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Literature in the Archive of Terror: Badiou, Blanchot, Beckett

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Theory and Criticism

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LITERATURE IN THE ARCHIVE OF TERROR: BADIOU, BLANCHOT, BECKETT

Thesis format: Monograph

by

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract and Keywords

Abstract:

This dissertation conjoins the two most dominant trends in the criticism of Samuel Beckett today: the philosophical and historicist approaches to his work. It explores how the Reign of Terror that erupted during the French Revolution acts as a traumatic catalyst for key developments in modernist literature and continental philosophy of which the philosophical writing of Alain Badiou, the literary-critical writing of Maurice Blanchot, and the literary-narrative writing of Beckett are perhaps the most exemplary expressions. The overarching thesis that this dissertation defends is that Beckett's post-war prose work in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* is overshadowed by the language and *logos* of terror that, according to Blanchot, is constitutive of the experience of political and aesthetic modernity. The first main chapter of this dissertation examines how the archive of terror is positioned within the philosophical project of Badiou, particularly where he is interested in articulating the conceptual distinction between what he terms destructive (failed) and subtractive (successful) protocols of eventual interruptions. Badiou does this by trying to exorcise the presence of terror from both the philosophical discourse of political modernity and also from within the narrative architecture of the Beckettian *oeuvre*. Whereas Badiou struggles unsuccessfully (in the eyes of this dissertation) to distance both his own philosophical project and also Beckett's post-war work in prose from the toxic and paralyzing influence of terror, Blanchot determines that terror is, on the contrary, indispensable for tracing the genealogy of the political and literary history of modernity back to its revolutionary origins. The second chapter of this dissertation reads Blanchot's multiple engagements with terror through the distinctly phenomenological and literary-historical registers that his work establishes. For Blanchot, the romantic theory of literature originally formulated through the fragmentary collections of writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, as well as the scandalous and virtually unreadable publications attached to the name of the Marquis de Sade, places the historical phenomenon of terror at the heart of an aesthetic project through which the avant-garde modernism of twentieth-century historical modernity continued to work. Through Blanchot's reading of German Romanticism and the Marquis de Sade, this dissertation develops the concept of the *fragmentary imperative of terror* as a philosophical stepping-stone for moving on in chapters three and four to a hermeneutical encounter with the terror that weighs so heavily on the narrative voices and that penetrates so incessantly and so ubiquitously the narrative spaces of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*. These chapters show that Beckett's admission that *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* "finished me or expressed my finishedness" is the direct consequence of the writing of these works being immersed so vigilantly and unpredictably in a literary and historical archive of terror (*Letters: Vol. II* 497). The argument here is that the ineluctable presence of terror in Beckett's writing is obliquely symptomatic of the demands that the traumatic events of twentieth-century modernity imposed on the otherwise aesthetically sovereign discourse of modernist literature and narrative.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; Maurice Blanchot; Alain Badiou; Reign of Terror; modernism and modernity; aesthetics and politics; continental philosophy; hermeneutics; phenomenology; poststructuralism; literary theory; literary criticism; historicism; fragmentary imperative; literature and trauma; literature and terror.

Acknowledgments

There are many people deserving of my sincere gratitude for the contributions that they have made to my work and to my life during the long course of this study. I would like to begin by thanking Jonathan Boulter for his encouragement, enthusiasm, intelligence, and wit throughout the highs and lows of this project's development. I consider Jonathan to be one of the smartest readers of Beckett out there today, and this project benefited immensely from his sound advice and criticism. I am also indebted to my second reader, Allan Pero, who taught me early on in his seminars and in our meetings the enjoyment there is to be had in labouring playfully through difficult literary and philosophical texts. I would also like to thank Călin-Andrei Mihailescu, through whom I learned and unlearned more than I can articulate here. I need to thank Christopher Keep as well, who worked silently behind the scenes and facilitated my first adjunct teaching appointment at King's University College.

This project has also benefited from my graduate colleagues in the Centre for Theory and Criticism and the Department of English. Debates and conversations around drinks and more drinks, coffee and more coffee with Kate Lawless, Will Samson, Kamran Ahmed, Marzena Musielak, and Jonathan Fardy provided me with much needed stimulating company and friendship throughout my studies. I count Jonathan Fardy in particular as one of my closest friends, and the development of many of the ideas contained in this study proceeded by being bounced off his razor-sharp mind. I also need to thank my cousin, Josh Cashaback, who never misses the opportunity for directing a deprecating remark my way, but who I can say without hesitation is one of the best and caring friends I have.

Finally, my warmest and deepest thanks go out to my mother, Mary Ann Langlois-Smith, for her sacrifices, her selflessness, and her strength, and to Valeria Puntorieri, my partner and my love. Her hard work and devotion are a daily inspiration for me, and I am simply better for having her in my life. This work is dedicated to them both.

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Introduction

Terror in the Literature and Literary Criticism of Beckett

*I mean Negative Capability, that is,
when a man is capable of being in
uncertainties, mysteries, doubts,
without any irritable reaching after
fact and reason.*

(John Keats)

*I lived through the revolutionary Irish
movement, Sinn Fein, and the wars,
Hiroshima, Hitler, the death camps,
and daily violence that I've
experienced all my life. And after all
that they want me to paint bunches of
pink flowers.*

(Francis Bacon)

The Methodological Borderposts of Beckett Studies Today

It is a commonplace in Beckett studies today that the philosophical modes of interpretation that had dominated critical analyses of the Beckettian *oeuvre* since at least the 1980s have been eclipsed in recent years by the rising popularity of so-called “archival” and “genetic” methods of criticism and scholarship. Papers presented at the “Beckett: Out of the Archive” conference that took place at the University of York in June 2011 were re-printed in a special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* in November of that year, thereby consolidating the academic influence of these modes of research on Beckett’s life and writing. In his editor’s introduction to this special issue, Peter Fifield, a philosophically-minded reader of Beckett in his own right, acknowledges that “Beckett is an archivist’s author. Storing his proofs, drafts, diaries, and notebooks for up to sixty years, the author has left textual remains that document his development as a writer in great detail. These are held in numerous libraries – public, academic, and private – but are also steadily becoming available to a wider audience via publications in print and online” (673). Archival research into the Beckettian *oeuvre* has been invigorated in no small part by the publication through Cambridge University Press of two volumes (with two

more forthcoming) of Beckett's letters¹. With this veritable deluge of archival material becoming more and more accessible (and therefore attractive) to readers and enthusiasts of Beckett's work, it should come as no surprise that philosophical and hermeneutical methods of disseminating Beckett's writing have started to lose their appeal and persuasiveness in the contemporary climate of Beckett criticism, which now more than ever is intent on reading Beckett for virtually all of the historical, political, and biographical resonances that his work provokes. Insofar as one of the consequences of the rise of archival Beckett studies has been a *de facto* eclipse of the philosophical and hermeneutical methods of criticism that had hitherto complemented Beckett's literature so adeptly, it is necessary at this stage in Beckett studies to reconsider if these types of readings – largely poststructuralist and posthumanist in their theoretical persuasion – cannot still further our understanding of the Beckettian *oeuvre* without simultaneously abstracting Beckett's work from out of the particular historical and biographical contexts of its composition and reception, contexts that archival modes of scholarship have started diligently and expertly to unearth.

The jury is still undecided on how the endgame of the “archival turn” will play itself out. That the tendency in this “archival turn” of subjecting Beckett studies to what Andrew Gibson labels a “new positivism” has “sometimes been invigorating” would be counter-productive and flat-out mistaken to deny, but it is imperative to stress, as Gibson does rather concisely, that “positivism does not logically end in an anti-philosophical account of Beckett. It rather explains why philosophical thought, or an activity akin to it, was essential to him. Philosophical and theoretically-based readings of Beckett in general repeatedly accomplish one side of his project, or confirm it in place. For they reiterate and extend his insistence on the privilege of the speculative intellect relative to historical disaster” (*Samuel Beckett* 166; my emphasis). Gibson's words of caution for what this “new positivism” risks engendering, namely an anti-theoretical anti-intellectualism that fits all too comfortably in the neo-liberal context of contemporary academia, articulates a potentially divisive fault line in Beckett studies. Closing this methodological divide demands a conceptual and ideological dexterity that is not always present in studies of Beckett which tend to approach his life and writing from one methodological

¹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1: 1929-1940* and *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 2: 1941-1956*. Both volumes are edited by Lois More Overbeck, Dan Gunn, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, and George Craig.

perspective at the expense of the other. Implicit in Gibson's recent biographical engagement with Beckett is the disarmingly commonsensical proposal that nurturing the interpretive and theoretical capacity for zeroing in on what makes Beckettian literature symptomatic of a particular historical context is a necessary (though not yet sufficient) condition for reconciling philosophical and "new positivist" readings of his work.

The historical disaster to which Gibson refers is not only the catastrophe of modernity that culminated in the physical and psychological devastation meted out by the Nazi Terror and the heavy hand the Nazism played in the traumatization of the European cultural consciousness, particularly in the (post-) Collaborationist France where Beckett continued to make his home after the war, but also the ideological and military victories of capitalism in late modernity and its dehumanizing expertise in reducing people, and relations between people, to things and relations between things (identity thinking writ large and wide in the late twentieth-century context of globalization). Understanding the complexity and particularity of the historical conditions contemporaneous with Beckett's texts is the minimal requirement necessary for considering, on the one hand, the non-aesthetic and non-literary imperatives (we will get to the aesthetic and literary imperatives soon enough) behind why Beckett's writing articulates itself with the particular formal architectures and narrative commitments that it did, and on the other hand for situating Beckett's neo-avant-garde experimentation with the poetics of narrative as a timely intervention against the pressures exerted on literature from outside the formalist territory of its aesthetic sovereignty². Beckett's writing must therefore be interpreted in the first analysis according to an historical symptomology that begins from the insights made available from the "new positivism" of Beckett studies and then continues to pursue more substantive questions relating to how historical disaster weighed so heavily on demarcating the aesthetic sovereignty of

² In *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, Christophe Menke suggests that one of the implications of Derridean deconstruction is that it extends the localized experience of aesthetic negativity (localized within the space of artworks alone) into nonaesthetic discourses as well. As such, the aesthetic experience of negativity fostered by our encounter with advanced artworks, as Adorno calls them, becomes the ground for transforming the logic and the experience of nonaesthetic discourses: "the sovereign enactment of aesthetic negativity is characterized by the fact that it develops the foundations of art as a threat to our meaning-producing discourses. The sovereign enactment of aesthetic experience breaks open the boundaries of its validity and asserts its validity for nonaesthetic discourses as well" (164). One of the ways that this dissertation envisions the aesthetic and literary relevance of terror is that it acts as an affective no less than conceptual catalyst for "breaking open" these boundaries.

the Beckettian space of literature and affected so dramatically its formalist protocols of composition (i.e. protocols of thinking in literature).³

The wager of this dissertation is that terror is uniquely situated to perform the double conceptual duty of reading Beckett's work historically and philosophically due to the Janus-faced role that terror is positioned to play as a site of mediation that stares out at the immanent inescapability of the suffering and violence of twentieth-century modernity at the same time as it looks forward to the "speculative" transcendence of trauma and affliction aimed at by the political and aesthetic discourse of modernist and contemporary literature. This is a literature, as Beckett puts it, which ceaselessly searches out a perspective (Adorno will call it the negative dialectical perspective of reconciliation) that would place literature in the privileged position of accommodating "the mess" of the anguished and dehumanizing world outside it (which alas, Beckett concedes, "is not a mess you can make sense of") (*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* 218-19). Devising this perspective in the space of literature is a question that falls both within the purview of philosophical thinking and of the aesthetic imagination, and is not solely a perspective laced with the pathos and melancholic lamentation of a discourse (literary or philosophical) that has forfeited the transcendental aspirations of thinking radically (and not just passively) aesthetically and philosophically. Saying that Beckett's is a literature of terror is decidedly not, in other words, simply a repetition of the perceptions of darkness and despair that continue to shroud the reception of Beckett's writing and dramatic texts in the imagination of contemporary popular (and sometimes even academic) culture. The conceptual specifications of terror do not permit this one-sided interpretation of its value and its consequences for understanding literature (and not only literature). Terror is an event of thinking and a singular catalyst of the aesthetic imagination (Jena Romanticism and the Marquis de Sade vouchsafe this assertion), even as it doubles simultaneously as the predicate of the historical experience of panic, anxiety, and suffering which Beckett's writing undeniably mimetically reproduces in the extreme limit-situations of its narratives and narrative voices. Accordingly, this dissertation is invested in the hypothesis that it is terror that most comprehensively confronts Beckett's writing with such contradictory imperatives and exigencies like maintaining fidelity to an event of

³ Anthony Uhlmann elaborates on the concept of "thinking in literature" in his latest work, *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov*.

thinking (in literature) and reflecting mimetically the suffering and the horror of the world around it, of giving voice to the echoes and archiving the remainders, as Beckett witnessed and reported first-hand atop the devastation at Saint-Lô, “bombed out of existence in one night”, of our “humanity in ruins” (“The Capital of the Ruins” 277).

What is Terror? How Does Terror Work? Or, Literature and the Aporetics of Terror

There is a phenomenological narrative to the experience of terror that is imperative for understanding its conceptual migration from the political and historical spaces of revolutionary possibility and violence and into the philosophical and aesthetic discourses of modernity and the avant-garde modernism of the twentieth century. In one sense, terror is the experience of undergoing physical and psychological torture coupled with being deprived of any and all expectation of when the violence and the anxiety that terror metes out will stop, deprived, that is to say, of any knowledge of whether or not what torture seeks to extract (almost always a right or true form of speech⁴) will suffice for its cessation. Terror is thereby directed through its impositions of violence and its exhortations for speech to dissolve as many of the phenomenological coordinates that it can that consciousness requires in order to orient itself epistemologically in the world. Terror works best through confusion and disorientation, and when a subject or a state struggles to set confusion and disorientation aright, terror intervenes all the more forcefully as the repetition of what led to terror in the first place. To be in terror is to be exiled from the world of phenomenological experience and epistemological assurance, to have lost contact with the temporal dissemination of being-in-the-world, and to be violently separated from one’s own consciousness and memory of a life before this existence in terror commenced.

⁴ The drama of Blanchot’s 1973 *récit*, *The Madness of the Day*, centres on the extraction of a story from the text’s narrator-protagonist, who, like the narrator-protagonist of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*, finds himself under the watchful eye of medical professionals, the “keepers” who dutifully watch over him and demand that he tell a story (*Complete Short Prose* 122). From *The Madness of the Day*: “I had been asked: Tell us ‘just exactly’ what happened. A story? I began: I am not learned; I am not ignorant. I have known joys. That is saying too little. I told them the whole story and they listened, it seems to me, with interest, at least in the beginning. But the end was a surprise to all of us. ‘That was the beginning,’ they said. ‘Now get down to the facts.’ How so? The story was over! [...] Then I noticed for the first time that there were two of them and that this distortion of the traditional method, even though it was explained by the fact that one of them was an eye doctor, the other a specialist in mental illness, constantly gave our conversation the character of an authoritarian interrogation, overseen by a strict set of rules” (18).

Reporting on the promise of the dialectical redemption of the traumatic experiences of subjectivity and consciousness that being-in-terror aggressively facilitates, Rebecca Comay explains (via an exegesis of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*) that from a phenomenological perspective,

Terror is in this way retroactively integrated as the condition of possibility of the self-willing will. It announces the heroic rebirth of the subject from the trauma of its own annihilation. There is a fetishistic component. To suffer the loss of oneself is already to enjoy the consoling fiction that there is or was a self to be lost; we can only regret or fear losing what is there for the losing. And there is a temporal twist. In psychoanalytic terms, we could say that traumatic terror is being rewritten as preemptive anxiety. The shock of unprepared injury is absorbed by the retrospective anxiety that transforms the unmastered past into a pending future. The terrified nonsubject of absolute freedom is reborn as an anxious subject. And anxiety itself reassures us that we still have something to lose. Transforming past into future, anxiety teaches us how to mourn in advance. (90).

Although terror exposes its victims to the twin fictions of phenomenological self-knowledge and metaphysical self-presence, it does so by impressing onto consciousness that such fictions are unavoidable and perhaps even constitutive of what it means to continue on as the subject of the subjectivity that terror spontaneously and retroactively attacks. The phenomenological and metaphysical losses that terror exacts, in other words, are supplemented (and thereby partially recuperated) with the anxiety that loss has not yet been total, that having lost so much in the past, the subject of terror stands to lose just as much and possibly even more in the future. Terror confronts the subject with the loss of what it did not even consciously register as having possessed in the world always already interrupted by terror. Terror performs these dialectical sleights of hand precisely through its introduction into consciousness of Comay's "preemptive anxiety", its inscription of an anticipatory anxiety on the phenomenological horizon of the subjects on which it is violently and abruptly imposed.

