

The Unbearable Trauma and Witnessing in Blanchot and Levinas

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Levinas describes and Blanchot cries – as it were – the *il y a*.
Bataille, “Primacy of Economy” 168

Language is the possibility of an enigmatic equivocation for better and for
worse, which men abuse.

Levinas, *Proper Names* 70

According to the classical conception of the relationship between the philosopher and language he or she is obligated to use, the doctrine of the philosopher elevates itself above its expression; language is a medium, the tool that subordinates itself to the delivery of the message. On this account, there is a clearly determined relationship between the constative and the performative, the philosophical and the rhetorical, the philosophical and the poetical. Hyperbolic language of whatever kind – the flourish of the author, the vivid image, the life-giving metaphor – would be an exaggeration of a univocal philosophical language that, whilst excessive, might still be safely paraphrased. But what if this hyperbolization resisted translation into a calmer, more philosophical idiom? What if there was a language of thought that disrupted the classical relation between philosophy and language?

I will draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot in order to address these questions and, more especially, what remains thought-provoking in their friendship, to which their texts bear witness and that ended only with Levinas’ death in 1995. The friendship between the Lithuanian Jewish phenomenologist, commentator on Talmudic texts and writer on Jewish affairs, and the French atheist novelist and critical commentator, began at Strasbourg University in the 1920s, and passed through several phases. It preceded and outlasted Blanchot’s career as a political journalist and marks itself in the essays he wrote after

his retreat from political commentary to literary commentary.¹ Levinas' early phenomenological studies, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, written after his return from the work camp where he was imprisoned as a French prisoner of war, leave their marks on Blanchot's texts. But likewise, they grant Blanchot's novels an exemplary status with respect to the phenomenological analyses of time and existence. Indeed, the crucial notion of the *il y a*, to which I will turn at length below, belongs to both men, and neither allows himself to refer to it without invoking the other.²

They also share a concern with the question of language. At stake in the work of Levinas and Blanchot is, I will argue, a witnessing of a traumatic experience at the root of language that resists translation into a calmer, philosophical idiom. A writer like Levinas might seem to call for such translation; and yet as I will argue, he depends on the untranslatability of his work in order to answer to the "object" of his inquiries. His account of the relation to the Other [*Autrui*], as I will show, calls for a philosophical discourse that would keep memory of the opening of language. It calls for a discourse that could answer the interruption that discourse bears at its origin. But Blanchot would answer an interruption that is at least as originary and does so in a way that is very different from Levinas. Blanchot shows that the articulation of Levinas' hyperbolic philosophical discourse depends upon a preliminary disavowal. He argues that philosophical discourse, despite itself, depends on the ongoing suppression of a resistance in language that is incarnated in a certain *literature*. To couch this relation in terms of a *trauma* of language, or to write of a witnessing that occurs in philosophical language is not to inappropriately *anthropomorphize* the text. It concerns, ultimately, something beyond the relation between texts or between two thinkers or, indeed, between philosophy and poetry. The issue in contention between Blanchot and Levinas bears upon the way in which witnessing and trauma might be said to determine the structure of language and experience.³

To witness, according to our ordinary understanding of the word, is to speak or write of what one saw with one's own eyes or heard with one's own ears – of an experience of which the speaker, the writer has a firsthand knowledge. Blanchot argues that the locus of the being-present to which witnessing points is not the "I," but the third person "it." Language, as I will argue, presupposes this locus. Like Freud's account

of deferred action [*nachträglichkeit*], the trauma at the birth of language reveals its effects only after the fact. Levinas does not disagree; his term, *le Dire*, the to-say or saying in *Otherwise Than Being*, bears a crucial reference to the expression *le dire*, to testify.

For both thinkers, then, language *witnesses*. Where Levinas and Blanchot differ is in their determination of this witnessing. Their two great texts of the 70s and 80s, *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) and *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) are rarely read together. And yet both concern the topic of witnessing. *Otherwise Than Being* might appear more homogeneous than *The Writing of the Disaster*. The former concerns the relation to the Other as it is claimed to bestow language; the latter is more heterogeneous, comprising fragmentary commentaries, aphorisms and lengthier meditations on Heidegger's etymologies, the figure of the child in Leclair and the notion of the gift in Bataille, Levinas and Heidegger as well as other, disparate topics. Moreover, whilst Levinas is a philosopher who expounds his thoughts in a manner that remains more or less classical, Blanchot rarely explicitly signals his own position on the "object" of his thought; emphasis in the secondary literature falls, broadly speaking, on his literary writings rather than taking up their philosophical implications.

Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* includes a lengthy commentary on Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being*, seeming to indicate his "take" on the work of his friend, but it is difficult for the reader to understand the status of this commentary. It might appear to merely *paraphrase Otherwise Than Being*. But I will argue that Blanchot shows how, with or against its grain, Levinas' work attests to a prior exposure to an experience he is unable to acknowledge. This is not a simple correction of Levinas' thought. Blanchot's writings open and maintain a relation to an enigma in Levinas' text by attending to the paradox upon which they depend. Blanchot neither resolves this paradox nor considers it to imply the failure of Levinas' endeavor. The practice of a writing of the disaster, of witnessing and trauma in Blanchot, is, I will show, one name for a general *paradoxology* to which *Otherwise Than Being* must bear witness.

In the first section, I show with Blanchot how Levinas' notion of witnessing rests on a paradox. I suggest that Blanchot's apparent agreement with Levinas in *The Writing of the Disaster* shields an attempt to open the question of witnessing in a different sense than Levinas. In the second section, I read the "primal scene" of *The Writing of the Disaster* as

an instance of Blanchovian witnessing. I then explore the significance of the remarks in one of Blanchot's "conversations" on the "primal scene" by drawing on the phenomenology of enjoyment and the *il y a* in the early Levinas. I also show how Levinas uses Blanchot's fiction to illustrate his account of the *il y a*, ostensibly incorporating the work of his friend into his own thought. In the third section, I argue that Blanchot's account of language parallels Levinasian phenomenology but for one crucial difference: he does not accord the relation to the Other an absolute status. I then argue that Blanchot's account of literature generates a different paradoxology than that of Levinas. It indicates a relation to the other [*l'autre*] that Levinas refuses to bear.

