

To Articulate the Void by a Void: Aporetic Writing and Thinking in *L'Attente l'oubli*

William S. Allen

University of Southampton
w.s.allen@soton.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay will discuss Blanchot's *L'Attente l'oubli* by examining the relation between the space of its sentences and that of the room they describe. This relation arises as a new understanding of literary space that indicates how far he has moved from his earlier thought of the *récit* as a search for an imaginary centre. For in this approach Blanchot has found a thought of space that is eccentric and aporetic, which reveals the nature and possibility of relation as an exposure to the outside.

Keywords *Blanchot, space, sentences, fragmentation, aporias, thought, relation, outside*

In the space of a sentence something happens. There is an announcement or declaration and something is over or is begun. The sentence conveys this irreversibility and transience in the abruptness of its appearance. But what is this space, and what does it mean to say that something occurs *in* the space of a sentence? A sentence arrives and departs, is stated and disappears, and yet everything changes even if only a trace of it remains. The sentence is an event, a rupture, and although it passes away it also takes place, it has a momentary spatial appearance that overlays what is there. It is thus the space of a decision, but one which despite its imperious manner cannot substantiate itself, and so it leaves an uncertainty over whether or not it was asserted, whether it actually took place. In the space of the sentence the decision is suspended so that it may happen, or may have happened, but meanwhile the space and the sentence are in limbo.

Such is the space that Blanchot introduces in *L'Attente l'oubli*, but it does not simply explicate the line of linguistic thinking developed from Hegel and Mallarmé in which the word negates reality and imposes its own presence in its place (although their works are significant forebears for his thinking in this work, as will be seen throughout my analysis). Blanchot pushes this thought further by showing that, on the one hand, language unveils the movement of negativity through its operation, and on the other hand it is not immune to this movement itself. This means that language falls prey to its own negativity as its sentences cannot substantiate themselves without further negation, but in doing so they take on a form that parallels that of the reality that is being negated. As a result, the strangely indefinite space in which language takes place is not simply an arbitrary obliteration of reality but is rather the reflected form of its indeterminacy. Thus, within the space of the sentence there is a possibility for thinking that which fails to be fully present, and Blanchot finds this most acutely in fragmentary writing.

The parallel between the (space of the) sentence and the (language of the) room enables an understanding of this enigma of literary space, in which the milieu of the work and its linguistic mode slip into each other, an enigma that is of lasting concern to Blanchot but is examined most subtly and thoroughly in *L'Attente l'oubli*. This enigma

involves both the literary nature of space and the spatial nature of literature, with the implication that there is a constitutive inter-relation or undecidable convergence between them, but with the caveat that this relation is not given but is always in doubt. For literature involves a relation between thought and writing in which space is their field of encounter or *expérience*, that which is both discovered and invented, which means that its experience is never simple or unified but elusive and disruptive.

When *L'Attente l'oubli* appeared in September 1962 it was not marked as a *récit* or *roman* and any consideration of the text, however brief, would confirm its lack of generic conformity. This anomaly has made it one of the most difficult of Blanchot's texts to discuss (and in this article I can only examine a few pages) as it operates across or between narrative and theory, that is, as both fiction and reflection but also as neither given how attenuated these have become. What begins as a conversation between a man and a woman is exceeded by numerous interjections that cannot be ascribed to the dialogue or its narrative, turning it into something that is at once more strange and more expansive, the only trace of its dialogic opening remaining in the fragmentary utterances and their gendered perspectives. He attempts to describe their encounter, in speech or writing, to which she responds and most often disagrees, but in doing so a space is created in their dialogue, another room, distinct from the room that they inhabit. Thus, while there is some sense of drama in this disagreement it is displaced into a philosophical milieu where these questions are pursued at the level of their conditions of possibility and impossibility, the space and time that would enable them to come together, as if it had not already happened but still needed to be recounted. Rather than being a reflexive exercise that simply discusses its own emergence, such fragmentary writing makes this attempt to think intrinsically provisional; it cannot guarantee its own emergence or success, just as the characters cannot be certain that they have met the conditions that would enable them to come together. It is thus not just a *récit*, as Blanchot understands the term, as it is not only concerned with seeking the point of its emergence for it also finds that this approach obscures or undermines itself, which is why its temporal dimensions are as provisional as its spatial ones.¹ Waiting and forgetting emerge as the contours of a new fragmentary kind of occurrence, and the writing thereof, which would never be present to itself.

A man signals to a woman and she comes to him. No more detail is given about this gesture so while there is a specific act at the basis of their encounter, it remains ambiguous and pre-linguistic in its lack of definition. Nevertheless, it is a gesture, however uncertain, and as such bears its unavoidable ambiguity into what follows, for such gestures are not only open to misinterpretation but there is also an inherent uncertainty as to whether they are even gestures at all, and so whether they actually happened. This opening resembles that of *Aminadab*, where another ambiguous gesture draws Thomas into a boarding house. But the situation in *L'Attente l'oubli* is different insofar as it is the man who gestures to the woman and also because they are both residents in the same hotel – he had seen her resting on the balcony and had waved to her (*il lui avait fait des signes*).² A hotel is not a home, not a house where people

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 13; trans. Charlotte Mandell as *The Book to Come* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6-7. Hereafter cited as *LV*.

