underivableness from the insurmountable ordeal, the *impossible solution* of that conflictual situation' (p. 42). See Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. by Gill, pp. 34-69.

to some form of presence and governed by an oscillating logic of worklessness. Blanchot writes that silence defines both states of language according to Mallarmé. Crude, raw or natural language negates the reality of things; this is language involved in the world of tasks and ends or language as pure exchange in which words disappear into their usage. The language of thought has more in common with the everyday than we may first assume; aiming for the pure idea it also returns us to the world of tasks.¹²⁵ Blanchot explains that ‘essential’ language is the unreal become language, or the epochal suspension of world; but words here, like in their everyday usage, retain their capacity to disappear.

Écrire ne consiste jamais à perfectionner le langage qui a cours, à le rendre plus pur. Écrire commence seulement quand écrire est l’approche de ce point où rien ne se révèle, où, au sein de la dissimulation, parler n’est encore que l’ombre de la parole, langage qui n’est encore que son image, langage imaginaire et langage de l’imaginaire, celui que personne ne parle, murmure de l’incessant et de l’interminable auquel il faut imposer *silence*, si l’on veut, enfin, se faire entendre.¹²⁶

The work of art may appear to silence the world in a way that everyday language does not, but it only pretends to split itself from all presence and being. Yun Sun Limet identifies a continuity and coherence in Blanchot’s reflection on language from the 1930s to the 1980s in which there is a continued distinction between the literary and the everyday. Limet argues that Blanchot thinks silence as double throughout his career: a sort of literary silence which speaks while imposing a different sort of silence on the noise of the everyday world, ensuring the limits of literature.¹²⁷ The idea that there is a more profound silence, to be distinguished from the trivial ‘keeping quiet’ of the everyday is bluntly dismissed by Blanchot in ‘L’Expérience de Mallarmé’, who remarks that there is nothing to distinguish between ‘la nullité silencieuse de la parole courante’ and the ‘silence accompli du poème’.

¹²⁵ Blanchot, ‘L’Expérience de Mallarmé’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, pp. 38-43

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

¹²⁷ Limet, pp. 49-60, 118.

Silence, as that capacity of words to disappear, is attained neither in ‘common’ nor ‘essential’ language and unworks any linguistic hierarchy. The impoverished language of which Blanchot writes above, which can never be silenced, is the only proof we have of the literary and looks more like the banal. Emmanuel Levinas writes of this murmuring in 1956: ‘Le langage poétique qui a écarté le monde laisse réapparaître le murmure incessant de cet éloignement, comme une nuit se manifestant dans la nuit. Ce n’est pas l’impersonnel de l’éternité, mais l’incessant, l’interminable, recommençant sous la négation qu’on puisse en tenter.’¹²⁸

Mallarmé remains an important reference for Blanchot from the 1950s onwards, but the name is now associated with the question of the absence of the work and fragmentation rather than any dichotomy between the poetic and the everyday. This is not to say that Blanchot denies a double state of language, but that he refuses any dividing line between two opposing forms:

Par une division violente, Mallarmé a séparé le langage en deux formes presque sans rapport, l’une la langue brute, l’autre le langage essentiel. Voilà peut-être le vrai bilinguisme.

L’écrivain est en chemin vers une parole qui n’est jamais déjà donnée; parlant, attendant de parler. Ce cheminement, il l’accomplit en se rapprochant toujours davantage de la langue qui lui est historiquement destinée, proximité qui cependant met en cause et parfois gravement son appartenance à toute langue natale.¹²⁹

The division of language which neatly delimited the poetic and the everyday, poetry and prose, was violent, forced and unsustainable. The two forms of language do not stand in a stable opposing relationship to one another; both exist in perpetual flux as they shift and overlap without any binding or separating relationship. This is true bilingualism for Blanchot. The crisis that Mallarmé sought to negotiate in *Crise de vers* comes back to haunt Blanchot in 1984: ‘[La poésie], épuisant toute définition, m’engage (non pas dans mon seul esprit, mais dans ma vie — écriture — esprit) vers une

¹²⁸ Levinas, ‘Le Regard du poète’, in *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, p. 16.

¹²⁹ Blanchot, [‘Par une division violente...’], in *L’Amitié*, p. 171.

crise définitive, à cause de l'indéfini qu'elle provoque incessamment.'¹³⁰ Mallarmé reached out to the distinction between the poetic and the everyday when the boundary between poetry and prose became confused; Blanchot recognises that this crisis cannot be resolved as all boundaries within language — between poetry and prose, the essential and the everyday, fiction and criticism — are indeterminable because constantly shifting.

Jacques Derrida echoes this view in 'La Double séance' [1969], where he challenges the longstanding metaphysical and philosophical idea that art is subordinate to truth. He begins by citing, or asking: '*qu'est-ce que la littérature*'? In relation to Mallarmé's *Mimique*, he states that literature is no longer subject to the metaphysical criteria of truth as agreement or of truth as *aletheia* or unforgetting. Heidegger argues that traditional correspondence theories of truth are derivative; they are reliant on truth as unconcealing which is more original and shown in art. Derrida writes that both versions of truth are destroyed in *Mimique* and shows that they are not as radically opposed as they may first appear.¹³¹ He questions the dogmatic assumption that art is based on truth and challenges the view that literature obeys the rules of mimesis:

Nous sommes devant une mimique qui n'imité rien, devant, si l'on peut dire, un double qui ne redouble aucun simple, que rien ne prévient, rien qui ne soit en tous cas déjà un double.

Aucune référence simple. C'est pourquoi l'opération du mime fait allusion, mais allusion à rien, allusion sans briser la glace, sans au-delà du miroir. [...] Dans ce speculum sans réalité, dans ce miroir de miroir, il y a bien une différence, une dyade, puisqu'il y a mime et fantôme.

Mais c'est une différence sans référence, ou plutôt une référence sans référent, sans unité première ou dernière, fantôme qui n'est le fantôme d'aucune chair, errant, sans passé, sans mort, sans naissance ni présence.¹³²

¹³⁰ Blanchot, 'La Parole ascendante ou sommes-nous encore dignes de la poésie?', in *La Condition critique*, pp. 381-390 (p. 381) (first publ. in *Hors de la colline*, by Vadim Kozovoï, (Paris: Hermann, 1984), pp. 119-27.

¹³¹ Jacques Derrida, 'La Double séance', in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 215-347 (p. 219).

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

In literature we are faced with an imitator without imitated, sign without referent, where ambiguity or doubleness is never secondary but always primary. Literature does not obey any dialectic and, as the referent has never been and will never be present, the reference is within an open system in which differences infinitely proliferate. The opposition between sign and referent which was central to the theories proposed by Russian Formalism and Structuralism no longer applies. In 'La Double séance' there is a direct rebuttal of where to begin with literary theory. Summing up Mallarmé's *Mimique*, Derrida writes:

La littérature s'annule dans son illimitation. Ce court-traité de la littérature, s'il *voulait-dire* quelque chose, ce dont nous avons maintenant quelque raison de douter, énoncerait d'abord qu'il n'y a pas — ou à peine, si peu — de littérature; qu'en tous cas il n'y a pas d'essence de la littérature, de vérité de la littérature, d'être-littéraire de la littérature.¹³³

When there is no essence, truth, or literariness of literature, all language is becoming literary and what is literature is determined only by context. There is nothing to distinguish between literature and what lies outside of literature according to Derrida, echoing the words of Blanchot in 1946: 'Toutes les recherches de Mallarmé tendent à trouver une limite où s'esquisserait, par le moyen de termes pourtant fixes et orientés vers des faits et des choses, une perspective de parenthèses s'ouvrant les unes dans les autres à l'infini et se soustrayant sans cesse à elles-mêmes.'¹³⁴ Brackets open up infinitely onto further brackets as the author works toward an unattainable goal.

We saw at the start of this chapter that the division between art and the utilitarian is upheld by writers and thinkers from the Jena Romantics to Jean-Paul Sartre; at a time of faithlessness literature is legitimated, in various ways, as a sort of aesthetic religion when it is shown to give up some truth. Blanchot demonstrates how the opposition between literature and the everyday, or between poetry and prose, is unstable and cannot be policed: the authoritative self-referential distinction which meant that literature was characterised by myth and necessity in 1943 is impossible by the 1950s; literature

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 252-53.

¹³⁴ Blanchot, 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', in *La Part du feu*, p. 40.

cannot be defined in contradistinction to everyday language, to the real, to chance, now that it has become an unanswerable question in which such differences infinitely proliferate. During this period it becomes a question for Blanchot of when one starts thinking about literature, or of how to police the boundaries between literature and politics. Autonomy can take on various guises depending on the circumstances and the sort espoused by Blanchot at the beginning of the 1940s, when the text gives itself its own law, is very different from the autonomy from political appropriation supported in 1945, with the admission that literature is not action in the world but only ever ‘imposture’. When the limits of literature are challenged, as they were for Blanchot during the Occupation and in the years following the Liberation, the radical non-essentiality of art and literature is exposed: ‘ce travail profond de la littérature qui cherche à s’affirmer dans son essence en ruinant les distinctions et les limites.’¹³⁵ This is why the question of literature is also the question of *techne*, that Greek term encompassing technology and art. Derrida states in *De la grammatologie* [1967] that writing functions according to the logic of the supplement, that indication of abundance which is also proof of a deficiency, a lack, an absence — an originary prosthesis that unworks the opposition between nature and culture, or nature and technology.¹³⁶ Blanchot’s account of literature in essays from 1946 onwards shows that he is in agreement: literature is nothing essential. In the place of literature there is only doubt, uncertainty, a question: ‘la littérature est une puissance telle qu’elle ne tient compte de rien. Mais quand y a-t-il littérature?’¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Blanchot, ‘La Littérature et l’expérience originelle’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 292 n. 1.

¹³⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit 1967).

¹³⁷ Blanchot, ‘Laissez-moi vous répondre brièvement...’, in *La Condition critique*, p. 465 (first publ. in *La Règle du jeu*, 6 (January 1992), 181).

An Inhuman Interruption

From the outset of his career as a journalist and literary critic, having been introduced to *Being and Time* by his friend Emmanuel Levinas in the late 1920s while studying in Strasbourg, Blanchot was reading Heidegger in the original German. The previous chapter demonstrated the debt owed to Heidegger in essays such as ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’ and ‘Mallarmé et l’art du roman’, and that from the mid-1940s onwards, as early as the publication of *Faux pas* in 1943, there is increasing distance between Heidegger and Blanchot, as the latter undermines the possibility of a linguistic hierarchy between poetic saying and instrumental language and concurrently an authentic relation to death and dying. Nonetheless, the philosophy of Heidegger remains a fundamental starting point from which to understand aspects of Blanchot’s later writing concerning, for instance, death and the neuter, as well as his reading of poets such as Mallarmé, Hölderlin and Rilke.

Allusions to Heidegger in Blanchot’s essays of the early 1940s often go unreferenced, but their significance should not be overlooked. Blanchot develops an understanding of poetic language in this period that incorporates the Heideggerian view of poetry as foundation, truth as a mode of revealing, and language as the house of Being. The influence of Heidegger, particularly his 1936 lecture ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, is clearest in those three essays on Mallarmé, originally written for the *Journal des débats* and later reworked for publication in *Faux pas*, in which the conception of poetic language presented is so close to that articulated by Heidegger that Blanchot is able to lift phrases directly from the former’s lecture and apply them in turn to his reading of Mallarmé. Blanchot implicitly revisits Heidegger on Hölderlin in these essays on Mallarmé because

the German philosopher has become, ‘the thinker most deeply and purposefully engaged in articulating philosophically the question of the foundational nature of language in general and poetic language in particular, and in challenging the inherited presuppositions of aesthetic theory as such’,¹ which is also to say that Heidegger’s turning was not simply a matter of philosophical interest for Blanchot, but was clearly linked to his own early career as a novelist. In this chapter we will see that Blanchot engages critically with Heidegger in essays written in 1953, the year that Heidegger published ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ and when Blanchot became a regular contributor to *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, exploring how Heidegger relates such ideas to death, technology and the privileging of the human over the animal, and how these broader concerns are adopted, rejected or displaced in Blanchot’s writing.

This chapter will examine how Blanchot engages with the Heideggerian concept of world in order precisely to show its cracks, insofar as what writing does for Blanchot is to suspend what constitutes world. In *Being and Time*, world refers to the familiar environment in which *Dasein* dwells; it is ‘a system of purposes and meanings that organises our activities and our identity, and within which entities can make sense to us’.² Worldliness is the privilege of *Dasein*; nonhuman entities can be described as belonging to or within the world, but they are never in the world. The phenomenology of Being-in-the-world appears to open up the possibility of originary technicity, because the instrument or the tool [*das Zeug*] is the means by which *Dasein*’s fundamentally ontological mode of existence is disclosed to it.³ In later Heidegger, world becomes more explicitly historical and no longer refers to beings as a whole. Richard Polt, with some reservation, compares the relation between world and earth, to be discussed later in this chapter, to the tension between culture and nature: culture arises from nature and tries to understand that from which it arises, but

¹ Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, p. 79.

² Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 54.

³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 91-107; *Gesamtausgabe*, II, 85-102. For an overview of Heideggerian world, see Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 245-48; and Polt, pp. 49-55, 136-40. For a discussion of equipmentality in *Being and Time* which summarises charges of anthropocentrism, the idealisation of technology, and technophobia, see Bradley, pp. 75-81.

nature, or earth, tends to reassert itself in its mysterious power, affirming the limits of our understanding.⁴

Heidegger has been accused of reducing or excluding technics from thought, of giving residual ontological priority to *physis* over *techne*, of presiding over a naturalisation of technology rather than a technicisation of nature.⁵ By comparing the treatment of the poet and prose writer Rainer Maria Rilke by Heidegger in 1946 and Blanchot in 1953, in particular his conception of the Open, a limitless region beyond metaphysical representation in which life and death are unified and to which the animal has privileged access, this chapter will reveal a work compatible with ecological thought, not because Blanchot romanticises nature and condemns the effects of technology, but because the technical is found to be always already inhabiting the natural. The aporetic relation between nature and culture, or nature and technology, or nature and history, means that, while being opposed, they are also mutually implicated in one another, so that the one is always already contaminated with the other.

The History of Being

It is usually assumed that there is a shift in Heidegger's thought after the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, signalling his abandonment of fundamental ontology for the history of being [*Seinsgeschichte*]. In this turning [*Kehre*], the stress shifts from the analytic of *Dasein*, which was the focus of *Being and Time*, to a thinking of Being where art and language loom large. As the English translator of his essays on Hölderlin notes, poetry is mentioned only twice in *Being and Time*.⁶ A reading of Hölderlin therefore plays an important role in this turning, as Heidegger delivered a series of lectures in the mid-1930s, not long after his resignation as rector at the University of Freiburg in

⁴ Polt, pp. 137-38.

⁵ See Bradley, pp. 68-93. Derrida argues that Heidegger privileges the human and presupposes a thought free from technics (see, for instance, Jacques Derrida 'De l'esprit', in *Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 9-143). Stiegler argues that the account of the tool given by Heidegger reduces technics to a supplemental role (see, for instance, Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, 3 vols (Paris: Galilée, 1994-2001), I: *La Faute d'Épiméthée*, 31).

⁶ Keith Hoeller, 'Translator's Introduction', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, by Heidegger, p. 11.

1934, which is to say that the turning has political, as well as philosophical, significance. In these essays on Hölderlin, Heidegger repeatedly affirms the view of poetry as the foundation of Being:

The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates the beings [*das Seiende*] as what they are. Thus they become known *as* beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word [*Dichtung ist werthafte Stiftung des Seins*].⁷

Dichtung is difficult to translate accurately in English; in German it refers to poetry in the sense of lines of verse, but can also be translated as fiction, literature, or the works of an author. The term therefore refers to a broader artistic category not fully encapsulated by 'poetry' in its normal usage. This reversal of the traditional hierarchy between ordinary language and poetic language, with its roots in German Romanticism, renders *Dichtung* the origin of beings and so poetry, as a broad fictional and artistic category, becomes the mode through which a people can access its common origin: Being. The focus on the ability of the poet to reveal Being through language is characteristic of Heidegger's writing after the so-called turn.

In later work, Heidegger therefore understands Being as essentially historical. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', an essay which, although first published in 1950, was drafted in the 1930s and so belongs to the same period as 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', he writes: 'The artwork opens up, in its own way, the being of beings. This opening up, i.e., unconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the artwork, the truth of beings has set itself to work. Art is the setting-itself-to-work of truth.'⁸ Heidegger is here referring to a fundamental mode of revealing that is prior to

⁷ Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 59; *Gesamtausgabe*, IV, 41. The English translation is working from the fifth edition of the essay as it appears in the *Gesamtausgabe*. 'Thus they become known *as* beings' is a later addition to the essay and would not have been included in the first edition read by Blanchot.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-56 (p. 19); 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes', in *Gesamtausgabe*, V: *Holzwege* (1977), 1-74 (p. 25).

objective truth and more primal or original than mere correspondence between thing and idea. The work of art is where truth happens; it is where beings are brought into unconcealment in the Open — the clearing which allows beings to stand revealed in time — while the work withdraws into its inexhaustible materials — the sculptor's stone, the painter's paint, or the poet's words. The Open will figure prominently later in this chapter as divergent readings of this region as it appears in the work of Rainer Maria Rilke — on the one hand as a false Open that is simply an inversion of the traditional metaphysical view, on the other hand as a mystical moment of confrontation with the outside, a fusion between the inner world of feeling and the outer world of animals — highlight the displacement of thought which occurs between Heidegger and Blanchot.

Truth comes to pass in the artwork in the strife between what Heidegger calls 'earth' and 'world'. We noted that in *Being and Time* world refers to the familiar environment in which *Dasein* dwells. In this later essay, world can similarly not be objectivised and is only available to the human; but there is also an historical and collective dimension to world, which Polt summarises as expressing 'a particular community's way of understanding itself at a particular juncture in history.'⁹ Heidegger writes: 'The stone is world-less. Similarly, plants and animals have no world; they belong, rather, to the hidden throng of an environment [*Umgebung*] into which they have been put. The peasant woman, by contrast, possesses a world, since she stays in the openness of beings. In its reliability, equipment imparts to this world a necessity and proximity of its own. By the opening of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits.'¹⁰ World is what gives meaning to everything that we do as a historical people in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'.

Equipment is said to 'impart to this world a necessity and proximity of its own' because it is through equipment that we access world. It is for this reason that Heidegger elsewhere places such importance on the hand, writing in *What Is Called Thinking?* that thinking is a handiwork (to be distinguished from the useful activity which cuts the hand from the essential).¹¹ A comparable

⁹ Polt, p. 137.

¹⁰ Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 23; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 31.

¹¹ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, p. 16; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 18. Jacques Derrida notes that an implicit but nonetheless clear hierarchy is evident in Heidegger's thinking of *Handwerk* [the work of the hand,

hierarchy is evident in the opening pages of 'The Origin on the Work of Art' which are dedicated to a consideration of the distinction between mere thing and a piece of equipment. Equipment 'frames' its material as ready for use, reducing material to its usefulness. Something different happens in the work of art: the 'thingliness' of the thing is re-presented in the work in a way that does not reduce the thing to equipment and materiality to usefulness. Heidegger writes that the depiction of a pair of unworn shoes in a painting by Van Gogh reveals the world of the peasant woman who owns them:

[...] A pair of peasant's shoes and nothing more. And yet.

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes [*Schuhzeuges*] the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift [*ihr stilles Verschenken*] of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. The equipment belongs *to the earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.¹²

The closing lines reveal that earth is the foundation onto which world is built. Earth is that elusive element into which the work sets itself back, allowing the materiality of the work to come forth and ensuring that the work cannot be objectified: 'Earth is the coming-forth-concealing. Earth is that

handiwork, handling]. The authentic carpenter, for instance, 's'accorde à la plénitude cachée de l'essence du bois et non pas à l'outil et à la valeur d'usage.' 'La méditation sur le *Hand-Werk* authentique a aussi le sens d'une protestation artisanaliste contre l'effacement ou l'abaissement de la main dans l'automatisation industrielle du machinisme moderne.' Jacques Derrida, 'La Main de Heidegger', in *Heidegger et la question*, pp. 173-222 (pp. 188, 190). The final section of this chapter considers unruly hands in Blanchot as examples of precisely such automaticity.

¹² Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 14; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 19.

which cannot be forced, that which is effortless and untiring. On and in the earth, historical man finds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth.’¹³ Truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting not because this is a representation of some being that was once present, but because the equipmentality of the equipment, which is to say the Being of beings, is opened up. This essay demonstrates that truth is more than revealing [*alētheia*], it is also concealment. The eventfulness of the work and its otherness which cannot be objectified reflect the mode of revealing and concealing that is truth according to Heidegger.¹⁴

The painting by Van Gogh discussed in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ is the subject of correspondence between Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro, who contests the claim that these are the shoes of a peasant woman, using Van Gogh’s correspondence to argue that the shoes depicted in the particular painting he determines to be the subject of Heidegger’s essay (it is ambiguous in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’) are those of the painter from the time when he had moved to the city.¹⁵ Derrida contests such identification in his analysis, prioritizing the double over the single he refutes the assumption made by both that the shoes form a pair and can be attributed to a subject. In binding the shoes together as a pair, Heidegger and Schapiro bind them to the law of normal usage: ‘Condition pour rendre justice à la vérité qu’ils croyaient devoir en peinture.’¹⁶ Detached from one another these shoes are then doubly detached on two further levels: on one level detached because defunct (unworn) and non-functioning (they are painted objects out-of-work because in a work); on another level detached in themselves (they are unlaced) and detached from the feet (the owner is absent).¹⁷ Such excessive doubling cannot be reduced to ‘mimetologism’, nor can it be thought in terms of the conflict between earth and world — an opposition which ‘sutures’. This doubling is an interlacing that moves in and out of the frame like the laces threading the eyelets of the shoes, in so doing it defies the

¹³ Ibid., p. 24; p. 32.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the rift between earth and world which results in the happening of truth in the work, see Gerald L. Bruns, *Heidegger’s Estrangements: Language, Truth and Poetry in the Later Writings* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 27-51.

¹⁵ See Meyer Schapiro, ‘Still Life as Personal Object: a Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh’, in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), pp. 135-42.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘Restitutions: de la vérité en peinture’, in *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), pp. 291-436 (p. 381).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 323.

distinction between the real shoes and the shoes of the painting, so that we are tempted to tie the laces tightly around the ankle of a subject such as Van Gogh (Schapiro) or the peasant woman (Heidegger). ‘Tout ce système de bordures entrelaçantes détache l’être-produit de sa *portée subjective* tout en amorçant (en induisant et en appâtant) le rattachement de ladite *portée subjective*.’¹⁸ The distinction between reality and the painting is not effaced by this lacing, but defied and doubled. Consequently the painted shoes are spectral; they are never self-identical (my ghost is always other than ‘I’), but always doubled and open to the other.¹⁹ Derrida challenges the claim that truth happens in the work of art by thinking these shoes, and the feet onto which they fit, in the plural.

The discussion of reliability [*Verlässlichkeit*] in Derrida’s essay contests the pre-originary ground of Heideggerian thought, revealing that the product presupposes this condition of its possibility, which suggests that the tool is always already implicated in the pre-originary. The foundation of Heidegger’s existential analysis, *Dasein* and then later Being, is therefore always already contaminated by the technical. Derrida writes of this presupposition: ‘Ce qui est *verlässig* mérite confiance, foi ou crédit. Dans ce cas, le crédit est antérieur à tout contrat symbolique faisant l’objet d’un engagement signé (explicitement ou non) par un sujet nommable. Il n’est pas culturel ni davantage naturel.’²⁰ The doubling of the shoes shows that one cannot claim a pure nature because there is only ever *différance*. Later in this chapter, we will see how Blanchot similarly contests what Heidegger’s thought takes for granted, namely the possibility of an authentic relation to death, and how his fiction and criticism is haunted by hands which, in their doubled state, signal the contamination of nature by the originary involvement of an automatic technology.

In ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, Heidegger refers to several art forms (sculpture, painting and poetry) but privileges poetry as the essence of all art, because it is in language that beings are for the first time brought into the open: ‘Building and plastic creation [*Bauen und Bilden*] [...] are an always unique poeticizing within the clearing of beings which has already happened, unnoticed, in the language.’²¹ Proof of this statement relies on the presumed worldly poverty or worldlessness of the

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 387-88.

¹⁹ ‘Les chaussures sont toujours ouvertes à l’inconscient de l’autre’ (Ibid., p. 435).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 398.

²¹ Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 46-47; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 62.

inhuman: ‘Where language is not present, as in the being of stones, plants, or animals, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness either of that which is not a being [*des Nichtseienden*] or of emptiness.’²² Blanchot and Derrida will both later contest this dogmatic division which privileges the human over all other beings. For Heidegger, however, writing after the turn, the human is the privileged being who has access to Being because they have language: ‘Language [*Die Sprache*] is the house of Being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying [*Sagen*].’²³ Saying [*Sagen*] is a showing that is prior to language [*die Sprache*] and speaking [*sprechen*]. Being is brought into language and held or preserved there by saying, which is also to say that language withdraws in this saying.

In the early 1940s, Blanchot takes from Heidegger the idea of poetry as foundation (‘[le langage] se montre dans son essence qui est de fonder un monde’); of truth as the revealing which conceals (‘une ombre qui laisse voir le corps invisible’); and of language as the house of being in which man dwells (‘le dialogue authentique que nous sommes nous-mêmes’).²⁴ In order to do so Blanchot did not need to rearticulate the German’s thought, but to translate this point into French and apply it in turn to Mallarmé, the French counterpart to Hölderlin.

Hölderlin remains an important figure for Heidegger from 1934 to the end of his life — he selected verses from Hölderlin’s poetry to be read aloud at his burial. The poetry of Hölderlin is of such significance because it fulfils the proper task of the work of art as it is understood by Heidegger: in his poetry, the poetic founding of Being is achieved, which involves the establishment of a time and space between the gods and humans, in which man can mourn the flight of the gods, endure their

²² Ibid., p. 46; p. 61.

²³ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on “Humanism”’, trans. by Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 239-76 (p. 239); ‘Brief über den Humanismus’, in *Gesamtausgabe*, IX: *Wegmarken* (1976), 313-64 (p. 313). This essay was originally a response to a letter from Jean Beaufret written in 1946. It was later reworked by Heidegger and first published in 1947 as ‘Über den “Humanismus”’. Brief an Jean Beaufret, Paris’. The edition used in the translation quoted here is the seventh edition of the essay, published in 1974.

²⁴ Blanchot, ‘La Poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?’, in *Faux pas*, pp. 128-29. The last quotation is in fact a quotation from a poem by Hölderlin quoted by Heidegger. See Hölderlin, ‘Versöhnender, der du nimmerglaubt...’ [Conciliator, you who never believed...], in *Poems and Fragments*, pp. 422-31 (pp. 428-29).

absence and prepare for the arrival of the new god.²⁵ Modernity for Heidegger is a time of distress, the dying days of the age of metaphysics when the gods have fled, and Hölderlin's poetry, more so than that of any other poet, offered the West the chance to turn away from this time, to found the inception of another history.²⁶ According to Heidegger, metaphysics substitutes for a proper understanding of Being a concern with beings in general; in metaphysical representation everything is objectivised and consequently in the age of metaphysics Being has withdrawn. It is through the event that is Hölderlin's saying — a showing which conceals, holds something back, prevents the totalization which is rampant in metaphysical representation — that we can once again appropriate Being as our own in this other history.

The poet in Heidegger's account is associated not only with the poetic and philosophical overcoming of the age of metaphysics, but also with the happening of a political event: through Hölderlin's mythic saying German Being comes to be constituted as such and the possibility of a new historical dwelling on earth is revealed.²⁷ Since the end of the First World War Hölderlin had been seen by some as the German national poet and by the 1940s his poetry would be used by the Nazi party to inspire troops on the Eastern front. In this period Hölderlin's reputation was consequently transformed from that of 'an incurable dreamer and romantic whose utter inability to cope with life's demands might serve as a warning to impressionable young minds', to a nationalist icon, proto-fascist and source of inspiration for German troops.²⁸ Heidegger's own turn to Hölderlin followed his resignation as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1934, a position which he had acquired through his connection to the Nazi party.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe relates Heidegger's turn to Hölderlin to the need to rectify his National Socialism (Heidegger attempts to differentiate between his own brand of Nazism and that of

²⁵ Heidegger's is a controversial reading of Hölderlin. Paul de Man argues that Heidegger distorts the meaning of 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...', making Hölderlin say that reconciliation between the Sacred and the poetic is possible when his is in fact a 'philosophy of separation'. See Paul de Man, 'Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin', in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 246-66.

²⁶ See Savage, pp. 32-95; and Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 77-91.

²⁷ For an overview of the significance of Hölderlin for Heidegger as 'The Poet of the Germans', see Miguel de Beistegui, *Heidegger and the Political: Dystopias* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 94-113.

²⁸ Savage, pp. 5-7.

Hitler), but sees an essential affinity between the two positions: both inherit the Romantic project of establishing a new mythology which is connected to the founding of a people.²⁹ For Heidegger, the inception of the other history is the task of the German people in the time of distress: through their unique affinity with ancient Greece this people can recollect the primal event and appropriate Being once again through the poet's — Hölderlin's — saying. This recollection is patriotic or political in that it restores the German people to earth as their homeland. Heidegger does not explicitly state that he is concerned with founding a new mythology; Lacoue-Labarthe nonetheless argues that the poem for Heidegger is theological — it is concerned with the gods even when they are absent — as well as foundational, rendering myth the only possible translation of *Sage*:

Rien n'assure par conséquent que la *Sage*, compte toujours tenu à la fois de la stratégie retorse qui est celle de Heidegger à l'égard du nazisme et de l'*apophasis* ontologique-fondamentale, ne soit pas autre chose que le mythe, au sens le plus répandu de la 'mythologie'. Si le Poème est originaire, et comme langue et comme poésie, c'est en tant qu'il est immédiatement le mythe à partir duquel un peuple est 'typé' dans son existence historique. L'origine est proprement mythique ou, si l'on préfère, le commencement exige le surgissement d'un 'mythe fondateur'.³⁰

Lacoue-Labarthe's argument is both forceful and compelling, though some have found it controversial. Why, it may be asked, should Heidegger employ *Sage* and not *Mythos* if indeed what he seeks to communicate here is the poem as myth? One possible reason is that Heidegger seeks to distance himself from Alfred Rosenberg, one of the principal ideologues of the Nazi party and author of *Der Mythos des 20 Jahrhunderts*. *Mythos* is closely associated with Nazi ideology and so Heidegger opts for a more Germanic word with its roots in Old Norse. *Sage* thus conveys a mythological moment in Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin which Lacoue-Labarthe finds extremely

²⁹ The primal scene binding Romanticism, myth, religion and philosophy for Lacoue-Labarthe, with implications for Heidegger's reprise of Hölderlin, is the famous 'Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism' [1796/7] with its endorsement of a 'new religion' or 'new mythology'. Authorship of this fragment is uncertain, but it is known to originate from a conversation between Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger: la politique du poème* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), pp. 62-64.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

problematic, given its role as the founding moment of national identity and its subsequent connection to a ‘disastrous politics’.³¹

Sage is a bringing-forth that does not objectify, what Heidegger refers to in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ as *techne*. There are two versions of *techne* at stake for Heidegger: *techne* as art and foundation, revealing while sheltering the mysterious [*Dichtung*]; and *techne* as modern technology and threat, commanding all into unconcealment and uprooting us from earth [*Technik*]. The former is more originary than the latter, rendering modern technology a form of art corrupted — the result of the unbridled totalization and objectivity of metaphysics [*Gestell*] which reduces the whole of nature to a stockpile of resources [*Bestand*].³² *Techne* as art and foundation is the saving power in the time of distress and the counterweight to modern technology; it provides the mode of dwelling for the German people who are able to resist the rootlessness attributed by Heidegger to the technical. Heidegger seeks to distinguish between these two modes of *techne* just as he tries to distinguish between his own politics and that of the Nazi party; however, as Lacoue-Labarthe argues, even if *Sage* is a more authentic and more originary version of *techne*, even if Hölderlin is more patriotic than Hitler, in the end the distinction does not survive scrutiny: modern technology and National Socialism are the logical extensions of this mythology.³³

When Blanchot is engaging with the idea of poetry as foundation, of truth as a mode of revealing which conceals and of language as the house of Being, drawn from his reading of Heidegger on Hölderlin, there are therefore underlying motifs, involving *techne* as *Sage* and politicised saving power, which are not explicitly discussed in essays from the early 1940s. It is interesting to note that it is in his essays on Mallarmé that Blanchot regularly draws upon Heidegger on Hölderlin. Just as Hölderlin remained a contentious figure in post-war Germany, fought over by right-wing and left-wing critics such as Heidegger, Theodor Adorno and Bertolt Brecht, Mallarmé occupied a similar position in France: right-wing figures such as Maurras condemned him as the last and most dangerous, irrational, ‘barbarian’ romantic, while others on the right such as Brasillach struggled to

³¹ Ibid., pp. 43-77.

³² See Heidegger’s 1953 lecture ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *Basic Writings*, pp. 311-41; *Gesamtausgabe*, VII, 5-36.

³³ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger*, pp. 159-74.

reconcile the poet who revived a national tradition with the writer who challenges the unity of the French language.³⁴ Mallarmé and Hölderlin are both implicated in their own respective national traditions and so, although Blanchot does not explicitly demonstrate that he is aware, which he surely must have been,³⁵ of Heidegger's politics in the early 1940s, the use of Mallarmé as a parallel to Hölderlin in essays written for the pro-Vichy *Journal des débats* suggests that a nationalist agenda may have influenced Blanchot's choice of preferred poet. The nationalist status of Mallarmé for Blanchot is evident in an essay for the *Journal des débats* from 1941 where he is cited as a poet (belonging to a lineage running from Maurice Scève to Paul Eluard) who embodies what is most essential about the French literary tradition: 'Il y a assurément peu de littératures où un poète, sans le moindre délire, par le simple effet d'une méditation rigoureuse des formes, ait pu envisager la rédaction d'un livre qui fût l'équivalent véritable de l'absolu. Cette ambition, tourment et gloire de Stéphane Mallarmé, purifie les lettres françaises de beaucoup des petites choses que la vanité des écrivains leur a apportées.'³⁶

There is, on the other hand, an important distinction to be drawn between Heidegger and Blanchot that casts doubt over the above assertion. The poetry of Hölderlin in Heidegger's account represents foundation. This is also the case for Blanchot reading Heidegger on Hölderlin in the 1930s; but the selection of Mallarmé, the poet whose shipwreck hangs above the abyss in *Un Coup de dés*, undermines the possibility of poetic foundation and propels Blanchot's view of poetry in the direction of the bottomless abyss and endless self-reflexivity. There is, of course, a parallel between Heidegger's use of Hölderlin and Blanchot's use of Mallarmé, but there is also radical dissymmetry.

³⁴ For Hölderlin's post-war reception in Germany by those on the left and the right, see Savage, *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe*. For Mallarmé's reception in France and how those on the right struggled to accept him as the 'national poet', see David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 80-81, 107-09.

³⁵ His close friend Emmanuel Levinas had written one of the earliest philosophical denunciations of Hitler in 1934: 'Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de Hitlérisme', in *Les Imprévus de l'histoire* (Paris: Livre de poche, 2000), pp. 23-33 (first publ. in *Esprit*, 26 (November 1934), 199-208). Levinas reinforces this point in 1947: 'Si au début, nos réflexions s'inspirent dans une large mesure — pour la notion de l'ontologie et de la relation que l'homme entretient avec l'être — de la philosophie de Martin Heidegger, elles sont commandées par un besoin profond de quitter le climat de cette philosophie et par la conviction que l'on ne saurait en sortir vers une philosophie qu'on pourrait qualifier de pré-heideggerienne' (Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence au l'existant*, 2nd edn (Paris: Vrin, 1986), p. 19).

³⁶ Blanchot, 'La France et la civilisation contemporaine', in *Chroniques littéraires*, pp. 32-33.

This stems from the important distinction between Heidegger as thinker and Blanchot as writer and critic.

In the opening two chapters of *Thomas l'obscur*, as Thomas swims in the sea and then gropes his way into a dark cave, Blanchot depicts a language reflecting on itself and distanced or detached from a worldly horizon; the watery grave and black fissure in which Thomas finds himself in chapters one and two respectively become bottomless, fathomless, as the narrative develops into an experience of language itself in the absence of all worldly objects: 'La nuit lui parut bientôt plus sombre, plus terrible que n'importe quelle autre nuit, comme si elle était réellement sortie d'une blessure de la pensée qui ne se pensait plus, de la pensée prise ironiquement comme objet par autre chose que la pensée. C'était la nuit même.'³⁷ The bottomless abyss which defines the literary experience is possible because language can refer to itself, undoing the certainty of the thinking subject and holding it, like Mallarmé's shipwreck, above the abyss: 'comme un bateau à la dérive, dans l'eau qui lui servait de corps pour nager.'³⁸

Heidegger's *Sage* relies on language not becoming an object for itself. As the house of Being, language brings beings forth in the poet's saying in a way that preserves the otherness of Being, protecting it from the rampant totalization of metaphysical representation and providing foundation. This understanding of language, with its emphasis on foundation, demonstrates a desire for comprehension and for the totality and unity of an absolute. For Blanchot, as writer and critic putting literature into practice and intervening into philosophy from a place irreducible to it, the fact that language can refer to itself is what makes literature possible.³⁹ Literature lies beyond this desire for comprehension and, in referring to itself, unworks itself into utter ambiguity, dispersing all meaning. The absence of foundation highlights the dispersal at the heart of the literary project.

³⁷ Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur* [1941], p. 33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁹ Derrida argues that philosophy constitutes itself by determining its own outside; it is therefore difficult to hold on to the opposition between what is inside and what is outside philosophy. Blanchot's neuter, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, ensures that his work resists classification and speaks from a place free of oppositions; it is neither inside nor outside philosophy: 'Le neutre et non pas la neutralité, le neutre au-delà de la contradiction dialectique et de toute opposition, telle serait la possibilité d'un "récit" qui n'est plus simplement une forme, un genre ou un mode de littérature, et qui se porte au-delà du système des oppositions philosophiques. Il ne se laisse dominer par aucun des termes pris dans une opposition à l'intérieur de la langue philosophique ou de la langue naturelle' ('Survivre', in *Parages*, pp. 117-218 (pp. 151-52)).

The difference between these two perspectives is emphasised in a 1946 review of Heidegger's commentary of 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...'. Here Blanchot contrasts his own reading of Hölderlin with that of Heidegger, who, Blanchot writes, interrogates each word and comma separately and demands a complete response from all of these isolated elements: 'L'impression est souvent fort étrange.' The richness and complexity of the language employed by Heidegger is contrasted with the simplicity of Hölderlin's poetic language. Blanchot hones in on the term *das Offene*. In Hölderlin, it simply means 'l'air libre'.⁴⁰ The term takes on a more complex meaning in Heidegger's commentary, where it is another name for the Greek word for nature: 'Φύσις is that rising-up which goes-back-into-itself; it names the coming to presence of that which dwells in the rising-up and thus comes to presence as open.' The Open mediates the connections between all things, which are constituted thanks to such mediation: 'What is mediated in that way only is by virtue of mediatedness. The open itself, however, though it first gives the region for all belonging-to and -with each other, does not arise from any mediation. The open itself is the immediate [*das Unmittelbare*].'⁴¹ Paul de Man underscores the difference between the poet and the thinker: Heidegger stakes his entire system on the possibility of living in the presence of Being, an experience which Hölderlin says is totally forbidden to, and impossible for, the human. The poet *prays* for the immediacy of Being but does not establish this presence: 'das Heilige sei mein Wort' (the subjunctive here marks desire).⁴² Blanchot makes a similar point in his review, insisting on the impossibility of the mediation of that which mediates. A later reference to an opening is significant: 'Ruine, contestation, division pure, réellement *jedem offen*, comme il est dit, ouvert à tous, parce qu'il n'est plus qu'absence et déchirement, c'est comme tel qu'il parle, c'est alors qu'il est le jour, qu'il a la transparence du jour, *denkender Tag*, jour devenu pensée.'⁴³ Rather than the presence and unity of Being, the poet experiences absence and rupture and this is pertinently related to the Open taken in its simple poetic meaning.

⁴⁰ Blanchot, 'La Parole "sacrée" de Hölderlin', in *La Part du feu*, pp. 118-20. Hill shows how Blanchot refuses the moment of reconciliation between Being and *Dichtung*, revealing Hölderlin's poem to be the site of a fundamental aporia, in *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 81-91.

⁴¹ Heidegger, "'As When On a Holiday...'", in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, pp. 67-99 (pp. 79, 83); 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...', in *Gesamtausgabe*, IV, 49-77 (pp. 56, 61).

⁴² De Man, 'Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin', in *Blindness and Insight*, pp. 255-59.

⁴³ Blanchot, 'La Parole "sacrée" de Hölderlin', in *La Part du feu*, p. 134.

‘Wozu Dichter?’

Heidegger’s essays of the 1930s focussed on the foundational and redemptive nature of Hölderlin’s poetry; these ideas are developed in relation to broader views on writing and technology in ‘Wozu Dichter?’ [1946]. Hölderlin remains the figure around whom Heidegger constructs his view of poetry — the essay opens with a question posed in the elegy ‘Bread and Wine’ (‘... and why poets in a desolate time [*dürftiger Zeit*]?’)⁴⁴ and a subsequent reading of Hölderlin prefaces an inquiry into the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. ‘Why Poets?’ was ostensibly written to mark the twentieth anniversary of Rilke’s death and the ‘desolate time’ can be understood as modernity or the age of the fulfilment of metaphysics, repeatedly the focus of hostility in Heidegger’s essays since the mid-1930s. Underlying the overt reasons for this essay is, however, its date of publication: 1946. The recent defeat and destruction of Germany at the hands of the Allies and the powerful sense that something went wrong for National Socialism provide the backdrop for a discussion which develops an understanding of dwelling to counteract the rootlessness and nihilism of technology.

In this desolate or needy time, the ground for world ceases to be grounding and the abyss opens up. Heidegger’s *Abgrund* is to be understood as an abyss without [*Ab-*] bottom; it is the absence of any ground whatsoever:

Abyss [*Abgrund*] originally means the soil and ground toward which, as the lowest level, something hangs down a declivity. In what follows, however, let us understand the ‘*Ab-*’ as the total absence [*völlige Abwesen*] of ground. Ground is the soil for taking root and standing. The age for which ground fails to appear hangs in the abyss.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Hölderlin provides a partial answer to this question in ‘Bread and Wine’: ‘They are, you say, like the wine-god’s sacred priests, | Who roamed from land to land during the sacred night.’ The response ties together religion, myth, the sacred and poetry, fitting neatly into Heidegger’s description of *Sage* which will play a significant role in the essay to come. Hölderlin quoted in Heidegger, ‘Why Poets?’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 200-41 (p. 202); ‘Wozu Dichter?’, in *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 269-320 (pp. 271-72).