Comay's dialectical reading of terror through stages of a phenomenological narrative that begins in radical loss and ends in an anxiety-ridden re-possession of subjectivity and self-consciousness, helps to reinforce the overall conceptual ambivalence that accompanies the act of thinking through the experience of terror. More than this, however, the dialectical-phenomenological narrative of terror that Comay rehearses from the script of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Blanchot does virtually the same in "Literature and the Right to Death") suggests that the only way really to understand the discourse of terror is to appreciate its

effects precisely as events and situations of narrative and fiction. Terror progresses through stages, but because terror throws temporality into confusion, because it complicates, to say the least, the phenomenological and epistemological acuity of the subjects forced to experience terror firsthand, to understand the narrative exigency of terror from a philosophical-hermeneutical perspective requires the willingness and capacity for critiquing situations where its presence and repetition in narrative leads inexorably to experimentation with the deconstruction of narrative as such. Because such experimentation reached its climax in twentieth-century modernism, and perhaps even singularly with the narratives of Samuel Beckett, the critique of terror that this dissertation is interested in performing is in some sense automatically drawn to this period in literary history. Its decision to devote its attention solely to Beckett, however, signals the conviction that it is in the Beckettian space of narrative where a symptomology of terror is most explicitly present and most problematically negotiated.

As with any concept worthy of serving as the basis for a lengthy study such as this, the concept of terror is not susceptible to being explicated straightaway and unambiguously, that is to say, articulated without accepting the ambivalence of its constitutive epistemo-phenomenological unknowability. Terror denotes a philosophical concept resistant to conceptualization (this is Alain Badiou's thesis) as much as it does an affective state and experience severed from phenomenological consciousness and anathema to straightforward narrative representation (this is Blanchot's thesis). It designates a traumatic site in the political history of modernity that doubles as modernity's disavowed condition of political possibility. In the frenzy of revolutionary enthusiasm, terror is at once the outer manifestation of the violence revolution requires for its very survival, the only potent method for converting the negativity of sovereign suspension into the positivity of a sovereign republic, as well as a phenomenological condition of social and political consciousness that is tasked with purging itself of all pre-revolutionary subjectivity and memory, which of course risks locking the reflexivity of this consciousness in an endlessly repetitive state of ascetic self-negation. Not only does terror denote a situation overdetermined by fear and anxiety⁵ of what will or will not come next (i.e. after

⁵ It is worth stressing that terror aggrandizes the consciousness of fear and anxiety into a single affective structure of a suffering that knows no physical or psychological bounds and that radically distorts the phenomenological experiences of temporality and subjectivity and of the subject's ontological bearings within both. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is perhaps more expedient to focus exclusively on anxiety as that which terror provokes. Alenka Zupančič provides a concise summary of what anxiety signifies for Lacanian psychoanalytic

terror), of what has or has not been lost, destroyed, preserved, gained, or revealed in the aftermath of being-in-terror, but terror also denotes the cause of a situation that is all of a sudden working through the effects of having undergone and presently undergoing a traumatic event of terror.

Accordingly, we do a disservice to the concept of terror if we denote it discretely according to any one of its definitions as noun (state of anxiety and fear), transitive verb (to strike one with terror), or intransitive verb (to cause terror). Like Derrida's analysis of what he outlines as "three autoimmunitary terrors" on the worldwide scale of post-9/11 globalization ("mondialisation"), the three forms of terror that the heterogeneous definition of terror denotes "cannot be distinguished; they feed into and overdetermine one another. They are, at bottom, the same, in perceptual 'reality' and especially in the unconscious – which is not the least real of realities" (*Philosophy in a Time of Terror* 100). Taken together, each of these moments or stages of terror foster a "vicious circle of repression", which irredeemably complicates a situation initially impinged upon from the outside by an act of terror as it subsequently, according to the logic of terror's reflexive repetition, goes about internalizing terror's effects and fighting terror by fighting *itself* as an unwitting instantiation of terror's methodology and madness. To conceptualize what a situation of terror looks like and how it behaves calls for a repetition of terror, tautological to be sure but also unavoidable, that is mimetically evocative of how terror in fact operates historically and phenomenologically. Terror, time and again, triggers this "autoimmunitary" response in individuals and states confronted with acts of terror where the fight against repression and violence (effects of terror) is insidiously metamorphosed into the application of violence and repression against oneself: "What will never let itself be forgotten is thus the perverse effect of the autoimmunitary itself. For we know that repression in both its psychoanalytical sense and its political sense – whether it be through the police, the military, or the economy – ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to

discourse, which comes very close to explicating the symptomatic consequences of being-in-terror: "Lacan places himself in opposition to the theory which claims that anxiety differs from fear in that anxiety, unlike fear, does not have an object. According to this theory, when we are afraid it is always of something, whereas with anxiety there is no object we can point to and say: 'This is the object of my anxiety'. Lacan claims that, on the contrary, it is in anxiety that the subject comes closest to the object (i.e. to the Real kernel of his *jouissance*), and that it is precisely this proximity of the object which lies at the origin of anxiety" (*Ethics of the Real* 144). Terror, as it is being used in the dissertation, would signify something like both the *anxiety* in the face of the Real, and also the *Real* that anxiety faces; hence terror's Janus-faced constitution.

disarm” (99). From a philosophical and hermeneutical perspective, terror can be seen performing an autoimmune critique of whatever situation or state into which it has suddenly intervened as traumatic event of violence and anxiety. Terror is manifested almost solely in its disorienting effects, which is why this dissertation has proposed that in the first analysis terror be approached symptomatically. When terror strikes, or rather when a situation is overtaken by the violence and affective experience of conditions of terror, terror sets itself up (retroactively and unpredictably) as a self-reproducing mechanism of confusion and dread that short circuits and disrupts conceptions of “then” and “now”, subject and object, inside and outside, individual and world, friend and enemy, comrade and traitor, victim and tormentor, virtue and corruption, enthusiasm and violence, subtraction and destruction⁶, criminal and executioner. Terror, radically speaking, denotes both cause and effect, event and situation of anxiety and anguish. As it concerns explicating the conceptual ambivalence and complexity of terror, the question that confronts this dissertation is to figure out if there is a way of understanding terror at its most phenomenological and epistemological extreme. This dissertation advances the argument that Beckett’s post-war prose work in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* inscribes, into the space of narrative and the speech of its narrative voices, precisely such an extreme limit-situation of terror.

As Robert J.C. Young exclaims, “Terror repulses: discussions of terror move quickly away from terror to its cause. ‘Terror’ gets conflated with ‘acts of terrorism,’ which produce the effect of terror or fear, or with ‘terrorists’ who carry out acts of terrorism. This leaves terror itself unchallenged and unexamined” (“Terror Effects” 308). Young’s observation about the conceptual misprision that plagues the majority of analyses of terror beckons that terror no longer be regarded as the exclusive critical reserve of political and historical research. Because “terror moves you into a state of producing fiction”, i.e. “it makes you live imaginatively on the

⁶ According to Terry Eagleton, terror enjoys nothing short of a sacred, untouchable yet infinitely alluring status both before and after the birth of modernity, and in virtually every historical and philosophical context where it is actively articulated, it acquires an ambiguous status as a conduit of both destruction and creation. “Subtraction”, in this case, is synonymous with creation, and if I use the term “subtraction” here it is only because of this term’s significance to Alain Badiou, whose work on terror is commented at length in this dissertation’s opening chapter. In any event, here is Eagleton explaining the ambivalence of terror and its genealogical convergence with the sacred: “terrorism runs all the way back to the pre-modern world. For it is there that the concept of the sacred first sees the light of day; and the idea of terror, implausibly enough, is closely bound up with this ambiguous notion. It is ambiguous because the word *sacer* can mean either blessed or cursed, holy or reviled; and there are kinds of terror in ancient civilization which are both creative and destructive, life-giving and death-dealing. The sacred is dangerous, to be kept in a cage rather than a glass case” (2).

borderlines of the real”, pursuing a critique of terror, as we have already glimpsed with the assistance of Comay, must of necessity take recourse to an aesthetic logic of fiction to measure terror’s relation to the real (psychological, political, historical, aesthetic, etc.) that it disrupts, the real that it reproduces contingently, repetitively, and indecisively anew whenever it takes firm hold of a situation and the psyche(s) that populate it (309). Young therefore argues that “literature is, unexpectedly, one of the best places to learn about the war on terror. It has been anticipating the condition of the twenty-first century for centuries: ever since, indeed, the French invented Terror in 1793. Fiction has the unique ability not only to represent terror, to mediate it through narration, but also to produce it” (310). Badiou is in implicit agreement with Young when he acknowledges that the “passion for the real” that motivated much of the institutional state violence and “acts of terrorism” of the twentieth century (particularly Stalinist and National Socialist) was symptomatic of competing fictional visions of the constitutive real of historical and political reality: “I think the crucial point (as Hegel grasped long ago with regard to the revolutionary Terror) is this: [...] the passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real” (*The Century* 52). The conclusion logically follows that “art provides the first guiding thread to think” the conceptual ambivalence of situations of terror (55): “the [twentieth] century experienced itself as artistic negativity, in the sense that one of its themes, anticipated in the nineteenth century by a number of texts [...], is that of the end of art, of representation, of painting, and, finally, of the work as such. Behind this theme of the end there obviously lies, once again, the question of knowing what relationship art entertains with the real, or what the real of art is” (55). The phenomenological, epistemological, ideological, and even metaphysical recourse to systems of fictions that a situation (even an entire century or historical epoch) ensconced in affective structures of terror obliges, in other words, ensures that literature and narrative, genres of fiction *par excellence*, will not only be indispensable spaces of investigation and critique into symptomologies of terror, but also that terror itself will prove to be indispensable as well for understanding the essential relation of literature and narrative to the historical violence and disaster of the terror of modernity – *what the real of art is*. Young, moreover, intuits in the space of literature something akin to Derrida’s autoimmunity reflexivity as it is engendered by the reciprocally constitutive encounter between literature and terror, such that to inquire into a symptomology of terror is to unavoidably inquire into what is

singularly literary, what is “real”, in Badiou’s (Lacanian) sense, in the language and *logos* of literature: “Can fiction also show us how to move out of terror, how to refuse its effects? Which is as much as to say: can literature tell us how to escape its own effects?” (310).⁷

Whereas terror is remoulded in the counter-revolutionary discourse of modernity (post-1795) as a conceptual and political pariah, the stigmata of modernity’s disavowed and dispossessed point of origin, it is reappropriated in the burgeoning aesthetic discourse of modern literature (however fleetingly in Jena Romanticism and unreadably with Sade) as the wordly substratum for the conviction that art and literature can and must move forward only if severed from the historical, ideological, and of course aesthetic allegiances to classicism and realism that were interrupted so dramatically by revolutionary terror. Avant-garde modernism is born (whether it explicitly acknowledges this birthplace or not) in the romanticism of terror where the aesthetic laws inherited by the aesthetic ideologies of classicism are suspended in romanticism’s daring repetitions of aesthetic fragmentation and negativity. This is how Comay goes on to situate terror’s migration from the space of politics in the French Revolution to the space of literature in Jena Romanticism at the turning point of the nineteenth-century: “Schlegel perceives this affinity when he connects the French Revolution to the infinite chain of ‘inner revolutions’ that this singular event unleashes at the cultural level, and this is why he insists on the secret Messianism at work in both events. The Romantic fragment repeats the Revolution by formalizing its essential incompleteness” (107-108). Although the Jena mobilization of terror proved short-lived, it nevertheless set the stage for an aesthetics of terror to be rehabilitated later down the cultural and (literary) historical road. “For the last two centuries at least,” adds Young, “‘terror’ has been transhistorical. It could be said to constitute the distinctive mark of modernity itself: the age of terror. As the object of terror moved from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie, the curve of terror has followed a parallel course to the rise of the novel, and it is there that we find its secret and subversive staging” (309). One of the underlying premises of this dissertation is that twentieth-century modernity unfolds precisely by rehabilitating the passion for violence, anxiety, exuberance, and ambivalence (of all kinds) that are to be expected of an epoch that by

⁷ Young’s relatively short essay is concerned above all with reading the genre of the Gothic novel as a genre of terror: “Within fiction, terror belongs to the discourse of the gothic, which has been aptly named ‘the literature of terror’” (310). However, such a claim has also been made with respect to English Romanticism, particularly through what in his *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime: From Transcendence to Finitude*, Christopher Stokes calls the “terror-sublime” that overdetermines the poetry and poetics of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (65).

all accounts has plunged itself repeatedly into the “transhistorical” and perhaps even transaesthetic immanence of terror.

There would appear to be no more pressing philosophical task for understanding the plight of the twentieth century and the genealogical inheritances bequeathed to it at the revolutionary birthplace of modernity than understanding its proximity and its relation to experiences of terror. However, this presupposes that the concept of terror is susceptible to philosophical conceptualization in the first place. Badiou refuses subscription to this point of philosophical commencement, arguing that terror represents a category of concepts that are strictly speaking *unthinkable* from a philosophical perspective. Chapter One of this dissertation is devoted to explicating how and why Badiou takes this to be the case, and in the process attempts to derive from his overall philosophical project the groundwork for an appropriate methodological approach to converting terror from a category of the unthinkable to a category of the thinkable. Badiou not only contends that terror is philosophically unthinkable in the space of politics, but also that it is aesthetically unworkable above all in the Beckettian space of literature. This is a position that demands to be taken seriously, not only because of Badiou’s lofty stature in contemporary philosophical and intellectual culture today, but because the local arguments he makes about the possibility of thinking terror and of mobilizing its affective and conceptual resources into material for literature and narrative is undeniably convincing. His argument with respect to Beckett is that the reason why Beckett’s aesthetic vision for literature undergoes a noticeable overhaul after *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* and beginning with *How It Is* is that Beckett somehow musters the courage to divorce the protocol of his thinking in literature from the exigency of terror, i.e. with what Badiou associates with the torture of the post-Cartesian cogito of Beckett’s narrative voices. To attain the blessed gift of silence that Beckett’s narrator-protagonists so valiantly and tragically desire would require “an internal violence,” “a superego fury, that is capable of submitting, in the proper sense, the subject of the *cogito* to the question, to torture. That would necessitate that the avowal of its silence be *extorted*. Beckett stressed that if the ‘I think’ comes to mark its own thinking-being, if thinking wants to grasp itself as the thinking of thought, then a reign of terror begins. [...] The cogito’s heroism marks an impasse” (*Conditions* 261; emphasis in original). While it is no doubt questionable that Beckett successfully escapes from the immanence of terror that marked his work in literature in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* with the post-impasse work of *How It Is*, nevertheless

Badiou's reading of the political unthinkability and aesthetic unworkability of terror represents a useful starting-point for articulating how it is that the language and *logos* of terror migrates from the space of politics and into the space of literature.

Reading Terror in the Beckettian Space of Literature

This dissertation intends to argue that Beckettian terror inheres in the absolute knowledge that taking a position in the historical and psychological immanence of suffering and violence, which Beckett's narrative voices appear obliged to do, is however ontologically incompatible with the secondary imperative that his writing faces – of translating into the language of literature the perspective of a “speculative” transcendence of historical disaster. Insofar as the philosophical and political discourses of metaphysics and the enlightenment had been rendered epistemologically bankrupt by the catastrophic events that punctuated the genocidal apex of modernity, it was art and literature that inherited the no less urgent desire for redemption and transcendence that the post-war historical present continued to demand amidst its devastation. As Adorno famously remarks, “the criterion of a philosophy whose hour has struck is that it prove equal to [the] challenge” that Beckettian aesthetics, the only surviving site of resistance to succumbing absolutely to “the catastrophe that has befallen the whole” (267), poses to continuing thinking and existing in the post-war world (“Trying to Understand *Endgame*” 262):

The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence. The catastrophe that has befallen the whole is illuminated in the horrors of the last catastrophe; but only in those horrors, not when one looks at its origins. For Beckett, the human being – the name of the species would not fit well in Beckett's linguistic landscape – is only what he has become. As in utopia, it is its last day that decides on the species. But mourning over this must reflect – in the spirit – the fact that mourning itself is no longer possible. No weeping melts the armour; the only face left is the one whose tears have dried up. This lies at the basis of an artistic method that is denounced as inhuman by those whose humanness has already become an advertisement for the inhuman, even if they are not aware of it. Of the motives for Beckett's reductions of his characters to bestialized human beings, that is probably the most essential” (267).