I

Witnessing, in Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being* rests on a *paradox*. Saying is the response of the "I" to the Other, an empty, wordless acknowledgement, an opening or exposition upstream of the "content" of any message. It reveals itself only in "the sound of my voice or the movement of my gestures" (*Otherwise Than Being* 106). Language is not, primordially, a matter of content or information. It belongs to the order of the traumatic, to a vulnerability or openness to the Other. This is why he writes of "the wound that cannot heal over," of "a shuddering of the human," of an emptying out "like in a haemophilic's haemorrhage" (*Otherwise Than Being* 126, 87, 126).

On Levinas' account, the "I" does not meet the Other as an intact subject facing another subject. The space between the "I" and the Other precedes the division of subject and object, of self and non-self. The response to the Other is the opening of language in the acknowledgement of the alterity of the Other. Saying is not addressed to something that solicits a response, that is, to another, fully present subject. It is a response that eludes the determination of the relation with the Other as a mother or daughter, as an employer or employee. Indeed, it precedes the attribution of *any* cultural characteristics to the Other. The "I" receives and is exposed to the alterity of the Other. Likewise, the receptivity to the Other is not an isolated faculty of the "I," but opens upstream of its very subjectivity, its selfhood. The Other "is" nothing other than the approach of alterity just as the experiencing "I" is nothing other than the site of an exposure to the Other.

This is why saying withholds itself from the order of the said [*le dit*], that is, of language understood as the medium through which a message would deliver itself. The encounter with the Other does not belong to the order of the recallable, recountable experience; it resists the synthesis that would incorporate it into the identity of the "I." At the same time, it is *visceral*, wounding, evidencing not just a limit in the progression of incorporation and identification, but a structural unknown, an experience that resists memorization.

It is in this sense that saying [*le dire*] might be understood to be *immediate*. Levinas writes of "the immediacy of the other, more immediate still than immediate identity in its quietude as a nature – the immediacy of proximity" (*Otherwise Than Being* 84). The experience in question is not an encounter with an object like other objects. "The immediacy on the surface of the skin characteristic of sensibility, its vulnerability, is found as it were anaesthetized in the process of knowing. But also, no doubt, repressed or suspended" (*Otherwise Than Being* 64). And yet, at the same time, this immediacy, the encounter with the Other, is claimed to bestow the possibility of knowledge and language.

Commenting on Levinas's thought, Blanchot writes:

When Levinas defines language as contact, he defines it as immediacy, and this has grave consequences. For immediacy is absolute presence – which undermines and overturns everything. Immediacy is the infinite, neither close nor distant, and no longer the desired or demanded, but violent abduction – the ravishment of mystical fusion. Immediacy not only rules out all mediation; it is the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of, for the relation itself, be it ethical or ontological, has burned up all at once in a night bereft of darkness. In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond – in this night God himself has annulled himself. Or, one must manage somehow to understand the immediate in the past tense. This renders the paradox practically unbearable. Only in accordance with such a paradox can we speak of disaster. (*Writing of the Disaster* 24)

Levinas' appeal to immediacy is not a new kind of empiricism that would remain in the field of facts. But nor is it the expression of a classical

transcendentalism since it depends not on the *a priori* structure of the subjectivity of the autonomous subject, but on the visceral, concrete heteronymous experience of the Other. Language is bestowed behind the back of the autonomous subject. As such, saying attests to an enigma, to a past that has never occurred as an object of experience, to an event that escapes any retrospective synthesis. As Blanchot comments, “We can no more think of the immediate than we can think of an absolutely passive past” (*Writing of the Disaster* 25). And yet, at the same time, it is necessary to remember this past, to bear the unbearable. At the heart of *Otherwise Than Being*, as Blanchot discerns, is a paradoxical bearing witness that is the condition of possibility of language and of Levinasian ethics.

But why should we suppose that it is the Other and not *things* that interpellate us? Language always confers ideality on the given, subsuming, gathering phenomena. The noun identifies beings, proclaiming a given *as* this or that, thereby fixing and immobilizing it, stabilizing it as an experience. The verb, by contrast, might be said to bear witness to the fluency of things, relations and events, to their temporality, allowing things to resound in their adverbiality. Indeed, it is Levinas who argues that verbs are in turn adverbialized by being, by verbality, by the “to be” that gathers them, positing them in language.⁴ Verbs attest to a way of being, but this does not mean that things escape nominalization and hence dissimulation. The thing cannot escape the schematization that occurs with language. But the trauma or witnessing of which Levinas writes does not fail to inscribe itself into language even as it escapes nominalization. Saying bestows the *possibility* of language and experience, that is, the said in which the thing can resonate.

The account of the visceral response that is the very opening of language in the address of the Other is central to Levinas’ work. Saying precedes the verbality that would reveal the sonority of things. But Levinas knows that other readings of his work are possible, that by placing witnessing upstream of the subjectivity of the subject, he must also permit an ambiguity with respect to the relation to the Other. He not only acknowledges the possibility of an ambiguity in this experience, but insists upon it: “Language is the possibility of an enigmatic equivocation for better and for worse, which men abuse” (*Proper Names* 70). Levinas knows there is an equivocation, but he resolves it even as he acknowledges it, determining what is better or worse, what is proper and what is abusive with respect to the equivocation in question.

