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PHILOSOPHY IN THE NARRATIVES OF MAURICE BLANCHOT

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INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL

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Speaking at Maurice Blanchot’s cremation at Guyancourt, outside Paris, on February 24, 2003, Jacques Derrida evoked his friend’s “récits, novels, fictions” that “we are scarcely beginning, it seems to me, to read,” and observed that their “future remains pretty much intact,” untouched by literary or philosophical criticism. He then went on to mention L’attente l’oubli (1962) and L’écriture du désastre (1980) as examples of works that “inseparably mix, in a still unprecedented way, philosophical meditation and poetic fiction” (45). Some years earlier, when introducing Parages (1986), a book of his essays and lectures on and around Blanchot, Derrida had noted that he had recently rediscovered the narrative part of his friend’s oeuvre. All of Blanchot’s narratives, not only L’attente l’oubli and L’écriture du désastre, query the usual distinctions between philosophy and literature, he had found, and he suggested that a whole new redistribution of distinctions was needed before we could talk of them. Doubtless one should not speak without caution of the “literary critical” and “philosophical” works of Blanchot, Derrida wrote, for those labels are woefully inadequate to the singular texts they seek to describe. Yet the books by Blanchot that we conventionally recognize by those terms—from Faux pas (1943) to La communauté inavouable (1983)—belong to an “essential movement of thought” that Derrida had long acknowledged and had taken into
account in his own writing. The “fictions,” as he called them, had remained inaccessible to him, however. Reading them, he said, was like being submerged “in a fog from which came to me only fascinating gleams, and sometimes, but at irregular intervals, the light of an invisible beacon on the coast” (11). In 1995, speaking about Blanchot’s last narrative, L’instant de ma mort (1994), Derrida once again noted the difficulty of classifying the work. “I do not know whether this text belongs, purely and properly and strictly and rigorously speaking, to the space of literature [l’espace de la littérature], whether it is a fiction or a testimony, and, above all, to what extent it calls these distinctions into question or causes them to tremble.”

Derrida is right: we have yet to read Blanchot’s narratives with the openness to their ways of being that is needed, and a part of that intellectual labor is a rethinking of the relations between the philosophical and the literary in them. Derrida has jump-started this process with Parages (1986) and Demeure (1998), but, as he says, the future of Blanchot’s narratives has not yet been compromised, let alone programmed, by past or present criticism. I recall a comment he made to me in New York in 1997: “It will be centuries—centuries!—before we can read Blanchot’s fictions,” quickly adding, “He has rethought so radically what it means to read and write that each page calls forth an immense commentary.” The thought of all those decades of close reading of Blanchot seemed to suffuse him with pleasure, and all the contributors to this collection will testify to the strange joy that comes from responding as fully as possible to Blanchot’s novels and récits. This collection of new essays seeks to take a modest step along the path of reading Blanchot well. All his narratives are commented upon: the early stories “Le dernier mot” (1935) and “L’idylle” (1936); Thomas l’obscur, mostly the récit (1950) but also the novel (1941); Aminadab (1942), Le Très-Haut (1948), L’arrêt de mort (1948), “La folie du jour” (1949), Au moment voulu (1951), Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas (1953), Le dernier homme (1957), and L’instant de ma mort (1994). Of the “mixed” works, full attention is given to L’attente l’oubli (1962), although neither Le pas au-delà (1973) nor L’écriture du désastre (1980) is considered. To be sure, traces of a narrative can be discerned in each of these fragmentary texts but not enough, or not regularly enough, to call forth sustained commentary under the heading of “Philosophy in the Narra-
For the title of this collection of essays, I have adapted the title of Blanchot’s contribution to François Laurelle’s Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas (1980). “Notre compagne clandestine.” Blanchot recalls his time with Lévinas at Strasbourg in the 1920s, an encounter not only with a man who would become a lifelong friend but also with philosophy. As soon as he had met Lévinas, Blanchot says, “it was with a sort of testimony that I persuaded myself that philosophy was life itself, youth itself, in its unbridled—yet nonetheless reasonable—passion, renewing itself continually and suddenly by an explosion of new and enigmatic thoughts.”8 Impatient with the sequestering of philosophy exclusively to the world of professors, Blanchot proclaims, “Whether shamefully, gloriously, mistakingly, or by default, we are all philosophers” (41). Yet Blanchot is sympathetic to that side of modern philosophy that declares or prophesies the end of philosophy, whether it be the end of metaphysics (Kant) or the conclusion of philosophy itself in one or more ways (Nietzsche, Hegel, Heidegger). So it comes as a surprise to hear Blanchot embracing philosophy in such an unrestrained way. As it happens, he does not embrace philosophy without reserve, and he remains committed to some ideas in that dark strain of modern philosophy. Yet those ideas do not have their roots in Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger. Those roots go far deeper, all the way back to Greek philosophy and one of its most enduring irritants, skepticism.

Blanchot well knows, as he writes in another essay, that “[w]hat ends, continues.”9 And in order to keep faith with both philosophy’s self-critique and its remarkable ability to renew itself from unlikely points and in surprising ways, he does what any good philosopher would do: he draws a distinction. He prefers to talk, he says, of “the philosophical” rather than of “philosophy” as such. The philosophical would be that which prompts “a questioning so radical that the entire tradition would have to be called forth in its support” (41). Later in the essay he returns to the word “philosophical” when giving a precise sense of what he values in Lévinas’s writing. One is always struck, he says,
by one of his typical procedures: to begin, or to follow out, an analysis (most often, phenomenologically inspired) with such rigor and informed understanding that it seems precisely in this way that everything is said and that truth itself is disclosed—right along, that is, until we get to a minor remark, usually introduced by, e.g., an “unless” [“à moins que”] to which we cannot fail to be attentive, which fissures the whole of the preceding text, disturbing the solid order we had been called upon to observe, an order that nonetheless remains important. This is perhaps the movement that could properly be called philosophical [C’est peut-être là le mouvement proprement philosophique], not by stroke of force or belabored assertion, but a movement that was already Plato’s expedient in his dialogues (his probity, and ruse as well). (48)

For Blanchot, then, the philosophical would be that which undoes an apparent order without simply denying its importance or replacing it with something else.

Elsewhere, as we shall see, Blanchot will tell us a lot more about this movement that characterizes the philosophical, but here he notes something significant about it, to which Derrida was alert, and which will become important when we read Blanchot’s narratives. “Philosophy would henceforth be our companion day and night,” he writes of his student days in Strasbourg, “even by losing its name [en perdant son nom], by becoming literature, scholarship, the lack thereof, or by standing aside” (42). Philosophy loses its proper name and the rights accrued to it over the centuries—to sit in judgment over other discourses, to weigh their rationality, their truth claims, and to expand itself by means of the formula “the philosophy of x”—and it does so first of all in becoming the philosophical. One way it does that is in becoming literature when literature constitutes itself as a radical questioning, beginning, no doubt, with received notions of “literature” as given by Nicolas Boileau, Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, and the brothers Edmond and Jules Goncourt, among others. The same would presumably happen with anthropology, history, politics, psychology, sociology, and so forth. So philosophy becomes a clandestine companion—secret, concealed, working underground—hidden in other discourses in order to question everything more thor-
oughly than any one discipline will allow, even the discipline that philosophy itself has become.