Beckettian literature prescribes for itself the terror of a present that is never successfully foreclosed to the future that, paradoxically, it is tragically denied from reaching. In this prescription its mission becomes to supplant the paralyzing horror of living in a past – the catastrophe that has befallen the whole – with the knowledge that the past is not therefore

ontologically synonymous with the present, that the horrors of the catastrophe are the horrors of the *last* catastrophe and not the one that insidiously continues to befall the post-war present. Terror is this horror, but thanks to (the revolutionary aesthetics of) terror it becomes a horror shot through with redemptive promises of a future still left to be forcibly and perhaps even violently decided⁸. The calculated inhumanism of Beckett's literature inscribes a militant position against the inhuman violence of a barbarous humanity, the alibi for which is supplied by the metaphysics of humanism and the ethical *apriori* attributed to language and speech as such, and the price that this Beckettian position has to pay for being "denounced as inhuman" is the price of terror. Because terror is connotatively indissociable from a revolutionary discourse of philosophical and political praxis, a discourse that in the beginnings of European modernity aspired to nothing less than the comprehensive reimagination of historical possibility, it is through the legacy of terror's radical subtractive protocols that a redemptive perspective of historical transcendence has the chance of being glimpsed in works of literature, like Beckett's, Adorno insists, that are totally submerged in the archival immanence of historical disaster.

Terror intervenes in any serious and sustained hermeneutical encounter with Beckett's writing as the phenomenological signature of an affective anxiety and epistemological uncertainty that readers invariably experience as they persevere in the Beckettian space of literature. Beckett's writing uncannily illuminates Maurice Blanchot's provocative proposal that "the name of Terror is not any aesthetic or critical concept whatsoever; *it is literature, or at least its soul*", and in so doing it demands that in the hermeneutical encounter with his work readers empathize (without the promise of an ethical return on their empathy) conceptually and phenomenologically with the limitless claustrophobia of continuing reading and thinking in this inescapable and perhaps even inscrutable exigency of a literature of terror (*Faux Pas* 80; my emphasis). To begin appreciating the implications of this affirmation of Blanchot's for an understanding of (Beckett's) literature, it is imperative to understand how it is that terror is

⁸ Such would be the moment of the liberating aspirations of terror in what Walter Benjamin theorizes in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (and tangentially in "Critique of Violence") as the messianic interruption of the perpetual historicity of the oppressive violence of modernity. There is also something of the terror implicit in what Slavoj Žižek, riffing off Fredric Jameson and building on the insight of Benjamin and Heidegger, calls the "the torture-house of language" (*Less Than Nothing* 869). If "speech does not simply express or articulate psychic troubles", then "at a certain key point, psychic turmoil itself" must be regarded as "a reaction to the trauma of dwelling in the 'torture-house of language'" (871). Accepting this to be true, moreover, results in literature being tasked with interrupting this dwelling at any and all costs and with any and all methods, including the thorough terrorization of language and of being-in-language as such.

doubly articulated the instant that it migrates away from its historical and political provenance and into the space of literature: first, it is articulated in the aleatory event where an anticipatory anxiety forces its way onto the phenomenological horizon of a subject's subjectivity, the subjectivity of narrative voices that have been relinquished of "their power to say 'I'", and as a result the subject that this subjectivity grounds is torn away from what is retroactively revealed as the albeit necessary fiction of its prior ontological stability and imprisoned in something like the ontological equivalent of an interminable nocturnal solitude where fragmentary thoughts and expressions are all there is to be had (*The Infinite Conversation* 385); and second, terror is articulated where the anticipatory anxiety that terror violently provokes begins to engender multiple fictions of liberation and redemption aimed at extricating these subjects (without subjectivities) from their solipsistic imprisonment and devising a new subjectivity for their post-terror existence, that is to say, fictions that the subject's imagination automatically concocts as it fights to free itself from the panic and destitution that this selfsame terror obliges it to experience in the first place. Intrinsic to the experience of terror is this conceptual and phenomenological ambivalence that points it in the directions of both the immanence and the transcendence of anxiety and suffering. This is perhaps what Blanchot means by saying that terror is not a "critical concept": the ambivalence constitutive of the experience of terror wrests it away from the possibility of a coherent conceptualization not riddled with contradiction and ambiguity, not beholden to what he calls the "the fragmentary imperative", as it is pulled between impulses toward immanence and transcendence (*The Writing of the Disaster* 60).

There is also in terror a peculiar temporal modality that makes it a relevant concept for understanding extreme narrative situations like Beckett's. In the temporal milieu of terror, the subject is subtracted from the ontological consistency of a finite temporality, a temporality which is ordinarily strung together from past through present to future, leaving the subject of terror writhing in its anticipatory anxiety like "a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage, in a word like a beast" (*The Unnamable* 380). Terror engenders a suffering and an anxiety that proliferates indefinitely and without limitation in the infinite time of a present that no possible future can redeem and no past can programmatically predict. Conversely, because the temporality of terror articulates as a present *subtracted* from the liveable and lived temporality of diachronic historicity and consciousness, to be exiled in solitude to the

immanence of terror is to experience this infinite present as a *tabula rasa* of infinite temporal possibility. The anticipatory anxiety of terror is the product of this present being both blind to and enthusiastic about a future to which terror constitutively denies it from transitioning. A subject that survives the presence of terror will not be the subject of the terror that it has survived and outlasted. Surviving terror does not simply result in the melancholic repetition of the loss of subjectivity that terror violently and relentlessly oversees, which tends to be the misguided conclusion drawn in so many post-traumatic discourses of situations of terror and of terrorized subjectivities. Terror supplements this melancholic pathos and this nostalgic desire for retrieving the subjectivity dissolved and lost in terror with a passion for transcendence unrivalled by any other affective and epistemological structures (hence what Badiou calls the “passion for the real” that is symptomatic of being-in-terror). What terror offers in addition to a conceptual translation of suffering, anxiety, and panic, and in addition to its *provocation* of experiences of suffering, anxiety, and panic, is the imperative of militantly and radically breaking free from the desolation and hopelessness of these conditions. It is in terror that inhabiting the immanence of suffering is most extreme; it is in terror that the transcendence of suffering is most insistent.

Unlike the narrative voices and protagonists that populate so many of Beckett’s texts, but particularly works like *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing*, *How It Is*, and *Company*, the hermeneutical consciousness that readers of Beckett adopt is not similarly forcibly inscribed in this terrorized space of literature and narrative. This is both its blessing and its inadequacy in facing the hermeneutical demands of terror. On the one hand, terror is the catalyst of an anxiety and a suffering that renders subjectivity paralyzed to do anything other than capitulate to the insane demands of terror’s violently insatiable exhortations; on the other hand, a situation taken over by terror is a situation that is ostensibly free from the past that programmatically dictates the transition of the temporal present into the future, and so if Beckett is to realize what in 1937 he called a “literature of the unword, which is so desirable to me”, a literature committed to boring “one hole after another” into the surface of language, “until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through”, it will almost by necessity have to be through the harnessing of the uncompromising subtractive powers of terror (*Disjecta* 172-173), which Beckett only began to see clearly in the post-war world that his literature mournfully inherited. Is it a coincidence that the literature of Beckett’s most conspicuously overshadowed by conditions of terror and that Beckett himself regarded as his most important

work is also the literature contemporaneous with the (aporetic) imperatives of a cultural and philosophical consciousness tasked with transitioning away from the post-war present of historical disaster whilst equipped only with the conceptual and imaginative resources that led it dialectically to disaster in the first place? Is it a coincidence that the post-war predicament (ethical and political as much as intellectual and artistic) diagnosed with such urgency and precision by figures like Adorno, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida (and most presciently by Walter Benjamin) translates so concisely and aphoristically into the autoimmunitary proposition uttered through the eponymous narrative voice of *The Unnamable* that “the search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (293)? The paradox that in the midst of Beckettian negativity, which positions the narrative voices and suffering protagonists of Beckett’s literary and dramatic texts somewhere in what Adorno calls “the no man’s land between the border posts of being and nothingness”, there persists in this strategy of composition the last surviving “haven of hope” against the nihilist proclivities of the world that literature has no choice except to inherit, is not a paradox that can so easily be evacuated of the aporetic sets of relation that structure its ambiguous unintelligibility (*Negative Dialectics* 381). Such a paradox cannot be overcome, this dissertation claims, by appealing, as so many readings of Beckett do, with a lop-sided emphasis to the ethical horizons that admittedly it logically refuses to foreclose. One of the phenomena this dissertation intends to excavate in reading *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* is Beckett’s narrative immersion in an aporetic of terror, which this dissertation secondarily uses as evidence of the necessity of adopting the ascetic hermeneutics that it endeavours to practice.

All of this is to say that perhaps reading Beckett through the conceptual architecture of terror, and as this dissertation goes on to claim, particularly through the ambivalent analytics of terror that arises out of the work of Alain Badiou and Maurice Blanchot, is a way out of the methodological morass in which, as Gibson intuits, Beckett studies risks becoming embroiled in either its “new positivist” or philosophical tendencies. Not only, then, is Beckett’s writing obliquely about the experience of terror at the historical apotheosis of modernity, and not only can we approach Beckett’s writing as *terror itself* translated (symptomatically) into the language and *logos* of literature; rather, and this represents the secondary thesis of this dissertation, it is that terror subsumes the hermeneutical encounter with Beckett’s writing as well. As Shane Weller explains in *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, there is something about

Beckettian literature that precludes deciding on non-conflicted and non-ambiguous interpretive conclusions or frameworks, which tend so frequently to be ethical in their tone and intent. Accordingly, perhaps “we might consider the possibility that the experience of reading [Beckett] – not necessarily ethical – is the experience of finding oneself precisely *in no position to say*, in that indecision” (196; italics in original). While concluding that the experience of reading Beckett is the experience of indecision does little in moving Beckett studies beyond the debilitating perception of the methodological incompatibility of “new positivism” with philosophical criticism, at least insofar as “indecision” represents metonymically the tendency to ahistorical abstraction that philosophical readings are accused of producing, it nevertheless opens up the possibility of considering how a certain historical exigency, i.e. the exigency of terror in the historical disaster of modernity, demands nothing less than the refusal of hermeneutical affirmation and phenomenological assuredness on the part of literary criticism.

Another part of what is at stake in this dissertation, in other words, is precisely the vigilant mobilization of the conceptual and hermeneutic resources of terror in order to resist lapsing into what Leslie Hill describes in *Radical Indecision* as “the infantile disorder” that tends to plague almost all acts of literary criticism: “even devoted students of Beckett would have to concede that much published criticism about the writer makes little claim upon the reader, not because commentators are insufficiently discriminating or because they discriminate too much, but because they necessarily always run the risk of falling victim to the infantile disorder of all literary criticism – which may be the fate of all criticism in general – which, in the guise of enabling access to the text, is to domesticate and normalise it, to reduce it to the horizon of expectation of the already known” (*Radical Indecision* 12). By the end of this dissertation terror will have made a “claim” upon the reader of refusing to domesticate and normalize the aporetics of terror that structure Beckett’s post-war negotiations with the language and *logos* of literature (literature *as* terror). In other words, this dissertation suspects that it is possible to let one’s reading of Beckettian literature be terrorized by the terror in Beckett’s texts, and that this is a hermeneutical experience and a philosophical commitment that simply cannot nor should not be avoided or resisted. Because the hermeneutical encounter with terror leads inexorably to an encounter with the fragmentary imperative of literature that Blanchot devotes virtually the entirety of *The Infinite Conversation* to circumscribing around a number of major thinkers and texts (reading these in what Deleuze and Guattari might designate as a minoritarian spirit), it runs

up against “the necessity of an interpretation that does not consist in the unveiling of a truth that is unique and hidden, or even ambiguous, but rather entails the reading of a text in several senses at once, with no other meaning than ‘*the process, the becoming*’ that is interpretation” (154-155; italics in original). The context for this insight on the fragmentary ideal of interpretation is Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche, but the conclusions that Blanchot draws here regarding how Nietzsche expressed his thinking and the philosophical dogmas and logics that Nietzsche’s thinking targeted resonates rather distinctly with the idiomatic presence of neutral speech, the plurality of truth, the multiplicity of imagery, and the heterogeneity of narrative perspective that Blanchot likewise articulates in many other texts and thinkers besides Nietzsche – reading Blanchot is therefore typically an exercise in welcoming and overcoming conceptual *déjà vu*. While Blanchot is not formalizing a theory of interpretation, nevertheless it is something like a style of reading that his thinking infectiously spreads to those who are interested in the criticism and creation of literature. It is this style, this emphasis on “*the process, the becoming*” that is interpretation that belies Hill’s disappointment in the ease with which readings of Beckett are convinced of the exegetical satisfaction they provide. This dissertation, at the very least, aspires to avoid this.

The Absence of Terror in Beckett Studies

From within the context of philosophical readings of Beckett, the contribution that this dissertation tries to make is to disrupt the hermeneutical fascination with ethical transcendence that captures virtually all philosophical readings of Beckett’s work. That several of the more prominent philosophical readings of Beckett conclude with appeals to ethical transcendence is taken by this dissertation as evidence that Beckett studies is too often complicit in what Deleuze and Guattari disparage as the pervasive ideological manoeuvre of “making us think that immanence is a prison (solipsism) from which the Transcendent will save us” (*What is Philosophy?* 47). There are two ways that the resistance to immanence has manifested itself in Beckett studies. Firstly, resistance to persisting in the immanence of the Beckettian text has manifested itself through the “archival turn” in Beckett studies, which as we have already seen consists in extricating the hermeneutical encounter with Beckett’s writing from out of the space of the sovereign immanence of literature and supplementing (with a fine line between

supplanting) our understanding of the Beckettian text with the historical and biographical contexts that inform the composition of Beckett's work. Accordingly, it is no longer fashionable to interpret Beckett's writing solely on the basis that between Beckett and the philosophical discourse of poststructuralism, in particular, there are uncanny affinities converging around the thematics of language's internal deconstructive operations, affinities which justify remarks like those of Richard Begam that "obviously there is a decisive connection to be drawn between Derrida's *différance* and Beckett's 'unnamable'" ("Splitting the Différance: Beckett, Derrida and The Unnamable" 875). Begam makes these remarks in 1992, and so is completely justified in his observation that "the relevant scholarship" up to that point "has generally overlooked this connection" (875). However, this deconstructive lacuna is no longer present in the twenty-first century context of Beckett studies, as so many of these "connections", connections between Beckett and poststructuralist discourses which largely pertain to literature's deconstruction of metaphysical concepts and experiences, of aesthetic genres and autonomies, have been exhausted (875). Nevertheless, returning Beckett criticism to the biographical archive cannot *not* signal a reactionary and quasi-nostalgic desire for escape from the ascetic poststructuralist suffocation in the immanence of language and text by re-installing the privileged status of a life's (Beckett's) narrative integrity. Secondly, and this time from within readings of Beckett that continue to mobilize around philosophical concepts and Beckett's own explicit engagement with the work of philosophers (Descartes, Geulincx, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, etc.), resistance to immanence is inflected by a fetishization of the ethical and political potentialities that Beckett's work is assumed intrinsically to harbour. It would hardly be surprising if readers looking at this dissertation's study of Beckett and terror did not immediately assume that its thesis is that Beckettian literature represents an ethical antidote to the violence and suffering of terror (empirical as much as metaphysical). Faced implicitly with the choice between immanence and transcendence, virtually all works of Beckett criticism choose transcendence, and they do so by dressing themselves up in the garb of ethical and political discourse.

To say that Beckett's writing takes place in an archive of terror requires that terror be positioned in such a way that it can be articulated as sheltering and overdetermining an experience in the immanence of literature. The concept of the archive must therefore be understood in its Derridean inflection as a concept that blocks the escape into transcendence. The archive, Derrida reminds us in the opening paragraphs to *Archive Fever*, "names at once the

commencement and the *commandment*”, two dimensions of the archive that converge around a site of immanence that Derrida calls “a scene of domiciliation” (1; italics in original): “at the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible” (3). Terror furnishes literature with precisely this “scene of domiciliation”, at once inscribing the origins of modernist literature at an historical site of articulation and authorizing what Blanchot understands as the fragmentary imperatives of literature at the limits of consciousness, knowledge, and existence. The polemical thrust behind saying that Beckett’s writing occurs in the immanence of the archive of terror is that the obligation Beckett betrays to the exigencies of narrative that are symptomatic of this archive forecloses any opening through which an event of transcendence or redemption would enter into the equation of what is presupposed and of what is possible in the fictional world of Beckett. Accordingly, if faced with the choice of reading Beckett *vis-à-vis* an ethics of immanence or of transcendence, this dissertation opts for an ethics of immanence, but an immanence that disrupts the operability of ethical discourse as such.⁹

Such a divergence of critical approaches within the philosophical interpretations of Beckett is starkly visible in the readings of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* presented in Jonathan Boulter’s “Does Mourning Require a Subject? Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*” and in Seán Kennedy’s “Does Beckett Studies Require a Subject? Mourning Ireland in the *Texts for Nothing*”, which Kennedy frames as a critical riposte to such poststructuralist Beckett scholars like Boulter. Whereas Boulter reads the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* as “unable to present itself as a stable, unified (or potentially unified) subject” (“Does Mourning Require a Subject?” 333), such that it becomes uncertain whether or not “the concepts of mourning and trauma” become “unworkable in the texts of Samuel Beckett” (346), Kennedy, in trying to make “the case for a historicized reading of Beckett’s work”, is insistent that this sacrificing of the Beckettian subject to the ahistorical paradigm of poststructuralist interpretation (Kennedy cites Boulter’s reading as

⁹ In *Against Ethics* John D. Caputo asks a question that I believe needs to be refurbished for Beckett studies today, and it concerns the problem of disentangling the experience of obligation from the Levinasian and post-Levinasian discourse of ethics that continues to reign virtually unchallenged in contemporary critical theory. His question is this: “Obligation is what is important about ethics, what ethics contains without being able to contain. I am prepared to make my way without ethics, with the safety net it affords, even to take a stand against ethics. But it is one thing to raise one’s voice against ethics, and quite another to speak against obligation. Am I prepared for life without obligation? Even so, what if I am not? What, then?” (18).

emblematic of poststructuralist styles of criticism), “this eagerness to merely dispense with the subject of history” in Beckett’s work, “can only be a debilitating gesture” (Does Beckett Studies Require a Subject? 25). Kennedy asks rhetorically if “in the absence of history/memory, is an ethical Beckett possible? Does Beckett studies require a subject, and does that subject require a politics?” (25). Inherent to the exception Kennedy takes to Boulter is a suspicion that Boulter’s dehistoricized reading of Beckett remains unproductively mesmerized by the immanence of a subjectivity that is severed from the possibility of political or ethical transcendence with the subject of its empirical grounding. There is indeed very little that is “workable” in the space of immanence, but this does not mean that inhabiting immanence (conceptually or phenomenologically) is *fatally* unworkable. The rhetorical self-assurance of Kennedy’s questions inadvertently (or not) disavow that there is any value or coherence to refusing to regard immanence as simply a prison-house of literary and philosophical criticism.