Is Blanchot's reading of Levinas abusive? *The Writing of the Disaster* presents neither a paraphrase of Levinas' work nor its appropriation. In one of his essays in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot allows a conversationalist to invoke an occasion where one man appeared simply to *repeat* what another man said:

I recall being present at a conversation between two men who were very different from one another. One would say in simple and profound sentences some truth had taken to heart; the other would listen in silence, then when reflection had done its work he would in turn express some proposition, sometimes in almost the same words, albeit slightly differently (more rigorously, more loosely or more strangely). This redoubling of the same affirmation constituted the strongest of dialogues. Nothing was developed, opposed or modified; and it was manifest that the first interlocutor learned a great deal, and even infinitely, from his own thoughts repeated – not because they were adhered to and agreed with, but, on the contrary, through the infinite difference. For it as though what he said in the first person as an “I” had been expressed anew by him as “other” [*autrui*] and as though he had thus been carried into the very unknown of his thought: where his thought, without being altered, became absolutely other [*l'autre*]. (*The Infinite Conversation* 342)

In passages close to the opening of *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot does indeed accede to the arguments of *Otherwise Than Being*. The fragments on Levinas appear to exhibit an absolute fidelity. The demand of Levinas' thought is unbearable, but Blanchot would have us bear what, for him, is its fundamental teaching: the suspension of the work of the apophantic, disclosive “is” that permits identification, abstraction and universalization. He would have us take upon ourselves the theoretical task of responding to a response, of writing of an encounter that occurs upstream of the conscious, self-possessed “I.” And yet this redoubling is a *conversation*. Nothing in his apparent paraphrase of Levinas' thought is modified or developed and yet in the very repetition, in the fact that it has been grafted into another text, it is subjected to an alteration since the suspension in question, as I will show, cannot be determined solely as an encounter with a human Other. If Blanchot writes of a “fore-word,”

of an *avant-propos* to a certain order of discourse, it is not to write, like Levinas, of “saying saying saying itself” (*Otherwise than Being* 143). He does not aim to hold open the openness of saying as an openness to the Other in its salutation, in the witnessing it occasions, but to disclose the opening of a witnessing beyond Levinasian witnessing, a Blanchovian practice of writing beyond saying. The primal scene of *The Writing of the Disaster* can be read, as I will suggest now, as just such a witnessing.

II

Blanchot writes:

(a primal scene? [*Une scène primitive?*]) You who live later, close to a heart that beats no more, suppose this: the child – is he seven years old, or eight perhaps? – standing by the window, drawing the curtain and through the pane, looking. What he sees: the garden, the wintry trees, the wall of a house. Though he sees, no doubt in a child’s way, his play space, he grows weary [*il se lasse*] and slowly looks up toward the ordinary sky, with clouds, grey light – pallid daylight without depth.

What happens then: the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature [*son trait interminable*]) is the feeling of happiness [*bonheur*] that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy [*la joie ravageante*] to which he can bear witness [*témoigner*] only by tears, an endless flow of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more. (*Writing of the Disaster* 72)

How might one read this fragment? There are several clues. The fragment begins with a parenthesized allusion to the notion of the primal scene in Freud. In “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” the so-called “Wolf Man,” it is claimed to refer to a scene of parental intercourse witnessed by a boy too young to frame and thereby understand

that experience. Freud wonders whether the one-and-a-half-year-old witness “could be in a position to take in the perceptions of such a complicated process and to preserve them so accurately in his unconscious”; nevertheless, he insists that what was traumatizing in the observation of parental intercourse “was the conviction of the reality of castration” (*Case Histories II* 38, 44). The traumatizing scene can only be interpreted as an experience long after it occurred, that is, when the child is old enough to have interpreted what happened to him. It is ruled, to this extent, by the logic of deferred action [*nachträglichkeit*] (*Case Histories II* 290).

Blanchot comments that the experience in question can only be endured as if one had “always already lived it, lived it as other and as though lived by another, consequently never ever living it but reliving it again, unable to live it” (*The Infinite Conversation* 290). These lines resonate with other passages in *The Writing of the Disaster* upon which I have commented. The “primal scene” that precedes the formation of the first person, that is, of the “I” confident in his or her powers, who is capable of remembering and forgetting, recalls the unbearable paradox of witnessing in Levinas. Strikingly, it is presented by Freud as a scene of witnessing and trauma.

In the “Wolf Man,” Freud wonders whether the primal scene need refer to an actually occurring event – a real act of witnessing. At the same time, he also appears confident that he has brought the mystery of the scene in this particular case study to expression, showing, as elsewhere, how any complex the psychoanalyst uncovers can be referred back to an older one, eventually pointing back to a lack that belongs to our originary history. We each, he explains, bear our own relation to the origin, a relation that is proper or particular to us in our uniqueness, but that nevertheless bears a structural similarity with other, more general primal phantasies. He responds to the charge that patients undergoing psychoanalysis might retrospectively project phantasies on their childhood by abandoning the notion that there must be an absolute point of anchorage for the primal scene in terms of an actually occurring event (cf. *Case Histories II* 343-344).⁵ It is the structure that is, perhaps, most important since the science of such primal phantasy structures would be psychoanalysis itself.

However, in the “Wolf Man,” Freud exhibits some hesitation about whether it is possible to provide an interpretation of the primal scene

that would ground it in an empirically occurring event. To this extent, as Blanchot comments, “the force of this analysis lies in the way it dissolves everything into an indefinite anteriority: every complex always dissimulates another” (*The Infinite Conversation* 232). What counts is not the actual occurrence of the primal scene but the way psychoanalysis would bring trauma to language, constructing a narrative that lacks the certainty of determining what happened. Freud’s practice, like Blanchot’s or Levinas’, is a paradoxology to the extent that it is inscribed in the place opened and closed by the trauma.