⁴⁵ Heidegger, ‘Why Poets?’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 200; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 269-70.

There is an urgent need to address the abyss because, without grounding, beings are revealed in their totality, all presencing is reduced to mere resource, and the rootlessness characteristic of modern technology takes hold. Without grounding there is no shelter or dwelling for Being. In order to prompt the turn, the poet must abandon himself to this groundless place and encounter the salutary trace of what has been lost: an indication of the god's departure. Heidegger quotes Hölderlin on this point: 'Mortals first reach into the abyss. For so it turns | with them.'⁴⁶ The abyss is the mark of the desolate time which offers redemption; Hölderlin's poetry dwells most intimately here, opening up a place, dwelling, or homeland where there was previously total absence of ground.⁴⁷

Decidedly inferior and anterior ('in its course within the history of Being') to Hölderlin's poetry, the work of Rilke has more in common with Nietzsche, the last metaphysician who exhausts the possibilities of Western metaphysics, than the poet who offers salvation in Heidegger's estimation. Rilke is accused of a fatal error: mistaking beings in their entirety for Being. His poetry lacks the mystery — the earthliness which shelters Being and forges a dwelling in the abyss — of Hölderlin's poetry and remains firmly trapped within a metaphysical view in which objectivity reigns and from which Being has withdrawn. Heidegger will endeavour to prove this by looking at a 'few basic words [*Grundworte*]' of Rilke's poetry.⁴⁸ Much turns here on divergent interpretations of one of these words: *das Offene*.

Rilke thinks the Open as completeness, or the unobstructed whole of all that is present or absent, in so doing he seeks to move beyond the limitations of subjectivity and objectivity. In the eighth *Elegy*, he writes that only animals have access to this region because they see without looking; they live in a pure space without concepts, expectations and projections: 'With all its eyes the creature-world [*die Kreatur*] beholds | the open [*das Offene*]. But our eyes, as though reversed [*umgekehrt*], | encircle it on every side, like traps | set round its unobstructed path to freedom.' Unconstrained by subjectivity, animals are dispossessed of their self, projected outwards and absorbed into the limitless Open: '[...] its own Being for it | is infinite, inapprehensible, | unintrospective, pure,

⁴⁶ An extract from Hölderlin's 'Bread and Wine' quoted in Heidegger, 'Why Poets?', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 201; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 270.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203; p. 273.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-06; pp. 275-76.

like its outgazing.’ Humans, on the other hand, at a very young age are turned away from this unseparated region by our sense of self and awareness of our mortality. Consequently, we see everything as if in reverse from this final knowable limit: ‘We face always World | and never Nowhere without the No [*Immer ist es Welt | und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht*].’⁴⁹ Rilke thus reverses the traditional hierarchy between humans and animals, privileging the figure of the animal and unreflective perception over human subjectivity, a reversal which Heidegger staunchly contests in the *Parmenides* lectures delivered between 1942 and 1943.⁵⁰

Heidegger objects to Rilke’s limitless and unobstructed region, thinking the Open instead in terms of *alētheia*: ‘We must never represent the globe of Being and the sphericity of the globe of Being objectively. Therefore, non-objectively? No, that would be merely to dodge behind a phrase. The sphericity must be thought in terms of the essence of original Being in the sense of unconcealing presencing [*im Sinne des entbergenden Anwesens*].’⁵¹ To see the Open as non-objective is simply to invert the metaphysical view and so to remain within it, states Heidegger in his criticism of Rilke. What Rilke calls the unobstructedness or completeness of vision, from which man is excluded, is nothing other than beings in their entirety; this, along with the danger that is the animalization of man, is a view inherited from Nietzsche.⁵² In this false Open there is no earthly figure to shelter Being and thus no binding rift between earth and world; all beings are drawn together in undifferentiated uniformity by the play of forces which form the ‘unheard midst’. In this sense Rilke does not think the Open as the clearing which allows beings to stand revealed in the structure of time, but totalises the realm of manifestation by portraying the Open as the ‘intact sphere of the unimpeded draw’.⁵³

⁴⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Martyn Crucefix (London: Enitharmon, 2006), pp. 62-63.

⁵⁰ For the opposition to Rilke’s inversion of the human-animal hierarchy, see Martin Heidegger, ‘Significance of Dis-Closure’, in *Parmenides*, trans. by André Schuwer and Richard Rojewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 131-60; ‘Die vierte Weisung: das Offene, das Freie’, in *Gesamtausgabe*, LIV: *Parmenides* (1982), 195-240.

⁵¹ Heidegger, ‘Why Poets?’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 226; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 301.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 214; p. 286.

⁵³ Véronique M. Fóti, *Heidegger and the Poets: Poiēsis, Sophia, Technē* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 33.

Rilke's false, limitless and undifferentiated Open is the final consequence of the forgetting of Being and reign of spatiality characteristic of metaphysics. In contrast, Heidegger defines the Open onto-historically as the rift caused in the conflict between earth and world; it forms as a result of the event which is the creation of the work of art and the happening of truth. The Open is therefore the result of *techne* in the sense of *Dichtung*. The abyss characteristic of modernity, rendered ever more pressing in 1946 by the recent destruction of Germany, can be transformed into the Open through the mythological moment that is Hölderlin's saying; this saying creates a dwelling for Being where there previously was none. It is man, not the figure of the animal, who, through language, can find his own stance within the Open and understand Being.⁵⁴

The distinguishing feature of these two conceptions of the Open is the mode of *techne* from which they emerge: Heidegger's Open, understood in terms of *alētheia* as the clearing formed in the conflict between earth and world, is the abyss transformed through *techne* as *Dichtung*; Rilke's Open is the consequence of *techne* as *Technik*. According to the former will has been masquerading as the Being of beings in the age of metaphysics.⁵⁵ This will is specifically human and has the character of an unconditional command, ensuring man's domination of the earth; it demands that everything, earth and all of its beings, including man, is transformed into material to be exploited and derives from *techne* as *Technik*.⁵⁶ By excluding man from the Open and placing this region, the entirety of beings, before man as material to be exploited, Rilke is working within the framework of Nietzschean will to power in Heidegger's view:

If Rilke experiences the Open as the unobjectiveness of full Nature, by contrast the world of willing men must stand out for him as correspondingly objective. Conversely, to look out for the integral entirety of beings [*das heile Ganze des Seienden*] is to take a hint from the phenomena of advancing technology [*der heraufkommenden Technik*], a hint in the direction of

⁵⁴ Michel Haar documents the differences between these two conceptions of the Open in *Le Chant de la terre: Heidegger et les assises de l'histoire de l'être* (Paris: Herne, 1985), pp. 71-79.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, 'Why Poets?', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 216; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 289.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217; p. 289.

those regions from where, perhaps, an originary, constructive overcoming of the technical
[*bildende Überwindung des Technischen*] could come.⁵⁷

Heidegger's critique of the Open in Rilke is closely associated with his critique of modern technology (and totalitarian political organisation). This sets this essay apart from his previous work: 'Why Poets?' is probably one of the most explicit early denunciations of the deleterious effects of technological progress — 'The Question Concerning Technology' was published seven years later in 1953.⁵⁸ At the mid-way point of this essay, Heidegger states that technical domination threatens man in his essence. He argues that the mastery which is a consequence of the essence of technology threatens to dehumanize the human in a world which is increasingly becoming a calculable resource to be exploited; man is exposed to the growing danger of becoming mere material.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, suggested in the above extract is also the possibility that Rilke's poetry, from its metaphysical viewpoint, may begin to show us the way back from the objectification of technical domination and help us to come by a way of thinking that moves beyond the self-accomplishment of metaphysics.

Rilke proposes that by turning inward, toward the worldly inner space of the heart which he calls *Weltinnenraum*, we can experience a fusion between the inner world of feeling and the outer world of animals and thus overcome the objectification which prevents man from accessing the Open. This inner space is nonetheless, in Heidegger's estimation, the sphere of subjectivity which continues to think Being as worldly presence; it does not move beyond metaphysics because it 'remains attracted to representation in consciousness'.⁶⁰ The poet's saying needs to be spoken from the very limit of consciousness, where the poet no longer wills but allows language to speak through him or her:

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 217; p. 290.

⁵⁸ The basis for 'Die Frage nach der Technik' was therefore underway a few years before the paper was first given as a lecture on 18 November 1953. Another key text in the development of Heidegger's thinking on technology, although not published until much later, is 'Das Ge-Stell' [1949]. According to the *Gesamtausgabe*, 'Das Ge-Stell' is a preliminary version of 'Die Frage nach der Technik'. See Martin Heidegger, 'Das Ge-Stell', in *Gesamtausgabe*, LXXIX: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge* (1994), 24-45.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, 'Why Poets?', in *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 217-21; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 290-95.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 233; p. 311.

Making statements [*Das Aussagen*] remains a way and a means. In contrast, there is a saying [*Sagen*] that is specially engaged with what is said [*das sich eigens in die Sage einläßt*] without, however, reflecting on language and thereby turning it too into an object. To enter into what is said characterises a saying that pursues what is to be said solely in order to say it. What is to be said would then be that which, in accordance with its essence, belongs in the precinct of language.⁶¹

It is the mythic saying [*Sage*] of Hölderlin's poetry that offers the possibility of a redemptive turn back from representation and from the fulfilment of Western metaphysics. This is a poetic language that articulates itself at the limits of the sayable, eschewing objectivity and self-reflexivity. From out of the groundless abyss thus surges the Open; this binding difference between earth and world allows beings to stand revealed in time while sheltering Being, providing a dwelling for man and nation.

Heidegger states that the more venturesome ones dare the saying.⁶² The poets are more daring because they risk an encounter with their own mortality, otherwise distanced in modernity by technology: 'The self-assertion of technological objectification is the constant negation of death. Through this negation, death itself becomes something negative; it becomes the archetype of the inconstant and the void.'⁶³ Authentic existence, in Heidegger's account, involves facing up to our own mortality; mythic saying is the opportunity to do just that in this destitute time, taking the poet to the limit of consciousness, to the limit of the human, and enabling him or her to re-appropriate Being.⁶⁴ The possibility of dying and the possibility of language constitute human existence and ensure that we, and not animals who do not 'die' in the true sense of the word, are the beings who may understand Being: 'To die [*sterben*] means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies [*stirbt*]. The animal drops dead [*verendet*].'⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 237; pp. 315-16.

⁶² Ibid., p. 237; p. 315.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 227; p. 303.

⁶⁴ On language and death as the limit of the human, see Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements*, pp. 150-58.

⁶⁵ Heidegger, 'Das Ding', in *Gesamtausgabe*, VII, 165-87 (p. 180), my translation. On the difference between perishing and properly dying according to Heidegger and how to translate these terms, see Jacques Derrida, *Apories: mourir — s'attendre aux 'limites de la vérité'* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), pp. 61-63.

Véronique Fóti comments that Heidegger should have stopped his criticism of Rilke from the moment he identifies that the poet is trapped within metaphysical representation. From there Fóti argues that Heidegger's attempt to explore *Sage* as the possibility of a redemptive turn from representation is flawed: 'In the end, Heidegger seeks to voice his own insights and his response to the destitution of the age in the poetic language he has exhaustively criticised, while also affirming the insurpassability of Hölderlin's poetic thought which reaches across and beyond destitution into the futurity of the pure advent.'⁶⁶ The purpose of the saying that Heidegger observes in Hölderlin's poetry is that it remains beyond metaphysical representation so that language does not become an object. However, as Fóti maintains, Heidegger constructs this argument from within the language that he so vehemently criticises and positions the coming of this redemption in the future. It remains to be seen whether there is a language that can evade objectification. *Sage* in this sense remains a mythic idea of myth.

This evasive form of poetic expression is the event that is yet to arrive. It hinges on the idea of authenticity: without an authentic relation to his or her death, without confronting his or her mortality, the poet does not speak from the limits of consciousness where language escapes all metaphysical representation and it becomes possible once again to appropriate Being. Any saving power in the desolate time relies on this authentic relationship to death which is, for Heidegger, rendered problematic in modernity by the development of modern technology. The atomic bomb is not dangerous as a deadly machine with the capacity to kill thousands, but as a manifestation of the totalising will which demands that everything is transformed into raw material to be exploited. Death withdraws itself in the face of technological objectification; the event that is the arrival of the poet's saying is thus perpetually delayed.

Rilke similarly likens death in modernity to a form of anonymous production in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, written while he was living in Paris and published twelve years before the *Duino Elegies* in 1910:

⁶⁶ Fóti, p. 35.

This excellent hôtel is very ancient. Even in King Clovis' time people died in it in a number of beds. Now they are dying there in 559 beds. Factory-like, of course. Where production is so enormous an individual death is not so nicely carried out; but then that doesn't matter. It is quantity that counts. Who cares today for a finely finished death? No one.⁶⁷

Unlike the hundreds dying anonymously in the death factory that is the modern hospital, Rilke's protagonist wishes to confront his own death in the virile and authentic manner which he believes to have witnessed in the passing of the Chamberlain, who is said to have died 'his own hard death [*Er starb seinen schweren Tod*]', a 'wicked, princely death', one which he had 'carried within him and nourished on himself his whole life long.'⁶⁸ The narrator of the *Notebooks* suggests that language and death are intertwined and writing is the way out of this impersonal impasse: 'I ought to have known that this third person who pervades all lives and literatures, this ghost of a third person [*dieses Gespenst eines Dritten*] who never was, has no significance and must be disavowed. [...] He is the noise at the threshold [*am Eingang*] of the voiceless silence of a real conflict.'⁶⁹ Malte seeks to overcome this anonymous humming which drowns out a personal and authentic experience in language and dying, but repeatedly fails to do so. In the next section I will demonstrate how Blanchot challenges the very notion of authenticity in his essay on Rilke: the anonymous hum, the noise of the impersonal third person resented by Malte, is the only possible-impossible experience of dying.

Death: the Impossibility of Possibility

Blanchot makes three explicit references to Heidegger in the essays collected in *L'Espace littéraire* under the broader title 'L'Œuvre et l'espace de la mort', where 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort' features.⁷⁰ The first concerns the possibility of a personal — authentic — relation to one's death (a

⁶⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1949] 1992), p. 17; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Zurich: Niehmanns & Rokitsky Verlag, 1948), p. 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23; pp. 19-20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27; p. 25.

⁷⁰ Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 103-210 (first publ. as 'La Mort possible', in *Critique*, 66 (November 1952), 915-33; 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', *Critique*, 71 (April 1953), 291-304; 72 (May 1953), 387-99; 'L'Expérience

key bone of contention with the Heidegger of *Being and Time* since ‘La Littérature et le droit à la mort’ [1947/8]):

La décision d’être sans être est cette possibilité même de la mort. Les trois pensées qui essaient de rendre compte de cette décision et qui, à cause de cela, semblent éclairer le mieux le destin de l’homme moderne, quels que soient les mouvements qui les opposent, celles de Hegel, de Nietzsche et de Heidegger, tendent toutes les trois à rendre la mort possible.⁷¹

For all three names cited in this extract, death represents an extreme possibility. Hegel’s death is productive; it is a moment in the progression of Spirit through different forms of consciousness to absolute knowing. Nietzsche’s death is reserved for the *Übermensch*, the one who maintains the pure essence of the will and moves beyond nihilism. And finally the possibility of an authentic relation to death in Heidegger’s philosophy would complete the existential analysis of *Dasein*;⁷² death must be confronted in a virile and authentic manner, resisting the anonymous relation to death pervasive in modernity.

Blanchot demonstrates that death as the essential possibility is simultaneously impossible, undermining the hierarchy between an authentic and inauthentic relation to death. The two later references to Heidegger concern authenticity. The first of these considers the ambiguity of the German word ‘eigen’ as it is employed by Rilke and Heidegger, meaning both personal and authentic. The translation of ‘eigentlich’ as ‘authentic’ is problematic and has given way to many existentialist debates.⁷³ Blanchot will later, in 1980, note that the word ‘authentic’ is anything but authentic:

d’Igitur’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 6 (June 1953), 1075-86; and extracts from ‘A toute extrémité’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 26 (February 1955), 285-93).

⁷¹ Blanchot, ‘La Mort possible’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, pp. 105-34 (pp. 118-19).

⁷² See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 304-11; *Gesamtausgabe*, II, 345-54.

⁷³ Blanchot, ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, pp. 194-95. Emmanuel Levinas notes that the connection to *eigen* was overlooked in France in the 1930s when *eigentlich* was translated as *authentique*, in *La Mort et le temps* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992), p. 29.

Il est certain qu'on affaiblit la pensée de Heidegger, lorsqu'on interprète 'l'être-pour-la mort' par la recherche d'une authenticité par la mort. Vision d'un humanisme persévérant. Déjà le terme 'authenticité' ne répond pas à l' '*Eigentlichkeit*' où s'annoncent les ambiguïtés plus tardives du mot *eigen* que détient l'*Ereignis* qui ne peut se penser par rapport à 'être'.

Cependant, même si nous quittons l'illusion de 'la mort propre' de Rilke, il reste que le mourir, dans cette perspective, ne se sépare pas du 'personnel', négligeant ce qu'il y a d' 'impersonnel' dans la mort par rapport à quoi il faut dire non pas 'je' meurs, mais *on* meurt, mourant toujours autre.⁷⁴

Any thought of death must respect what is foreign to me in that death, which is therefore constituted at once by authenticity and inauthenticity. The second reference to Heidegger in the essay from 1953 concerns the origin of the Heideggerian term 'Entschlossenheit' in the language of Rilke's poetry.

'Decision' [*Entschluss/résolution*], pointedly connected by Blanchot to 'disclosure' [*erschließen/s'ouvrir*], is the origin of Heidegger's 'resoluteness' [*Entschlossenheit/acception résolue*], defined in *Being and Time* as 'authentic Being-one's-Self', the recognition of the possibility unique to oneself that cannot be shared by any other, which is to say the possibility of having no more possibilities, or death.⁷⁵ This move through language, from disclosure to decision, reveals the historical task of the artist according to Heidegger; it underscores the work as disclosure, or an opening, and associates this origin with an authentic death: 'ce qu'il [Heidegger] appelle point de départ est l'approche de ce point où rien ne commence, est "la tension d'un commencement infini" — l'art lui-même comme origine ou encore l'expérience de l'Ouvert, la recherche d'un mourir véritable.'⁷⁶ Blanchot is folding Heidegger back to the fundamental ontology of *Being and Time*, because the historicising of Being endlessly keeps open the possibility that we can understand Being and have an authentic relation to death but this possibility never materializes: Hölderlin's mythic

⁷⁴ Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, pp. 180-81.

⁷⁵ Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 199-200. See also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 344; *Gesamtausgabe*, II, 395.

⁷⁶ Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 200.

saying remains the 'pure advent' to come. The impossibility of this possibility is played out in Rilke's work.⁷⁷

The essay on Rilke opens with a reference to Nietzsche, the last metaphysician in whose work, according to Heidegger, Being is reduced to a series of metaphysical representations. Blanchot notes that Nietzsche sought to overcome the human and to die a death unique to him, two aims which are entwined. Rilke shares a similar ambition: in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* he seeks to overcome death by articulating an authentic relation to death, which is to say by portraying the death unique to Malte, an aim which goes unfulfilled because his writing is premised on impossibility. Written and set in Paris, the experience of writer and character overlap in Blanchot's account, where both are described as coming face to face with the horror of an impersonal neutral death from which they continually turn.

Mort en masse, mort en série et de confection, faite en gros pour tous et où chacun disparaît hâtivement, produit anonyme, objet sans valeur, à l'image des choses du monde moderne dont Rilke s'est toujours détourné: on voit déjà, par ces comparaisons, comment il glisse de la neutralité essentielle de la mort à l'idée que cette neutralité n'est qu'une forme historique et provisoire, la mort stérile de grandes villes.⁷⁸

Rilke attributes his failure to the brutality of the modern world and the anonymity of large cities. Blanchot does not overlook modernity and the modern city as a feature of Rilke's writing, but presents this as a distraction from what is really at stake. Rilke ought to confront the banality of death, which is not a historical condition. Blanchot writes elsewhere in this section of *L'Espace littéraire*: 'penser la mort, c'est introduire en la pensée le suprêmement douteux, l'effritement du non-sûr, comme si nous devions, pour penser authentiquement la certitude de la mort, laisser la pensée s'abîmer dans le doute et l'inauthentique.'⁷⁹ Rilke and Malte repeatedly return to the impossible

⁷⁷ Notes made by Blanchot on Rilke and Hölderlin, and a translation of the latter's poem beginning 'Was ist Gott?', are included in *Blanchot*, ed. by Hoppenot and Rabaté, pp. 53-54.

⁷⁸ Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 156.

⁷⁹ Blanchot, 'La Mort possible', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 117.

moment of trying to capture what evades all consciousness because dying is constituted by both authenticity and inauthenticity.

Repetition is therefore the mark of the impossible task of dying and writing. The first of three subsections in this essay ends by noting Rilke's comment that what made the existence of Malte impossible becomes the condition of possibility for life once again in the *Duino Elegies*, completed twelve years after the publication of *The Notebooks* in 1922. The following section opens with an extract from a letter to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, where Rilke explains his view of death in the *Elegies* as the side of life which is turned away from us: death forms part of 'la grande unité' which is 'la vraie forme de la vie'.⁸⁰ Blanchot's first move in this section is to criticise the desire evident in this letter to substitute the clarity of ideas for the obscurity of the poetic movement. Here we see, once again, Blanchot as writer and critic seeking to address what philosophy neglects, forgets, or represses: we should seek not the clarity and understanding of an absolute in literature, but the obscurity of the poetic movement which has ambiguity at its very core. The movement of Blanchot's own critical thought in the remaining two sections of 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort' further reinforces this view.

Blanchot repeatedly returns to Rilke's 'failure' to attain an authentic relationship to death in order to demonstrate that such failure is the condition of the possibility of dying. In the *Duino Elegies*, we are turned away from death because we are limited beings who perceive things as objects; consciousness and representation ensure that we remain trapped within the everyday realm of doing, acting and possessing. In order to access life and death as 'la grande unité', we must turn away from objectified worldly reality toward the imaginary space of literature. The conversion proposed by Rilke toward a more interior consciousness is described as the transformation of the visible into the invisible, a movement of dispossession by which objects are no longer the tools of the everyday. For both Blanchot and Rilke, this is the task of dying and the task of writing; the former, however, undermines the view that this task is achievable. A few lines later, 'transformation' is placed in quotation marks and the past participle of the verb 'transformer' is repeated twice in italics.⁸¹ These

⁸⁰ Rilke quoted in Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 169.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 182.

stylistic devices suspend the process of becoming or dying; they place its completion in doubt and tease out the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent to death and literature. The movement of Blanchot's criticism echoes what he sees in play in the literary experience: '[Rilke] a peu à peu dissous, au cours de l'expérience, la substance et la réalité de la mort.'⁸²

Throughout this essay Blanchot sets up the conditions for the possibility of dying, only to then demonstrate the impossible basis of such conditions. In the third section of the essay, for instance, his argument shifts over the course of one paragraph from the recognition that the task of attaining an authentic relationship to death must begin with things, saving things by rendering them invisible, to the admission that things are only available to us as such when we are free of all limits: 'Il faut donc partir, non plus des choses pour rendre possible l'approche de la mort vraie, mais de la profondeur de la mort pour me tourner vers l'intimité des choses'.⁸³ If Rilke thinks he has in some way grasped death, he has been fooled. Death as the unattainable certainty, the elusive inevitable, gives us the impression of dying but only ever errs around its hidden and ambiguous centre: '[La mort] est bien ce qui n'arrive à personne, l'incertitude et l'indécision de ce qui n'arrive jamais, à quoi je ne puis penser avec sérieux, car elle n'est pas sérieuse, elle est sa propre imposture, l'effritement, la consommation vide, — non pas le terme, mais l'interminable, non pas la mort propre, mais la mort quelconque, non pas la mort vraie, mais, comme dit Kafka, "le ricanement de son erreur capitale".'⁸⁴ The failure of Rilke is inevitable, because the poem is premised on a ruinous impossibility that cannot be overcome.

Heidegger and Blanchot therefore agree that Rilke is thinking within the framework of the Nietzschean individual: restricted by the limitations of will and subjectivity, Rilke's more interior consciousness is simply a more conscious consciousness.⁸⁵ This failure is avoidable for Heidegger, writing in *Being and Time*, because death is the possibility of impossibility:

⁸² Ibid., p. 184.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 201.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 203. A discussion of Blanchot on Kafka comes in Chapter Three.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 178-79.

*The closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual. The more unveiledly this possibility gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all. Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be ‘actualized’, nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing.*⁸⁶

In contrast, the failure of Rilke is necessary for Blanchot, who later describes death as the impossibility of all possibility:

celui qui a été jusqu’au bout du désir de mort, invoquant son droit à la mort et exerçant sur lui-même un pouvoir de mort — ouvrant, ainsi que l’a dit Heidegger, *la possibilité de l’impossibilité* — ou encore, croyant se rendre maître de la non-maîtrise, se laisse prendre à une sorte de piège et s’arrête éternellement — un instant, évidemment — là où, cessant d’être un sujet, perdant sa liberté entêtée, il se heurte, autre que lui-même, à la mort comme à ce qui n’arrive pas ou comme à ce qui se retourne (démentant, à la façon d’une démente, la dialectique en la faisant aboutir) en *l’impossibilité de toute possibilité*.⁸⁷

This is not a simple refusal or negation of Heidegger’s thought, but a radicalisation of his thinking which deconstructs the notion of authenticity by teasing out the paradox at the heart of this understanding of death. Heidegger assumes a power or control over death which lures him into a trap: death can never be experienced as one’s own; it is only ever the death of an other (‘il se heurte, autre que lui-même, à la mort comme à ce qui n’arrive pas ou comme à ce qui se retourne’). Derrida echoes this point in his analysis of the aporia of dying in Heidegger: ‘Rien n’est plus substituable et rien ne l’est moins que le syntagme “ma mort”’.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 306-07; *Gesamtausgabe*, II, 348.

⁸⁷ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, pp. 114-15; (first publ., with other fragments from *L’Écriture du désastre* (pp. 108-17), as ‘On tue un enfant (*fragmentaire*)’, *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 33-34 (Spring 1976), 19-29).

⁸⁸ Derrida, *Apories*, p. 49.

Derrida stresses that Heidegger's existential analysis requires limits: a hierarchical order between *Dasein* and other entities is structured by impassable edges, most notably the limit separating the dropping dead of animals from the properly-dying of *Dasein*. Death, as the most proper possibility of *Dasein*, is the limit which determines all subsequent distinctions drawn between human, animal, plant and stone:

Qu'est-ce alors que franchir cette frontière de l'ultime? Qu'est-ce que passer le terme d'une vie (*terma tou biou*). Est-ce possible? Qui l'a jamais fait? Qui peut en témoigner? Le 'j'entre', en passant le seuil, le 'je passe' (*peraô*) nous met ainsi, si je puis dire, sur la voie de l'*aporos* ou de l'*aporia*: le difficile ou l'impraticable, ici le passage impossible, refusé, dénié ou interdit, voire, ce qui peut être encore autre chose, le non-passage, un événement de venue ou d'avenir qui n'a plus la forme du mouvement consistant à passer, traverser, transiter, le 'se passer' d'un événement qui n'aurait plus la forme ou l'allure du pas: en somme une venue sans pas.⁸⁹

The *aporia* is the interminable experience of the limit, an impossible and necessary passage signalled by the word 'pas' in French, meaning both 'step' and 'not', on which Derrida writes elsewhere in relation to Blanchot.⁹⁰ To experience the *aporia* is not necessarily a failure or simple paralysis, Derrida writes, neither is it a stopping at or an overcoming of the limit. It touches on an event that is always arriving, that never arrives because always arriving, what Blanchot refers to above as that non-arriving or returning death. The *arrivant* is new and unexpected; it makes possible everything to which it cannot be reduced, simultaneously marking a limit and crossing that limit.⁹¹ This is the same logic of presupposition evident in the reliability of equipment in 'The Origin of the Work of Art': 'Pour identifier les différentes manières de vivre (*erleben*) le décès (*Ableben*), autrement dit de vivre

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁰ 'Toute transgression opère dès lors contre ou au-delà de la transgression en tant qu'elle serait le fait d'un pas, elle transgresse le pas même, franchit un pas au-delà du pas, et ce que nous appelions la digression de l'éloignement déroute, dès *Thomas l'obscur*, toute logique de la limite, de l'opposition, de l'identité, de la contradiction, mais aussi bien libère, sous l'apparente normalité de sa langue (lexique et syntaxe), la contamination du nom (pas) et de l'adverbe (pas)' (Derrida, 'Pas', in *Parages*, pp. 19-116 (p. 47)).

⁹¹ Derrida, *Apories*, pp. 65-68.

comme tel le moment de “quitter la vie”, de passer comme vivant, dans le vécu (*Erleben*) du vivant, le passage hors de la vie (*Ableben*); pour parler avec compétence de ces modes de passage, du passant ou du passeur, il faut *déjà* savoir ce que *mort* veut dire, et à quoi reconnaître la mort proprement dite.⁹² Possibility refers both to what is most proper to *Dasein* and to what I am capable of doing; the implication is that I can lay my hands on *Dasein*, as Blanchot also suggests in the extract quoted above. Derrida shows that the only way to avoid confusion between *Dasein* and what is *Vorhandensein* or *Zuhandensein* is to come back to the ontological determination of the limit which he challenges, by doubling it, in his analysis.⁹³

Derrida describes access to death for Heidegger as nonaccess to a nonborder. Death in Blanchot, on the other hand, is a relentless turning on or around the threshold which undoes that very threshold. Derrida is reluctant to draw an opposition between Heidegger and Blanchot: ‘Quand Blanchot dit sans cesse, et c’est alors une longue plainte et non un triomphe de la vie, l’impossible mourir, l’impossibilité, hélas, du mourir, il dit à la fois la même chose et tout autre chose que Heidegger. Il s’agit de savoir seulement dans quel sens (au sens de la direction et du trajet) on lit l’expression “possibilité de l’impossibilité”.’⁹⁴ Blanchot does indeed read this expression in reverse in the extract quoted above, but he is not arguing in opposition to Heidegger, because his writing, like the laces lacing those shoes in the painting by Van Gogh, is the experience of the endlessly repeated turning which complicates any distinction between inside and outside, which contests the ultimate limit of dying, with consequences, we shall see, for any claim to the purely natural or a hierarchy between human, animal and stone.

The poem in Blanchot’s account is therefore not a disclosure of the time spoken from the limit of consciousness, as Heidegger would have us understand it, but an encounter with that which exceeds all consciousness and complicates all limits: ‘La découverte de Malte est celle de cette force trop grande pour nous qu’est la mort *impersonnelle*, qui est l’excès de notre force, ce qui l’excède et la rendrait prodigieuse, si nous réussissions à la faire nôtre à nouveau. Découverte qu’il ne peut

⁹² Ibid., p. 85.

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 135-36. See also Derrida, ‘La Main de Heidegger’, in *Heidegger et la question*, pp. 172-222.

⁹⁴ Derrida, *Apories*, p. 133.

maîtriser, dont il ne peut faire l'assise de son art.⁹⁵ The neutral, anonymous, impersonal death encountered by Malte forms the lack of foundation above which the poem hangs. Blanchot teases Heidegger's thinking out to its paradoxical conclusion: the *Abgrund* from 'Why Poets?', a bottomless pit where the poet can forge a dwelling, becomes the *abîme* which is not just absence of ground, it is truly bottomless. Death is synonymous with this abyss; it is an endless void in which notions of foundation do not belong: 'la mort comme abîme, non pas ce qui fonde, mais l'absence et la perte de tout fondement.'⁹⁶

The association between death and the abyss is closely related to Blanchot's reading of the Open as it is explored in the *Duino Elegies*. For Heidegger, the non-objective nature of Rilke's Open is simply an inversion of the traditional metaphysical view. Blanchot agrees to a point: subject and object persist in the Open and so Rilke remains trapped within representation. On the other hand, there is also something radical about Rilke's Open which Heidegger overlooks — the Open as a mystical moment of confrontation with the outside. 'Il l'appelle *Weltinnenraum*, l'espace intérieur du monde, lequel n'est pas moins l'intimité des choses que la nôtre et la libre communication de l'une et de l'autre, liberté puissante et sans retenue où s'affirme la force pure de l'indéterminé.'⁹⁷ The Open is a fusion between the inner world of feeling and the outer world of animals; in this moment of confrontation subject and object merge and there is absolute uncertainty. Where Heidegger sees an inversion of the hierarchy between man and animal and persistent subjectification, Blanchot sees an extreme limit-experience, one which leaves us teetering on the edge of the abyss.

The affirmative endorsement of experience is evident throughout the chapter, where the term features in the opening paragraphs of all three essays and is particularly relevant to Blanchot's reading of Rilke: 'Dans le mouvement de Rilke, ce qui est, en outre, très frappant, c'est comment la force de l'expérience poétique l'a mené et presque à son insu, de la recherche d'une mort personnelle [...] à une tout autre exigence.'⁹⁸ The poetic experience is the movement, evident in Blanchot's essay and Rilke's work, which undermines the possibility of an authentic death; it is the experience of the

⁹⁵ Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 166-67.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 202.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

limitless affirmation of the limit — *I cannot die so I am dying interminably*.⁹⁹ In a footnote, Blanchot notes Rilke's comparison of existence to a vase which would be full of water if we were to have an authentic relationship to death, but which culminates in the void:

Le désir de mourir exprimerait donc [...] un certain besoin de plénitude, il serait l'aspiration vers l'extrême bord, l'élan du liquide qui veut remplir le vase. Mais atteindre le bord, est-ce assez? 'Déborder', c'est là la secrète passion liquide, celle qui ne connaît pas de mesure. Et déborder ne signifie pas la plénitude, mais le vide, l'excès au regard duquel le plein est encore en défaut.¹⁰⁰

The experience of the Open is this exposure to the uncertainty of death, at once limitless excess and void, which is never authentic and can never be overcome. The infinite void beyond this limit displaces Heidegger's view of the abyss as 'völlige Abwesen', as plenitude, or of the Open as the entirety of beings mistaken for Being. In neglecting Rilke's poetic experience, Heidegger overlooks the conditions that undermine the possibility of foundation in literature.¹⁰¹ When the poet allows *Sage* to speak through him or her from the limit of consciousness, when death marks the completeness and authenticity of existence, when the vase is full of water, the poet experiences the limitless affirmation of the limit: the emptiness into which existence overflows, the absence of all foundation, the abyss as truly bottomless. Any attempt to grasp and understand the Open, evident in Rilke's letter to Hulewicz, risks transforming the boundless demand of the limit into an ordinary and mundane region. Blanchot shows that only the poetic peripheral experience of the Open maintains the movement which is the transformation of the visible into the invisible, the interminable task of dying and writing.

⁹⁹ On the limitlessness of the limit in Blanchot, see Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 91-102.

¹⁰⁰ Blanchot, *Rilke et l'exigence de la mort*, in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 165 n. 1.

¹⁰¹ Paul de Man acknowledges Heidegger's reading of Rilke, but argues that Rilke's language puts into question what it seems to promise ('a form of existential salvation that would take place in and by means of poetry'): 'The promise contained in Rilke's poetry, which the commentators, in the eagerness of their belief, have described in all its severe complexity, is thus placed, by Rilke himself, within the dissolving perspective of the lie. Rilke can only be understood if one realizes the urgency of this promise together with the equally urgent, and equally poetic, need of retracting it at the very instant he seems to be on the point of offering it to us.' Paul de Man, 'Tropes (Rilke)', in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 20-56 (pp. 23, 56).

A Turning

The Open, the rift caused in the conflict between earth and world, is the happening of truth in the work of art according to Heidegger. The Open is defined onto-historically because it offers the West the chance to found the inception of another history through the mediation of Being. In the turn to the Open the poet — Hölderlin — founds the inception of another history. What sets Hölderlin apart is his ability, in the desolate time, to reach into the abyss and prepare the ground for the turning; he is the intermediary between the absent gods and man in modernity.

Blanchot cites Hölderlin as the first to have expressed and celebrated the task of the poet as translator of the visible into the invisible which is the turn to the Open.¹⁰² As we have seen, this mediation is unachievable because premised on an impossible relation to death. The poem cannot be described as an event by Blanchot, not even as an inauthentic event, because its accomplishment will never be realised. On the other hand, Blanchot repeatedly refers to the poem as beginning, origin, source; this is, however, a dispersed origin which is never present: ‘Le poème véritable n’est plus alors la parole qui enferme en disant, l’espace clos de la parole, mais l’intimité respirante, par laquelle le poète se consume pour accroître l’espace et se dissipe rythmiquement: pure brûlure intérieure autour de rien.’¹⁰³ The poem as origin is not finite and enclosed, but infinite and fluid, with sheer absence at its unobtainable centre. The turn back to the Open in Blanchot’s account is therefore far from the singular and redemptive turn described by Heidegger.

An essay focussed on Hölderlin and originally published as ‘Le Tournant’ is included in the appendix of *L’Espace littéraire*. Blanchot begins by rehearsing the argument of Beda Allemann, who writes that the poet, in earlier work such as *Hyperion* and *Empedocles*, seeks reconciliation with nature, and the divine, through a desire for death.¹⁰⁴ In later work such as the hymns — Blanchot

¹⁰² Blanchot, ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 185.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁰⁴ See Beda Allemann, *Hölderlin et Heidegger*, trans. by François Fédiér, 2nd edn (Paris: PUF, [1959] 1987). The text was published in German in 1954 and appeared in French translation five years later in 1959; Blanchot’s article appeared in January 1955 and is one of the last to be included in *L’Espace littéraire*. Paul de Man is critical of Allemann, who proposes a homogeneity between Heidegger and Hölderlin which rests on the movement of reversal that occurs in both: ‘There is not to be found in Hölderlin a singular ontological reversal, but a lived philosophy of repeated reversal, that is nothing more than the notion of becoming. Since there is

references ‘Wie wenn am Feiertage...’ as a well known example thanks to Heidegger’s commentary, which itself became known in France thanks to his review from 1946, ‘La Parole “sacrée” de Hölderlin’ — the poet’s task becomes one of mediation, as he stands in intimate relation with the gods.¹⁰⁵ A reversal occurs in Hölderlin’s work, as he turns away from the gods and back towards the world, which is comparable to the Heideggerian turn beyond metaphysics — this is the contention of Allemann challenged by Blanchot.

The section following this introduction begins by stressing the experience of Hölderlin. Blanchot had accused Heidegger of neglecting Hölderlin’s experience in 1946 and here, in 1955, the irresolvable tension of the poetic experience undermines the ‘rich conception’ of the turning offered by Heidegger: ‘Il y a là une énergique lucidité, une affirmation énergique des limites de l’expérience à laquelle tout devrait l’inviter à s’abandonner sans réserve: elle ne doit pas nous tourner vers l’immédiat, non seulement il y a risque de périr dans l’embrasement du feu, mais elle ne le peut pas, l’immédiat est impossible.’¹⁰⁶ The more Hölderlin experiences the fire of the sky, the more he expresses the necessity not to deliver oneself to it excessively. This limitless experience of the limit reflects a tension between the desire for the immediate and the law of mediation. The turning for both Rilke and Hölderlin is not singular and redemptive but repeated and doubled because it endlessly encounters the impossible. Blanchot writes that death is the side of life that is turned away [*détourner*] from us in Rilke’s *Notebooks*. In order to turn back [*retourner*] to death and the Open, the poet must turn away [*détourner*] from the exterior world of objects toward a more interior consciousness; but it is our ability as human beings to will death that makes such an inward turn possible — the condition of impossibility is shown to be the condition of possibility. Rilke recognises that we are turned away [*se détourner*] from the Open by our awareness of our mortality. Death, in the essays on Rilke and Hölderlin, becomes the limit at which everything turns back [*se renverser, se retourner*].¹⁰⁷

always reversal, there is never any effective reconciliation, not even in the early works’ (*Blindness and Insight*, p. 265).

¹⁰⁵ Blanchot, ‘L’Itinéraire de Hölderlin’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, pp. 363-74 (pp. 363-64) (first publ. as ‘Le Tournant’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 25 (January 1955), 110-20).

¹⁰⁶ Blanchot, ‘L’Itinéraire de Hölderlin’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, pp. 369-70.

¹⁰⁷ Blanchot, ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 190.

The suggestion, in the closing section of the essay on Hölderlin, is that the experience of repeated reversal is comparable to the experience of the Open in Rilke: ‘c’est le cœur de l’homme qui doit devenir le lieu où la lumière s’éprouve, l’intimité où l’écho de la profondeur vide devient parole, mais non pas par une simple et facile métamorphose.’¹⁰⁸ The closing lines of the essay cite Hölderlin at a time of madness:

Et quand nous lisons ces mots rayonnants de la folie: ‘*Voudrais-je être une comète? Oui. Car elles ont la rapidité des oiseaux, elles fleurissent en feu et elles sont en pureté comme des enfants*’, nous pressentons comme a pu se réaliser, pour le poète, dans la pureté que lui a assurée sa rectitude insigne, le désir de s’unir au feu, au jour, et nous ne sommes pas surpris de cette métamorphose qui, avec la rapidité silencieuse d’un vol d’oiseau, l’entraîne désormais par le ciel, fleur de lumière, astre qui brûle, mais qui s’épanouit innocemment en fleur.¹⁰⁹

Hölderlin suggests that the turn to the Sacred, the immediate, the Open, is achievable; perhaps his madness is evidence of this indifference.¹¹⁰ Blanchot’s rewriting of these lines, however, does not bear witness to the incineration of this comet but to its light which at once destroys and unveils. Figurative language becomes more literal in this rewriting as the comet transforms into blossoming flower, signalling not reconciliation between the human and the gods but multiple metamorphoses which result from this endless confrontation with the outside.¹¹¹

The poetic experience is sketched as a hedgehog curled up on a road by Derrida when asked, by the Italian journal *Poesia* in November 1988, ‘Che cos’è la poesia?’ What is poetry? ‘Pas le

¹⁰⁸ Blanchot, ‘L’Itinéraire de Hölderlin’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 373.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 374.

¹¹⁰ Blanchot will later write of madness in terms of indifference (in ‘L’Oubli, la déraison’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 289-99) and equate madness in *La Folie du jour* to being blinded by light. A discussion of both texts takes place in Chapter Four.