Answering Kennedy’s questions is not as straightforward as Kennedy rhetorically intends, and this in spite of the ideological triumph of the “post-ethical” and “historicist” turns in the critical discourse on art and literature that have not ceased enjoying hegemonic status in the humanities today. At the most basic level, Kennedy’s call for an ethical Beckett, a Beckettian subject (author, narrator, protagonist, voice, etc.) re-equipped with a history and a memory and thus invested with a multiplicity of ethical responsibilities, is laudable insofar as it seeks to do away with the apparent stalemate that plagues so many philosophical readings of Beckett, i.e. denying that what is said in Beckett’s writing comes from an historically and biographically rooted subject that incontrovertibly speaks from such rootedness. Accordingly, insofar as there is such a thing as an “ethical Beckett”, as Kennedy invites us to accept *a priori* that there is, it is a Beckett that acknowledges that literature and writing have a certain responsibility to the historical, geographical, political, and biographical contexts from which they emerge and in which they are inextricably inscribed: literature’s debt to history is infinite and, especially for critics like Kennedy, Beckett’s attachment to Ireland is permanent. Reintroducing history, (geo-) politics, and biography back into Beckett criticism, or so Kennedy’s argument suggests, would signal a productive first step into rescuing Beckett from ahistorical and nonethical critical paradigms that implicitly ground Beckett’s writing in the ideologically resilient post-Romantic, poststructuralist, and posthumanist discourses of literature’s sovereign displacement in the worlds of language, narrative, and text. However, the point that Kennedy misses entirely and that

Boulter does not explicitly communicate is that foregrounding the traumatized historical ontology of modernity of which Beckett's literature and writing is the symptomatic heir is precisely what may enable us to short-circuit the ethical-poststructuralist chasm that the anti-theoretical camp of Beckett studies decries and that theoretical Beckett studies inadequately struggles to close.

Kennedy advocates a decidedly post-theory mode of criticism that extends from the supposition that in challenging so radically concepts like meaning, stability, and identity, the pendulum of poststructuralist critique swung too far in the direction of basing its insights in linguistic and textual self-referentiality and of thereby facilitating the ahistorical ghettoization of art, literature, and language. Whereas the semiotics of referentiality and the metaphysics of presence are diligently deconstructed by the poststructuralist modes of literary critique that Kennedy implicitly targets, these very same modes of critique imputed onto the work of literature precisely the metaphysics of sovereign presence that they had denied in the historical, cultural, and political realms. As Paul de Man writes in *The Resistance to Theory*, "literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations" (7). Accepting Kennedy's call for turning to more historicized readings of Beckett that would ostensibly pave the conceptual foundation requisite for extracting ethical value from Beckett's literature is to simultaneously accept the departure from "literary theory" as de Man and the literary-critical discourse of poststructuralism conceives it. Although a straightforward returning to a critical paradigm inspired by a de Manian conception of literary theory is not what this dissertation has in mind as a strategy for supplementing historically conscious readings of Beckett's work that Kennedy proposes, jettisoning the conceptual structure of immanence out of which de Manian "literary theory" ontologically derives, whereby literature is not necessarily answerable to non-literary considerations, is premature and represents a knee-jerk reaction to such readings in immanence that do not deliver an identifiable pay-off at the end of the reading experience.

Kennedy thereby joins Laura Salisbury in bemoaning how "a significant strand of deconstructive literary criticism [...] seemed to suggest an ethical relativism and a coded political retreat" as the only interpretive game in town for grasping the true value of Beckett's writing (8). Despite the Derridean-inflected Levinasian turn that has experienced a resurgence in Beckett studies over the last several years, a turn which Salisbury explains was first taken "as a

resource for a reading practice informed by, and in some way demonstrative of, the necessity of certain ethical obligations”,¹⁰ nevertheless the poststructuralist penchant for historical and biographical abstraction and for the immersion of literary hermeneutics into albeit irrefutably ethical discourses surrounding questions of alterity, justice, interruption, indecision, etc. cannot help but echo today as methodologically anachronistic and ideologically bankrupt whenever it is forcibly applied to Beckett’s literature in a way that occludes the otherwise historically-grounded and biographically-derived dimensions of Beckett’s ethical commitments in literature (8).

Poststructuralist modes of interpretation that revel in the historical blindness and biographical indifference of their commitments to the ethics of literature and criticism, indeed the ethical exigencies inherent in our being-in-language-and-text *as such*, paint a limited picture indeed of all that is going on in Beckett’s world-conscious writing. As Salisbury makes clear, the strategy of addressing the ethical lacuna in Beckett studies by so enthusiastically mobilizing the ethical discourses implicit in Levinas and Derrida exposed Beckett studies to new charges that the philosophical thrust of its ethics was historically and politically escapist and guilty of perpetuating the philosophical equivalent of a high modernist elitism.¹¹

Salisbury’s *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* is symptomatic, however, of what happens to literary criticism when it decides in advance on actively pursuing ethical traces in Beckettian literature.¹² Specifically, she approaches the question of a Beckettian ethics

¹⁰ To be sure, Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel*, published with Routledge in 1999, had already made the connections between Levinas and Beckett around the thematic constellation and ethical exigency of what in *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas calls the “saying” and the “said”.

¹¹ One of the more notable exceptions here is Anthony Uhlmann’s critique of the incongruity of Levinasian and Derridean ethical paradigms alongside Beckett’s negotiation with language, alterity, and justice in *The Unnamable*: Beckett “might resemble Levinas and at other times differ from him, and at times he might resemble Derrida and at other times differ from him (just as Derrida and Levinas overlap at times and move apart at times)” (*Beckett and Poststructuralism* 158).

¹² Salisbury’s presentation of the comedic elements of Beckett’s literature tends towards reproducing what Alenka Zupančič references as a humanism of comedy, which is distinguished from what Zupančič is trying to contemplate and (if need be) develop as a theory of the “materialism of comedy” (43). Humanisms of comedy yearn after transcendence and faith in the ultimately redeemable dimensions of human finitude (which comedy singularly exposes): Humanist “comedy is a genre that strongly emphasizes our essential humanity, its joys and limitations. It invites – or even forces – us to recognize and accept the fact that we are *finite* beings. It teaches us that we are *only human*, with all our faults, imperfections, and weaknesses, and it helps us to deal affirmatively and joyfully with the burden of human finitude” (47). Comedic materialism, on the other hand, not only recognizes, with a distinctly Hegelian twist added on for good measure, “the mud, the dirt, dense and coarse reality as our ultimate horizon (which we need to accept), and as a condition of life. Comedy is materialistic because it gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality itself. *This* is the true incarnation involved in comedy. The body is not the limit of a ‘pure intellect’ seeking to be independent, but the very point of its origin. [...] Comedy is materialistic because it sees the turning of materiality into pure spirit and of pure spirit into something material as

from the thematic and formal perspective of comedy. She interprets the comedic intrusions into Beckett's work as consistent and indeed persistent fissures running throughout the Beckettian corpus, thereby offering up the best chance of glimpsing the contours of an ethical Beckett. According to Salisbury's definition, the comedic aspect of Beckett's work consists in a punctual seizure or interruption of narrative and textual temporality, which operates so as to suspend the Beckettian subject's traversal across the catastrophic and suffocating fault lines of a traumatic subjectivity that she recognizes as symptomatic of twentieth-century modernity, and perhaps in this gesture of interruption the comedic is poised to sublimate, or at the very least defer or displace the subject's drive for catharsis and redemption. Ultimately, she wants to argue that "the temporal, peculiarly passing, experience of the comic that Beckett's work elicits can be related to a historically specific hope for an ethics of the aesthetic" (14). "Laughter and amusement", comedy and humour, Salisbury continues, "are one of the psychological and physiological givens of the human", and as such Beckett's unremitting insistence never to let his narrative voices or his dramatic protagonists miss the opportunity of suspending their all-too-human destitution in comedic relief (successful or otherwise) is what stages the conditions for the possibility of opening up humanity's future to an ethical encounter with traces of its intrinsic susceptibility to redemption. However, even as "Beckett's art remains bound by a sense of the concerns at stake within specific versions of ethics emergent" in the post-war and post-Holocaust present in Europe and France, stakes that Beckett no doubt shares in particular with Adorno and Levinas, still Salisbury is compelled to admit that Beckett "retains little confidence, knowledge or belief that the work could offer up any graspable ethical position for itself" (28). Salisbury does not give up on her desire for an "ethical Beckett", but pursues it all the more vigilantly in what the comedic dimension of his texts is poised to offer. The comic therefore represents an imprint or a trace of an ethical arrival barred from occupying the space and time of presence (and is therefore not susceptible to the charge of reinstalling a metaphysics of presence). Salisbury does not say as much, but in this recognition of interminable ethical deferral the boundaries are inevitably blurred between the comedic and the melancholic dimensions of Beckett's writing, a slippage

one and the same movement, driven by a difficulty inherent to materiality itself" (47). Once again we are returned to the metaphysical territory disputes between transcendence and immanence and how they are interwoven into the topography of the other. Beckett's comedic insight, I would argue, is implicated in Zupančič's materialism of comedy more so than it is the humanism of comedy that Salisbury, very much against her better judgment, cannot resist reproducing in wanting to read Beckett as the ethicist that so many take him so easily to be.

which is symptomatic of framing an analysis of comedy within an explicitly ethical paradigm of interpretation. Ethical disappointment does not have to be the only hermeneutical endgame worth playing.

Accordingly, if Kennedy's endorsement of reorienting Beckett studies around the presence of "history/memory" in Beckett's writing is to be a viable and conceptually responsible gesture for overcoming the hermeneutical impasse of poststructuralist modes of interpretation and critique, perhaps it is not toward an *ethical* Beckett, a Beckett nostalgically returned to the metaphysical discourse of the subject and interpolated as the object of contemporary criticism's hysterical post-Levinasian demand for an ethics (and more often than not a politics) of alterity, that Beckett studies should be oriented. Nevertheless, Kennedy's suggestion that the difficult work of the "weaving together of history and memory after postmodernism is one of the most important and challenging tasks confronting Beckett studies today" serves as an apt statement of the critical climate presently dictating the contemporary reception of Beckett's writing (25). This dissertation does in fact take this call seriously, but it does so less by scouring the historical and geographical references, the biographical and cultural memories and allusions that punctuate the otherwise barren landscape of Beckett's literary and dramatic topographies, and more by trying to situate Beckett's writing in a relation of symptomatic dialogue with historical and phenomenological experiences of the twentieth century – particularly experiences of *terror* – too traumatic and inexplicable, paradoxically, to be registered historically or phenomenologically.

Admittedly, there have been notable instances of resistance to the call for an "ethicalized" Beckett. Beginning from the perspective of Blanchot's phenomenological conceptualization of the imperatives of literature, Jeff Fort insists that what Beckett, no less than Kafka or Blanchot, "encounters in attempting to strip writing of everything but its own most essential compulsion – in a movement that systematically confounds the difference between elevation and depth, between exaltation and baseness – is an empty necessity that insists all the more brutally for being voided of its contents" (*The Imperative to Write 2*). The imperative to which Fort sees Kafka, Blanchot, and Beckett singularly responding is the one that in *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry* Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe identifies as "an imperative without content"¹³, and insofar

¹³ The full quote from Lacoue-Labarthe begins with reference to Blanchot and ends with a reference to Beckett. Lacoue-Labarthe: "'To write, the exigency to write': The formulation is from Maurice Blanchot. Such a formulation, and one can hear this immediately, touches on the very essentiality of what we can no longer have the

as the imperative that constitutes the literary vocation of writers committed to such a radical degree to their profession is devoid of content, it is not an imperative that can be easily conceptualized outside the textual parameters of its symptomatic implementation in the uncanny depths of literature and of literature exclusively (qtd. Fort 2). Lacoue-Labarthe's *imperative without content* is a concise distillation of Beckett's famous and oft-cited description of literature's irreducible responsibility simply and impossibly to the obligation for the negativity of expression and the expression of negativity. What does literature's obligation for expression express?: "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Disjecta* 139). Blanchot had drafted this formula almost verbatim when in the introductory essay to the 1943 French publication of *Faux Pas*, "From Anguish to Language", he writes that whenever the writer takes writing seriously, he "finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it" (3). If the only legitimate reason behind a commitment to literature is an imperative stripped of all content and all allegiance to the world outside literature, if the writer's only answer to the question *why write?*, Fort posits, is reducible to "a mode of helpless compulsion", then there is reason to conclude that the situation of literature eschews "any pretensions to an ethical, much less a sublime, dimension in the task of writing. [...] The important point to begin with" in considering Blanchot, Fort goes on to say, "which applies as well to Kafka and to Beckett, is that the irreducibility of writing's imperative is itself subject to disturbing vacillations that remove it from the sphere of ethics, and that reduce its echoes of sublimity to the varied and empty figures of its failure – figures of a law in default" (4).

The labour of writing and literature becomes in this situation an all-consuming task for figures like Blanchot, Kafka, and Beckett. Literature and writing, particularly for this trio (but not only for this trio), is fundamentally separated from the content-saturated context of "life"

nerve to name 'literature' [*la littérature*]. And it does so without any commotion, almost modestly, but in a way that is altogether decisive. By means of this imperative without content, what was known as 'literature' – a term that has authorized so many immense pretensions and inspired poses – is given over to its own naked existence as a fact and as a sort of duty without reason, much as the Rimbaud of a Season in Hell says that he is given over to the earth and to a harsh reality. In a register that is quite close to this (despite appearances), when Beckett was asked by a newspaper survey 'Why do you write?' he gave this lapidary response: 'Bon qu'à ça' ('It's all I'm good for')" (38).

where ethical discourse is essentially and practically situated. If there is to be an ethical call of literature, however, it would have to derive from nowhere else but literature itself, and so whatever ethical discourse of literature is discoverable in the Beckettian world will by definition be confined to that world alone and to no other. What Fort identifies as the “imperative to write” in the work of Kafka, Blanchot, and Beckett translates as writing’s imperative to reflect the sovereign law of its immanent ontological alterity. A sovereign imperative like the one that oversees the space of literature, because evacuated of all concept and content and abjected into a world of sovereign devising and oversight, cannot be an ethical imperative. Ethics begins in relation to the world and in communion with the alterity of the other; it is thereby subsumed with content, and the imperative to which literature is beholden is precisely an imperative that blocks the epistemology of relation and the possibility of community and communication with any content or concept outside of the singular idiom of the literary imperative itself. Closer to the concerns of this dissertation is the analogous conclusion that Badiou draws regarding the possibility of conceptualizing terror, which he regards as philosophically unthinkable insofar as terror, like Lacoue-Labarthe’s diagnosis of the imperative of literature, designates “an imperative without concept” (261). Part of this dissertation consists in articulating terror precisely in this non-ethical and non-philosophical language of an imperative without content or concept.

