Dead Transcendence
Blanchot, Paulhan, Kafka

Blanchot's first critical collection, *Faux pas*, was published in 1943 and largely consists of articles written over the previous two years. The climate of French philosophy at this time was heavily influenced by Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, but what is interesting is the manner in which Blanchot's writings develop within the purview of these influences without directly following any of them. Significantly, this independence arises because Blanchot approaches philosophy by way of literature rather than treating philosophical problems directly, and so issues that he may find in the works of these philosophers are refracted through the lens of literature, which in turn casts a strange light back upon those philosophical problems. To pinpoint this idiosyncratic transformation I will focus on the issue of transcendence, which was much discussed at the time when *Faux pas* was being written and which draws out the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy. What is compelling about Blanchot's response to this problem is the way that he transforms it by reading it in terms of literature, but doing so does not reduce its philosophical or metaphysical complexity; instead, literature seems to make the issue of transcendence more profound by problematizing the nature of the limit that is seemingly being overstepped.

Blanchot's earliest thoughts on this issue are to be found in three major essays from the years 1941–45, and at each stage in this development his writings draw out different aspects of the relation of language to its limits that demonstrate the peculiarity of this relation. But what repeatedly

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arises from these examinations is the evasive nature of the limits of language, which persist and yet remain intangible, creating a pressure that destabilizes any attempt to establish definitive meaning, thereby propelling language into an ambivalence without end. It is helpful in this regard to take up a term that Jean Wahl coined and that was later used by Levinas—that is, "transdescendence," which begins to concretize some of the disturbing implications of a step beyond finitude that recoils on itself, leading to a descent into the enigma of what there is. The anguish that arises from this experience becomes pivotal for how Blanchot understands the demands that affect the writer involved in such a descent of language, which focus on the necessity and yet impossibility of trying to respond to this enigma. As such this chapter will show how the autonomy of the work materially reflects this isolation of writing, which then develops into a concrete expression of the indeterminate through the indeterminate. In doing so the literary begins to question the positions of philosophy and ontology by problematizing the nature of finitude and transcendence, as well as becoming a critique of phenomenology, in terms of its faith in accessing the truth of appearance and the harmony of being in the world that this entails.

Blanchot's first major piece of criticism, his review of Paulhan's *Les fleurs de Tarbes, ou la terreur dans les lettres*, initially appeared as a series of articles in the *Journal des débats* in October, November, and December of 1941. The following year these articles were gathered into a single volume and published under the title of *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* Blanchot then went on to include a reduced version of this text in *Faux pas* in 1943. The focus of this key work is signaled in the first sentence of the review: "We read the book that Jean Paulhan has just devoted to literature and language, *Les fleurs de Tarbes*, with a strange feeling." "Strange" is an odd word to associate with reading, for ordinarily reading is the most straightforward and unproblematic activity, but, as he has indicated, the origin of this feeling comes from the ambiguity of reading a book devoted to literature *and* language. This is the crux of Paulhan's argument: that there is an uncanny and undecidable ambiguity in language that prevents us from being able to determine the (literary) status of a text definitively, something that is echoed in the doubling of the title, which holds the rhetorical trope of using a parable as an example and the seemingly explicit mode of direct presentation.

Much has been written about the turbid atmosphere of French cultural and political thinking in the 1930s, and Paulhan's book is a powerful, if indirect, commentary on these debates. But the significance it held for Blanchot arises from his own ambiguous pursuit of language in the same

period, a point he remarked upon some thirty years later in noting the difference between his practice of writing fiction at night and political journalism during the day, with the "certainty that in writing he was putting precisely this certainty between parentheses, including the certainty of himself as a subject of writing."[1] If it is possible to see this suspension of certainty as a comment not only on the self-relation of the literary but also on its relation to the political—how writing might suspend the meaning of language, and perhaps preeminently the meaning of political language, and the effects that this might have—then it is just as significant to consider the necessity behind Blanchot's way of writing in this manner: why and how he was able to conduct himself, at least up to a certain point, along two fronts with seemingly opposing aims—whether indeed his nationalist polemics and literary investigations arose out of a *concerted* effort to pursue the nature and relation of language, which only becomes more involved as he turns to criticism.

For, if his critical writings were in part an attempt to understand what was under way within his own literary works, then they must also take into account the relation of the literary to the political, which his writing was increasingly placing between parentheses. In doing so it becomes possible to see that the development of Blanchot's writings in the 1930s is less divided than it may appear and that his early critical works draw together the demands of the political and the poetic, not to sublate them in criticism, but to persistently interrogate their possibility as aspects of the demands that language places on our relations to the world. This indicates the indirection of Blanchot's writing, for although he abandoned direct political engagement after 1937 and devoted himself wholly to the literary (until the late 1950s), it is not possible to see his writings from then on as abstracted from worldly concerns, since the nature of the literary bears ambiguously on the relation of language, something *Les fleurs de Tarbes* directly addresses.

As was mentioned in the introduction of this study, Paulhan's book examines the role of criticism in the history of modern French literature in its attempts to divide writing into two camps: the classical and the revolutionary, or, as he terms it, Rhetoric and Terror. Echoing Kojève's reading of Hegel, Paulhan emphasizes the way that Terror operates as a mode of rigorous creative purity that seeks to eradicate all conventional forms of literary expression.[2] Hence the opposition of Terror to Rhetoric, which is that school of literature that remains shackled to clichés and traditional styles; but Paulhan's aim is not only to isolate this terrorist strand but also to expose its contradictions and shortcomings. However, as Blanchot remarks, it is precisely here that our reading becomes troubled. I will quote

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the passage at length to show how Blanchot's reading and writing negotiate this strangeness:

> We enter unwarily into the analyses he formulates, not really sensing the perils towards which the charming, precise sentences, their tight construction a guarantee of safety and order, are precipitated. Everything about it is clear, ingenious, straightforward. Just as the words follow on effortlessly from one another, so a series of sound reasons is elaborated, which seems intended to dispel equivocations and to ensure that any writer is able to proceed with his writing. We calmly witness the disempowering of a certain critical conception, whose defeat, it seems, we can scarcely regret, since it was by nature hostile to conventions and rules. However, an initial feeling of uneasiness begins to emerge. The movement of the thought we would like to follow, all the while remaining marvellously coherent and regular, reveals at the same time a number of discontinuities and allusions, whose meaning is somewhat threatening. Where is this author, who appeared to be quietly carrying out his police duty with exquisite artfulness, taking us? Is he not talking about something other than what he was supposed to be saying? Could there be, hidden within his refutations and arguments, a kind of infernal machine which, invisible today, will one day explode, overwhelming literature and rendering its use impossible? This is the anxiety that Jean Paulhan is able to produce. We read his book unsuspectingly, but when we reach the end, we suddenly see that he has put into question not only a certain critical conception, not only all of literature, but also the mind, its powers and means, and we look back in horror at the abyss we have just crossed—but have we really gone over it?—and which a succession of veils had skilfully hidden from us as we crossed over. [HLP: 49]

Blanchot begins by pointing out the unremarkable nature of Paulhan's writing: the sentences proceed in a clear and precise manner, and in doing so the argument develops soundly, dispelling equivocations. There is a sense of order and security to the work, but in describing it a sense of unease arises; a wariness that was not initially present becomes more and more apparent as Blanchot starts to generalize the point of Paulhan's argument. Then, as Kafka would say, the "disaster" (*Unglück*) happens, for attendant upon this rising unease we start to see gaps in the argument, and in describing them they seem to become abyssal; the order and security we had first observed dissolves, and instead we find ourselves before an alien and forbidding uncertainty.[3] It is not that we have been launched into an inco-

herent and eccentric text, for, as Blanchot insists, the careful ordering of sentences is still present, but now we find this disturbing, for we are aware of its lack of foundation and so we become plagued by doubts: are we being deceived? Are we being led to a point of instability? What prevents this disruption affecting everything? Once the radical groundlessness of the argument has been exposed, it is uncontainable, and the illusion of security that had obscured it cannot be replaced. And this is still the first paragraph of the review; without holding back, Blanchot has propelled us directly into the heart of the anxiety that literature carries with it.

This double-sided strategy of generalization and radicalization is characteristic of many of Blanchot's critical writings, but as this paragraph has shown, it is conducted in the most inconspicuous manner.[4] Blanchot's language could hardly be simpler, and yet the effect of its seeming transparency is all the more startling as a result, such that when we are told of this anxiety that haunts literature we already have before us an instance of its disclosure. But Blanchot's aim is not to be sensational, for this issue has arisen out of Paulhan's attempt to say something profound about the nature of literature and its relation to ordinary language. And in turning from political journalism to fiction himself there could hardly be a more pressing concern for Blanchot, so what is at stake in this unsettling ambiguity?

For Paulhan, the struggle of Terror in literature is the struggle for purity, originality, and control: a writer should not follow received styles and conventions but should rigorously oppose them so as to impose the pure voice of his own thoughts. But this struggle would appear doomed, for conventional or "commonplace" language cannot be removed so easily, as it is inherently ambiguous, since in encountering a text that uses commonplaces (and all necessarily do), it is not possible to know whether they are being used critically or uncritically, and so the problem for the terrorist writer lies in the issue of how, and how far, he should attempt to control the text. But for the reader these attempts only increase the ambiguity of language, for he now stumbles over every word, unsure if it is meant to be a cliché or an innovation and, consequently, finds himself anxious and uncertain about the nature of the text as a whole. But if the writer attempts to respond to this problem by reducing the ambiguity of commonplaces, by agreeing to designate them in advance and thereby making them more common, then, as Paulhan concludes, we are faced with a further ambiguity, for is the text then a reinvented Rhetoric or perfected Terror? But if this is the conclusion, then how is "literature" possible? If the pure expression of literary revolution inevitably leads to reinvented cliché, then what are the conditions upon which literature is possible? As Blanchot makes clear, this Kantian turn that Paulhan has uncovered opens the question of

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literature up to "the most extreme human darkness," for the ambiguity of language touches upon the nature and limits of our existence, which is what confronts any attempt to understand the nature of writing [HLP: 53].

This, however, is only the "first book," as Blanchot calls it, "the apparent book," for beneath what we have read, is there not another reading that our unease has remarked? Indeed it is through this anxiety that we are able to attest to a hidden element to Paulhan's work, since the initial development of the argument, as we have seen, leaves nothing remarkable apart from a certain unease as to the status of Paulhan's own position: what kind of text is *Les fleurs de Tarbes*, which appears to end by disavowing itself? So, as Blanchot now writes, we return to the beginning and this time attempt to read more critically, and in doing so we find that Terror is not so easily discussed, for it conceals an apparently unbridgeable division between those writers who want to eradicate commonplaces and thereby assert themselves over language, making of it the transparent expression of thought, and those who wish to remove themselves from common language entirely and discover the mode in which language communicates itself. Despite this division, both of these methods lead the writer to become more troubled by language rather than less; whereas he may have begun by espousing the goal of asserting the pure creativity of thought over language, or submitting thought to the pure communication of language, he ends up becoming ever more strongly involved with language the more he tries to extricate himself from it. What began as a distrust or even hatred of language quickly becomes an obsession, leading the writer to the point of being unable to say anything without coming up against an unavoidable ambiguity where any attempt to control the use of language seems perpetually at risk of undermining itself: it is in this sense that there is a "terror" in literature (from the Latin *terrere* meaning "to tremble").