² Maurice Blanchot, *L'Attente l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 8-9; trans. John Gregg as *Awaiting Oblivion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 2. Hereafter cited as *AO*. Translations amended throughout. Useful studies of Blanchot's text can be found in John Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the*

ordinarily live for a long time, but a place of transition, much like the rooms here as well, which in their narrowness and unusual length appear more like corridors. Thus, the space where they come together is marked as a place to pass through rather than to dwell, and it is from the periphery of these spaces that they first see each other.³ As such it concentrates the opening of *Aminadab*, where Thomas is passing through a town when he sees a woman make signs to him, or appear to do so, from the upper window of a boarding house, but it also echoes the compressed encounters that open *Au moment voulu* and *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* and that address the difficulty of establishing an encounter, so it is a mistake to move too quickly into assimilating the relation in *L'Attente l'oubli* to that of an Orphic encounter in which a man seeks to draw a woman to himself and to hold her there. Instead, at the root of these opening scenarios is the very possibility of beginning, of opening a relation when it cannot be said to have existed or to have not existed, a relation that is not just of language but of something more meagre although still as ambiguous, like the transient and silent mark of a wave, something writing appears to resemble in its nearly insubstantial material signification, and perhaps precisely because writing is, as Blanchot notes, recalling Plato's *Phaedrus* (275a), a speech of forgetting (*parole d'oubli*) (AO, 68-69/34).

Thus there is a feeling of restraint in their encounter, as it seems as though the man and the woman came together for no other reason than to discuss their encounter, as if it were never meant to be a relation but only an examination of its possibility. And, if they had not met, then this would not be possible, but because there is no assurance of such precedence the conversation cannot progress but turns about on the spot, tirelessly recapitulating itself as it attempts to pursue its self-examination, which only further prevents it from taking place. Reflection is thus a force of negation and interrogation and the encounter stutters and fragments by way of this dual tension. Hence the fragmentation of the text is not just a formal device but one that has arisen out of the material as a necessary result of its reflective tensions, which should give us pause before adverting to other fragmentary styles in discussing Blanchot's work. He may have been intensely interested in the notion of fragmentary writing but this was because it reflected his concern with the nature and possibility of narrative as a manifestation of these aporetic dynamics that insist in writing. So his understanding of fragmentary writing is very different from the aphoristic writing of Pascal, Schlegel, and Nietzsche (whom he would not start to discuss until after his own fragmentary experiments), as it is not designed to be fragmentary; rather its internal tensions prevent it from being anything else. If we take a sentence like 'Thomas sat down and looked at the sea', it is perfect, nothing more needs to be said, and yet language will not stop there, and so it becomes a question of how another sentence can come after it, how the writer is to carry on. If there is another sentence, then what happens in the first is lost, so to be faithful to it is to return to this sentence rather than go on. However, to return is to write more, which is to move away from it again, unless a way of writing is found that can do both, for only then can what is said in this sentence be brought back so that it is not lost in the

Literature of Transgression (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 132-67; and, Anthony Abiragi, 'The Measure of the Outside', *Colloquy* 10 (2005): 102-33.

³ That is, the language of this space is not the house (*demeure*) of being in which humans poetically dwell (Heidegger), or in which thought realises itself in the unity of interiority and exteriority (Hegel). Instead, after Mallarmé, the space that occurs in this language for Blanchot is what does not remain (*demeure*), what lacks foundation, and that leads to the crisis of thought and its moving void (LV, 289/237-38).

proliferation of words. Part of what is at stake in this recursive pressure can be felt in the key sentence of the work, the demand that the woman repeatedly raises: 'Make it so that I can speak to you' (*Faites en sorte que je puisse vous parler*), which seems to undermine itself by turning back on itself (AO, 14/5). But this aporetic imperative also makes itself felt in the space that the characters inhabit, in which they can never be sure that it has actually taken place, and which leads to the indistinction between the language and the space of their encounter. For the conditions of possibility that this sentence evoke are as much spatiotemporal as they are linguistic, but in their reflexive problematisation they reveal a literary space that fragments and diverges from itself.

It is thus that there is something in the narrative that goes beyond language and gives an indication of how this aporetic imperative arises for, after all, he made signs to her and she came. There had been others in this room, she says, but she avoided them (AO, 8/2). An unspoken but mutual attraction exists between them, an attraction that is decisive since it involves both of them in decisions, but it is not clear whether it could be termed erotic even though there is a sense of passion in taking a decision that is to be endured come what may. In this regard, it is worth recalling an earlier essay by Blanchot on the relation of Tristan and Isolde, who are subject to a passion that binds without form or necessity but through its exposure to the outside, to that which is beyond the level of thought, and in *L'Attente l'oubli* the experience of this exposure is one of the silence and emptiness of a hotel room, which, like the time in which they persist, only reveals itself to a disinterested gaze, a gaze of *désœuvrement* (AO, 16/6).⁴ This is why Blanchot's discussion of Tristan and Isolde comes at the end of a piece entitled 'Réflexions sur l'enfer', since hell is the milieu of the limit-experience, the experience of thinking what cannot be thought, what remains outside of thought, and in the sparse modernist version of *L'Attente l'oubli* this experience manifests itself in the *désœuvrée* awareness that the encounter will never end and that everything spoken there will be a lie, so nothing will ever be known (AO, 17/6-7). And so, in an inversion of what was said above about the internal necessity of fragmentary writing, in being exposed to this space the narrative finds that its effects are evacuated, providing a tendency that works alongside but contrary to the formal difficulties of sentence progression. These two dimensions model the spatial and temporal vectors of waiting and forgetting as a paratactical non-relation rather than a unified syntax: the narrative that opens and yet empties the space of waiting, and the sentences that return to themselves in the time of forgetting. That is, space and time, narrative and reflection, are not coordinated but diverge from each other, creating unexpected (*inattendu*) conjunctions and disjunctions so that it is no longer simply a *récit*.