¹¹¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, breaking with the Romantic Hölderlin of Heidegger, points to the sober literalness of the poet: ‘le commentaire emphatique et pieux de Heidegger — pour ne rien dire de sa très pesante surdétermination politique —, qui se prête si mal à la *diction* propre de ce poème, toute de “sobriété”. [...] il faut — il *fallait* — une singulière mauvaise foi, et des intentions très précises, pour dénier *a priori* ce que j’appellerai le sens, au reste désespéré, de la *réalité* dans le dernier Hölderlin. Ou, si vous préférez, son “exigence de la vérité”’ (Heidegger, pp. 86-88).

phénix, pas l'aigle, le hérisson, très bas, tout bas, près de la terre. Ni sublime, ni incorporel, angélique peut-être, et pour un temps.'¹¹² This is not a meeting between the otherwise absent gods and the human, but a lowly nocturnal affair concerning the possibility of grounding. Derrida's response echoes Blanchot's rewriting of Hölderlin through the sober selection of the hedgehog; the lack of any verb, any designation of existence, similarly stresses the suspension of world in this poetic experience. Perhaps we are here reminded of Schlegel's hedgehog, that animal turned in on itself and detached from the surrounding world like the fragment which represents organic individuality and the work. The hedgehog of Derrida's response is very different; in rolling itself up into a ball the hedgehog is not protected from the elements but all the more fragile and vulnerable, exposed to the (mechanical) dangers of the road. It anticipates death, it is being-for-death in a way that Heidegger refuses to the animal, but remains open to the outside because, Derrida explains fifteen months later in an exchange with Maurizio Ferraris, the aporia of dying, death as the most proper possibility of *Dasein*, is never closed in *Being and Time*.¹¹³ In crossing and curling up on the road the hedgehog is the *arrivant*, the new and unexpected, which signals the coming of the event that never arrives (the poem); it simultaneously marks and crosses a limit, making possible everything to which it cannot be reduced.

Central to the history of Being for Heidegger is our ability to recollect a primal relationship with Being, to live once again in the presence of Being, through the poetic saying of Hölderlin. The opening lines of Derrida's response underscore the aporia of forgetting which prevents the completion of this turning and the inception of another history: 'Pour répondre à une telle question — *en deux mots, n'est-ce pas?* — on te demande de savoir renoncer au savoir. Et de bien le savoir, sans jamais l'oublier: démobilité la culture mais ce que tu sacrifies en route, en traversant la route, ne l'oublie jamais dans ta docte ignorance.'¹¹⁴ We must forget in order to remember; but we can never renounce all knowledge.¹¹⁵ You would like, Derrida writes, to retain by heart a singular event; you desire

¹¹² Jacques Derrida, 'Chè cos'è la poesia?', in *Points de suspension: entretiens* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), pp. 303-08 (p. 307).

¹¹³ Derrida, 'Istrice 2: Ick bün all hier', in *Points de suspension*, pp. 309-36.

¹¹⁴ Derrida, 'Chè cos'è la poesia?', in *Points de suspension*, p. 303.

¹¹⁵ Blanchot writes elsewhere that we cannot know the limits of forgetting: '❖ Tu ne trouveras pas les limites de l'oubli, si loin que tu puisses oublier' (Maurice Blanchot, *L'Attente L'Oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 68). See Chapter Four for discussion of forgetting and exteriority in Blanchot.

absolute inseparation; but it is precisely this ‘by heart’ which is problematic because confided, ‘à une certaine extériorité de l’automate, aux lois de la mnémotechnique, à cette liturgie qui mime en surface la mécanique, à l’automobile qui surprend ta passion et vient sur toi comme du dehors: *auswendig*, “par cœur” en allemand.’¹¹⁶ The ‘by heart’ means automaticity or technicity, at the very least animality (and here there is an echo of Rilke who turns toward the worldly inner space of the heart to access the Open, which is otherwise reserved for animals). In crossing the road we sacrifice the poetic to the automation of artificial memory, what Heidegger wants to maintain outside poeticising and thinking. ‘By heart’ therefore reaches beyond organic bodily limits and signals an originary contamination by the inorganic: ‘il efface les bords, il échappe aux mains, tu l’entends à peine, mais il nous apprend le cœur.’¹¹⁷

The turn for Heidegger is very much related to technology. In the age of metaphysics the essence of technology threatens to transform everything into a calculable resource to be exploited. The turn back toward the Open offered by *Sage* is the event which marks the beginning of a new era. Blanchot borrows much from Heidegger’s ‘Why Poets?’ but remains carefully guarded in relation to Heidegger’s *Seinsgeschichte* and omits any discussion of technology from his essay. The emphasis placed on experience and the movement of his own critical thought throughout ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’ indicates why Blanchot does not follow Heidegger down this route. Blanchot is attentive to the mobility of syntax, whereas Heidegger focuses on static words. A footnote to an essay published in 1957 accuses Heidegger of abusing etymology:

¹¹⁶ Derrida, ‘Chè cos’è la poesia?’, in *Points de suspension*, p. 306.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 308. Leslie Hill writes that, in refusing any explicit or implicit appeal to an ontology of the artwork and any reliance on the metaphysical category of the aesthetic or the supposed autonomy of poetic language or discourse, Derrida’s modest yet radical purpose in this response ‘was to reconsider the minimal conditions of possibility of what in the Western tradition has come to be known as literature.’ The name given to these conditions by Derrida was iterability, that paradoxical doubling which binds repetition to alterity and which marks a fundamental property of all language. If there was something distinctive about literature in general for Derrida, it derived ‘from the remarkable diligence with which a literary work, radicalising a feature inherent in all inscription as such, could always point to itself, among others, as a so-called literary text.’ Hill demonstrates that the hedgehog of Derrida’s response marks not a retreat into the interiority of the self but an exposure to danger, an encounter with the outside which is the experience preceding and exceeding poetry or the poetic. Leslie Hill, ‘On the Persistence of Hedgehogs’, in *The Agon and its Agony: Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophers on Poetry*, ed. by Ranjan Ghosh (New York: Colombia University Press, forthcoming 2018).

l'attention, portée au langage par Heidegger et qui est d'un caractère extrêmement pressant, est attention aux mots considérés à part, concentrés en eux-mêmes, à tels mots tenus pour fondamentaux et tourmentés jusqu'à ce que se fasse entendre, dans l'histoire de leur formation, l'histoire de l'être, — mais jamais aux rapports des mots, et moins encore à l'espace antérieur que supposent ces rapports et dont le mouvement originaire rend seul possible le langage comme déploiement.¹¹⁸

This note goes some way to explaining why Blanchot was not convinced by *Seinsgeschichte* [*l'histoire de l'être*]. Heidegger presupposes finding in words the evidence of truth; in his philosophical desire for the unity and totality of truth, he tortures words, lifting them out of their context and considering them in isolation. In 'Why Poets?', for instance, the term 'das Offene' is extracted and translated into numerous 'synonyms' which seem disjointed from the original context of the *Duino Elegies*: 'The gravity of the pure forces, the unheard centre, the pure *Bezug*, the whole *Bezug*, full Nature, life, the risk are all the same. All the names just offered name beings as such in their entirety. The conventional idiom of metaphysics offers the name "Being" for them as well.'¹¹⁹ Rather than focusing on single immobile words, Blanchot seeks to capture the incessant movement of Rilke's syntax which signals the radical non-foundation of the neuter — that indeterminate element felt in death, the abyss, and once too hastily attributed by Rilke to the modern city.

The possibility of an authentic death is repeatedly implied only to be crossed out by its impossible premise; the transformation of the visible into the invisible is implied and then suspended in quotation marks and italics; the turn to death and the Open plays a significant role throughout the essay but is annulled by the errant nature of the discussion. Blanchot substitutes the experience of the limitless affirmation of the limit for Heidegger's founding event.¹²⁰ 'Dernier témoin, fin de l'histoire,

¹¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'Une Entente nouvelle de l'espace littéraire', in *Le Livre à Venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 317-32 (p. 320 n. 1) (first publ. as 'Le Livre à venir', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 59 (November 1957), 917-31).

¹¹⁹ Heidegger, 'Why Poets?', in *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 212; *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 283.

¹²⁰ See Jérôme de Gramont in *Blanchot et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Corlevour, 2011), pp. 57-80. De Gramont distinguishes between the Heideggerian event and the experience of the limit in Blanchot, but risks reading the neuter as ontology by overlooking or underestimating the significance of the impossibility of an authentic relation to death and dying for Blanchot.

époque, tournant, crise — ou bien fin de la philosophie (métaphysique)’ — these terms, listed at the beginning of a fragment in *L’Écriture du désastre*, demonstrate the fundamental aporia affecting historicism. The claim that everything is historical is based on a state of being which is anything but historical and so disproves itself; the idea that there might be an end to metaphysics is itself a metaphysical view. In this fragment, writing bears the fluid traits which imply a turning only to leave it hanging above an abyss, simultaneously marking a change and suspending it: ‘Pourquoi écrire, entendu comme changement d’époque, entendu comme l’expérience (la non-expérience) du désastre, implique-t-il chaque fois les mots inscrits en tête de ce “fragment”, qu’il révoque cependant? Qu’il révoque, même si ce qui s’y annonce, s’y annonce comme un nouveau qui a toujours déjà eu lieu, *changement radical* dont tout présent s’exclut.’¹²¹ The fluidity of language here and in ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’ challenges the identification of metaphysics with technology. Blanchot moves beyond the historicising of death and technology alike, relating the inhuman, the mechanical, repetition, the impersonal, to the non-experience of dying.

The technical, which plays a significant role in ‘Why Poets?’, is therefore omitted from ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’ not because Blanchot has in some way misinterpreted Heidegger’s claims: the technical resonates from that unknowable outside in which all that is inhuman is located. Again there is a significant divergence between these two readings of Rilke: while Heidegger disregards the notion that animals have access to the Open, Blanchot accepts that there is an inhuman aspect to this space of confrontation and merger: ‘L’horreur de la guerre éclaire sombrement ce qu’il y a d’inhumain pour l’homme dans cet abîme’.¹²² Indeed, Blanchot’s account of the flies in Malte’s bedroom seems to contain within it all of the complexities of his view of death as the impossibility of possibility, of the Open as the experience of the limitlessness of the limit, of the turn as mobile and yet suspended, as well as his rejection of the historicising of an authentic relation to death:

¹²¹ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, pp. 158-59.

¹²² Blanchot, ‘Rilke et l’exigence de la mort’, in *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 164. Elsewhere in the essay, Blanchot notes that Rilke had to admit that the literary experience had an inhuman aspect which he labelled the void (p. 197 n. 1).

Parfois, quand la peur le saisit, il lui faut bien entendre le bourdonnement anonyme du ‘mourir’ qui n’est nullement par la faute des temps ni par la négligence des gens: en tout temps, tous, nous mourons comme des mouches que l’automne jette dans les chambres où elles tournoient aveuglément dans un vertige immobile, tapissant tout à coup les murs de leur sottise mort.¹²³

Human beings ‘die’ just as these flies ‘die’ (the quotation marks suspending this process in the extract above). The extent to which Blanchot excludes any discussion of the animal in this essay is perhaps surprising, given that animals play a large role in the formulation of the Open in the eighth *Elegy*; however, contained within the above reference to flies in Rilke is Blanchot’s entire conception of the possible-impossible experience of dying which is not reserved for the human. The experience of dying is a confrontation with an outside in which all that is inhuman errs — this is not outside thought in opposition to inside, but an outside which, like the other night, is irreducible to any such binary.

Animals and Automation

Animals, in their ignorance of their own mortality, gaze into the boundless Rilkean Open; humans, constrained by the knowledge of their approaching death, can only look backwards: ‘What is really out there [*Was draußen ist*] we only know | by looking at the countenance of creatures. | For we take a young child and force it | to turn around, to see shapes and forms, | and not the Open that is so deep in the face | of an animal. Free from death.’¹²⁴ Heidegger inverts the hierarchy constructed by Rilke; the human stands at the top of the clear and stable order which composes *Dasein*: ‘The stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, the human forms a world [*der Stein ist weltlos, das Tier ist weltarm, der Mensch ist weltbildend*].’¹²⁵ The animal is poor in world because it does not perceive being as Being; beings only appear to the animal as elements of its environment, consequently the animal is

¹²³ Ibid., p. 156.

¹²⁴ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, pp. 62-63.

¹²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 176; *Gesamtausgabe*, XXIX-XXX: *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt — Endlichkeit — Einsamkeit* (2004), 261. Leslie Hill notes that it is unlikely that Blanchot read this given the publication date of this lecture course, in “‘An Outstretched Hand...’: Writing, Fragmentation, Politics”, unpublished article.

surrounded by a circle of its urges rather than things. Only man sees being in the light of Being. The difference between man and animals is underscored by the animal's lack of language; the animal is deprived of speech because it does not have access to the world as the struggle between concealment and disclosure.¹²⁶ This account of the negativity of the animal's worldly or spiritual poverty, from a lecture course from 1929 to 1930, led Derrida to argue that Heidegger's characterisation of animal life perpetuates the humanistic and anthropocentric prejudices that have long dominated Western philosophy. There is no animal *Dasein*, nor is the animal *Vorhandensein* or *Zuhandensein*; Heidegger thinks the animal only as a median between stone and man, and so his thesis remains, 'foncièrement téléologique et traditionnelle, pour ne pas dire dialectique.'¹²⁷

References to animals by Blanchot may be easily overlooked because there are only ever fleeting glimpses or passing comparisons; the creatures which do appear are not majestic beasts, household pets, or farmyard animals, but almost always what we may consider unexceptional, perhaps even base or dirty, and alien: several rodents, numerous flies, a butterfly, a caterpillar, dragonflies, cuckoos, a magpie, a nightingale, a skylark, a stag beetle, a squirrel, woodlice, toads, fish, a lizard, a wolf. These creatures, from fictional and critical work, tell us something significant about the experience of writing and dying when they appear.

In 1943, Blanchot tentatively proposes a comparison between writer and animal, remarking that both live a lonely existence, only to then re-inscribe some sort of Heideggerian hierarchy: 'Ces images, si naturelles qu'elles soient, ne sont pas convaincantes. La bête muette, c'est au témoin intelligent qu'elle apparaît en proie à la solitude.'¹²⁸ The implication here is that this witness is a human and it is only down to his or her presence that the animal can be deemed solitary; the mute beast lacks a sense of otherness because it lacks language.¹²⁹ The solitude reserved for the writer is not a solipsistic refuge but an exposure to the outside; the anguish experienced by the solitary writer deprives him or her of the relation with another, estranges him or her from human reality, and likens

¹²⁶ For an overview of *Dasein* and animality, see Haar, pp. 63-71.

¹²⁷ Derrida, 'De l'esprit', in *Heidegger et la question*, p. 71.

¹²⁸ Blanchot, 'De l'angoisse au langage', in *Faux pas*, pp. 9-23 (p. 10).

¹²⁹ The writer has privileged access to this solitude or sense of anguish; it does not occur to us, Blanchot writes, to consider the anguish of the cobbler in the same way (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

him or her (perhaps surprisingly following the previous quotation) to something inhuman, in this instance vermin: ‘ainsi depouillé, et prêt à s’enfoncer dans sa particularité monstrueuse, [l’angoisse] le rejette hors de soi et [...] elle le confond avec ce qu’il n’est pas’.¹³⁰ From an early point in his career as a novelist and critic then, the difference between animals and humans proves to be extraordinarily fragile for Blanchot as he recognises the otherness reserved for the writer as the figure who experiences the frailty of world. The elaboration of the inhuman in Blanchot’s writing demonstrates the extent to which he moves beyond an understanding of language as the sheltering ‘house of Being’, solely accessed by the human, toward a view of literature as the medium that dismantles the sovereign subject through exposure to the alterity of the outside.

At the midway point of *L’Arrêt de mort*, a *récit* first published in 1948, a parallel is drawn between one of the female protagonists, Nathalie, and a squirrel. Nathalie enters the narrator’s hotel room early one morning; she stands in the middle of the room like a statue, but is paralysed with fear rather than made of stone. The narrator remarks that something irreversible has happened (‘l’irréversible était arrivé’), before recounting the time he witnessed a squirrel become trapped in a cage hanging from a tree:

J’ai vu une fois un écureuil se faire prendre dans une cage pendue à un arbre: il franchissait le seuil avec tout l’élan de sa vie la plus gaie, mais à peine sur la planchette intérieure, le léger déclic ayant rabattu la porte, et bien qu’il n’eût aucun mal, qu’il fût encore libre, car la cage était vaste avec dedans un petit tas de coquilles, son sautillement s’était brisé net et il demeurait paralysé, frappé dans le dos par la certitude que maintenant le piège l’avait pris.¹³¹

The vastness of the cage means that the squirrel remains free even once the trap has closed and the small pile of nuts inside ensures its survival: this is both a death sentence and the suspension of death, transforming the squirrel and Nathalie alike into living statues. Neither are sovereign subjects in this debilitating experience which shakes the human-animal hierarchy to the core. The irreversible is

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹³¹ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Arrêt de mort*, L’Imaginaire, 15 (Paris: Gallimard, [1948] 1977), pp. 65-66.

therefore a realisation that something other is in control, something beyond the limits of the cage which has always already preceded any account of Being. Emmanuel Levinas calls this anonymous force the *il y a*, a sort of impersonal field which presents being and cannot itself be negated, since the necessity of affirmation always precedes the possibility of negation. The *il y a* constitutes a radical challenge to dialectical thought and renders any origin or event, beginning or ending, impossible.¹³²

In a 1943 review of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Blanchot writes: ‘L’angoisse découvre à l’homme qu’il existe dans chaque parcelle de l’air un je ne sais quoi de terrible, et cette existence du terrible est l’épreuve même de l’existence.’¹³³ The *il y a* is so terrible for Malte because he staunchly tries to remain faithful to himself, refusing to embrace what terrifies him in his death: its impossibility. He clings on to the hope that he will die an authentic death; however, as his childhood fear, referred to in one episode as ‘das Große’ reminds him, death brings with it a radical transformation into something completely other: ‘Now it was there. Now it grew out of me like a tumour, like a second head, and was a part of me, though it could not belong to me at all, because it was so big. It was there like a huge, dead beast, that had once, when it was still alive, been my hand or my arm.’¹³⁴ Limbs, distanced from any bodily identity, morph into strange animals in this anonymizing experience. What emerges is nothing familiar, comforting, or natural, but an unrecognisable inhuman. Rilke maintains in 1923 that animals are ignorant of their mortality in the *Duino Elegies*. Significantly for Blanchot, by *L’Arrêt de mort*, this anguished revelation is not reserved for the human. It is for this reason that we must reject Ulrich Baer’s passing comment that the ‘philosopher’ Maurice Blanchot, along with Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben, has interpreted the eighth *Elegy* as ‘a treatise about the ontological difference between human and animal.’¹³⁵ Blanchot’s concern is what precedes or gives ontology which itself has no origin and exceeds the distinction between human and animal.

¹³² See the chapter ‘Existence sans existant’ in Levinas, *De l’existence à l’existant*, pp. 93-105. On Blanchot and the *il y a*, see Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, pp. 31-83.

¹³³ Blanchot, ‘Rilke’, in *Faux pas*, p. 62.

¹³⁴ Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 59; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 68.

¹³⁵ Ulrich Baer, *The Rilke Alphabet*, trans. by Andrew Hamilton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 126.

To return to the ensnared squirrel of *L'Arrêt de mort*: within this cage it is free to move and to survive, but this is a limited freedom normally reserved for people. Here the squirrel is exposed to the experience of death and so, like Nathalie, it is irreversibly altered, transformed into a moribund figure. One page later, Nathalie, her hair longer than usual, makes a bid for freedom having been reminded of the room's limitations when she knocks into a table:

A ce bruit elle répondit par un ricanement de peur, et fila comme une flèche. Tout alors devient confus. J'imagine qu'à partir de ce cri j'étais hors de moi. La voyant bondir vers l'air libre, l'instinct de proie me saisit, je la rattrapai vers l'escalier, la pris à bras-le-corps et la ramenai en la traînant à terre jusque sur le lit où elle tomba tout à fait. Ma colère, l'une des rares que j'aie eues depuis mon enfance si coléreuse, n'avait plus de borne. Je ne sais d'où venait cette violence, j'aurais pu à un tel moment tout faire: lui casser le bras, lui écraser la tête ou m'enfoncer le front dans le mur, car cette force furieuse n'était pas, il me semble, dirigée particulièrement contre elle. C'était une puissance sans but, pareille au souffle du tremblement de terre, qui secouait, renversait les êtres. Ce souffle, moi-même, j'en ai été ébranlé, et ainsi je suis devenu une tempête qui a ouvert les montagnes et rendu la mer folle.¹³⁶

Both characters are overcome by their instincts in this passage. Assuming the roles of predator and prey they behave like animals: Nathalie bounds for freedom sniggering fearfully; the narrator chases after her, dragging his prey along the floor in an uncontrollable and limitless rage, comparable to a natural disaster powerful enough to tear the ground from beneath them. Neither the narrator nor Nathalie can be described as human in this brief moment; like the squirrel, both assume a disturbing otherness. The possibility of an authentic death and language constitute human existence for Heidegger and ensure that we, and not animals, understand Being as such. When the conditions of authenticity are shown to be impossible for man and animal alike, the distinction between the two is suspended and the response to this 'tout autre exigence' is a non-linguistic mode of expression

¹³⁶ Blanchot, *L'Arrêt de mort*, pp. 67-68.

bearing some resemblance to animalistic cries and gestures, rather than any redemptive poetic language.

The fragility of the difference between human and animal in this *récit* has consequences beyond their responses to death and dying. As beings that are partly inhuman, bearing animalistic or savage traits, the narrator, J. and Nathalie experience the solitude which occurs in the presence of an estranged and unhearing other. Linguistic communication is consequently often ineffective and replaced by other forms of expression: touch evokes memories and ideas ('Lentement, je posai ma main sur la sienne, ce contact était comme un souvenir amer, une idée, une vérité froide, implacable, contre laquelle la lutte n'avait qu'un sens mesquin'); facial expressions communicate strong emotions and demands ('je m'aperçus que son humeur avait changé: sur son visage montait une sorte de froideur respectable, un de ces airs de moralité qui rendent ennuyeuse la plus belle figure, et celle-ci n'était qu'un peu jolie. J'eus immédiatement envie de m'en aller'); and the silent gaze transforms the 'listener' ('Un regard est très différent de ce que l'on croit, il n'a ni lumière ni expression ni force ni mouvement, il est silencieux, mais, du sein de l'étrangeté, son silence traverse les mondes, et celui qui l'entend devient autre').¹³⁷ Michel Haar has criticised Heidegger's view of the animal, arguing that he overlooks other forms of expression beyond language: 'Malgré cette absence de langage articulé, on pourrait objecter à la phénoménologie heideggérienne qu'elle ne tient compte ni des cris, gémissements, ni des grimaces, mimiques, gestes, postures qui chez les mammifères par exemple sont irréfutablement des modes d'expression.'¹³⁸ Haar's criticism cannot be directed at Blanchot.

Dialogues in this *récit* are brief and often unsuccessful, generally failing to communicate any decisive message: 'Pour la première fois, je pris le parti de lui téléphoner. C'était aux environs de midi. [J.] était seule. Je ne l'entendis presque pas, car dès les premiers mots elle fut prise d'un violent accès de toux et de suffocation. J'écoutai quelques instants ce souffle déchiré, étouffé; puis elle réussit à me dire: "Allez-vous-en", et je raccrochai.'¹³⁹ The ability to reach out to the being that witnesses one's solitude is what is at stake in this failed communication and in the indeterminate nature of the various

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 122, 60, 109.

¹³⁸ Haar, p. 70.

¹³⁹ Blanchot, *L'Arrêt de mort*, p. 25.

cries, howls, splutters and sneers that feature throughout the *récit* : ‘une sorte de souffle sortit de sa bouche encore serrée, un soupir qui peu à peu devint un léger, un faible cri’; ‘elle avait naturellement une voix qui surprenait, assez rauque, légèrement voilée, assombrie par le mal et cependant toujours très gaie ou très vive’; ‘elle dit avec une grande angoisse: “Vite, une rose par excellence”, tout en continuant à dormir mais maintenant avec un léger râle’; ‘Cela fut dit sur le ton le plus orageux, et comme un cri forcené que je n’aurais pas trouvé naturel chez la personne la plus violente’.¹⁴⁰ The narrator endeavours to make himself understood but this moment of comprehension never takes place in the here and now.

The question of an inhuman transformation in the face of impossible death again arises in a lengthy study of Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*, published one year after *L’Arrêt de mort* in 1949. Blanchot remarks that the creatures who populate the definitive edition of the first song — the octopus with the silken gaze, the horseshoe bat, the toad, the itch bite which causes scabies — have taken the place of the name Dazet, which appears in the first edition of the song published one year earlier.¹⁴¹ Georges Dazet is an old classmate, a relic from the author Isidore Ducasse’s past. This is not some mere literary artifice, writes Blanchot; we have not caught Lautréamont in the act of replacing one name for another. This interruption signals something far more radical: that the author has been transformed by the experience of writing this text.¹⁴² Dazet ceases to be Dazet and the inhuman emerges from the depths to take his place. How does this happen? Surely Ducasse is not complicit in his own transformation? Blanchot has a theory: ‘La vérité est qu’en effet à ce moment Dazet meurt et si complètement que la main qui le rejette au néant, reviendra plus tard sur le passé pour effacer toutes les traces de son existence.’¹⁴³ A second hand returns to the text to haunt the first: in doubling the hand in this way Blanchot contests the limit between nature and technology, because this second hand cannot be described as organic.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 36, 37, 44, 96.

¹⁴¹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘L’Expérience de Lautréamont’, in *Lautréamont et Sade*, Propositions, 6 (Paris: Minuit, 1949); Arguments, 19, rev. edn (Paris: Minuit, 1963), pp. 243-380 (p. 285). Originally published in 1949, there were two further editions of this text published in 1963. A preface is added to later versions; Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* is included in the second edition; and the order of the essays differs across all three editions.

¹⁴² Blanchot, ‘L’Expérience de Lautréamont’, in *Lautréamont et Sade*, p. 287.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 289.

In 'La Solitude essentielle' [1953], an essay which would later be selected to open *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot considered solitude once again, attributing it here to the work rather than the figure of the writer. The essay begins with a reference to Rilke, differentiating his meditative solitude from the radical solitude of the work. The distinction between the two forms of solitude can be mapped onto the distinction between the book and the work:

ce que l'écrivain a en vue, c'est l'œuvre, et ce qu'il écrit, c'est un livre. Le livre, comme tel, peut devenir un événement agissant du monde (action cependant toujours réservée et insuffisante), mais ce n'est pas l'action que l'artiste a en vue, c'est l'œuvre, et ce qui fait du livre le substitut de l'œuvre suffit à en faire une chose qui, comme l'œuvre, ne relève pas de la vérité du monde.¹⁴⁴

The work is solitary because, unlike the book which is unreliable or insufficient action in the world, the work suspends the world of familiarity. Blanchot portrays a writer in the process of being erased; the solitary work to which he or she belongs is not contained within itself, or within world, but is always open to the outside: 'Le "Il" qui se substitue au "Je", telle est la solitude qui arrive à l'écrivain de par l'œuvre. "Il" ne désigne pas le désintéressement objectif, le détachement créateur. "Il" ne glorifie pas la conscience en un autre qui moi, l'essor d'une vie humaine qui, dans l'espace imaginaire de l'œuvre d'art, garderait la liberté de dire "Je". "Il", c'est moi-même devenu personne, autrui devenu l'autre'.¹⁴⁵

One section of this essay considers the role of hands in the composition of a solitary work: 'La Préhension persécutrice'. Here Blanchot argues that there are always at least two hands involved in writing: one deals in the possible and looks to assert itself as master by bringing the writer's task to an end and releasing the pencil; the other continues to write even when asked to stop by the first hand: 'La maîtrise de l'écrivain n'est pas dans la main qui écrit, cette main "malade" qui ne lâche jamais le

¹⁴⁴ Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 13-32 (p. 16 n. 1) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1 (January 1953), 75-90). Implied here is also a critique of Sartre's committed literature.

¹⁴⁵ Blanchot, 'La Solitude essentielle', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 23.

crayon, qui ne peut le lâcher, car ce qu'elle tient, elle ne le tient pas réellement'.¹⁴⁶ While the first hand seeks to put an end to this task, the hand that makes writing possible undermines the conditions of this possibility by refusing to let go of the pencil, by never even having a real hold on that pencil. The other hand deals with something beyond the world in a time that is 'barely human'. The quotation marks suspending 'malade' highlight the uncertain status of this other hand as it hovers over the page, neither grasping nor letting go of the pencil it is impossible to tell whether it is dead or alive, singular or plural, animal or human. The writer belongs to the work but only ever achieves the book; torn between action in the world and the *désœuvrement* of the outside, he or she is unable to put an end to this task. This more radical solitude of the work reveals a fissure between writing and world: 'Écrire, c'est [...] retirer le langage du cours du monde, le dessaisir de ce qui fait de lui un pouvoir par lequel, si je parle, c'est le monde qui se parle, c'est le jour qui s'édifie par le travail, l'action et le temps.'¹⁴⁷ The writer is exposed to the radical solitude of the work by the hand that withdraws language from world.

Blanchot's consideration of hands in this subsection bears some resemblance to a passage from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*; it seems likely that he had this text in mind given the reference to Rilke in the opening paragraphs. In this passage, a young Malte drops a crayon while drawing a picture of a solitary knight on horseback. He kneels down under the table, his left hand supporting him, and gropes around in the dark with his right hand looking for the crayon. He watches as this hand becomes distanced from him to the extent that it resembles 'an aquatic animal, examining the ground'. A ghostly disembodied hand suddenly emerges from the wall, a fur rug stretches between Malte and this wall: 'I felt that one of the hands belonged to me, and that it was committing itself to something irreparable. With all the authority I had over it, I checked it and drew it back flat and slowly, without taking my eyes off the other, which went on groping. I realized that it would not leave off'.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, pp. 84-85; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, pp. 101-02.

Malte's left hand is engaged in work in the world; it resembles the first hand described by Blanchot in 'La Solitude essentielle'. Malte's right hand reaches out, pulls away from bodily identity and transforms into an indeterminate animal. The hand that reaches out to him is described as 'a larger, extraordinarily thin hand, such as I had never seen before'. This hand is also not necessarily a human hand; it certainly does not seem to bear any human characteristics and it seems at least noteworthy that a fur rug marks the region where this encounter takes place. It is unclear whether this hand is a reflection of Malte's own hand, the hand of another human, the hand of another animal, dead or alive. It reaches out to grasp Malte's hand but is refused. Could it have grasped or touched him in the first place? If it is like the hand that writes in 'La Solitude essentielle' it would have been able to neither grasp nor release. One thing is, however, certain: what Malte has embarked upon cannot be undone. This encounter with the other forever exposes him to the alterity of the outside and to the impossible and irreversible experience of dying and writing.

Thinking is described by Heidegger as a craft [*Hand-werk*].¹⁴⁹ The hand serves a purpose beyond its everyday use as a bodily organ; it is the means by which the human stretches out and receives itself in the other — Blanchot welcomes this aspect of Heidegger's thought. However, Heidegger restricts the hand to the human (paw, fin and claw are excluded from his thinking of the hand) and thinks the hand only in the singular; this is noted by Derrida who remarks that when both hands do appear they are folded together as one, for instance in prayer.¹⁵⁰ The essence of the hand, according to Heidegger, does not let it be determined as an organic part of the body for grasping — apes have organs that can grasp — but as a thought that gives and is given; he denies the hand as first instrument. Derrida reveals an aporetic logic governing Heidegger's thinking of the hand ('Le *Dasein* n'est ni *vorhanden*, ni *zuhanden*. Son mode de présence est autre mais il faut bien qu'il ait la main pour se rapporter aux autres modes de présence')¹⁵¹ and shows that a critique of modern technology is evident in the privileging of the singular hand of thinking and craftsmanship, threatened, in Heidegger's account, by industrial automation and modern mechanization.

¹⁴⁹ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, pp. 16-17; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 18-19.

¹⁵⁰ Derrida, 'La Main de Heidegger', in *Heidegger et la question*, p. 206.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

In stark contrast, hands in Blanchot are always plural, possibly animal, and disperse rather than gather.¹⁵² Hands surface in *L'Arrêt de mort* as characters perform mundane tasks ('Elle avait à portée de la main le téléphone'), as they try to communicate ('je reçus quelques lignes de la main de J., de sa main plutôt que de son écriture'), and as they reach out to others ('je pris doucement la main, le poignet de J. (qui dormait), et à peine l'eus-je touchée, elle se redressa, les yeux ouverts, me regardant d'un air furibond, et me repoussa en disant: "Ne me touchez plus jamais"'). These hands have a transformative, even destructive, effect on those they touch: 'Je n'avais plus la moindre crainte pour moi, mais j'avais une crainte extrême pour elle, de l'effaroucher, de la transformer, par la peur, en une chose sauvage qui se briserait sous mes mains'.¹⁵³ The plaster casts of the hands of J. and Nathalie in particular reflect the uncertain status of the hand which closes the text. The survival of J.'s hands beyond her death in plaster form and the disunity that characterises the lines spreading across the palms incite wonder in the narrator toward the beginning of the text, while the infinite mortality of the cast produced from Nathalie's hands horrifies the narrator in the closing pages: 'Et que maintenant cette chose est là-bas, que vous l'avez dévoilée et, l'ayant vue, vous avez vu face à face ce qui est vivant pour l'éternité, pour la vôtre et pour la mienne! Oui, je le sais, je le sais, je l'ai toujours su.'¹⁵⁴ The hand is at once what is most human and most inhuman; the two versions of the plaster casts in this text reveal that hands transgress the presumed border between nature and technology.

The sight of these inhuman hands, the acknowledgement of their finitude which traps the narrator and Nathalie, provokes the irreversible realisation that something other which cannot be negated, which precedes any account of Being, is in control. The writing hand always intervenes and suspends this world. A further passage from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* echoes the experience of Blanchot's protagonists. Rilke's narrator speaks, in the second person, of exceeding your own boundaries: like a beetle that is trodden on you gush out of yourself, beyond your limits;

¹⁵² Hill considers the role of the hand for Heidegger and hands for Blanchot in "'An Outstretched Hand...': Writing, Fragmentation, Politics'.

¹⁵³ Blanchot, *L'Arrêt de mort*, pp. 17, 24, 44-45, 109-10.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.125; for the plaster casts of J.'s hands, see p. 21.

your hands cannot contain your ‘infinitely ramified being [*deines zahlloszweigigen Daseins*]’.¹⁵⁵ The role of hands in both texts is not to gather existence into one unified and finite bodily identity which would represent some philosophical truth, but to reach beyond existence toward the outside, death, the inhuman, and a dispersion that precedes all gathering.

The hand haunting the suppressed third section of *L’Arrêt de mort* stresses the significance of this motif to the text. At the end of the first edition of this text, Blanchot’s narrator asks us to imagine the hand that once wrote and is still writing these pages: ‘Que cela soit donc rappelé à qui lirait ces pages en les croyant traversées par la pensée du malheur. Et plus encore, qu’il essaie d’imaginer la main qui les écrit: s’il la voyait, peut-être lire lui deviendrait-il une tâche sérieuse.’¹⁵⁶ The brief third section containing this plea would be deleted in the 1971 edition along with the subtitle ‘récit’ — the second edition of this text bears no acknowledgement of the fact that it is a later edition.¹⁵⁷ The continued non-presence of the other hand ensures that the work never achieves completion and can always be copied, edited, rewritten — evidenced by the silent modifications to this text some 23 years after its initial publication. Rilke’s Malte similarly recognises the power of the hand to continue in his absence: ‘For a while yet I can write all of this down and express it. But there will come a day when my hand will be far from me, and when I bid it write, it will write words I do not mean.’¹⁵⁸ Blanchot and Rilke are in many ways anticipating Derrida’s understanding of iterability as already a kind of technology: ‘Écrire, c’est produire une marque qui constituera une sorte de machine à son tour productrice, que ma disparition future n’empêchera pas principalement de fonctionner et de donner, de se donner à lire et à réécrire.’¹⁵⁹ Iterability is that paradoxical doubling, not reliant on the authority of any author, which means that a text or a word can be repeated; as the condition of possibility of writing it simultaneously undermines the possibility of any ‘original’ copy. Iterability is the logic linking repetition to alterity; it is the condition of writing which interrupts the self-identity of the

¹⁵⁵ Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 69; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 82.

¹⁵⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Arrêt de mort [récit]* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 149.

¹⁵⁷ Derrida considers the unacknowledged changes to *L’Arrêt de mort* in ‘Survivre’, in *Parages*, pp. 146-48.

¹⁵⁸ Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 52; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 58.

¹⁵⁹ Derrida, ‘Signature, événement, contexte’, in *Marges de la philosophie*, pp. 365-93 (p. 376).

same. There is a connection, for Blanchot as well as Derrida, between the mechanical and the inhuman.

Nowhere is this clearer in Blanchot's work than in the essay on Lautréamont. 'L'analyse est une machine qui ne s'arrête pas facilement', writes Blanchot in a section entitled 'Le Mouvement perpétuel de l'analyse'.¹⁶⁰ Analysis is not easily stopped because any definitive interpretation of the work is shown to be illegitimate or insufficient, and so analysis is compelled to continue its 'underailable' mechanical movement, producing differing interpretations of the work with each turn of the faulty wheel. One such interpretation of *Les Chants de Maldoror* is that this text recounts the struggle between God and man; Blanchot cites H. R. Linder, who published *Lautréamont: sein Werk und sein Weltbild* in 1947, as an example of such criticism. He continues:

ce qui devient alors significatif, c'est qu'au cours d'une telle lutte, l'œuvre se laisse peu à peu envahir par une obscure confusion d'êtres métamorphosés, c'est qu'elle s'abandonne à des fantômes marécageux, amas de poulpes, de crapauds, de crabes, araignées qui bruissent, sangsues qui vampirisent, serpents innombrables. La poésie de Lautréamont ne livre peut-être rien à qui l'interroge naïvement sur Dieu et sur le mal, mais elle se livre elle-même par sa tendance à ne pouvoir parler de Dieu que par le moyen de fantastiques figures animales — et non pas à nous en parler, mais à oublier de nous en parler, en se condensant autour d'épaisses substances vivantes, à la fois surabondamment actives et d'une traînante inertie.¹⁶¹

'God' appears in this work not as one figure but as a differing fluid animal forms. The work is constructed around these marshy phantoms which reveal the condition of its possibility, which is the absence of any creator beyond its limits, or iterability as its condition of possibility. Blanchot is not here replacing faith in God with the faith in progress characteristic of modernity, because analysis is a faulty machine which never delivers any definitive interpretation or truth. These strange animals are ominous, perhaps even terrifying (bloodsucking leeches, murmuring spiders, uncountable snakes),

¹⁶⁰ Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Lautréamont', in *Lautréamont et Sade*, p. 271.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 273.

because they signal danger as the work turns on itself and confronts its own impossibility, that enigmatic outside which can never be conceptualised and when it is, by critics such as Linder for instance, is only ever ‘une armature rudimentaire, maladroitement reconstruite du dehors’.¹⁶² The work as a result is as fluid and unstable as these amorphous creatures which Linder seeks to solidify by imposing a concrete meaning on the text. Repetition, for Blanchot in 1949 as much as Derrida in 1971, and this includes critical interpretations of the literary work, is bound to alterity because it interrupts the self-identity of the same. Iterability is the condition of possibility of all language but its effect is heightened in the literary work by its ability to point to itself; it is such outward self-reflection that ensures *Les Chants de Maldoror* is flooded by these haunting beasts.

The closing chapter of *Thomas l'obscur*, in which Thomas takes a springtime walk through the countryside, is perhaps the most sustained engagement with the ‘natural’ world in Blanchot’s entire work, but this is not nature as we know it. This chapter demonstrates the extent to which Blanchot seeks to draw a parallel between the human and the animal as creatures inhabiting a world traversed by the outside. The animals described in this chapter are deprived of world: there are dragonflies without wings, blind toads and deaf cuckoos. Like the animals of the Rilkean Open, they live in ignorance of their mortality: the toads look to the future, the notion of perishing compels the pupa to become a butterfly, mayflies give the defiant impression that life will last forever. The backdrop is no richer: the sky is transparent and empty, trees bear no fruit, birds fly through nothingness, and an immense sea stretches out beneath Thomas’ feet. On first inspection, this scene could appear gloomy; but there is something overwhelmingly positive about Thomas’ walk through the countryside, where he exists harmoniously with these strange creatures: ‘Le printemps enveloppa Thomas comme une nuit étincelante et il se sentit doucement appelé par cette nature qui débordait de félicité.’¹⁶³ Even the stone, the inanimate object that Heidegger once sentenced to worldlessness, gains a world of its own in this joyous scene: ‘Une pierre roulait, et elle glissait à travers une infinité de métamorphoses dont l’unité était celle du monde dans sa splendeur. Au milieu de ces

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 274.

¹⁶³ Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur: nouvelle version* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 131.

frémissements, la solitude éclata.’¹⁶⁴ The weird and wonderful transformations of the stone and the animals mentioned above indicate the suspension of the familiar world and an exposure to something completely alien. They affirm the impossibility of dying for both human and animal, neither of whom are able to address death as a personal or individual experience because they are erased in this process. The concept of the subject, at least any sovereign subject, is here dismantled by Blanchot.

The mood of the chapter shifts as Thomas enters the town and encounters the humans who have raised themselves to the top of the hierarchy of beings: ‘Ils s’élevaient comme des astres, ravageant par leurs cours fortuit l’arrangement universel. Avec leurs mains aveugles, ils touchaient, pour les détruire, les mondes invisibles.’¹⁶⁵ The hands which appear here are concerned with action in the world: they reach out, touch and destroy from within their finite world. The hand that writes, conversely, never touches or grasps; it responds to the demand of the outside, reaches out to the other and suspends the world, opening up the abyss above which the poem hangs and creating a non-hierarchical society which favours no people or being. Thomas leads these ‘hommes-étoiles’ to the sea, in a literary experience comparable to his own in the first chapter, where they encounter the impossibility of dying: ‘se penchant sur la crypte, [ils] demeurèrent là, dans une profonde inertie, à attendre mystérieusement que la langue dont chaque prophète, au fond de sa gorge, a senti la naissance, sortît de la mer et leur poussât dans la bouche les mots impossibles.’¹⁶⁶ Unlike the animals compelled to transform when confronted with the impossibility of dying, these people await the arrival of a redemptive poetic language, akin to Heidegger’s *Sage*, which will save them from their forlorn state. This redemption never occurs; the impossible words never fill their mouths; and they do not die an authentic death. Instead, they are called back to the sea where this *récit* began, lured there by the promise of an ending which Thomas recognises will never arrive. The difference between animal and human is fragile in this closing chapter: both are condemned to interminably transform, to affirm the abyss above which they all hang when world is suspended.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 132. The later edition of *Thomas l’obscur* [1950] quoted here omits a few words from the earlier edition: ‘et bien qu’elle [la pierre] fût toujours comme une pierre’ (*Thomas l’obscur* [1941], p. 318). This omission signals a shift toward a much more fragile world.

