

THE THOUGHT OF THE OUTSIDE *

I LIE, I SPEAK

In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundations of Greek truth: "I lie, I speak," on the other hand, puts the whole of modern fiction to the test.

The force of these assertions is not in fact the same. As we know, Epimenides' argument can be mastered if, discourse having been slyly folded back upon itself, a distinction is made between two propositions, the first of which is the object of the second. The grammatical configuration of the paradox cannot suppress this essential duality, try as it might to dodge it (particularly if the paradox is locked into "I lie" in its simple form). Every proposition must be of a higher "type" than that which serves as its object. That the object-proposition recurs in the proposition that designates it; that the Cretan's sincerity is compromised the instant he speaks by the content of his assertion; that he may indeed be lying about lying—all this is less an insurmountable logical obstacle than the result of a plain and simple fact—the speaking subject is also the subject about which it speaks.

In forthrightly saying "I speak" I am exposed to none of these perils; the two propositions hidden in the statement ("I speak" and "I say that I speak") in no way compromise each other. I am protected by the impenetrable fortress of the assertion's self-assertion, by the way it coincides exactly with itself, leaving no jagged edges, averting all dan-

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ger of error by saying no more than that I am speaking. Neither in the words in question nor in the subject that pronounces them is there an obstacle or insinuation to come between the object-proposition and the proposition that states it. It is therefore true, undeniably true, that I am speaking when I say that I am speaking.

But things may not be that simple. Although the formal position of "I speak" does not raise problems of its own, its meaning opens a potentially unlimited realm of questions, in spite of its apparent clarity. "I speak" refers to a supporting discourse that provides it with an object. That discourse, however, is missing; the sovereignty of "I speak" can only reside in the absence of any other language; the discourse about which I speak does not preexist the nakedness articulated the moment I say, "I speak"; it disappears the instant I fall silent. Any possibility of language dries up in the transitivity of its execution. The desert surrounds it. In what extreme delicacy, at what slight and singular point, could a language come together in an attempt to recapture itself in the stripped-down form, "I speak"? Unless, of course, the void in which the contentless slimness of "I speak" is manifested were an absolute opening through which language endlessly spreads forth, while the subject—the "I" who speaks—fragments, disperses, scatters, disappearing in that naked space. If the only site for language is indeed the solitary sovereignty of "I speak," then in principle nothing can limit it—not the one to whom it is addressed, not the truth of what it says, not the values or systems of representation it utilizes. In short, it is no longer discourse and the communication of meaning, but a spreading forth of language in its raw state, an unfolding of pure exteriority. And the subject that speaks is less the responsible agent of a discourse (what holds it, what uses it to assert and judge, what sometimes represents itself in it by means of a grammatical form designed to have that effect) than a nonexistence in whose emptiness the unending outpouring of language uninterruptedly continues.

It is a widely held belief that modern literature is characterized by a doubling-back that enables it to designate itself; this self-reference supposedly allows it both to interiorize to the extreme (to state nothing but itself) and to manifest itself in the shimmering sign of its distant existence. In fact, the event that gave rise to what we call "literature" in the strict sense is only superficially an interiorization; it is far more a question of a passage to the "outside": language escapes the mode of being of discourse—in other words, the dynasty of

representation—and literary speech develops from itself, forming a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbors, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all. Literature is not language approaching itself until it reaches the point of its fiery manifestation; it is, rather, language getting as far away from itself as possible. And if, in this setting “outside of itself,” it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding-back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion. The “subject” of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void that language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of “I speak.”

This neutral space is what characterizes contemporary Western fiction (which is why it is no longer mythology or rhetoric). The reason it is now so necessary to think through this fiction—while in the past it was a matter of thinking the truth—is that “I speak” runs counter to “I think.” “I think” led to the indubitable certainty of the “I” and its existence; “I speak,” on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear. Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us, by way of literature as well as perhaps by other paths, to the outside in which the speaking subject disappears. No doubt, that is why Western thought took so long to think the being of language: as if it had a premonition of the danger that the naked experience of language poses for the self-evidence of “I think.”

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OUTSIDE

The breakthrough to a language from which the subject is excluded, the bringing to light of a perhaps irremediable incompatibility between the appearing of language in its being and consciousness of the self in its identity, is an experience now being heralded at diverse points in culture: in the simple gesture of writing as in attempts to formalize language; in the study of myths as in psychoanalysis; in the search for a Logos that would be like the birthplace of all of Western reason. We are standing on the edge of an abyss that had long been invisible: the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject. How can we gain access to this strange rela-

tion? Perhaps through a form of thought whose still vague possibility was sketched by Western culture in its margins. A thought that stands outside subjectivity, setting its limits as though from without, articulating its end, making its dispersion shine forth, taking in only its invincible absence; and that, at the same time, stands at the threshold of all positivity, not in order to grasp its foundation or justification but in order to regain the space of its unfolding, the void serving as its site, the distance in which it is constituted and into which its immediate certainties slip the moment they are glimpsed—a thought that, in relation to the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge, constitutes what in a phrase we might call “the thought of the outside.”