A New Understanding of Literary Space

When the nouvelle version of *Thomas l'Obscur* was published in 1950 it was prefaced by a brief note explaining its relation to the much larger version that had appeared nine years before. As has been widely discussed, this note states that the new version is

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 284-88; trans. Susan Hanson as *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 190-93. Hereafter cited as *EI*. Alternatively, much could be made of the relation between *L'Attente l'oubli* and the story of Cupid and Psyche in its nocturnal obligations between thought and desire, although Blanchot has reversed the genders in keeping with his Orphic tendencies.

identical to the earlier one, despite its reduction in size, 'if one is right in making no distinction between the figure and that which is, or believes itself to be, its centre, whenever the complete figure itself expresses no more than the search for an imagined centre'.⁵ The relation between the figure of a work and its imagined centre, in which the former is no more than the search for the latter, is distinctive of Blanchot's understanding of the *récit* and governs his work until the late 1950s, as can be seen by the note that prefaces *L'Espace littéraire* as well as in the discussion of the *récit* in the essay that opens *Le Livre à venir*. In fact, the latter volume seems to chart the transition that occurs as this approach exhausts itself for by the end of *Le Livre à venir* the question has become one of where literature is going now that it is disappearing beyond the zero point, and thus what the form of the book to come might be. Such an impasse is marked even more decisively by the repetition that closes Blanchot's last *récit*, *Le Dernier Homme*, which seems to conclude that if there is no distinction between the figure of the work and its imagined centre, then the search for the latter can only occur by each sentence turning in on itself. Given this impasse, it is not surprising to see that Blanchot's next book would separate itself from the *récit* as much as from the novel, and also from the essayistic approach to critique.

So, if we are to understand what has occurred in the writing of *L'Attente l'oubli* we must consider how this structure of searching for the imagined centre has become transformed, for the fragmentation of *L'Attente l'oubli* seems to indicate that the centre has exploded, or otherwise been lost. Thus it is now a question of what the nature of such a literary space might be, if it lacks a centre towards which we are drawn as readers or writers, and thus what the thought of such a text would be in the face of this absence. That is, Blanchot's turn to fragmentary writing has not occurred simply because of the exhaustion of his former approach, but because the lack of a centre imposes its own form of space and thinking.

An aporia is a point of doubt, confusion, or difficulty, whose complexity or obscurity creates an impasse so that thought or language cannot go on. In the face of demands that cannot be resolved or satisfied thought or language stops dead, unable to proceed. There is a blockage, that which affords no passage (*poros*), which is then associated with a lack of productivity or fruitfulness leading to idleness and impotence. Thus, for this impasse to have an effect on the nature of the space that literature exposes and is exposed to, is for it to encounter a space that cannot be crossed or opened up. Such an encounter is more perplexing than it might at first appear, since space is primarily that in and through which movement occurs. Yet the notion of the aporia also implies the necessity or demand to move, for there would be no blockage unless there were an imperative. We are perhaps more familiar with the bodily and cognitive aporias that fill Beckett's works where the imperative to carry on is coupled with the impossibility of doing so. However there are also aporias at the level of the sentence, which have a very different effect on literary space, and it is this that concerns Blanchot in the period of *L'Attente l'oubli*. In this mode of writing the aporia arises within each

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur, nouvelle version* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 7; trans. Robert Lambertson as *Thomas the Obscure*, in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1999), 53. I have examined the relation between writing and space in Blanchot's early works in my forthcoming monograph *Aesthetics of Negativity: Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), and in a reading of *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, 'The Absolute Milieu: Blanchot's Aesthetics of Melancholy', *Research in Phenomenology* 45.1 (2015): 53-86.

sentence as it attempts to give expression to its event, even as this disappears, so that it fails to proceed from its very opening gesture and thereby fragments. And within this fragmentation a different form of space arises, and the void that inserts itself in place of the interrupted sentence is the absence or neutral space that is only given to thought through such ruptures. It is thus that we can come to understand the peculiar nature of the room where the characters stay, a room that only reveals itself in a language or thought that is ruptured or workless, in waiting and forgetting its appearance, such that it is never fully there but only emerges fragmentarily, aporetically.

If we start from the first fragment, then it is possible to see how this aporetic logic begins to take place. After the opening preamble, which begins like a narrative and then ends after its fifth paragraph, there is a break before the first fragmentary piece, which is marked by an emblem like almost all the pieces that follow. This emblem (❖) is less significant for its specific form as much as for the way that it enables the text to operate in its fractured capacity: by showing how it is broken up into pieces that can be identified but underscoring their lack of linear order since the emblem does not operate like a number or letter that provides a sequential system. Instead, each fragment is simply placed next to the others in a way that does not determine its relation to what is spatially before or after it; the emblem indicates that it exists in a space apart rather than in a sequence. In effect, this emblem is a deictic that marks an opening, here, it says, and again, here, and here, in parataxis.

❖ He was looking at her furtively [*à la derobée*]. Perhaps she was speaking, but on her face no good will in respect to what she was saying, no consent to speak, a barely living affirmation, a scarcely speaking suffering.

He would have liked to have the right to say to her: 'Stop speaking, if you want me to hear [*entende*] you.' But at present she could no longer keep silent, even saying nothing.