¹⁶⁵ Blanchot, *Thomas l’obscur: nouvelle version*, p. 134.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

The opposition between *techne* and technology for Heidegger thus gives way in Blanchot's fiction and criticism to a very different experience of language: the mechanical. The experience of writing *Thomas l'obscur*, his first novel, prompted the evolution in Blanchot which sees him move away from a nationalist agenda and a Heideggerian understanding of literature as foundation and truth as revealing. For Heidegger the possibility of a new historic dwelling on earth for the German people is revealed through Hölderlin's mythic saying; Blanchot shifts from such a foundational view of literature through his engagement with Mallarmé, the poet of the abyss, and the recognition that literary language can take itself as object. Literature is founded on a ruinous impossibility — the bottomless abyss, the outside, the neuter, the *il y a* — which cannot be overcome and so writing is condemned to repeat what it cannot articulate: the experience of dying. There is no redemptive turn or event, only incessant exposure to the outside. The appearance of hands and animals in Blanchot signals the suspension of world, exposing its frailty, shaking the hierarchy holding such an isolated system in place to its very core, and creating non-hierarchical differences as opposed to a single hierarchical distinction between writer and man, man and animal. This mechanical, repetitive, impersonal, inhuman experience is therefore inseparable from the possibility of literature which does not reside in *alētheia*, but in radical errance. Such nomadism explains why Thomas is depicted as shepherd at the end of *Thomas l'obscur*, guiding the lost beings back to the sea to start again at the beginning (or the end).

What we encounter in Blanchot's writing is a strange environment beyond human control or understanding into which we may reach and meet, at the limits of the human, an inhuman resistance that can only be affirmed. Unlike Rilke, and subsequently Heidegger, Blanchot privileges neither animal nor human, but indicates a region where difference is maintained but released from an anthropocentric teleology. For Blanchot, writing cannot be enclosed within anthropological or anthropocentric mastery, which it challenges in the name of the other to which it gives voice. Perhaps at first, because of the urban climates which dominate his *récits*, Blanchot's thought seems irreconcilable with ecological thinking. His writing is almost bereft of references to landscapes of any sort: in his fictional work we occasionally glimpse the sea, a beach, a distant mountain range, but on the whole his characters are located within anonymous urban surroundings. On his green credentials,

Timothy Clark writes: 'Ultimately, Blanchot's work may adumbrate a thinking that meets one of the most urgent demands of post-enlightenment thought, that is, resources towards a re-enchantment of the natural world that would not at the same time be a kind of mystification, evasion or deception.'¹⁶⁷

While Clark accurately highlights a thinking of world that destabilises our traditional view of the environment, the description of this work as a 're-enchantment of the natural world' suggests a residual Romanticism. This is not a work that seeks to captivate in its presentation of the natural world, but to expose the impossibility of any such 'nature' which is always already contaminated by the technical. Earlier we saw that Heidegger is accused of presiding over the naturalisation of technology, where the tool or instrument exists simply for *Dasein* who alone discloses the world.¹⁶⁸ In Blanchot, hands transgress the presumed border between nature and technology, they are simultaneously what is most human and most inhuman. These hands are evidence of an unruly technology that is not subordinate to pre-technological ontological questioning, because it precedes and exceeds the human subject.

¹⁶⁷ Timothy Clark, 'A Green Blanchot: Impossible?', in *Blanchot's Epoch*, ed. by Leslie Hill and Michael Holland (= *Paragraph*, 30: 3 (November 2007)) pp. 121-40 (p. 123). See also Timothy Clark, 'Maurice Blanchot and the End of Nature', *Parallax*, 16: 2 (April 2010), 20-30.

¹⁶⁸ Bradley, pp. 68-93.

3

The Neuter and Modern Technology

The fluid animal forms in the fiction and criticism of the late 1940s, the recurring motif of hands, the impersonal and mechanical experience of language, the eternal repetition played out in his writing through the impossibility of dying, the silent reproduction of his texts: while Blanchot may not overtly discuss modes of ‘technique’ in his essay on Rilke, where Heidegger’s condemnation of technology looms in the background, or in other essays of this period, the traits listed above and explored in the previous chapter render his view of literature indissociable from an understanding of the complex relationship between the artwork and technology. Almost twenty years earlier, in 1936, Walter Benjamin had suggested that technological innovations could create a new experience of art past, present and future. Claiming that the ‘production’ of a unique work is but a special case in the reproducibility of works of art — imitation should not necessarily be considered in terms of an original and its replicas — Benjamin points to a new technological structure of experience:

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past

— a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.¹

Technology offers the potential for constant innovation through infinite transformation: if the borders of the work of art are permeable and open, then technology enables this constant becoming other of the work.² Technology may thus be considered an art of repetition. Much of what Benjamin says in this essay resonates with the view of the work of art offered in Blanchot's writing of the 1940s and early 1950s, yet Blanchot does not discuss in detail the technological, modes of technique, *techne* — however the somewhat ambiguous French term 'technique' should be translated or understood.

Significant appearances of the term 'technique' in essays first published in the 1950s will be traced in this chapter, before a consideration of essays from the early- to mid-1960s in which there is an explicit discussion of modern technologies such as the atomic bomb, space travel and the printing press. The neuter as a quasi-concept emerges in Blanchot's writing in 1958 and, this chapter will demonstrate, it is no coincidence that this is also when a discussion of technique, the technical, or the technological takes precedence in several essays.³ The neuter is a mode of *techne* (different from, but always implicated in, technologies of the modern kind) that makes art possible:

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004-06), III: 1935-1938 (2006), 101-33 (p. 104). This essay was first published in French in a translation by Klossowski in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5 (1936), 40-68. See Walter Benjamin, 'L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée', trans. by Pierre Klossowski, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-89), I (1974), 709-39. It is unclear whether Blanchot ever read this essay by Benjamin, although we do know that he was aware of his work from at least 1959 when he publishes a review of a translation of his selected works by Maurice de Gandillac; this review was later published in *L'Amitié* as 'Traduire' (pp. 69-73). This article was mainly concerned with Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' (a translation of which has been found in Blanchot's personal archives and is included in *Blanchot*, ed. by Hoppenot and Rabaté, pp. 55-56), but the essay quoted here was included in the same volume of translations and so we may speculate that Blanchot was aware, at some point in his career, of this essay. On Blanchot's engagement with Benjamin, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 429-30 n. 239.

² Howard Caygill provides a useful commentary of Benjamin's essay in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 97-117.

³ See Blanchot, 'L'Étrange et l'étranger', in *La Condition critique*, pp. 278-88 (p. 287 n. 1) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 70 (October 1958), 673-83). Christophe Bident notes that this is the first use of *Neutre* as noun in Blanchot's work in 'The Movements of the Neuter', in *After Blanchot: Literature, Philosophy, Criticism*, ed. by Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 13-34 (p. 33 n. 15).

Si l'art se définit et se constitue par sa distance à l'égard du monde, par *l'absence* de monde, il est naturel que tout ce qui met le monde en question, ce qu'on appelle d'un mot, devenu d'un usage si peu rigoureux, la transcendance, tout ce qui dépasse, nie, détruit, menace l'ensemble des relations stables, aisées, raisonnablement établies et soucieuses de durer, toutes ces puissances, qu'elles soient pures ou impures, proposées au 'salut' de l'homme ou à sa destruction, dans la mesure où elles font voler en éclats la validité du monde commun, travaillent pour l'art et lui ouvrent la voie, l'appellent.⁴

The call is the seductive form that these powers take here and in other fictional and critical works by Blanchot from this period. The origin and the destination of this call are the concern of Derrida in an analysis of the apocalyptic tone that has dominated Western philosophy since the time of Kant. Noting that apocalypse in the Hebrew Bible says discovery, disclosure, uncovering and unveiling, Derrida observes that any attempt to shed light on the apocalypse leads only to a further, brighter apocalypse which blinds; the apocalypse does not just destroy, it also unveils: 'toute eschatologie apocalyptique se promet au nom [...] d'une lumière plus lumineuse que toutes les lumières qu'elle rend possibles.'⁵ A deconstruction of such discourse (Derrida names, among others, Heidegger on the history of metaphysics, the essence of science or technology) must fold to [*se plier à*] (in the sense of giving in to and doubling over) the finest diversity of apocalyptic ruses.⁶ Any discourse on the apocalyptic risks becoming apocalyptic, but there is the suggestion that through such a folding, or doubling, it might be possible to derail the apocalyptic tone — to interrupt the unity of the destination,

⁴ Blanchot, 'Le Musée, l'art et le temps', in *L'Amitié*, p. 33 (first publ. in *Critique*, 43 (December 1950), 195-208; 44 (January 1951), 30-42).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), p. 63. In this text Derrida refers, implicitly and explicitly, to *L'Arrêt de mort* (the 'viens' of the closing line), *La Folie du jour*, *Le Dernier Homme* and 'L'Apocalypse déçoit', which suggests that Blanchot is of considerable importance to his thinking of the apocalypse. Derrida also recognises Blanchot's place in the debates of the 1950s on the end of history, which happened in the context of the end of communism, and provides a commentary of 'Les Trois Paroles de Marx' in *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp. 39-69. Also see Blanchot, 'Les Trois Paroles de Marx', in *L'Amitié*, pp. 115-17 (first publ. anonymously as 'Lire Marx', *Comité*, 1 (October 1968), 31).

⁶ Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique*, p. 66.

the self-identity of the addressee or sender — and to hear the other tone, or the tone of the other. ‘[I]l faudrait commencer par respecter cette démultiplication différentielle des voix et des tons qui les divise peut-être au-delà d’une pluralité distincte et calculable.’⁷ This chapter will endeavour to listen to the various apocalyptic tones in fiction and criticism of the 1950s and early 1960s to reveal a continuity between the experience of the technological and of the imaginary for Blanchot.

The selection, in an essay written for *La Part du feu* [1949], of a moment from Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* to show how between everyday language and the simple prose of a *récit* there is an important change in the ‘nature’ of language, reveals the unarticulated significance of the technical to Blanchot’s understanding of narrative: ‘le chef du bureau a téléphoné’.⁸ This is not a precise citation from *The Castle* but a paraphrase of a moment in the opening chapter; it assumes the origin of the phone call to be the head of the department, whereas in Kafka’s narrative the words of this figure are reported indirectly.⁹ Blanchot does not dwell on the significance of the telephone, but one must question why he selects and adapts this particular phrase. He explains that Kafka’s *récit* is symbolic, and not allegorical or mythical, because, in revealing our ignorance of this other world of *The Castle*

⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸ Blanchot here comes close to reinstating the opposition between the literary and the everyday, but the difference is one of degree and not of any essential nature. He writes that the phrase read in an office and read in *The Castle* has the same effect: in both cases language destroys the world by reducing it to abstraction, revealing a void. The difference is that everyday language encloses this absence within a presence (in the office: ‘Si novice que je sois, je suis pressé de toutes parts par la réalité et partout je l’atteins et la rencontre’ (pp. 80-81)), whereas literary language goes one step further by destroying this abstraction. As we saw in Chapter One, the literary is a radicalisation of the everyday by 1949 and so there is no solid opposing relationship between the literary and the everyday and the simplest, most mundane of phrases can be literary.

⁹ In the opening chapter the main character K. arrives in the village at the foot of the Castle and arranges to spend the night in the inn. He is asked to produce a permit, which he does not have, to prove that the Count is expecting his visit. The landlord rings the Castle. K. notes with some surprise that they have a telephone: ‘They had everything up to the mark’. The landlord is told by an assistant that no Land Surveyor is expected and hangs up, accusing K. of deception. ‘But the telephone rang again, and with a special insistence, it seemed to K. Slowly he put out his head. Although it was improbable that this message also concerned K. they all stopped short and Schwarzer took up the receiver once more. He listened to a fairly long statement, and then said in a low voice: “A mistake, is it? I’m sorry to hear that. The head of the department himself said so? Very queer, very queer. How am I to explain it all to the Land Surveyor?”’ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, additional material trans. by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, definitive edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), p. 15; *Das Schloss*, ed. by Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, [1963] 1983), p. 10. Blanchot, writing in the 1940s and 1950s, would have been reading early versions of the text edited by Max Brod and it is for this reason that I refer, where possible, to older German and English editions throughout this chapter (while the English translation is a later ‘definitive’ edition, the publisher’s note states that the original translation by Willa and Edwin Muir, which dates from 1930 and works from the first German edition of the text, is largely unchanged).

and of the Castle, which is to say in signifying nothing, it lays bare the void as the milieu of all imagined form; it is the reversal of the world in its totality through the imagination.¹⁰ Blanchot here echoes the account of the telephone call given by the Superintendent in *The Castle*: ‘You [K.] haven’t once up till now come into contact with our authorities. All those contacts of yours have been illusory, but owing to your ignorance of the circumstances you take them to be real.’¹¹ The account of *The Castle* given by Blanchot is apocalyptic because it is related to everything that puts the world and human existence in its totality in question, but it also disrupts our perspective by refusing knowledge.

La Technique

In ‘Le Musée, l’art et le temps’ [1950], a review of André Malraux’s *Le Musée imaginaire*, the technological is very much side-lined — where the term ‘technique’ is used it is to refer simply to the means by which an artistic work is expressed or performed (‘La peinture d’un paysage serait-elle un paysage réduit, transformé par le recours à la technique, rendu ainsi au désintéressement de l’art? Nullement, car la fin de la peinture serait alors de chercher à réduire cette réduction, comme, il va de soi, beaucoup d’écoles l’ont tenté avec peu d’honneur’), when reproduction is mentioned it is done in passing as Blanchot indicates a more pressing aspect of Malraux’s argument (‘Malraux sans doute ne pense pas avoir fait une découverte, quand il montre que, grâce au progrès de nos connaissances, par suite aussi de nos moyens de reproduction — mais aussi pour des raisons plus profondes —, les artistes, chaque artiste, disposent pour la première fois de l’art universel’).¹²

As with the essay responding in part to Heidegger’s reading of Rilke published just over two years later, the omission of the technical aspect to the discussion is perhaps surprising given that technology, the ability to reproduce and broadly disseminate works of art, is of some importance to Malraux’s *Musée imaginaire*: ‘Comme la lecture des drames en marge de leur représentation, comme l’audition des disques en marge du concert, s’offre en marge du musée le plus vaste domaine de

¹⁰ Blanchot, ‘Le Langage de la fiction’, in *La Part du feu*, pp. 80-91 (pp. 84-87) (this is one of the few essays not previously published elsewhere). On the difference between allegory, myth and symbol for Blanchot, see Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, pp. 74-79.

¹¹ Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 95; *Das Schloss*, p. 72.

¹² Blanchot, ‘Le Musée, l’art et le temps’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 29, 22.

connaissances artistiques que l'homme ait connu. Ce domaine — qui s'intellectualise tandis que l'inventaire et sa diffusion se poursuivent, et que les moyens de reproduction s'approchent de la fidélité — c'est, pour la première fois, l'héritage de toute l'histoire.'¹³ In this age of technological reproduction art is revealed for the first time as an autonomous whole in an eternal present; according to Malraux only recreated forms regain presence after death — artistic immortality. But the very condition on which this eternal 'presence' is based, argues Blanchot, is the absence of the everyday world of work and action; an absence which means that nothing is realised, achieved, attained, but rather infinitely repeated. This is the time not of eternity but of eternal recurrence, 'ce temps-espace qui nous saisit quand le monde s'éloigne'.¹⁴ Radically outside history, not simply to be thought of as eternity or timelessness, this time of absence renders the realisation of the work impossible:

Au sein de cette absence, les œuvres sont en perpétuelle dissolution et en perpétuel mouvement, n'étant chacune qu'un repère du temps, un moment du tout, moment qui cependant voudrait, et désespérément, être à lui seul ce tout en quoi seulement l'absence se repose sans repos. Et comme ce vœu est impossible, l'œuvre elle-même, prenant de plus en plus conscience de cette impossibilité, tend toujours plus à s'affirmer comme un signe pathétique, une flèche indicatrice fascinante, pointée vers l'impossible.¹⁵

Repetition is a characteristic of the work of art not because of the technological developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but because the work of art is premised on a ruinous absence. If repetition were not inherent in all artworks, it would be impossible to reproduce them — the possibility to reproduce precedes all reproduction.¹⁶ One may argue that Blanchot does not discuss

¹³ André Malraux, 'Le Musée imaginaire', in *Œuvres complètes*, 6 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1989-2010), IV: *Écrits sur l'art I*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié (2004), 201-332 (p. 240).

¹⁴ Blanchot, 'Le Musée, l'art et le temps', in *L'Amitié*, p. 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁶ The idea that there is no origin to repetition, that there is never a first time and that everything is therefore always a replica, is evident in essays collected in *L'Espace littéraire* which were also first published in the early 1950s: 'De ce qui est sans présent, de ce qui n'est même pas là comme ayant été, le caractère irrémédiable dit: cela n'a jamais eu lieu, jamais une première fois, et pourtant cela recommence, à nouveau, à nouveau, infiniment' ('La Solitude essentielle', in *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 26).

technology or methods of reproduction in this essay because to do so would be to suggest that there is something unique about the age of mechanical reproduction, to agree with Malraux that the *Musée imaginaire* emerges ‘for the first time’ in this age when in fact, in Blanchot’s account, the Museum is this nowhere beyond world which is always already there, which precedes and traverses the whole of history, work, world.

When art is understood as nothing historical, when its essence is perceived radically outside time, Malraux’s understanding of the artist as master comes undone. In Malraux’s account the drawings of a child or a madman cannot be art because these people are not masters of the craft; this mastery is steeped in history and artistic tradition: ‘Comment se développe toute vocation? Par l’imitation, la copie, jusqu’au moment où, à travers cette imitation passionnée des formes magistrales, l’artiste naissant se rend maître du secret plastique des œuvres et peu à peu [...] éprouve, crée, distingue son propre secret plastique, ce que Malraux appelle les “schèmes initiaux” de son art.’¹⁷ Malraux regards artistic development and mastery as a highly technical process, involving imitation and reproduction, through which the artist seeks the power to transform art through a certain style or technique. For Blanchot, on the other hand, for whom the repetition identified by Malraux is not the consequence of artistic endeavour or mastery but of the abyssal non-foundation of art, the child can be artist because of their ignorance of the world and the madman can be artist because he has lost the world. The Museum reveals the essence of artistic creation through the painter who transforms disordered colours on the palette into a great work, but also through the fortuitous sketch drawn by a hand of an unintentional artist.

Some sort of power is implied in this Museum — and some sort of technology as an anonymous hand (*une main* and not *la main*) hovers over the work, retaining a ghostly presence in Blanchot’s discussion — but this ‘power’ is other-worldly: not the power [*pouvoir*] of conquest, mastery, technology, but the impersonal force [*puissance exemplaire*] emanating from the abyss (the use of ‘exemplaire’ [‘exemplary’ but also ‘copy’ or ‘specimen’] implies that this power is the source of the reproduction or repetition that enables Malraux’s Museum).¹⁸

¹⁷ Blanchot, ‘Le Musée, l’art et le temps’, in *L’Amitié*, p. 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 34.

L'absence de temps que désignerait l'art fait seulement allusion à ce pouvoir que nous avons de mettre fin au monde, de nous tenir avant ou après le monde [...], pouvoir qui est peut-être une souveraineté, mais qui s'affirme aussi dans toutes les situations où l'homme renonce à se maîtriser, accepte de ne pas se ressaisir. C'est pourquoi l'art est lié à tout ce qui met l'homme en danger, à tout ce qui le place violemment hors du monde, hors de la sécurité et de l'intelligence du monde auquel seul l'avenir appartient.¹⁹

The power of man to end the world is affirmed in those moments when man is powerless; it is affirmed in the *Musée imaginaire* where man has conquered the world through art but equally where the individual artist now relinquishes all power to this impersonal Museum standing outside of the relationship between conquest and the work.

It may seem unusual that a figure such as Malraux, the first and only Minister for Culture during De Gaulle's presidency, appears in a book entitled *L'Amitié* published years after Blanchot's transition from right-wing nationalist to left-wing radical. The political paths of Blanchot and Malraux cross and diverge as they head in different directions following the Second World War — Malraux moves from his pre-war pro-communist stance towards a nationalism that would see him become a key figure in De Gaulle's government as Blanchot moves in the opposite direction, the latter's shift being most clearly signalled in a 1946 article on Malraux's Spanish Civil War novel *L'Espoir* [1937], in which he praises the Republican Popular Front forces he had once criticized.²⁰ While there are radical differences between the two writers, what they share and what explains the presence of Malraux's name here and at the end of *L'Instant de ma mort* is an experience of the imminence but impossibility of death: both narrowly escaped execution during the war as recounted by Blanchot in the aforementioned text and by Malraux in *Antimémoires*.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

²⁰ Blanchot, 'L'Espoir d'André Malraux', in *La Condition critique*, pp. 45-53 (first publ. in *L'Espagne libre*, ed. by Georges Bataille (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1946), pp. 106-11).

²¹ See Maurice Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994; Paris: Gallimard, 2002); and André Malraux, *Œuvres complètes*, III, ed. by Marius-François Guyard (1996), pp. 11-12, 160-62. Leslie Hill

What emerges from this ‘staged execution’ for Malraux is the notion of the imaginary museum (around this time, just as Blanchot had a manuscript confiscated in 1944, Malraux lost the beginnings of what would later become *Les Voix du silence*), that domain of artistic immortality in which the work overcomes death and time. The end of art, for Malraux, is myth and its purpose is the salvation of man, civilisation and history. Malraux’s imaginary museum, tied up as it is with his near-death experience, appeals in some respects to Blanchot, who nonetheless diverges from the view that death and time can ever be overcome.²² The impossibility of dying means that for Blanchot the imaginary museum can never be present or subject to any teleology. Blanchot and Malraux therefore share an encounter with death, but head in different directions as a result both literarily and politically.

Leslie Hill explores how the divergence between these two writers is used by Godard at the end of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* — who quotes (with some alterations) from ‘Le Musée, l’art et le temps’ — to explore the relationship between cinema and death: ‘Like death, [the image] makes clear; but like death it also brings the human world to a realisation of its endless, unmasterable impotence.’²³ The darkness that precedes the image renders the completion of the imaginary museum and the history of cinema impossible because it affirms the excess of textuality, image, or sound which makes the repetition or reproduction of artworks, and so these two projects, possible in the first place. The impersonal force felt through Malraux’s imaginary museum is thus impossible death, enabling reproduction but denying any finality: ‘[En l’image] s’avance cette sombre impuissance privée de maître, qui est celle de la mort comme recommencement.’²⁴

Three years later, in 1953, Blanchot summarises our view of art in the technological world [*le monde de la technique*] of the Museum and libraries: ‘Apparemment, l’art n’est rien s’il n’est

notes the ‘oddly chiasmic relationship’ between the political paths of Blanchot and Malraux, in *Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 189-91 n. 17.

²² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, while noting the convergence between these two figures, argues that in citing Malraux’s name at the end of *L’Instant de ma mort* Blanchot is attempting to free himself from the mythical with all of its political associations, in *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable: sur Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), pp. 63-90.

²³ Leslie Hill, ‘“A Form that Thinks”: Godard, Blanchot, Citation’, in *Forever Godard*, ed. by Michael Temple, James S. Williams and Michael Witt (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), pp. 396-415 (pp. 410-15).

²⁴ Blanchot, ‘Le Musée, l’art et le temps’, in *L’Amitié*, p. 51.

souverain.²⁵ Blanchot notes that it was around 1850 that the work of art is seen to have assumed this autonomy. Perhaps this date marks the beginning of the technological era — it roughly coincides with Baudelaire's essay 'La Modernité' in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* [1863], which was so important for Benjamin, and it is the moment too when photography is invented — but Blanchot does not say as much. He notes that there were writers and artists who fought against the perceived autonomy of the artwork, attempting to ensure their own status as creators. Mallarmé and Cézanne, on the other hand, did not frivolously react to historical tasks and goals in an attempt to save art from some technological onslaught, understanding that art precedes all history: 'l'art ne nie pas le monde moderne, ni celui de la technique, ni l'effort de libération et de transformation qui prend appui sur cette technique, mais il exprime et peut-être accomplit des rapports qui *précèdent* tout accomplissement objectif et technique.'²⁶ The result is not the complete disappearance of the artist in exchange for a sovereign art: the artwork stands radically outside history but is not aesthetically autonomous because, rather than giving itself its own rule, it challenges the rule. Art — literature — becomes a question and the artist is the powerless conqueror whose task it is to respond to the impossible.

The relationship between Ulysses and the Sirens in 'Le Chant des Sirènes' [1954], later included as the opening essay of *Le Livre à venir* with the title 'La Rencontre de l'imaginaire', provides an oblique insight into the power relationship between the technical and the work of art for Blanchot. Of Homer's narration of the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens — Ulysses who ordered his men to tie him to the boat's mast and not to release him under any circumstance so that he may hear the Sirens without succumbing to their call, which results in the Sirens throwing themselves

²⁵ Blanchot, 'La Disparition de la littérature', in *Le Livre à venir*, pp. 265-74 (p. 266) (first publ. as 'Où va la littérature?', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 7 (July 1953), 98-103).

²⁶ Blanchot, 'La Disparition de la littérature', in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 268, Blanchot's emphasis. A similar point is made in the essay which follows this when collected in *Le Livre à venir* (originally published two months later in September 1953): 'bien avant les inventions de la technique, l'usage des ondes et l'appel des images, il eût suffi d'entendre les affirmations de Hölderlin, de Mallarmé, pour découvrir la direction et l'étendue de ces changements dont nous nous persuadons aujourd'hui sans surprise. La poésie, l'art, pour en venir à eux-mêmes, ont, par un mouvement auquel les temps ne sont pas étrangers, mais par des exigences propres qui ont donné forme à ce mouvement, projeté et affirmé des bouleversements bien plus considérables que ceux dont, sur un autre plan, nous percevons maintenant, dans la commodité quotidienne, les formes impressionnantes' ('La Recherche du point zéro', pp. 275-76). I discuss both of these essays again in Chapter Four.

into the depths in grief and despair — Blanchot writes: ‘Les Sirènes vaincues par le pouvoir de la technique qui toujours prétendra jouer sans péril avec les puissances irréelles (inspirées), Ulysse n’en fut cependant pas quitte.’²⁷ Ulysses and his tools may foretell the dominion of modern technology,²⁸ but worldly technical power [*pouvoir*] does not overcome the other-worldly call [*puissance*] in this encounter as the struggle endures beyond the Sirens’ disappearance. From their tomb the Sirens continue to call out to Ulysses. Blanchot states that the novel is born from this struggle between the *récit* and the encounter with the Sirens; the *récit* become novel is an exploration whose destination is never articulated.

The novel mediates what was once immediate; although this is itself misleading because the encounter with the Sirens never takes place in the here and now.²⁹ The *récit* is the event that, because always arriving, never arrives, simultaneously marking and crossing a limit. A similar failed experience is recounted in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (Blanchot writes that both encounters represent a metaphysical struggle) but this is a different sort of failure, one that does not deny the impossibility of the limit. Ulysses claims to restrict his power [*pouvoir*], ‘de rechercher froidement et avec calcul ce qu’il peut encore, face à l’autre puissance. Il sera tout, s’il maintient une limite et cet intervalle entre le réel et l’imaginaire que précisément le Chant des Sirènes l’invite à parcourir.’³⁰ He is comparable to those artists discussed in ‘La Disparition de la littérature’ who succumb to the demands of their age; he stamps his cold and technical authority on the narrative and, by maintaining

²⁷ Blanchot, ‘La Rencontre de l’imaginaire’, in *Le Livre à venir*, pp. 9-18 (p. 11) (first publ. as ‘Le Chant des Sirènes’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 19 (July 1954), 95-104).

²⁸ Vivian Liska makes this point in a comparison of the accounts of the Sirens given by Blanchot and Adorno. Liska’s claim that the transformation of the song into prose is the triumph of the Sirens according to Blanchot, as the *Odyssey* becomes the space in which the world is swallowed up by the *récit* that it contains, is questionable, because implied in this interpretation is a view of literature as autonomous, suggested elsewhere in the essay by references to the temporality of myth. Liska is reading Blanchot from the perspective of Adorno, for whom literature in modernity was autonomous as a protest against capitalism and a retreat from history. See Vivian Liska, ‘Two Sirens Singing: Literature as Contestation in Maurice Blanchot and Theodor W. Adorno’, in *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*, ed. by Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 80-100. Ahab was described by Blanchot in 1941 as bearing witness to an invisible order (myth), but by 1954 what matters is the endless confrontation between the real and the imaginary. The *récit* is possible only as an impossible effort.

²⁹ Ian Maclachlan presents the encounter of the Sirens provided by Blanchot as a ‘temporal quandary’ in *Marking Time: Derrida, Blanchot, Beckett, des Forêts, Klossowski, Laporte* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 73-79.

³⁰ Blanchot, ‘La Rencontre de l’imaginaire’, in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 16.

his distance from this ‘autre puissance’, he makes the world firmer, surer, but poorer. Ahab, in contrast, the captain of the ship dragged into the depths by the lure of the whale at the end of *Moby Dick*, is lost in the image of this encounter: ‘Achab ne se retrouve pas et, pour Melville lui-même, le monde menace sans cesse de s’enfoncer dans cet espace sans monde vers lequel l’attire la fascination d’une seule image.’³¹ *Moby Dick*, once described by Blanchot in 1941 in mythical terms as the written equivalent of the universe, a description which now evokes Malraux’s version of the imaginary museum, is seen thirteen years later as a space of confrontation and merger between the real and the imaginary.³² The contestation of this limit is felt by Melville, for whom, Blanchot writes, the world ceaselessly threatens to sink into this worldless space. The difference between these two experiences may be attributed to the role of the technical: ‘Mais il est clair que le roman, s’il manque aujourd’hui à ce rôle, c’est que la technique a transformé le temps des hommes et leurs moyens d’en être divertis.’³³

It is thanks to ‘la technique’ that Ulysses is deprived of the rich possibilities of Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Homer remains entrenched in the world where the artist is master. Is Blanchot setting art and technology in opposition to one another in this essay? The two descriptions given of the Sirens’ song indicate that art and technology are mutually implicated:

De quelle nature était le chant des Sirènes? en quoi consistait son défaut? pourquoi ce défaut le rendait-il si puissant? Les uns ont toujours répondu: c’était un chant inhumain — un bruit naturel sans doute (y en a-t-il d’autres?), mais en marge de la nature, de toute manière étranger à l’homme, très bas et éveillant en lui ce plaisir extrême de tomber qu’il ne peut satisfaire dans les conditions normales de la vie. Mais, disent les autres, plus étrange était l’enchantement: il ne faisait que reproduire le chant habituel des hommes, et parce que les Sirènes qui n’étaient que des bêtes, fort belles à cause du reflet de la beauté féminine, pouvaient chanter comme

³¹ Ibid.

³² See Chapter One where I discuss Blanchot’s mythical reading of *Moby Dick* in ‘Le Secret de Melville’, an essay originally published in the *Journal des débats* in 1941 and later collected in *Faux pas*.

³³ Blanchot, ‘La Rencontre de l’imaginaire’, in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 13.

chantent les hommes, elles rendaient le chant si insolite qu'elles faisaient naître en celui qui l'entendait le soupçon de l'inhumanité de tout chant humain.³⁴

The difference between these two interpretations is fragile. The point is that the song is both natural and technical, a reproduction of an always forgotten original, and simultaneously what is most human and most inhuman. Blanchot is perhaps reflecting on Heidegger's famous claim that the essence of technology is nothing technological, made at the beginning of 'The Question Concerning Technology' [1953] and repeated in *What is Called Thinking?* [1954], where it is added that nor is this essence anything human:

For the essence of technology is not anything human [*ist nichts Menschliches*]. The essence of technology is above all not anything technological [*ist vor allem nichts Technisches*]. The essence of technology lies in what from the beginning and before all else gives food for thought [*was einsther und vor allem anderen zu denken gibt*]. It might then be advisable, at least for the time being, to talk and write less about technology, and give more thought to where its essence lies, so that we might find a way to it. The essence of technology pervades our existence [*unser Dasein*] in a way which we have barely noticed so far. This is why in the preceding lecture, precisely at a juncture which almost demanded a reference to the technological world, we kept silent about technology.³⁵

Blanchot, also writing in 1954, may be suggesting something similar: the essence of technology, which enables the repetition or the reproduction of the artwork and the retelling of this story, is located in the abyss from which the call of the Sirens and the whale emanates. To listen carefully to this call is to hear a tone that differs from the usual apocalyptic foretelling of technology. The technical as writing, the technical thought in its relation to writing, is no longer monotonal; in it we hear a shifting multiplicity.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

³⁵ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, pp. 22-23; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 25.

Two years later in 1956, there is a shift to a more explicit discussion of technology in Blanchot's essay on Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*. This self-consciously literary and autobiographical text considers the para-philosophical status of anthropology and ethnography as a key 'science humaine'. It is the status of Lévi-Strauss's writing as a self-reflexive questioning of human knowledge, straddling the scientific and the non-scientific, which appeals to Blanchot, who argues that the ethnographer's project is more interesting than the scientific technicity of Einstein and Oppenheimer.³⁶

The precarious status of technology is evident throughout *Tristes tropiques*, as Lévi-Strauss recognises that the tools and technological advancements that have enabled ethnographers to access their objects of study have simultaneously wiped-out these people. This is a condition he sees repeated throughout civilization: '[l'homme] apparaît lui-même comme une machine, peut-être plus perfectionnée que les autres, travaillant à la désagrégation d'un ordre originel et précipitant une matière puissamment organisée vers une inertie toujours plus grande et qui sera un jour définitive.'³⁷ The paradoxical position of the ethnographer and the uncertain status of technology is stressed early in Blanchot's discussion as he notes that the successes of the modern world carry the ethnographer to the limits of the earth [*jusqu'aux confins de la terre*] where the object of study is promptly transformed or destroyed: 'L'ethnographe est le trouble compagnon de l'impérialisme qui lui donne d'une main et, de l'autre, lui retire sa science et l'objet de sa science.'³⁸ The hands of the ethnographer are comparable to the hands of the writer: one hand accepts the gift of imperialism and reaches worldly limitations thanks to technical prowess, like the hands of those humans at the end of *Thomas l'obscur* it destroys invisible worlds; the other hand can never grasp the object of study, like the hand hanging over the suppressed third section of *L'Arrêt de mort* unable to either hold or put down the pen it is assigned an impossible task.³⁹ The ethnography of Lévi-Strauss undoubtedly bears

³⁶ Blanchot, 'L'Homme au point zéro', in *L'Amitié*, pp. 87-97 (pp. 87-89) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 40 (April 1956), 683-94).

³⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), p. 478.

³⁸ Blanchot, 'L'Homme au point zéro', in *L'Amitié*, p. 89.

³⁹ I discussed the role of hands in *Thomas l'obscur*, *L'Arrêt de mort* and *L'Espace littéraire* in the final section of the previous chapter. In 'L'Homme au point zéro' Blanchot comments that it is naive to believe that 'le développement de la technique suffira à nous mettre en main la solution de toutes les difficultés qu'elle suscite' (pp. 96-97). The hand left wanting, forever waiting for a solution or an end, is the hand that writes.

literary traits for Blanchot as his work leads to the imaginary in its search for the impossible origin; but implied here is also a technicity which Blanchot recognises and cautiously praises, noting that Lévi-Strauss's ambition to return to the source of the human is not merely a nostalgia for a more natural and simple humanity which would avoid 'cette dénaturation que la puissance technique poursuivrait inlassablement.'⁴⁰

In Lévi-Strauss's account there is a universal human logic found everywhere, what may be thought of as a technology of sorts running through all societies. This is clearly argued in his conclusion quoted above and is evidenced specifically in his discussion of the art of so-called 'primitive' societies. Take, for instance, his consideration of the face-paintings of the Caduveo: 'Les peintures de visage confère d'abord à l'individu sa dignité d'être humain; elles opèrent le passage de la nature à la culture, de l'animal "stupide" à l'homme civilisé. Ensuite, différentes quant au style et à la composition selon les castes, elles expriment dans une société complexe la hiérarchie des statuts. Elles possèdent ainsi une fonction sociologique.'⁴¹ These face-paintings have a meaning and therefore function as a form of writing. When Blanchot comments that a nostalgic view of these peoples is to some extent avoided in *Tristes tropiques*, it is because Lévi-Strauss recognises that technology is not something belated or reserved for the modern world but is already there in 'primitive' societies as a form of writing. This is the point on which Blanchot's essay focuses in the concluding paragraph:

C'est donc en quelque sorte l'indigence du monde de la technique qui en fait la vérité, et sa grande vertu — intellectuelle — n'est pas de nous enrichir, mais de nous dépouiller. Monde barbare, sans respect, sans humanité. Il nous vide atrocement de tout ce que nous aimons et aimons être, nous chasse du bonheur de nos refuges, du faux-semblant de nos vérités, détruit ce à quoi nous appartenons et parfois détruit lui-même. Effrayante épreuve. Mais cette contestation, précisément parce qu'elle nous laisse pauvres de tout, sauf de la puissance, nous donne peut-être aussi la chance qui accompagne toute rupture: quand on est contraint de

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴¹ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, p. 220.

renoncer à soi, il faut périr ou commencer, périr afin de recommencer. Tel serait alors le sens de la tâche que représente le mythe de l'homme sans mythe: l'espoir, l'angoisse et l'illusion de l'homme au point zéro.⁴²

When led beyond our shelter and exposed to an inhuman and barbaric new place by technology, it becomes evident that the human subject is universally constituted by a different mode of technique ('elle nous laisse pauvres de tout, sauf de la puissance'), expressed here as an aimless and impersonal power which succeeds only in reproduction: writing. The achievement of *Tristes tropiques*, according to Blanchot, is the laying bare of *techne* as art.

Originally published six years after 'Le Musée, l'art et le temps', 'Le Mal du musée' [1957] begins by placing clear emphasis on the technological aspect of the debate surrounding Malraux's *Musée imaginaire*, 'que le perfectionnement de la technique de la reproduction enrichit sans cesse avec une générosité prodigieuse'.⁴³ The names of other writers, critics, thinkers also figure prominently in the opening pages of this essay: the famous German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, the art historian Georges Duthuit, Plato, Heidegger and Socrates. Each of these names represents a desire to link writing or art to presence, either in the 'eternal present' of Malraux, in the wholly accessible and reproducible literature of Curtius,⁴⁴ in the reality of a past conceived by Duthuit, or as the spoken language with its living and breathing source extolled by Plato, Socrates and Heidegger. Over the course of this essay Blanchot builds a rebuttal to all of these views through an understanding of art as *techne*. 'Ce n'est pas par hasard que ce qui se donne pour "pure présence", se fige aussitôt et se stabilise dans une permanence sans vie et dans l'éternité pourrissante d'un vide solennel et indifférent.'⁴⁵ This sentence (quoted above as it appears in *L'Amitié* [1971]) read in the first version of the essay published in 1957: 'Ce n'est pas par hasard que ce qui est pure présence,

⁴² Blanchot, 'L'Homme au point zéro', in *L'Amitié*, p. 97.

⁴³ Blanchot, 'Le Mal du musée', in *L'Amitié*, pp. 52-61 (p. 52) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 52 (April 1957), 687-96).

⁴⁴ See the first chapter of Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 3-16.

⁴⁵ Blanchot, 'Le Mal du musée', in *L'Amitié*, p. 61.

rigoureuse lumière, se fige aussitôt [...].'⁴⁶ Displaced by inverted commas in an instance of typographical technique, the words 'pure présence' are withdrawn as Blanchot denies presence more radically in the amended version of the essay, suggesting that art was never present in the first place. There are two further notable changes made to the essay for publication in *L'Amitié*: 'Privées du monde, les œuvres du Musée? livrées à l'insécurité d'une absence pure', had previously read, '[...] livrées à l'insécurité d'une présence pure'; and the phrase 'à l'interrogation de l'art', had previously read, 'à la vérité de l'art'.⁴⁷ Presence becomes absence and the status of art is obscured as truth becomes questioning. At work here is the neuter as a neutralizing and displacing technique; while more pronounced in 1971, its effect is still palpable in the original version of the essay as Blanchot recognises that techniques of reproduction have indeed enriched the imaginary museum, but only in a way that serves to create an ungraspable, unachievable, uncontrollable excess that is never present — the possibility of reproduction precedes all world and the machine functions 'comme hors de la durée'.⁴⁸

The precarious status of technology as both destructive and enabling power is central to Blanchot's 1957 critique of the imaginary museum: 'La technique nous donne l'art, comme elle nous donne la terre, la possession de tout et l'accès à tout, par un pouvoir de domination qui effraie les uns, anime les autres, mais ne peut être arrêté par personne.'⁴⁹ What technology gives with one hand it withdraws with the other: we do not experience works in the time or setting in which they were produced, for which they were intended, and the imaginary museum therefore achieves only the illusion of presence, the experience of the 'non-present presence' of art. *For the first time*, Blanchot writes, all works become available to us, no longer sheltered within our world, but without shelter and as if without world.⁵⁰ A subtle shift has occurred in Blanchot's thinking since he first wrote about the imaginary museum in 1951: the impact of technology is more palpable by 1957 and closely related to the work of art. Technology as a power belonging to the human becomes disobedient *techne* beyond

⁴⁶ Blanchot, 'Le Mal du musée', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 696.

⁴⁷ Blanchot, 'Le Mal du musée', in *L'Amitié*, p. 60; *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, pp. 695-96.

⁴⁸ Blanchot, 'Le Mal du musée', in *L'Amitié*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60, my emphasis.

our control which allows the possibility of art, literature, language. Blanchot, unusually, refers to one of his earlier essays in a footnote: 'La Bête de Lascaux' [1953].

This essay is a pre-Derridean attempt, against Plato, to link the disobedience of writing to the possibility of the artwork.⁵¹ 'Le savoir impersonnel du livre', Blanchot writes, '[...] est lié au développement de la technique sous toutes les formes et il fait de la parole, de l'écriture, une technique.'⁵² This impersonal knowledge linking all techniques is impossible death: that force enabling reproduction but denying any finality. All techniques reveal an end void of significance. What distinguishes writing from other techniques is that it harnesses this side of power beyond human control:

Toute parole commençante, bien qu'elle soit le mouvement le plus doux et le plus secret, est, parce qu'elle nous devance infiniment, celle qui ébranle et qui exige le plus: tel le plus tendre lever du jour en qui se déclare toute la violence d'une première clarté, et telle la parole oraculaire qui ne dicte rien, qui n'oblige en rien, qui ne parle même pas, mais fait de ce silence le doigt impérieusement fixé vers l'inconnu.⁵³

Blanchot glosses Heraclitus in this extract to argue that this language does not reveal and conceal, it is not bound to the visible and the invisible, and therefore is not subject to Heideggerian *aletheia*. This language does not dictate future events, nor does it not rely on any truth, pre-existent language, or indeed anything which already is: 'Il annonce parce qu'il commence. Il *indique* l'avenir, parce qu'il ne parle pas encore, langage du futur, en cela qu'il est lui-même comme un langage futur, qui toujours se devance, n'ayant son sens et sa légitimité qu'en avant de soi, c'est-à-dire foncièrement injustifié.'⁵⁴ Suggested here is the possibility that, by listening to that other tone, to the silence which accompanies the violence of the first speech, we may hear that radical otherness announced in this forever deferred

⁵¹ See Derrida, 'La Pharmacie de Platon', in *La Dissémination*, pp. 69-197.