Six years later, in his politically charged essay on the possibility of literature as action, this Terror will return as Blanchot finds its undermining of meaning at the source of the "two slopes" of literature, for each approach—expression or communication, prose or poetry—inevitably drifts toward its other, because each is divided within itself, and so each tends toward an impasse [PF: 321/332]. Hence, within his review of Paulhan, Blanchot can conclude by noting how this oscillating or trembling ambiguity opens onto an impossibility that is the basic characteristic of literature as such, but if this is the case, the central question again arises: how is literature possible if all modes lead to its ruin?

Blanchot's answer is, in short, that it is out of this ruin that there is literature; the illusory point of departure that leads literature either by eradication or avoidance of commonplaces to an aporia is precisely the *faux pas*

by which literature occurs. This is not a reassuring conclusion, for it severely curtails the writer's activities by grounding his work in the failure of his intentions, something that has hovered on the edge of Paulhan's own text. But to say that the possibility of literature lies in its impossibility—insofar as the genuinely original text only arises from its lack of originality, the purity of its creativity from impurity and impotence—means that this terrible ambiguity within literature is not only the mark of its paradoxical essence but also the undecidable response of the reader, who is never able to ascertain the status of what he is reading. Thus the difficulties of reading that Blanchot has introduced us to have led to the difficulties of writing as Paulhan has described, in which the essential ambiguity of language leads to a fundamental anxiety in both the writer, who now does not know how to write, and the reader, who now does not know how to read, but what does this relation between ambiguity and anxiety reveal?

Transdescendence of the Writer

According to Kevin Hart, taking up a line from *L'écriture du désastre*, transcendence persists for Blanchot "only in a negative form"—that is, as transdescendence [ED: 143/91].[5] This would seem to be confirmed by an earlier line that Hart does not mention where transcendence is glossed as transdescendence: "according to Levinas's designation, the other [*autre*] replaces the Same, as the Same substitutes itself for the Other [*Autre*], it is henceforth in me—a me without me [*un moi sans moi*]—that the traits of transcendence (of a transdescendence) mark themselves," a point unfortunately lost in Ann Smock's translation, which reads "transdescendence" simply as "transcendence" [ED: 37/19]. Moreover, the transition from the first version of this fragment in "Discours sur la patience" to its later inclusion in *L'écriture du désastre* involves the notable omission of a question mark placed after "transdescendence" "(of a transdescendence?)," suggesting that it has become a more certain point of paraphrase: transcendence—*that is*, transdescendence.[6] However, this would appear to be the only occasion when Blanchot uses Wahl's terminology, and the fact that it is in the context of a discussion of Levinas, who had adopted Wahl's terms, may explain this.

Indeed, Blanchot reiterates this point more explicitly a few years later by stating that in Levinas's understanding of transcendence there is a reference to Wahl's ideas about the transcendence of transcendence, which Wahl had thought was the only way for there to be a transcendence that was not reduced to either abstraction or vacuity and that would entail transcendence transcending itself by turning back to immanence, which, as

Blanchot notes, is the basis for Levinas's ideas about "transcendence within immanence."[7] It is this reversion that Wahl called "transdescendence," which is a chthonic rather than an ethereal transcendence (which Wahl termed "transascendence," by way of contrast); that is, it returns to immanence rather than departing from it and, in doing so, hollows it out from within, opening up an abyssal transcendence that descends infinitely inside it.[8] As will be seen, this material reconfiguration of transcendence is central to the repositioning of the literary work in Blanchot's thought, much as it was for Schlegel. Blanchot makes use of many phrases to indicate such a transformation of transcendence, most pointedly perhaps with his use of "dead transcendence" in 1945 in his first discussion of Kafka, but Hart's point holds because of the consistently atheistic reading of transcendence that Blanchot pursues; however, what is intriguing is the possible relation of Blanchot's ideas to Wahl's more specific rendering of the problem.

Wahl's ideas on transcendence arose from a lecture he gave in December 1937 in which he was concerned with the possibility of adapting Kierkegaard's thinking to a nonreligious context, thus converting the step beyond of transcendence into something that returned it to the world. This problem is quite evident in Blanchot's early writings, as *Faux pas* begins with several essays on the nature and limits of mystical language, albeit ones that are filtered through the lens of his discussions with Bataille. This suggests that Blanchot was focusing on these issues before and without Levinas's influence—Levinas first uses transdescendence in 1948 in "La réalité et son ombre," and between 1940 and 1945 he had been a prisoner of war.[9] Not only does this show an independent philosophical perspective developing in Blanchot's earliest works, which will remain consistent over the rest of his career, but also indicates the significance of certain Kierkegaardian themes to his thinking, specifically his insistence that the writer has a "privileged" relation to anxiety or anguish (*angoisse*), which is the steppingstone to a reconfigured transcendence. It is anguish that leads to the transformation of transcendence, as Wahl had claimed, but as Blanchot then adds, in a formulation on which the philosophical significance of his work stands, it is by way of writing that *there is* anguish, thereby exposing the fact that it is by way of *writing* that the borders of the finite become ambiguous, something that Derrida's more extensive studies will pursue much later on.

To explore the development of this philosophical innovation, I will read through the opening essay of *Faux pas*, which indicates how the problems of transcendence are focused to an extraordinary degree by the study of writing, while also drawing out the manner in which transcendence itself is reformed and the essential role that writing plays in this. When *Faux*

pas was published in November 1943, Blanchot grouped his essays into separate "digressions" on poetry, the novel, and other topics, but the first section that preceded these digressions consisted of more theoretical or philosophical articles thematically joined under the title of "De l'angoisse au langage."[10] The essay that opened this section, and thus introduced the collection, was left untitled but has become known by this somewhat programmatic title, and in it Blanchot took up the aporetic relation of the writer to language that was left hanging at the end of his reading of Paulhan and situated it within the major critical debates of the time. Thus, there is in this opening essay a decisive rejection of the Sartrean reading of existence in favor of a version much closer to Bataille's, but one that also carries on his own concerns with the nature of literature that had surfaced in his reading of Paulhan. In doing so, Blanchot returns directly to the problem at the end of *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* by addressing the traditional and parodic image of the writer driven to anguish by the failure of language who yet writes "I am alone."