Thus, Blanchot’s fragment on the child presents one way in which a certain constitutive lack reveals itself upstream of the mastery and subjectivity of the “I.” In this sense, the scene enjoys no absolute primacy, being dissolvable into a prior scene, and that prior scene to a prior one *ad infinitum*. This is why Blanchot suspends his reference to Freud’s notions of the primal scene and phantasy by adding a question mark to the parenthesized remark that opens this passage.⁶ But in so doing, he draws the scene towards what his own fictional commentators in *The Writing of the Disaster* argue is the ultimate “object” of witnessing in the *récit*: the *il y a*.

This becomes clear in the excerpt from this commentary:

“nothing is what there is” [*rien est ce qu’il y a*] rules out being said in a calm and simple negation (as though in its place the eternal translator wrote “There is nothing”). – No negation, but heavy terms, like whole stanzas juxtaposed while remaining without any connection, each one closed in self-sufficiency (but not upon any meaningfulness) – each one immobile and mute, and all of them thus usurping the sentence their relation forms, a sentence whose intended significance we would be hard put to explain. – Hard put is an understatement: there passes through this sentence what it can contain only by bursting. - For my part, I hear only the inevitability of the *il y a*, in which being and nothing roll like a great wave, unfurling it and folding it back under, inscribing and effacing it, to the rhythm of a nameless rustling [*j’entends l’irrévocable de l’il y a que être et rien, houle vaine, déployant, reployant, traçant, effaçant, roulent selon le rythme de anonyme bruissement*]” (*Writing of the Disaster* 116).

How should we understand these lines? The allusion to the *il y a* might lead one to read the comments as a referral back to the Levinasian notion of the *il y a*, in particular to his early texts in which he presents the *il y a* as a kind of trauma, a pain that interrupts the structure of experience he calls enjoyment. And yet, as I will show after a brief account of this presentation, the concern with writing, the invocation of what the sentence in question “can contain only by bursting,” leads us beyond Levinas’ account of the relation between witnessing and language.

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The *il y a* does not enjoy the same primacy as the relation to the Other in Levinas, but plays a role in a complex dramaturgy in the pages of *Time and Other* and *Existence and Existents* as well as later texts. In these texts, he explains that enjoyment is the basic, spontaneous mode of our comportment to the things around us. I do not eat in order to promote its flourishing but because I am hungry; I stroll *in order to* enjoy the air, not for health, but for the air; I smell a flower simply to enjoy its perfume, and therefore without any purpose that extends beyond savoring its immediate appeal. To *have time*, for Levinas, is to enjoy time enough to fulfill a need, that is, to dwell in the happy absorption of food and light, soil and water. It is to enjoy the panorama of beings that are, in one way or another, within my grasp. The phenomenology of enjoyment in Levinas attests to the possibility of making one’s home, of establishing a dwelling, of living with others in a civilization.⁷ But it also attests to what cannot be so domesticated, that is, to a dissension in the order of beings. The *il y a*, for Levinas, is as an interruption of enjoyment, as the disruption of the time of need. It is as if the world that apparently gives itself to be enjoyed suddenly *affirmed its resistance* to fulfilling the needs of its occupants. The subject who *has* time, who is separate from the world, working in order to tame the elements, to make a dwelling, meets a force greater than its own. At the most basic level, the power and possibility of the “I,” its *ecstasis*, its subjectivity, is rendered provisional and penultimate. The *il y a* reveals what *gives itself* as the “il” in the place [y] of the ecstatic subject in these experiences.

In *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, Levinas attempts to evoke the *il y a* through an implied reading of Heidegger, through a sketchy phenomenology of insomnia and in a thought experiment that mimics the Husserlian reduction. Yet the notion of the *il y a* remains elusive. What he asks us to envisage cannot be envisaged: an indetermi-

nate “something is happening” implies neither a locus of experience nor an object. As he writes, “the indeterminateness of this ‘something is happening’ is not the indeterminateness of a subject and does not refer to a substantive” (*Existence and Existents* 52). The “*il*” of the *il y a* should be understood in the same way as the impersonal “subject” of expressions like “it rains” or “it is warm.” Likewise, the “*il*” cannot be situated with respect to the subject of an encounter. It is to be thought as “the anonymous current of being,” of a movement that “invades, submerges every subject, person or thing” (*Existence and Existents* 52).

There are certain modes of experience in which this submergence makes itself felt: in *Time and the Other*, it is physical pain and in *Totality and Infinity* it is the intimation of a menacing element outside enjoyment. But this does not mean the *il y a* is simply a state of the soul, a feeling had by a particular subject, since there is no subject of this experience. Nevertheless, we are accustomed, after Freud, to invoke just such a traumatized locus of an experience. But as I suggested with respect to the reading of Blanchot’s primal scene, the *il y a* plays itself outside the hands of any specifically psychoanalytical determination. And likewise, in Levinas, it is simply an anonymous movement, an invasion of the subject that arrives not from an exterior object, but from a dimension that precedes and underlies the distinction between subject and object.

How, then, is one to think this precedence? It is not chronological, if time is thought in terms of the time a subject “has” for enjoyment. Rather, like saying, it attests to an event that dephases this temporal order. It is situated in a “past” before any particular past instant. In this sense, the precedence of the *il y a* with respect to the power and mastery of the subject is *structural*. It inscribes itself into the very opening of the world, furling within every relation to the world that the subject enjoys. To that extent, it threatens to affirm itself in the place of the ecstatic subject as a kind of pain or suffering – that is, as something that is deficient with respect to enjoyment. Indeed, at base, as Levinas writes in *Existence and Existents*, “the rustling of the *il y a* . . . is horror” (*Existence and Existents* 55); it is “an undetermined menace of space itself disengaged from its function as receptacle for objects, as a means of access to beings” (*Existence and Existents* 55). Horror names the “impersonal vigilance,” the “participation [. . .] in which the identity of the terms is lost” (*Existence and Existents* 55). To the enjoyment of the subject who can master objects, who can leap beyond beings, maintaining its open-

ing to the future, Levinas counterposes the horror of a worldless experience in which no such *ecstasis* is possible.