He understood [*se rendait*] quite well that she had perhaps forgotten everything. That did not trouble him. He wondered if he did not want to take possession of what she knew, more by forgetting than by remembering. But forgetting ... It was necessary that he, too, enter into forgetting. (*AO*, 12/4)

As it comes after the opening preamble, rather than existing as part of the fragments that follow, this first fragment is to some degree privileged and it orients the reader quite carefully. The first paragraph could not be more clear in its aporetic approach, as each statement concerns an approach that does not succeed but is broken or blocked leading to a failure of communication: a glance is stolen, an expression is unwelcoming, words arise only with difficulty. This sense is also conveyed in the way that the sentence, in concerning itself with this inability, finds that it is stuck in it and begins to stutter from phrase to phrase, just as the woman's attempts are neither fully alive nor fully speaking and yet they continue. The interjection that the man considers reflects and further expresses this blockage and although it does not break the impasse it seems to offer a moment of insight. This is a crucial point as it not only expresses something of what will need to be absorbed (interruption, silence, saying nothing) in order to respond to what is going on but equally, by way of its emergence from this impasse, it indicates that such aporias are not inexpressive but find their own way to speak, albeit, as it is here, only by way of reflection. Through this rupture the man realises that it is not by holding on (seizing and comprehending) that he will understand but by forgetting, and so find what is known in forgetting, even if this only leads to an ellipsis, an opening of uncertainty. Blanchot is thus providing a means of understanding his approach in these first few lines by showing how the move into this uncertain space expresses itself in a

breakdown of language. That is, the fragment does not so much develop or explore a space, as slowly and repetitively sketch out its contours by showing what is happening through what is not happening. A delicate and inverted field of encounter is thereby found, in which we observe more of what is not possible than what is, but in doing so another form of space is exposed, an endless penumbra of negative or non-relation. In the fragment that comes next we find that a voice arises out of this non-relation:

❖ ‘Why do you listen to me as you do? Why, even when you speak, do you still listen? Why do you attract in me this speech [*parole*] that I must then say? And never do you answer; never do you make something of yourself heard. But know this [*sachez-le*], I will say nothing. What I say is nothing.’

Undoubtedly she wanted him to repeat what she had said, only repeat it. But never did she recognise her words [*paroles*] in mine. Did I change something in them without knowing it [*à mon insu*]? Did something change from her to me?

In a low voice for himself, in a lower voice for him. Speech that must be repeated before it has been heard, murmur without trace that he follows, nowhere-wandering, everywhere-residing, the necessity of letting it go.

It is always the ancient word that wants to be there again without speaking. (*AO*, 12-13/4)

Without following what has gone before but perhaps tacitly responding to its call for silence, this time the fragment starts with the woman but with as much emphasis on the collapse of communication, for again the problem lies with the fact that while he continues to listen, she says nothing. Therefore, although speech seems available it nevertheless fails because there is no sense of exchange between them, even when their relation is reversed, since the possibility of a shared relation is breached from both sides by an invisible rupture. Such double failure will be termed dissymmetrical by Blanchot as the relation of the man to the woman deviates from itself (insofar as it is a non-relation) as well from its other, and in a way that is not symmetrical to how the relation of the woman to the man also deviates from itself and from its other. Alongside this double breach (and perhaps indicating its form) there is a third voice that is neither that of the man or the woman, nor is it fully within the narrative or without. The other voice is not that of another narrator, or meta-narrator, as it is almost disconnected from what is taking place and instead seems to be reflecting from a great remove, from outside the text. This strangeness comes from the fact that in the third paragraph Blanchot is citing and adapting lines from two poems by Saint-John Perse, thus it is the ancient word of poetry that has erupted between them as the turning, or verse, that language always carries with it.⁶ The fragmentation of speech also comes from the pressures of this speech from elsewhere, which makes itself felt as the approach of an unknown outside. We recognise this intrusion of another voice but it remains enigmatic and only reinforces the disturbance of textual development, as these lines do not declare their

⁶ Michael Holland has pointed out this reference to Saint-John Perse in ‘Space and Beyond: *L’Attente L’Oubli*’, in *Clandestine Encounters: Philosophy in the Narratives of Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 278. Blanchot remarks in a paper from 1961 that ‘language lends itself to the movement of stealing and turning away – it watches over it, preserves it, loses itself there and confirms itself there. In this we sense why the essential speech of detour, the “poetry” in the turn of writing, is also a speech wherein time turns, saying time as a turning’ (*EI*, 31/23; cf. 42/30). Some of the background to my thinking in this essay comes from an earlier reading in *Ellipsis: Of Poetry and the Experience of Language after Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Blanchot* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 193-212.

provenance or purpose but simply and obscurely refer elsewhere as a divergence that is always possible and that is called poetry. But this other voice is also the appearance of a kind of thought, as the oscillation between third and first person in the sentences of the second paragraph suggests, however obliquely, a thought that arises from the encounter to reflect what is occurring. Not necessarily to reflect on, but just to reflect, as the subsequent lines of poetry imply, for these thoughts do not cast light on what is taking place but restate it elsewhere, or state it otherwise, in another space or line or fragment, deferring and estranging the development of thought. In a few lines we have entered a very different field of reading where the source and direction of the narration are as unclear as the matter of what is being narrated, but while this lack of clarity might prevent reading from progressing something else happens in its place. For reading finds itself moving into a space that is anomalous but not empty, as the void in relation to which the narrative is moving is not without its reverberations, which language conveys in these unplaceable echoes of poetry as well as in its errant form, so that it only appears through its repetition.

A work that is made of fragments and the spaces between them already indicates that it is concerned with the roles of presence and absence, of what is there and not there in writing as that which constitutes its spatial form, and such concerns are further borne out by the relation between the characters and between them and the space they inhabit. And, as this space is figured as a hotel room that is unnaturally long and thin, like a sentence, it highlights the issue of a space that is physical but also literary and, moreover, mortal, insofar as the room/sentence becomes the site of an absence, as if it were also a tomb: 'Poor room, have you ever been lived in [*habitée*]? How cold it is here, how little I live in you. Don't I remain here only to efface all the traces of my stay?' (*AO*, 13-14/4-5). To enter this space is deceptively easy; after seeing her on the balcony he had waved to her and she had come to his room. Immediately the relation between them is complicated for she insists that he describe what happened, as if (literally) it had not taken place: 'Perhaps in order to reinforce the certainty that she was really there. Perhaps because she had the feeling that this description would conjure up [*ferait surgir*] the same room inhabited by someone else' (*AO*, 16/6). Through the force of this interrogation he is led into a different kind of space that undecidably implies both her presence and her absence, and when he tries to describe the room he finds it is empty but in such a way that its distinguishing characteristic is its emptiness.