It will one day be necessary to try to define the fundamental forms and categories of this “thought of the outside.” It will also be necessary to try to retrace its path, to find out where it comes to us from and in what direction it is moving. One might assume that it was born of the mystical thinking that has prowled the confines of Christianity since the texts of the Pseudo-Dionysus: perhaps it survived for a millennium or so in the various forms of negative theology. Yet nothing is less certain: although this experience involves going “outside of oneself,” this is done ultimately in order to find oneself, to wrap and gather oneself in the dazzling interiority of a thought that is rightfully Being and Speech, in other words, Discourse, even if it is the silence beyond all language and the nothingness beyond all being.

It is less rash to suppose that the first rending to expose the thought of the outside was, paradoxically, the recursive monologue of the Marquis de Sade. In the age of Kant and Hegel, at a time when the interiorization of the law of history and the world was being imperiously demanded by Western consciousness as never before, Sade never ceases speaking of the nakedness of desire as the lawless law of the world. In the same period Hölderlin’s poetry manifested the shimmering absence of the gods and pronounced the new law of the obligation to wait, infinitely long no doubt, for the enigmatic succor of “God’s failing.” Can it be said without stretching things that Sade and Hölderlin simultaneously introduced into our thinking, for the coming century, but in some way cryptically, the experience of the outside—the former by laying desire bare in the infinite murmur of discourse, the latter by discovering that the gods had wandered off through a rift in language as it was in the process of losing its bear-

ings? That experience was afterward to remain not exactly hidden, because it had not penetrated the thickness of our culture, but afloat, foreign, exterior to our interiority, for the entire time the demand was being formulated, most imperiously, to interiorize the world, to erase alienation, to move beyond the false moment of alienation [*Enttäusserung*], to humanize nature, to naturalize man, and to recover on earth the treasures that had been spent in heaven.

The same experience resurfaced in the second half of the nineteenth century at the very core of language, which had become—even though our culture was still seeking to mirror itself in it as if it held the secret of its interiority—the sparkle of the outside. It resurfaces in Nietzsche's discovery that all of Western metaphysics is tied not only to its grammar (that had been largely suspected since Schlegel) but to those who, in holding discourse, have a hold over the right to speak; and in Mallarmé when language appears as a leave-taking from that which it names, but especially—beginning with *Igitur* and continuing through the aleatory and autonomous theatricality of the *Le Livre*—as the movement of the speaker's disappearance; and in Artaud, when all of discursive language is constrained to come undone in the violence of the body and the cry, and when thought, forsaking the wordy interiority of consciousness, becomes a material energy, the suffering of the flesh, the persecution and rending of the subject itself; and in Bataille, when thought ceases to be the discourse of contradiction or the unconscious, becoming the discourse of the limit, of ruptured subjectivity, transgression; and in Klossowski, with the experience of the double, of the exteriority of simulacra, of the insane theatrical multiplication of the Me.

Blanchot is perhaps more than just another witness to this thought. So far, has he withdrawn into the manifestation of his work, so completely is he, not hidden by his texts, but absent from their existence and absent by virtue of the marvelous force of their existence, that for us he is that thought itself—its real, absolutely distant, shimmering, invisible presence, its necessary destiny, its inevitable law, its calm, infinite, measured strength.

REFLECTION, FICTION

It is extremely difficult to find a language faithful to this thought. Any purely reflexive discourse runs the risk of leading the experience of

the outside back to the dimension of interiority; reflection tends irresistibly to repatriate it to the side of consciousness and to develop it into a description of living that depicts the “outside” as the experience of the body, space, the limits of the will, and the ineffaceable presence of the other. The vocabulary of fiction is equally perilous: due to the thickness of its images, sometimes merely by virtue of the transparency of the most neutral or hastiest figures, it risks setting down readymade meanings that stitch the old fabric of interiority back together in the form of an imagined outside.

Hence the necessity of converting reflexive language. It must be directed not toward any inner confirmation—not toward a kind of central, unshakable certitude—but toward an outer bound where it must continually content itself. When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel. That is why Blanchot's language does not use negation dialectically. To negate dialectically brings what one negates into the troubled interiority of the mind. To negate one's own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak. It is to leave it where it lies, far behind one, in order to be free for a new beginning—a beginning that is a pure origin because its only principles are itself and the void, but that is also a rebeginning because what freed that void was the language of the past in the act of hollowing itself out. Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces; not reconciliation, but droning on and on; not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun. “Not speech, barely a murmur, barely a tremor, less than silence, less than the abyss of the void; the fullness of the void, something one cannot silence, occupying all of space, the uninterrupted, the incessant, a tremor and already a murmur, not a murmur but speech, and not just any speech, distinct speech, precise speech, within my reach.”¹