In becoming philosophical we need to be attentive to philosophy without being unduly distracted by the prestige of the proper names we associate with it, big names from Heraclitus to Derrida, and perhaps without our paths being circumscribed by borders between its provinces—epistemology, ethics, logic, metaphysics, political philosophy, and the rest—and without restricting ourselves to the vocabularies that have imposed themselves as foundational at specific times, from the Greeks (logos and nous, ousía and morphé) to the moderns (consciousness and intentionality, the transcendental and the reduction, among others). The vocabulary of intelligibility given by Aristotle in Book Delta of the Metaphysics is essential to thought, but it is also essential, Blanchot would remind us, that we remain attuned to what presses against intelligibility. Not that Blanchot was himself inattentive to the formal study of philosophy. No later than 1929 he was working at the Sorbonne on a thesis for a Diplôme d’Études Supérieures. Its title was “La conception du dogmatisme chez les sceptiques.” The thesis was submitted in June 1930, about two years before he started writing Thomas l’obscur, in which one can feel the pressure of its apparent concerns from time to time. Through his life, he read philosophy with care, and, as Derrida would admiringly observe in conversation, had a profound “philosophical culture.” His interest in skepticism would color that culture and would be transformed in his writings, both theoretical and literary—if I may rest lightly for a moment on a distinction that gives way in his later writing.

Blanchot’s early interest in skepticism returns unexpectedly in “Notre campagne clandestine,” prompted by a sentence in one of his friend’s books. Toward the end of Lévinas’s Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence (1974) we read, “Language is already skepticism” [Le langage est déjà scepticisme]. As Blanchot rightly suggests, the sentence should be pronounced with the accent on the adverb: “Language is already skepticism” (47). The skeptical is not something that contaminates language when it is used imprecisely or something into which it stumbles when it attempts to grasp metaphysical principles outside the realm of the understanding, Lévinas suggests. Not at all: the skeptical is constitutive of language as such. This insight becomes the point d’appui of Blanchot’s essay.
intrigues him, as it does every student of skepticism, is that, \textquote{\textit{[w]hile easily refuted, the refutation leaves skepticism intact. Is it really contradicted when it openly uses reasons that it destroys?}}\) (42).\textsuperscript{13} He goes on:

Contradiction is also the essence of skepticism: just as it combats every dogmatism openly, by exposing its unsatisfactory or onerous presuppositions (origin, truth, value, authenticity, the exemplary or proper, etc.), so does it do so in an implicit way, referring itself back to a \textquote{\textit{dogmatism}} so absolute that every assertion is threatened (this is already to be observed in the ancient skeptics and in Sextus Empiricus). (42)

This situation does not allow us to accede to an easily won nihilism, or to a loose and baggy epistemological or moral relativism, which merely teaches us that there is no point in searching for the truth. Instead, as Blanchot’s Lévinas realizes, it requires us to recognize that everything we say is \textquote{\textit{overseen by an indefatigable adversary [contradicteur infatigable], one to whom he does not concede but who obliges him to go further, not beyond reason into the facility of the irrational or towards a mystical effusion, but rather towards another reason, towards the other as reason or demand [mais vers une raison autre, vers l’autre comme raison ou exigence]}}” (42).

In \textit{Autrement qu’être}, Lévinas elaborates this theme in terms of a distinction between the Saying and the Said. It is not simply a division between two different functions of language. \textquote{\textit{Is not the inescapable fate in which being immediately includes the statement of being’s other not due to the hold the said has over the saying, to the oracle in which the said is immobilized?}}, the philosopher asks in one of the rhetorical questions that contribute to his unique style.\textsuperscript{14} Saying is an ethical openness to the other person, and—in its moment of self-exposure, its act of invitation and unstudied receptiveness—is strictly irreducible to the settled being of the Said. And yet there is an inevitable passage from the Saying to the Said. For as Stéphane Mallarmé observed, \textquote{\textit{everything in the world exists to end up as a book.}}\textsuperscript{15} The master had in mind \textit{Le livre}, his projected great book that would contain the whole world. Yet the remark can also be played in a minor key, and that is what Lévinas wishes to do: the book in
question may well be a collection of parliamentary debates or a classroom notebook, not a collection of poems or a novel, and once the Saying has become the Said it presents a closed face to us. Unless, of course, it is unsaid, shaken up, by not attending solely to what is written as a list of so many themes but by being approached from a fresh angle, with a view to indicating that another person is presumed by what has been said, even if only by being addressed or being assumed to read what has been written.

Lévinas’s later moral philosophy turns on affirming the Saying without the Said, on accepting a “responsibility for another” that is “bound to an irrecoverable, unrepresentable past, temporalizing according to a time with separate epochs, in a diachrony” (47). In Saying, I do not speak to you simply in the present, I address you as you come to me from an immemorial past that has never been present, and that frustrates any attempt I might make to figure my responsibility for you in the limited terms of a moral contract made in the past, the present, or even in a time to come. I am always and already responsible for the other person, regardless of any relation or non-relation I may have with him or her, even to the point, Lévinas will say in a moment of hyperbole, of being responsible for the other person’s lack of responsibility.16 Blanchot affirms this idea of Saying without the Said, speaking, in a darker tone, of “the unqualifiable Saying, the glory of a ‘narrative voice’ that speaks clearly, without ever being obscured by the opacity or the enigma or the terrible horror of what it communicates.”17 It is an instance, one among many, of Blanchot accepting a distinction drawn by a philosopher in the narrow sense of the word and then drawing it into his own terms: a translation, if you like, of philosophy into the philosophical. What is at issue, as we shall see, is what Blanchot means by “narrative voice.”

I return to the expression “indefatigable adversary.” When reading these words, and not limiting them to a narrowly dialectical context, anyone familiar with Blanchot’s narrative writing is likely to think of Thomas l’obscur, where an obscure nonbeing sets itself on Thomas in the night. “He was locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could say: That doesn’t exist . . . and which nonetheless filled him with terror as he sensed it wandering about in the region of his solitude.”18 One may think, too, of the terse yet constant questioning in
Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas, and the dialogues in L’entretien infini and hidden even in fragments of Le pas au-delà and L’écriture du désastre. In another way, the words on the last page of L’arrêt de mort come to mind: “As for me, I have not been the unfortunate messenger of a thought [une pensée] stronger than I, nor its plaything, nor its victim, because that thought, if it has conquered me [si elle m’a vaincu], has only conquered through me, and in the end has always been equal to me.”