In order to capture the movement of the *il y a*, Levinas invokes Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?" in particular the phrase, "*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*" (*Holzwege* 114) which Farrell Krell translates, "the nothing itself nihilates" (*Basic Writings* 103) and which is roughly translated by Levinas as *le néant néantit* (*Temps et l'autre* 49). In "What is Metaphysics?" this phrase refers simultaneously to the repulsion of *Dasein* from things, pulling it back from its engagements and, in particular, from the anticipating forethrow that launches it into discrete tasks and projects. Nihilation, in Heidegger, is the continual interruption of this forethrow, of the for-the-sake-of [*Umwillen*] that involves *Dasein* in the world. In the dense pages of "What is Metaphysics?", Heidegger explains that it holds *Dasein* out into what it is not – and ultimately towards death as the impossibility of being there. Death-as-impossibility forces *Dasein* back upon itself, allowing it to reclaim itself as itself in the face of *Das Man*. Individuation occurs in this process. But for Levinas (and, as I will show, for *Blanchot*), no such individuation is possible since the subject is unable to leap beyond their equivalent of the experience of anxiety in order to, as it were, rebound from death so as to be individualized.

One way to understand the notion of impossibility at stake here is in terms of a reversal Levinas and *Blanchot* would accomplish with respect to Heidegger's formulation, "the impossibility of possibility." For Heidegger, whilst "*Dasein* comports itself towards something possible in its possibility by *expecting* it" – that is, by anticipating what it will be like when it is actually here or has actually happened – death cannot be expected in the same way (*Being and Time* 306). Indeed, as he argues, "the closest closeness which one may have in being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual" – that is to say, I cannot imagine what death is like when it happens, because when it does, I will no longer be there to experience it (*Being and Time* 306). Death, in this sense, should thus be understood "as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all" (*Being and Time* 307). For Levinas, Heidegger's argument is misconceived. Levinas emphasizes the *unknowability* of death, it renders "every assumption of possibility impossibility" (*Time and the Other* 50). The notions of 'possibility' and 'impossibility' are crucial here. The transformation of these terms culminates in Levinas' claim that "death in Heidegger is not [. . .] 'the

impossibility of possibility,' but 'the possibility of impossibility'" (*Time and the Other* 70). Death, for Levinas, is not a possibility that could be seized upon and thereby assumed in order to allow for an authentic mode of existing: it spells "impossibility" in a sense that Heidegger is claimed to have missed. Blanchot reverses Heidegger's formulation, the possibility of impossibility, writing of "a sort of trap" which "halts eternally (halts, obviously, just an instant) at the point where, ceasing to be a subject, losing his stubborn liberty and becoming other than himself, he comes up against death as that which does not happen or as that which [. . .] reverses the possibility of impossibility into *the impossibility of every possibility*" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 70). Nihilation, for both, entails precisely the impossibility of Heideggerian *ecstasis*. Being is, for them, the very *impossibility* of *ecstasis* that reveals itself in the burden of an attachment to the instant that reveals itself in certain modes of experience. Original temporality is not grounded in the relation to death, as it is in Heidegger. The *il y a* invites us to conceive of a *stuttering* temporality, the rhythm of an opening and closing of nothingness.

What sense, then, does the phrase "the nothing nothings" have when it reappears in Levinas' text? It refers to the movement in which the subject is given to itself and to its powers and then deprived of those same powers. It indicates the opening and closing of the field opened to the subject in terms of what Heidegger might call its ability-to-be [*Seinkönnen*]. This is why it recalls the rhythm of being and nothingness that the commentator evokes, in that it is precisely the same opening of the nothing that occurs in the instant in question as the interruption of the being of the subject. Being, in this phrase, is to be understood as the equivalent of beings in the distinction Heidegger makes between being and beings. Likewise, Blanchot's phrase, "nothing is what there is," is to be understood in reference to the impossibility of establishing oneself in a position of mastery with respect to the nothing. Nihilation prevents the subject of the experience anticipating its future. Nothing is what there is, in the sense that there is no way out of the experience in question.

It is perhaps significant that it is with weariness that the child of Blanchot's *récit* looks up at the sky. This weariness permits nihilation: it is permeated with its rhythm. This is why the commentator claims to hear an unfurling and refolding in the phrase "nothing is what there is": the inscription and effacement of being and nothing. There is a striking

difference from Levinas, however. The first is that the child does not appear to be horrified at the disclosure in question. He is weary *and then* joyful. But one cannot read the fragment as offering anything like a phenomenology of the experience of the *il y a*. It is, crucially, a *fictional* fragment and not a work of philosophy. Why, then, write of Blanchot at all? Do his novels not remain, precisely, a literary supplement to Levinas' philosophy?

In a valuable book, Jill Robbins makes available a text of Bataille on Levinas and Blanchot in which he writes: "Levinas says of some pages of *Thomas the Obscure* that they are a description of the *il y a*. But this is not exact. Levinas describes and Blanchot cries – as it were – the *il y a*" ("*Primacy of Economy*" 168). Yes, Levinas provides a phenomenology of the *il y a* and he goes so far as to attribute "analytic procedures that are characteristic of phenomenology" (*Proper Names* 129) to Blanchot's literary criticism. But Blanchot does not describe the *il y a* but cries it – and he does so in the *récit* in *The Writing of the Disaster*.