However, no sooner does Fort acknowledge the non-ethical imperatives of literature than he pivots his argument towards defending a thinly-disguised Adornian theory of ethical negativity buried deep within the aesthetic and historical unconsciousness of literature and writing (above all in the fictional universes of Kafka, Blanchot, and Beckett). There would appear to be in Beckett criticism, and here Fort is no exception, a pervasive hesitation, even repulsion toward refusing Beckett’s writing an ethical commitment or even a responsiveness to an ethical imperative that does not force its way into the space of literature from out of Beckett’s autobiographical existence and memory. In the ethical obsession of Beckett criticism, Beckett’s weaknesses and failures to adhere to the imperative of literature convert almost automatically into the strengths and successes of the ethical imperatives of his writing. If Beckett “is ‘good for nothing but’ writing,” Fort speculates, “it may also be that nothing is quite so good as writing, that writing is the last holdout against the good’s corrosion and dispersion, the one thing that has managed, after all, to resist elimination in the all-devouring process of rejecting everything on offer [...]. In other words, the minimal and minimized vindication of writing actually harbors an

extreme and hyperbolic affirmation, or even a receding and residual version of transcendence, that holds out the hope (and the persistent demand) of unparalleled satisfactions, not to say ecstasy, even in the midst of the extreme attenuations already noted” (6). It is curious to see an ethical imperative weave its way into Fort’s reading so insidiously and with so much promise for salvaging Fort’s preliminary encounter with the hermeneutically unworkable hypothesis of literature’s sovereign imperative outside ethics. The methodological and hermeneutic question that Fort’s recourse to an ethical discourse for the legitimation of the paradoxes of literature and of literary commitment raises is whether or not either literature or criticism are sustainable enterprises once they have forfeited their exposure to the world outside literature and outside the hermeneutical consciousness that literature jealously aspires to sequester.

As it turns out, and this is Fort’s culminating insight, occupying the space of an absolute commitment to literature proves to be an impossible task as history and memory (the accoutrement of Levinas’s “existents”), as “life” forcefully penetrates across even the most heavily-guarded thresholds (between life and literature¹⁴) as those that demarcate the ontological border posts of literature and writing. If there is an ethical remainder in Beckett, or for that matter in Kafka, Blanchot, or whomever, it is a consequence of the imperative of writing having failed in its uncompromising demand for totalization and in inadequately living up to the ideal of the absolute subtraction of the literary subject from non-literary spheres of experience. The ethics of literature would therefore have to be conceptualized as an accident of the inevitable failure of literature’s sovereign imperative. Rather than call into question the desire for ethics *as such*, however, Fort is able to reconceptualise ethics on the basis of literature’s intrinsic failure not to be ethical, thereby perpetuating the trend in Beckett criticism of always arriving at an ethical conclusion that rescues all of the ambiguities, paradoxes, and indecisions of the readings preceding it.

Peter Fifiield shares with both Fort and more explicitly with Weller the suspicion, particularly in the case of Beckett, of “the deafness of the ethical turn in literary studies to critical

¹⁴ Deleuze characterizes this relation in terms of literature’s singular expressions of the immanence of lived experience, but given Deleuze’s non-phenomenological conception of living-in-immanence, the emphasis falls on literature’s *non*-relation with what is livable: “writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived. [...] The shame of being a man – is there any better reason to write?” (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 1).

voices” (*Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* 2). Fifield is referring in this passage to critical voices like Levinas’s that do not *a priori* presume that literature is constitutively indebted to the ethical protection of alterity: “literature for Levinas is [...] *unethical*” (2; italics in original). With this counter-intuitive proposition Fifield attempts to re-read Levinas stylistically in such a way that the signature-traits of his philosophical writing converge with Beckettian formalisms around the unspeakable presence of alterity and otherness. What distinguishes Levinas from Beckett, in Fifield’s view, is that Levinas’s philosophical writing supplements for literature’s unethical shortcomings, and Beckett’s literary precociousness (i.e. Beckett’s position as a forerunner of deconstruction and poststructuralism) undermines Levinas’s suspicions about literature’s suitability for mastering a demonstration of an ethical comportment in language. In starting from what is *unethical* in Levinas and Beckett, Fifield arrives most assuredly at what is irreversibly *ethical* in both of their projects.

In the introduction to his *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity*, Weller provides a far more subtle characterization of the status of ethical discourse in the Beckettian space of literature. He counters the inadequacy endemic in Beckett criticism of attributing either an ethical or non-ethical valence to Beckett’s writing by proposing the neologism of “the anethical”¹⁵ as a more precisely ambiguous and flexible concept for capturing the dynamic ambivalence that Beckett’s literature expresses toward the question of ethics and of ethical possibility. Weller begins by accepting that the ethical posturing of Beckett’s writing tends to share a close affinity with the structural parameters and affective pathos of the Levinasian notion of the *il y a*, the “there is” that emanates out of the pure presence of being: “the murmur of the *il*

¹⁵ Weller’s insistence on deploying what he terms “the anethical” derives from his interest in analyzing “the works of Beckett and others in a manner that is less polarized by the nihilist/anti-nihilist model, but that does not assume either the possibility of an analysis of literature that would be clearly distinguishable from the ethical, or the possibility of a literary practice that would have, as Blanchot argues in his 1963 preface to *Lautréamont and Sade* (1949), a power of affirmation wholly liberated from the notion of value. [...] [W]hat I have termed the anethical [...] is to be distinguished from, although not necessarily to be thought as either prior or posterior to, the ‘ethics of alterity’ or the ‘ethics of difference’ that has come to dominate what is generally termed ‘postmodern’ thought” (viii). While I share Weller’s concerns about the productive capacity of so-called postmodern thought and its application to Beckett, I remain committed to exploring affinities between Blanchot’s theoretical construction of what I term a literature of interruption, and Beckett’s struggle with the realization of a literature of inexistence (which is close to what Alain Badiou calls “the generic”), and the extent to which these do, in fact, remain distinct from ethical discourse, including the “anethical” type. Granted, Weller deploys his notion of the “anethical” in a way that is designed to highlight the failure inherent in any attempt to distinguish, in the context of Beckett, between ethical and unethical discourses. Weller’s aversion to discourses of relation, then, repeats what Blanchot had already argued *vis-a-vis* the *il y a*.

il y a does indeed seem to be present in *The Unnamable* and the *Texts for Nothing*, which ends with an ‘it murmurs,’ a ‘voice murmuring a trace’. In Beckett, though, there is no acceptance of the *il y a*, no living with it, but rather, as in Levinas, an unremitting attempt to escape it” (12-13). Later in his introduction Weller revises this post-Levinasian interpretation of Beckettian ethics and the interpretive applicability of the *il y a* to Beckett’s writing, claiming that “while, for Levinas, it is precisely the ethical relation with the Other that constitutes an escape from the horror of the *il y a*, in Beckett the *il y a* certainly appears to be irreducible and inescapable in a way that it is not for Levinas, blocking the path to the ethical. In *Texts for Nothing*, for instance, this persistence that is not an event of being is figured as a ‘voice murmuring a trace’ which appears to resist all efforts to silence it with ‘no’s knife’. The Beckettian *il y a* appears, then, to be the most radical form of unmasterable alterity” (29). Weller’s latter claim here that Beckett manages to deny an escape from the *il y a* with recourse to a Levinasian-style ethical posturing (which was the suggestion in Weller’s former claim) depends on an interpretive privileging of the final words of *Texts for Nothing* – “it murmurs” (154) – as a meaning-granting end, the performative value of which is to preclude the inauguration of ethical transcendence and responsibility in the face of the Other (i.e. establishing an ontological distance from the horror of the interminability of existence, the horror that inscription in the site of the *il y a* permanently occasions). Weller’s is a reading that further depicts *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* as narratively inclined towards positively instantiating (as negativity) the non-event of ethical transcendence foreclosed at the conclusion of *Texts for Nothing*, a reading which takes aim at Levinas’s premature ethicalization (ontologically speaking) of the category of alterity and of literature’s responsibility toward it. As such, insofar as the *il y a* is a productive concept for interpreting the ethical horizon of Beckett’s literature, it will have to be the *il y a* as this concept is explicated in Blanchot as the non-ethical and non-historical provenance where the absolute work of literature is disclosed. Weller’s (possibly strategic) indecisiveness regarding how best to situate the *il y a* in relation to Beckett’s writing acts as an invocation to return to Blanchot’s ambivalent articulation of this notoriously slippery concept.

Conceiving of literature as no longer concerned with converting the encounter with alterity (with *autrui*) or the escape from the *il y a* into principles for devising an ethical relation of transcendence raises the question, however, of whether it really is possible for literature to interminably inhere in the liminal and non-ethical relation (a relation without relation) that being

in immediate proximity with the *il y a* prescribes. A relation like this, one that recuses itself from relations of ethical transcendence, Blanchot writes, is nothing less than “most terrible because it is tempered by no intermediary. For in this view there is between man and man neither god, nor value, nor nature. It is a naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation. Can this really be asserted?” (*The Infinite Conversation* 59). Blanchot accepts the Levinasian presupposition that in the *il y a* the distance that ordinarily separates the other and the same, the subject from its subjectivity, the narrative voice from the discourse it speaks, is dissolved and that “this relation is language” (55). Blanchot, however, stops just short of valorizing this neutral relation, this relation *qua* language, as the springboard to any ethical relation whatsoever between the one who speaks and the one who listens and responds. What then is the purpose behind Blanchot discussing this relation at all if it does not advance dialectically or *via* the repetition of differences beyond the brute and absolute presence of the relation itself, this “strange relation that consists in there being no relation” (51)? Without proposing to have knowledge of what etiologically precipitates this relation with the presence of the outside of all relation, Blanchot is nevertheless confident that it is this relation that circumscribes the concept and the experience of the radical unknown, of radical unknowability and the affirmation of the experience of the phenomenological impossibility of finding oneself in the presence of this relation: “it seizes us, staggers and ravishes us, carrying us away from ourselves” (51).

Blanchot is perplexed that for Levinas the presence of this relation is so philosophically comprehensible, and it is so because what mediates this unmediated relation of transcendence between Self and Other (*autrui*) is the accompanying presence of speech that equalizes the ontological playing field of this relation¹⁶. The critique of Levinas that Blanchot develops is fixated on pointing out that the “thought that recognizes in Autrui this dimension of radical exteriority with respect to the Self cannot at the same time ask of interiority that it furnish a common denominator between the Self and Autrui, any more than it can seek in the (subjective) presence of the ‘I’ to its speech what would make language a manifestation without peer” (57).

¹⁶ Derrida develops a similar critique of the history of metaphysics more generally in the opening essay to *Of Grammatology*, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”.

Levinas, effectively, sanitizes the all too real threat of violence inherent to language, and it is because Levinas privileges speech (oral discourse) over writing (literature) that he is able to limit the danger that language exerts over *autrui*. In writing, the question is not that of responding to the invocation of speech that the encounter with *autrui* ethically demands as a precondition of speech *as such* (pure speech, the saying prior to the said); rather, it is a question of responding first and foremost to language *as such*, and not to either language or speech as the vanishing intermediary between myself and *autrui*. Language circumscribes my speech in the space of a solipsistic interiority where the only outlet of expression is the outlet we call writing, the outlet, that is to say, that does not necessarily presuppose a relation outside of language. Literature and writing are indifferent to Levinasian ethics precisely because their relation is not primordially with *autrui*, but with the presence of language qua this relation of non-relation that the encounter with *autrui* only really exposes after the fact. Blanchot distinguishes himself from Levinas by substituting *autrui* qua other for *autrui* qua “presence itself; the presence of the infinite,” and this presence is the presence of a language that does not, or more exactly that *cannot* privilege ethical speech over the radical violence that all speech risks precipitating (59): “to speak is always to speak from out of this interval between speech and radical violence, separating them, but maintaining each of them in a relation of vicissitude” (62).

What makes Blanchot’s intervention into Levinasian ethics relevant for the purposes of this dissertation is that the relation between speech and violence in the presence of language that Blanchot substitutes for Levinas’s relation of the self and *autrui*, which Levinas mediates through ethical speech, is decidedly a relation that is “most terrible, *but without terror*” (59; my emphasis). What this relation lacks is the possibility of its philosophical measurement, the possibility of conceiving its philosophical accessibility. Because “the human relation, as it affirms itself in its primacy” as the primacy of the pure presence of language and speech, “is terrible”, and because what is so terrible about this relation is that it precludes predicating of either speech or language the ethical status of an intermediary between myself and the other qua *autrui*, the only affirmation that can be made about this relation translates, with unmistakably Beckettian overtones and resonances, into “the hard language of exigency: one must speak” (65). One way of determining the impetus behind this dissertation is simply that of asking whether or not terror, which Blanchot has subtracted from his analysis at this point in *The Infinite Conversation* of what is so “terrible” about this relation in language, this relation with the *il y a*

of pure speech, can possibly provide some measurement of conceptualization and access to this exigency that ceaselessly demands and violently extorts speech: “this is a speech,” Blanchot contends later in *The Infinite Conversation* and to which this dissertation will return in Chapter 3, “of which we are not directly aware and, it must be said again, a speech that is infinitely hazardous, for it is encompassed by terror. Radical violence is its fringe and its halo; it is one with the obscurity of the night, with the emptiness of the abyss, and so doubtful, so dangerous that this question incessantly returns: why the exigency of such a language?” (187).

Blanchot provides the theoretical armature of this dissertation, but he does so in a way that enables it to conjoin the philosophical and historical approaches to Beckett’s work that are far too often regarded as methodologically antithetical. Like Beckett’s, Blanchot’s biographical narrative includes a pronounced, though politically distinct engagement with terror in the pre-war years when he was writing articles and reviews for several right-wing publications in France. However, Blanchot’s most sustained affirmation and critique of the singularly literary prerogatives of terror does not appear until after the war, when in the essay “Literature and the Right to Death” he asserts the inseparability of literature and terror. Here Blanchot associates terror with what he identifies as the fourth and final temptation that writers must confront in bringing the work of literature into the improbability of its existence. So as to avoid any misunderstanding with anyone who desires to see in Blanchot (as many see in Paul de Man or Heidegger) only a politically compromised intellectual, it is imperative at the outset that this dissertation align itself with Rodolphe Gasché when he writes that “to suspect that Blanchot’s discussion of revolutionary terror [in “Literature and the Right to Death”] represents a hidden reference to his own association with right-wing movements in pre-war France and is a late attempt to come critically to grips with it completely misreads the status of the fourth temptation. [...] Moreover, the theme of revolutionary terror in question concerns terror in the name of freedom, not the terror of the far Right” (*Of Minimal Things* 372). Gasché continues: “a literary criticism thus limited to hunting down in the literary text the signs of scandalous political involvement is indeed nothing but a pretext for a return to an autobiographical and anecdotal understanding of literature” (68).

The links that Blanchot sees between literature and terror go much deeper than merely supplying Blanchot with anything so banal as a remorseful alibi for his prior political activity. As Michael Syrotinski notes, it was through the specifically conceptual and philosophical crucible

of terror, facilitated at first by Blanchot's exposure to the publication of Jean Paulhan's *Flowers for Tarbes, Or, Terror in Literature*, as well as Jean Hyppolite's *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* and Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, that signaled "the shift between Blanchot's career from being an apologist for a certain form of Right Wing nationalism in France during the 1930s to his more celebrated role as a fiction writer and literary critic from the 1940s onwards" ("Noncoincidences: Blanchot Reading Paulhan" 81). Terror acted as the conceptual hinge around which Blanchot could turn his attention to the complex of ways that history and politics speak in and through the language of literature and philosophy. For both Blanchot and Beckett it was imperative midway through the twentieth century that the discourse of contemporary modernity begin to embrace and critique (deconstruct?) the terror of thinking and the terror of literature if it was to begin to cease the continuous catastrophe of again and again "making terror the measure of history and the logos of the modern era" (*Infinite Conversation* 355) with nothing to show for it but the fading memory of revolutionary possibility and a mounting body of corpses signalling its failures and miscalculations. As such, there is enough evidence scattered throughout Blanchot's *oeuvre* to make the case that between literature and terror there is an essential relation of reciprocal articulation. Chapter 3 of this dissertation focuses on precisely this relation.

Although the theoretical framework of this dissertation is indebted to Blanchot, it owes its historical and archival point of departure to the secondary writings of Marjorie Perloff and Andrew Gibson. In their essays "'In Love with Hiding': Samuel Beckett's War" and "Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49: *L'Innommable* and *En attendant Godot*", both Perloff and Gibson, respectively, forcibly draw attention to the ways that Beckett's wartime and post-war experience in France, first as part of the Resistance and then in perilous exile once Beckett's underground cell had been exposed, came to exert a profound influence over shaping the ascetic literary form that typified Beckett's writing during this impressively productive period of his life as a writer (from the "Nouvelles" to *En attendant Godot*). Forced into hiding and exile in order to elude the German and French-Collaborationist patrols along the route to the Unoccupied Zone in the south of France, Perloff explains, Beckett underwent "an elaborate war nightmare – a nightmare Beckett never wrote about directly, although allusions to it are [...] everywhere in the texts of the postwar decade" (77). Unable to differentiate "between friend and enemy", Beckett and Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, his soon-to-be wife, lived in constant danger of being

discovered and exposed (81). Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil lived out the remainder of the war in a “claustrophobic” environment, “indeed a kind of prison” (82).