Retrospectively, the distance from Levinas's thought could hardly be more marked than it is in this opening, for it is not only with a concern with solitude that Blanchot begins, but also with the solitude of the writer, the one whose concern with language only makes this solitude more inescapable. While this starting place indicates Blanchot's engagement with the contemporary Kierkegaardian vogue, it also shows the singular way in which his own interests have transformed the notion of anguish into something peculiarly linguistic, which carries profound ontological implications. For the point at which Blanchot begins is that of the impossibility of locating the writer's presence: in writing "I am alone," the writer appears to be claiming a position outside the world that his words seem to tacitly deny. But this expression does not simply remove him from his isolation, since by way of his writing he is placed in contact with that which only intensifies his solitude while decreasing its meaning, hence he remains "outside," but the site of this "outside" is now indeterminable, for although he is not "here," neither is he "there." This might seem absurdly comical were it not for the fact that it is the writer's existence as a human and as a user of language that is caught in this double bind, which is why it is the site of anguish. To be alone would be to be extracted from society, but the writer who writes "I am alone" cannot be so easily defined, as language inevitably places him back within the borders of the cultural while at the same time rendering those borders indeterminate. It is this dislocation that the writer's anguish reflects, for if he is within the borders of the social at the same time as being without, then he is neither, and so he finds himself without a firm location or relation. The solitude that he feels is *of* this

singular dislocation, which only becomes more unbearable the more he seeks to shake it off.

This is no longer the angst of Kierkegaard or Heidegger, but something altogether stranger and more profound, something Blanchot had begun to explore in his discussions with Bataille about the possibilities of an atheological mysticism, an experience of nonexperience, which Bataille sought in many areas of nonknowledge, but particularly for Blanchot in the occurrence of certain "slipping words" like "alone" that appear *to* contest themselves [Exp: 28/16]. That is, they appear and contest that appearance in the same moment, thereby slipping between meaning and nonsense, presence and absence, and as Blanchot notes in the first paragraph of *Faux pas*, these "aporias of language are rarely taken seriously" [FP: 9/1]. Blanchot's interest in the possibility of a mystical atheism is an important aspect of his early thought, as is shown in a number of pieces in *Faux pas*, but it differs from Bataille's thinking over the implications of such mystical writing for the nature and status of a language that takes place neither here nor beyond, neither within nor without. Equally, this dislocation begins to resemble Wahl's idea of a secularized transcendence that would transcend itself in immanence, a movement that Blanchot explicitly refers to in an article on Eckhart that follows the two opening pieces on Kierkegaard [FP: 38/27].[11]

Returning to the problem of the solitary writer, one of the reasons that the aporias of his language are disregarded is that their depth is ignored, for if we believe that the ambivalence of his language is simply part of his more or less respected craft, then it becomes easy to dismiss either his experience or his writing: if we admire the artistry of his language, then its ambivalence is just part of its capacity to transform misery into beauty, or, alternatively, if we regard the elusiveness of his language as evidence of its distance from truth, then his attempted expressions of solitude are merely further confirmations of this falsehood. If the apparent contradiction between experience and expression is even noticed, then too often it is displaced into one of these two responses as a direct result of the inability to appreciate how a writer relates to his language. Language does not simply allow a writer to describe or express his ideas and experiences, as it is not a tool that is separable from his life; rather, language "is" the writer's experience. In emphasizing this point Blanchot is demonstrating how intimately language is tied to existence and, consequently, how difficult it is to explicate its anguish either philosophically or ontologically. This is indicated by the fact that whether the writer writes well or poorly, the statement concerning his solitude is still inadequate, and this only increases his isolation, because the "writer is not free to be alone without expressing that he

is." This deceptively simple phrase conveys an enormous amount, for it suggests that the writer raises to an acute degree the instability of an existence that is always accompanied by its expression; as it never *is* without also saying as much, just as it never speaks without also being. But the correlation of language and being, which is ontology, is never given, let alone perfect, as it is always contesting itself by way of the disjunction and difference between language and being. This is the freedom without freedom of the writer's existence, the play of its disconnection that uncovers the straits of its anguish and its chance.

This is the point that appears to complicate the possibility of Levinas's thought, since solitude is that which can never be excluded even if it can also never arise "as such," for writing conveys its own isolation just as it places this under extraordinary conditions of uncertainty, which means that the relation to the other is always complicated to an impossible degree by this uncertainty. For while the writer is in thrall to writing, he is subject to an extreme ontotheological destitution, which means that although he is not free to be alone, this does not mean that there is an other that can guarantee his writing instead, and so the expression that is drawn from him is pronounced under an emphatically starless sky. Indeed, for Blanchot, it is solely by way of this disastrous writing that the writer can respond to his anguish, for in doing so he "coincides best with the nothingness without expression that he has become" [FP: 10/2]. That is, it is only in its failure to transcend its situation that writing converges on the impossible isolation that the writer has entered, an isolation that provokes and inhibits writing by way of the silence that overwhelms it.