This kind of symmetrical conversion is required of the language of fiction. It must no longer be a power that tirelessly produces images

and makes them shine but, rather, a power that undoes them, that lessens their overload, that infuses them with an inner transparency that illuminates them little by little until they burst and scatter in the lightness of the unimaginable. Blanchot's fictions are, rather than the images themselves, their transformation, displacement, and neutral interstices. They are precise; the only figures they outline are in the gray tones of everyday life and the anonymous. And when wonder overtakes them, it is never in themselves but in the void surrounding them, in the space in which they are set, rootless and without foundation. The fictitious is never in things or in people but in the impossible verisimilitude of what lies between them—encounters, the proximity of what is most distant, the absolute dissimulation in our very midst. Therefore, fiction consists not in showing the invisible, but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible. Thus, it bears a profound relation to space; understood in this way, space is to fiction what the negative is to reflection (whereas dialectical negation is tied to the fable of time). No doubt, this is the role that houses, hallways, doors, and rooms play in almost all of Blanchot's narratives: placeless places, beckoning thresholds, closed, forbidden spaces that are nevertheless exposed to the winds, hallways fanned by doors that open rooms for unbearable encounters and create gulfs between them, across which voices cannot carry, and that even muffle cries; corridors leading to more corridors where the night resounds, beyond sleep, with the smothered voices of those who speak, with the cough of the sick, with the death rattle of the dying, with the suspended breath of those who ceaselessly cease living; a long and narrow room, like a tunnel, in which approach and distance—the approach of forgetting, the distance of the wait—draw near to one another and unendingly move apart.

Thus reflexive patience, always directed outside itself, and a fiction that cancels itself out in the void where it undoes its forms intersect to form a discourse appearing with no conclusion and no image, with no truth and no theater, with no proof, no mask, no affirmation, free of any center, unfettered to any native soil; a discourse that constitutes its own space as the outside toward which, and outside of which, it speaks. This discourse, as speech of the outside whose words welcome the outside it addresses, has the openness of a commentary: the repetition of what continually murmurs outside. But this discourse, as a speech that is always outside what it says, is an incessant advance

toward that whose absolutely fine-spun light has never received language. This singular mode of being of discourse—a return to the ambiguous hollowness of undoing and origin—no doubt defines the common ground of Blanchot's "novels" and "narratives," and of his "criticism." From the moment discourse ceases to follow the slope of self-interiorizing thought and, addressing the very being of language, returns thought to the outside; from that moment, in a single stroke, it becomes a meticulous narration of experiences, encounters, and improbable signs—language about the outside of all language, speech about the invisible side of words. And it becomes attentiveness to what in language already exists, has already been said, imprinted, manifested—a listening less to what is articulated in language than to the void circulating between its words, to the murmur that is forever taking it apart; a discourse on the nondiscourse of all language; the fiction of the invisible space in which it appears. That is why the distinction between "novels," "narratives," and "criticism" is progressively weakened in Blanchot until, in *L'Attente l'oubli*, language alone is allowed to speak—what is no one's, is neither fiction nor reflection, neither already said nor never yet said, but is instead "between them, this place with its fixed open expanse, the retention of things in their latent state."²

BEING ATTRACTED AND NEGLIGENT

Attraction is no doubt for Blanchot what desire is for Sade, force for Nietzsche, the materiality of thought for Antonin Artaud, and transgression for Georges Bataille: the pure, most naked, experience of the outside. It is necessary to be clear about what the word designates: "attraction," as Blanchot means it, does not depend on any charm. Nor does it break one's solitude or found any positive communication. To be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the exterior, rather, it is to suffer—in emptiness and destitution—the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside. Far from calling on one interiority to draw close to another, attraction makes it imperiously manifest that the outside is there, open, without depth, without protection or reserve (how could it have any when it had no interiority. and, instead, infinitely unfolds outside any enclosure?), but that one cannot gain access to that opening because the outside never yields its essence. The outside cannot

offer itself as a positive presence—as something inwardly illuminated by the certainty of its own existence—but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible, receding into the sign it makes to draw one toward it, as though it were possible to reach it. Attraction, the marvelous simplicity of opening, has nothing to offer but the infinite void that opens beneath the feet of the person it attracts, the indifference that greets him as if he were not there, a silence too insistent to be resisted and too ambiguous to be deciphered and definitively interpreted—nothing to offer but a woman's gesture in a window, a door left ajar, the smile of a guard before a forbidden threshold, a gaze condemned to death.

Negligence is the necessary correlate of attraction. The relations between them are complex. To be susceptible to attraction a person must be negligent—essentially negligent, with total disregard for what one is doing (in *Aminadab*, Thomas enters the fabulous boarding-house only because he neglects to enter the house across the street) and with the attitude that one's past and kin and whole other life is nonexistent, thus relegating them to the outside (neither in the boardinghouse in *Aminadab* nor in the city in *Le Très-haut*, nor in the "sanatorium" of *Le Dernier homme*, nor in the apartment in *Le Moment voulu* does one know what is going on outside, or care to know: one is outside the outside, which is never figured, only incessantly hinted at by the whiteness of its absence, the pallor of an abstract memory, or at most by the glint of snow through a window). This kind of negligence is in fact the flip side of a zealousness—a mute, unjustified, obstinate diligence in surrendering oneself, against all odds, to being attracted by attraction, or more precisely (since attraction has no positivity) to being, in the void, the aimless movement without a moving body of attraction itself. Pierre Klossowski was so right to emphasize that in *Le Très-Haut* Henri's last name is "Sorge" (Care) although it is mentioned only once or twice in the text.