Following Beckett’s example, however, we too should not give in to hyperbole: Beckett’s wartime experience simply did not compare to what befell countless millions during what the world would soon come to know as the Nazi Holocaust, but this did not mean that he was not deeply and personally affected by what the Germans were planning at the onset of war and what they in fact carried out once war truly and brutally commenced. Anthony Cronin attributes Beckett’s relationship with Alfred Péron, “Beckett’s oldest [and closest] friend among French people”, as one of the influences behind Beckett’s decision to join and remain active in the Resistance to the Nazi Occupation of France. Péron, “a daily associate at this time [1941] even apart from their joint resistance activities, and a Jew who saw – and had reason to see – more clearly than most French people what the Nazis were up to, what their intentions regarding the new order really were and what future awaited Jews should they triumph” (*Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* 326), would eventually be interned in the Mauthausen concentration camp, and like “Robert Desnos”, Beckett notifies Thomas MacGreevy in a letter dated 19 August 1945, he died “on his way home from deportation” (*Letters* 19). Cronin helps fill in some of the details surrounding the death of Péron:

While in Ireland he heard the news of the death of Alfred Peron. Apart from the grief it caused him, the news emphasized the difference between the complacencies of Foxrock and the life-and-death nature of the war years for so many people in Europe. Arrested in August 1942, Péron had been taken in February of the following year to Mauthausen, a camp where many who had been involved in resistance activities were kept. He had managed to survive there until liberation and had then been transferred to a Red Cross camp in Switzerland. Here, as a result of his ill treatment in Mauthausen, he died in June 1945. (*Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* 346).

So although Beckett was luckily not counted amongst the victims of the Nazi Terror, he was not entirely spared from mourning the deaths of people he called his friends and from witnessing firsthand the suffering and violence that humanity was capable of inflicting on itself during times of pervasive paranoia, anxiety, and fear. After a brief sojourn in Ireland, Beckett managed to return to “French soil, if not [immediately] to Paris and some semblance of normal life there” (347).

When Beckett finally did return to Paris in January 1946 (following his work with the Irish Red Cross at Saint-Lô) for what would later be dubbed the “siege in the room” period

where he composed his most famous writings, Beckett soon discovered that it was a Paris that he no longer recognized. In the post-war aftermath of France's Nazi collaboration, the government of de Gaulle embarked on a Robespierresque "Purge" of confirmed and suspected collaborationists and various other elements of France's now disgraced heritage. As Weller writes, this "period of political *épuration* (purging)" had "immediate consequences for the literary world, not least the suicide on 15 March 1945 of the novelist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, who during the German occupation had taken on the editorship of France's most influential pre-war journal, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. On account of its collaborationist stance, the NRF was closed down after the Liberation and did not reappear until 1953, when it was relaunched under the title *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*" ("Post-World War Two Paris" 161). If it was the case, as Beckett is said to have put it in an interview with Israel Shenker, that "I preferred France in war to Ireland at peace", the same could not be said about the France (Paris specifically) that Beckett inhabited now that the war had nominally been concluded ("An Interview with Beckett" 147). Gibson makes much of a letter Beckett wrote to Thomas MacGreevy dated 4 January 1948: "The news of France is very depressing, depresses me anyhow. All the wrong things, all the wrong way. It is hard sometimes to feel the France that one clung to, that I still cling to" (*Letters* 72). Gibson takes these remarks "of the culture immediately around him" as "central" to "Beckett's work in the mid- and late 40s" ("Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49" 1). Beckett "returned to Paris at a time when, in the words of the historian Herbert Lottman, because of the Purge, the atmosphere was one of terror" (3).

The problem that ensnared Beckett's writing, and here he was not alone amongst the Parisian intelligentsia and literati, was how to go on engaged in writing literature amidst the post-war conjuncture of France's collaboration with the Nazi war-machine, a collaboration that left France morally humiliated and economically eviscerated once this collaboration came to an end, on the one hand, and the revival of an unmistakably French Republican recourse to Terror taken by the Vichy Purges under the government of de Gaulle, on the other.¹⁷ Neither of these personal

¹⁷ David Weisberg does an excellent job in *Chronicles of Disorder* of situating Beckett's writing relative to the cultural politics of early to mid-twentieth-century Europe and France and of literature's responsibilities towards it. His analysis logically begins with the important observation that "during the interwar years when Beckett began his career, the rise of fascism, the consolidation of the Soviet revolution, the economic crises of the 1930s, and the expanding potential of mass media, photography, and film determined, to a great degree, how writers understood the relationship of art and politics" (161). Beckett, Weisberg goes on to argue, incorporates critical visions of the role of literature as these were articulated in turn by Sartre, Barthes, and Adorno: "in Sartre's sense, Beckett's work does

and cultural memories could be ignored, but neither could they be addressed directly without the vehicle of their condemnation and critique – literature – being reduced to either anti-fascist or anti-Gaullist propaganda. That the publication of Beckett's writing could not evade being implicated in the post-war constellation of historical, political, and cultural crisis in France, accordingly, is to concede the legitimacy of the first premise of Jean-Paul Sartre's thesis on the commitment of literature as it was articulated for the inaugural issue of the journal *Les temps modernes*¹⁸. "The writer", according to Sartre, "is *situated* in his time; every word he writes has reverberations. As does his silence" (252; italics in original). Writing in the essay "Situation of the Writer in 1947" Sartre elaborates further on what the politics of silence now means for post-war literature and culture in France, particularly as it owed much of its ethical capital to the men and women, Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil not excluded, of the Resistance to the Nazi Occupation: "most of the resisters, though beaten, burned, blinded, and broken, did not speak. [...] Everything concurred in making them believe that they were only insects, that man is the impossible dream of spies and squealers, and that they would awaken as vermin like everybody else. [...] But they remained silent and man was born of their silence" (*What is Literature?* 180). If Beckett was to continue his fidelity to literature, and not let its cultural dignity be subsumed by the interests of political and ethical propaganda, then it was imperative that his writing articulate the terms of its commitment exclusively in the language and architecture of literature. It is from this vantage point, from deep within the language and form of the literary dimension of Beckett's writing, that this dissertation intends to move forward, focusing in particular in Chapters 4 and 5 on how in the writing of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* Beckett negotiated, through the fragmentary discourse of literature and narrative, the real historical and cultural predicament of a world immersed in experiences of terror.

take up identification with the oppressed; in Barthes's sense, it does seek to neutralize its own relation to the order of narrative convention; in Adorno's sense, it does actively recreate, in a negative way, a reified, instrumental consciousness" (168).

¹⁸ Beckett later published the first part of his short story "Suite" (later re-titled "La Fin", or "The End") in the July 1946 issue of the journal.

Chapter 1

Alain Badiou and the Philosophical Impasse of Terror

*The impulse to think, to inquire, to reweave oneself
ever more thoroughly, is not wonder but terror.*

(Richard Rorty)

The work of Alain Badiou is distinctly representative of the ambivalent presence of terror in the contemporary philosophical encounter with twentieth-century modernity, and so it is with Badiou that our first investigation into how terror has been inherited from the politico-historical site of its original appearance in the revolutionary government of Robespierre will commence. Badiou's thinking of the problematic of terror warrants analysis insofar as it consists in using terror to articulate many of the concepts that are integral to his philosophical apparatus of the Subject and of the Event only to then be relegated thereafter to the seemingly inauspicious territory of concepts and phenomena that are strictly speaking unthinkable from his philosophical perspective (the perspective of philosophy *as such*, insists Badiou). Because terror, in Badiou, is invested with an aura of fascinating and seductive inexplicability, it is no doubt a fertile place to reflect on the idea that terror is as ruinous as it is productive of the literary and philosophical discourses that have risked exposing themselves to the madness of terror's demands. In the case specifically of diagnosing the effects of terror in the work of Badiou, it is imperative to spend a few moments becoming familiar with the methodological formula that Badiou typically adopts when inscribing "evental turns" in both the ontological and phenomenological ordering and rupture of what he calls pre-evental situations, or quite simply the status quo of what there is in any particular situation and discourse of existence (i.e. a scientific paradigm, a political order, a literary genre, or the quotidian experience of pre-amorous subjectivity). One of these methodological formulae is modelled after the Beckettian trope of the "pseudo-couple", which by substituting the grammatical work of a hyphenated relationality with a non-relational ontology of the void – the "black-grey as the site of being" (*Conditions* 254) – allows Badiou to better explicate certain of his more difficult concepts in counter-distinction to their negative complements. Such conceptual "pseudo-couples" include disaster/event, destruction/subtraction, solipsism/love, and perhaps most notably, anti-philosophy/philosophy. These pseudo-couples are

what further enable Badiou to emphasize the novelty of eventual subtractions and subjective commitments as they unfold according to the ethical protocol of the truth procedure.

As we will discover shortly, terror engenders a pseudo-couple as well, but it is a self-engendering that is split between, for instance, the revolutionary terror of Robespierre (terror as subtraction) and the destructive terror of twentieth-century totalitarian and fascistic violence (terror as catastrophe). For obvious conceptual reasons, Badiou's most sustained discussion of terror occurs in the context of revolutionary politics and the various ways that political sequences are susceptible to betrayal and perversion. But it is in his schematic reading of the trajectory of Beckett's artistic project, which is punctuated, he argues, by the immanently irresolvable impasse of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, that terror most clearly figures as an object of philosophical and literary (and no doubt political) ambivalence. It is in the space of his reading of Beckett, interestingly, that Badiou concludes that terror is an unthinkable object of philosophical intelligibility precisely because it operates essentially, within the reciprocating poles of "an insistence without hope" and "an imperative without concept" (*Conditions* 260-261): "Here what is necessary is exactly what is impossible, the continuation of the repetitious insistence of the voice is also the voice of intolerable torture. Throughout *The Unnamable* the speaker's face streams with tears. The cogito's heroism marks an impasse" (261). The intention of the present chapter is to take a closer look at how terror operates in the work of Badiou and to begin the adventure of zeroing in on the discourse and concept of terror as it singularly presents itself to the perspectives of philosophy, literature, and literary criticism. To begin to adequately appreciate the consequences of these discourses being haunted by an imperative – the imperative of terror – that is anathema to conceptualization and representation, an insistence that relentlessly blocks the "gleam of hope", "the hope of a truth" (270), which is otherwise present in "the second part of Beckett's oeuvre" – *How It Is to Worstward Ho* – in those moments where Beckett's writing "opens up to chance" (266; emphasis in original), we will first try to wade through the multiple locations in Badiou's work where the problem of terror arises. For heuristic convenience, the analysis that follows is divided into four sections.

The first of these sections is devoted to Badiou's interpretation of the political history of terror and the philosophical consequences of its complicity with the politics of catastrophe and destruction that regrettably typified the legacy of the twentieth century. His investment in articulating actual historical instances where the desire for eventual subtraction went horribly

awry derives from the honest and intellectually courageous recognition that in any of the four generic truth procedures that he advocates there is an inherent proclivity for catastrophe and nihilism. Indeed, Badiou's thesis that philosophy proceeds on the basis of a "violent forgetting of every historical assemblage" (*Conditions* 5), a thesis that we will look at more closely below, is supplemented quite explicitly by his work in *The Century*, a text that reinforces the idea that an event's exposure to the contingency of the ontological void of being does not always tend towards the *ethical* interruption of either the historical malaise or political injustice of pre-evental situations (discourses of existence). The conceptual valence of terror bridges these two dimensions of Badiou's philosophy of the event – ethical subtraction and destructive negation – with a high degree of concision, and it appears in his political philosophy at three distinct sites of analysis. Firstly, and most importantly, it arises out of the revolutionary terror of Robespierre, which operates for Badiou as a necessary accompaniment to the sequence of emancipation that delivered France from the socio-political tyranny of monarchical sovereignty and the theological myth of the divine origin of state power. Secondly, it immediately re-emerges in the Thermidorian return (restoration) to the anti-revolutionary degradation of politics as a system of management and a narcissistic accumulation of power. The Thermidorian historical and historiographical project, Badiou argues, involved a misreading of terror as a political system that was limited to the violent spectacle of death unimaginatively associated with the guillotine, and thus the Thermidorian restoration (willfully) neglected to acknowledge the inextricable relation that terror formed with the survival of the revolution and the safe passage of the Constitution through the turbulent years of 1789-1795. Thirdly, explicating the rationality of terror is integral to Badiou's analysis of the totalitarian politics of Stalinism and National Socialism that so spectacularly and catastrophically punctuated the twentieth century and exposed it, in Agambenian terms, to the state of its constitutive exception. Confronting these two instantiations of the politics of twentieth-century catastrophe is a logical necessity in Badiou's analysis of the event, particularly as he takes the risk of admitting, in a very Žižekian way, that "the striking break provoked by the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 [is] *formally indistinguishable from an event* – it is this that led Heidegger astray" (*Ethics* 73; my emphasis). Spending some time with these three sites of the thinking of terror in Badiou's work – Thermidorian, Nazi, Stalinist – will aid in representing terror as a philosophically recalcitrant concept and historical phenomenon. It is from here that we can then proceed into a discussion of how Badiou's

underlying methodological approach to representing those concepts that he diagnoses as interwoven into situations of evental and pre-evental immanence can disentangle the philosophical formalization of the Event from the knotty concatenation of Terror.

Badiou, far too often depicted as the contemporary thinker of post-Nietzschean affirmation and ahistorical enthusiasm, is here at his most ambivalent and melancholic when dealing with the persistence of terror in the narrative sequencing of events. To be sure, once it is clear that a genuine political sequence is underway, the question inevitably arises of whether or not a politics of catastrophe and destruction or a politics of subtraction and the universality of truths will be installed as the *order of the day*, and thus all political sequences must negotiate the difficulty of interpreting whether or not their trajectory is being driven by principles of justice and inclusion or by images of the false simulacrum of their nihilistic purchase on existence: “when a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth-processes, convokes not the void but the ‘full’ particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a *simulacrum of truth*” (73). “This is why”, Badiou goes on to explain, “the exercise of fidelity to the simulacrum is necessarily the exercise of terror” (77). By predicating the exercise of terror on an immanent misreading of the undecidability of the presence of truth and confusing it with the false image of its simulacrum, Badiou implicitly invites us to inquire (though importantly without guaranteeing success) into the non-sublatable difference between the constructive terror of subtraction and the annihilating terror of destruction. It is in the space of this particular inquiry, moreover, that we can begin to see traces of the aesthetic (and therefore interpretive) dimension permeating the simulacrum of truth and the subjectivity of terror in Badiou’s philosophy of the event and his ethics of the subject. Writing in a not altogether dissimilar context, Blanchot too recognizes the stakes involved in deciphering the difference between destruction and subtraction (creative negativity): “For one cannot construct the universe without the possibility of its being destroyed. Destruction and creation, when they bear upon the essential, says Nietzsche, are hardly distinguishable: the risk, therefore, is immense” (*The Infinite Conversation* 146). The existence of truth, the “essential”, is unmistakably a problem of *reading* truth as the subtractive difference from its simulacrum and disavowal. What primarily separates Badiou from Blanchot and Nietzsche is that for Badiou this distinction – destruction and subtraction/creation – can indeed be convincingly and forcefully demonstrated, beyond the central paradox of its engrossing self-contradiction, by the right form of the philosophical seizure

of truths. Again, the irreducible complexity of this problem is what points us in the direction of the methodology of thinking that drives Badiou's philosophical system. It is in the transition midway through this chapter from how Badiou thinks the politics of terror to how, simply put, he negotiates the *thinkability* of concepts more generally, that we are forced to entertain the idea that pursuing an analysis of terror cannot succeed through an exclusive reliance on the discursive resources of philosophy. The concept of terror is philosophical as much as it is historical-historiographical and literary, and thus the philosophical seizure of the concept of terror demands supplementation from the perspectives of the historical-historiographical and of literature.

Accordingly, the second section of this chapter turns to the methodological ground of Badiou's latest philosophical intervention in *Logics of Worlds*, arguing that it is by adopting a variation of the Hegelian dialectic that Badiou finally begins (though whether or not he succeeds is another story) to develop the tools that would enable his philosophy to more patiently think through the conceptual ambivalence of terror. This section is nevertheless forced to challenge Badiou's idiosyncratic appropriation of Hegelian dialectics on the grounds that Badiou's instantiation of dialectical thinking is prematurely closed off to the work of conceptual mediation performed in the distinctly Hegelian anticipation of the subtractive movement of negativity. Out of this critique of Badiou's appropriation of the dialectic the section then proceeds to resuscitate the impulse of dialectical negativity as a methodological device for thinking terror as "an imperative without concept," particularly in a way that is more amenable to how terror is appropriated in the literary (as provisionally distinct from the philosophical) space of Beckett's post-war writing and prose (primarily *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*). Already in Badiou's reading of the first part of Beckett's *oeuvre* we find evidence that he is sensitive to the dialectical principle of mediation, attributing it to the dislocation of narrative from prose – prose is transformed into the medium of a latent poetics of happiness and love – that begins to crystallize against the Beckettian impasse of the 1950s. Central to Badiou's reading of the scission that took place in Beckett's *oeuvre* around the time of *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* is Badiou's philosophical distaste for the unnamable's relentless hermeneutical bombardment against the ontological fiction of its existence. Something like dialectical mediation is possible in Beckett's narrative schema, Badiou believes, but only once it concedes the possibility of the encounter, the possibility of the event of love and happiness. Indeed, Badiou's thesis is that Beckett's embrace of a logic of the event is what successfully mediates between the self-

destructive solipsistic period of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, on the one hand, and on the other the imperative to “know happiness” that punctuates the post-1960 period of *How It Is*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *The Lost Ones*, *Enough*, *Happy Days*, *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho*¹⁹.