That is, this absence takes on a strange presence so that the contents of the room (the bed, the table, the armchair) reveal themselves only insofar he looks at them disinterestedly, absently, *par désœuvrement*, in a kind of negative or non-relation. It is no longer a room with a purpose or form, other than its abnormal length, and so his attempts to express this can only apply (*recouvrent*) to its emptiness (*AO*, 16-17/6-7). Just as it is only by gazing at the room absently that it reveals itself in its absence, so writing can only respond to this non-relation by exposing what is not there as it insists alongside what is there, much as the fragments are interleaved with blanks. Thus the space that emerges through description is not the space of the room but something else that supervenes on it unclearly: 'He would close the room as soon as she had entered. He would put another room in its place, the same one and just as he had described it to her, yes, just like it, he would not deceive her in this respect, only more barren [*pauvre*] on account of the very barren words, reduced to the space of some names outside of which he knew she would not go' (*AO*, 28/12-13). Although language evokes the space, in doing so it evokes its absence as much as its presence, and perhaps more so when it is

itself impoverished, but it is this imbrication of what is there and not there that provides the measure of the room in its appearance as that which both provokes and eludes its interrogation (which is why it is a 'poor' room: unfulfilled, unsuccessful). Nevertheless, to exist in such a space or spaces is to exist in neither one nor the other but in their midst, in the space of decision (or intercision) that is their unspoken bond, the mark or gesture that divides and holds them together so that they cannot leave, even as their words exile them from this space in seeking to describe it: 'Neither one of us is here. Only some of your words have entered, and we listen to them from afar' (AO, 30/13).

Language is impoverished here as it is barely language at all, it hardly rises above the level of the inarticulate or mute, or, conversely, it is an utterance that is so thin and pale that it is hardly there, 'a barely living affirmation, a scarcely speaking suffering' (AO, 12/4). It is thus that writing deviates from living speech, by either diminishing its expression or its vitality, and passes closer to a level of almost indiscernible material ambiguity (of writing), as we cannot say of it that it is life approaching language, or vice versa, as it fails to make this appearance fully manifest. But, in this inability, words reflect the space of their encounter, and so the characters seek fewer words and words that are less rich, and find that abstract words are more suited to respond to this ambiguity as they evoke nothing (AO, 19/8). And yet such speech is also a minimal form of life, as is shown by the affirmation that is found in the barest of utterances, 'yes', a word that 'is so transparent that it lets what she says pass through, including the word itself', such that in its expression it effaces itself, leaving nothing more than the mark of this disappearance (AO, 22/9). Words like this are transitory as well as empty (like the room), as they consist of nothing but an opening that erases itself, a relation that is no more than a gesture and so is used up in its appearance (AO, 24/10).

The word that can be used only once, that disappears in its utterance, is not singular because it resists change and inter-relation but because it is nothing but relation, as Derrida remarked in his discussion of the poetic quality of idioms. The idiomatic is the trace of a particular place and moment that is lost as soon as it is translated, but the idiom that Blanchot is exploring in *L'Attente l'oubli* is the idiom of language in its barest material form, its minimally open and abruptly interrupted gesture, which in the loss and pain (*douleur*) of its aborted appearance takes shape in and as the space of thought, like the momentary gasp of sorrow that is neither language nor thought but finds the element in both that is mere expression (AO, 23/10). Derrida notes that the idiom attempts this undecidable union in a '*literality of the vocable*', the moment in which form and meaning combine in a speculative poetics of the literal.⁷ So when Blanchot refers to the *parole neutre et blanche* that occurs here, it is as the attempt to express thought literally, as we say, the opening of thought in writing as a mark of thought, its own deictic (AO, 27/12). Such a form would be the space of thought as it is thinking it out and no more, a sheer relation whose possibility is what is at stake in *L'Attente l'oubli*. However, as we have seen, the words that open this space do so only to the extent that they separate themselves from the writer or speaker, leaving a void that the work can only seek to approach. Thus it is necessary to reduce speech to its barest, to remove the support of existence from what is said, and speak at the limit of the living so as to leave room for the void as that which is not expressed (AO, 35/16).

In doing so the space imparts itself to workless (dis)affections that touch but fail

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Points ...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 292-93.

to relate to each other, like weakness or distraction, which provide a different kind of focus: 'it was around this point that everything he had written and had had to live through had, by an ill-perceived necessity, been arranged and oriented, like a capricious and moving force field'. The field of work shifts in line with the attraction and repulsion exerted by its changing focus that is at times threatening and at others joyous, or even threateningly joyous (*gaîté menaçante*), thereby marking it, if its solitary remoteness needed any further elaboration, as sublime, although in a form that brings out its secular minimalism and unending strangeness (*AO*, 33-34/15). This is a limit-experience of thought that cannot be assimilated to a supersensible idea but is rather a sensible experience of the void, an anomalous suffering or passion that refuses to be thought but exposes a lacuna that provides a place within thought for what cannot be thought, and that language holds open in certain modes of disinterestedness, in the waiting and forgetting of the fragment to finish.⁸ Thus the aporetic form of the fragment, its ruptured progress, becomes the form in which this lacuna is expressed, as the absence that takes the place of the sentence and imposes itself as another form of (un)ending, an abrupt opening onto the outside rather than the premature closure of its intended goal.