In lines that directly recall Beckett's conversations with Georges Duthuit, which appeared six years later, but which also echo the form of apophatic language, Blanchot summarizes this opening section by stating that the "writer finds himself in this more and more comical condition of having nothing to write, of having no means to write it and of being constrained by an extreme necessity of always writing it."[12] This condition also resonates with Mallarmé's desire for a poetry of "Nothingness," but crucially the necessity of having to write nothing does not sublate it into a concept, since, as Blanchot insists in a manner closer to Bataille, "nothing" must be taken "in the simplest way" as that which "annihilates" the will [FP: 11/3]. That writing can lead to this extraordinary situation seems hard to accept, as being a writer appears to indicate an occupation rather than a fundamental aspect of human existence, and so the anguish that arises in writing seems out of place. But any attempt to shrug off the nothing that assails the writer in his solitude will fail, as it cannot be removed, since what writing is concerned with is not something that can be separated from his life;

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instead, in its "annihilation" it subjects him to "a death without end [*terme*]"—that is, a finitude without finitude [FP: 12/3]. Moreover, attempting to detach the anguish from its source only increases it, which only leads the writer to become even more profoundly "riveted" (*rivé*) to his writing, as Blanchot writes, borrowing a word from Levinas [FP: 12/4].[13]

Being "riveted" was the term Levinas used to explicate Heidegger's theme of *Geworfenheit*—the facticity of always finding ourselves "thrown" into a situation that constitutes, but exceeds, our existence, which for Levinas meant that we are bound to existence and so cannot escape it. Blanchot is less concerned with trying to evade this essential bond, as Levinas was, than with examining what we are riveted to, which for him is the "death without end" that is the writer's relation to writing, and this would seem to be one of the earliest of the many paradoxical and apophatic formulations to thread through his critical writings. This endless death was already developed in *Thomas l'Obscur*, but here it is explicitly rendered as an aspect of the writer's relation to language, which suggests that what takes place in this relation is profoundly disturbing not just to the ontological approaches of Hegel and Heidegger (as it reveals a death without end, a finitude without finitude) but also to Levinas's thought, for even if the meaning of ontology is radically altered as its nature and limits are reconfigured, it cannot simply be evaded. For what writing exposes is that human existence has an end that does not end: we can never be done with it, nor it with us; it can never be appropriated or sublated, nor is it subject to any relation to the other, divine or otherwise; writing simply reveals an ending without end, a *dead* end that never fully appears or disappears but permeates language with a never-ending destabilization of meaning. The place of language becomes uncertain, for it appears to be neither within the terms of ontology nor without—since we cannot speak of it "as it is," as it avoids finite determination—and it is to this disruption of being and language that the writer's anguish opens him.

It is this strange convergence of anguish and writing that focuses Blanchot's interest, for not only does the writer who is concerned with language inevitably find himself drawn to anguish, as Paulhan had discovered, but anguish itself appears to exist in some way *for* the writer. So the writer would seem to exist because of anguish *just as* anguish would seem to exist because of the writer, as if each arose from the same tear in the universe, or each converged on the other in its tearing of the universe. This strange correlation, which was earlier found in the struggle between innovation and convention in writing, also arises between poetry and mysticism, where language and experience find themselves turning to each other. For Blanchot this ontological reversal is the mark of the primal

scene of writing in which the (speculative) gaze outside reveals only "the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty," thus exposing its unworkable groundlessness and secular intransigence [ED: 117/72]. This disaster is prefigured in the introduction to *Faux pas*, where he writes that "anguish, which opens and closes the sky, needs the activity of a man sitting at his table and tracing letters on a piece of paper in order to manifest itself." This is a significant point, for in the earlier work Blanchot makes it much clearer what he considers to be the essential relation: "The case of the writer is privileged because he/it [*il*] represents the paradox of anguish in a privileged way" [FP: 12–13/4].

Thus each side is tied to its other in a relation whose ambivalence can never be resolved, which is writing, which is anguish, and so on. It is for this reason that the nothing that the writer seeks to say can never be attained, for as a writer there can never be pure silence; and so, as Blanchot remarks recalling a prominent theme of Bataille's thought, he works toward a different aim: to write toward a "consumption without goal [*but*] or result"; and for Bataille (and later for Blanchot) this leads toward "worklessness" (*désœuvrement*) [FP: 14/5; Exp: 61–62/48–49]. Hence, as Blanchot continues, making plain the mystical implications of this thinking, the writer is led by way of this consumption "to a real sacrifice of himself." But while this understanding of writing carries the *kenosis* of conventional models of inspiration, no voice speaks through the writer, other than the incessant murmuring of the nothing in its finitude without end, which is what ensues for the one inspired by language, for the *Sprachbegeisterter*, as Novalis wrote. So if there is a hint of mysticism in Blanchot, it is only by way of the atheistic resonances of someone as radical as Kafka, for such a disastrous writing will only be found in a work that contests itself to an extreme so that the work that is made "signifies that there is no work made," a work "in which perfect success and complete failure must appear at the same time," which exists only as long as that existence is also cast into nothingness [FP: 14/5].

The writing of such a work is an almost impossible burden, for it requires the writer to exclude his writing from any system of exchange where the effort required to produce the work is recouped in some form by the results that the work produces. Even if the writer attempts to reduce his writing to no more than an empty gesture, this always risks being turned into a gesture of emptiness: a pure product of art in its purity. For any attempt by the writer is haunted by the horizon of possibility that can determine his meager attempts as a project of meagerness. Thus Blanchot talks of writing only ever being "provisionally possible in the impossibility that weighs it down. And this continues to be the case until this possibility gives

itself as real in destroying the share of impossibility that was its condition" [FP: 17/8]. If it is by way of this window of impossibility that any writing that would respond to anguish arises, then such writing reveals itself to be that which occupies the nonplace of death and nothingness in a manner irreducible to the ontological determinations of Heidegger and Hegel. For this nonplace is absolute to an extent that we cannot term it an exteriority or an alterity, for it is simply "not" to an infinite degree. This dislocation that anguish has exposed comes from the demands that it places on language to speak from it without speaking of it. So the power of language remains inescapable, for as soon as the writer seeks to reduce the expressibility of language to allow the inexpressibility of anguish to appear, he finds this inexpressibility itself becoming an expression. (Much later Blanchot would ascribe this movement to the "weakness of the negative," by which it can never assert or dissolve itself fully, and that thus provides the basis of its persistence, its ambivalent and unending reversals [EI: 225/149].)