But is this zeal always alert? Does it not commit an oversight that may seem trifling but is in fact more crucial than that massive forgetting of an entire life, of all prior attachments and relations? Is not the stride that tirelessly carries the attracted person forward precisely distraction and error? Was it not necessary to "hold back, stay put," as is suggested several times in *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* and in *Le Moment voulu*? Is it not in the nature of zeal to weigh itself down with its own solicitude, to hold it too far, to multiply steps, to grow dizzy

with stubbornness, to advance toward the attraction, when attraction speaks imperiously from the depths of its withdrawal only to what is itself withdrawn? It is of the essence of zeal to be negligent, to believe that what is concealed lies elsewhere, that the past will repeat itself, that the law applies to it, that it is awaited, watched over, spied upon. Who will ever know if Thomas—perhaps "Doubting Thomas" should come to mind—had more faith than the others in his questioning of his own belief and in his demands to see and touch? And is what he touched on a body of flesh really what he was after when he asked for a resurrected presence? And was not the illumination suffusing him as much shadow as light? Perhaps Lucie was not who he was looking for; perhaps he should have questioned the person who was thrust on him for a companion; perhaps, instead of trying to get to the upper stories to find the implausible woman who had smiled at him, he should have followed the simple path, taken the gentlest slope, and abandoned himself to the vegetal powers below. Perhaps it was not he who had been called, perhaps someone else was awaited.

All this uncertainty, which makes zeal and negligence two indefinitely reversible figures, undoubtedly has as its principle "the carelessness ruling the house."⁵ This negligence is more visible, more concealed, more ambiguous yet more fundamental than any other. Everything in it can be deciphered as an intentional sign, as secret diligence, as spying or entrapment: perhaps the lazy servants are hidden powers; perhaps the wheel of fortune dispenses fates recorded long ago in books. But now zeal does not envelop negligence as its necessary allotment of shadow; rather, negligence remains so indifferent to what can manifest or conceal it that any gesture pertaining to it takes on the value of a sign. It was out of negligence that Thomas was called: the opening of attraction and the negligence welcoming the person who is attracted are one and the same. The constraint it creates is not simply blind (which is why it is absolute, and absolutely nonreciprocal). It is illusory; it binds no one because it itself is bound to that bond and can no longer be pure and open attraction. How could attraction not be essentially negligent—leaving things what they are, letting time pass and repeat, letting people advance toward it? For it is the infinite outside, for it is nothing that does not fall outside it, for it undoes every figure of interiority in pure dispersion.

One is attracted precisely to the extent that one is neglected. This is

why zeal can only consist in neglecting that negligence, in oneself becoming a courageously negligent solicitude, in going toward the light in negligence of shadow, until it is discovered that the light itself is only negligence, a pure outside equivalent to a darkness that disperses, like a blown-out candle, the negligent zeal it had attracted.

WHERE IS THE LAW, AND WHAT DOES THE LAW DO?

Being negligent, being attracted, is a way of manifesting and concealing the law—of manifesting the withdrawal with which it conceals itself, of consequently attracting it in a light that hides it.

If it were self-evident and in the heart, the law would no longer be the law, but the sweet interiority of consciousness. If, on the other hand, it were present in a text, if it were possible to decipher it between the lines of a book, if it were in a register that could be consulted, then it would have the solidity of external things: it would be possible to follow or disobey it. Where then would its power reside, by what force or prestige would it command respect? In fact, the presence of the law is its concealment. Sovereignly, the law haunts cities, institutions, conduct, and gestures; whatever one does, however great the disorder and carelessness, it has already applied its might: “The house is always, at every instant, in proper order.”⁴ Taking liberties is not enough to interrupt it; you might think that you have detached yourself from it and can observe its exercise from without. The moment you believe that you can read its decrees from afar, and that they apply only to other people, is the moment you are closest to the law; you make it circulate, you “contribute to the enforcement of a public decree.”⁵ Yet this perpetual manifestation never illuminates what the law says or wants: the law is not the principle or inner rule of conduct. It is the outside that envelops actions, thereby removing them from all interiority; it is the darkness beyond their borders; it is the void that surrounds them, converting, unknown to anyone, their singularity into the gray monotony of the universal and opening around them a space of uneasiness, of dissatisfaction, of multiplied zeal.

And of transgression. How could one know the law and truly experience it, how could one force it to come into view, to exercise its powers clearly, to speak, without provoking it, without pursuing it into its recesses, without resolutely going even farther into the outside

into which it is always receding? How can one see its invisibility unless it has turned into its opposite, punishment, which, after all, is only the law overstepped, irritated, beside itself? But, if punishment could be provoked merely by the arbitrary actions of those who violate the law, then the law would be in their control: they would be able to touch it and make it appear at will; they would be masters of its shadow and light. That is why transgression endeavors to overstep prohibition in an attempt to attract the law to itself; it always surrenders to the attraction of the essential withdrawal of the law; it obstinately advances into the opening of an invisibility over which it will never triumph; insanely, it endeavors to make the law appear in order to be able to venerate it and dazzle it with its own luminous face; all it ends up doing is reinforcing the law in its weakness—the lightness of the night that is its invincible, impalpable substance. The law is the shadow toward which every gesture necessarily advances; it is itself the shadow of the advancing gesture.