⁵² Blanchot, 'La Bête de Lascaux', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 684.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 687.

beginning. The next section of this chapter will consider what writing as *techne* may have to say to technology of the modern kind.

Writing as *techne* and Modern Technology

The 1950s was a tumultuous decade for France: not only was the Cold War building beyond its borders, driving France to make the decision to arm itself with nuclear weapons in 1954 with the first French tests taking place in 1961, there was the crisis and subsequent collapse of the Fourth Republic in 1958, caused in large part by the intensification of the Algerian War, which prompted De Gaulle's controversial return to power. Blanchot did not distance himself from such events; he moved back to Paris from Èze in 1958 and resumed an active interest in politics no longer as a right-wing nationalist, as had been the case in the 1930s, but alongside Dionys Mascolo as a member of the radical non-communist left. He openly contested De Gaulle's government in publications such as *Le 14 Juillet*,⁵⁵ and fiercely opposed the Algerian War, being one of the principal authors and signatories of what became known as the 'Manifeste des 121'.⁵⁶

Beyond such political upheavals, great social change was also taking place in France with the growth of mass culture, as Roland Barthes documents in *Mythologies* [1957]. The Livre de poche collection was launched by the Librairie Générale Française, releasing its first title in 1953; this collection made popular novels available to the masses at a low cost by reproducing them in small paperback format. Mass culture and the impact of technology on the work of art had already been scrutinized in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936]; however, the publication of *Mythologies* and the appearance and subsequent translation into French of Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology' [1953], *What is Called Thinking?* [1954] and *Off the Beaten Track* [1950], containing 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and

⁵⁵ See, for instance, 'Le Refus' and 'La Perversion essentielle', in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 27-29, 31-41 (first publ. respectively in *Le 14 Juillet*, 2 (25 October 1958), 3; 3 (18 June 1959), 18-20).

⁵⁶ Bident provides an overview of Blanchot's response in 1958 to De Gaulle's return to power and his contribution to the 'Manifeste des 121' in 1960 in *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, pp. 376-87, 391-402. The manifesto is included in Blanchot, *Écrits politiques*, pp. 49-54.

‘Why Poets?’, in 1958, 1959 and 1962 respectively ensured that technological developments remained a concern of philosophical and literary circles of the period.

The implications of paperback publishing in mid-twentieth-century France were questioned in 1964 by the art-historian Hubert Damisch who denounced the format, arguing that rather than offering cultural democratization it transformed the contestatory book into an everyday consumer commodity and therefore neutralized its revolutionary potential. The inclusion in the original article of an epigraph from Heidegger’s ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ left Damisch’s position open to the accusation that he was simply taking up a traditional stance against writing and the dangers of technology.⁵⁷ In the midst of the wide-ranging debate which ensued and citing Damisch’s article in his own essay, Blanchot explicitly welcomed the new paperback format⁵⁸ whilst recognising that the potential for the wider diffusion of works and the cultural change that this implied was in fact not realised: those who bought paperbacks were often the relatively well-off middle classes, not all texts were available in paperback form, and the driving motivation for the publishing industry was profit.⁵⁹

According to Blanchot, the ideology of progress seemingly represented by the affordable paperback and advancing technology masks a capitalist ideology which seeks the appeasement of the people; the mass production and diffusion of the scandalous works of Trotsky and Sade helps to normalize and institutionalize what was revolutionary about their writing while giving the general public the false impression that access to culture is universal and unlimited.

Il n’y a rien à dire contre la technique. Mais ce qui frappe dans son emploi, c’est à nouveau l’idéologie qu’il recouvre et qui fournit au livre de poche sa signification de base, sa moralité: la technique règle tous les problèmes, le problème de la culture et de sa diffusion, comme tous

⁵⁷ See Hubert Damisch, ‘La Culture de poche’, in *Ruptures/Cultures* (Paris: Minuit, 1976), pp. 57-73 (first publ. in *Mercure de France*, 1213 (November 1964), 482-98). Douglas Smith compares the positions of Blanchot and Damisch in ‘The Burning Library: Hubert Damisch, Maurice Blanchot, and the “Paperback Revolution”’, unpublished article.

⁵⁸ ‘Et, bien sûr, il faut se réjouir d’un tel succès. Comment ne pas souhaiter ce qui développe la diffusion des grandes (et des petites) œuvres? [...] Donc, réjouissons-nous, mais ne soyons pas tout à fait naïfs. La littérature de poche fonctionne comme un mythe, un petit mythe tapageur et avantageux’ (Blanchot then goes on to cite Barthes’ *Mythologies*). Blanchot, ‘Les Grands Réducteurs’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 74-86 (p. 81) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 148 (April 1965), 676-86).

⁵⁹ Blanchot, ‘Les Grands Réducteurs’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 81-82.

les autres, nul besoin de bouleversements politiques, encore moins de changements dans les structures sociales; il suffit de reproduire les œuvres, d'une manière flatteuse et à un prix apparemment modeste, pour qu'elles aient libre cours (cependant dans les limites bien déterminées du marché capitaliste) pour que tous puissent les assimiler, se les approprier dans ce qu'elles ont d'unique [...].⁶⁰

Modern technology is not going to solve any problems; it is not the enabler of progress but the servant of capitalist ideology. In stark contrast, literature is essentially contestatory power: 'contestation du pouvoir établi, contestation de ce qui est (et du fait d'être), contestation du langage et des formes du langage littéraire, enfin contestation d'elle-même comme pouvoir.'⁶¹ While cultural forces may attempt to pacify turbulent works by incorporating them into the whole, transforming them into mere entertaining morsels through the printing press and the television, a structure of exclusion always persists and it is the changeable outside ensured by this structure which we experience through literature.

The contrast between technology and literature that emerges in this essay is, however, not as unambiguous as it may first appear. 'Comment ne pas se rendre compte que, s'il y a dans la culture humaniste une puissance de conformité et une proposition d'accommodement [...], ce n'est pas à coups de revolver qu'on la limitera, mais au contraire en la développant, en la précipitant, de manière à transformer en un processus explosif le système de freinage et d'arrêt qui la constitue?'⁶² Blanchot does not condemn the paperback or indeed the technology which has driven this so-called revolution ('Il n'y a rien à dire contre la technique'). His argument is that we should not limit the power behind cultural assimilation but that we should push it to the extreme limit, to the point of explosion where the system cannot maintain the limits it has imposed. There seems to be a convergence of technology at the very limits of its power and literature as contestation in this essay, although the relation is not wholly elucidated here. Writing laid bare as *techne* reveals that side of technology which is not about

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 80.

⁶² Ibid., p. 81.

capitalist progress; to this other side of technology beyond human control Blanchot gives the name the neuter. The remainder of this chapter will explore how the relationship between these two modes of technique, stemming from the same abyssal source, is played out in Blanchot's writing.

The worldly tremors which had induced Blanchot's return to Paris and politics at the end of the 1950s coincide with the emergence of the neuter as a noun in his writing in 1958 and a sustained rejection of the idea of the artwork as an autonomous whole entirely subject to aesthetic rules and norms. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the limits of human knowledge were facing unprecedented challenges as the atomic bomb threatened devastation, as Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space, as the mass reproduction of the artwork through the printing press and photography intensified with the launch of the *Livre de poche* collection. An essay of 1960 heralds the arrival of a new era — that of *la technique moderne* — in which total human destruction seems possible.

In this essay, 'Entretien sur un changement d'époque', Blanchot demonstrates how cultural forces attempt to rein in the significance of modern technology: while some argue that the power of the bomb can be used for peaceful purposes such as nuclear energy, many scientists see this as a mere alibi and are quick to highlight the infinite possibilities awarded to the human through atomic energy and the impending catastrophe that this implies.

La bombe est un avertissement visible de la menace invisible que toute la technique moderne dirige contre les façons de l'homme. Un chimiste américain, Stanley, un Prix Nobel (cela s'entend), a fait cette déclaration: 'Le moment est proche où la vie ne sera plus dans la main de Dieu, mais dans celle du chimiste qui à son gré modifiera, édifiera ou détruira toute substance vivante.' De telles déclarations, faites par des hommes de responsabilité, on en lit tous les jours, on les lit parmi les autres nouvelles du journal, avec négligence, avec amusement, sans voir que par la puissance de la technique moderne se prépare une attaque en comparaison de laquelle l'explosion des bombes signifie peu de chose.⁶³

⁶³ Blanchot, 'Sur un changement d'époque: l'exigence du retour', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 394-418 (p. 403) (first publ. as 'Entretien sur un changement d'époque', *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 88 (April 1960), 724-34).

Wendell Stanley's statement may once have been terrifying, but today this warning has been defused by cultural forces; regularly disseminated far and wide by the press, the threat posed by nuclear energy is reduced to a mere diversion. The idea, however, that nuclear power represents infinite human possibility, whether exploited for peaceful or belligerent purposes, is a mystification. The explosion of the bombs pales in comparison to the real threat posed through modern technology: 'Qu'il y ait Dieu ou qu'il y ait atome, tout ne dépend pas de l'homme précisément.'⁶⁴ The human is not master of his or her destiny: this is what the change of epoch indicates through the atomic bomb. Perhaps Stanley's error was formulating the danger of the bomb in terms of the singular hand of God and man: hands are always plural and not necessarily human, *L'Arrêt de mort* taught us as much, and the boundless possibilities offered by modern technology cannot be contained by the single human hand.

Although not foreseeing worldly catastrophe, Blanchot is hardly optimistic about the unlimited technological possibilities of the age. One interlocutor persistently rejects the romantic faith in technology advocated by writers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Jünger. The latter, in *An der Zeitmauer* [1959], argues that in a world threatened by atomic destruction humanity is able to think its relation to earth differently and move, via technological means, beyond nihilism into a new age.⁶⁵ 'J'ai entendu dire que nous étions en train de franchir le mur du temps', remarks Blanchot's unconvinced interlocutor.⁶⁶ One can perhaps detect the odour of atomic explosion, sense the imminence of this possibility, but one can never be certain of the end of history:

Je me demande si tout au contraire vos auteurs n'ont pas pour l'avenir une sorte de répugnance, puisqu'ils refusent d'accueillir l'inachèvement qu'il recèle nécessairement en lui. On dirait qu'ils font tout pour se détourner de la simple vérité de notre mort qui est d'être toujours

⁶⁴ Blanchot, 'Sur un changement d'époque: l'exigence du retour', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 402.

⁶⁵ See Ernst Jünger, *An der Zeitmauer*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 22 vols (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978-1983), VIII: *Der Arbeiter* (1981), 397-645.

⁶⁶ Blanchot, 'Sur un changement d'époque: l'exigence du retour', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 397.

prématurée et avant terme. De là, cette hâte avec laquelle ils affirment: l'époque est achevée, un temps a pris fin.⁶⁷

By regarding technology as the means by which the human exerts total control over the earth, writers such as Jünger and Teilhard de Chardin overlook the excessive inhuman possibilities of the atomic bomb and disregard futural uncertainty. They turn away from the banality of a death that will never be authentic. Responding to the assertion that the decline of the mythic hero and the rise of the cult of the unknown soldier signal the beginning of a new age, the sceptical interlocutor states: 'Vous lui préférez le mythe de la fin des temps, cette peur d'une catastrophe mondiale avec laquelle on secoue jour et nuit les imaginations des hommes.'⁶⁸ Fear of a mystified end is more comforting than facing up to the banal uncertainty of the future for Jünger and Teilhard de Chardin. Blanchot, in contrast, is undoubtedly recalling Nietzsche's admission of faith in an unknowable future which his friend Georges Bataille had quoted at least twice elsewhere and which he will cite nine years later in the fragmentary additions to the end of the essay when published in *L'Entretien infini* [1969]: 'My thoughts [...] should show me where I stand, but they should not betray to me *where I am going*. I love ignorance of the future [*Ich liebe die Unwissenheit um die Zukunft*] and do not want to perish of impatience and premature tasting of things promised.'⁶⁹

Nietzsche is an important reference for Blanchot when thinking the impact of technology. In 1958 Blanchot wrote two essays on Nietzsche: 'Nietzsche, aujourd'hui' [August 1958] and 'Passage de la ligne' [September 1958]. In the first of these essays, having outlined the falsification of his

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 400. This essay is of some importance to Bernard Stiegler's *La Technique et le temps*. A quotation from this essay is used as epigraph to the first volume and the Texte de présentation begins: 'La technique *trans-forme* l'horizon de toute possibilité à venir, de toute possibilité d'avenir. Le danger, écrivait Maurice Blanchot en 1969, "n'est pas dans le développement insolite des énergies et de la domination de la technique, il est d'abord dans le refus de voir le changement d'époque et de considérer le sens de ce tournant".' Stiegler wants to specify the way technics constitutes our experience of time differently in different epochs; but Blanchot is sceptical that a different epoch can ever be identified and addressed as such. I return to Stiegler's reading of Blanchot in the Conclusion.

⁶⁸ Blanchot, 'Sur un changement d'époque: l'exigence du retour', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 402.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 162, emphasis in the original; *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols, 2nd edn (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), III: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 528.

work by his sister and her husband and the subsequent appropriation of his thought for anti-Semitic and fascist purposes by the Nazi party, Blanchot stresses the paradoxical and decentred nature of Nietzsche's thought which contests all certainties:

Parmi les contradictions, maintenir l'exigence du tout qui est constamment présent, bien que constamment dissous par les contradictions. Ne jamais concevoir ce tout — le tout non-unitaire — comme un système, mais comme une question et comme la passion de la recherche dans l'élan du vrai, unie à la critique de tout ce qui a pu être acquis au cours de la recherche.⁷⁰

Blanchot asks that any interpretation of Nietzsche remain faithful to the above principles. The disjointed totality that emerges through such a reading challenges the limits of systematic thought; here, the volatility of the contested whole echoes the impact of the printing press pushing culture to the point of explosion in 'Les Grands Réducteurs'. The aside 'le tout non-unitaire' is a later addition to the essay for its publication in *L'Entretien infini*; this and other small edits to the essay highlight that Blanchot is keen to further stress the impossibility of any such totality in 1969, which will always be challenged by the work of the neuter. For instance, Blanchot writes in 1958 that something fundamental seeks to be expressed in Nietzsche's work, 'une constante pensée et comme l'appel d'un centre unique, d'un tout, lequel n'est jamais atteint, mais sans cesse supposé et interrogé, parfois exigé'. In 1969 this reads, '[...] comme l'appel d'un centre non centré, d'un tout au-delà de tout'. In 1958 Blanchot writes: 'tout ce qui s'y apparente semble affluer de tous côtés pour y ressembler'. Eleven years later this becomes: 'tout ce qui s'y apparente semble se presser de tous côtés afin d'y ressembler en en différant'.⁷¹

The essay ends with Blanchot considering words from Heidegger, who claimed that what was a cry threatens to become chatter [*bavardage*] in Nietzsche. Of this cry, Blanchot writes: 'on ne l'a

⁷⁰ Blanchot, 'Nietzsche, aujourd'hui', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 211. Blanchot notes that Karl Jaspers was the first to alert us to this manner of reading Nietzsche, but later argues that Jaspers risks betraying Nietzsche by using his work, which is the exception to any rule and contains something non-transferable, to develop an existential philosophy (pp. 209-11).

⁷¹ Blanchot, 'Nietzsche aujourd'hui', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 291; *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 210-11.

pas entendu, on l'a trop entendu; le nihilisme est devenu le lieu commun de la pensée et de la littérature.⁷² At stake here is the difference between the interpretation of nihilism offered by Heidegger and that offered by Blanchot, or the difference between what we might call philosophical and literary nihilism. Heidegger recognises the exceptional nature of Nietzsche's work, Blanchot writes, but only insofar as he declares it to be the final, perhaps unending, phase of the metaphysical tradition, consequently overlooking what is marginal, incommunicable and fragmentary in his writing.⁷³ The suggestion is that nihilism as contested totality offers a way out of this impasse if we listen with greater care to this chatter.

In 'Nietzsche's Word: "God is Dead"' [1943], Heidegger had considered how Nietzsche remains trapped within nihilistic thought. Picking out the various, sometimes contradictory, meanings associated with nihilism for Nietzsche, Heidegger links them closely to technology as a form of mastery of the earth: representational metaphysical thinking is the origin of modern technology and nihilism. Nietzsche attempts to move beyond nihilism (the process of the devaluation of the highest values), but achieves only a more complete nihilism (the revaluation of all values): 'The no to the former values is derived from the yes to the new dispensation of value.'⁷⁴ The conclusion to Heidegger's essay considers how we are to begin to think beyond metaphysical representation: 'If we hear in the name nihilism that other note [*Ton*], in which there sounds the essence of what it names, then we also hear differently into the language of the metaphysical thinking that has experienced something of nihilism but without being able to think its essence.'⁷⁵ This 'other note' within nihilism signals that Being is nothing: 'Provided that every "is" is the responsibility of Being, then the essence of nihilism consists in the fact that there is nothing going on with Being itself [*daß mit dem Sein selbst nichts ist*].'⁷⁶ By emphasizing that 'nothing is going on with Being', Heidegger gestures to a

⁷² Blanchot, 'Nietzsche aujourd'hui', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 215.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 212. For an overview of Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger during the late 1950s and early 1960s, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 103-23.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, 'Nietzsche's Word: "God is Dead"', in *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 157-99 (p. 167); 'Nietzsches Wort "Gott ist tot"', in *Gesamtausgabe*, V, 209-67 (pp. 223-24).

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 198; p. 266.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

dispensation of *Sein* beyond the positing of values which allows the possibility of thinking more originally (beyond reason or logic).

There is perhaps a clearer sense from Heidegger of how to respond to nihilism in his later exchange with Ernst Jünger. The latter's contribution to the *Festschrift* celebrating Heidegger's sixtieth birthday was an essay entitled 'Über die Linie' [1949], in which he considers whether we live in the age of fulfilled nihilism and, if so, whether such nihilism can be overcome. Heidegger responded to this essay six years later in 1955 with an open letter, later published as 'Zur Seinsfrage' [On the Question of Being]. While noting that his description of the technical era in *Der Arbeiter* was influential to 'The Question Concerning Technology', Heidegger argues against Jünger, insisting on the prior question about the essence of nihilism and focussing on the line itself as opposed to what lies beyond: 'In the title of your essay *Über die Linie* means as much as: across, trans, μετά. By contrast, the following remarks understand the *über* only in the sense of *de*, περί. They deal "with" the line itself, with the zone of self-consummating nihilism.'⁷⁷ His argument is that a thinking of the essence of nihilism leads to a thinking of Being as the unthought ground of metaphysics. Representational language is the barrier to crossing the line and overcoming nihilism and so, in an attempt to retrieve a more original sense of *Sein* unsullied by metaphysics, Heidegger crosses out the word in 'On the Question of Being': 'A thoughtful forward glance into the realm of "Being" can only be written in the following way: ~~Being~~.'⁷⁸

The dialogue between Heidegger and Jünger informs Blanchot's reading of Nietzsche in the second essay of 1958, 'Passage de la ligne'. Here Blanchot remarks that Heidegger's treatment of the line is more rigorous because sensitive to the movement of nihilism which renders any such line indecipherable; like the end of history, there is an unknowable or impossible element to nihilistic achievement.⁷⁹ While Heidegger is praised for questioning the possibility of this line, the subsequent deferral of a thinking that goes beyond metaphysical representation is criticised. Heidegger's waiting

⁷⁷ Martin Heidegger, 'On the Question of Being', trans. by William McNeill, in *Pathmarks*, pp. 291-322 (p. 292); 'Zur Seinsfrage', in *Gesamtausgabe*, XI, 385-426 (p. 386).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 310; pp. 410-11. Critchley provides a summary of 'Nietzsche's Word: "God is Dead"' and Heidegger's response to Jünger in the opening chapter of *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, pp. 13-18.

⁷⁹ Blanchot, 'Passage de la ligne', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 215-27 (p. 225) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 69 (September 1958), 468-79).

game is irresponsible, even dangerous, according to Blanchot, for whom the writer and critic break with values via the endless *détours* of abyssal self-reflexive language.

A few months later — in an essay that would become the preface to a revised edition of *Lautréamont et Sade* published in 1963 — Blanchot writes that literature and criticism are associated with one of the most difficult and important tasks of our time: ‘la tâche de préserver et de libérer la pensée de la notion de valeur, par conséquent aussi d’ouvrir l’histoire à ce qui en elle se dégage déjà de toutes les formes de valeurs et se prépare à une toute autre sorte — encore imprévisible — d’affirmation.’⁸⁰ Traditionally, criticism is thought to assert the value of the literary work; but in this essay, by contesting the line demarcating literature from criticism, Blanchot suggests how we are to move beyond the positing of value. Why, Blanchot asks, would the critic be necessary to the work? Why can the work not speak for itself? Why between the reader and the work, between history and the work, is this strange hybrid figure, itself between reader and writer, imposed? Criticism, having no reality of its own, disappears in the affirmation of what is otherwise silent in the work; the accomplishment of criticism is signalled by its disappearance as the mediated becomes the immediate. But any such relation to the immediate is impossible and so the work of criticism and the work of literature are perpetually turned outwards:

cette sorte de subite distance dans laquelle l’œuvre faite se réfléchit et dont le critique est appelé à donner la mesure, n’est que la dernière métamorphose de cette ouverture qu’est l’œuvre en sa genèse, ce qu’on pourrait appeler sa non-coïncidence essentielle avec elle-même, tout ce qui ne cesse de la rendre possible-impossible. La critique ne fait donc que représenter et poursuivre au dehors ce qui, du dedans, comme affirmation déchirée, comme inquiétude infinie, comme conflit (ou sous de tout autres formes), n’a cessé d’être présent à la manière d’une réserve vivante de vide, d’espace ou d’erreur ou, pour mieux dire, comme le pouvoir propre à la littérature de se faire en se maintenant perpétuellement en défaut.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Qu’en est-il de la critique?’, in *Lautréamont et Sade*, pp. 9-14 (p. 14) (first publ. in *Arguments*, 12-13 (January-March 1959), 34-37).

⁸¹ Blanchot, ‘Qu’en est-il de la critique?’, in *Lautréamont et Sade*, p. 12.

The domain of literature cannot be stabilised because there is no outside point from which to delimit the parameters of the work. This lack which allows the work and criticism to proliferate offers the possibility of moving beyond metaphysical representation toward this torn affirmation, torn because erring between the yes and the no, between the inside and the outside, contesting all limits, including those of literature.

This is an affirmation freed from historical constraints. By thinking the possibility of the end of metaphysics, of the turning that will initiate a new history, Heidegger remains committed to traditional values. A text entitled 'L'Attente', published only a few months after those two essays on nihilism in 1959, is a critique of such a teleological perspective: 'Dès qu'on attendait quelque chose, on attendait un peu moins.'⁸² This contribution, which can be categorised neither as fiction nor criticism but assumes an ambiguous status between the two and which is one of the first examples of Blanchot adopting the fragmentary idiom that would dominate later works, stresses that to move beyond value, to liberate thinking from history, an indirect or oblique approach to the unknowable that allows it to remain unknown is required. The two male and female figures of 'L'Attente' repeatedly comment on or adopt such indirectness. For instance, the female figure is described as having the impression of an error that she could not situate and, everything turning before her eyes, she has lost the centre of the room and of the discussion; the male character feels linked to her by failure and watches her surreptitiously.⁸³ 'L'attention, accueil de ce qui échappe à l'attention, ouverture sur l'inattendu, attente qui est l'inattendu de toute attente.'⁸⁴

This oblique approach characterises the discussion of nihilism in 1958 in 'Passage de la ligne'. Nihilism is a trap if confronted, because this becomes merely an attempt to overcome nihilism which is in itself nihilistic. Eternal return, on the other hand, is the nihilistic thought *par excellence*:

⁸² Maurice Blanchot, 'L'Attente', *Botteghe oscure*, 22 (1958), 22-33 (p. 26). This would later be split up and included in *L'Attente L'Oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 7-13, 16-18, 19-21, 26-27, 31-34, 38, 44-45, 47-48, 49, 50-51, 52-53.

⁸³ Blanchot, 'L'Attente', *Botteghe Oscure*, 22, pp. 22-24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

‘celle où le nihilisme se dépasse absolument en se rendant définitivement indépassable.’⁸⁵ Eternal return offers that radical shift in perspective which is other than the positing of values:

Mais le retour en arrière du temps est ce qui échappe au possible, impossibilité qui a ici le plus grand sens: elle signifie l'échec du surhomme en tant que volonté de puissance. Le surhomme ne pourra jamais l'extrême. L'éternel retour n'est pas de l'ordre du pouvoir. L'expérience de l'éternel retour entraîne un renversement de toutes les perspectives. Le vouloir qui veut le néant devient la volonté voulant l'éternité et en laquelle l'éternité sans vouloir et sans but retourne à elle-même. La toute-puissance personnelle et subjective se transforme dans l'impersonnelle nécessité de 'l'être'. La transvaluation ne nous donne pas une nouvelle échelle des valeurs à partir de la négation de toute valeur absolue, elle nous fait atteindre un ordre auquel la notion de valeur cesse de s'appliquer.⁸⁶

Eternal Return for Nietzsche is an attempt to overcome the transient nature of time. In Heidegger's analysis Eternal Return is an attempt to abolish time. Blanchot reads Eternal Return as the *détour* of all thought which turns with history; it is announced with fear and hesitation by Zarathustra, unlike the categorical announcement of the *Übermensch*, prompting Blanchot to ask: 'Pourquoi cette différence de ton?'⁸⁷ This thought experiment is a deconstruction of the will that slackens the philosophical tone, enabling us to hear obliquely or indirectly the other note which points toward the impersonal necessity of 'Being', which is to say to the impossibility of being done with Being:

⁸⁵ Blanchot, 'Passage de la ligne', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 223. Michael Holland considers those essays published between 1954 and 1958 with a focus on nihilism in *Avant dire*, pp. 249-79.

⁸⁶ Blanchot, 'Passage de la ligne', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 224. This is a fairly brutal refutation of Heidegger on Nietzsche, for whom the *Übermensch*, the will to power and eternal return say exactly the same: the subjection of Being (or Time) to the subjective (representational) will. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, 'Who Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?', in *Nietzsche*, trans. by David Farrell Krell, 4 vols (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979-87), II: *Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (1984), 211-33 (pp. 227-28); 'Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?', in *Gesamtausgabe*, VII, 99-126 (pp. 118-19). I discuss Blanchot's engagement with Eternal Return in more detail in Chapter Four.

⁸⁷ Blanchot, 'Passage de la ligne', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 222. Compare: 'Behold, I teach to you the Overhuman!' [repeated three times] with Zarathustra's reflection after announcing Eternal Return: 'Thus was I talking, and ever more softly: for I was afraid of my own thoughts and the motives behind them' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 11-13, 134-38).

‘Jusqu’ici, nous avons cru le nihilisme lié au néant. Comme c’était léger: le nihilisme est lié à l’être. Il est l’impossibilité d’en finir et de trouver une issue même dans cette fin. Il dit l’impuissance du néant, le faux éclat de ses victoires, il dit que, lorsque nous pensons le néant, c’est encore l’être que nous pensons.’⁸⁸

This nihilistic thought is abyssal and discontinuous; it is founded on this movement of infinite reversal as it encounters the insurmountable which it bears within itself: death. It is nihilism’s continual association with Being (and also with the denunciation of the modern world and nostalgia for a bygone time) that eventually leads Blanchot to argue in 1963 that we should renounce this term because ‘il a cessé de résonner en direction de ce qu’il ne peut atteindre.’⁸⁹ In 1958, Blanchot notes that by crossing out only *Sein*, Heidegger privileges Being because this is possible with any word — Blanchot crosses out both *être* and *néant* in the later version of his essay. This simple strikethrough is how the neuter works; constantly intervening in language it highlights the possibility of displacement within all words. ‘Soyons donc circonspects, manions avec prudence ces notions provocantes, ne laissons pas parler les mots selon l’efficacité réaliste qu’ils ont acquise et reconduisons-les doucement vers le silence d’où ils viennent.’⁹⁰ The neuter as this technical intervention allows Blanchot to silently respond to the view that Heidegger has been seduced by words and to approach that other tone which, in ‘La Bête de Lascaux’, is so despised by Socrates: ‘silence majestueux, mutisme en lui-même inhumain et qui fait passer dans l’art le frisson des forces sacrées, ces forces qui, par l’horreur et la terreur, ouvrent l’homme à des régions étrangères’.⁹¹

Heidegger once famously declared, ‘Only another God can save us now [*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*].’⁹² The experience of modern technology leads Heidegger to conclude that the human no longer has any agency in this hopeless world; Blanchot will reach a similar conclusion, but there is something to be celebrated about this shift beyond the sovereign subject, which does not entail

⁸⁸ Blanchot, ‘Passage de la ligne’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 224.

⁸⁹ Blanchot, ‘La Littérature encore une fois’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 583-95 (pp. 591-92) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 120 (December 1962), 1055-61; 121 (January 1963), 102-07).

⁹⁰ Blanchot, ‘Passage de la ligne’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 226.

⁹¹ Blanchot, ‘La Bête de Lascaux’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, pp. 685-86.

⁹² ‘“Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel*’s interview with Martin Heidegger’, trans. by Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo, in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 91-116 (p. 107).

the complete destruction of the human. Four years before ‘Passage de la ligne’, this time in relation to the work of Albert Camus, Blanchot had written that we enter nihilism by questioning vermin.⁹³ A strange statement perhaps, one which has proved troubling for some,⁹⁴ but it communicates the idea that nihilism cannot be overcome and again emphasises an indirect approach to this line or region through exposure to what is alien to the human. A lengthy passage from the original essay is omitted when the essay is collected fifteen years later in *L’Entretien infini*:

Comme on le voit, la question, sinon la réponse, se concentre sur le mot impossibilité, mot nécessairement ambigu, puisqu’il ne s’offre à nous que dans la rigueur de la négation — absence de pouvoir, privation de la possibilité, l’impuissance absolue — et que cependant il cherche à dégager une affirmation qui échapperait à la fois à l’être (entendu au sens où l’entend l’ontologie: non pas seulement les êtres, mais l’être qui est à l’œuvre sous les existences réelles ou possibles) et à la négation de l’être.⁹⁵

This is an affirmation that precedes ontology and this is perhaps why the above extract was replaced in *L’Entretien infini* with: ‘Espace où ce qu’on appelle l’homme a comme par avance toujours déjà disparu.’⁹⁶ The power of man in modernity to destroy the world is limited because, exposed to the limit, this negation goes hand-in-hand with an affirmation of the unknowable region beyond this limit. Roger Laporte calls this, ‘une nouvelle dimension, celle du Neutre, qui n’est pas [...] un troisième terme se situant entre l’affirmation et la négation, mais bien plutôt un tout autre terme, car établissant un rapport avec l’essentiellement autre.’⁹⁷ The human, although exposed to something completely alien, persists in this response which is not some masterful overcoming, but a helpless abandoning of

⁹³ Blanchot, ‘Tu peux tuer cet homme’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 271-80 (p. 272) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 18 (June 1954), 1059-69; this essay was heavily amended for its publication in *L’Entretien infini*).

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Holland, *Avant dire*, p. 271.

⁹⁵ Blanchot, ‘Tu peux tuer cet homme’, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, p. 1061.

⁹⁶ Blanchot, ‘Tu peux tuer cet homme’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 273.

⁹⁷ Roger Laporte, ‘Le Oui, le Non, le Neutre’, *Critique*, 229: *Maurice Blanchot* (June 1966), 579-90 (p. 587).

oneself to nihilism. The neuter is that impossible and silent *puissance*, of neither human nor animal origin, which responds to human *pouvoir*, possibility, speech.

Cautious regarding our prospects in the age of modern technology and aware that these powers are easily and often abused for political or ideological purposes, Blanchot seeks to demystify the apocalypse and expose its impossibility, banality, insignificance. These essays carry warnings against complaisance but do not endorse a fear of technology. Blanchot's position on modern technology thus seems very remote from that of Heidegger, who in 1966 spoke of the terror induced by the technological world:

Everything is functioning. This is exactly what is so uncanny, that everything is functioning and that the functioning drives us more and more to even further functioning, and that technology tears men loose from the earth and uproots them. I do not know whether you were frightened, but I at any rate was frightened when I saw pictures coming from the moon to the earth. We do not need any atom bomb. The uprooting of man has already taken place. The only thing we have left is purely technical relationships. This is no longer the earth on which man lives.⁹⁸

The date of this interview suggests that Heidegger could be referring to the first images transmitted to the earth from the moon by Lunar Orbiter 1. That 'everything is functioning' within technology need not be something to be feared for Blanchot, who sees in this power an appeal beyond the human.⁹⁹

Two years prior to Heidegger's interview with *Der Spiegel*, Blanchot had considered the responses of

⁹⁸ "Only a God Can Save Us", in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. by Wolin, pp. 105-06.

⁹⁹ In a study of the shifting patterns of 'linguistic negativism' across Blanchot's work, particularly negative affixes and negative modifiers to words (or 'unwords') such as 'inhumain', 'inquiétude' and 'immobile', Shane Weller argues that Blanchot belongs to a late modernism that 'develops such forms of linguistic negativism as what it takes to be the only aesthetically and ethically justifiable response to a modernity increasingly perceived as both socially and politically catastrophic.' Shane Weller, 'Voidance: Linguistic Negativism in Maurice Blanchot's Fiction', *French Studies*, 69: 1 (2015), 30-45 (pp. 44-45). Blanchot in fact rarely uses the term modernity and, as these essays on technology demonstrate, he is not fearful of technology. Moreover, there is an affirmative tone to be heard in any such catastrophe that precedes and outstrips such negation which is overlooked in Weller's analysis.

various heads of state — Khrushchev, Kennedy and De Gaulle — to the first cosmonaut and the real significance of Yuri Gagarin's experience:

tous des héritiers prêts à proclamer pour leur prestige les bienfaits de la technique, mais incapables d'accepter, d'accueillir la conséquence, qui est de ruiner toute appartenance et de mettre en tous lieux, le lieu en question.

— Admettons-le. Mais ne doit-on pas dire que l'exploit de Gagarine, d'un côté, n'a rien fait d'autre, par ses développements politiques et mythiques, que de permettre aux Russes d'habiter plus solidement la terre russe, et, d'autre part, ne peut nullement apparaître comme physiquement modifié, d'une manière radicale, le rapport avec le Dehors?¹⁰⁰

The second half of this quotation demonstrates how Gagarin was going to be recuperated by political powers; but the real import of this spaceflight, unable to be embraced by the heads of state because it exposes and challenges the limits of culture, is the experience of dislocation and dispersion and the shift in our relationship to the outside which results. The instance of typographical technology, the em dash, included in the version of the essay quoted above but omitted from the original publication of the essay in Italian translation in 1964, serves to remind us that there is always something outside of the text enabling it to take place (and to be repeated).¹⁰¹ This silent inscription is a form of writing which cannot be put into speech: the neuter as a neutralizing and displacing technique which challenges the limit of world, history, culture and subtly shifts our perspective.

It is interesting that 'La Conquête de l'espace' was Blanchot's contribution to the ill-fated project for *La Revue internationale* — the intention of which was to publish anonymous fragments

¹⁰⁰ Blanchot, 'La Conquête de l'espace', in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 125-28 (p. 127) (first publ. in Italian translation as 'La Conquista dello spazio', trans. by Guido [Davide] Neri, *Il Menabò*, 7 (1964), 10-13). This is in part a response to an essay by Emmanuel Levinas, 'Heidegger, Gagarine et nous', in *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), pp. 299-303 (first publ. in *Information juive*, 13 (1961), 1-2).

¹⁰¹ Michael Holland comments on the significance of the insertion of such a dash in 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort' for its publication in *L'Espace littéraire*; here the dash precedes the words 'notre fin'. Holland argues that this is Blanchot interrupting his argument at the point where his analysis is face to face with what defies it utterly, thus introducing a difference into the work. Michael Holland, 'Towards a New Literary Idiom: the Fiction and Criticism of Maurice Blanchot from 1941 to 1955' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1981) p. 305.

from a community of international writers which would form a contemporary response to radical historical change.¹⁰² The project — reliant on modern technologies of communication, production, and distribution — sought to question place and to break more explicitly from the organic form as the expression of a single authorial intent through the collective, fragmented, anonymous, and international nature of the pieces published. The selection of an essay which considers the power of technology to overcome international boundaries is therefore perhaps not surprising.

While trying to establish this ambitious project, Blanchot wrote that the translator was its most important figure, ‘le véritable écrivain de la revue.’¹⁰³ Other comments made about the significance of the translator are lifted from an earlier essay on Walter Benjamin: ‘[Le traducteur] est le maître secret de la différence des langues, non pas pour l’abolir, mais pour l’utiliser, afin d’éveiller, dans la sienne, par les changements violents ou subtils qu’il lui apporte, une présence de ce qu’il y a de différent, originellement, dans l’original.’¹⁰⁴ Translation, Blanchot argues in agreement with Benjamin, rather than bringing languages together in one harmonious and superior unity, is founded on the difference between languages and accentuates this original difference. The translator is portrayed by Blanchot as a linguistic technician who brings the otherness of the work to the fore through its reproduction — the proximity to Benjamin’s position in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ and ‘Task of the Translator’ is evident here. It is this otherness, this original difference, which enables the repetition of the artwork and is indicated in ‘La Conquête de l’espace’ by the insertion of the em dash. The *Revue internationale* therefore represented a sort of harnessing of modern technology (printing presses, translation, fragmentation, the questioning of place, the anonymity of texts) for the purposes of the neuter.

¹⁰² Blanchot outlined his plans for *La Revue internationale* in a set of papers published posthumously under the title ‘[La Gravité du projet]’, in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 101-17. See also Christophe Bident’s chapter on the *Revue internationale* in *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, pp. 403-17; and Christopher Fynsk, ‘Blanchot in *The International Review*’, in *Blanchot’s Epoch*, ed. by Hill and Holland, pp. 104-20.

¹⁰³ Blanchot, ‘[La Gravité du projet]’, in *Écrits politiques*, p. 111.

¹⁰⁴ Blanchot, ‘Traduire’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 69-73 (p. 71) (first publ. as the first section of ‘Reprises’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 93 (September 1960), 475-83). On the significance of translation for Blanchot, see Leslie Hill, ‘“A Fine Madness”: Translation, Quotation, the Fragmentary’, in *Blanchot Romantique*, ed. by McKeane and Opelz, pp. 211-31.

The problem for those listening to the garbled speech of Yuri Gagarin and the interlocutors of ‘Entretien sur un changement d’époque’ is how to formulate a response to what lies beyond traditional structures of expression. Blanchot is able to set aside the metaphysical menace of technological dominance, so feared by Heidegger, and move beyond metaphysical representation, the point at which Heidegger faltered, by looking to a more originary sense of *techne* which harnesses the power of modern technology: the neuter. In ‘Entretien sur un changement d’époque’, the change of epoch is considered in terms of the shift in our relation to world which has become a building that we can burn.¹⁰⁵ Do not burn the scientists, do not wipe out the contemporary world to which we happily belong, pleads one interlocutor, but burn the structures to expose something other than the regularity of the concept.¹⁰⁶ Announced in this oscillating dialogue is the neuter as a response to what always surpasses meaning (the worldly, historical, cultural limit demarcating the boundaries of human knowledge), which (as a more originary form of *techne*) is also essential to the production of this meaning or the demarcation of this limit in the first place.

The motif of the street indicates the neuter in ‘La Conquête de l’espace’ (only the man of the street grasps the significance of Gagarin’s experience) and ‘Entretien sur un changement d’époque’: ‘J’admets qu’en marchant dans la rue, on respire de telles pensées; mais on les respire, on ne les pense pas; dès qu’on les formule, elles perdent leur gentillesse de conte.’ The other interlocutor replies: ‘La rue est donc bien plus sage que les penseurs soigneux qui attendent d’avoir de nouvelles catégories pour penser ce qui arrive.’¹⁰⁷ The human participates in the anonymous and collective flow, hum, movement of the street, but is not subject in this errant and unrestricted space. Blanchot refers to this hum elsewhere as ‘la parole bavarde’ or ‘le bavardage’:

J’ai toujours été frappé par l’approbation empressée et enchantée, donnée universellement à Heidegger, lorsque celui-ci, sous prétexte d’analyse et avec la vigueur sobre qui lui est propre, a condamné la parole inauthentique. Parole méprisée, qui n’est jamais celle du ‘Je’ résolu,

¹⁰⁵ Blanchot, ‘Sur un changement d’époque: l’exigence du retour’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 402.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

laconique et héroïque, mais la non-parole du ‘On’ irresponsable. On parle. Cela veut dire: personne ne parle. Cela veut dire: nous vivons dans un monde où il y a de la parole sans un sujet qui la parle, civilisation de parleurs sans parole, bavards aphasiques, rapporteurs qui relatent et ne se prononcent pas, techniciens sans nom et sans décision.¹⁰⁸

This *bavardage*, rather than being degraded or inauthentic as the German pronoun *man* is for Heidegger, points toward the unknowable future for Blanchot precisely because it belongs to no one.¹⁰⁹ Blanchot in 1958 notes Heidegger’s concern that the myth surrounding Nietzsche threatens to reduce the cry of his suffering to mere ‘bavardage’.¹¹⁰ The cry for Heidegger reflects authentic death, something akin to that experienced by the Chamberlain in Rilke’s *Notebooks*. Any cry will unavoidably be reduced to mere chatter in Blanchot’s account, but this is not something to be deplored. Anonymous and nomadic, these *technicians* are a vehicle for the neuter and the street in which they roam is the region of nihilism. Modern technologies — the printing press, the atom bomb, the spacecraft — provide the conditions for contesting cultural limits and recognising this excessive background force. We are exposed to an outside, to an unknowable future, to a new place and to human impossibility in these essays on modern technology which subtly shift our perspective and encourage us to abandon ourselves to the nomadic movement without determination that is the chatter of the street.

¹⁰⁸ Blanchot, ‘La Parole vaine’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 137-49 (p. 145) (first publ. in Louis-René des Forêts, *Le Bavard* (Paris: U.G.E., 1963), pp. 163-84).

¹⁰⁹ Blanchot would locate a force for revolutionary change in the street in May 1968: ‘Depuis Mai, la rue s’est réveillée: elle parle. C’est là l’un des changements décisifs. Elle est redevenue vivante, puissante, souveraine: le lieu de toute liberté possible. C’est contre cette parole souveraine de la rue que, menaçant tout le monde, a été mis en place le plus dangereux dispositif de répression sournoise et de force brutale’ (Blanchot ‘La Rue’, in *Écrits politiques*, pp. 180-81 (first publ. as an anonymous pamphlet [attributed to Blanchot by Dionys Mascolo, dated 17 July 1968] in *Comité*, 1 (October 1968), 11)). Michael Sheringham argues that the chatter of the street in Blanchot brings us closer to the ‘essence of the everyday’, which, ‘in its radicality, its immunity from all origins, its anarchic destruction of all established order, will always provide a basis for the future.’ Sheringham acknowledges the contestatory power of the neuter but does not think it radically enough when he writes that this chatter ‘epitomises the ontology of the everyday’, because the neuter also contests the limits of being. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 21; see also Michael Sheringham, ‘Attending to the Everyday: Blanchot Lefebvre, Certeau, Perce’, *French Studies*, 54: 2 (2000), 187-99.