Language appears incapable of not signifying, since it never "is" without also announcing this fact (which only dissimulates its appearance), and a few years later, in "La littérature et le droit à la mort," Blanchot will pursue this double bind more fully and will go even further in showing the nondialectical nature of its movement (this essay will be discussed in Chapter 7). But this point is hinted at in the introduction to *Faux pas*, as Blanchot indicates that it is not necessary to seek bold solutions to the problems of expression and production, for the destabilizing effects of ambiguity haunt the most rigorous expositions of reason. Thus it is not simply the case that emptiness continually finds itself being transformed into a gesture, for every purposeful gesture is also open to being transformed into emptiness. This is the ambiguity of ambiguity, which means that we are not at liberty to decide, and thereby resolve, this ambiguous situation in one way or the other, for the presence of ambiguity in the text is itself ambiguous, as Blanchot's reading of Paulhan had shown, and so any decision taken is contaminated by undecidability. But this is no idle confusion, for it bears upon the anguished writer as a torment, since it holds out the possibility of meaning under conditions of impossibility, conditions that, as we will see in the next section, bear on his very existence.

Hence, our attempts to devise methods to approach this ruination of the work fail by necessity, but the reason for this is also the mark of a more profound discovery: while Blanchot had found through Paulhan that language can reverse its meaning within even the most simple sentences, this ambiguity is now to be viewed as the essential mode of worklessness in language. Thus, rather than trying to develop a project in which anguish can come to language, we instead find that anguish is *already within language*

in the form of ambiguity, but this does not make ambiguity into a solution, because *as* ambiguity it no more reveals anything than conceals it. It is a case not of a simple oscillation between different meanings but of a much more profound uncertainty about the very presence of meaning as such, which cannot be assuaged by indicating the absence or concealment of meaning, for this indication is itself concealed in uncertainty. The ambiguity of anguish does not refer to a secret whose revelation we are only temporarily unable to apprehend, as this would presuppose that there is something to be revealed; rather and much more radically, anguish "has nothing to reveal and is itself indifferent to its own revelation" [FP: 21/11].

Again the question of possibility arises, for under the pressure of this demand to respond to such an all-consuming but ever-vanishing anguish the writer is led into the most complex negotiations with language, which lead back to the problem of literary innovation. At the end of his introduction to *Faux pas* Blanchot returns to the argument of the Paulhan review by restating the relation between common and revolutionary language and concludes that no form of literary invention can accede to the ambiguity of language unless it realizes the necessity of chance within the falling cadence of words. That is, the relation between innovation and rules, in which innovation is the movement from familiar to novel rules, carries with it the chance that gives each new rule the same arbitrary outcome as a retrieval of old rules, and thus the necessary choice of rules is itself under the rule of chance, which places it beyond the naïve randomness that might appear in such practices as automatic writing: "It is then that one can say that everything that is written has for the one who writes it the greatest possible meaning, but also this meaning that it is a meaning bound to chance, that it is non-meaning" [FP: 26/16]. From this point of imperfection, writing finds itself filled with anguish *because* it cannot accede to the demands of anguish; and out of this ruin there is, in Bataille's terms that Blanchot takes up, "communication," as anguish has led writing to bearing its own (anguish's) expression as the meaning *of* its solitude, which remains after writing has been unable to express any other meaning.

The "cadence" that I have just mentioned is a very specific notion that refers to that movement in which there is a falling of words toward the end of a phrase or sentence, and it comes from the Latin *cadere*, "to fall," which is also the root of "accident," "chance," "decay," and "cadaver." The aspect of this range of meanings that I want to focus on here is the relation between falling and the end, for there is an ambiguity between the occurrence of falling as a *consequence* of reaching a limit, or as the *means* of reaching that limit: does the sentence end because the falling of words has taken place, or do the words fall because the end has been reached?

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This relation is essentially ambiguous, and it indicates something peculiar about the nature of limits, which has been noted earlier in terms of the failing of words. For when language turns upon itself, it comes up against a limit that leads words to fail, but in this failing the limits of language themselves come to speak of language *in* its failing. Equally, this reversal itself befalls language by accident; there is an imperceptible change of course, a chance event, and suddenly words are failing us, as if in a mute gesture of language's own weakness.

Negating Transcendence

The pressure that this cadence brings to the relation of language and existence has only begun to arise within Blanchot's essay introducing *Faux pas*, but we can see something of what is indicated when the curious figure of the writer stricken by language, isolated in anguish, comes to resemble the very image of the prematurely interred or the unquiet dead: alone in his room, buried and silent, beset with the feverish demands of responding to the nothingness that surrounds and permeates language, he has fallen along with language. The aporetic relation of language that provoked this failing now reveals itself as that which precipitates an encounter with the limits of our existence; just as the anguish at the basis of existence called forth the ambiguity of language, so too does this ambiguity now expose our mortality, in its finitude without finitude, as the *disastrous failure of the end*. Writing occurs at this limit, as the very turning of its ambiguity upon itself, which is the basis of its relation beyond (mystical, political, or otherwise).