Aminadab and *Le Très-haut* form a diptych, one on each side of the invisibility of the law. In the first novel, the strange boardinghouse Thomas enters (attracted, called, perhaps elected, although not without being constrained to cross many forbidden thresholds) seems subject to an unknown law: its nearness and absence are continually recalled by doors open and prohibited, by the great wheel handing out blank or undecipherable fates, by the overhang of an upperstory from which the appeal originates, from which anonymous orders fall, but to which no one can gain access. The day some people decide to track the law into its lair is the day they encounter the monotony of the place where they are already, as well as violence, blood, death, and collapse, and finally resignation, despair, and a voluntary, fatal disappearance into the outside: for the outside of the law is so inaccessible that anyone who tries to conquer and penetrate it is consigned not to punishment which would be the law finally placed under restraint; but to the outside of that outside—to the profoundest forgetting of all. What it is that is served by the “domestics”—those *guards* and *servants* who, unlike the “boarders,” “belong to the house” and must represent the law, enforcing it and submitting silently to it—is known to no one, not even to themselves (do they serve the house or the will of the guests?). As far as anyone knows, they could even be former boarders who became servants. They are simultaneously zeal and indifference,

drunkenness and attentiveness, slumber and tireless activity, the twin figures of wickedness and solicitude: what conceals concealment and what makes it manifest.

In *Le Très-haut* the law itself (somewhat like the upper story in *Aminadab*, in its monotonous resemblance and exact identity with every other law) is manifested in its essential concealment. Sorge ("care" for and of the law: the solicitude one feels for the law, and the solicitude of the law for those to whom it is applied, even, especially, if they wish to escape it), Henri Sorge, is a bureaucrat: he works at city hall, in the office of vital statistics; he is only a tiny cog in a strange machine that turns individual existences into an institution; he is the first form of the law, because he transforms every birth into an archive. But then he abandons his duty (but is it really an abandonment? He takes a vacation and extends it—unofficially, it is true, but with the complicity of the administration, which tacitly arranges this essential idleness). This quasi retirement—is it a cause or an effect?—is enough to throw everyone's existence into disarray, and for death to inaugurate a reign that is no longer the classifying reign of the municipal register but the dishonored, contagious, anonymous reign of the epidemic; not the real death of decease and its certification, but a hazy charnel house where no one knows who is a patient and who is a doctor, who is a guard and who is a victim, whether it is a prison or a hospital, a safe house or a fortress of evil. All dams have burst, everything overflows its bounds: the dynasty of rising waters, the kingdom of dubious dampness, oozing, abscesses, and vomiting: individualities dissolve; sweating bodies melt into the walls; endless screams blare through the fingers that muffle them. Yet when Sorge leave state service, where he was responsible for ordering other people's existence, he does not go outside the law; quite the opposite, he forces it to manifest itself at the empty place he just abandoned. The movement by which he effaces his singular existence and removes it from the universality of the law in fact exalts the law; through that movement he serves the law, shows its perfection, "obliges" it, while at the same time linking it to its own disappearance (which is, in a sense, the opposite of transgressive existence exemplified by Bouxx and Dorte); he has become one with the law.

The law can only respond to this provocation by withdrawing: not by retreating into a still deeper silence, but by remaining immobile in

its identity. One can, of course, plunge into the open void: plots can hatch, rumors of sabotage can spread, arson and murder can replace the most ceremonious order; the order of the law was never so sovereign than at this moment, when it envelops precisely what had tried to overturn it. Anyone who attempts to oppose the law in order to found a new order, to organize a second police force, to institute a new state, will only encounter the silent and infinitely accommodating welcome of the law. The law does not change: it subsided into the grave once and for all, and each of its forms is only a metamorphosis of that never-ending death. Sorge wears a mask from Greek tragedy—he has a threatening and pitiful mother like Clytemnestra, a dead father, a sister relentless in her mourning, an all-powerful and insidious father-in-law. He is Orestes in submission, an Orestes whose concern is to escape the law in order better to submit himself to it. In that he insists on living in the plague quarter, he is also a god who consents to die among humans, but who cannot succeed in dying and therefore leaves the promise of the law empty, creating a silence rent by the profoundest of screams: where is the law, what does the law do? And when, by virtue of a new metamorphosis or a new sinking into his own identity, he is recognized, named, denounced, venerated, ridiculed by a woman bearing a strange resemblance to his sister, at that moment, he, the possessor of every name, is transformed into something unnameable, an absent absence, the amorphous presence of the void and the mute horror of that presence. But perhaps this death of God is the opposite of death (the ignominy of a limp and slimy thing twitching for all eternity); and the gesture with which he kills her finally liberates his language—a language that has nothing more to say than the "I speak, I am speaking now" of the law, indefinitely prolonged by the simple fact of that language's proclamation in the outside of its muteness.

EURYDICE AND THE SIRENS

The law averts its face and returns to the shadows the instant one looks at it; when one tries to hear its words, what one catches is a song that is no more than the fatal promise of a future song.