Certainly we also think more generally of the “other” evoked by Blanchot, “the other as reason or demand,” that impinges on all his narrative writing, as well as on all his critical and philosophical writing. It is tempting to associate skepticism, understood as contestation of any dogmatic attitude, with one of the ways in which this “other” presses on some of Blanchot’s narratives. For there is often a moment in these narratives when a settled view, a situation or language itself, turns into questions that are seemingly without end. In Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas we read of a question that “kept opening and closing” so that the narrator “could not even fall into it”; and in Le dernier homme we are told, “our words are so light that they keep opening out into questions,” while in L’attente l’oubli one fragment reads, “When you affirm, you still question.”

We can get closer to what this “other” is for Blanchot if we turn to another of his essays on a philosopher, this time his reflections on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le ‘discours philosophique’” (1971). The philosopher and the writer are very close to one another, Blanchot says, since each is borne along by a movement of self-effacement. Philosophy does not forever depend on the one who develops it: the Phenomenology of Mind, for example, transcends Hegel’s signature. And the same is true, Blanchot says, of a novel or a récit. On hearing this, we are likely to recoil and insist on the importance of an authorial idiom when reading Rabelais or Flaubert, Proust or Duras. Yet Blanchot looks at the matter through the lens of ontology: “before the work, the writer does not yet exist; after the work, he is no longer there: which means that his existence is open to question.”

Philosophical discourse is “without right,” he says; it does not have the legitimate power to say what it wants to say—the truth—and keeps falling short of itself even when, especially when, it authorizes itself to tell the truth. He turns to Le visible et l’invisible (1964) to hear what Merleau-Ponty says on the topic:
It is a question of knowing if philosophy, as the reconquest of brute or wild being [comme reconquête de l’être brut ou sauvage], can be accomplished by means of eloquent language, or if it would not be necessary for philosophy to use language in a way that takes its power of immediate or direct signification from it in order to match it with what it wants all the same to say [pour l’égaler à ce qu’elle veut tout de même dire].

Philosophy needs an indirect mode of expression in order to be able to say what it wants to say. It has known that ever since Plato wrote dialogues. But what is this something that can only be spoken of indirectly?

The philosopher, Blanchot says (with Merleau-Ponty specifically in mind), is the one who speaks in the name of philosophy, forever questioning what comes before him or her, including his or her received language and style of questioning, and holding open “an empty place” where “a word always other” (2) than the one he or she actually says can indirectly be heard. So the philosopher is the person of “double speech” (2), oriented to two phased counterparts. On the one hand, the philosopher elaborates a discourse, a rigorous critical reflection on being, knowledge, rights, and so on; while, on the other hand, he or she responds to a “dis-course,” Blanchot’s term for a word without any rights, the “other word, word of the Other [l’Autre]” (2), which lacks any sense or direction and cannot be heard directly. This “other word” incessantly poses a question to us, disturbing the discourse on being, knowledge, and rights, while nonetheless leaving it intact. We do not doubt that this discourse has its value, but the question that comes to us from the other word makes the philosopher lose this discourse at a certain point. And that loss, for Blanchot, is constitutive of “philosophical discourse” (4). Philosophy loses itself when “the other word” comes to dispute the philosopher’s argument, even in its most assured points, thereby forcing him or her to continue the discussion by examining its premises and conclusion ever more radically. Merleau-Ponty writes “philosophical discourse,” Blanchot thinks, in being attentive to the indirect call of brute or wild being, while, for his part, Blanchot calls this “other word” the murmur of the Outside [le Dehors]. We might see ancient skepticism, as Blanchot understands it, as a foreshadowing of this dis-course of the Outside.
It is worthwhile to pause a moment to consider this central notion of the Outside, for it comes up time and again in the essays in this collection, and has already been raised in the notion of “narrative voice.”

Blanchot approaches the Outside (or as he sometimes calls it, the Neutral or the Imaginary) from several vantage points—from literature and art, from mysticism and the everyday, from Marxism and psychoanalysis, and always from dying. There can be no understanding any of his writings, including his narratives, without grasping what he means by it; and this is no simple matter, partly because of the strangeness of the notion itself and partly because he characterizes it in different ways, depending on the text or question which he is considering. Consider, first, his evocation of it in “La littérature et le droit à la mort” (1947–48):

The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them really present outside of themselves. It is an element, a piece barely detached from its subterranean surroundings: it is no longer a name, but rather one moment in the universal anonymity, a bald statement, the stupor of a confrontation in the depths of obscurity. And in this way language insists on playing its own game without man, who created it. Literature now dispenses with the writer: it is no longer this inspiration at work, this negation asserting itself, this idea inscribed in the world as though it were the absolute perspective of the world in its totality. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists. That is why it cannot be confused with consciousness, which illuminates things and makes decisions; it is my consciousness without me.26

The ground against which Blanchot cuts his figure here is Hegel’s account of language as creating meaning by negation. When a singular thing is named its simple singularity is abolished, Hegel argues, for it is
then incorporated into a general category. Language is not consumed by negativity, however, for it also plays a passive, neutral role simply by itself: it keeps an author, whether alive or dead, held between being and non-being, in an impersonal twilight existence. We hear the murmur of our own words without the minds that wrote them; we hear an “endless resifting of words without content” (332). When we read a story we can hear the narrator’s voice, but beneath that voice we can also overhear the “narrative voice,” the endless murmur of the Outside.

This eerie sense of the Outside, like a macabre device in a story by Edgar Allen Poe, continues to be explored in *L’espace littéraire* (1955). Here, though, Blanchot associates the Outside more generally with art, not only with language:

Art—as images, as words, and as rhythm—indicates the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless: art points into a sordid absence, a suffering condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness.

Art is originally linked to this fund of impotence where everything falls back when the possible is attenuated. In the world, decisive affirmation dependably serves truth as a basis and foundation, as the place from which it can arise. By comparison, art originally represents the scandalous intimation of absolute error: the premonition of something not true but whose “not” does not have the decisive character of a limit, for it is, rather, brimming and endless indeterminacy with which the true cannot communicate. Nor does truth by any means have the power to reconquer it [le pouvoir de reconquérir]. The true cannot define itself vis-à-vis this “not” except by becoming the violence of the negative.