It can be seen that this notion of literary space is quite different from that of *L'Espace littéraire*, where Blanchot was still speaking in terms of an approach to an imaginary centre, for as there is no centre, the text has become eccentric, exposed, ruptured. In such a form it is not possible to find the relation between general and particular that Hegel, for example, hoped to achieve in his written works, where the whole is reflected in each part just as each part is to be understood by way of the whole, leading to the development of dialectical thinking through reading. With *L'Attente l'oubli* the fragments do not reflect a greater but invisible whole, instead they are simply parts of an irregular and ever-extendable field that will at no point reach the summation of a whole. It may appear that there is a consistency of tone across the work that unifies it, but this is only to respond to the fact that each fragment is on its own terms legible, but in concert they become intractable as there is no theoretical or fictional horizon towards or from which they are coordinated that would grant them an underlying consistency. It is thus that the text becomes aporetic *in extenso* as well as in its parts, and so instead of the syntheses performed by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* or *Science of Logic*, this exploded and eccentric space is closer to another project that interested Blanchot around the time he began *L'Attente l'oubli*: that of Mallarmé's late works.

Indeed, it is precisely in terms of Mallarmé that Blanchot speaks in 1957 of 'a new understanding of literary space', an understanding partly drawn from *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* but also from the sketches for the Book that Mallarmé worked on until his death. Although the project for the Book was never fulfilled, Blanchot sees the notions of space developed in *Un Coup de dés* as indicating the path that Mallarmé was pursuing, for here was a work that existed in dispersal: '[s]uch a book, always in movement, always at the limit of scattering, will also always be

⁸ In an essay on Simone Weil from 1957, Blanchot makes the following comments: 'the further thought goes in its expression of itself, the more it must maintain a reserve somewhere within itself, like a place [*lieu*] that would be a kind of uninhabited, uninhabitable non-thought, something like *a thought that would not let itself be thought* [...] Forgetting this might be the most appropriate [*le plus juste*], as forgetfulness has perhaps its origin in this initial lacuna' (*EI*, 173/119). And then later in the same article in relation to the peculiar temporal mode of attention, he concludes that 'through attention, language has with thought the same relation that thought would like to have with this lacuna in it – this affliction – that it is and that it cannot render present to itself. Language is the place of attention' (*EI*, 179/122).

gathered in all directions through the dispersion itself and according to the division essential to it, which it does not make disappear but appear, by maintaining this dispersion so it can accomplish itself there'. Much of this essay is relevant to *L'Attente l'oubli* but perhaps what is most helpful is the way that language is discussed as the 'silent movement of relations', where 'words are only there to designate the extent of their relations: the space where they are projected and that, scarcely designated, is folded and bent, not existing anywhere it is' (LV, 286/235). Such a notion conforms to the idea indicated above that words form the transient and self-diverging contours of space so that the work, like *Un Coup de dés*, 'exists only insofar as it expresses the extreme and exquisite improbability of itself', its presence voided by virtue of the fact that it 'is identified with the announcement and expectation [*attente*] of the work as it is, without content other than the presence of its infinitely problematic future [*avenir*]' (LV, 284-85/234). The Book thus only exists *à venir*, it is to come, 'here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, under a false appearance of the present' (LV, 278/230).⁹

This new understanding of literary space comes about because Mallarmé was able to discern 'the space unique [*propre*] to language' (LV, 287/235). Instead of seeing literature in terms of 'a simple surface crossed by a uniform and irreversible movement' that its sentences unfold, Mallarmé saw it as a depth that exists at many levels and in different movements, in which sentences are not inter-related by a grammar of syntactical subordination but expose a space operating with a different kind of logic, one of endless errancy and superimposition, in which (recalling *Un Coup de dés*), 'to the extreme point of dispersion, only the place is affirmed: nothingness as the place where nothing took place [*le rien comme le lieu où rien n'a lieu*]' . Thus, such a depth is not pure nothingness but the 'indefinite stirring of absence', a dissolution of presence that persists as it cannot dissolve its own movements of dissolution (LV, 287-88/236). And so, like its space, the present of the work is also hypothetical since 'instant never follows instant according to the horizontal unfolding of an irreversible future [*devenir*]. One does not recount in it something that would have happened, even fictively. Story [*histoire*] is replaced by hypothesis'. This point bears directly on *L'Attente l'oubli*, as it implies that the 'event the poem makes its point of departure is not given as historical and real fact, fictively real: it has value only relative to all the movements of thought and language that can result from it' (LV, 291-92/239). Hence, it is only in the aporetic movements of thought and language that this hypothetical space expresses itself, for this 'moving indecision is the very reality of the space unique to language', the undecidable oscillation between meaning and materiality, and reading and seeing, in which 'doubt belongs to poetic certainty, just as the impossibility of affirming the work brings us close to its own affirmation' (LV, 293/241, 291/239).

Fragmentary Exposures to the Outside

Leslie Hill has shown that the changes in Blanchot's writings in the late 1950s were influenced by a range of pressures – political, literary, critical, and philosophical – but this complex neglects to show how the development of fragmentary writing also arose

⁹ Blanchot here cites the line made well known by Derrida in 'The Double Session', which derives from Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Mimesis', in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 140.

out of the pressures and tensions of his own writing, as we have seen.¹⁰ In this case it is a question of understanding how the sentence breaks down from within, how it bears its own aporias that lead to it becoming fragmentary as it cannot do otherwise. As soon as the sentence starts it begins to undermine itself with its own negativity, which means that even as its own appearance is suspended it necessarily calls forth a further sentence that seeks to respond to that negativity. This mode of appearance corresponds to Lyotard's understanding of the ontology of sentences (*phrases*), in which the failure of the sentence to authorise its own presence leads it to displace or defer this negativity by calling for a response.¹¹ But for Blanchot this is not primarily an ethical gesture but rather syntactical insofar as it concerns the nature and possibility of its occurrence as relation. And what he has done in *L'Attente l'oubli* is to focus on this stuttering of language in order to understand the kind of relation it entails, not just interpersonally but also in terms of its effects on space and time, and their exposure to the outside.