In Blanchot's first article on Kafka from November 1945, which was later used as the opening essay for his second collection, *La part du feu*, he focuses on this relation that writing has to its outside by looking at the nature of Kafka's stories and the problem of how to read them when their status is so uncertain: Are they narratives, allegories, or meditations? How and of what are they attempting to speak? For Blanchot this uncertainty comes from the fragmentary nature of Kafka's writings, which seem to inhibit interpretation by appearing both incomplete and excessive, as if they were both saying too much and too little. This fragmentation arises from the negativity that destabilizes writing, for at any moment the story can appear both meaningful and meaningless, its narrative both fulfilled and undermined, thus it is not possible to define the work or its meaning, as the means of determining it lie neither inside nor outside. Blanchot finds that the key to these writings is that they are impossible attempts to achieve the impossible: to give linguistic form to that which gives rise to language,

to the source of their own emergence. That is, they are not to be understood in terms of their relation to other works, ideas, or themes, but rather as texts that seek to reinscribe the enigma of their own appearance; they are parables of themselves before that of anything else. The basis of this impossible attempt lies in the transition Kafka makes when he moves from the first to the third person, from writing as "I" to "he," for it is only in moving away from himself that this origin can be expressed [PF: 29/21]. But this chance for language to express is also the hollow of a narrative that resonates with the impossibility of expressing its own background. For this opening exposes "a negative structure," a distance, interior or parallel to the work that suspends every assertion it seeks to make, in such a way that "having reached the end, the assertion is both entirely developed and entirely withdrawn; we do not know if we are seizing the back or the front, if we are in the presence of the building or the pit into which the building has disappeared" [PF: 31/23].[14] This ambiguity leads to anguish, for at each stage the writing appears, undecidably, as a step (*pas*) or as an obstacle (*pas*) to meaning, and that this reversibility hangs over it is the strongest evidence that it is involved in some form of transcendence, which as Wahl noted can never be affirmed without negating itself, and vice versa.

The significance of this ambiguity lies in its implications, for the reversibility of transcendence cannot be avoided or defeated, which, as Blanchot discovers, has a disastrous impact on our ability to relate to the ambiguity of death; in Kafka's fragments on the hunter Gracchus this ambiguity becomes acute. As Blanchot recalls, although Gracchus fell to his death, his passage to the far side was subject to an accidental deviation, the "disaster," so that even now he "has not succeeded in reaching the beyond." Instead, he is stranded in the impossibility of death in which he is neither dead nor not dead, but suspended in a death without end in which he *is* "dying," in the intransitive, which becomes the *form* of the narrative, its mode of expression, as we shall see in the next chapter. Blanchot calls this "a dead transcendence"—that is, a transcendence that is not, that is dead, and a death that is not, that is transcendent: a step/not beyond (*pas au-delà*) [PF: 15/7, 88/83]. This step has the double issue that death is impossible even as it is unavoidable—that is to say, death "does not end our possibility of dying; it is real as an end to life and illusory as an end to death." As Blanchot insists, contra Sartre, it is *through* literature that we are exposed to this double ambiguity that is the origin of our anguish, for anguish "does not come only from this nothingness above which, we are told, human reality would emerge to fall back there, it comes from the fear that even this refuge might be taken away from us, that there might not be

nothing, that nothing might be more being" [PF: 16/8]. The ambiguity of literature, in which each meaning can reverse itself, is the mark of dead transcendence, which indicates that existence cannot be finished, it is interminable, indeterminate; "we do not know if we are excluded from it (and this is why we search vainly in it for something solid to hold onto) or forever imprisoned in it (and we turn ourselves desperately toward the outside). This existence is an exile in the strongest sense: we are not there, we are elsewhere and we will never stop being there" [PF: 17/9]. Thus the ambiguous autonomy of the writer's solitude is here echoed in more ontological terms that further emphasize the nonabsolute status of its autonomy, its imbrication with its inverse, from which it can never release itself but that reinforces the singularity of its situation as the reflection of the ambivalence of material isolation.

As noted, Blanchot's readings have not only put in question the nature of negativity as conceived by Hegel and the nature of death as conceived by Heidegger, but they have also cast doubt upon Levinas's thoughts on the possibility of an escape from ontology. In all these cases the outside that is being posited is shown to be far less easy to assert, as its affirmation inevitably slips into negation, due to the ambiguity that it never loses. Of equal significance is the manner in which Blanchot has begun to articulate the relation between the ambiguity of language, which was present in the earlier reading of Paulhan, and the ontico-ontological ambiguity of death, insofar as each ambiguity uncovers the unstable nature of finitude, which in turn puts in question our understanding of transcendence. As a result, the transcendence of this *faux pas* is only quasi-transcendent—that is, it only appears *as if* it were transcendent, as an *image*, and so any transdescendence that occurs is only as an image of descent toward the "underside" of being. Thus the encounter with finitude reveals this passage *là-bas* to be a repeated experience of groundlessness, an experience of nonexperience that appears *as* an image in the inscription of writing, which develops no work as it configures no beyond that persists outside its image, but only recurs as an endless series of singular inscriptions of transdescendence.

Although the philosophical sophistication of Blanchot's readings is profound, the basis of this sophistication, its literary articulation, places its "philosophical" designation in doubt. This suggests something critical about the relation of literature and ontology, for literature contests the basis of what we call "ontology" by way of the particular attention that it pays to the nature of the word, which is not *logos* conceived in any traditional sense. What Blanchot has uncovered is the fact that the language of ontological articulation can never rid itself of its literary ambiguity; that it

both presents and represents itself, that it is both present and not present, positing and negating, which inevitably affects the nature of the articulation that it offers to being and language. For this ambiguity destabilizes any notion of a secure or fixed ground of experience and instead introduces a nothingness at its heart that can neither be assuaged nor avoided. Despite this, there is a strong suspicion that, although Blanchot may have modified phenomenology substantially, he would still seem to be thinking from a position that remains broadly faithful to it in its focus on issues of experience and appearance. To understand how this similarity is only apparent involves understanding the *materiality* of appearance in Blanchot's thought, as it constitutes an indirect if persistent critique of phenomenology.