The role played by dialectics in this interpretive manoeuvre is clarified somewhat by the distinction Badiou intends to make at the level of the intellectual history of contemporary philosophy in France between the post-Heideggerian hegemony of hermeneutics and what in Badiou’s “inaesthetics” is represented as the seizure, demonstration, elaboration, and announcement of the indiscernible existence of generic truths (*Handbook of Inaesthetics* 14). Badiou has in recent years written extensively on the history of French thought and his respective position within its contemporary configuration. Such texts include *The Adventures of French Philosophy*, “The Adventure of French Philosophy” (*New Left Review*), and the chapter on “Philosophy and Politics” in *Conditions*, though it is Badiou’s remarks in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* on the lasting impression of Heideggerian romanticism (impressionable on Deleuze’s aesthetics²⁰) and its effects on the suturing of philosophy to art that is relevant to the present context, which is concerned above all with understanding the relation that Badiou reads into the interminable interpretation and fictionalization of existence in the world of *The Unnamable*, and the subsequent mediation of this existence after 1960 by contingent encounters in Beckett’s writing with alterity and the event. To negotiate this relation in a way that does not sacrifice philosophy to the power of poetic truth it is necessary to break with the Heideggerian disposition of hermeneutics and to avoid emulating the meta-hermeneutical spectacle of the *The Unnamable*:

what interests us here and characterizes the romantic schema is that between philosophy and art it is *the same truth that circulates*. The retreat of being comes to thought in the conjoining of the poem and its interpretation. Interpretation is in the end nothing but the *delivery* of the poem over to the trembling of finitude in which thought strives to endure the retreat of being as clearing. Poet and thinker, relying on one another, embody within the word the opening out of its closure. In this respect, the poem, strictly speaking, cannot be equaled” (6-7; emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Badiou is conspicuously inattentive to the double entendre in “know happiness” that concludes *Ill Seen Ill Said* (55).

²⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of Badiou’s relation to Deleuze around the question of Beckettian aesthetics, see my article “‘Cease to exist in order to be’: *Worstward Ho* between Badiou and Deleuze,” which appeared in the fall issue of the journal *Mosaic* (45:3).

Where philosophy and poetry are integrated by a common truth that circulates indistinctly within their respective regimes of sensibility, Badiou is quite certain that there inevitably comes a point at which the presence of the poetic truth must be violently extorted from the primordial site of its enunciation. What is the truth of poetry? In Badiou's reading of the Heideggerian legacy we have come to accept that it is nothing less than the silent being of all speech. Or at least "this was the hope of *The Unnamable*: 'there were moments I thought that would be my reward for having spoken so long and so valiantly, to enter living into silence...' This entering silence", continues Badiou, "which holds death at bay ('still living'), was perfectly described by Maurice Blanchot as a repetition of writing, which at once effectuates its point of enunciation, and wants to capture it, to signify it" (*Conditions* 260). Here Badiou finds a destructive movement and image of terror insofar as the "repetition of writing" has nowhere else to go except an endless path into self-torture and ontological disintegration. Participating in the desire to capture the silent being of all speech, as do Blanchot and other post-Heideggerian hermeneutists, leads philosophy to violate its ethical mandate – fidelity to eventual subtraction – by conjoining with the ascetic wandering of the interminable imperative of writing. One of the ways that philosophy is complicit in the catastrophe of its suturing to poetry and hermeneutics is by subscribing to the idea of the dialectical inescapability of nothingness and negativity. The Beckett of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, we are encouraged to consider, is as guilty as Blanchot for ultimately succumbing to the dialectical trap of a post-Heideggerian hermeneutics played out on the restrictive horizon of a finite ontology of existence and truth. Badiou's dialectics, on the other hand, consists in allowing the event to do the work of mediation, whereas in the Heideggerian variation of a dialectical representation it is negativity and nothingness that is charged with mediating between thinking and being. Beckett as much as Blanchot fails to escape the dialectical nihilism of this Heideggerian disposition: "Beckett came to replace the hermeneutics with which he began, trying to pin the event to the network of meanings, with a wholly different operation, and which is that of *naming*. As regards a hazardous supplementation of being, naming will not look for meaning, but instead propose to draw an invented name from the void itself of what happens" (269; italics in original). Looking closely at what Badiou has to say about dialectics in *Logics of Worlds* will assist in coming to grips with the provocative thesis that Beckett's *oeuvre* reaches ontological and aesthetic maturity when it no longer senses the need to be the literary and hermeneutical vessel of finitude and terror.

The third section of this chapter is concerned specifically with Badiou's reading of Beckett in light of what Badiou's philosophical methodology of thinking, having finally acknowledged its indebtedness to dialectics, is willing to permit *vis-à-vis* thinking a heterogeneous concept like terror. Whereas in other places in his work Badiou appears unsure about how exactly to accommodate terror, his remarks on the "reign of terror" that consumes Beckett's middle-period prose are certain that Beckett's writing in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* had "nothing more to assert" other than that the subject of "the *cogito*", which Badiou had earlier identified as being "pulled between the subject of enunciation, the subject of passivity and the questioning subject" (262), is "literally intolerable and yet also ineluctable" (263). Accordingly, the effect of terror on Beckett's writing is that his prose (or so Badiou insists) is pressed firmly against a threshold that Beckett himself was unable to cross. Through the conceptual lens of terror Badiou concludes that Beckett's middle-period prose became riveted to the solipsistic terror of the *cogito*, and it was only when Beckett embraced the ethics of the subject as predicated on the contingency of an event – "the Two of love as the passage from the One of solipsism to the multiple infinite of the world" (*Conditions* 280) – that his writing was able to transcend the creative morass occasioned by the momentary intransigence of terror. Unfortunately Badiou stops just short of considering the possibility, which it is the intention of this dissertation to do, that by orienting his writing around the imperative of terror Beckett becomes implicated in a theory and discourse of literature – derived out of Blanchot – that cannot simply be transcended "through a modification in his *orientation of thought*" (264; italics in original). On the contrary, *terror orients the thinking of literature* such that to no longer find one's writing being pursued by the pressure of the imperative of terror is likewise to no longer be writing literature. The pivot in the conclusion of this section to Blanchot through the definition ascribed to terror in Badiou's reading of Beckett is aimed at beginning to defend the theoretical strength and interpretive validity of this undoubtedly contentious assertion. Badiou offers a productive (though nevertheless inconsistent) entry-point into this idea concerning the integral relation between literature and terror, particularly in the work of Beckett. However, it is in the critical distance he offers to this project's admittedly very cozy relationship with Blanchot that the ultimate service of this chapter to the dissertation as a whole is revealed.

The Terror is a philosophical curiosity for Badiou precisely because its empirical consequence was to initiate and preserve, however tentatively, a suspension of history and a rupture with the homogeneous state structure of the *ancien régime* (hence the adoption of the revolutionary calendar). In Badiou's philosophical universe, reflecting on the singularity of the concept of terror cannot be done, if it can be done at all, without first articulating the philosophical essence of Thermidor. Interestingly, though, Badiou does not complete a philosophical critique of the revolutionary sequence as it stretches from 1789-1795, from Robespierre and Saint Just to Tallien and d'Anglas, content as he is to focus almost exclusively on what constitutes Thermidor from the instant that it interrupts and overruns the revolution. Nowhere in Badiou's expansive philosophical corpus, for instance, do we find the equivalent of an analysis of revolutionary terror as the chapter on Thermidor in *Metapolitics*, "What is a Thermidorean?". It is clear from *Being and Event* and the essay "Philosophy and Politics" (amongst many other places in his work) that the French Revolution is one of the rare instances that satisfy Badiou's restrictive criteria for an event of politics²¹. Why, then, does he not provide his readers with a philosophical examination of the concept and phenomenon of terror as it was singularly experienced and debated from within the discursive space of the historical caesura of the revolutionary sequence itself? After all, if "it is through Saint-Just and Robespierre that you enter into this singular truth [militant fidelity to the eventual becoming of politics] unleashed by the French Revolution, and not through Kant or François Furet", why is Badiou's most sustained analysis of the Revolution devoted almost entirely to the concept of Thermidor and not to that of the Terror (23)? The point here is not to play the hysterical game of demanding of Badiou what he does not provide, namely a philosophically and historically immanent systematization of the concept of terror. In fact, Badiou is not oblivious to this relative lacuna in his work²², yet with the exception of his reading of terror in Beckett's prose this has not resulted in a convincing

²¹ Cf. "Meditation Seventeen: 'The Matheme of the Event'" in *Being and Event* (178-184).

²² The place of Terror in Badiou's philosophy is complex and not always consistent, owing in part to the difficulty that Badiou has with clearly separating a genuine event from disaster. Nevertheless, Andrew Gibson overstates the issue when he writes that "what Badiou himself lacks, what he everywhere refuses, and what distinguishes him from Beckett as much as Benjamin and [François] Proust, is the thought, not only of anything resembling what Benjamin calls catastrophe, but of the logic that, *according to his own scheme of things*, must bind event and catastrophe together" (Beckett and Badiou 269; italics in original). It is perhaps the concept of Terror that fashions Badiou with just this power of binding.

explanation for the philosophical elusiveness of the concept of terror, specifically as it is inherited by modernity from Robespierre and the French Revolution. Because the philosophical significance of the Terror hinges for Badiou not only on how it was experienced immanently during the most decisive and uncertain days of the revolutionary upheaval, but also on how it was digested historiographically after the terror-phase of the revolution came to its nominal end in the Thermidorian counter-revolution, it is imperative that we pause on these two dimensions of the Terror before passing back into our discussion of Badiou. Hovering over these dimensions will assist greatly in ensuring that we have a firm historical foothold prior to explicating the twentieth-century discourse of terror from philosophical and literary perspectives. What the twentieth century has in common with the revolutionary experience in France is the ambivalent and indecisive relation to the question of beginnings and endings, the question, Badiou argues in *The Century*, that overdetermined the “passion for the real” that constituted the twentieth century’s obsession with radical violence (in its catastrophic political manifestations, May 1968 notwithstanding) and creative subtraction (in its modernist and avant-garde artworks and aesthetic manifestos) (52).

In his comprehensive study *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution*, David Andress recounts the execution of Maximilien de Robespierre:

Robespierre would not fit into the guillotine with the bandages applied to his wounds, so the executioner ripped them off. Thus the end of the Incorruptible, the great tribune of the people, the architect and prophet of the Terror, was signalled from his ruined throat by a ghastly, inhuman scream, only cut short as the blade fell upon his neck (344).

Slavoj Žižek comments similarly on the event of Robespierre’s death, placing greater emphasis than does Andress on the interpretive ambiguity of the scream:

The status of this last scream is legendary: it gave rise to a whole panoply of interpretations, mostly along the lines of the terrifying inhuman screech of the parasitic evil spirit which signals its impotent protest when it is losing possession of its host human body – as if, at this final moment, Robespierre humanized himself, discarding the persona of Revolutionary Virtue embodied and emerging as a miserable scared human being. (“Robespierre, or the “Divine Violence” of Terror”).

As Žižek’s graphic recantation of Robespierre’s last scream suggests, what is remarkable about it is not that it signalled the abrupt extirpation of fanatical terrorism from the newly civilized Republic of France. On the contrary, what was so inexplicably horrifying about Robespierre’s scream was that it denoted his monstrous re-birth into humanity at the instant of his gruesome

decapitation. It would be tempting to conclude that with the execution of Robespierre the systematic politics of Terror that he had orchestrated were extinguished as well. This, at least, was the short-lived hope of his executioners, the political representatives of Thermidor. However, the fact that Robespierre was executed with the very instrument that had become the metonymic representative of the system of Terror, called into question (perhaps even precluded) any such termination of its continuing political and historical operability. The revolutionary politics of the Terror, in other words, exceeded and outlived the reign of Robespierre by having institutionalized the very mechanisms and discourses of capital punishment, purgation, and paranoid suspicion that left him decapitated and screaming on the blade that severed Robespierre from Thermidor. If the guillotine was the instrument that carried the Terror past its abrupt and tenuous beginnings in 1789, it was the guillotine again that delivered France out of the Terror and into the post-revolutionary years after 1795. Nevertheless, the Thermidorian representatives of the Convention who had ordered Robespierre's arrest (on 9 Thermidor) and execution (on 10 Thermidor) were hopeful that these events would serve as a symbolic announcement of the end of Terror (not unlike President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" announcement) and of the political influence of the Jacobin faction of the Montagnards that Robespierre and Saint Just had so propitiously led into power. In other words, the Thermidorians were hopeful that Robespierre's execution would substitute "terror as the order of the day" with "justice as the order of the day", short-circuiting the entire discursive and disciplinary machinery that Robespierre had erected in defence of the principles of the Revolution. Because of the pervasive and totalizing grip of the culture of terror that swept through France during the revolutionary period, however, sublating its radical temporal rupture into the historical homogeneity of a constitutional Republic cleansed of the Terror quickly became a far more problematic and uncertain project for the "happy revolution" of 9 Thermidor than had initially been anticipated.

"The blade that cut short Robespierre's screams on 10 thermidor," writes Andress, "could not snuff out the Terror like a candle. The Incorruptible had been processed to his death by the same machinery that had accounted for his victims, and on the next day, 29 July, the guillotine was the busiest it had ever been in Paris, dispatching no fewer than seventy-one members of the Robespierrist hierarchy of the capital" (345). Greater than the sum of its agents and its victims, the Reign of Terror became an irrevocable mainstay of the Revolutionary and post-

Revolutionary (Thermidorian) Republic of France. As spectacle *par excellence* of the end of Terror, as condition of possibility *par excellence* of the beginning of the Constitutional Republic of France, and finally as untranslatable expression *par excellence* of what the Terror came to signify (an incomprehensible and Janus-faced symbol of liberation and justice, anxiety and fear), the scream of Robespierre punctuates both the spirit of the Revolution between 1793-1795, but also the ambivalent origin of the anti-revolutionary politics of restoration that the Thermidorians ushered abruptly into historical existence. Robespierre's scream becomes the echo of a negativity that the culture and politics of modernity will ceaselessly struggle to disavow. If Thermidorian politics failed to adequately articulate an end of the Terror, it is because by 1793 the Terror had exceeded its status as a temporary strategy for purging the political and social landscape of France of its counter-revolutionary discourses and actors and become the basis for political enthusiasm, Kant famously reported, for more or less all of Europe (spectators of the Revolution outside of France). If we are to appreciate what allowed the Terror to be converted into a quasi-perpetual motion machine of the revolutionary politics of suspicion, purgation, and liquidation (of people, ideas, monuments, memories, etc.), then considering how the Terror developed into an automatic extension of revolutionary politics is indispensable to further inquiring into why it was so difficult to abort once it was deprived of its most vocal and impassioned representatives.

Not only was Robespierre's guillotine the instrument that materialized and then (ostensibly) terminated the Terror, but its use on 10 Thermidor also became a source of the discrepancy over how the political system and culture of the Terror would be appropriated by the historiographical archive of France's liberation from the *ancien régime*. Would the Revolution be the inaugural event of political modernity *because* of the Terror, or in spite of it? What was it about the events of the French Revolution that required the capitalization of and on Terror? Can the genealogy of modernity, what Jürgen Habermas famously calls the "unfinished project of modernity", be re-traced without confronting head-on, as it were, the violent excess of the Terror? The historiographical project of Thermidor would thus set the tone for post-enlightenment intellectuals like Habermas to issue stern condemnations of "those who link the project of modernity with the conscious attitudes and spectacular public deeds of individual terrorists" ("Modernity: An Unfinished Project" 50). Such thinkers "are just as short-sighted as those who claim that the incomparably more persistent and pervasive bureaucratic terrorism practiced in obscurity, in the cellars of the military and secret police, in prison camps and

psychiatric institutions, represents the very essence of the modern state (and its positivistically eroded form of legal domination) simply because such terrorism utilized the coercive means of the state apparatus” (50). Leaving aside Habermas’s not-so-implicit polemic against Foucault, Adorno, and their respective critiques of the disciplinary state and the repressive mythological core of the dialectical perversity of the enlightenment project, Habermas is nevertheless correct to point out that if the discursive and empirical mechanisms of revolutionary terror and state terrorism only coincidentally rely on the language of liberty and the technology of reason, then this does not mean that liberty and reason, *as such*, are thereby to be indicted as the tainted consequences of the fanaticism that subsequently usurped them. For Habermas, then, consigning systems of terror that were (and still are) perpetrated in the name of the enlightenment principles of modernity to a set of decidedly *anti*-modern ideologies is the first step to preserving its rational and ethical spirit, and this is precisely what the representatives of Thermidor realized as well. Habermas’s vision of the enlightenment project of modernity, in other words, operates on the basis of disavowing the irrational and violent symptoms of the birth of this project.