Levinas' appreciation of literature is well attested. In an interview from 1986, he writes of his love of Puskin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, recalling that Blanchot introduced him to Proust and Valéry (just as he introduced Blanchot to Heidegger) (see *Is it Righteous to Be?* 23-83). As he writes in *Existents and Existence*, "Certain passages of Huysmans or Zola, the calm and smiling horror of de Maupassant's tales do not only give, as is sometimes thought, a representation 'faithful to' or exceeding reality, but penetrate behind the form which light reveals into that materiality which, far from corresponding to the philosophical materialism of the authors, constitutes the dark background of existence. It makes things appear to us in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia" (*Existents and Existence* 54-55). He also invokes Shakespeare and, more briefly, Racine (*Existents and Existence* 56-7, 58). As Bataille observes, Levinas does not hold himself back from enthusiastically quoting Blanchot in his work. Already in *Existence and Existents*, he points to the opening chapters of Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*, where he claims "the presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night, the horror of being, the return of being to the heart of every movement, the reality of irreality are [...] admirably expressed" (*Existents and Existence* 58 ft. 1). In *Ethics and Infinity*, he draws on a number of formulas in Blanchot's work in order to explain the *il y a*: the "'hustle-bustle' of being [. . .] its 'clamor,' its

‘murmur’” (*Ethics and Infinity* 50). The *il y a* is decreed to be the “real subject” of Blanchot’s novel and stories (*Ethics and Infinity* 50). Elsewhere, Levinas tells us that Blanchot’s literary work “brings us primarily a new feeling: a new ‘experience,’ or, more precisely, a new prickling sensation of the skin, brushed against by things. It all begins at this tangible level: these places – the hotel rooms, the kitchen, the hallways, the windows, the walls” (*Proper Names* 143). He evokes “the remoteness and strangeness of things heavy with their meaninglessness: a glass of water, a bed, a table, an armchair – expelled, abstract . . .” (*Proper Names* 143). He also mentions “the anonymous and incessant droning,” the “song filling the literary space” (*Proper Names* 152). Blanchot’s literary work is the very incarnation of the kind of language that Levinas calls *verbality*, recalling the rumbling of language that re-echoes the rumbling in things, in the existents that have been expelled from the world. This is what Levinas discovers in the hotel rooms, the kitchen, the hallways, the windows and the walls of Blanchot’s *récits*.

Levinas allows Blanchot to attest to an absence and anonymity in the things, to a rustling that refuses to become a discrete sound. The thing in Blanchot bears the weight of being, but it does not reveal what Heidegger might call the *whole* [*Ganze*] of being, understood as that which reveals itself against the backdrop of the nothing: the object of anxious *Dasein*. Since no *ecstasis* is possible, this weight crowds in upon the Blanchovian subject; the glass of water overflows itself, not just the water, but the glass, the corridor seems to encompass everything and the walls of the room, whilst drawing closer to its inhabitants, simultaneously attests to the whole space of being: to an infinite expanse of space that has become, paradoxically, claustrophobic because of its very infinitude. The poignancy of Blanchot’s fiction, for Levinas, is that it reveals the tragedy of tragedy as profoundly as Shakespeare, that is, the fact that there is *no way out*: that being is all, that nihilation will always interrupt the possibility of an authenticating relation to existence.

In this way, Blanchot’s literary writings appear to complement Levinas’ thought, providing vivid illustrations of the difficult notion of the *il y a*. Moreover, Levinas’ philosophy would help us orient ourselves to Blanchot’s strange narratives just as the narratives illuminate the seemingly abstract notion of the *il y a*. But he would fail to uncover a deeper relation between the “philosopher” and the “poet.”

The rumbling that disturbs our rooms and corridors also threatens to tear language apart, too, including the serene sentences of the phenomenologist who writes *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*. The rumbling that can be heard through the kitchens and the hallways calls, in turn, for a verblativity that makes all firm and decided speech tremble. There is an experience that cannot rest in the philosophical book; it does not return to the fold of ordered words and experience, to the ordering relations that would allow a memory to be transmitted and a lesson taught. This is why Blanchot allows one of his commentators to draw attention to the difficulty of writing the phrase, “nothing is what there is” (*Writing of the Disaster* 116). It cannot be expressed “in a calm and simple negation”; rather, “there passes through this sentence what it can contain only by bursting” (*Writing of the Disaster* 116). But how, then, can it be expressed?

This is not a problem that concerns a particular, isolated experience or even a kind of experience. The *il y a* belongs to the structure of our experience. It belongs to the way in which things emerge into appearance. But how is it possible to *witness* the *il y a*? In the philosophical works, Levinas appears to be able to do just that. But this is possible because he allows the language of philosophy to be kept safe, preserved from its ostensible “object,” and he uses literature as an illustrative supplement to the philosophical exposition. But literary language cannot be grafted into a philosophical body of work in which the separation of saying from verblativity is rigorously maintained without wagering the discursive procedures of philosophy itself. Levinas maintains that the rustling of the *il y a* is ventriloquized by the Blanchovian *récit*, but, as I will show, the *il y a* also implies a theory of language that renders Levinas’ rigorous separation of saying and the *il y a*, philosophy and literature, unsustainable.

III

In “Literature and the Right to Death” (1949), Blanchot’s account of language in Blanchot parallels Levinas’ account of *ecstasis* and enjoyment. He uses the phrase *Lazare, veni foras* to figure the summoning of the referent out of its real existence by language. Language depends on this negation for it loses what it would name in the very movement of nomination. Yes, language grants the referent an ideal life, the life of the mind, but it has already lost what originally called for language. As

such, “the torment of language is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this. It cannot even name it” (*The Work of Fire* 326-327).