¹¹⁰ Blanchot, ‘Nietzsche, aujourd’hui’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 215.

‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’ [1964] reads like a culmination of Blanchot’s writing on nihilism, modern technology, the inhuman and the unknown. This essay is a response to *Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* [1958], published in French translation in 1963, in which Karl Jaspers argues that humanity’s newly acquired capacity for self-destruction signals the dawning of a new age.¹¹¹ The choice presented to us by Jaspers is underscored by Blanchot: ‘Ou bien l’homme disparaîtra ou bien il se transformera.’¹¹² Blanchot criticises Jaspers for continuing to think the atomic bomb in terms of values; the theme of his work is change, but there is nothing new about his language, thought or political formulations. ‘Si la pensée retombe dans ses affirmations traditionnelles, c’est qu’elle ne veut rien risquer d’elle-même en présence d’un événement ambigu dont elle ne réussit pas à décider ce qu’il signifie, avec sa face terrible, avec son apparence d’absolu — événement démesuré, mais démesurément vide, dont elle ne peut rien dire, sinon cette banalité: qu’il vaudrait mieux l’empêcher.’¹¹³ The apocalypse always disappoints; it is that ambiguous and excessive event that does not reveal the truth of the end because it encounters death as the insurmountable impossibility which we are incapable of dominating or wanting. ‘L’entendement nous a placés auprès d’un horizon mortel qui est celui de la compréhension et, par là, il nous aide à concevoir à quoi nous sommes exposés: non pas à mourir universellement, mais à éluder le savoir de cette mort universelle pour échouer dans la platitude d’une fin dénuée d’importance.’¹¹⁴ Blanchot exposes the difference between the future treated as an object by totalising scientific knowledge and the future as what cannot be negated, as what remains unknowable and uncertain. The latter is why the apocalypse always disappoints; apocalyptic foretelling exposes us to the banality of an end that will never have any meaning for us as subjects.

Michael Holland, one of the few to have considered a thinking of technology in Blanchot, argues that the question of the bomb is radically separated from the question of technology in both

¹¹¹ See Karl Jaspers, *Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (Munich: R. Piper, 1958); *The Future of Mankind*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); *La Bombe atomique et l’avenir de l’homme: conscience politique de notre temps*, trans. by Edmond Saget (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1963).

¹¹² Blanchot, ‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 118-27 (p. 118) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 135 (March 1964), 488-96).

¹¹³ Blanchot, ‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’, in *L’Amitié*, p. 122.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

essays on nuclear weapons: the latter is a question of language with the potential to indicate a new departure for man because it is associated with his being; the former remains engaged in that nihilistic or catastrophic situation. Holland writes that for Blanchot (and Levinas) it is the image of Gagarin in space, not the total annihilation threatened by the bomb, which is the event that marks ‘le vrai tournant devant lequel la technique met l’homme’.¹¹⁵ The distinction made between spaceflight and the atom bomb seems arbitrary and overlooks the implication of the neuter in modern technologies: all modes of technique expose the human to a turning because all relate us to the unknowable and expose us to a profound *impuissance*. (Elsewhere Blanchot directly compares the pen to a weapon: ‘Elle devait éprouver une sorte de trouble devant cette plume qu’elle lui voyait entre les mains. C’était une arme redoutable devant laquelle elle était désarmée.’)¹¹⁶ As evidence Holland argues that the account of spaceflight in Blanchot is a clearer rejection of the stance of Heidegger, because engaging in notions of rootedness; but the essays on the bomb engage with the question of our relation to the future in a way that similarly disrupts our worldly perspective. Furthermore, Holland, reading Blanchot alongside Levinas, assumes that there is a ‘subjectivity’ and a ‘humanity’ that is capable of the new language offered in the change encapsulated by the term *technique*. The terms ‘humanity’ and ‘capable’ seem strange when reading Blanchot, for whom all possibility is conditioned by the impossible and for whom this new perspective, this new language, which is always already technical, exposes the human to something completely alien.

Noted at the start of this chapter was Derrida’s analysis which claimed that any attempt to shed light on the apocalypse leads only to a brighter apocalyptic tone; Derrida suggests that by listening to the multiplicity of apocalyptic tones, by recognising that there is more than one tone, we may allow the possibility for the other tone, or the tone of the other, to be heard. Toward the end of ‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’ Blanchot is doing just this when he argues that Jaspers, ‘[écarte] comme s’il s’agissait d’une mouche importune, l’ombre abstraite de cette apocalypse et [s’obstine] dans les habitudes d’une tradition et d’un langage auxquels on ne voit rien à changer’.¹¹⁷ The essay concludes

¹¹⁵ Holland, *Avant Dire*, pp. 297-306 (p. 302).

¹¹⁶ Blanchot, ‘L’Attente’, *Botteghe Oscure*, p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Blanchot, ‘L’Apocalypse déçoit’, in *L’Amitié*, p. 126.

by stressing that the choice between all or nothing, between transformation or destruction, is not the one and only truth of our situation. We should note this fly out of the corner of our eye; we should risk a surreptitious glance in its direction.

The Neuter: Kafka and *Le Dernier Homme*

At the height of his involvement with the *Revue internationale*, Blanchot published two essays on Kafka in 1964: 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)' and 'Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)'.¹¹⁸ The first of these essays begins by quoting from Kafka's *The Castle*: 'Les forces de la vie ne suffisent que jusqu'à un certain point.'¹¹⁹ The meaning of life is limited by fatigue; but in order to draw this limit there must be something other than 'les forces de la vie'. Limitlessness haunts the limit as the condition of its possibility. In the essays concerning modern technologies we have seen how the limits of history, world and culture are contested by an impersonal force which the human cannot master: the neuter as a sort of disobedient *techné* continuing where other modes of technique have left off. For this reason the neuter is not spoken by one single authoritative voice in Kafka's texts. Blanchot is naming not the narrator when he refers to the 'voix narrative', but the neuter as the condition of possibility of narration.

As a non-concept which perpetually evades location, working at the limit to destroy all limit, the neuter is experienced as a sort of emptiness within the work. It has profound consequences for how the author and the reader relate to the work as well as the work's relation to the world; consequences which are experienced in Kafka's writing but are elsewhere eroded or clouded by the misuse of the narrative voice. This 'il' is described as the unlit event that unfolds within the space or distance [*étendue*] of the narration, here referred to as a song: 'c'est dans le chant qu'Orphée descend réellement aux enfers: ce que l'on traduit en ajoutant qu'il y descend par le pouvoir de chanter, mais

¹¹⁸ Blanchot, 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)' and 'Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 556-67, 568-82; and in *De Kafka à Kafka*, pp. 171-84, 185-201 (first publ. as 'La Voix narrative', *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 142 (October 1964), 674-85; and 'Le Pont de bois', *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 133 (January 1964), 90-103). 'La Conquête de l'espace' and 'L'Apocalypse déçoit' appeared the same year; 'Les Grands Réducteurs' appeared the following year in 1965.

¹¹⁹ Blanchot, 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 556.

ce chant déjà instrumental signifie une altération de l'institution narrative.¹²⁰ Blanchot signals the corruption of the narrative voice which is subsequently played out in the novelistic tradition. Rather than experiencing the neuter as a technique beyond the control of Orpheus, which creates this melodic distance and so enables narration, we understand the song as nothing more than an instrument mastered by Orpheus. Consequently, we take the narrative voice, the 'il', to be the expression of an objective reality or of multiple and personalised subjectivities.¹²¹ Here we are reminded of Ulysses tied to the ship's mast in 'La Rencontre de l'imaginaire': through what are described as 'technical' means he maintains a cold and calculated distance from the Sirens in order to hear their call without becoming implicated in this imaginary space. This controlled distance resurfaces in 'La Conquête de l'espace' where the heavens are merely transformed into another absolute, 'celui de l'espace des savants qui n'est rien qu'une possibilité calculable.'¹²² The impersonal narration employed by Flaubert is cited as the modern outcome of such corruption in 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)'. Such aesthetic distance treats the artwork as an autonomous whole and ensures a clear division between spectacle and spectator: 'L'idéal reste la représentation du théâtre classique: le narrateur n'est là que pour lever le rideau; la pièce se joue, dans le fond, de toute éternité et comme sans lui; il ne raconte pas, il montre, et le lecteur ne lit pas, il regarde, assistant, prenant part sans participer.'¹²³

An altogether different sort of distance is evident in Kafka's writing. The contemplative enjoyment of a detached author and reader is no longer possible when the space between spectator and spectacle is restored to its Orphic origins as the very milieu of the narrative. The stability of the measurable, controllable, calculable distance (which was only ever an illusion) between Flaubert or his narrator and the work, between Ulysses and the Sirens, between Gagarin and the earth, is shaken

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 558.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 559.

¹²² Blanchot, 'La Conquête de l'espace', in *Écrits politiques*, p. 126.

¹²³ Blanchot, 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 560. Two essays before 'La Voix narrative (le "il", le neutre)', when collected in *L'Entretien infini*, 'L'Effet d'étrangeté' considers an altogether different sort of distance in Brechtian theatre which lingers in our memory as we consider this view of Flaubertian narration: 'Constamment, cette distance entre le spectacle et le spectateur, [Brecht] cherche à l'animer, à la rendre maniable et disponible, à empêcher qu'elle ne se fige et ne devienne l'espace à travers lequel les mots qui s'adressent à nous et les images qui nous reflètent se changent en être (en absence d'être) et, au lieu de nous parler et de nous représenter, nous absorbent et nous attirent hors de nous' (p. 537) (first publ. as 'Brecht et le dégoût du théâtre', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 50 (February 1957), 283-92).

by a volatile distance which cannot be pinned down or controlled because, the limits of the work challenged, there is no external perspective by which to judge the work. The work is decentred by an indeterminate and undetectable distance which subtly alters our perspective and draws us into this space; it is now no longer a distant object upon which we gaze from afar. ‘Ce que Kafka nous apprend [...], c’est que raconter met en jeu le neutre.’¹²⁴ The parentheses added to the titles of both of these essays for their publication in *L’Entretien infini* echo the work of the neuter: there is a difference between the main body of the title and what is marginalised within these typographical marks, but this difference is unstable because while ‘named’ in parentheses the neuter is also implied in the narrative voice and on the wooden bridge.

The narrative voice is neuter, writes Blanchot; it says nothing but is felt everywhere in the narration and, at the limit, it prevents the work from having a limit.¹²⁵ It precedes and exceeds the omniscient narrator of Flaubert’s novels (the narrative voice as it is formulated by Gérard Genette),¹²⁶ who is only ever a stand-in, an actor obscuring the stage. This ‘il’ cannot be pinned down to what we traditionally understand by ‘place’ or attributed to any one subject:

le ‘il’, se dispersant à la façon d’un manque dans la pluralité simultanée — la répétition — d’une place mouvante et diversement inoccupée, désigne ‘sa’ place à la fois comme celle à laquelle il ferait toujours défaut et qui ainsi resterait vide, mais aussi comme un surplus de place, une place toujours en trop: hypertopie.¹²⁷

Blanchot here indicates a new place and new perspective opened up by the neuter; a region that nonetheless resists location or identification and so it seems fitting that it is discussed in a footnote in the margins of the essay which, via an interruption, refers beyond the limits of this essay to ‘Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)’. K., the main character in Kafka’s *The Castle*, bears the traits of a figure exposed to such instability according to Blanchot, because he is foreign to the foreignness of

¹²⁴ Blanchot, ‘La Voix narrative (le “il”, le neutre), in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 563.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 565-66.

¹²⁶ See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 225-67.

¹²⁷ Blanchot, ‘La Voix narrative (le “il”, le neutre)’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 563-64 n. 1.

the Castle, foreign to the village, foreign even to himself as he inexplicably breaks with his own familiarity to move toward this new place.¹²⁸ “I can’t go away [*Auswandern kann ich nicht*],” replied K. “I came here to stay. I’ll stay here.” And giving utterance to a self-contradiction which he made no effort to explain he added to himself: “What could have enticed me to this desolate country except the wish to stay here?”¹²⁹ K. is a nomad constantly threatened with homelessness in this new place; moving between inns, the school, and the homes of the villagers, he experiences that profound lack of belonging felt by Gagarin at the limits of the earth.

One of the shortcomings of the rhetoric surrounding modern technology is the widespread assumption that an individual can say, define, negate, or destroy the world; similar difficulties are encountered in those narratives with an omniscient authorial or narrative figure. ‘[La parole neutre] ouvre dans le langage un pouvoir autre, étranger au pouvoir d’éclairement (ou d’obscurcissement), de compréhension (ou de méprise).’¹³⁰ The neuter is that unconquerable power which opens up an unsayable emptiness within the work. Yuri Gagarin, dislocated and exposed as technological man, was momentarily a vehicle for this limitless force: ‘Toutefois, dans ce bavardage, il y a quelque chose qui effraie et qui émeut: c’est qu’il ne cesse pas, qu’il ne doit pas cesser; le moindre trou dans la rumeur signifie déjà le vide à jamais; toute lacune, toute interruption introduit bien plus que la mort, mais le néant extérieur même dans le discours.’¹³¹ The anonymous speech of the cosmonaut invites the outside into language, testing worldly limits it incites a fearful reaction in those listening within the parameters of culture, but enables a more liberated perspective for the attentive listener.

Marthe Robert is an example of a critic working within the prism of culture to fill similar gaps and inconsistencies in *The Castle*. She argues that *The Castle* is not only the unique work of a solitary writer, but the palimpsest where we can read a thousand years of literature: Kafka’s attempt to classify the monstrous archives of Western culture from which he could not exclude his own work.¹³² There are similarities between Robert and Gagarin; both are ‘scapegoats’ sent to the very edge of literary

¹²⁸ Blanchot, ‘Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 577-78 n. 1.

¹²⁹ Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 172; *Das Schloss*, p. 133.

¹³⁰ Blanchot, ‘La Voix narrative (le “il”, le neutre)’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 566.

¹³¹ Blanchot, ‘La Conquête de l’espace’, in *Écrits politiques*, p. 128.

¹³² Marthe Robert, *L’Ancien et le nouveau: de Don Quichotte à Kafka* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1963; Paris: Payot, [1967]).

space with an impossible task: to say the world in its totality, to complete the authentic work.¹³³ In contrast, Blanchot points to the wandering structure of the narrative which situates Kafka's writing in the Jewish tradition; he describes K. erring from interpretation to interpretation until the narrative opens out onto the possibility of writing, which invites endless commentary.¹³⁴ Blanchot suggests that the opening lines of *The Castle* are perhaps where the 'meaning' of the work is to be found: '*K. demeura longtemps, les regards levés vers l'apparence vide.*'¹³⁵ The original German reads 'die scheinbare Leere' [apparent emptiness]. Blanchot, in his own translation, subtly alters our perception of the text so that K. now observes 'empty appearance', a move which nudges Kafka's writing closer to the neuter. Suggested in the conditional tense and placed in a footnote in the margins of his essay, Blanchot does not propose that this is the definitive meaning of the text; such a concrete interpretation is impossible. His argument is that, the limits of the work challenged by the neuter, 'internal' commentaries on the Castle and 'external' commentaries on *The Castle* are equally justifiable and equally powerless.

The work derives its power from the non-difference between inside and outside: '(l'ambiguïté: la différence de l'identique, la non-identité du même)'.¹³⁶ The parentheses again signal the trembling of the difference between what can no longer be described as subject and object; they expose the empty relationality which founds the work and is most palpable on the wooden bridge, that crossing between places. The critic of *The Castle* is comparable to the translator of the *Revue internationale*; the work is founded on this original difference between languages and criticism accentuates this further, testing the limits of our cultural perspective. Blanchot later writes in *L'Écriture du désastre*: '◆ Dans la nuit, l'insomnie est dis-cussion, non pas travail d'arguments se heurtant à des arguments, mais l'extrême secousse sans pensées, l'ébranlement cassé jusqu'au calme

¹³³ '[Le critique] bouc émissaire que l'on envoie aux confins de l'espace littéraire, chargé de toutes les versions fautives de l'œuvre, pour que celle-ci, demeurée intacte et innocente, s'affirme dans le seul exemplaire tenu pour authentique — d'ailleurs inconnu et probablement inexistant — conservé dans les archives de la culture: l'œuvre unique, celle qui n'est complète que s'il lui manque quelque chose, manque qui est son rapport infini avec elle-même, plénitude sur le mode du défaut.' Blanchot, 'Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 572.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 576.

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 577-78 n. 1. See Kafka, *Das Schloss*, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Blanchot, 'Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 579.

(les exégèses qui vont et viennent dans “Le Château”, récit de l’insomnie).’¹³⁷ The stress is not on the value of individual interpretations but on the trembling relationality between the work and its commentary, which is the condition of possibility for both. Later in the same text Blanchot writes:

◆ Il est étrange que K., à la fin du *Château*, ait été par certains commentateurs promis à la folie. Dès le début, il est hors du débat raison-déraison, dans la mesure où tout ce qu’il fait est sans rapport avec le raisonnable, cependant absolument nécessaire, c’est-à-dire juste ou justifié. De même, il ne paraît pas possible qu’il meure (damné ou sauvé, c’est presque sans importance), non seulement parce que son combat ne s’inscrit pas dans les termes de vivre et de mourir, mais parce qu’il est trop fatigué (sa fatigue, seul trait qui s’accroît avec le récit) pour pouvoir mourir: pour que l’avènement de sa mort ne se change en inavènement interminable.¹³⁸

His growing fatigue is the only indication we have of a sense of progression in this *récit*; it signals that there is another power beyond the limits of life and the narrative. This is the same power that allows the subtle shift in the title (from ‘Le Château’ to *Le Château*) between the two fragments quoted here, which ensures that the interpretation of the work can never be stabilised. Labelling K. mad is a strange exercise because he has never worked within the laws determined in the Castle and enforced in the Village; he belongs to neither place and his condition mirrors that of the writer.¹³⁹

When external and internal commentary become almost interchangeable, when the non-identical difference of the same is the source of the power of the work, of the neuter, then it becomes impossible to attach a value to work and to commentary, to the Castle and to the Village. The concluding footnote to the second of these essays on Kafka reads: ‘L’un des traits essentiels du neutre est, en effet, de ne se laisser ressaisir ni en termes d’immanence ni en termes de transcendance et de nous attirer dans une tout autre sorte de rapport.’¹⁴⁰ The neuter does not command from above, but

¹³⁷ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, p. 83 (this and a number of other fragments (pp. 60-107, 120-21) first publ. in ‘L’Écriture du désastre’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 330-331 (July-August 1980), 1-33).

¹³⁸ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, p. 214.

¹³⁹ On Blanchot on Kafka, literature and the Law, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 374-78.

¹⁴⁰ Blanchot, ‘Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 581 n. 1.

nor does it exist in itself as something self-identical; between immanence and transcendence, it dismantles that age-old philosophical distinction. This is why readings of *The Castle* vary according to whether the castle is seen as transcendent (divine) or as immanent social entity.¹⁴¹ The neuter is founded on that shifting relationship and so offers a means of moving beyond metaphysical representation. Ending the narrative would allow the relationship to stabilise and we could draw a meaning or value from this text; but K., Blanchot argues, will never die a personal and heroic death, it would only ever be general, bureaucratic, and thus an interpretation of death. This neutral death is a liquidation, writes Blanchot in 'La Fin du héros' [1965], referring to the hero of *Der Prozess* who declares that when we die, we do so '[c]omme un chien'.¹⁴²

Suspended between life and death, between subject and object, between human and animal, characters, authors and readers are like the Hunter Gracchus in Kafka's short story: "I am forever." replied the Hunter, "on the great stair that leads up to it [the other world]. On that infinitely wide and spacious stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in motion. The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh."¹⁴³ The theme of this short story is recognisably Blanchotian: the impossibility of death. Blanchot, however, objects to its allegorical status in 1949: 'il y a une contradiction entre la nature du récit qui est achevé et précis et un contenu qui exige l'ambiguïté absolue de la négation.' Rather than allegory, which presents us with a neatly packaged idea, *The Castle*, it was noted at the beginning of this chapter, is

¹⁴¹ For a brief overview of interpretations of *The Castle* from that period, see *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'The Castle': A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Peter F. Neumeyer (London: Prentice-Hall, 1969): 'Not only will man not achieve salvation. He is presumptuous in even seeking it' (Erwin R. Steinberg, p. 31); 'Kafka presents in *The Castle* the task facing modern man in general. Unmoored from his spiritual and social anchorage, expelled from his once secure place in the cosmos, modern man [...] has to make his own identity and project his own existence instead of assuming it as given. Kafka's fragmentary novel depicts the tragic irony and ultimate impossibility of this exercise' (Walter Sokel, p. 35); 'The Castle, beyond its environmental significance, is a bureaucracy, an institution; the difficulties that K. encounters are those any ordinary person experiences in trying to influence an institution' (Coley Taylor, p. 105); 'in *The Castle* God is dead, and we are faced with a universe devoid of sense' (Walter Kaufmann, p. 108); 'K.'s stubborn singleness of purpose, however, opens the eyes of some of the villagers; his behaviour teaches them that human rights may be worth fighting for; that the rule of the Castle is not divine law and, consequently, can be attacked' (Hannah Arendt, p. 112).

¹⁴² Kafka quoted in Blanchot, 'La Fin du héros', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 540-55 (p. 552) (first publ. as 'Le Héros', *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 145 (January 1965), 90-104).

¹⁴³ Franz Kafka, 'The Hunter Gracchus', trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, in *The Complete Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 226-30 (p. 228); 'Der Jäger Gracchus', in *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. by Paul Raabe (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970), pp. 285-88 (p. 287).

symbolic because it places the world in parentheses and exposes us to the void which is the milieu of all imagined form. Blanchot writes later in this essay: ‘Le passage du oui au non, du non au oui, est ici la règle, et toute interprétation qui s’y dérobe, y compris celle qui fonde cette alternance, contredit le mouvement qui la rend possible.’¹⁴⁴ The rule is one of ambiguity, one that contests everything, including itself, in this movement between affirmation and negation. The pressing question is how we are to begin to respond to a *récit* that resists all interpretation? It is a question of how we are to respond to this call that lies both beyond the boundaries of the text and within the text itself, the *récit* as the condition of possibility of all narrative: ‘K. a été appelé, et il est bien vrai que la mort semble un appel; mais il est vrai aussi que répondre à cet appel, c’est le trahir, faire de la mort quelque chose de réel et de vrai.’¹⁴⁵

Kafka wrote his own version of the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens, published seven years after his death in 1931. In this retelling of the episode, the Sirens are silent and it is his own ears, rather those of his boatmen, which Ulysses plugs with wax. Ulysses conjures up their song in his imagination and controls these creatures with his gaze: ‘Soon, however, all this faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution [*Entschlossenheit*], and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer.’¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Boa describes Ulysses as following ‘his own inner visionary journey. Intent on the figures in his mind, he does not see the Sirens.’¹⁴⁷ But there is a third twist to this retelling of the encounter: ‘Ulysses, it is said, was so full of guile [*listenreich*], was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could pierce his armour [*nicht in sein Innerstes dringen konnte*]. Perhaps he had really noticed, although here the human understanding is beyond its depths, that the Sirens were silent, and held up to them and to the gods the aforementioned pretence [*Scheinvorgang*] merely as a sort of shield.’¹⁴⁸ Without the addition, we might consider this a mythical representation of the Sirens

¹⁴⁴ Blanchot, ‘Le Langage de la fiction’, in *La Part du feu*, pp. 88, 90.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁴⁶ Kafka, ‘The Silence of the Sirens’, in *The Complete Stories*, pp. 430-32; ‘Das Schweigen der Sirenen’, in *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, pp. 304-05 (p. 305).

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Boa, ‘Revoicing Silenced Sirens: A Changing Motif in Works by Franz Kafka, Frank Wedekind and Barbara Köhler’, *German Life and Letters*, 57: 1 (January 2004), 8-20 (p. 12).

¹⁴⁸ Kafka, ‘The Silence of the Sirens’, in *The Complete Stories*, p. 432; *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, p. 305.

(‘En nous engageant dans l’histoire mythique, nous nous mettons à vivre son sens, nous en sommes imprégnés, nous le “pensons” vraiment et dans sa pureté, car sa pure vérité ne peut être saisie que dans les choses où elle se réalise comme action et sentiment’);¹⁴⁹ however, the third and final twist, in which Ulysses, hearing the silence of the Sirens, affirms their unknowable presence, introduces an ambiguity that allows an other sort of affirmation which is not of the order of knowing and which opens the human up to that other place.

This is that unforeseeable affirmation for which Blanchot had called in 1959 in what would become the preface to *Lautréamont et Sade*. Within and without the text, it is both the call that makes the text possible and its response: the neuter. When K. puts his ear to the telephone in the inn, a rare instance locating *The Castle* in the twentieth century, the noise he hears through the receiver is the hum of the neuter:

The receiver gave out a buzz [*Summen*] of a kind that K. had never before heard on a telephone. It was like the hum [*Summen*] of countless children’s voices — but yet not a hum, the echo rather of voices singing at an infinite distance [*aber auch dieses Summen war keines, sondern war Gesang fernster, allerfernster Stimmen*] — blended by sheer impossibility into one high but resonant sound which vibrated on the ear [*an das Ohr schlug*] as if it were trying to penetrate beyond mere hearing. K. listened without attempting to telephone, leaning his left arm on the telephone shelf.¹⁵⁰

This is not an original noise from a present and visible source; it is the echo of some already repeated sound, signalling withdrawn presence and the impossibility of knowing this inhuman other — a reworking of the Sirens who, in Blanchot’s retelling of the episode, continue to call from their tomb. It is the distant call which lured K. to this place; calling from beyond the confines of the text it is the condition of possibility of the narrative. The distance between unknown sender and receiver is distorted by this technical device. The neuter cannot be located, represented, signified (‘nommer le

¹⁴⁹ Blanchot, ‘Le Langage de la fiction’, in *La Part du feu*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁰ Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 33; *Das Schloss*, p. 24.

neutre, c'est peut-être, c'est sûrement le dissiper; mais nécessairement au bénéfice encore du neutre'),¹⁵¹ but the telephone allows us to hear its echo.

Later, the Superintendent warns K. that any contact he has had with the Castle has been illusory; his attention turns to the telephone: 'Now this humming [*Rauschen*] and singing transmitted by our telephones is the only real and reliable thing you'll hear, everything else is deceptive. There's no fixed connection with the Castle, no central exchange which transmits our calls further.'¹⁵² This *récit*, it has already been noted, refuses knowledge, indicates the void and deals in the imaginary. The humming heard down the telephone is, however, different: real and reliable, the implication is that it reaches beyond the imaginary boundaries of the text. The Superintendent goes on to explain that a 'stranger' calling the Castle cannot expect to be put through to a particular person. Any exchange across the telephone is anonymous and meaningless; what matters is this background noise. Derrida writes that anonymity is the mark of the apocalyptic text:

Et il n'est pas assuré que l'homme soit le central de ces lignes téléphoniques ou le terminal de cet ordinateur sans fin. On ne sait plus très bien qui prête sa voix et son ton à l'autre dans l'Apocalypse, on ne sait plus très bien qui adresse quoi à qui. Mais par un renversement catastrophique ici plus nécessaire que jamais, on peut aussi bien penser ceci: dès qu'on ne sait plus qui parle ou qui écrit, le texte devient apocalyptique.¹⁵³

Between the neuter, this anonymous force heard down the telephone, and those modern technologies promising the apocalypse and enabling us to hear this noise, there is undoubtedly an unstable relation. The neuter is not a self-identical concept; it means that there is always a different tone and it allows us to hear this in technology.

First published in 1957, *Le Dernier Homme* is a fundamental moment of engagement which gives rise to the neuter as a non-concept and allows Blanchot to return to Kafka, in whose writing he

¹⁵¹ Blanchot, 'Le Pont de bois (la répétition, le neutre)', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 580.

¹⁵² Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 95; *Das Schloss*, p. 72.

¹⁵³ Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique*, p. 77.

senses the neuter tangibly in play. Set chiefly within the walls of a hospital, the first section of the text tells of the suffering and weakness of the last man in the face of his impending death; it explores the relationships between characters when exposed to this heightened sense of mortality. The first section ends with a moment of transition as the narrator follows in the footsteps of the last man and moves, with the technical assistance of an elevator, into a corridor. This corridor is comparable to the wooden bridge in Kafka's *The Castle*: it is a transitional space suspended between life and death, a void which promises eternity and leads to the intrusion of the inhuman other in the disorientating second section of the text:

J'aimais ce couloir. J'y passais avec le sentiment de sa vie calme, profonde, indifférente, sachant que là pour moi était l'avenir, et je n'aurais plus d'autre paysage que cette solitude propre et blanche, que là s'élèveraient mes arbres, là s'étendrait l'immense bruissement des champs, la mer, le ciel changeant avec ses nuages, là, dans ce tunnel, l'éternité de mes rencontres et de mes désirs.¹⁵⁴

This corridor is the extreme limit at which nihilism is turned back on itself in this apocalyptic text; it signals the relinquishing of power and identity to this region and a shift toward an experience where the self is exposed to a more radical contestation. What follows is expressed from a new place where the distinction between the narrator of the first section and the last man has collapsed; they belong to an anonymous and fluctuating *bavardage* which is here exposed to a muffled but insistent inhuman murmuring.

The last man sits in an arm chair toward the beginning of the *récit*, his large tired hands hanging at the end of his arms.¹⁵⁵ Around this weak and suffering man other characters acquire a

¹⁵⁴ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme: nouvelle version*, L'Imaginaire, 283 (Paris: Gallimard [1957] 1992), p. 104. In the two years leading to the publication of this text, sections of the narrative were published in several journals: 'Le Calme', *Botteghe Oscure*, 16 (1955), 28-36 [*Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 106-21]; 'Le Dernier Homme', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 46 (October 1956), 653-63 [*Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 1-23]; 'Comme un jour de neige', *Botteghe Oscure*, 18 (1956), 11-19 [*Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 125-27, 134-47]; and 'L'Hiver', *Monde nouveau* (January 1957), pp. 43-52 [*Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 26-28, 44-46, 47-56, 58-61].

¹⁵⁵ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 15-16.

heightened sense of existence, making them stronger, crueler, more dangerous, and on the brink of a dream of extreme power. This power, the narrator remarks, remains a perverse dream; a will to dominate or a sense of superiority felt at a moment when the future looks bleak.¹⁵⁶ The excessive force is only felt in relation to this weak figure; it cannot be appropriated by an individual but draws its energy from the relation between them on which the first section of this text focuses. The apocalyptic tone of this narrative is, of course, misleading, because the last man will not be the last; his experience is universal and will be repeated in the lives of all the individuals who form the surrounding 'community'. In 'L'Apocalypse déçoit' Blanchot writes in relation to the atom bomb: 'D'un côté, un pouvoir qui ne se peut pas, de l'autre, une existence — la communauté humaine — qu'on peut supprimer, mais non pas affirmer ou qu'on ne pourrait affirmer en quelque sorte qu'après sa disparition et par le vide, impossible à ressaisir, de cette disparition, par conséquent quelque chose qu'on ne peut pas même détruire, puisque cela n'existe pas.'¹⁵⁷ *Le Dernier Homme* is the narration of this nihilistic situation. The last man bears the traits of the human in the technological age; exhausted and powerless now that the possibilities of modern technology are not contained within his large hands, he is the momentary (not the last) vehicle for an impossible power. Around him an impossible community forms, drawn together by the experience of dying which will mark each individual existence but will never be achieved as the separate egos dissolve into the chatter of the second section of the text.

In 1951 Heidegger wrote in relation to Nietzsche that the 'last man — the final and definitive type of man so far — fixes himself, and generally all that is, by a specific way of representing ideas.'¹⁵⁸ The last man is closely associated with metaphysical representation for Heidegger, who goes on to write that, '[t]his well made-up and well staged manner of forming ideas, of representation, with its constantly more refined mechanism, dissimulates and blocks from view what really *is* [*was eigentlich ist*].'¹⁵⁹ The last man in Blanchot's text is at points associated with representational thinking: speaking 'in the style of books' he depicts his hometown, a city in the East whose buildings

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

¹⁵⁷ Blanchot, 'L'Apocalypse déçoit', in *L'Amitié*, p. 124.

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, p. 62; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 66.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 72-73; p. 77.

he describes in such detail as if to construct them before his listeners. The narrator is initially disappointed by this representation, the last man describes a town very similar to ‘our’ own, but is then struck by the strange character of this town, crossed by a dried-up river, where huge crowds incessantly flow through the streets. ‘Plus qu’étrange: familière et trompeuse et rendant fausses — pas exactement fausses, sans fondement, sans fondation — les images du monde qui nous était le plus proche.’¹⁶⁰ This is not the representation of a knowable reality but a symbol as it is defined in that essay on Kafka from 1949, exposing us to the void which is the milieu of the imaginary and rendering the familiar world unreal.

Observations of the last man are occasionally made from across the card table, which provides the only reference point (other than doors and walls) within the building in which this narrative unfolds. We have seen that narrating puts the neuter *into play* for Blanchot. The game occupying the narrator of *Le Dernier Homme* allows an oblique exposure to the last man; observations made across the card table read as if the narrator is peering at this figure out of the corner of his eye: ‘Et pourtant, je les laissais, l’un et l’autre. Je jouais, tandis qu’elle s’enfonçait dans son recoin. Je me dissimulais moi-même derrière le jeu, oubliant volontairement à quelle épreuve l’exposait le tête-à-tête dans la solitude’; ‘J’étais à la table de jeu et lui, dans le fauteuil, son grand corps un peu effondré, mais dans une attitude où il y avait une certaine élégance.’¹⁶¹ Blanchot writes in 1965 that the indirect is the medium of literature: ‘D’étranges tableaux imaginaires ou, à défaut, des scènes qui sont comme arrêtées dans leur immobilité visible, constituent les moments essentiels d’une intrigue obéissant à un jeu nécessaire de multiplication.’¹⁶² *Le Dernier Homme* obeys this necessary game of multiplication: suspended scenes and strange immobile images abound in a work which refuses to pin any one description down to straightforward representation.

In *What is Called Thinking?* [1954] Heidegger writes of the multiple possible interpretations to be drawn from the work of Plato and Nietzsche (in the same lecture where he associates the last man with metaphysical representation):

¹⁶⁰ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme*, p. 63.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 40, 84.

¹⁶² Blanchot, ‘Le Rire des Dieux’, in *L’Amitié*, pp. 192-207 (p. 194) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 151 (July 1965), pp. 91-105).

multiplicity of meanings is the element in which all thought must move in order to be strict thought. To use an image [*Im Bild gesprochen*]: to a fish, the depths and expanses of its waters, the currents and quiet pools, warm and cold layers are the element of its multiple mobility. If the fish is deprived of the fullness of its element, if it is dragged on the dry sand, then it can only wriggle, twitch, and die [*verenden*]. Therefore we must always seek out thinking, and its burden of thought, in the element of its multiple meanings, else everything will remain closed to us.¹⁶³

The narrator of *Le Dernier Homme* speaks of the ‘spectre d’une douleur infinie’ which the last man perhaps represents. He acknowledges that the female character may once have alluded to this burden. What follows is a scene, impossible to know whether this is a dream or a memory, in which she requests that they go for a walk one night in the hospital grounds. ‘Il y avait déjà un peu de neige, mais le ciel n’était pas un ciel de neige, c’est là que je vis combien l’espace pouvait être sombre, resserré, comme fuyant vers un lointain infini et pourtant se rapprochant aussi infiniment de nous. “Regardez comme le ciel est noir”.’¹⁶⁴ The characters are located in what may at first appear a more recognisable surrounding when compared to some of those scenes which take place within the walls of the disorientating hospital, but there is something strange about this wintery environment. The black sky, disjointed from the scene on the ground, provides a vanishing perspective which is at once vast and infinitesimal. At the sight of this sky, the female character is overcome with dizziness. Its uneven quality, the dissymmetrical distance which she experiences here, exposes her to the emptiness which is both within her and beyond world and creates an excess that overwhelms her. This is an experience of the neuter as both transcendence and immanence. The narrator leads her to the edge of the pond which serves as a breeding pool for the nearby kitchens: ‘Tout était tranquille et nous n’entendions que le bruit d’eau, un bruit mystérieux et vivant où l’on pressentait l’agitation confuse

¹⁶³ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, p. 71; *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 75-76.

¹⁶⁴ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 90-91.

des poissons troublés par notre présence.’¹⁶⁵ The fishpond is almost overflowing with life and ‘meaning’; it neatly contains a world which exists solely for the purposes of nourishing the human. Blanchot is perhaps drawing on Heidegger’s image of the fish moving within ‘the element of its multiple mobility’. In contrast to the excess or incalculable distance of the sky, this image composed of living material is reassuringly finite and provides the female character with a reference point which positions her within the element of human possibility, values and limits, enabling her to dismiss the abstract shadow of the sky.

In contrast to the female character whose relationship with the inhuman, in its captured and restricted state, is marked by human possibility, the last man is exposed to human impossibility: he cries like a wolf on more than one occasion and, while sitting in the armchair struggling for breath, his fur hat casts a moving shadow over his face.¹⁶⁶ He grows ever weaker as his death approaches; he joins the other patients to eat,¹⁶⁷ an act which Blanchot refers to elsewhere, in relation to Robert Antelme’s account of life in a concentration camp, as the experience of, ‘l’homme réduit à l’irréductible, c’est le besoin radical, qui ne me rapporte plus à moi-même, à la satisfaction de moi-même, mais à l’existence humaine pure et simple, vécue comme manque au niveau du besoin.’¹⁶⁸ No longer a sovereign subject, he is barely human in the first section of the text and, once at the threshold and dispersed in the *bavardage* of the second section, he and the narrator, perhaps they are the same non-identical figure, are surrendered to impossibility:

Réponse mystérieuse, murmure étrange qui nous trouble: la voix est faible, grêle comme un crissement de lézard. La nôtre a l’ampleur et la force de mondes ajoutés aux mondes, mais elle est silencieuse aussi. L’autre a quelque chose d’animal, de trop physique. Imperceptible, elle

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 10, 36, 84-85. Christophe Bident has argued that this may be a reference to Hermann Hesse, on whose work Blanchot wrote in 1956 (see ‘H.H. 1. La Poursuite de soi-même’ in *Le Livre à venir*, pp. 227-38; first publ. in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 41 (May 1956), 872-83) in *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, p. 360 n. 3. In any case, this pack animal may not be such an unusual reference for Blanchot when one considers the importance of that anonymous movement represented by the chatter of the street, *le bavardage*.

¹⁶⁷ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme*, pp. 29-31.

¹⁶⁸ Blanchot, ‘L’Indestructible. 2. L’Espèce humaine’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 191-200 (p. 196) (part of this essay first publ. as ‘L’Indestructible’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 112 (April 1962), 671-80).

nous ébranle. Bien qu'elle soit comme rituelle, l'entendre est une inquiétante, une sublime surprise.¹⁶⁹

Hailing down on us like the screech of a lizard, this strange murmuring, in spite of its weakness, demands that we pay it attention. It marks the arrival of something new and unexpected and indicates something profoundly affirmative in the second section of this text: that with danger also comes chance. 'C'est une voix étrange, un murmure étouffé qui sort de la terre, un cri sec, aride; cela nous trouble, nous oblige à entendre, et qui le dit?'¹⁷⁰ No one, no thing, says this strange murmuring. It echoes the song of the Sirens and the troublesome fly of 'L'Apocalypse déçoit' and it also takes the form of the inhuman. It is the trace of the impossible which interrupts all possibility, including the possibility of destruction, at a moment in the text when the narrator and the last man seem close to death.

The choice of disappearance or transformation seemingly posed by modern technologies such as the atom bomb, according to thinkers such as Jaspers, is not really a choice at all. Man both disappears and transforms in this turning, so that only a residue of the human persists. The limit (the end of history, culture and world) is contested but never wholly erased. Of course it is possible that the world could be destroyed, Blanchot admits as much, but we would never experience this destruction as subjects. The neuter allows a step, which is not a step, over this line; it allows a disjointed perspective which is other than human, an inhuman transformation in which a residual trace of the human persists. Blanchot is not a humanist, as some have claimed,¹⁷¹ but open to something

¹⁶⁹ Blanchot, *Le Dernier Homme*, p. 113.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁷¹ See, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Misquoting Blanchot (Agamben: 'man is the indestructible that can be infinitely destroyed'; Blanchot: 'l'homme est l'indestructible qui peut être détruit' (*L'Entretien infini*, p. 192)), Agamben writes: 'The human being can survive the human being, the human being is what remains after the destruction of the human being, not because somewhere there is a human essence to be destroyed or saved, but because the place of the human is divided, because the human exists in the fracture between the living being and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human. That is: *the human being exists in the human being's non-place, in the missing articulation between the living being and logos*. The human being is the being that is lacking to itself and consists solely in this lack and in the errancy it opens' (p. 134). Agamben frames his discussion of the concentration camps in terms of human possibility; but for Blanchot the experience of death is premised on impossibility and, as Leslie Hill has noted, the indestructible names 'the impersonal, always other trace of

other than the human, that inhuman interruption heard at the end of 'L'Apocalypse déçoit' and *Le Dernier Homme*.

impossibility that interrupts all possibility, including that of absolute destruction' (*Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, p. 362). The screech of the lizard in *Le Dernier Homme* is just such a mark of otherness.

Inorganic Writing

When ‘Le Passage de la ligne’ [1958] was revised for publication in *L’Entretien infini* [1969], the following line was omitted: ‘la conception de la technique considérée comme le retour du même en sa constante rotation: l’être comme recommencement’. It was replaced with: ‘l’absence d’être comme recommencement’.¹ We can speculate that the association of a thinking of technology with the name Heidegger led Blanchot to subsume ‘la technique’ into the neuter from 1965 onwards. He suggests in 1958 that *Sein* is ‘un Neutre un peu honteux’ and continues: ‘La philosophie de Heidegger n’est pas une philosophie du déracinement, mais l’enracinement. Levinas écrit ceci, qui est pénétrant: “Il s’agit d’une existence qui s’accepte comme naturelle, pour qui sa place au soleil, son sol, son *lieu* orientant toute signification. Il s’agit d’un *exister* païen. L’Être l’ordonne bâtisseur et cultivateur, au sein d’un paysage familier, sur une terre maternelle...”’² We have seen that in Blanchot pure nature is always traversed or contaminated by something unnatural; the suppression of ‘la technique’ in work from 1965 onwards suggests a more radical refusal of any such thinking of nature in opposition to technology. Indeed, from the late 1960s onwards the emergence of fragmentary writing and the substitution of nonliving, but not necessarily inert, stones for those animals and insects which populate earlier work signal a more radical contestation of the limits of the human. Focussing on a selection of fragments from *Le Pas au-delà* and *L’Écriture du désastre*, we will see that ‘la technique’ is everywhere implied once the term disappears from Blanchot’s idiom and that the fragmentary is a

¹ Blanchot, ‘Le Passage de la ligne’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 477; *L’Entretien infini*, p. 223.