Here we do not have “wild being” so much as “wild nonbeing.” The very nature of art is tied to the image. Blanchot maintains. So we are not dealing with figurative rather than nonfigurative visual art, with a poetry that is rich in visual images (Philippe Jaccottet, say) as distinct from a more discursive poetry (Gérard Macé, for example), but with art as image. The artist does not seize the phenomenon before him or her but instead takes the image that is given at the same time (but not in the same way) as the
phenomenon. In the terms that Blanchot puts it, a phenomenon gives itself as being while its image gives itself as nonbeing; and the artist each time chooses nonbeing over being in order to produce art. If this situation grants the artist an unusual, and hardly pleasurable, experience, it also yields to him or her direct contact with what Blanchot takes to be most profound in reality, something beyond or beneath being itself. To be sure, philosophers and mystics have been on the verge of formulating a concept of the Outside—Heraclitus and Eckhart, Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas, among them—but the artist, who works daily with the space of images, encounters this profundity without the need of an education in philosophy. Artistic practice seems to confirm phenomenology (the artist is less bothered with what to look at than with how to look at it), and yet it also questions the scope and status of phenomenology: for art, as Blanchot understands it, is constitutively drawn to what remains obscure, not what manifests itself.

Later, in “L’homme de la rue” (1962), now better known by the new title it received in L’entretien infini (1969), “La parole quotidienne,” Blanchot once again considers the nearness of the Outside, though this time with no reference to literature or art. Now it is the everyday that indicates the Outside. I quote a very rich passage at some length:

There must be no doubt about the dangerous essence of the everyday, nor about the uneasiness that seizes us each time that, by an unforeseeable leap, we stand back from it and, facing it, discover that precisely nothing faces us: “What? Is this my everyday life?” Not only must we not doubt it, we must not dread it; we should rather seek to recapture the secret destructive capacity in play in it, the corrosive force of human anonymity, the infinite wearing away. The hero, while still a man of courage, is he who fears the everyday; fears it not because he is afraid of living in it with too much ease, but because he dreads meeting in it what is most fearful: a power of dissolution. The everyday challenges heroic values; but this is because, even more, it impugns all values and the very idea of value, ruining always anew the unjustifiable differences between authenticity and inauthenticity. Day-to-day indifference is situated on a level at which the question of value is not posed: there is [il y a] the everyday (without subject, with-
out object), and while there is, the everyday “he” does not have to be of account; if value nonetheless claims to step in, then “he” [or “it,” il] is worth “nothing” and “nothing” is worth anything through contact with him. To experience everydayness is to undergo the radical nihilism that is something like its essence and by which, in the void that animates it, everydayness does not cease to hold the principle of its own critique.\footnote{25}

If the everyday was first a sociological category, a way of evoking the rituals, symbols, and social practices of average daily life in a big modern city, and then a metaphor of utopia (as proposed by the Neo-Marxist Henri Lefebvre), it becomes for Blanchot a philosophical notion in his sense of the word “philosophical.”

Two very different vanishing points are set in place in “La parole quotidienne.” The first is Heidegger’s account of everydayness, \textit{Alltäglichkeit}, in \textit{Sein und Zeit} (1927), which brings in its wake a host of related concepts: authenticity and inauthenticity [\textit{Eigentlichkeit} and \textit{Uneigentlichkeit}], chatter [\textit{Gerede}], the “They” [\textit{das Man}], and publicness [\textit{Öffentlichkeit}]. The everyday is what wears away the distinction between acting on one’s own and acting so as to follow what “They” say one should do or indeed failing to act because of indifference. It erodes the “as mine” [\textit{je meines}] of \textit{Da-sein}. The second vanishing point is \textit{Lévinas’s} notion of the \textit{il y a} or the “there is”: not the generosity of being that Heidegger affirms in his talk of the “es gibt,” but the impersonal persistence of being even in nonbeing. Even if we imagine a cosmos where there is absolutely nothing, we must imagine that sheer nothingness weighing on the one who imagines it. This sense of the inescapable nature of being is concretely experienced in states of deep boredom, fatigue, and insomnia. For \textit{Lévinas}, the advent of another person to whom one cannot remain indifferent suffices for us to overcome the \textit{il y a}. It is a passage from being in general to a particular being, and hence a movement going in the exact opposite direction from the one that Heidegger follows in \textit{Sein und Zeit}.$^{31}$

\textit{Blanchot} is close to \textit{Lévinas} in many respects, but his Outside and the \textit{il y a} are not quite the same.$^{32}$ For him, the other person comes to me in the strangeness of the neutral, and there is no escape from the onset of the Outside in the kingdom of the ethical.$^{33}$ Indeed, it is the Outside as it
comes endlessly toward us in our everyday life that makes the everyday a site of continuous contestation, and that makes the “man on the street” a dangerous person for the government. (As always in his later political writing, Blanchot is thinking of les événements of May 1968.) We are urged to go further in our questioning of political authority, the “I,” and even God. Again, we see that skepticism is associated with the Outside, which itself is “untransgressable.”

I recall what Blanchot said with respect to Lévinas in “Notre compagne clandestine,” that skepticism refers back “to a ‘dogmatism’ so absolute that every assertion is threatened.” In the same way, the dis-course of the “other word” refers us to the Outside, which is the closest that Blanchot gets to a dogma. This neutral space is certainly not an Absolute (whether in Hegel’s, Schelling’s, or Bradley’s sense), and yet it cannot be transgressed because it is that which enables transgression in the first place.

In putting things in this way, I do not mean to figure the Outside as a curious piece of new metaphysical machinery, or to present the endless questioning that it motivates as a mere academic extension of skepticism. As the discussion of the everyday indicates, the Outside for Blanchot is as much a political concern as it is literary or artistic. Infinite contestation should result not in the formation of a mandarin sensibility, wearily reflecting on the truth as unattainable, but in a transformation of that self, a change that is at once existential (one loses the power to say “I”) and political (one becomes a revolutionary of a certain sort). Nor was this a position he reached only years after his meditations on literature. In a critical reflection on Lefebvre’s La somme et le rest (1959), originally entitled “La fin de la philosophie” (1959), Blanchot contemplates the fate of a dissident Marxist philosopher such as Lefebvre in the world of communist action. Lefebvre was expelled from the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) in 1958, an act that did not surprise many on the far left of French politics, for Lefebvre never represented the official Marxist philosophy of the party, the dialectical materialism that supposedly marked the end of philosophy. On the contrary, his “critique of everyday life” proposed an alternate vision of Marxism, one that inspired the Situationist International.