The Sirens are the elusive and forbidden form of the alluring voice. They are nothing but song. Only a silvery wake in the sea, the hollow

of a wave, a cave in the rocks, the whiteness of the beach—what are they in their very being if not a pure appeal, if not the mirthful void of listening, if not attentiveness, if not an invitation to pause? Their music is the opposite of a hymn: no presence shimmers in their immortal words; only the promise of a future song accompanies their melody. What makes them seductive is less what they make it possible to hear than what sparkles in the remoteness of their words, the future of what they say. Their fascination is due not to their current song but to what it promises to be. What the Sirens promise to sing to Ulysses is his own past exploits, transformed into a poem for the future: “We know all the suffering, all the suffering inflicted by the gods on the people of Argos and Troy on the fields of Troad.” Presented as though in negative outline, the song is but the attraction of song; yet what it promises the hero is nothing other than a duplicate of what he has lived through, known, and suffered, precisely what he himself is. A promise at once deceptive and truthful. It lies because all those who surrender to seduction and steer their ships toward the beach will only meet death. But it speaks the truth in that it is death that enables the song to sound and endlessly recount the heroes’ adventure. Yet one must refuse to hear this song so pure—so pure that it says nothing more than its own devouring withdrawal—that one must plug one’s ears, pass by it as if one were deaf, in order to live and thus begin to sing. Or, rather, in order for the narrative that will never die to be born, one must listen but remain at the mast, wrists and ankles tied; one must vanquish all desire by a trick that does violence to itself; one must experience all suffering by remaining at the threshold of the alluring abyss; one must finally find oneself beyond song, as if one had crossed death while still alive only to restore it in a second language.

Then there is the figure of Eurydice. She would seem to be the exact opposite, since she must be summoned back from the shadows by the melody of a song capable of seducing and lulling death, and since the hero is unable to resist Eurydice’s power of enchantment, of which she herself is the saddest victim. Yet she is a close relative of the Sirens: just as they sing only the future of a song, she shows only the promise of a face. Orpheus may have succeeded in quieting barking dogs and beguiling sinister forces, but on the return trip he should have been chained like Ulysses or as unperceiving as his sailors. In

fact, he was the hero and his crew combined in a single character: he was seized by the forbidden desire and untied himself with his own hands, letting the invisible face disappear into the shadows, just as Ulysses let the song he did not hear vanish in the waves. Each of their voices is then freed: Ulysses’ with his salvation and the possibility of telling the tale of his marvelous adventure; Orpheus’s with his absolute loss and never-ending lament. But it is possible that behind Ulysses’ triumphant narrative there prevails the inaudible lament of not having listened better and longer, of not having ventured as close as possible to the wondrous voice that might have finished the song. And that behind Orpheus’s laments shines the glory of having seen, however fleetingly, the unattainable face at the very instant it turned away and returned to darkness—a nameless, placeless hymn to the light.

These two figures are profoundly interwoven in Blanchot’s work.⁶ Some of his narratives, for example *L’Arrêt de mort*, are dedicated to the gaze of Orpheus: the gaze that at the wavering threshold of death goes in search of the submerged presence and tries to bring its image back to the light of day, but secures only the nothingness in which the poem can subsequently appear. In Blanchot, however, Orpheus does not see Eurydice’s face in a movement that conceals it and makes it visible: he is able to contemplate it face to face; he sees with his own eyes the open gaze of death, “the most terrible gaze a living thing can encounter.” It is that gaze, or rather the narrator’s gaze into that gaze, that exerts an extraordinary power of attraction; it is what makes a second woman appear in the middle of the night in an already-captive state of stupefaction and forces her to wear the plaster mask allowing one to contemplate “face to face that which lives eternally.” The gaze of Orpheus acquires the fatal power that sang in the voice of the Sirens. Similarly, the narrator of *Au Moment voulu* goes in search of Judith in the forbidden place where she is imprisoned; against all expectations, he easily finds her, like an overly close Eurydice who offers herself in an impossible, happy return. But the figure lurking in the background who guards her, and from which Orpheus comes to wrest her, is less a dark and inflexible goddess than a pure voice: “Indifferent and neutral, withdrawn into a vocal realm where she is so completely stripped of superfluous perfections that she seems deprived of herself: just, but in a way reminiscent of justice ruled by every negative destiny.”⁷ Is not this voice—which “sings blankly” and

offers so little to be heard—the voice of the Sirens, whose seductiveness resides in the void they open, in the fascinated immobility seizing all who listen?

THE COMPANION

At the first signs of attraction, when the withdrawal of the desired face remains sketchy, when the firmness of the solitary voice is just beginning to stand out against the blur of the murmur, something like a sweet and violent movement intrudes on interiority, drawing it out of itself, turning it around, bringing forth next to it—or rather right behind it—the background figure of a companion who always remains hidden but always makes it patently obvious that he is there; a double that keeps his distance, an accosting resemblance. The instant that interiority is lured out of itself, an outside empties the place into which interiority customarily retreats and deprives it of the possibility of retreat: a form arises—less than a form, a kind of stubborn, amorphous anonymity—that divests interiority of its identity, hollows it out, divides it into noncoincident twin figures, divests it of its unmediated right to say *I*, and pits against its discourse a speech that is indissociably echo and denial. To lend an ear to the silvery voice of the Sirens, to turn toward the forbidden face that has already concealed itself, is not simply to abandon the world and the distraction of appearance; it is suddenly to feel grow within oneself a desert at the other end of which (but this immeasurable distance is also as thin as a line) gleams a language without an assignable subject, a godless law, a personal pronoun without a person, an eyeless expressionless face, an other that is the same. Does the principle of attraction secretly reside in this tear and this bond? When one thought that one was being drawn out of oneself by an inaccessible remoteness, was it not simply that this mute presence was bearing down in the shadows with all its inevitable weight? The empty outside of attraction is perhaps identical to the nearby outside of the double. That would make the companion attraction at the height of its dissimulation: it is dissimulated because it presents itself as a pure, close, stubborn, redundant presence, as one figure too many; and because it repels more than it attracts, because one must keep it at a distance, because there is always the danger that one will be absorbed by it and compromised by it in boundless confusion. This means that the companion acts both as a

demand to which one is never equal and a weight of which one would like to rid oneself. One is irretrievably bound to the companion with a familiarity that is hard to bear; yet one must draw still closer to him and create a bond with him different from the absence of ties that attaches one to him through the faceless form of absence.