Literary language is distinctive because it is intended to reclaim this beginning in its real existence:

it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life. (*The Work of Fire* 327)

Literary language would maintain its relation to the real thing, to the Lazarus who refuses to rise from the tomb. It does not save Lazarus, like ordinary language, in granting him an ideal existence. Rather, it attests to the Lazarus who remains in darkness, to the rotten corpse, to an irredeemable excess. As such, literature dreams of “the presence of things before the *world exists*, their perseverance” (*The Work of Fire* 328). Blanchot invokes “existence without being, existence which remains below existence like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end - death as the impossibility of dying” (*The Work of Fire* 328). Literary language attempts attempting to become thing-like, to suspend the movement of meaning in order, through an extraordinary *mimesis*, to incarnate the real existence of things before negation. In this sense, it points to an existence that precedes the ideal existence of language, reaffirming itself as the reserve with which language cannot have done. It is, paradoxically, the *dead* Lazarus who gives life to living language. As such, it is the pre-worldly existence without being that literature would remember. The impossible death to which Blanchot refers is the affirmation that returns in every negation: it is the existence in general that refuses to confine itself in a discrete existent. Blanchot refers, like Levinas, to the *il y a*.

It is not by chance that the structure of enjoyment in Levinas and the power of the speaking “I” in Blanchot run parallel. Language, for the latter, belongs essentially to the same *ecstasis* or openness to the world that permit existents to be discovered. It articulates the same existents as

they offer themselves to the ecstatic subject. But language in Blanchot also belongs to what dissimulates itself in the disclosure of the world. It has a “hither side” since it allows the “I” to bring to expression the way in which existents come into presence as an interrelated whole, as a meaningful contexture. The *il y a* is a name for the resistance implicit in language with respect to the power of the subject. But this means that any act of literature, including the fictional fragment on the child, already bears witness to the *il y a*. It is *as literature* that it bears witness to the torment of language even as it is *as literature* that it is condemned to make sense.

This means that the fragment on the child must not only be read as a representation of a real or imagined child who undergoes a real or imagined experience, but as the performance of what happens *as* language. Like all of Blanchot’s fiction and indeed all literature, it attests to the witnessing of language itself insofar as it is a piece of literature. It stages an experience of witnessing *and* enacts a witnessing because of its very status as literature.

*

As I have shown, the status of language in Blanchot is paradoxical: it both grants the possibility of subjectivity whilst rendering the power and the mastery of the subject provisional. Language allows itself to be appropriated, to appear transparent, a medium, whilst implying the expropriation of the language user. It gives and denies itself, and in so doing, opens the world as something that grants itself to the powers of the ecstatic “I.”

What differs in Blanchot and Levinas is the *status* of this gift. Paraphrasing Levinas, Blanchot writes the Other, “separates me from myself (from the ‘me’ that is mastery and power, from the free, speaking subject) and reveals the other *in place* of me [*l’autre au lieu de moi*],” it requires that “I answer for [*me donne à répondre*] absence, for passivity” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 25). It is in this pre-voluntary donation of this response that I originate, but only insofar as there is no foundation, nothing that would permit a root to secure itself. It is in this sense that this answering for, this giving or response, is traumatic. And this trauma, like the trauma of witnessing in Levinas, is paradoxical. In allowing the fragment on the child to figure this trauma, Blanchot indicates that it is the *il y a*, the rhythm of being and nothingness, *and not the Other, Autrui* is the “object” of witnessing.

What differs in Blanchot and Levinas is the status of this traumatic gift in their work as a whole. Unlike Levinas, Blanchot grants no ultimate privilege to the witnessing that occurs in the relation to the Other. As in his implied reading of Freud in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the identification of a structure of the primal scene, of an originary opening of language and experience *cannot be determined*. Freud seems to abandon the notion that there must be a backstop, a place of last resort that would halt the infinite regress of complexes. But Levinas never abandons this notion; although he presents the relation to the Other as culturally *indeterminable*, it remains a relation to the Other, *Autrui* and not to the other, *l'autre*. As I have shown, the structure of Levinasian paradoxology is similar to the Blanchovian disaster, retaining the fracturing of the subject and the reference, beyond recollection or representation, to an immemorial, unassumable past. But this originary desubjectivisation is a response to the Other and as such can only be *one kind* of witnessing.

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Levinas argues that every written work, however dry or impersonal, would bear the marks of this saying, an address to the Other that *turns it from itself*. He would renew the texts of his predecessors and contemporaries in his essays by attending to the trace in the letter of the text of the saying that opens that text beyond what he calls the said, understood as the mode of discourse that would permit the disclosure of being. He would “unsay [*dédire*]” the dead letter of the said, writing against writing and reading against reading in order to incarnate a wisdom that escapes the letter.

But Levinas does not simply present a restricted determination of a more general phenomenon. Here, it is not a matter of simply *broadening* the notion of Levinasian ethics, for example, in the extension of the status of the Other to animals or things. Rather, it is to argue that the language of *Otherwise Than Being* is a disavowal of the nominalization or verbalization upon which it depends. It is, thereby, a disavowal of the resistance of literature to a philosophical mobilization. This is why it is insufficient to *quote* literature in a philosophical text in order to make a philosophical point. The graft of literary words refuses to heal – and, in so doing, it shows that philosophical language, too, is originally wounded and that it cannot attain the health it would seek.

From Levinas' perspective, Blanchot would not have thought the ultimate dimension of witnessing. Beneath or before the death that it is impossible to die in Blanchot, there is saying, the response to the Other. But as the commentators in *The Writing of the Disaster* point out, the phrase "nothing is what there is" is a sentence that explodes; it bursts open. The *récit* is a dramatization of that explosion, providing its figure in the weeping child. In one sense its referent, that is, the relationship between being and nothingness is nominalized and thereby dissimulated. But in another, it points towards an opening of language that *precedes* Levinasian saying. *The Writing of the Disaster* is an exploded book, a book about the explosion that phrases like "nothing is what there is" indicate: it is a book given over to the rhythm of being and nothingness as they unfold and refold in the event called the *il y a*. But it also shows how *Otherwise Than Being* has already exploded from within, that Levinas' text rests on a disavowal of its own textuality.