Marxism seeks to overcome bourgeois philosophy but nonetheless remains a philosophy, Blanchot insists. And not just any philosophy: “the destiny of philosophy has become our destiny,” he writes (as a “man of
the left” during the Cold War), not only because “philosophy has taken power and exerts it in its very name,” but also because “philosophy has transformed the essence of power, which has become the whole of life and accomplishes itself as a whole.” Then, once again, he distinguishes the philosophical from philosophy:

Today the decision is not philosophical because it translates a philosophy; it is philosophical, on the contrary, because philosophy has ceased to exist as a mode of questioning that is autonomous and theoretical, and because, in its place, in the place that was specific to it, the overcoming—demanded by the advent of a new power—of what is private and what is public, of thought and action, of society and nature, of discourse and life, of reason satisfied and without power, and of labor discontented and without thought, affirms itself or would like to affirm itself. (87)

With Lefebvre, Marxist philosophy has passed from philosophy to the philosophical; it has become the endless task of contesting sites of power in everyday life, something that will be continued, in a manner less patient with Marxism, by Michel Foucault. In an earlier yet related essay, consecrated to Dionys Mascolo’s Le Communisme, révolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins (1953), Blanchot says with sober deliberation, “It is undoubtedly the task of our age to move toward an affirmation that is entirely other,” an affirmation of human beings abiding in a neutral relation with one another, a relation without relation. This is a political task, one to which “communism recalls us with a rigor that it itself often shirks,” and yet it is also “to this task that ‘artistic experience’ recalls us in the realm that is proper to it” (97). It is, Blanchot acknowledges, a “remarkable coincidence” that politics and art converge in the Outside.

Blanchot’s romans and récits introduce many encounters with philosophy. Some are overt, as when Thomas summons the specter of Descartes in Thomas l’obscur, or when Henri Sorge finds that in the absolute state there is also absolute knowledge, that “inside and outside correspond,” or
when the Nietzschean figure of the “last man,” the person who has nothing to do now that history has ended, is reworked in *Le dernier homme.* Yet some of these encounters are clandestine, as when philosophy becomes the philosophical and is transmuted into a literary mode that relentlessly probes a question deeper and deeper, being “tempted by a splendid thought” that the narrator is “trying in vain to bring to its knees,” or when—and sometimes it is the same thing—a character feels the Outside impending on him or her.

In *Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas,* for example, one of the speakers asks, “Where we are, everything conceals itself, doesn’t it?” only to intuit the advance (and retreat) of the Outside, which is actually mentioned by name:

> Scarcely was it spoken before this remark sank into the emptiness, reverberated there emptily, awoke the infinite distended outside [*éveilla le dehors infiniment distendu*], the infinite pain of the affirmation occupying all of space, where what was said kept passing through the same point again, was the same, and, always, at whatever moment, said the same thing and eternally remained lacking.

And, later, the narrator again registers the approach of the Outside, this time in a slightly more heavily marked manner, especially in the English translation:

> To say that I understand these words would not be to explain to myself the dangerous peculiarity of my relations with them. Do I understand them? I do not understand them, properly speaking, and they too who partake of the depth of concealment remain without understanding. But they don’t need that understanding in order to be uttered, they do not speak, they are not interior, they are, on the contrary, without intimacy, being altogether outside [*étant tout au dehors*], and what they designate engages me in this “outside” of all speech [*dans ce dehors de toute parole*], apparently more secret and more interior than the speech of the innermost heart, but, here, the outside is empty [*le dehors est vide*], the secret is without depth, what is repeated is the emptiness of repetition, it doesn’t speak and yet it has always
been said already. I couldn’t compare them to an echo, or rather, in this place, the echo repeated in advance: it was prophetic in the absence of time. (72)

The Outside is “older, dreadfully old” (24), an “infinite past” (23), which is Blanchot’s way of indicating that it has never been fully present to any consciousness, and is outside time as we know it. Even the slightest word or change of affect can recall this “dead time” (36), as when the narrator is asked, “Someone? Here?” and discerns “the shiver that ran behind them, enveloped them in a fear that he seemed to feel, a fear that drove that instant back towards another sort of time, older, fearfully old” (30).

Never having been wholly present, the Outside never becomes so. Yet it returns eternally, almost brushing against characters in the récits—and so we have another clandestine encounter, between Blanchot and Nietzsche—sometimes as an “empty depth” (92), a shadow falling over being, although on occasion it can be figured differently. It can lead a character to affirm “the renunciation of mystery” and to embrace “the ultimate insignificance of lightness” (43). For there is a gaiety in Blanchot that is not always noticed, a sense of gentleness, and sometimes a smile behind the lapidary prose. There is also a dark humor to relish. I think of L’arrêt de mort, when the narrator remembers the sister of the young woman who lived at 15, rue —: “What became of her? She lived, as she liked to say, off the kindness of gentlemen. I assume she’s dead.” And I think, too, of the comic passage in “La folie du jour” when the narrator and the Law have been flirting with one another. “The truth was that I liked her. In these surroundings, overpopulated by men, she was the only feminine element. Once she had made me touch her knee—a strange feeling. I had said as much to her: ‘I am not the kind of man who is satisfied with a knee!’ Her answer: ‘That would be disgusting!’” But such moments are few and far between. In general, no one would confuse the tone of Blanchot’s Death Sentence with that of David Lodge’s Deaf Sentence (2008).

More than something that brushes against characters in the narratives, the Outside is also what enables a récit to be written in the first place, and what enables us to distinguish a roman from a récit. A roman consists of events that take place in time, that we follow one after the
other, interested in how situations develop, get complicated, and are then more or less resolved for characters. A récit addresses itself to just the one event that has taken place, if it has taken place, and there is no moment in principle when it must end. In “La rencontre de l’imaginaire,” the opening piece of Le livre à venir (1959), Blanchot identifies the “secret law” of the récit. It is, he says, “the movement towards a point—one that is not only unknown, ignored and foreign, but such that it seems, even before and outside of this movement, to have no kind of reality; yet one that is so imperious that it is from that point alone that the narrative draws its attraction, in such a way that it cannot even ‘begin’ before having reached it.” A récit begins, then, not by the act of an author expressing himself or herself, being in control of a content and a style, but by being drawn toward the point where being and image pass endlessly into one another, a point that is real only while the narrative is being written or read. From the first word of the narrative, language has been detached from the world and the author; it seems to go on as though by itself—an experience familiar to any writer of prose fiction or poetry, commonly known as “inspiration.” The attraction of the Outside is Blanchot’s revision of this old idea. Whereas Plato in Phaedrus 244 thought that the artist was taken into a higher world when in the throes of creation. Blanchot suggests that in fact he or she descends to what flows beneath being, namely, the Outside.

The récit, as Blanchot sees it, is a better medium than the novel for the philosophical, for it needs no conclusion, thereby allowing contestation to continue (at least in theory) without ever coming to an end. Also, the récit, as Blanchot practices it, embodies the philosophical par excellence: it responds to the lure of the Outside. And yet we should be careful not to draw too continuous and firm a line between the roman and the récit, as Blanchot thinks of them. In 1941 Thomas l’obscur was a roman, and then it was edited in 1950 to become what Blanchot called a “nouvelle version” and what his readers regard (with the prompting of the liminal text) as a “récit.” Minor characters were omitted to allow a sharp focus on Thomas and Anne, and many passages were removed. Nothing, except quite minor rephrasings, was added to the text. Also, what is at first a récit can be transformed, with next to no changes, into something that is either not a récit, as Blanchot conceives it, or that does not need its genre to
be marked as a récit. When Gallimard published Le dernier homme in 1957, it bore the designation “récit,” yet when the same house reissued it in 1979, with only a few slight changes here and there, the word “récit” had been replaced by “nouvelle version.”