To turn back to the key sentence of the work, 'make it so that I can speak to you', it seems to invalidate itself on two counts, firstly, as a request for that which it would appear to be already demonstrating; secondly, and consequently, if the request nonetheless still stands it is impossible to know how to respond to it if it is not requesting the kind of speech that it is already demonstrating. The sentence seems to abort itself in this double bind, but does not. It has appeared, it is there, but it also seems to negate or deny that appearance in the same moment. This resistance to presentation renders the sentence opaque in a way that only makes it more obtrusive. Whatever this sentence is, it will not go away, and so despite its denial of linguistic relation it still calls for a response. Through this self-interruption the sentence has made itself akin to what is not language insofar as it is without relation, but in doing so it makes apparent a different kind of relation, the relation without relation found in waiting or forgetting, or in minimal gestures where thought upholds a space for what is not thought, like a wave. Waiting and forgetting disclose temporal relations that are indeterminate as they are not attached to particular moments, but they do not disclose this in a positive form: they do not give an image of the indeterminate as a form of time but rather convey that indeterminacy in a manner closer to its own lack of presence, as an exposure to the outside. The sentence that destabilises itself into such an opacity is thus, in Blanchot's words, 'the proper [*propre*] determination of indeterminate and meaningless existence', which is not nothingness but instead the event of ambiguity as such, a kind of ontological sublime, as was indicated above, in that it is an experience of the limits of occurrence, the very possibility of something happening that resists resolution or comprehension.¹² If we return to the key sentence, then it is possible to find this exposure in the sequence that follows it:

❖ 'Make it so that I can speak to you.' – 'Yes, but do you have an idea of what I should do to accomplish that?' – 'Persuade me that you hear me.' [...] 'To hear you or to hear in

¹⁰ Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), 9-26, see also pages 124-50 for a discussion of *L'Attente l'oubli*.

¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), esp. 65-80.

¹² Maurice Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 320; trans. Charlotte Mandell as *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 331. On the ontological sublime see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 306-11.

general?' – 'Not me, you have understood that well. To hear, only to hear.' – 'In that case, may it not be you who are speaking, when you speak.'

And therefore in a single language always to make the double speech heard. (*AO*, 14-15/5)

For there to be speech there must be more than just hearing, but for this to be the case there must be more than just speaking, which is inevitably accompanied by forgetting, and so in this doubly dissymmetrical speech it would be 'more by forgetting than by remembering' that each will find a way of approaching the other, of grasping what is unsaid in their speech, what disappears within each utterance (*AO*, 12-13/4). If what is said in general is displaced by its saying, then this can only be apprehended by something other than hearing, something that hears what is not said. Thus he 'started hearing to the side of what she was saying, and as if behind it, but in an expanse without depth, without top or bottom, and yet which was materially locatable, another speech with which hers had almost nothing in common' (*AO*, 25/11).

Another form of language arises in place of their own as they find that their utterances, however simple or impoverished, leave their own idiomatic trace, the mark of their transparency, as when the woman says 'Give me that' in a way that is neither a request nor an order, and then apparently follows this up with 'But this thought, it's always the same thought!' (*AO*, 27/12). These empty phrases reveal the deixis in/of their blankness that is singularly but materially locatable as *this* or *that*, and in being exposed to this neutral space language is no longer that which communicates or represents, it neither speaks nor conceals, as Heraclitus has it, but gives signs.¹³ A language that is neither direct nor indirect, neither clear nor obscure, is one that by way of these neutral signs gives onto its conditions, its 'initial distraction', the opening *écart* of the narrative, which, in turn, 'would only let itself be reached when dissimulated and dispersed in acts of extreme attention' that 'should be exerted as it were by the *récit* so as to slowly tear it [*l'arracher*] from the initial distraction' (*AO*, 21/8). Instead of a beginning there is only the aporia of a space in which hypothetical sentences fragment and dissemble in their 'energetic refusal to let the story begin [*l'histoire débiter*]', but in doing so they hold to the sense that both ruptures and initiates language, like the signs he had made to her in the first place (*AO*, 22/9). These signs operate like the poison in Nessus' shirt, attaching language to the spacing in and from which it arises in its opening gestures, and that it cannot remove itself from without obliterating itself. A point made clear by the deictic in the very first line of the narrative: 'Here, and on this sentence that was perhaps also meant [*destinée*] for him, he was forced to stop', since its aporetic form renders the narrator its subject but also its object, preventing and yet compelling him to go on, and thereby exposing him to its fragmentary space (*AO*, 7/1).

In a later essay on Nietzsche's notebooks, Blanchot discusses this textual deixis of thinking in a way that casts light on *L'Attente l'oubli* and its emblematically marked fragments, as he sees punctuation marks as 'modes of space', that make space 'a play of relations where time is at stake [*en jeu*]'. Such marks do not represent anything but rather figure emptiness (that of the page as it is thought, that is, of literary space) by preventing it from being lost in indeterminacy yet without giving it form, for on the one hand they provide an impulse (*élan*) to the writing and on the other they suspend it,

¹³ Ann Smock, 'Conversation', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995), 123-37, emphasises the way that the endlessly suspended nature of the dialogue in *L'Attente l'oubli*, its *entretien infini*, occurs by way of its deictics.

without positing or negating its terms. Juxtaposition yields a discontinuity 'that is unfigurable and without foundation', which lets the writing 'articulate emptiness by emptiness [*le vide par le vide*], to structure it as empty by detaching from it the strange irregularity that always from the outset specifies it as empty' (*EI*, 253-54/169). An irregularity that appears as the aporetic imperative under discussion, for these marks do not 'translate this emptiness or render it visible in the manner of a musical notation', but instead indicate the rupture 'through which the inside eternally turns back to the outside', and by which it diverges from any apparent meaning or origin (*EI*, 254/170).