This figure is infinitely reversible. Is the companion an unacknowledged guide? Is he a law that is manifest but is not visible as law? Or does he constitute a heavy mass, an encumbering inertia, a slumber threatening to engulf all vigilance? No sooner does Thomas enter the house to which he has been attracted by a half-made gesture and an ambiguous smile than he receives a strange double (is this what, according to the meaning of the title, is “God-given?”): the double’s apparently wounded face is only the outline of a face tattooed over his, and in spite of hideous flaws, he retains something like “a reflection of former beauty.” Does he know the secrets of the house better than anyone else, as he will boast at the end of the novel? Is not his apparent fatuousness but a silent awaiting of the question? Is he a guide or a prisoner? Does he count among the inaccessible powers that dominate the house, or is he only a domestic? His name is *Dom*. He is invisible and falls silent whenever Thomas addresses a third party, and soon disappears entirely; but when Thomas seems to have finally gained entry to the house, when he thinks he has found the face and voice he was seeking, when he is being treated as a domestic, Dom reappears in possession of, or claiming to be in possession of, the law and speech: Thomas had been wrong to have had so little faith, to have failed to question he who was there to respond, to have squandered his zeal on his wish to gain access to the upper stories, when it would have been enough for him to allow himself to go down. The more choked Thomas’s voice becomes, the more Dom speaks, assuming the right to speak and to speak for him. All of language totters; when Dom uses the first person, it is actually Thomas’s language that is speaking, without him, in the void that the wake of his visible absence leaves in a darkness connected to dazzling light.

The companion is also indissociably what is closest and farthest away. In *Le Très-haut* he is represented by Dorte, the man from “down there”; he is a stranger to the law and stands outside the order of the city; he is illness in its raw state, disseminated death infusing life; by contrast to the “Most High” of the title he is “Most Low”; and yet he is obsessively close; he is unreservedly familiar; he freely confides; he is

inexhaustibly and multiply present; he is the eternal neighbor; the sound of his cough carries across doors and walls; his death throes resound through the house; and in this world oozing moisture, water rising on all sides, Dorte's flesh itself, his fever and sweat, cross the partition to stain Sorge's room next door. When he finally dies, howling in one last transgression that he is not dead, his scream goes out into the hand that muffles it, forever vibrating in Sorge's fingers. Sorge's flesh and bones, his body, will long remain that death, and the cry that contests and confirms it.

It is in this movement which is the pivot of language that the essence of the stubborn companion is most clearly manifested. The companion is not a privileged interlocutor, some other speaking subject; he is the nameless limit language reaches. That limit, however, is in no way positive; it is instead the deep into which language is forever disappearing only to return identical to itself, the echo of a different discourse that says the same thing, of the same discourse saying something else. "*Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*" ("he who did not accompany me") has no name (and wishes to be kept in that essential anonymity); he is a faceless, gazeless *he* who can only see through the language of another whom he submits to the order of his own night; he edges as close as can be to the *I* that speaks in the first person, and whose words and phrases he repeats in an infinite void. Yet there is no bond between them; an immeasurable distance separates them. That is why he who says *I* must continually approach him in order finally to meet the companion who does not accompany him and who forms no bond with him that is positive enough to be manifested by being untied. There is no pact to tie them to each other; yet they are powerfully linked by a constant questioning (describe what you see, are you writing now?) and by the uninterrupted discourse manifesting the impossibility of responding. It is as if this withdrawal, this hollowness that is perhaps nothing more than the inexorable erosion of the person who speaks, cleared a neutral space of language. The narrative plunges into the space between the narrator and the inseparable companion who does not accompany him; it runs the full length of the straight line separating the speaking *I* from the *he* he is in his spoken being; it unfolds a placeless place that is the outside of all speech and writing, that brings them forth and dispossesses them, that imposes its law on them, that manifests through its infinite unraveling their momentary gleaming and sparkling disappearance.

NEITHER ONE NOR THE OTHER

Despite several consonances, we are quite far from the experience through which some are wont to lose themselves in order to find themselves. The characteristic movement of mysticism is to attempt to join—even if it means crossing the night—the positivity of an existence by opening a difficult line of communication with it. Even when that existence contents itself, hollows itself out in the labor of its own negativity, infinitely withdrawing into a lightless day, a shadowless night, a visibility devoid of shape, it is still a shelter in which experience can rest. The shelter is created as much by the law of a Word as by the open expanse of silence. For in the form of the experience, silence is the immeasurable, inaudible, primal breath from which all manifest discourse issues; or speech is a reign with the power to hold itself in silent suspense.