If we adopt a long perspective, we can see Blanchot contributing to the French “philosophical novel.” It has many variants. In the eighteenth century alone, it is possible to point to three quite different exemplars: Voltaire’s Candide, ou l’optimisme (1759), Rousseau’s Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse (1761), and Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste et son maître (1796). In the twentieth century, we find Sartre’s La nausée (1938) pressing hard on the young Blanchot. Yet, ten years later, he had established himself so firmly as an original and powerful writer, at least within a small circle of admirers, that his friend Georges Bataille pondered writing a book called Maurice Blanchot et l’existentialisme. The idea would presumably have been to distinguish Blanchot’s thought from the existentialism of Sartre. “La littérature et le droit à la mort” (1947–48) had quietly set itself against Sartre’s notion of “committed writing” in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (1947). His narratives introduced a new element, the neutral or the Outside, to the existential fiction characterized by La nausée (1938), and undermined the secure “I” on which Sartre’s notions of freedom and commitment are based. Le Très-Haut offers a dark vision of the end of history, very different from the picture of human freedom given in L’âge de raison (1945), and L’arrêt de mort (1948) presents a competing vision of France just before the war to the one given in Le sursis (1947).

In 1938, several years before he had completed Thomas l’obscur, the idea of a book about his work, one offering a contrast with the leading intellectual of the day, must have seemed an eternity away. Reviewing La nausée for Aux Écoutes shortly after the novel had appeared, he judged the performance “imperfect,” yet praised it in terms that revealed something of his own ambitions for his first novel. Sartre “takes the novel to a place where there are no longer any incidents, any plot, any particular person; to the site where the mind sustains itself only by beguiling itself with philosophical notions like existence and being, notions that appear indigestible to art and which are only refractory to it as a result of the arbitrary
workings of thought.” A novel stripped of extraneous psychological interest in its characters, a novel occupied instead with being and nonbeing, was precisely what Blanchot was writing at the time. More than that, he was drawing on the same philosophical school as Sartre. “This novel,” he wrote of La nausée, “is visibly inspired by a philosophical movement that is little known in France, but is of the utmost importance: that of Edmund Husserl and especially Martin Heidegger” (34). Phenomenology had made its first French novel, and was about to make its second, though one that (for the faithful) hid a stinging critique of phenomenology and that (for the thoughtful) contained the seeds of a new phenomenology that was aware of its limits and that peered over them into the darkness.

One might call Blanchot a “philosophical novelist” in two senses. First, like Sartre before him and Michel Henry after him, he writes narratives that obliquely investigate what interests him philosophically. Thomas l’obscur is about being and nonbeing, about the being that remains in nonbeing, and the central drama of the novel turns on Descartes’s “Je pense donc je suis,” while Le Très-Haut is about the realization of the Hegelian State. Yet philosophical figures, problems, and obsessions, are far less in evidence in the récits. And it is in reading these narratives that we might read the expression “philosophical novelist” with a slightly different accent so that we take the adjective in the sense that Blanchot gives to it when reading the work of Lévinas, Merleau-Ponty, or Lefebvre. In these récits we find philosophy having gone underground, having passed from the study of canonical works and authors to a style of questioning that started with the Greek skeptics and that was given new life by formulating the idea of the Outside that runs beneath being. In Blanchot’s narrative writing, philosophy often loses its proper name; it becomes the philosophical.

Clandestine Encounters tracks Blanchot’s narrative writings in chronological order of composition, a passage of almost sixty years, from his first stories written in the mid-1930s to L’instant de ma mort (1994). Contributors to the volume were told that they were free to treat its theme, “philosophy in the narratives of Maurice Blanchot,” in any way that they wished. Some contributors place an accent on “philosophy”; others, on
“the philosophical.” Some take their cues from philosophers who have already written on Blanchot’s narratives—Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Lévinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Sartre—while others make their own way through this difficult terrain. For some, the philosophical interest is in aesthetics or phenomenology, while for others it is ethics or politics. The result is a wide-ranging introduction to Blanchot’s narrative writings, one that opens up the texts in diverse ways and promises to stimulate more discussion among Blanchot’s readers and, I hope, excite more people to read him. Contributors to this collection come from the fields of literary criticism, literary theory, philosophy, theology, and the theater. They live in Australia, Belgium, England, France, Scotland, and the United States. These details, banal in themselves, are a testimony to the breadth of scholarly interest in Blanchot’s novels and récits.

We begin with a jointly written essay by Vivian Liska and Arthur Cools on Blanchot’s early stories “Le dernier mot” and “L’idyll.” Are these stories to be read by way of questions of aesthetics or issues of political violence? In a meticulously close reading of both récits, Liska and Cools examine the question, paying particular care to the shifts between representation and reality in the stories. Along the way they stop to heed philosophers Sarah Kofman, Giorgio Agamben, and Theodor W. Adorno. The stories anticipate Blanchot’s major themes developed after World War II, and the authors show that “Le dernier mot” is a very early attempt to talk about the Outside. The Outside that is reached at the end of “Le dernier mot” is, as Liska and Cools say, coordinate with the “space of literature” that Blanchot would elaborate after the war. Yet this Outside does not mark an escape from the world of politics. Even here, it seems, literature and politics converge in the Outside.

Blanchot observes in “Après coup” that the two stories now gathered in Le ressassement éternel interrupted the writing of Thomas l’obscur, and Liska and Cools point out that a Thomas appears in “Le dernier mot.” In my essay on Thomas l’obscur, I consider the motif of the double and doubling in the novel and, more particularly, the récit that it became in 1950. Thomas is divided into two: a living-dead figure and another obscure being (or, better, nonbeing) that abides in the Outside. As early as Thomas l’obscur, Blanchot questions the unity of the human subject, and he does so here in a dramatic argument with Descartes. Where the philosopher
affirms “Je pense donc je suis” in the *Discourse on Method* (1633), Thomas cries out, “Je pense, donc je ne suis pas.” The philosopher of *la clarté* must enter the lists with the novelist of *l’obscur*. But how can anyone, novelist or philosopher, talk intelligibly of what must remain obscure? To be sure, Blanchot as novelist performs the reduction merely in writing fiction. The novelist’s gaze is very like the phenomenologist’s. However, Blanchot also performs what I call a “neutral reduction” in order to disclose, insofar as it is possible, the obscure Thomas and, with him, the Outside.