The fragmentary lets the outside be thought only as that which cannot be thought, that which takes place in the interruptions of the page as a different kind of punctuation or polarisation where negations appear alongside positions as innumerable voids that undermine its development as an organised or systematic work, for at every point it is as workless as it is worked. The thought that emerges is not the thought of philosophy as it does not posit or negate but renders any movement of thinking *neutre* by suspending its accumulation, exposing it to what is outside, what is not there, what remains nameless and meaningless in existence. Indeterminacy is often figured as formless materiality or negativity in Blanchot's early works and the concomitant space of death as an inescapable companion, but it is telling that the fragment appears in his writings at the same time as he starts to write dialogues. The convergence of these forms shows that it is the indeterminacy of the encounter and the very possibility of relation as a spatiotemporal event that now concerns him, which is also why it takes place in and as a room (or stanza). In its repetition the fragment restages the encounter with each insistent attempt and aporetic rupture, leaving a form of space that in its stuttering and porosity appears very differently from the obscure and endless dying that marked his earlier works, and in its place reveals a mode of thinking as persistent insidious inquiry.

Part of the impetus for Blanchot's interest in the nature of conversation was the work of Levinas, for whom the self is defined through its discourse with the other. The dialogues that feature in the first part of *L'Entretien infini* pursue a subtle but insistent critique of this point by showing how discourse is not grounded in an asymmetrical relation between the self and the other, where the other is that which calls the self to its responsibility (but not vice versa). Instead, as noted above, Blanchot finds a space that is dissymmetrical, in that the distance from the self to the other differs from its reverse as language renders a space that is negatively rather than positively curved on both sides, so that movements diverge from each other without ever converging (*EI*, 104/73). Thus this is not a space of conversing but rather dispersal in which points of repetition do not return to themselves but perpetually deviate into other spaces. Later, in reference to Klossowski's reading of Nietzsche on the Eternal Return, Blanchot will speak of a circle deprived of a centre that is 'uncurled along a straight line rigorously prolonged', the 'circle out of circulation of all circles', but such a thought does not need to wait for these later works for already in *L'Attente l'oubli* he is writing of a circle in which 'the innermost and outermost coincide' such that language forms sentences by way of these interruptions (*AO*, 20/8; cf. *EI*, xvii-xviii/xviii, 112/79).¹⁴ That is, the line does not

¹⁴ Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 8; trans. Ann Smock as *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 2; *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 22; trans. Lycette Nelson as *The Step Not Beyond* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 12. Blanchot's response to Levinas in *L'Entretien infini* culminates with these terms: interruption, man without a horizon, speaking is not seeing, and a relation of a third kind, all of which indicate the extent to which he wants to move

unfold around a centre where it rejoins itself but proceeds eccentrically as it is exposed to a space of indeterminate rupture and dispersal that the book sustains. In this space there is no centre; instead the text operates by way of the outside that makes itself felt in each sentence as that which prevents it from fulfilling itself and so leads it to deviate.

Such topological deformations are not metaphorical but manifest themselves in the deviations of narrative and reflection that are found in *L'Attente l'oubli*, as well as in the appearance of space and time, the attempts at dialogue, and the forms of waiting and forgetting themselves. It is thus that there is no sense of agreement here; the characters do not come together as the fractured spatiotemporal dimensions of their encounter indicate. Hence, alongside its formal necessity, this space has appeared in Blanchot's writings at this time as a response to ontological and ethical discussions about the nature of events. An event takes place, it happens, whether it is an encounter between a man and a woman, or the literary opening of such an encounter, but the nature and form of this event is not such that thought or language may converge on it, partly because the event does not fully present itself but lapses into the absence of the not yet and no longer, not here or there, and partly because thought and language cannot bring themselves to expression without being interrupted and distracted by their own occurrence. But it is thus that some form of negative correspondence between the two deviations can arise, and precisely insofar as they are exposed to their own neutrality, the outside that is neither this nor that, neither there nor not there. Such would be the rigour of a work that would attempt to assemble these lines of dispersal and thereby give form to their thought, a thought of negative or non-agreement that for Blanchot expresses more of what is at issue for ontology and ethics in modernity. Non-agreement is not simply violent, nor is it one of passive abdication, instead it is a thought of persistent contestation, for if its negativity is rigorously pursued it will only persist in its deviations, which leads to a refusal in thought and language that perpetually challenges agreement by deviating from it. But it is not as if this is a conscious choice for Blanchot, rather this development has been imposed on him by the way that language conveys this deviation and rupture through its negative curvature or eccentricity, and if we ignore or deny this we are not only deceiving ourselves about the indeterminacy of linguistic relation but are also limiting our ability to realise and respond to its possibilities, to what it expresses in and as endlessly differentiating forms of space and thinking. The aporia is there from the beginning, the sentence inescapably fails to reach its goal, but in doing so, in falling away from successful completion, it enters a different kind of relation that is marked by its interruptions as it continues to fail to proceed, but also by its eccentricity, its extravagance and errancy, as it persists in turning aside into a line rigorously prolonged away from any centre.

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Articularea vidului prin vid. Scrierea aporetică și gândirea în *L'Attente l'oubli*

Articolul discută textul lui Blanchot *L'Attente l'oubli* prin examinarea relației dintre spațiul între propoziții și camera pe care acestea o descriu. Această relație apare ca o nouă înțelegere a spațiului literar care indică cât de departe s-a deplasat gândirea blanchotiană din textele anterioare de tip *récit* către o căutare a unui centru imaginar. Pentru această abordare, Blanchot a găsit un spațiu care este excentric și aporetic și care revelează natura și posibilitatea relației ca expunere către exterioritate.