² Blanchot, ‘L’Étrange et l’étranger’, in *La Condition critique*, p. 287 n. 1.

more inclusive writing, radically open to the other, offering the possibility of transgression through a wayward ‘unnatural’ proliferation that extends beyond the subject.

Fragmentary writing and technology

In 1953 Blanchot had gone as far as to claim that writing was one, albeit privileged, mode of technique among others and several essays from the 1950s and early 1960s had explored the dislocation, dispersion, suspension, and futural uncertainty which result from encounters with various forms of modern technology.³ But just as Blanchot proposes that we abandon the term ‘nihilisme’ in 1963, ‘technique’ disappears from his writing from 1965 onwards. The term does not appear at all in *Le Pas au-delà* [1973] and emerges twice in the closing pages of *L'Écriture du désastre* [1980], but only to refer to that sort of technology associated with mastery, knowledge, possibility. The second of these references to technology in the closing pages of *L'Écriture du désastre* reveals a rethinking of technology since the mid-1960s.

◆ Les lois — le prosaïque des lois — libèrent peut-être de la Loi en substituant à la majesté invisible du temps la contrainte multipliée de l'espace; de même, le réglementaire supprime ce qu'évoque le pouvoir, toujours premier, du nom de loi, ainsi que les droits qui la doublent, mais établit le règne de la technique, laquelle, affirmation du pur savoir, investit tout, contrôle tout, soumet tout geste à sa gestion, de sorte qu'il n'y a plus de possibilité de libération, puisque l'on ne peut plus parler d'oppression.⁴

This sentence ends (the fragment continues, I quote the concluding half below) with a Foucauldian emphasis: there can be no liberation when there is no oppression. In other words, there is no natural

³ ‘Le savoir impersonnel du livre [...] est lié au développement de la technique sous toutes les formes et il fait de la parole, de l'écriture, une technique’ (‘La Bête de Lascaux’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 684). I discuss this quotation in Chapter Three.

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 218. The first reference to technology comes one page earlier: ‘La substitution des règles à la loi semble, dans les temps modernes, une tentative non seulement pour démystifier le pouvoir lié à l'interdit, mais pour libérer la pensée de l'Un en proposant à la coutume la multiplicité des possibilités non liées de la technique’ (p. 217).

order which one can invoke; nature is just as much a product of *techne* as technology (in the restricted sense). In modern times multiple and dispersed laws have replaced the Law of time. Techniques of ‘pure knowledge’, spread throughout a network of social institutions, exert a more comprehensive, but also more subtle, control over the individual than brute sovereign force.⁵

The disciplinary power of which Foucault wrote in 1975 is fragmented and dispersed; unlike the sovereign power which is exercised by one individual over many others, disciplinary power is thought in terms of a complex arrangement of forces in society without reference to sources or agents of power. This is a power built from the bottom up rather than wielded repressively from the top down; it concerns individuals as effects of discipline, moulded or generated by techniques which target the body with the aim of rendering it useful and docile. The language employed by Foucault to describe the traits of this individuality implies the natural — individuals are cellular, organic and genetic —, but this is a constructed ‘nature’ and these individuals combine to form a machine which attains a greater efficiency than the sum of its parts.⁶ Foucault’s point is that there is no origin or essence, rather any knowledge of a natural state that we have is a construct of the techniques of disciplinary power: ‘Le corps, requis d’être docile jusque dans ses moindres opérations, oppose et montre les conditions de fonctionnement propres à un organisme. Le pouvoir disciplinaire a pour corrélatif une individualité non seulement analytique et “cellulaire” mais naturelle et “organique”.’⁷ Disciplinary power is, then, productive rather than oppressive, generating identities, knowledges and discourses by meticulously and extensively distributing, controlling, organising and combining the forces of bodies. The chance of rebellion against this power which permeates every aspect of our lives and every level of society seems slim.

There is, nonetheless, room for resistance in Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power, because without resistance there would be no power relation. He clarifies this position in *Histoire de*

⁵ See the transition traced by Foucault from the sovereign power exercised in the spectacle of execution to a more subtle and dispersed disciplinary power in the opening chapter of Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 9-40.

⁶ Foucault outlines how the distribution of individuals, the control of activities, the organising of geneses and the composing of forces produce a cellular, organic, genetic and combinatory individuality respectively (*Ibid.*, pp. 159-99). Marcello Hoffman provides a useful introduction to disciplinary power in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. by Diana Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), pp. 27-40.

⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 183.

la sexualité: ‘là où il y a pouvoir, il y a résistance, et [...] pourtant, ou plutôt par là même, celle-ci n’est jamais en position d’extériorité par rapport au pouvoir. Faut-il dire qu’on est nécessairement “dans” le pouvoir, qu’on ne lui “échappe” pas, qu’il n’y a pas, par rapport à lui, d’extérieur absolu, parce qu’on serait immanquablement soumis à la loi?’⁸ A tame form of resistance is certainly possible; but Foucault also gestures, via Blanchot, a figure for whom he would express profound admiration,⁹ to a more radical uprising in a short tribute to the writer and journalist Maurice Clavel published shortly after his death in 1979. Here Foucault, writing in fragments, tries to integrate Clavel (‘impatissant, sursautant au moindre bruit, clamant dans la pénombre, appelant l’orage’) and Blanchot (‘diaphane, immobile, guettant un jour plus transparent que le jour, attentif aux signes qui ne font signe que dans le mouvement qui les efface’). Two very different men, writes Foucault, both of whom introduced into the world the tension that rends apart the fabric of time.¹⁰ There is no further mention of Blanchot in the five short fragments which follow, but Foucault surely has him in mind when he writes:

Ce qui échappe à l’histoire, c’est l’instant, la fracture, le déchirement, l’interruption. À la grâce correspond (et répond peut-être), du côté des hommes, le *soulèvement*. La révolution s’organise selon toute une économie intérieure au temps: des conditions, des promesses, des nécessités; elle loge donc dans l’histoire, y fait son lit et finalement s’y couche. Le soulèvement, lui, coupant le temps, dresse les hommes à la verticale de leur terre et de leur humanité.¹¹

It is worth noting that Foucault’s is a genealogical study of power; his concept of power is entrenched within history. The sort of uprising envisaged here, conversely, is something like the change of epoch

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1984), I: *La Volonté de savoir* (1976), 125-26.

⁹ Reminiscing about the 1950s with his friend Paul Veyne, Foucault is reported to have said: ‘À cette époque, je rêvais d’être Blanchot’. See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault: 1926-1984* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 79.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, ‘Vivre autrement le temps’, in *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988*, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), III: 1976-1979, 788-90 (p. 788).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

which for Blanchot both inscribes and suspends world, fracturing the present and positioning itself beyond historical parameters.¹² Blanchot attributes this rebellious possibility to literature; the fragment quoted above continues:

Le procès de Kafka peut être interprété comme un enchevêtrement des trois règnes (la Loi, les lois, les règles): interprétation cependant insuffisante, dans la mesure où il faudrait, pour la faire admettre, supposer un quatrième règne ne relevant pas des trois autres — celui du surplomb de la littérature même, alors que celle-ci refuse ce point de vue privilégié, tout en ne se laissant pas dépendre d'un autre ordre ou de quelque ordre que ce soit (pure intelligibilité) au nom duquel on pourrait la symboliser.¹³

One law cannot contain all laws, because it would then have to contain itself in an infinite regress. The Law to which Blanchot refers in the opening sentence of this fragment, quoted above, is the Law of time or death, that impossible necessity which incorporates its own transgression — I can die but I cannot die. Faced with this intractable thought the Law is, in modern times, replaced with the sort of laws or disciplinary techniques discussed by Foucault which seek to control or to regulate life. The literary cornice, however, offers the possibility of transgression from within the Law; this is an alternative non-hierarchical and rootless perspective which hangs beyond the limits of knowledge, representation and history. Blanchot's writing occupies that interval identified by Foucault from which it challenges the ruling powers in the same fragmented and dispersed mode as the technologies of disciplinary power. It seems, therefore, that there is more to Blanchot's rethinking of 'technique' from the mid-1960s onwards than a simple rejection.

This is confirmed by two essays from 1953 (the same year that Blanchot claimed that writing was one 'technique' among others) which, when collected in *Le Livre à venir* in 1959, open the final

¹² '◆ Dernier témoin, fin de l'histoire, époque, tournant, crise — ou bien fin de la philosophie (métaphysique). [...] Pourquoi écrire, entendu comme changement d'époque, entendu comme l'expérience (la non-expérience) du désastre, implique-t-il chaque fois les mots inscrits en tête de ce "fragment", qu'il révoque cependant? Qu'il révoque, même si ce qui s'y annonce, s'y annonce comme un nouveau qui a toujours déjà eu lieu, *changement radical* dont tout présent s'exclut' (Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, pp. 158-59).

¹³ Ibid., pp. 218-19.

section entitled 'Où va littérature?': 'La Disparition de la littérature' and 'La Recherche du point zéro'. In both essays Blanchot considers the status of art in the modern technological world. In the first he writes: 'l'art ne nie pas le monde moderne, ni celui de la technique, ni l'effort de libération et de transformation qui prend appui sur cette technique, mais il exprime et peut-être accomplit des rapports qui *précèdent* tout accomplissement objectif et technique.'¹⁴ A similar point is made in the second essay: 'bien avant les inventions de la technique, l'usage des ondes et l'appel des images, il eût suffi d'entendre les affirmations de Hölderlin, de Mallarmé, pour découvrir la direction et l'étendue de ces changements dont nous nous persuadons aujourd'hui sans surprise.'¹⁵ Literature and technology may belong to the same tradition, but the work of Mallarmé and Hölderlin, whose names appear in both essays alongside others, anticipates and outstrips radio and cinema. The second of these essays, a review of Roland Barthes' *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, culminates in a discussion of that 'impersonal neutrality' (also mentioned in the first essay)¹⁶ experienced through modes of technology but more significantly through literature:

En nous orientant, par une réflexion importante, vers ce qu'il a appelé le [degré] zéro de l'écriture, Roland Barthes a peut-être désigné aussi le moment où la littérature pourrait se saisir. Mais c'est qu'en ce point elle ne serait pas seulement une écriture blanche, absente et neutre, elle serait l'expérience même de la 'neutralité', que jamais l'on n'entend car quand la neutralité parle, seul celui qui lui impose silence prépare les conditions de l'entente, et cependant ce qu'il y a à entendre, c'est cette parole neutre, ce qui a toujours été dit, ne peut cesser de se dire et ne peut être entendu, tourment dont les pages de Samuel Beckett rapprochent de nous le pressentiment.¹⁷

¹⁴ Blanchot, 'La Disparition de la littérature', in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 268, Blanchot's emphasis.

¹⁵ Blanchot, 'La Recherche du point zéro', in *Le Livre à venir*, pp. 275-85 (pp. 275-76) (first publ. as 'Plus loin que le degré zéro', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, 9 (September 1953), 485-94).

¹⁶ Blanchot, 'La Disparition de la littérature', in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 272.

¹⁷ Blanchot, 'La Recherche du point zéro', in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 285.

The repetition and lack of origin readily associated with radio and screen is also captured in this inhuman murmuring of language; the reference to Samuel Beckett calls to mind the rambling voice of *L'Innommable* and one is also reminded of the strange noise heard down the telephone in Kafka's *The Castle*. The disembodied voice tirelessly repeating words in the above extract does not indicate a grey, undifferentiated and pure neuter — 'une écriture blanche, absente et neutre' are the words of Roland Barthes¹⁸ — but an infinitely contested and vibrant neutrality which cannot be grasped or set in stone and which is not restricted to a traditional notion of 'literature'. Literature cannot be reduced to a question of language and it is impossible, Blanchot argues in both of these essays, to define the limits of literature: 'l'expérience de la littérature est l'épreuve même de la dispersion, elle est l'approche de ce qui échappe à l'unité, expérience de ce qui est sans entente, sans accord, sans droit — l'erreur et le dehors, l'insaisissable et l'irrégulier.'¹⁹ Already in 1953 the influence of the fragmentary is evident as 'literature' becomes associated with dispersion and disunity. The impact of modern technology reverberates with this experience, but the relationship is simultaneously underscored by discontinuity and difference as 'literature' exceeds and precedes the historical parameters within which technology functions.

The previous chapter demonstrated that Blanchot's engagement with questions surrounding modern technology peaks in the 1950s and early 1960s. During this time he begins to develop the fragmentary idiom which he will employ in *L'Attente L'Oubli* [1962], *Le Pas au-delà* [1973], *L'Écriture du désastre* [1980] and in those parenthetical additions to essays collected in *L'Entretien infini* [1969]. One of the earliest explicit engagements with this mode of writing is a 1960 review of

¹⁸ Promising a brief history of writing in the introduction to *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes argues that literature went through a process of solidification during the nineteenth century as it became the object of a gaze, then of creative action, and finally of murder in the work of Mallarmé. In our time, Barthes contends, writing has become absence: 'dans ces écriture neutres, appelées ici "le degré zéro de l'écriture", on peut facilement discerner le mouvement même d'une négation, et l'impuissance à l'accomplir dans une durée, comme si la Littérature, tendant depuis un siècle à transmuier sa surface dans une forme sans hérédité, ne trouvait plus de pureté que dans l'absence de tout signe, proposant enfin l'accomplissement de ce rêve orphéen: un écrivain sans Littérature. L'écriture blanche, celle de Camus, celle de Blanchot ou de Cayrol par exemple, ou l'écriture parlée de Queneau, c'est le dernier épisode d'une Passion de l'écriture, qui suit pas à pas le déchirement de la conscience bourgeoise' (Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, I: 1942-1961, 173). On the dialogue between Blanchot and Barthes and the question of the neuter, see Christophe Bident, 'R/M, 1953', in *Blanchot's Epoch*, ed. by Hill and Holland, pp. 67-83.

¹⁹ Blanchot, 'La Recherche du point zéro', in *Le Livre à venir*, p. 279.

Clémence Ramnoux's doctoral thesis on Heraclitus, where Blanchot wonders in a footnote whether cutting up things and words had a precise technical meaning for Heraclitus at a time when Greek was written without spacing or punctuation.²⁰ This is a somewhat enigmatic comment coming at the end of a footnote without any further deliberation or explanation. The work in question was written and left by Heraclitus in the temple for his readers, Ramnoux stresses, and it was the separation of words which enabled it to be read. Translations vary significantly depending on where one chooses to separate the signs which make up these fragments.

Dedicating a chapter to the first fragment, Ramnoux arranges two of the three given translations in tables; her suggested translation that follows is presented in a numbered list, each point indicating where she has chosen to separate the words which compose the fragment.²¹ This technical manner of presenting translation may call to mind Foucault's discussion of the use of tables as a disciplinary technique to organise the multiple, to impose order, to partition space and to create 'cellular' individuals.²² Separation in this account of fragmentary writing, however, encourages proliferation rather than imposing order. What matters is not that there is one definitive translation, but that the separation between words is never established because always mobile, simultaneously placing every translation in doubt while affirming an excess which cannot be contained within any one interpretation: 'lorsque s'affirme l'irréductible séparation du mot et de la chose, cette séparation n'arrête pas et ne sépare pas, mais au contraire rassemble, car elle fait sens, se signifiant elle-même et faisant signe à ce qui autrement n'apparaîtrait pas'.²³

The fragmentary form of Heraclitus' writing is crucial for Blanchot, because it ensures that the double movement which is this dispersion that gathers is never stabilised. This reading of Heraclitus diverges significantly from that offered by Heidegger in an essay of 1951, taken from a lecture course from the summer of 1944, where he writes: 'In the thinking of Heraclitus, the Being (presencing) of

²⁰ Maurice Blanchot, 'Héraclite', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 119-31 (p. 125 n. 1) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 85 (January 1960), 93-106).

²¹ Clémence Ramnoux, *Héraclite ou l'homme entre les choses et les mots* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1959), pp. 308-16.

²² See Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 173-75.

²³ Blanchot, 'Héraclite', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 129.

beings appears as *ὁ Λόγος*, as the Laying that gathers.²⁴ He will publish a second essay in 1954 drawing on the same lecture content and entitled 'Aletheia'. Blanchot, in contrast, does not approach the work of Heraclitus in terms of truth and gathering, but emphasises that the play of words ensured by fragmentation exposes the original discontinuity that makes language possible:

Au fond, ce qui est langage, ce qui parle essentiellement pour Héraclite, dans les choses et dans les mots et dans le passage, contrarié ou harmonieux, des uns aux autres, enfin dans tout ce qui se montre et dans tout ce qui se cache, c'est la Différence elle-même, mystérieuse, parce que toujours différente de ce qui l'exprime et telle qu'il n'est rien qui ne la dise et ne se rapporte à elle en disant, mais telle aussi que tout parle à cause d'elle qui reste indicible.²⁵

Ramnoux stresses in her thesis that we only have access to the thought of Heraclitus in quotation.²⁶ The problem of the origin is therefore extremely pertinent and Blanchot is keen to demonstrate that this separation, or this dispersion which gathers, indicates an originary void. What speaks through these fragments is not Heraclitus as supreme thinker of Being but that original difference or separation which enables us to distinguish between words and things, between differents, but which never appears as or for itself: the neuter.²⁷

The disembodied rambling which is the focus of the conclusion to the 1953 review of Barthes finds an echo in the fragmentary writing of Heraclitus: both indicate this difference which is everywhere present but never presents itself as such. This is not Heideggerian ontico-ontological

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, 'Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment 50)', in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 59-78 (p. 76). 'Alétheia (Heraclitus, Fragment 6)' is also collected in translation in *Early Greek Thinking*, pp. 102-23; both in *Gesamtausgabe*, VII, 211-34, 263-88. For a comparison of these two readings of Heraclitus, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 116-23.

²⁵ Blanchot, 'Héraclite', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 129.

²⁶ Ramnoux, p. 220.

²⁷ Lars Iyer misinterprets the neuter in a confused reading of Blanchot on Heraclitus, in 'Logos and Difference: Blanchot, Heidegger, Heraclitus', *Parallax*, 11: 2 (2005), 14-24. Iyer thinks words in the neutral gender (mentioned by Blanchot in this essay) as the mark of the immediate in language, which stands for the materiality of the whole; this is, according to Iyer, a form of resistance to the 'great liquefaction of reality in the streaming of language' (p. 22). But the neuter as a sort of non-concept, an impersonal force, cannot be located within any one term, concept, or text; nor is it the pure indifference which Iyer suggests above, but a difference always differing from itself.

difference because Blanchot thinks difference (rather like the *il y a*) prior to ontology as a writing that precedes all being and nonbeing; while Heidegger privileges difference as a fundamental event in Being, for Blanchot (and Derrida) this difference is multiple and there is no privilege.²⁸ The neuter is specifically directed at something in the absence of all origin. The content of these Heraclitean fragments is a discourse on nature which, according to Ramnoux and Blanchot, represented a significant departure in the sixth century from those first interrogations of the origin by Hesiod which focussed on the sacred.²⁹ One of the sections of the first fragment, as it is translated by Ramnoux, reads: ‘découpant chaque chose selon sa nature, et arrangeant les signes pour dire la chose comme elle est’.³⁰ Blanchot may have this particular fragment in mind when he wonders about the technical meaning of cutting up things and words in the earlier footnote. Each Heraclitian sentence is a carefully calculated cosmos, he writes elsewhere in the essay.³¹ Technical separation has always already contaminated the natural and fragmentary writing exposes that unstable and reversible difference which occurs between nature and technology.

A year later Blanchot reviewed Foucault’s doctoral thesis *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* and considered madness in similar terms to those Heraclitian fragments: an unspeakable difference also defines the experience of madness which cannot be classified as ‘natural’. Foucault sets out a history of madness from the Renaissance through to the beginning of the nineteenth century and practices that are recognisable in modern times. During the Renaissance, in Foucault’s account, the mad were perceived to be bearers of an otherwise hidden truth able to move beyond the boundaries of the known. This changes with the emergence of houses of confinement in the seventeenth century, which expressed the emerging normative order of modern society; those who did not conform to norms were imprisoned and exposed to the public gaze: paupers, prostitutes, the mad,

²⁸ Derrida thinks Difference prior to ontology in ‘La Différance’, in *Marges de la philosophie*, pp. 3-29. It was shown in the previous chapter, through Blanchot’s strikethrough of *néant* as well as *être*, that not just Being but potentially all words and all language can be put under erasure. Some critics misread the neuter as ontology in disguise; see, for instance, Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt, *Maurice Blanchot: l’écriture comme expérience du dehors* (Geneva: Droz, 1995), pp. 199-204, 358-62: ‘cette région ontologique de l’élémentaire, là où tout est absent mais par là même infiniment présent, c’est précisément ce que Blanchot appelle le neutre’ (p. 203).

²⁹ Ramnoux, pp. 1-5; Blanchot, ‘Héraclite’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 120-21.

³⁰ Ramnoux, p. 314.

³¹ Blanchot, ‘Héraclite’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 123.

criminals, orphans, invalids, the old, beggars. It was not until the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries, following the reforms of Tuke and Pinel, that those judged insane were imprisoned in asylums and madness came to be seen as something to be separated from various forms of unreason and studied and understood in isolation.³² In modern times, madness and unreason are therefore distinguished by reason: if one is mad one cannot tell the difference between things, one does not question on waking whether one is still dreaming. Madness is the call of indifference, but lurking in the depths of unreason is similarly this inability to make distinctions: ‘Est originaire la césure qui établit la distance entre raison et non-raison; quant à la prise que la raison exerce sur la non-raison pour lui arracher sa vérité de folie, de faute ou de maladie, elle en dérive, et de loin.’³³ Blanchot questions how one writes a thesis, a reasoned argument, on unreason when the distinction between the two is always on the brink of collapse: ‘jusqu’à quel point la pensée peut-elle se maintenir dans la *différence* de la déraison et de la folie, si ce qui se manifeste dans la profondeur de la déraison, c’est l’appel de l’*indifférence*: le neutre qui est aussi la différence même, ce qui (ne) se différencie en rien?’³⁴ The neuter differentiates, but the mobile difference that it establishes (prior to identity or opposition) creates indifference as much as difference. There are implications for Foucault’s thesis: Blanchot had praised the vigilance of Heraclitus to whom is entrusted knowledge of what is double and care of what is reversible; he had praised Clémence Ramnoux for responding to the Heraclitian fragments in a similarly doubled movement;³⁵ Foucault, writing a history of madness, must take care to sustain this reversible mobility between reason and unreason, not to fall into the same trap as those psychoanalysts who, ‘hésitent à abandonner quelques-unes des exigences de la connaissance dite scientifique, laquelle veut situer la folie d’une manière toujours plus précise dans la solidité d’une nature et dans un cadre temporel, historique et social (en réalité, il ne s’agit pas encore

³² See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961; Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

³³ Michel Foucault, ‘Préface’, in *Dits et écrits*, I: 1954-1969, 159-67 (p. 159). This is the preface to the original 1961 edition of *Histoire de la folie* which is omitted in later editions.

³⁴ Maurice Blanchot, ‘L’Oubli, la déraison’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 289-99 (p. 297) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 106 (October 1961), 676-86; partially reproduced in *L’Attente L’Oubli*, p. 87). Derrida similarly argues that *Histoire de la folie* is an impossible project in ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, in *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 51-97.

³⁵ Blanchot, ‘Héraclite’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 128, 119-20 n. 1.

de science).³⁶ Reason tries to locate madness within the confines of an understandable nature but risks itself in this engagement.

Madness, situated beyond historical limits and eluding classification, is that sort of resistance or uprising envisioned by Foucault and Blanchot in those extracts quoted above from 1979 and 1980 respectively. The fragility of the difference established by the neuter between reason and unreason, and between unreason and madness, ensures that something always eludes the System. In *La Folie du jour* [1973], originally published in 1949 as 'Un Récit[?]', this excess appears as a sort of inhuman resistance. Largely set in an asylum, the narrative is centred on the moment someone crushes glass into the narrator's eyes. Now blinded by light, he cannot return the unremitting studious gaze of the ophthalmologist and psychiatrist to whom, we learn at the end of the text, this narrative has been recounted. But behind these figures of authority embodying the laws of this panoptic society³⁷ lurks that other Law discussed at the beginning of this chapter: 'Derrière leur dos, j'apercevais la silhouette de la loi. Non pas la loi que l'on connaît, qui est rigoureuse et peu agréable: celle-ci était autre. Loin de tomber sous sa menace, c'est moi qui semblais l'effrayer.'³⁸ Leslie Hill has written that this is the text's transgressive moment, revealing the double bind and fragility of the Law which is always both inescapable and unanswerable.³⁹ Madness responds to the demand of this Law in a double movement: the day is mad because its light, which enables sight, blinds us when we look at it. Such reversible mobility ensures that madness cannot be confined to the limits of reason. Consequently, when the narrator as 'madman' is imprisoned and studied in an attempt to render him an object of knowledge, a trace evades the scrutiny of the experts: 'Sous leurs yeux en rien étonnés, je devenais une goutte d'eau, une tache d'encre. Je me réduisais à eux-mêmes, je passais tout entier sous leur vue, et quand enfin, n'ayant plus présente que ma parfaite nullité et n'ayant plus rien à voir, ils cessaient aussi de

³⁶ Blanchot, 'L'Oubli, la déraison', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 298.

³⁷ Jeffrey Mehlman makes the connection between *La Folie du jour* and Foucault's analysis of panoptic society in 'Blanchot at Combat: Of Literature and Terror', *MLN*, 95: 4 (May 1980), 808-29.

³⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *La Folie du jour* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973; Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 24. This was first published in a literary journal bearing the name of the eponymous hero of Hölderlin's unfinished tragedy of 1797-99; the title of Blanchot's contribution was given as 'Un récit?' on the front cover of the journal, but appeared simply as 'Un récit' on the inner contents page of *Empédocle*, 2 (May 1949), 13-22. For a discussion of the significance of the connection to Hölderlin, see Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 94-102.

³⁹ Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 100-01.

me voir, très irrités, ils se levaient en criant: Eh bien, où êtes-vous? Où vous cachez-vous? Se cacher est interdit, c'est une faute, etc.'⁴⁰

This unknowable trace is a resistance to the Law and is signalled elsewhere in the text by a stag beetle, once the narrator, scuttling around the basement of the library. This alien transformation occurs after the first of two references to a telephone in *La Folie du jour*: 'Un jour, je me trouvai enfermé dans la ville: voyager n'était plus qu'une fable. Le téléphone cessa de répondre. Mes vêtements s'usaient. Je souffrais du froid; le printemps, vite.' There are echoes here of the situation of K. in Kafka's *The Castle*: trapped in a town, unable to travel further and sinking into poverty, K. attempts to ring the Castle but hears only a strange background hum likened to the sound of children singing. The second reference to a telephone indicates the, otherwise unknown, destination of this call: 'Dans l'établissement, on me donna une petite situation. Je répondais au téléphone.'⁴¹ The telephone call is an externalised monologue between the two non-identical figures of the narrator: one a 'madman' imprisoned within the asylum and working for the System, the other a delinquent roaming the city streets. But this exchange is one-sided, the telephone having refused to respond in the first instance. Christopher Fynsk has written of the closing line of *La Folie du jour* ('Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais') in terms of a refusal that 'seems to issue from a space and time other than that of the incarceration described in the lines that precede it. It speaks to the law and to the sovereignty of reason, to be sure, but it now draws a line in relation to the latter's demand.'⁴² This analysis could perhaps be more persuasively applied to the telephone, which similarly refuses an exchange with reason, represented paradoxically by the narrator's non-identical double within the asylum.

The telephone establishes and annuls a distance which precedes and enables language. It interrupts oral presence and reveals the intervention of *techne* in what seems most human. Writing of the telephone in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Derrida argues that in the beginning there must have been a telephone call. He continues: 'avant tout dispositif portant ce nom dans la modernité, la *tekhne*

⁴⁰ Blanchot, *La Folie du jour*, p. 23.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 15, 20.

⁴² Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writing* (New York: Fordham, 2013), pp. 57-75 (p. 66).

téléphonique est à l'œuvre au-dedans de la voix, multipliant l'écriture des voix sans instruments, dirait Mallarmé, téléphonie mentale qui, inscrivant le lointain, la distance, la différance et l'espace dans la *phonè*, à la fois institue, interdit *et* brouille le soi-disant monologue.⁴³ There is no consequence for the narrator who answers the telephone within the asylum, committed as he is to an exchange within the limits of reason; but the narrator wandering the city, for whom the telephone refuses to respond, is exposed to that rupture which triggers an identity crisis: 'il me vit tel que j'étais, un insecte, une bête à mandibules venue des régions obscures de la misère. Qui étais-je? Répondre à cette question m'aurait jeté dans de grands soucis.'⁴⁴ Left waiting on the telephone, the narrator refuses in turn to respond to this question; when refusal ceases to be subjective will, it becomes dehumanized in a positive sense. Nine years later, in the context of De Gaulle's return to power, Blanchot writes of the political dimension of refusal:

Quand nous refusons, nous refusons par un mouvement sans mépris, sans exaltation, et anonyme, autant qu'il se peut, car le pouvoir de refuser ne s'accomplit pas à partir de nous-mêmes, ni en notre seul nom, mais à partir d'un commencement très pauvre qui appartient d'abord à ceux qui ne peuvent pas parler. On dira qu'aujourd'hui il est facile de refuser, que l'exercice de ce pouvoir comporte peu de risques. C'est sans doute vrai pour la plupart d'entre nous. Je crois cependant que refuser n'est jamais facile, et que nous devons apprendre à refuser et à maintenir intact, par la rigueur de la pensée et la modestie de l'expression, le pouvoir de refus que désormais chacune de nos affirmations devrait vérifier.⁴⁵

Refusal is an act of resistance, not one which pits counter-power against power, but one which is affirmed through something other than power. The telephone in *La Folie du jour* is precisely that sort of powerless power which is simultaneously this refusal and what precedes it. In this sense the telephone call is fragmentary because, as Leslie Hill has remarked evoking Moses' broken tablets, it is

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysse gramophone: oui-dire de Joyce', in *Ulysse gramophone: deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), pp. 55-143 (p. 82); see in particular the second section of this essay (pp. 73-88).

⁴⁴ Blanchot, *La Folie du jour*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Blanchot, 'Le Refus', in *Écrits politiques*, p. 29.

not dependent on any prior law but is itself that abyssal law of interruption that forcibly interrupts all laws, including itself.⁴⁶

How, then, is *techné* implied in Blanchot's review of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* and what is the relationship between technology and the fragmentary, which is beginning to take precedence in Blanchot's writing and features in the introduction to this review subtitled 'Sur L'Oubli'? This introduction — not taking Foucault's text as its object and falling under the category of neither fiction nor essay because partially reproduced in *L'Attente L'Oubli* and included in full in *L'Entretien infini* — is more radical than the main body of the review. Here Blanchot identifies the double movement of *oubli* [forgetting, oversight, oblivion], thinking forgetting in the same terms as death or that original impossibility. Forgetting is the condition of possibility because we can only remember since there is forgetting, but it is also the condition of impossibility because we can never know the limits of forgetting, as he notes in *L'Attente L'Oubli*: '❖ Tu ne trouveras pas les limites de l'oubli, si loin que tu puisses oublier.'⁴⁷ At stake here is the exteriority of fragmentary writing, about which Blanchot is able to be more specific in the review itself where he begins by describing forgetting as what is inscribed beyond memory, forming an outside that is never articulated and whose inarticulation by society consequently interns this dangerous and unknowable region.⁴⁸

Thinking the exteriority of writing without enclosing it within knowable limits is a difficult task: how can a certain type of language speak from, and welcome, the outside while working within the parameters of the Law? This is the focus of an essay by Foucault on Blanchot from 1966, 'La Pensée du dehors'. What is required is a sort of reflexive language; not reflexive in the sense that it is turned inward toward an internal confirmation or central certitude, writes Foucault, but toward an

⁴⁶ Leslie Hill, 'From Deconstruction to Disaster (Derrida, Blanchot, Hegel)', *Paragraph*, 39: 2 (July 2016), 187-201 (p. 198).

⁴⁷ Blanchot, *L'Attente L'Oubli*, p. 68.

⁴⁸ Blanchot, 'L'Oubli, la déraison', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 291-92. Foucault similarly demonstrates that madness exceeds the limits of society and that, from the seventeenth century onwards, society endeavours to protect itself from this unapproachable truth by locking madness away, by making it possible and knowable, by interning and silencing the outside. See, for instance, the chapters "'Stultifera navis'" and 'Le Grand Renfermement', in Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, pp. 15-109.

extremity where it contests and is contested to the point that it is effaced.⁴⁹ Foucault looks to Blanchot's fiction to indicate what this language might look like:

[Le langage de la fiction] ne doit plus être le pouvoir qui inlassablement produit et fait briller les images, mais la puissance qui au contraire les dénoue, les allège de toutes leurs surcharges, les habite d'une transparence intérieure qui peu à peu les illumine jusqu'à les faire éclater et les égaille dans la légèreté de l'inimaginable. Les fictions chez Blanchot seront, plutôt que des images, la transformation, le déplacement, l'intermédiaire neutre, l'interstice des images.⁵⁰

This writing is not the sort of power [*pouvoir*] which produces, here we are perhaps reminded of productive disciplinary power, but that power [*puissance*] which undoes, lightens words of their burden of meaning and scatters. 'Pas de réflexion, mais l'oubli', writes Foucault of this outward-looking language.⁵¹ Blanchot had considered forgetting in similar terms five years earlier in the introduction to the review of *Histoire de la folie*: 'En même temps que nous nous servons de l'oubli comme d'un pouvoir, le pouvoir d'oublier nous remet à l'oubli sans pouvoir, au mouvement de ce qui dérobe et se dérobe, le détour même.'⁵² Forgetting is power turned outside-in; it is that affirmative dimension to technology which is something other than power and which is also captured in the movement of fragmentary writing. Modern technology furthers the forgetting of Being for Heidegger; there is something deeply nostalgic in this identification of technology with representational calculating reason, which Blanchot here rejects. This view of *techne* is only further confirmed when 'technique' gets subsumed into the neuter from 1965 onwards, as the difference between the fragmentary and broader technology, like any difference established by the neuter, proves to be extremely fragile.

⁴⁹ Foucault, 'La Pensée du dehors', in *Dits et écrits*, I, 518-39 (pp. 522-23) (first publ. in *Critique*, 229: *Maurice Blanchot* (June 1966), 523-46).

⁵⁰ Foucault, 'La Pensée du dehors', in *Dits et écrits*, I, 524.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

⁵² Blanchot, 'L'Oubli, la déraison', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 290.

In 1964 Blanchot turned his attention to the version of the fragment put forward by the Jena Romantics in the *Athenaeum*, the influential journal edited by August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel between 1798 and 1800. The latter wrote of the form chosen for some of the contributions to this journal: ‘A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments. But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary, both in form and in content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences.’ And also: ‘A fragment, like a work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and complete in itself like a hedgehog.’⁵³ Schlegel thinks the fragment as an ideal inclusive totality which promises the all-inclusive work as a theoretical horizon or endpoint. Blanchot, while noting the revolutionary action implied in this project and its potential to open an epoch,⁵⁴ is critical of this aphoristic fragment:

Altération peut-être inévitable et qui revient: 1) à considérer le fragment comme un texte concentré, ayant son centre en lui-même et non pas dans le champ que constituent avec lui les *autres* fragments; 2) à négliger l’intervalle (attente et pause) qui sépare les fragments et fait de cette séparation le principe rythmique de l’œuvre en sa structure; 3) à oublier que cette manière d’écrire ne tend pas à rendre plus difficile une vue d’ensemble ou plus lâches des relations d’unité, mais à rendre possibles des rapports nouveaux qui s’exceptent de l’unité, comme ils excèdent l’ensemble.⁵⁵

The exteriority and the originary caesura characteristic of the fragmentary were already evident in the earlier essay on Heraclitus and Blanchot’s engagement with forgetting and madness; but it is this third excessive characteristic which Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe underestimate in their mock dialogue of 1982, where they argue that the fragment in Blanchot’s account remains dialectical.

⁵³ ‘Athenaeum Fragments’, trans. by P. Firchow, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 246-60 (pp. 248, 251).

⁵⁴ Blanchot, ‘L’Athenaeum’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 522.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

They quote the following passage from *L'Écriture du désastre*, omitting what follows 'énergie de disparaître':

◆ Le fragment, en tant que fragments, tend à dissoudre la totalité qu'il suppose et qu'il emporte vers la dissolution d'où il ne se forme pas (à proprement parler), à laquelle il s'expose pour, disparaissant, et, avec lui, toute identité, se maintenir comme énergie de disparaître, énergie répétitive, limite de l'infini mortel — ou œuvre de l'absence d'œuvre (pour le redire et le taire en le redisant). De là que l'imposture du Système — le Système élevé par l'ironie à un absolu d'absolu — est une façon pour le Système de s'imposer encore par le discrédit dont le crédite l'exigence fragmentaire.⁵⁶

Noting that the Greek origin of 'énergie' can be translated as work, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue that Blanchot's fragment has the all-inclusive work as its horizon and is therefore no different from the Romantic aphorism.⁵⁷ However, read further through this passage and the relationship between fragment and totality becomes more complicated than a simple opposition: 'énergie répétitive' suggests worklessness rather than work and the insertion of a quotation from an earlier essay on the Jena Romantics, 'ou œuvre de l'absence de l'œuvre',⁵⁸ and the subsequent response placed within parentheses silences and exceeds this aphorism. The 'œuvre de l'absence de l'œuvre' associated with Romanticism is not the worklessness at stake in the fragmentary, which is the effect of an uncontrollable repetition or dissemination. The Romantic irony to which Blanchot refers in this passage is, like reflexivity in the conventional sense, a means of further reinforcing the dialectic: the system pretends to be unsystematic only to have a better grip on itself, to include its own opposite in

⁵⁶ Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, pp. 99-100.

⁵⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Noli me frangere', *Revue des sciences humaines*, 185 (1982), 83-92 (p. 87).

⁵⁸ The 'original' passage from which this quotation is taken: 'Et certes [le romantisme] est souvent sans œuvre, mais c'est qu'il est l'œuvre de l'absence de l'œuvre, poésie affirmée dans la pureté de l'acte poétique, affirmation sans durée, liberté sans réalisation, puissance qui s'exalte en disparaissant, nullement discréditée si elle ne laisse pas de traces, car c'était là son but: faire briller la poésie, non pas comme nature, ni même comme œuvre, mais comme pure conscience dans l'instant' (Blanchot, 'L'Athenaeum', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 517).

an authoritarian way.⁵⁹ But the dialectic can go in either direction and there is another kind of irony which is reflexive in the sense that it is turned toward an extremity — the sort of reflexivity discussed by Foucault in ‘La Pensée du dehors’ — so that writing and other modes of technology are unleashed in a disseminating and uncontrollable manner which escapes the system.

Blanchot’s return to Schlegel in 1980 was probably prompted by the publication of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *L’Absolu littéraire* in 1978. Other critics have also overstated the connection between Blanchot and Romanticism. J. M. Bernstein, for instance, argues that the primary context in which one should read Blanchot is Romanticism.⁶⁰ One source of confusion is the opposition between transitive and intransitive language and the subsequent view of literature as autonomous, associated with Romanticism and often mistakenly with Blanchot.⁶¹ In addition, the distinction is sometimes blurred between *désœuvrement* as Blanchot employs the term (explicitly not a dialectical negativity) and *désœuvrement* as *œuvre* in the Romantics, but Blanchot never articulates the idea of the work as worklessness in his own name. For instance, he writes specifically of the Jena Romantics in ‘L’Athenaeum’: ‘qu’écrire, c’est faire œuvre de parole, mais que cette œuvre est désœuvrement’.⁶² There is also the question of subjectivity in Romanticism which is broached in the following paragraph of the essay: ‘Le “je” du poète, voilà donc ce qui finalement importerait seul, non plus l’œuvre poétique, mais l’activité, toujours supérieure à l’ouvrage réel, et seulement créatrice lorsqu’elle se sait capable à la fois d’évoquer et de révoquer l’œuvre dans le jeu souverain de l’ironie.’⁶³ There is a vast difference between what Blanchot says of Romantic subjectivity and that

⁵⁹ Blanchot makes a similar point in relation to Maurice Clavel (the writer alongside whom Blanchot is considered by Foucault in 1979) and Socratic irony in *L’Écriture du désastre*: ‘◆ Quelqu’un (Clavel) a écrit de Socrate que nous l’avons tous tué. Voilà qui n’est guère socratique. Socrate n’aurait pas aimé nous rendre coupables de rien, ni même responsables d’un événement que son ironie avait par avance rendu insignifiant, voire bénéfique, en nous priant de ne pas le prendre au sérieux. Mais, bien sûr, Socrate n’a oublié qu’une chose. C’est que plus personne après lui ne pouvait être Socrate et que sa mort a tué l’ironie. C’est à l’ironie que ses juges en avaient tous; c’est à l’ironie que nous autres, ses justes pleureurs, nous continuons d’en avoir tous’ (p. 103). On Blanchot and irony, and how Blanchot may misread Schlegel, see Hector Kollias, ‘Unworking Irony’s Work: Blanchot and de Man Reading Schlegel’, in *Blanchot Romantique*, ed. by McKeane and Opelz, pp. 191-207.

⁶⁰ J. M. Bernstein, ‘Poesy and the Arbitrariness of the Sign: Notes for a Critique of Jena Romanticism’, in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. by Nikolas Kompridis (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 143-72 (p. 164-68).

⁶¹ This was discussed in Chapter One in relation to Bruns’ reading of Blanchot as ‘last Romantic’ in *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*.

⁶² Blanchot, ‘L’Athenaeum’, in *L’Entretien infini*, p. 524.

⁶³ Ibid.

non-subjective refusal seen in *La Folie du jour* and 'Le Refus'. Care should therefore be taken when reading Blanchot in the context of early German Romanticism.

The force of repetition takes over from the subject in fragmentary writing. It is the repetition enabled by modern technology, the printing press, which drives the logic behind the paperback to the point of explosion in 'Les Grands Réducteurs' [1965], which is (when reading essays in chronological order) Blanchot's last explicit engagement with 'la technique' for fifteen years. The 'système de freinage et d'arrêt' associated with modern technology and culture is transformed in this essay into 'un processus explosif'.⁶⁴ Works are so readily available in the age of the Livre de poche that it is as if time were abolished by this mass reproduction: 'La durée tend ainsi à s'abolir, ce temps de la maturation et de la patience que, jusqu'ici, à raison ou à tort, on tenait pour nécessaire à toute transmission culturelle.'⁶⁵ The printing press allows that interruption or fracture of which Foucault writes in 1979, outplaying the cultural limits within which it functions. In this essay it is argued that one consequence of the mass reproduction of texts is that we may now better understand the reductive power associated with culture, a power which degrades works to mere values and ensures that the incalculable and enigmatic distance of the work becomes familiar, knowable and sayable. Culture is here defined by plenitude; existing within a continuous and homogenous space without weakness or digression an all-encompassing unity and identity are its ideals.⁶⁶ Literature is displaced through cultural appropriation; but 'literature', questioning not only the limits of this cultural unity but also itself, challenges this continuity. Quoting Trotsky in the footnote which concludes the essay, Blanchot compares literature and art in the era of the Livre de poche to the Revolution which turns life into a sort of bivouac, rendering everything — but itself more than anything else — strange, transitory and precarious: "*Prise dans la diversité de ses épisodes, la Révolution apparaît soudain dénuée de signification. Où est donc la Révolution? Voilà la difficulté.*" Texte plus énigmatique qu'il ne semble, et la question qu'il pose, je crois qu'elle ne se pose pas moins aux manifestations les plus assurées de la littérature et de l'art.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Blanchot, 'Les Grands Réducteurs', in *L'Amitié*, p. 81.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 85 n. 1.