The “Thomas” years of Blanchot come to an end with *Aminadab*, a novel first critically examined by Sartre and here read in a quite different way by Christopher Strathman. Converging on the novel from the perspective of the Kantian style of criticism that Blanchot was formulating in the early 1940s, Strathman shows the importance of a certain conception of language for the young novelist. One might say that *Aminadab* is a novel that, among other things, comes into being by way of an intense reflection on Kantian critique and a redirected Romantic view of language, first explored in the Jena circle, that gave rise to what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have memorably called “the literary absolute.” Illuminating as it is, the philosophical background to this novel can never quite account for the peculiarity of *Aminadab*. As Strathman indicates, *Aminadab* not only is about a bizarre house that Thomas enters but also is itself a “haunted house of being.”

*Le Très-Haut*, Blanchot’s last novel, has usually been read with reference to Hegel’s doctrine of absolute knowledge as mediated by Alexandre Kojève, with a sidelong glance to the Heidegger whose analysis of *Sorge* in *Sein und Zeit* perhaps informs the character of Henri Sorge. Attention to a law that absorbs all attempts to resist it is inevitable when reading this novel; however, as Stephen Lewis shows, it is equally important to examine the law of the other person in the novel, a law associated with desire and sexual difference. To this end, Lewis refers us to Jean-Luc Marion’s *Le phénomène érotique* (2003), a book he has translated beautifully into English, to understand the peculiar play of desire and love in the novel. “What I ultimately see going on in the novel,” Lewis says, “is the presentation of a world in which human erotic interaction not only lacks but is hostile to what Marion calls ‘flesh,’ the auto-affective faculty that each
human being receives from another flesh in love.” This essay offers us a fresh philosophical view of Le Très-Haut while introducing Marion’s philosophy to the world of “literature and philosophy.”

The year 1948 was remarkable for Blanchot and must have been an unsettling one for his early readers. Not only did Le Très-Haut appear but also a narrative of a quite different sort, L’arrêt de mort, which embodied a more concerted questioning of the unity of the artwork. In the United States, at least, many readers of L’arrêt de mort first came across it in Derrida’s “Living On,” a signal text of the “Yale School.” There Derrida attends to the structure of survival of a text, partly with an oblique and passing reference to Shelley’s unfinished poem “The Triumph of Life,” and mainly by way of a reading of the first part of L’arrêt de mort. One thing that attracts Derrida is the character J., who dies and then comes back to life at the narrator’s bidding; and, since “Living On” first appeared in print, other readers have commented on the narrative of J. Often left in the shade, though, is the elusive second part of L’arrêt de mort, and it is this narrative that Alain Toumayan examines with admirable fidelity to the text. This is a narrative neither of being nor nonbeing but of the neuter, Toumayan argues, looking with care at Lévinas’s account of the il y a in his De l’existence à l’existant (1947). We find ourselves faced in this narrative not with death but with an existence haunted by death or worn down by a dying that seems to last forever. Just as Aminadab is a haunted house of being, so, too, is the second part of L’arrêt de mort.

“La folie du jour” has received close attention from Derrida and Lévinas. Here, Christopher Fynsk brings a new philosophical lens to bear on the text, that of sovereignty. He examines the sovereign refusal of the epistemic, juridical, and political order in this powerful récit. Also, however, it contains a sovereign affirmation of life. Fynsk’s question is: What relation is there between this “yes” and this “no”? Pursing the question leads him to seek the sovereign traits of the “other relation,” the neutral one, and to push past Lévinas’s reading of the text. Neutral this relation may be, but it is associated with women. The affirmation of life and death, Blanchot’s narrator tells us, is something he has found only in women, “beautiful creatures.”

Alain Toumayan asks us to look more closely at the second part of L’arrêt de mort, which readers have not emphasized as they have the first
part. In an unusual study, Christophe Bident invites us to listen very closely to the opening words of *Au moment voulu*—“In the absence of the friend who lived with her, the door was opened by Judith” [En l’absence de l’amie qui vivait avec elle, la porte fut ouverte par Judith]—because it is a way of beginning a phenomenology of recognition. That phenomenology can be explored, Bident believes, by attending to the performance of the sentence; to that end, he directed a theater workshop devoted to the opening of the *récit*. Here is a rare opportunity to find Blanchot’s biographer in his other life as a theater director, one who does not forget his philosophical interests. He concerns himself with reference, reflection, and the structure of enunciation in that first sentence, and is attentive to the murmur of the Outside, the “narrative voice,” in the background of what Blanchot writes.

In a dense, closely argued essay, Rodolphe Gasché tackles one of the most challenging of Blanchot’s *récits*, *Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas*. For the assigned task given to the contributors, this *récit* is particularly tough going, for, as Gasché quickly points out, the narrative seems not to solicit any philosophical theme, and it stages itself so that it remains at odds with the usual procedures of philosophical inquiry. Yet Gasché notes that in the words “Je me le demande” the narrative performs a phenomenological reduction, and this gives him the purchase he needs to explore it by way of its phenomenological description, that reflective attitude which is also a reception of what shows itself. Much of the *récit* turns on light, the medium of manifestation. And yet the narrative does not yield completely to a phenomenological reading; it frustrates description as much as it engages in it. The narrator reflects on his inability to describe things, and the light in rooms varies in peculiar ways.

“Blanchot asked me,” Bataille wrote in 1943, “why not pursue my inner experience as if I were the last man?” Blanchot may have had Nietzsche’s “der letzte Mensch” in mind, although if he did, he must have been using the figure ironically. For Nietzsche’s “last man” is the exact opposite of the *Übermensch*; he is the weary modern man who avoids risk and no longer has any zest for life, which is far from how Bataille wanted to live. More likely, Blanchot was thinking of the Kojèveian idea of man at the end of history, the man who has nothing to do except play, make love, and produce art. This would involve a radical transformation of “man,”
for, as Kojève says, “[t]he end of History is the death of man, strictly speaking.” Yet if this is Blanchot’s source, it could only have been anecdotal, drawn from someone, perhaps Bataille, who had attended Kojève’s lectures at l’École pratique des Hautes Études (1933–39). Those lectures appeared in print only in 1947. We should not be too quick, though, to assimilate Bataille’s remark to Blanchot’s récit of 1957, Le dernier homme. As Caroline Shaeffer-Jones argues, we cannot grasp Le dernier homme without following the allusions to Nietzsche’s “last man” and indeed to Nietzsche’s Oedipus. Like so much of Blanchot’s writing, in all its genres, Le dernier homme is about death and dying. Yet it is also about life, Shaeffer-Jones insists: not a vitalism, to be sure, but a new understanding of human being without reliance on the “I” in the first-person singular but as a “he” and as plural, “a Who?, a whole crowd of Who?s.”