It is as though Blanchot's text enclosed itself in the text of Levinas, spinning itself from Levinas' writings and hatching as the enemy from within. In one sense, Blanchot's thought is parasitic, inhabiting the terms and structures of the host text. The text that hatches from *Otherwise Than Being* is not obedient: it is not the Lazarus who comes compliantly towards us when he is summoned by the words "Lazarus venture forth." The "other" Lazarus refuses resurrection, remaining in the tomb of *Otherwise Than Being*. But in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot calls forth the other Lazarus in his refusal to be resurrected, showing how Levinasian witnessing depends upon a prior witnessing, how another writing is inscribed across the pages of *Otherwise Than Being*. Blanchot points not to the *respiration* of language but its *asphyxiation*, not to Levinasian saying but to a *smothering*, not to the wisdom of love of *Otherwise Than Being*, but to the madness of a foreword that unravels every word in advance.

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What general lesson might be drawn from the relationship between the texts of Levinas and Blanchot? I do not mean suggest that philosophy must be supplanted by poetic evocation, but rather that the text of the philosopher who retains a classical relation to language bears witness in the spirit of that text if not its letter. It carries a burden heavier than it can bear. But this does not mean the philosophical text is condemned to disavow its own verballity. If it is the case that the *il y a* rumbles in our

language and in our experience, then it is insufficient to acknowledge that a certain literature attests to this rumbling, that the unbearable is borne in the literary work to the extent that it remains resolutely non-discursive, non-philosophical. Yes, the philosopher uses the same language as the literary writer; but this does not mean philosophy must become literature – that philosophy, all along, was a branch of poetry. Rather, it is to admit that philosophical language is traumatized and that it witnesses, despite a certain notion of the philosophical text and, more broadly, of the philosophical.

I would suggest that Blanchot's theoretical writing is exemplary insofar as it acknowledges its dividedness. What unifies this book is an attentiveness to the witnessing that, as he shows in various contexts, wounds and marks language. It is a book that places its own discursive procedures at stake. It is not only a book on witnessing; it *witnesses* – and it does so by figuring a certain explosion of language in its exploded fragments. But no textual practice will allow a book to become the thing it designates. It still *means*; which means that it remains and must remain bound by discursivity. It is never just *performative*; it is also *constative*. This is why it must remain a paradoxology and binds itself to a hyperbolization of language that cannot be translated away. One does not need to imitate the fragmentation of *The Writing of the Disaster* nor indeed any particular aspect of Blanchot's theoretical practice. But it is important to understand its fragmentation as the figure of the call to which it would witness. The task of maintaining and prolonging the demand that designates itself in Blanchot's text falls to us insofar as we belong and must respond to the demand of or from community.

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Notes

¹ Holland gives a fine account of Blanchot's retreat from political journalism in his remarks in *The Blanchot Reader*, 102-109.

² On the relationship between Blanchot and Levinas, see Davies' "A Fine Risk: Reading Blanchot Reading Levinas" and "A Linear Narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the Work of Levinas," Libertson's *Proximity, Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication*, Critchley's "Il y a – Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire," Holland's "Let's Leave God Out of This': Maurice Blanchot's Reading of *Totality and Infinity*," Mole's *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement*, Wall's *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben*, Iyer's "The Sphinx's Gaze" and Large's "Impersonal Existence: A Conceptual Genealogy of the There Is from Heidegger to Blanchot and Levinas."

³ I do not have the space here to discuss the relationship between witnessing and trauma in more general terms. This task has been taken up admirably in LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*. I am also indebted to Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* and Felman and Laub's *Testimony* in the discussion of witnessing that follows. But it is Derrida's *Demeure*, which broaches the question of testimony chiefly with respect to Blanchot's "The Instant of My Death," that indicates the importance of the theme of testimony in Blanchot. Derrida provides a micrological reading of *The Instant of My Death* raising questions about the relationship between fiction and testimony. However, my focus here is on the relationship between Levinas and Blanchot with respect to the issue of the relation to the Other and to literature – to what I still regard as a question of language, but a question that is not considered in Derrida's *Demeure*.

⁴ See, for a prolonged discussion of verbality, *Otherwise than Being* 39-42. "Already the tautological predication, A is A, in which an entity is both subject and predicate, does not only signify the inherence of A in itself or the fact that A possesses all the characteristics of A. A is A is to be understood also as 'the sound resounds' or 'the red reddens' -- or as "A As" (*Otherwise than Being* 38). Levinas attributes the discovery of verbality to Heidegger, writing in *Proper Names*, "thanks to Heidegger our ears learned to hear being in its verbal resonance -- a reverberation never heard before, and henceforth unforgettable" (*Proper Names* 3).

⁵ Laplanche and Pontalis ask, "Should we look upon the primal scene as

the memory of an actually experienced event or as a pure phantasy? Freud debated this problem with Jung, he debated it in his own mind, and it is raised at several points in the case-history of the Wolf Man” (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 335). As they note, Freud gives different responses to this question at different times: in “The Wolf Man,” he seems to want to establish the reality of the scene. Elsewhere, as Laplanche and Pontalis write, “he comes to emphasize the role of retrospective phantasies, he still maintains that reality has at least provided certain clues (noises, animal coitus etc.)” (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 335). What is crucial is that the scene has already happened; “this scene belongs to the (ontogenetic or phylogenetic) past of the individual and that it constitutes a happening which may be of the order of myth but which is *already given* to any meaning which is attributed to it after the fact” (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 336). It is to this extent that it resembles Levinas’ paradoxology.

⁶ For a fascinating reading of Blanchot alongside Lacan, see Fynsk’s *Infant Figures*. See also Cixious’ *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lizpector, and Tsvetayeva* for an abrupt reading of the primal scene from *The Writing of the Disaster*.

⁷ I draw on Section II of *Totality and Infinity* and part II of *Time and the Other* in this account of Levinas’ notion of enjoyment.