Returning to ‘Nietzsche, aujourd’hui’ [1958] for publication in *L’Entretien infini* [1969] Blanchot replaces ‘aphorisme’ with ‘fragment’ to further distance fragmentary writing from the Schlegelian fragment which suppresses repetitive energy and shores up the absolute self. In the last of the three essays on Nietzsche collected in *L’Entretien infini*, ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’, originally published in two parts in 1966/7, some eight years after ‘Nietzsche, aujourd’hui’ and ‘Passage de la ligne’, Blanchot no longer appeals to nihilism, but turns to the fragment as a means of responding to that affirmation which demands separation. ‘Mais qu’en est-il d’elle, la pensée, lorsque l’être — l’unité, l’identité de l’être — s’est retiré sans faire place au néant, ce refuge trop facile? [...] Langage: l’affirmation même, celle qui ne s’affirme plus en raison ni en vue de l’Unité. Affirmation de la différence, mais toutefois jamais différente. Parole plurielle.’⁶⁸ The account of the neuter given in ‘L’Oubli, la déraison’ echoes this unstable relationship between language and affirmation, where madness: (un)reason. And just as the telephone call in *La Folie du jour* establishes and annuls a distance within the doubled narrator and exposes ‘him’ not caught up within the exchange to an unwilling refusal, the colon equates language to an affirmation of (in)difference which it simultaneously destabilises. This is not an isolated instance where Blanchot uses punctuation as a destabilising strategy, or ‘technique’; elsewhere in the same essay he writes: ‘Nous savons seulement que la pensée du surhomme signifie: l’homme disparaît, affirmation qui est poussée au plus loin, lorsqu’elle se redouble en question: l’homme disparaît-il?’; ‘Le monde: un texte; le monde, “*jeu divin par-delà le Bien et le Mal*”’; ‘± ± Interpréter: l’infini: le monde. Le monde? Un texte? Le texte: le mouvement d’écrire dans sa neutralité’; ‘± ± Différence: la non-identité du même, le mouvement de distance, ce qui porte en déportant, le devenir d’interruption.’⁶⁹ The colons suggests a clear and stable relationship between two, sometimes three, terms; however, the relation is no sooner asserted than it is under erasure through the introduction of semi-colons or question marks in a sort of typographical

⁶⁸ Blanchot, ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 227-55 (p. 234) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 168 (December 1966), 967-83; 169 (January 1967), 19-32).

⁶⁹ Blanchot, ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’, in *L’Entretien infini*, pp. 236-37, 248, 252, 254. Derrida makes a similar point about Blanchot’s use of the colon in *Michel Foucault tel que je l’imagine*: ‘Aura-t-on jamais ponctué avec plus de rigueur, d’économie, de réserve, laissant même ouverte l’hypothèse, mais ne nous y arrêtons pas, que là, peut-être, personne n’est plus là pour personne, et c’est bien la mort, ce mourir dont Blanchot s’est plaint, si souvent, si profondément, non qu’il fût fatal mais qu’il restât impossible?’ Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), pp. 334-35.

re-enactment of the movement of distance and the becoming of interruption described in that last line quoted.

What better emblem for this formulation than the plus-minus sign ($\pm \pm$), a mathematical symbol that indicates a choice of two possible values, each of which is the suspension or deferral of the other, and precedes each of the twenty-eight fragments of 'Nietzsche et l'écriture fragmentaire'? This symbol points to that original separation, allowing Difference to speak (because what matters is the unstable answer or reversible movement between the two values) and an incalculable excess to escape this mathematical system. Blanchot notes the importance of typographical marks in the penultimate fragment of the essay:

$\pm \pm$ [...] Articuler le vide par le vide, le structurer en tant que vide en dégageant de lui l'étrange irrégularité qui toujours dès l'abord le spécifie comme vide, c'est par là que les signes d'espace — ponctuation, accent, scansion, rythme (configuration) —, préliminaire de toute écriture, font le jeu de la différence et sont engagés dans son jeu. Non pas qu'ils servent à traduire ce vide ou à le rendre visible, à la manière d'une notation musicale: au contraire, loin de retenir l'écrit au niveau des traces que celui-ci laisse ou des formes qu'il concrétise, leur propriété est d'indiquer en lui la déchirure, la rupture incisive (le tracé invisible d'un trait) par laquelle le dedans retourne éternellement au dehors, tandis que s'y désigne au pouvoir de donner sens, et comme son origine, l'écart qui toujours l'en écarte.⁷⁰

These interrupting signs do not translate the void but indicate a rupture. Of course, this distance is never stable and is continually distanced from itself in a double movement of external reflection — one is here reminded of the discussion of revolution and literature at the end of 'Les Grands Réducteurs' similarly enabled by the printing press. The Nietzschean fragment, Blanchot had written in his notes for the *Revue internationale*, is linked to that roving thought which is accomplished in

⁷⁰ Blanchot, 'Nietzsche et l'écriture fragmentaire', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 254.

separate affirmations.⁷¹ These signs place this discourse in relation to the fragmentary which lies outside the totality and coherence of language, enabling each fragment to think the impossible.

Blanchot returned to Nietzsche after a new edition of his work edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari started to appear in German in 1967. The first volume to appear, which was in fact the fifth volume of the edition, included *Le Gai Savoir* and fragments from the summer of 1881 to the summer of 1882, which are those quoted by Blanchot in 'Nietzsche et l'écriture fragmentaire'. That same year also saw the publication of the important Nietzsche *Cahiers de Royaumont*, an account of a conference organised by Deleuze in 1964, to which Foucault, Deleuze and Klossowski had contributed among others. A further text on Nietzsche by Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, appeared in 1969 and would be hugely influential to Blanchot's reading of Eternal Return.

Heidegger thinks Eternal Return as the sum of the will: by dint of the will, Nietzsche is able to overcome time and Eternal Return is the last ditch statement of metaphysics. Blanchot, on the other hand, following Klossowski, sees a total loss of will in Eternal Return. Klossowski reads Eternal Return on two levels: the direct experience or revelation that Nietzsche underwent at Sils-Maria and the presentation of the doctrine of the vicious circle.⁷² Eternal Return as revelation represents an apprehension of the self as what it really is — a fortuitous moment — through a process of passing through previous instances of the self. The past is irretrievable and so to will the past is to will necessity or to will what is beyond will. In this account, the self is nothing other than a discontinuous series of non-identical and fortuitous instances and Eternal Return is a forgetting of the current self and a remembering of the others each in turn until one returns to the inactive self which first underwent the revelation of Return.⁷³ Eternal Return is therefore a sort of deconstruction of the will, which brings us back to the machine. Blanchot writes in 1970:

⁷¹ Blanchot, '[La Gravité du projet...]', in *Écrits politiques*, p. 112.

⁷² See Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, rev. edn (Paris: Mercure de France, 1969), especially the chapter 'L'Expérience de l'Éternel Retour', pp. 89-112.

⁷³ On Klossowski's reading of Eternal Return, see Ian James, *Pierre Klossowski: The Persistence of a Name* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), pp. 129-41.

◆ Admettons que les événements ne soient ‘réels’ qu’au passé, machine fonctionnant de telle sorte que nous puissions nous remémorer, par une mémoire bien agencée, quoique avec un léger doute, tout ce que le futur pourrait nous promettre ou nous faire redouter. Mais le passé n’est-il pas toujours moins riche que l’avenir et toujours autre? Assurément, sauf si, le passé étant l’infiniment vide et l’avenir l’infiniment vide, l’un et l’autre n’étaient que la manière oblique (l’écran différemment incliné) dont le vide se donne, simulant tantôt le possible-impossible, tantôt l’irrévocable-révolu; sauf encore si la loi de l’Éternel Retour ne laissait jamais d’autre choix que de vivre au passé l’avenir et à venir le passé, sans cependant que passé, avenir soient appelés à s’échanger selon la circulation du Même, puisque, entre eux, l’interruption, le défaut de présence, empêcherait toute communication autrement que par l’interruption: interruption vécue soit comme le révolu du passé ou le possible de l’avenir, soit précisément comme l’utopie incroyable de l’Éternel Retour. On ne peut croire à l’Éternel Retour. C’est sa seule garantie, sa ‘vérification’. Telle est, là-bas, l’exigence de la Loi.⁷⁴

The future belongs as much to yesterday as to tomorrow when it is experienced as repetition of an irretrievable past. This is a messianic futurity void of any past or future Messiah which, rather than hastening the end, is the patient deferral of all ending. This messianic structure is eternally open to a future which is never limited by the horizons of meaning and which allows for the passage toward the other.⁷⁵ At every point in Eternal Return the present is eclipsed; interrupted, a void is opened between past and future in which what matters, like those two values indicated by the plus-minus sign in ‘Nietzsche et l’écriture fragmentaire’, is that difference which always risks slipping into indifference. But the only proof we have of Eternal Return is that we cannot believe in it: what Klossowski calls the presentation of the doctrine of the vicious circle is parodic because always describing something that escapes that description. The law of interruption interrupts itself; returning to the self that first

⁷⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 25 (this and a number of fragments in the opening pages of *Le Pas au-delà* (pp. 7, 10-15, 21-27, 33-36, 73) first publ. as ‘L’Exigence du retour’, *L’Arc*, 43 (Winter 1970), 48-53).

⁷⁵ The text by Blanchot which most obviously sets in play this self-deconstructive movement of the messianic (the promise that can never realise itself and in affirming itself resists the possibility of its realisation and in so doing simultaneously maintains and suspends itself) is *L’Écriture du désastre*, pp 214-16. For the messianic in Blanchot, see Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 368-91.

underwent the revelation of Eternal Return, the will that wills this experience is undone and Eternal return, dehumanized, becomes an uncontrollable mechanism. In the final section of this chapter I will consider how the shift toward a broader more inclusive *techne* following the suppression of ‘technique’ in 1965 results in a sort of inorganic writing, what we may think of as a cancerous machine or nature gone haywire.

The Cancerous Machine

The suppression of ‘technique’ from 1965 to 1980 betrays a rethinking of technology which coincides with the development of a fragmentary mode of writing. The description of Eternal Return as a forgetting machine in *Le Pas au-delà* reveals the otherwise unarticulated role of *techne* in the privation of subjectivity. Eternal Return, preventing all communication other than by interruption, is a sort of radicalised telephone call exposing the self to its own fortuity at all moments in time. Fragmentary writing similarly disobeys all rule of identity to outplay the human; it is when ‘technique’ disappears from Blanchot’s idiom that technology becomes everywhere implied and the humans, animals and insects which once populated Blanchot’s writing give way to piles of rubble in *Le Pas au-delà*.⁷⁶

A short contribution to a special issue of *Cahiers Confrontation* in 1984 entitled ‘Après le sujet qui vient’ provides no answer to the interrogative pronoun ‘Qui?’ which it takes as its title, but is an unwilling refusal to respond between the one who writes and a spectral figure hanging over his or her shoulder: ‘Quelqu’un regardant par-dessus mon épaule (moi peut-être) dit, lisant la question: *Qui vient après le sujet?*: “*Vous voilà revenu à l’époque lointaine où vous passiez votre baccalauréat.*” — “*C’est juste, mais cette fois j’irai à l’échec.*””⁷⁷ What comes after the subject is a non-identical

⁷⁶ Gerald L. Bruns — reading Blanchot alongside thinkers such as Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault — notes that the neuter is absolutely refractory to normalization and to the rule of identity. Bruns rightly notes that the loss of self for Blanchot is equal to the loss of subordination, but Blanchot remains a marginal figure in this study and the shift that occurs in his writing in the 1960s, which sees the substitution of stones for animals and insects, such as the stag beetle of *La Folie du jour*, is overlooked. Gerald L. Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-3, 56-57.

⁷⁷ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Qui?’, in *La Condition Critique*, pp. 440-43 (p. 440) (first publ. in *Cahiers Confrontation*, 20 (February 1989), 49-51).

past; there can be no facsimile when the self is destitute and the repetitive energy of fragmentary writing takes over, undoing all presence. The *who?* does not belong to an ordinary temporality — always arriving its arrival is perpetually deferred — but to the temporality of a suspended afterwards. In this sense the *who?* is nonliving and the unending dialogue that forms the bulk of this ‘response’ gives way to a mechanistic, because uprooted, mode of writing — some of the closing lines of ‘Qui?’ are a quotation from Claude Morali who is in fact quoting from *Le Pas au-delà*.⁷⁸

Eternal Return as doctrine, a thought void of any content, places the entirety of individual experience under the law of repetition, non-identity and discontinuity according to Klossowski.⁷⁹ The interrogative pronoun, having evacuated the subject of all identity, persists unanswered so that the only thing left to question is itself. The only possible response to this self-reflexive question is the unwilling refusal of all response. The result is therefore the echoed repetition of the *who?* which is forever differing from itself like that spectral figure reading over the shoulder of the one who writes. Interrogating the neuter is analogous to posing the question: ‘Qui?’

◆ Nous pouvons nous interroger sur le neutre, sachant que l’interrogation ne va pas au-delà de l’interrogation; celle-ci serait déjà neutralisée, et ‘qu’est-ce que?’ ne peut être sa forme, même si elle laisse ainsi vide la place du questionné en ne questionnant que cette place vide; peut-être parce que le neutre vient toujours dans la question hors question. Nous pouvons nous interroger sur le neutre, sans que le neutre entre dans l’interrogation. Quant à la réponse, l’écho répété du neutre, elle n’est même pas pure tautologie, puisqu’elle disperse la parole du même. *Le neutre, le neutre*: est-ce une répétition, ou quelque chose comme les ricochets qui, à l’infini, par le glissement de ce qui glisse, déclinent des séries multiples: le galet, la propulsion, la surface qui porte, la surface qui se dérobe, le temps, la droite qui se courbe et fait retour jusqu’à la chute qui résulte, sans leur appartenir, de tous ces moments et ainsi ne peut s’isoler, tout en

⁷⁸ This is quoted later in this chapter. The fragment in question is found in Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 16. Claude Morali quotes this fragment in *Qui est moi aujourd’hui?* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

⁷⁹ Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, pp. 94-95.

ayant lieu à part, en sorte que le point singulier qui la marquerait, reste, dans sa singularité, hors de la réalité de l'ensemble: irréel et irréalisé?⁸⁰

'*Le neutre, le neutre*', Blanchot writes in this extract, leaving the unspoken difference suspended over the clause that follows. This ricochet produces differing unforeseen effects with each impact. Like a skimmed stone travelling across the water, the subject becomes impoverished, weakened with each glance off the water's surface, and is revealed to be nothing other than a discontinuous series of non-identical and fortuitous instances. There are echoes here of the description of Eternal Return as forgetting machine; 'galet' may refer to a pebble but also to the tensioner or pulley within an engine which keeps the belt taut and the engine running smoothly; here the pulley is faulty and introduces play into the mechanism.⁸¹ Derrida, in his analysis of the apocalyptic tone, remarks that 'tonos' [*ton*, tone] first signified everything subject to stricture: the tight ligament, cord, the braided rope, cable, strap (we could also add to this list the shoelaces in the painting by Van Gogh).⁸² Changes in tone or a multiplicity of tones leads to a slackening or unravelling of the philosophical tone, a derailment that interrupts the unity of the destination, the self-identity of the addressee or sender. Fragmentary writing allows such a multiplicity of tones and proposes radical change; the neuter renders everything non-identical with itself, but this cannot take place in the here and now — the neuter can never be the object of an interrogation — and once advanced like the skimmed stone this radical change collapses and everything remains the same.

What would a space caught up in this temporality of a suspended afterwards look like? The fragments of *Le Pas au-delà* emanate from a depopulated world in which nonliving figures await a forever deferred future. There is almost nothing in this text which can be identified as natural or organic: those fragments that seem to narrate a fiction are set in a cityscape littered, indoors and out, with rubble. Other than a fleeting reference to the dove of Noah's ark and a passing simile in which

⁸⁰ Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, pp. 149-50 (this and a series of other fragments from *Le Pas au-delà* (pp. 121-36, 156, 137-52) were first publ. as 'Fragmentaires', *L'Éphémère*, 16 (Winter 1970), 376-99).

⁸¹ Galet is also a homophone of 'galée', which refers to galley proofs used in printing.

⁸² Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique*, pp. 25-27. See also Derrida's discussion of those loose shoelaces in the painting by Van Gogh, in 'Restitutions: la vérité en peinture', in *La Vérité en peinture*.

our relationship to death is described as rodent-like, there are no animals of any kind in this text.⁸³

Compare this with earlier works such as *Thomas l'obscur* and *Le Dernier homme* which include references to what we might traditionally call nature: the beach, the sea, caves, a distant mountain range, a fish pond, dragonflies, birds and so on. What remains in *Le Pas au-delà* is a strange depopulated world.

◆ *Les paroles échangées par-dessus la lourde table de marbre, allant de l'immobilité à l'immobilité. Il s'écarterait de quelques pas, écoutant le jeune murmure là-bas des jours et des années. Tout autour, il y avait des hommes apparemment endormis, couchés à même le sol, des couvertures jetées sur eux comme on jette de la terre en talus, et ces petits monticules innombrables, pensées de la ville émiettée, s'égalisaient jusqu'à devenir le plancher nu de la pièce.*⁸⁴

The stones scattered across the floor of this room signal a radical non-identity which is open to the other because it is difference itself — the doubled figure of 'Qui?' and the ricocheted movement of the skimming stone and of the neuter in the previous extract also indicate this difference. Neither dead nor alive but suspended in nonliving repetition, the difference that speaks from these stones is also the difference that renders the subject destitute. Blankets are thrown over these figures as if they were throwing earth on a rampart: these piles of rubble are a defence or resistance. Refusal, Blanchot had written in connection to De Gaulle's return to power in 1958, is not accomplished by an individual but from, 'un commencement très pauvre qui appartient d'abord à ceux qui ne peuvent pas parler'. It is in this sense that the stones are open to the other which could be human, animal, insect or thing.

What is depicted in this fragment is the echo of a politically significant event, most likely the student occupations of May 1968 in which Blanchot was heavily involved.⁸⁵ A debate takes place

⁸³ Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, pp. 123, 134.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁸⁵ On Blanchot's involvement in May '68, see Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, pp. 469-83.

across the table while on the floor tired figures lying down to rest are exposed to a persistent youthful murmuring coming from days and years to come and those already gone. The echo of May 1968 is also heard in the children's song in that displaced quotation at the end of 'Qui ?' (Blanchot quoting Morali quoting Blanchot): '*Comme si avait retenti, d'une manière étouffée, cet appel, un appel cependant joyeux, le cri d'enfants jouant dans le jardin: "qui est moi aujourd'hui?" — "qui tient lieu de moi?"*' Et la réponse joyeuse, infinie: lui, lui, lui.'⁸⁶ Only children can give an account that is open to impossibility, Blanchot continues in 'Qui?', and only children can sing it joyously: 'Soyons, fût-ce dans l'angoisse et la pesanteur de l'incertitude, de temps en temps, ces enfants.'⁸⁷ The first-person plural imperative commands or asserts the presence of these children which is then suspended by the third-person imperfect subjunctive that follows, introducing uncertainty and discontinuity and eclipsing this presence. The song of the children playing in the garden simultaneously rings out and is stifled; the stress is on their presence and identity as subjects but the response is inconclusive and the repeated impersonal pronoun indicates a ricochet, an unspoken difference, which has undone and will undo the subject. That the undoing of the subject has already begun is more apparent in the version quoted in 'Qui?' in 1984 where an em dash is inserted which does not appear in *Le Pas au-delà* in 1973. This typographical interruption suggests a doubling of 'moi'. The response to these discontinuous questions is a joyful one that does not pit counter-power against power but is a sort of powerless power.

The unwilling refusal to respond to the impossible question put to Blanchot by Jean-Luc Nancy and René Major, the editors of *Cahiers Confrontation*, in 1984 reveals a destitute subject evacuated of all identity and suspended in the temporality of nonliving repetition. The subject, interrupted, gives way to an uncontrollable mechanism: fragmentary writing. The fragment behaves like a cancerous cell, proliferating beyond its own borders and undermining the stability of (Blanchot's) original text:

⁸⁶ Blanchot, 'Qui?', in *La Condition critique*, p. 443. The extract quoted, without the em dash, is an unacknowledged citation of a fragment in *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 16

⁸⁷ Blanchot, 'Qui?', in *La Condition critique*, p. 443.

◆ Du ‘cancer’ mythique ou hyperbolique: pourquoi nous effraie-t-il par son nom, comme si par là l’innommable se désignait? C’est qu’il prétend mettre en échec le système de code sous l’autorité duquel, vivant et acceptant de vivre, nous sommes dans la sécurité d’une existence purement formelle, obéissant à un signe modèle d’après un programme dont le processus serait de bout en bout normatif. Le ‘cancer’ symboliserait (et ‘réaliserait’) le refus de répondre: voilà une cellule qui n’entend pas l’ordre, se développe hors loi, d’une manière qu’on dit anarchique — elle fait plus: elle détruit l’idée de programme, rendant douteux l’échange et le message, la possibilité de tout réduire à des simulations de signes. Le cancer, sous cette vue, est un phénomène politique, une des rare manières de disloquer le système, de désarticuler par prolifération et désordre la puissance programmatrice et signifiante universelle — tâche jadis accomplie par la lèpre, puis par la peste. Quelque chose que nous ne comprenons pas neutralise malicieusement l’autorité d’un savoir-maître. Ce n’est donc pas par la simple mort au travail que le cancer serait une menace singulière: c’est comme *dérèglement* mortel, dérèglement plus menaçant que le fait de mourir et rendant à celui-ci son trait de ne pas se laisser compter ni entrer en ligne de compte, de même que le suicide disparaît des statistiques où l’on prétend le dénombrer. [Si la cellule dite cancéreuse, se reproduisant indéfiniment, est éternelle, celui qui en meurt pense, et c’est l’ironie de sa mort: ‘Je meurs de mon éternité.’]⁸⁸

The final sentence of the fragment quoted here does not appear in the first edition of the text; it is a later addition which does not change the pagination of the text, which bears no acknowledgement that it is anything other than a first edition.⁸⁹ Through a sort of wayward proliferation, an uncontrollable dissemination that escapes the system, the cancerous cell works outside the law of the programme and destroys all idea of a programme. The cancerous cell is perhaps a Foucauldian resistance to the biopolitical forces that regulate and manage our lives. Foucault writes in the first volume of *Histoire*

⁸⁸ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, p. 137, Blanchot’s emphasis.

⁸⁹ Blanchot says this in a letter to Pierre Madaule dated 2 March 1981: ‘Je puis vous confier ceci: la première édition de *L’Écriture du désastre* se trouvant épuisée (comment? je ne sais, presque personne n’en ayant parlé), je n’y ai ajouté qu’une seule phrase qui se termine par ces mots “Je meurs de mon éternité”.’ Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Madaule, *Correspondance: 1953-2002*, ed. by Pierre Madaule (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 29. That this is the only change he made to the text makes it all the more significant.

de la sexualité [1976] that suicide was once a crime, because the right to death was the power possessed by the sovereign over his people, but now it is a unique and individual act of resistance against forms of administering life: ‘Cette obstination à mourir, si étrange et pourtant si régulière, si constant dans ses manifestations, si peu explicable par conséquent par des particularités ou accidents individuels, fut un des premiers étonnements d’une société où le pouvoir politique venait de se donner pour tâche de gérer la vie.’⁹⁰ The influence of Foucault is certainly evident in this fragment (the reference to disease and leprosy is perhaps a nod to *Histoire de la folie* and *Surveiller et punir*), but Blanchot goes further than Foucault: cancer is mortal debauchery, not simply death at work. The significance of this difference is clarified in the cancerous proliferation of the fragment: the irony of this death is that it eludes the subject. Blanchot is suggesting that Foucault’s account of resistance is reliant on the will of a subject (we saw earlier that Blanchot understands Romantic irony as an expression of poetic subjectivity); this cancerous proliferation is a different sort of incomprehensible and infinitely reflexive irony which exceeds and contests subjectivity.

A Blanchotian reflexivity marks the proliferation of the cancerous cell: turning outward it contests and is contested to the point that it is effaced. The fragment echoes this cancerous proliferation. The fragmentary has a complicated relationship with the organic which is one of excess rather than a simple opposition. In its excess the fragmentary is that *techne* which outplays the human; it is an inorganic writing which does not abide by the cellular, genetic, organic and combinatory programmes defined by those technicians of disciplinary power.

⁹⁰ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, I, 182.

Conclusion

This thesis began by noting that Blanchot is a thinker deeply engaged in the events and debates of his time. Some have drawn parallels between Blanchot and Heidegger, for whom the identification of technology with representational calculating reason reflects a desire to return to a more originary experience of Nature or Being. Heidegger is an important and persistent interlocutor, but his thought is increasingly challenged and displaced by Blanchot, who is far from subscribing to any sort of technophobia but equally does not share the faith in the machine characteristic of modernity. This thesis has shown that the natural or Being is always traversed or interrupted by the technical for Blanchot and that this was already evident in the work of, for instance, Heraclitus, Hölderlin and Mallarmé — an assertion which casts some doubt over claims that we are experiencing something new in the age recently labelled the Anthropocene.¹ Blanchot remains relevant today because, at a time when we face an onslaught of narratives concerning the end of the world, his work hears something other than destruction in this ending and indicates a way of thinking other than the *anthropos*.

Roger Laporte recognises the prophetic nature of Blanchot's writing, which looks toward and welcomes an uncertain future: 'Blanchot, contrairement à ce que certains ont pu penser, n'ouvre

¹ For instance: 'The Anthropocene represents, for the first time, the demand made upon a species consciously to consider its impact, as a whole and as a natural/physical force, upon the whole planet — the advent of a kind of new, totalizing reflexivity as a species. [...] Above all, considered at this planetary scale, the Anthropocene undermines the nature/culture distinction itself, the difference between natural history and human history.' Timothy Clark, 'Nature, Post Nature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* ed. by Louise Westling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 75-89 (p. 86).

aucun nouvel espace religieux: non seulement il n'éprouve aucune nostalgie pour un arrière-monde, mais il annonce, voire prophétise, une époque où l'athéisme serait chose passée, car aurait enfin disparu et le souci de Dieu et celui de l'absence de Dieu.² In rejecting the binary between theism and atheism Blanchot recognises something profoundly affirmative in a future where nothing is predetermined, neither by an all-powerful God nor by the teleological progress of history. Those often italicised fragments in *Le Pas au-delà*, situated in the temporality of a suspended afterwards, reveal the patient deferral of the possibility of ending in Blanchot, or the impossibility of dying, marking the step beyond belief and disbelief which is precisely never a step because 'pas', in its double meaning, suspends or withdraws itself. The emphasis placed by Derrida on the *à-venir* — unlike the *futur*, which is predictable, programmable, foreseeable and will be at a later date, the *à-venir* is the totally unpredictable coming of the other — was no doubt prompted by Blanchot's invocation of the future.³ Derrida insists on how far Blanchot is still ahead of us: 'S'il y avait, ce que je ne crois pas, quelque pertinence à lui en faire l'éloge, s'il n'y avait là grossière attribution de maîtrise et si *Le Pas au-delà* ne périssait d'avance telle métaphore, je dirais que jamais, autant qu'aujourd'hui, je ne l'ai imaginé si loin devant nous.'⁴ It is as though this thought resonates from an unknowable future and our response to it can only ever be inadequate.

One telling instance of how Blanchot has set the agenda for later thinkers is the use of his work by Bernard Stiegler, perhaps currently the most influential thinker of *techné*. Stiegler quotes from or refers to Blanchot in all three volumes of the work,⁵ and a quotation from the first of

² Roger Laporte, 'L'Ancien, l'effroyablement ancien', in *Études* (Paris: P.O.L., 1990), pp. 9-50 (p. 12).

³ Derrida's analysis of the *viens* that features in what would become, once the third section was suppressed, the closing line of *L'Arrêt de mort* signals his indebtedness to Blanchot. See Derrida, 'Pas', in *Parages*, pp. 9-115).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵ See Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, I, 15, 29, 101-02, 120, 123 n. 1, 209 n. 1, 257, 268-70; II: *Désorientation* (1996), 43-45, 212-13; III: *Le Temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être*, 48 [this is an unacknowledged reference to *L'Instant de ma mort*]. The engagement with Blanchot continues in some of his most recent work; a quotation from 'Le Grand Refus' is one of three given as the epigraph to Bernard Stiegler, *La Société automatique* (Paris: Fayard, 2015-), I: *L'Avenir du travail*, 7: 'Inlassablement, nous édifions le monde, afin que la secrète dissolution, l'universelle corruption qui régit ce qui "est", soit oubliée au profit de cette cohérence de notions et d'objets, de rapports et de formes, claire, définie, ouvrage de l'homme tranquille, où le néant ne saurait s'infiltrer et où de beaux noms — tous noms sont beaux — suffisent à nous rendre heureux.' See Blanchot, 'Le Grand Refus', in *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 46-69 (p. 46) (first publ. in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 82 (October 1959), 678-89).

Blanchot's two essays on nuclear weapons is the epigraph to the general introduction to *La Technique et le temps*:

Admettez-vous cette certitude: que nous sommes à un tournant?

— Si c'est une certitude, ce n'est pas un tournant. Le fait d'appartenir à ce moment où s'accomplit un changement d'époque (s'il y en a), s'empare aussi du savoir certain qui voudrait le déterminer, rendant inappropriée la certitude comme l'incertitude. Nous ne pouvons jamais moins nous contourner qu'en un tel moment: c'est cela d'abord, la force discrète du tournant.⁶

This quotation is significant because Stiegler wants to specify the way technics constitutes our experience of time differently in different epochs; he sees in Blanchot a writer engaging with similar concerns and undoubtedly recognises a conception of writing as *techne* in his work. Stiegler takes up, albeit discreetly, many of the key emphases of Blanchot's thought, but he does so without grasping their full measure.

The relation between writing and modern technology as it is articulated by Stiegler clarifies his interpretation of the above quotation from Blanchot. Stiegler argues that historical epochs and the collective forms of time consciousness which define these epochs are constituted in and through technical systems and prostheses. There are three different layers of memory according to Stiegler: genetic or biological memory, which is programmed into our DNA; epigenetic memory, which refers to the experience acquired over a lifetime stored in the central nervous system; and epiphylogenetic, or tertiary, memory, which is where genetic and epigenetic memories come to be deposited in technical systems or artefacts. Only human beings have access to this third sort of memory, which transforms not only our understanding of the human but also our understanding of technics. Stiegler thinks the human in terms of an originary lack and thinks technics according to a logic of supplementarity which responds to that lack: the first volume takes its name from the myth of Epimetheus, the Greek god who forgot to bestow the human with any positive trait or skill, which

⁶ Blanchot, 'Sur un changement d'époque: l'exigence du retour', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. 394.

meant that his brother Prometheus then stole the gift of the arts or craft (*techné*) and fire from the gods to give to the human. This sort of (epiphylogenetic or tertiary) memory is what distinguishes the human from other living creatures; Stiegler contends that philosophy has repressed the technical dimension of the human and accorded technicity only secondary instrumental status when it is in fact constitutive of the human. The latter half of the twentieth century, he argues in the second volume of *La Technique et le temps*, marks the end of the historical culture rooted in the linearity of writing, in which the retention of the past and collective apprehension of the present passes through the technical system of the written word, and the emergence of a new historical epoch of media such as photography and cinema. These new technologies are changing, or reprogramming, our experience of time so that we become ‘deterritorialised’, as real time digital communication annihilates geographical situatedness and temporal delays.⁷

The danger is that we remain ignorant of these changes; this is the problem Stiegler is contemplating when he writes that technics is evolving quicker than culture. He refers to Blanchot on Ernst Jünger when making this point:

Tout se passe alors comme si le temps sautait hors de lui: non seulement parce que les processus de prise de décision et d’anticipation (dans le domaine de ce qui Heidegger nomme la ‘préoccupation’) passent irrésistiblement du côté de la ‘machine’ ou du complexe technique, mais parce que en quelque sorte, comme l’écrit Blanchot reprenant un titre de Jünger, l’époque passe le *mur du temps*.⁸

What is important for Stiegler is not to look back nostalgically to the previous epoch of linear writing, because writing and modern technology produce a similar effect of disorientation. He quotes from ‘La Bête de Lascaux’ (‘le savoir impersonnel du livre qui ne demande pas à être garanti par la pensée d’un seul, laquelle n’est jamais vraie, car elle ne peut se faire vérité que dans le monde de tous et par

⁷ For an overview of *La Technique et le temps*, see Ian James, *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp. 61-82.

⁸ Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, I, 29.

l'avènement même de ce monde. Un tel savoir est lié au développement de la technique sous toutes les formes et il fait de la parole, de l'écriture, une technique')⁹ to argue that an impersonal knowledge, an authority without author, also inheres in writing as technics [l'écriture *comme technique*]:

Il s'agit *ici* de l'écriture orthographique du livre ouvert par Hérodoté inaugurant une époque dont on pressent, 'lisant dans nos années', la clôture — une autre impersonnalité, une autre entente de l'impersonnel advenant, où le 'plus considérable' changement est inscrit dans l'avènement des 'puissances impersonnelles' de la technique moderne.¹⁰

Stiegler is fearful that in the age of real time media we risk losing individual liberty, freedom and choice in a society governed by a sort of Foucauldian biopower.¹¹ In the third volume he considers how we risk the synchronisation of our time consciousness in the service of mass markets and economic productivity, which renders it impossible for individuals to differentiate themselves and become distinctly singular and unique. This impersonal knowledge associated with technics is evident in writing, which means that rather than looking back we need to engage critically with the impact on our time consciousness of these new media. Stiegler calls for a new consideration of technicity. Blanchot, on the other hand, is sceptical of the Heideggerian claim, which Stiegler seems to be adopting, that there are different epochs of Being that can be identified and addressed as such; his objection is that to do so with any certainty it is necessary to withdraw from Being, which then implies that the epoch cannot be delimited with any certainty.

Stiegler sees in Blanchot a thinker of writing as *techne* and, as well as the use of 'La Bête de Lascaux', he quotes extensively from 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' to argue that there is continuity between the written word and technical objects: writing exemplifies the question of invention as paradox, which is to say the constitution of time as technics.¹² He quotes Blanchot on the

⁹ Blanchot, 'La Bête de Lascaux', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, p. 684.

¹⁰ Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, II, 43-44. In the first volume, Stiegler quotes Blanchot on Herodotus as an example of a prior change of epoch, the beginning of the epoch of writing (*La Technique et le temps*, I, 101).

¹¹ James, *The New French Philosophy*, p. 79.

¹² Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, I, 268-70.

maker of the stove and the writer and argues that for both to work [*œuvrer*] is to forget the self and to let one's other be. This is a materialization or solidification of consciousness in the technical artefact. Stiegler clarifies this point:

Cela dit, la lecture de Blanchot signifie aussi une 'conversion' — mais qui n'oublie jamais l'hors-de-soi: elle n'est pas retour au soi, mais aller en effets (d'écriture) au dehors, au 'monde'. Chez Blanchot, l'écriture (et tout ce qu'elle désigne: le dehors comme instrumentalité, la *tekhnè*) est l'horizon originaire, c'est-à-dire constitutif, de la temporalité en tant que telle. Et la publicité est essentielle à cette 'conversion' — car tel est le sens de toute écriture.¹³

There are hints that Stiegler is a thoughtful and attentive reader of Blanchot: the suspension of world in quotation marks, the bracketing off of writing from outside and then vice-versa, the recognition that this is an outward-facing reflexivity and the designation of writing as *techne*. On the other hand, the characterisation of the outside as instrumentality and the claim that writing is the originary horizon indicates a further misreading of Blanchot.¹⁴ Stiegler argues that writing gives time and as such is the origin of the human; but for Blanchot it is writing without horizon that traces, but also exceeds, the horizon.

Drawing influence from Blanchot, Stiegler does not always think the implications of his thought through to their logical conclusion. From a Blanchotian perspective Stiegler's suggestion that welcoming the other is a process of work is problematic. A footnote after 'conversion' in the extract quoted above directs us to those texts in *L'Espace littéraire* 'sur l'usage'. We can speculate that Stiegler has in mind the following passage on conversion in the real and in the imaginary:

Nous voyons ainsi que la conversion, ce mouvement pour aller vers le plus intérieur, œuvre où nous nous transformons en transformant tout, a quelque chose à voir avec notre fin —, et cette

¹³ Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁴ Watt contests the use of Blanchot by Stiegler on the grounds that the latter wants writing to be more useful, or more technical, than Blanchot's text permits in 'Uses of Maurice Blanchot in Bernard Stiegler's *La Technique et le temps*', p. 316.

transformation, cet accomplissement du visible en l'invisible dont nous avons la charge, est la tâche même de mourir qu'il nous a été jusqu'ici si difficile de reconnaître, qui est un travail, mais assurément bien différent du travail par lequel nous faisons des objets et projetons des résultats. Nous voyons même à présent qu'il lui est opposé, s'il lui ressemble toutefois en un point, car, dans les deux cas, il s'agit bien d'une 'transformation': dans le monde, les choses sont *transformées* en objets afin d'être saisies, utilisées, rendues plus sûres, dans la fermeté distincte de leurs limites et l'affirmation d'un espace homogène et divisible — mais, dans l'espace imaginaire, *transformées* en l'insaisissable, hors d'usage et de l'usure, non pas notre possession, mais le mouvement de la dépossession, qui nous dessaisit et d'elles et de nous, non pas sûres: unies à l'intimité du risque, là où elles ni nous ne sommes plus abrités, mais introduits sans réserve en un lieu où rien ne nous retient.¹⁵

For Stiegler the conversion is an exteriorisation of the self in the technical artefact; it marks the inauguration of the human. This understanding of technics as constitutive of time and of the human is premised on the possibility of death; it is only through technics that we retain the past and anticipate the future. Blanchot writes in the above extract that this conversion has something to do with our end, but the em dash following this statement indicates something that cannot be articulated or recalled. In the imaginary the conversion acts on both the thing and the subject: withdrawn from ourselves as subjects we no longer face the thing as object. The metamorphosis described by Blanchot is not a simple change of form, the concretization of consciousness in the technical artefact, but a deconstruction of the will which allows us to step aside from the sovereign subject and welcome the other. In his analysis of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* from 1949, metamorphosis results in a proliferation of strange creatures¹⁶ and in the extract above the homogeneity, which Stiegler fears to be the consequence of the contemporary synthesis of time consciousness via real time media, is associated with the world of the sovereign subject rather than the impersonal knowledge of the book. It is through not work but worklessness — an exteriorization that is never complete, the bracketing off

¹⁵ Blanchot, 'Rilke et l'exigence de la mort', in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 181-82.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Blanchot, 'L'Expérience de Lautréamont', in *Lautréamont et Sade*, p. 273.

of world in the phenomenological epoché that does not refound or rediscover the ego (as in Husserl), but dramatises a moment of absolute uncertainty which leaves us teetering over the edge of the abyss — that the hierarchy between human, animal and stone collapses in Blanchot's writing.

Stiegler frames his project in terms of remembering what has long been forgotten in metaphysics — technics — and looks to challenge the limit between the organic and inorganic. Richard Beardsworth has argued that in claiming that only the human has access to this memory stored in technical artefacts Stiegler implies the prior existence of a pure nature that precedes this rupture.¹⁷ This is problematic because there is an uncontested or unexamined foundation which could provide the grounding for a dogmatic politics. Blanchot, on the other hand, conceives writing as a forgetting, or an interruption of the present. The distinction between the two conceptions of writing as a tool for memory and as a means of contesting our historical assumptions is important. Stiegler asks for a greater understanding of the impact on our consciousness of time and limits his analysis to the human; writing that it is a question of knowing if we can predict the evolution of technics as impersonal 'puissance' and if we can determine what sort of 'pouvoir' we may have over technics, he pits power against counter-power.¹⁸ Blanchot, by refusing to think in terms of different epochs of Being, welcomes the uncertainty of an unknowable future and foretells neither devastation nor salvation. The technical is irreducible to history which it contests, thus allowing Blanchot to recognise in writing and also in recently developed technologies (radio, cinema, the telephone, the atom bomb, the printing press and spaceflight) the potential to challenge our worldly perspective. Fear felt in the face of an uncertain future does not translate into simple technophobia for Blanchot, but responsibility for the other: '♦ La peur, nous l'appelons mortelle, alors qu'elle nous dérobe la mort où elle nous attire, mais toujours la peur excédant le moi où elle se retranche, absent de celui qui la porte, comme du langage qui la prononce, nous rendant étrangers à nous-mêmes, est la peur pour *quelqu'un* qui ne se laisse pas aborder et que la mort détourne déjà de notre secours pourtant appelé, attendu.'¹⁹

¹⁷ Richard Beardsworth, 'Thinking Technicity', *Cultural Values*, 2 (1998), 70-86 (p. 81).

¹⁸ Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*, I, p. 35.

¹⁹ Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, p. 83.

The uncertainty that undermines any claim that we are undergoing a change of epoch signals not that writing has fallen into timeless eternity, but a withdrawal from presence which is simultaneously a radical interruption of the present, demanding a new perspective. It resonates with recent work in eco-criticism,²⁰ but denies that there is anything new about our current situation. In the twenty-first century there is undeniably a sense of entrapment, unpredictability and fragility, reflected in daily reporting of extreme weather events, worsening air quality and species extinction; but the same irreversible realisation is shared by the squirrel trapped in the cage in *L'Arrêt de mort*: something else is in control. Blanchot's priority is to insist how, with danger, comes also a chance. This is his version of what Hölderlin says in 'Patmos': 'Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst | Das Rettende auch'.²¹ The chance for something other than destruction is heard in the call of the impossible which insistently appears throughout Blanchot's work in the form of the inhuman and which encourages an outward self-reflection (this is perhaps what Blanchot is naming in the letter to Roger Laporte from 1984 when he writes of '[l]a chose publique'). The end does not always imply a new beginning, as was Heidegger's belief [*ein neuer Anfang*], but a suspended moment where nothing is final: 'la fin commence'.²²

²⁰ See, for instance, Timothy Morton's call for us to think ecology without (Heideggerian) world in 'Coexistants and Coexistence: Ecology without a World', in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 168-80.

²¹ Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, p. 462.

²² Blanchot, *La Folie du jour*, p. 17.

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