L’attente l’oubli and Le dernier homme form a diptych, Michael Holland argues, while also noting that this “mixed” work reaches back to Aminadab in its attention to rooms and corridors. L’attente l’oubli learns from Le dernier homme something about language. “And, therefore, in a single language always to make the double speech [parole] heard,” reads one of the fragments quite early in the text. We think of the duality of discourse and dis-course explored earlier, of philosophical speech and the murmur of the Outside. Holland maintains that in L’attente l’oubli, Blanchot carries forward what he has learnt in Le dernier homme, namely, the idea of a language that is neither philosophical nor narrative, a “vocative-invocative” mode. This modality of language comes from poetry, not narrative, and Holland subtly points out that in L’attente l’oubli Blanchot is not engaging in a dialogue with Heidegger the thinker, as is usually assumed, but with what is poetic in his writing. “By gesturing to Heidegger as a poet rather than as a philosopher in 1958,” Holland says, “Blanchot is not just signaling the importance of the poetic in Awaiting Oblivion. He is referring back to the work of his in which the relation between poetry and philosophy in Heidegger’s thinking is thoroughly explored and radically overturned.”

Leslie Hill tells the fascinating story of how a book came to include a récit, and how this récit came to contain, in a sense, the longest and most philosophically attuned of Blanchot’s books. The récit is the dialogue that first appeared as “L’entretien infini,” discussed by Christopher Fynsk at the end of his essay on La folie du jour, and the book is of course L’entretien...
infini (1969), which features the récit at its start. At one with Holland, Hill affirms that Blanchot is less concerned to stage an infinite dialogue between literature and philosophy than to point out that the two are infinitely held together and apart. L’entretien infini, a “mixed” work, shows that literature and philosophy abide in a relation without relation. The weariness that pervades Blanchot’s “L’entretien infini” is not a fundamental attunement of the kind that Heidegger analyzes so brilliantly in Sein und Zeit (1927) or in the slightly later lecture course of 1929–30, Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit.55 Not at all: it undermines even the attunement of deep boredom that interests Heidegger and that allows what Jean-Luc Marion calls “the third reduction.”56 It does not open a rapport between Dasein and being, or between Dasein and what gives itself beyond the horizon of being, but erodes the self so that it cannot even be that structure of open doors and windows that Dasein is.57 Philosophy can deal with Angst and boredom; it cannot get any traction with weariness.

The opening essay of this collection addresses the relation between aesthetics and historical violence in Blanchot’s first stories. Exactly the same disjunction is considered in the final essay, Thomas Davis’s reading of L’instant de ma mort. This last, apparently limpid, yet surprisingly enigmatic narrative of a young maquisard who is nearly executed by the Nazis has called forth long commentaries by Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe; and Davis keeps one eye on them as he reads it for the meaning of “the political.” Again, double speech comes into the spotlight: for Davis’s Blanchot, it has pertinence in the philosophy of history, with the negative—the dialectical—making history, and with historical disasters, where the negative breaks down, incapacitating language as the bearer of meaning and truth and neutrally keeping watch over us. L’instant de ma mort is not related by a self-sufficient “I” but by a voice that has lost the power to say “I,” an afflicted voice where the murmur of the Outside can be heard. As Davis is at pains to stress, the neutral and the Outside are not apolitical philosophical notions in L’instant de ma mort. The narrative is political in its solidarity with those who have been lost in the disaster of the war. And the political, here, is not a concept of philosophy, from this system or that, but “an incessant questioning.” Once more, philosophy has dissolved into the philosophical.
And now the very last word, or, rather, two words: Geoffrey Hartman. In his essay “The Fullness and Nothingness of Literature,” published in *Yale French Studies* in the Winter issue of 1955, Hartman first brought English-speaking readers into contact with Blanchot and underscored the importance of Blanchot’s narratives as philosophical novels and stories. Several years later, in 1961, we were able to read his “Maurice Blanchot: Philosopher-Novelist” in the *Chicago Review*. Later, on the appearance in the *Georgia Review* of the first part of Lydia Davis’s translation of *L’arrêt de mort* in 1976, he guided us on how to think about that dark, mysterious work; and then, in 2004, he joined me in editing a collection of new essays on Blanchot, *The Power of Contestation*, to which he contributed a strong new essay. Geoffrey Hartman is the father of Blanchot studies in the English-speaking world. This collection of essays is dedicated to him.

**Notes**


7. For an English translation, see the opening untitled pages of *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and foreword Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiii–xxiii.


11. Despite repeated attempts, and with the help of several friends in France, I have not been able to obtain a copy of the thesis. One can only hope that it will turn up in Blanchot’s posthumous papers.


19. Blanchot, *Death Sentence*, 80. These lines evoke not only a thought but a female character in the narrative.

20. Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me*, 41; *The Last Man*, 77; and *Awaiting Oblivion*, 50.


25. Sometimes Blanchot writes *le Dehors* and sometimes *le dehors*, almost always the latter in his narratives.


28. See Blanchot, “The Narrative Voice (the ‘he,’ the neutral),” in The Infinite Conversation, 379–87. Can one speak also of a “poetic voice”? Michael Holland takes up the question in his essay on L’attente l’oubli in this collection.


32. It should be noted that Blanchot uses the expression “il y a” in his story “Le dernier mot.” See “The Last Word,” in Vicious Circles, 45.

33. See Blanchot, “Keeping to Words,” in The Infinite Conversation, 59.


35. Blanchot, “Slow Obsequies,” in Friendship, 86. This essay first appeared under the title “La fin de la philosophie” in Le Nouvelle Revue française 80 (October 1959): 678–89. It should be noted that Blanchot begins “Notre compagne clandestine” by reflecting on Lévinas’s sentence, “Ce siècle aura donc été pour tous la fin de la philosophie!” [“This century will therefore have been for everyone the end of philosophy!”]. The sentence appears in “Le regard du poète,” the opening essay of Lévinas’s little book Sur Maurice Blanchot (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973). It first appeared in Monde Nouveau, no. 98 (1956): 6–19.


38. Blanchot, The Most High, 136; The Last Man, 2.


40. Blanchot, The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me, 50.

41. Blanchot, Death Sentence, 2.


43. Blanchot, “Encountering the Imaginary,” in The Book to Come, 7. For further discussion of the récit, including its history, see my The Dark Gaze, 61–63.

44. The unsigned note to the 1992 “Imaginaire” edition of the nouvelle version of Thomas l’obscur says that Le dernier homme was Blanchot’s “first récit”; however, the publication date is mistakenly given as 1947.

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48. Blanchot says that “Le dernier mot” was an attempt “to short circuit” *Thomas l’obscur*. See “After the Fact,” in *Vicious Circles*, 64.