The experience of the outside has nothing to do with that. The movement of attraction and the withdrawal of the companion lay bare what precedes all speech, what underlies all silence: the continuous streaming of language. A language spoken by no one: any subject it may have is no more than a grammatical fold. A language not resolved by any silence: any interruption is only a white stain on its seamless sheet. It opens a neutral space in which no existence can take root. Mallarmé taught us that the word is the manifest nonexistence of what it designates; we now know that the being of language is the visible effacement of the one who speaks: "Saying that I hear these words would not explain for me the dangerous strangeness of my relations with them. . . . They do not speak, they are not inside; on the contrary, they lack all intimacy and lie entirely outside. What they designate consigns me to this outside of all speech, seemingly more secret and more inward than the inner voice of conscience. But that outside is empty, the secret has no depth, what is repeated is the emptiness of repetition, it does not speak and yet has always been said."⁸ The experiences Blanchot narrates lead to this anonymity of language liberated and opened to its own boundlessness. What they find in that murmuring space is less an endpoint than the site without geography of their possible rebeginning: hence the direct and luminous, at last serene, question Thomas asks at the end of *Aminadab* when all speech seems to be denied him; and the pure flash of the empty promise—"now I am speaking"—in *Le Très-haut*; and the appearance

in the final pages of *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* of a smile that has no face but is worn at last by a silent name; or the first contact with the words of the subsequent rebeginning at the end of *Le Dernier homme*.

Language is then freed from all of the old myths by which our awareness of words, discourse, and literature has been shaped. For a long time it was thought that language had mastery over time, that it acted both as the future bond of the promise and as memory and narrative; it was thought to be prophecy and history; it was also thought that in its sovereignty it could bring to light the eternal and visible body of truth; it was thought that its essence resided in the form of words or in the breath that made them vibrate. In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power resides in dissimulation. That is why it is one with the erosion of time; it is depthless forgetting and the transparent emptiness of waiting.

Language, its every word, is indeed directed at contents that preexist it; but in its own being, provided that it holds as close to its being as possible, it only unfolds in the pureness of the wait. Waiting is directed at nothing: any object that could gratify it would only efface it. Still, it is not confined to one place, it is not a resigned immobility; it has the endurance of a movement that will never end and would never promise itself the reward of rest; it does not wrap itself in interiority; all of it falls irremediably outside. Waiting cannot wait for itself at the end of its own past, nor rejoice in its own patience, nor steel itself once and for all, for it was never lacking in courage. What takes it up is not memory but forgetting. This forgetting, however, should not be confused with the scatteredness of distraction or the slumber of vigilance; it is a wakefulness so alert, so lucid, so new that it is a goodbye to night and a pure opening onto a day to come. In this respect forgetting is extreme attentiveness—so extreme that it effaces any singular face that might present itself to it. Once defined, a form is simultaneously too old and too new, too strange and too familiar, not to be instantly rejected by the purity of the wait, and thereby condemned to the immediacy of forgetting. It is in forgetting that the wait remains a waiting: an acute attention to what is radically new, with no bond of resemblance or continuity with anything else (the newness of the wait drawn outside of itself and freed from any past); attention to what is most profoundly old (for deep down the wait has never stopped waiting).

Language—in its attentive and forgetful being, with its power of dissimulation that effaces every determinate meaning and even the existence of the speaker, in the gray neutrality that constitutes the essential hiding place of all being and thereby frees the space of the image—is neither truth nor time, neither eternity nor man; it is instead the always undone form of the outside. It places the origin in contact with death, or rather brings them both to light in the flash of their infinite oscillation—a momentary contact in a boundless space. The pure outside of the origin, if that is indeed what language is eager to greet, never solidifies into a penetrable and immobile positivity; and the perpetually rebegun outside of death, although carried toward the light by the essential forgetting of language, never sets the limit at which truth would finally begin to take shape. They immediately flip sides. The origin takes on the transparency of the endless; death opens interminably onto the repetition of the beginning. And what language *is* (not what it means, not the form in which it says what it means), what language is in its being, is that softest of voices, that nearly imperceptible retreat, that weakness deep inside and surrounding every thing and every face—what bathes the belated effort of the origin and the dawnlike erosion of death in the same neutral light, at once day and night. Orpheus's murderous forgetting, Ulysses' wait in chains, are the very being of language.

At a time when language was defined as the place of truth and the bond of time, it was placed in absolute peril by the Cretan Epimenides' assertion that all Cretans were liars: the way in which that discourse was bound to itself undid any possibility of truth. On the other hand, when language is revealed to be the reciprocal transparency of the origin and death, every single existence receives, through the simple assertion "I speak," the threatening promise of its own disappearance, its future appearance.

NOTES

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 125 [*The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1993), pp. 66–67].
- 2 Blanchot, *L'Attente l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 162.
- 3 Blanchot, *Aminadab* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 235.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

- 5 Blanchot, *Le Très-haut* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 81.
- 6 See Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 179–184; and *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 9–17 [cf. “The Gaze of Orpheus” and “The Song of the Sirens,” in Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1981), pp. 99–104 and 105–113].
- 7 Blanchot, *Au moment voulu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 68–69.
- 8 Blanchot, *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, pp. 136–37 [*The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*, p. 72].