In one of the clearest studies of this issue, Marlène Zarader has shown how Blanchot's thought of the "outside" rigorously if tacitly brings into question the basic dimensions of phenomenological thought: the intentional relations of the subject to the world that surrounds it, which constitute both the subjectivity of the subject and the horizon of its world, insofar as it is according to these relations that the things of the world give themselves to the subject. This is not a model of ordinary experience, but one purified of everything but its essential elements; it is not actual objects that give themselves to the subject but rather their essences, which are in turn not given to the subject as such but to its transcendental ego. Experience is thus a form of eidetic vision, stripped of all worldly (historico-material) contingencies, allowing the pure subject to apprehend the pure object as it is given to it—that is, according to the way that it is given to it through its intentional relations, which represent (to the subject) whatever has been intended (as objects). As such, Husserl hoped to establish an approach to experience that would not be grounded in any preconditions about subject or object but would instead unveil that experience as being of the things themselves. Although Blanchot does not explicitly reject this model, or even engage with it directly, his thought places each aspect of it in doubt: the world-forming horizon is suspended by the interruption of a formless exteriority that cannot be represented and objectified; the grounding nature of intentionality is put in question by the notion of a nonintentional relation without relation; and both these developments affect the constitution of subjectivity by exposing it to a loss that cannot be converted into selfhood.[15] In a Heideggerian vein (although he goes much further than Heidegger in realizing the actual ramifications of these inversions), Blanchot transforms the dimensions of phenomenology through an emphasis on the nonappearance of nothingness, which leads to its constitutive absencing from all relations.

As a result, it has been suggested that Blanchot's rethinking of phenom-enology pursues a method akin to that of negative theology, in that his thinking of appearance is apophatic, and as such might be comparable to the work of Jean-Luc Marion, who explicitly reconceives phenomenology from the perspective of negative theology. The basis for such a comparison would lie, as Hart has pointed out, in the way that Blanchot's understand-ing of literature seems to resemble Marion's understanding of the icon. It is helpful to consider this comparison more closely, as it casts light on the depth of Blanchot's distance from phenomenology and its theological res-onances. As Marion explicates it, the icon redirects our gaze away from its visible appearance and toward the invisible to which it refers (and he makes clear that texts as well as images can perform this role), but in doing so it does not bring the invisible to visibility but rather makes the distance of the invisible from the visible apparent. Thus, the visible aspect of the icon is subordinated to the manifestation of this distance, leaving its appear-ance open to the ambiguity of multiple interpretations. Consequently, the role of the icon in referring to the invisible is not to direct the gaze to an essence, but to allow the viewer to encounter the gaze *of* the invisible. This means that the icon is the point at which these gazes cross, invisibly, and in doing so the viewer's gaze is overwhelmed by the excess of the invisible, which imposes itself with an obligation to respond. For Marion, this indicates how theology dissolves the classical Husserlian version of phenomenology in which the intentionality of the subject lies at the basis of its constitution as a subject, for with the icon the subjectivity of the viewer is not constituted by his intention but is dissolved in the encounter with that which exceeds his gaze. However, this raises a key point, for although it would seem that the icon is not inherently theological—because it is strictly impossible to decide what it refers to, since the encounter with the invisible is with that which exceeds thought in the sense that it cannot be grasped conceptually, which is what enables Hart to assert that it can instead refer to the outside—this is undermined by the persistent sugges-tion that the encounter with the icon is an encounter with that which not only gazes back at the viewer but also calls for a response.[16]

Hart's claim that literature is an "icon of the Outside" rests on the be-lief that it entails a similar radicalization of the phenomenological relation, in which the writer or reader is exposed to a dissolution of selfhood in an encounter with an emphatically atheistic outside. Although there are clearly similarities here, nevertheless, I find this formulation to be too strong for three reasons. First, it neglects the ambivalent negativity of literature, which is never solely dedicated to the outside in Blanchot's thought as it is always stretched across the two slopes of its possibility and impossibility. Second,

it risks allowing a thought of the outside to be separated from the actual texts to which it is materially specific, for it is false to believe that the outside is something "beyond" literature, to which it somehow gives immediate access; rather it is its singular and aporetic experience. Third, the manner in which the icon is commonly understood to be the point at which the viewer's gaze encounters the gaze of the other makes it difficult to disentangle it from a theological framework, however much it might be claimed that this is not necessarily the case; in practice, the idea of an atheist icon is unsustainable because of the way that atheism reconstrues the very nature of transcendence. It is because Blanchot's understanding of literature forces a rethinking of these notions of transcendence, thinking, images, and spatiality (as is shown in these chapters) that it bears such critical weight.

Although such a comparison is useful insofar as it brings out the theological resonances of Blanchot's thought, which are considerable and not without significance, it is ultimately untenable for the same reasons that Blanchot's relation to phenomenology cannot be sustained, for while he seems to use a similar language of appearance and experience to Marion, this is done with a persistent degree of qualification that places its theological resonances in an unassuageable doubt [cf. EI 377–79/252–53]. One cannot underestimate the force and extent of what might be called Blanchot's skepticism here, which continually places terms like experience under pressure until their conditions of possibility are also shown to be conditions of impossibility. This could be termed Paulhan's lesson, since it is the fundamental understanding of language that marks Blanchot's thinking from the 1940s onward and that will draw him toward a dialectical mode of thought, albeit one that is mediated through the extreme ambivalences of the experience of literature. For it is this experience that (un) grounds the dialectic for Blanchot, just as it focuses the rupture of nothingness in Heideggerian terms, but it only does so to the extent that it makes such an experience of the dialectic or of nothingness irresolvable, since, as an experience constituted by a lack of horizon, intentional relation, or content, it is more like a nonexperience, an encounter with that which resists comprehension and remains opaque to appearance, and is rigorously neutral in regard to any ethicoreligious claim that its gaze may bear. These terms indicate that Blanchot's thought is concerned less with the (onto)theology of appearance than with its materiality, when this is understood as that which is (there) but is not (given).