We should not lose sight of the necessity that the Thermidorians faced in having to decide on how to inherit the unforgettable spectacle of the Terror in the wake of Robespierre’s beheading. “The political plans and conflicts of the period initiated by 9 Thermidor,” explains Bronisław Baczko, “cluster around a central issue:

that of emerging from the Terror. The overthrow of Robespierre on that date was a seminal event that gave a name to a political period and plan, as well as to its instigators. We might say then that the Thermidorians were those who accepted emergence from the Terror as a crucial, urgently necessary, political imperative. Within a few weeks of 9 Thermidor, it became clear that the ‘happy revolution’ could not end with the execution of Robespierre and his accomplices. It had to go further; it had to dismantle an entire system of power. (“The Terror before the Terror? 19).

As a prelude to the Wagnerian logic of *Parsifal* – “the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you” – the representatives of Thermidor immediately recognized that only by purging the political scene of any and all traces of Robespierre would it be possible to dissipate the remnants of the Terror that was implemented in his name. To preserve the ethics and idea of a Revolution without Terror required a repetition of the Terror to which the Revolution undoubtedly owed its existence. Baczko is one of the few historians of the French Revolution and the historiography of Terror to touch on the Thermidorian consciousness that the political and historical remainders of the Terror presented an imminent threat to the safe passage into the restorative (“justice as the

order of the day”) phase of the Revolution. Before turning our attention squarely on how the political culture of 9 Thermidor intended to distance itself from the revolutionary government of the Terror and the guillotine-seal of its legislative authority, it is instructive to look at how Robespierre’s initial proclamation of Terror quickly escalated into a *system* of juridico-political comportment. Before there was the Thermidorian reaction against the Terror, there was the parliamentary support of its application over the entire political landscape of revolutionary France. Advocates of the reaction against the Terror were, only a year or so earlier, fervent supporters of the very same Terror. What explains the perceived necessity of creating distance between the Thermidorian Restoration and Robespierre’s revolutionary government of the Terror? While the causes of this decision are debatable, the results of the reactionary politics of Thermidor are perhaps more straightforward on the subject of its consequences for the role the revolution went on to play in the historical and political theatre of Europe. “Rather than engaging in a mourning work that would inherit, surpass, and transmit the revolutionary legacy,” Rebecca Comay tells us, “the Thermidorians sought to normalize the event; the Revolution both elided its traumatic memories and suppressed its own utopian demands” (84). The task of normalizing the revolutionary legacy and for blotting out the horizon of political liberation and equality that it promised to construct was taken on by the Thermidorians as a historiographical project aimed at re-writing and re-imagining virtually every detail of the revolutionary narrative.

Historiography (both in the midst of Thermidor and continuing into the twentieth century) on the French Revolution is divided over where and when to attribute the birth of Terror within the revolutionary experience. The execution of Louis Capet is a reasonable candidate, yet it does not account for the turbulence of 1789-1793, a period that witnessed the substitution of the divine right of monarchy with the secular right (which was no less indebted to the language and myths of religion and theology) of popular sovereignty. The establishment of the National Assembly and the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 *de facto* deprived the king of absolute sovereignty (Louis XVI formally acknowledged the Constitution in September 1791 in an effort to subdue the impending threat of revolt), re-conceiving the source of political power as a divine gift of God to a secular gift self-decreed to the People. The execution of the king merely confirmed the vacancy of the seat of political power, and because the “People” was too abstract and vague of a concept, no doubt, to be translated into real political control of state power, it was left to the revolutionary government of Robespierre and the Jacobins to preserve

this vacancy until the appropriate time when a suitable structure of political leadership could occupy it in accordance with the principles laid out in the 1789 Constitution. Other candidates for the historical birthplace of the Terror include the 1789 Constitution of the Rights of Man (François Furet's candidate), the September Massacre of 1792 (this is Sophie Wahnich's preferred point of origin for her recently published work in *In Defence of the Terror*), the inauguration of the Revolutionary Tribunal, the Law of Suspects, and also the Law of 22 Prairial (which granted the Revolutionary Tribunal, particularly Robespierre, Couthon, and Saint-Just, the ability to expedite the trials and executions previously administered, and with greater leniency and restraint, by the National Convention). All of these options were floated during the Thermidorian reaction to the Terror, and the purpose of sifting through all available candidates was so that the Thermidorians could begin the arduous work of cleansing the Revolution and the Republic of any supposedly superfluous uses of violence that the Terror had implemented and systematized. One of the more glaring ironies of this procedure was that several of the more vocal Thermidorians, most notably Jean-Lambert Tallien, whom Baczko identifies as "the very model of the 'weathervane', a *political turncoat*, that most characteristic figure of the Thermidorian political landscape", had themselves frequently resorted to the mechanisms of the Terror in carrying out their revolutionary duties while stationed in the administrative shadows of the cities and provinces outside Paris, i.e. in Bordeaux, Lyon, Nantes, etc. (*Ending the Terror* 49).

The key distinction that the Thermidorians were interested in establishing, in other words, was the questionable, and in the case of Tallien the hypocritical, separation between Revolutionary violence and terroristic violence, morally defensible violence that founded the Republic ("sovereign violence") and the reprehensible violence that sullied its aspirations to a political order grounded in enlightenment and justice ("administrative violence"). It is within this Thermidorian debate, interestingly, that the Terror emerges as a *problem* and as a *site* of ambivalent historiographical archivization. Taking immediate control of this problem meant that the Thermidorians could guide the narrative through which the Revolution began to enter the next phase of its political and historical development and memorialization. As is often the case with historiographical projects, what gets remembered is determined above all by what is selectively forgotten and re-configured. How, then, to distinguish between the necessary acts of violence perpetrated in the name of the Revolution from the fanatical violence enacted at the

tyrannical whims of Robespierre? It was a fact: the Revolution existed side by side with the Terror. If the Revolution was to be preserved as a symbol of enlightenment politics to which the rest of Europe could look for inspiration, and even closer to our concerns here, if the Revolution was to take responsibility for framing the historical narrative of its origin and legitimacy, then it was imperative that the newly self-appointed guardians of the Republic decide on whether or not the Terror was to be excluded from the narrative of Revolution or somehow integrated into the narrative of its continuing existence.

There is certainly controversy over the claim that the Terror *as such* comes to an end with the fall of Robespierre, or also that the Terror is concluded once its political existence is consciously registered as a problem and a question from within revolutionary historiography itself, albeit according to the post-revolutionary ideology of Thermidor. Far more controversial, however, is trying to pinpoint precisely where the Terror, properly speaking, erupts onto the scene of revolutionary France. Although it ultimately has to be the regicide of Louis XVI that is deemed responsible for inaugurating the system of the Terror, the passing of the Law of Suspects is a close and compelling contender for this dubious distinction²³. “The *suspect*,” writes Baczko, “both as a concept and a representation, was the cornerstone of the Terror. Indeed, the Terror was a system of power threatening and punishing people for what they were, not for what they did. The Law of Suspects of 17 September 1793 was the end point, and, one might say, the systematization of the punitive attitude and apparatus from which the Terror largely drew its force” (26). After all, had not Robespierre relied on a *de facto* law of suspects when condemning Louis XVI to the guillotine for an ontological crime (the *being* of monarchy), and not for any empirical crimes the king may have committed (the “Indictment of Louis XVI” issued on 11 December 1792 nevertheless accused Louis of 33 separate crimes against the state²⁴)? As Robespierre coldly exclaims, “Louis was king, and the Republic is founded: the famous question you are considering is settled by those words alone” (57). Extending the rationale deployed by Robespierre in his infamous speech on the trial of the king, the Law of Suspects decreed as guilty of treason “those who, by their conduct, associations, talk, or writings have shown themselves

²³ It is possible, however, to trace the Terror already to the birth of the Revolution. This is the Hegelian candidate as read by Rebecca Comay: “Hegel backdates the Terror to the very onset of the revolution: June 17, 1789” (*Mourning Sickness* 75).

²⁴ Stewart, John Hall. *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*. Pg. 386.

partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of the people” (*Documentary Survey* 478). Historians have been quick to highlight the strategic ambiguity of this decree, and it is not difficult to see how the revolutionary virtues of a person’s “associations”, “talk”, or “writings”, could be interpreted in any number of ways, inscribing a situation, to adopt a Beckettian formula, where *to be is to be guilty*. To be suspected of anti-revolutionary conduct was enough evidence for the signing of one’s incarceration or death sentence. What the Law of Suspects succeeded in accomplishing then was a widening of the scope of the Terror from the spectacle of the guillotine to a political culture of arbitrary condemnation, i.e. from spectacle to system. The Law of Suspects effectively legislated for a politics of paranoia that was complemented by the executive power required for carrying out a seemingly endless series of imprisonments, executions, and purges. Having already sacrificed the monarch in the name of the sovereign authority of the People, the Law of Suspects elevated the “People” to so abstract of a category that no single person was safe from also being sacrificed as a result of the indefinite insecurity of the Revolution. Divesting the monarchy of its sovereignty by dropping the king “back into the void”, as Robespierre put it²⁵, led to a political climate whereby the Revolution was at perennial risk of also being plunged into the void by, for example, counterrevolutionary forces from within the boundaries of France, but also by the external pressure of the entrenched monarchs in the rest of Europe. Closing the void of sovereignty proved far more difficult than its opening had been. When Tallien attacks the Revolutionary Government of Robespierre and the Jacobins his primary target is the pervasive culture of suspicion that making “terror the order of the day”, as the Convention had ominously declared on 5 September 1793, had produced, and that was made official with the passing of the Law of Suspects.

²⁵ Robespierre emphatically denounces the trial of the king on the grounds that to debate his innocence is to risk putting the Revolution itself on trial: “Louis cannot be judged; either he is already condemned or the Republic is not acquitted. Proposing to put Louis on trial, in whatever way that could be done, would be to regress towards royal and constitutional despotism; it is a counter-revolutionary idea, for it means putting the revolution itself in contention. [...] Peoples do not judge in the same way as courts of law; they do not hand down sentences, they throw thunderbolts; they do not condemn kings, they drop them back into the void; and this justice is worth just as much as that of the courts” (58-59). Insofar as the Revolution owes its existence to the ontological guilt of the king, in other words, deliberating over Louis’s innocence is tantamount to also deliberating over the right to existence of the Revolution. If Louis can be acquitted, Robespierre insists, then so too can the Revolution be invalidated. “I am convinced,” Robespierre tells the Assembly, “that deliberation is a scandal” (62).

“This system of Terror”, declared Tallien while speaking on behalf of the anti-Robespierre sentiments of Thermidor, “supposes the exercise of an arbitrary power in those who undertake to spread terror. It also supposes absolute power, and I mean by absolute power one that owes obedience or justification to no one, and which demands it of everyone else... The system of Terror supposes the most concentrated power, the power that approaches closest to uniformity and tends inevitably to royalty” (qtd. Baczkowski 51). What Tallien objects to is precisely the hypostatization of Terror into an unrestrained system of repression and violence answerable to no single political representative. While it is possible that the Terror began as an extension of the executive power increasingly accrued by Robespierre in the aftermath of the execution of the king, its adoption by the National Convention as the “order of the day” and then applied in the Law of Suspects as an expedited means of purging the French Citizenry of counter-revolutionaries condemned on the basis of fear and paranoia alone, meant that the Terror had indeed outgrown its tutelage under Robespierre and therefore could not be eradicated by simply ridding the Republic of the body of Robespierre and of the Robespierreists. Tallien recognizes that the Terror was irreversibly embedded in the political culture of the Revolution, and purging the Revolution of the Terror could only proceed by purging the Revolution of its very own condition of revolutionary possibility.

What motivates Robespierre’s incessant proposals for increasingly extreme measures designed to accelerate the purging of counter-revolutionaries is that the Revolution quickly encountered the point at which it could no longer sustain its transitional political status. At some concrete point in its development the revolution inevitably had to transition *into something real*, yet the logic of revolution and the perceived need for perpetuating indefinitely a revolutionary government dictated that converting the void of sovereignty into a positive political order could only proceed if the revolution itself was negated and betrayed. Nothingness invariably becomes the transcendental guardian and source of the revolution. Robespierre fervently resisted the inevitability of the Revolution becoming a new State and a new sovereign power, and his resistance to the Revolution ceasing to be a revolution, and instead becoming the *de jure* French Republic, explains why the system of Terror needed to be extended indefinitely. Without Terror the Revolution would calcify into a homogenous system of power. Concluding the Revolution, in other words, was the equivalent in the eyes of Robespierre to capitulating to counter-revolutionary discourse. In the frenzy of revolutionary enthusiasm, terror is at once the outer

manifestation of the violence revolution requires for its very survival, the only potent method for converting the negativity of sovereign suspension into the positivity of a sovereign republic, as well as a condition of consciousness that is tasked with purging itself of all pre-revolutionary subjectivity and memory, which of course risks locking the extorted reflexivity of revolutionary consciousness in an endlessly repetitive state of ascetic self-negation. In this, terror gazes at a future from the blinding perspective of a present it ceaselessly negates, and insofar as it is devoid of contact with presence, terror is powerless to capture the future it insists is on the horizon. Because of its absolute ambivalence, terror is a permanent fixture on the revolutionary horizons of consciousness and possibility, horizons where the historical discourse of modernity forcefully originated. Seen through these post-revolutionary lenses of perspective, i.e. “in the certainty of its uncertainty”, Rebecca Comay tells us, “the Terror serves the stabilizing function of all paranoia: it gives consistency and security – meaning, purpose, even existence – to a world otherwise untethered, unknowable, and strictly inadmissible” (69).

As Robespierre explains in a speech on 25 December 1793, “the Republic’s defenders adopt Caesar’s maxim: they believe nothing has been done so long as something remains to be done. We still face enough dangers to occupy all our zeal” (98). Defending the principles of the Revolution, Robespierre seems to be suggesting, requires endorsing what amounts to the endless horizon of revolutionary politics – the infinite Reign of Terror. Ostensibly, Robespierre delivers this speech as a polemic rejoinder to Camille Desmoulins, who had criticized the system of Terror in the popular newspaper *Le Vieux Cordelier*. As a defence of the Terror, however, Robespierre wastes little time descending into an exposition of what he terms “the theory of revolutionary government” (98). Because we are concerned here with how the system (and concept) of Terror was retroactively constructed as an object of Thermidorean (post-revolutionary) historiography, confronting the discourse of Robespierre and its contemporaneity with and justification of the administration of Terror is the only responsible gesture to make in recovering the twists and turns, often violent and unpredictable, of its historical (and soon to be philosophical and literary) genesis.

The justification Robespierre provides for the revolution’s recourse to the system of terror is contained in the proto-Benjaminian distinction he makes between constitutional and revolutionary government: “the goal of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it” (99). Determining when is the appropriate time

for substituting constitutional government for revolutionary government is anybody's guess, particularly if Robespierre's claim a few sentences earlier that "nothing has been done so long as something remains to be done" is truly the slogan of the revolution and not just rhetorical hyperbole (and the excessive endorsement *in practice* of the Reign of Terror suggests the former). Casting the revolution against the backdrop of an infinite project of installing a new political order – establishing the (fiction of) transcendental permanence of the sovereignty of the Republic – means simply that there will never be an ideal moment for enacting the substitution whereby revolutionary government would happily pass over the reins of power to constitutional government. Robespierre is careful not to consider the possibility that by imposing the conditions for its interminable political existence the champions of revolutionary government – Robespierre, Saint-Just, Couthon, *et al.* – have not in fact usurped the empty signifier of sovereignty and stuffed it with the system of the Terror. Keeping the distinction between revolutionary and constitutional government alive is paramount for Robespierre to sustain the illusion that the Terror had not exceeded its justification as the "order of the day" and become in its place the permanent order of the Republic.

Accordingly, cleansing the revolutionary period of the memory of the Terror was nothing less than a Herculean task of political historiography: "the counter-Revolution wished to return to the past, glossing over not only the Terror but also the tabula rasa of 1789: that was where they wished to begin their rewriting of history" (Furet 153). The significance of Robespierre's execution extended far beyond the political calculation of purging the Republic of the perpetrators of the Reign of Terror. Once again Baczko's analysis is indispensable for appreciating the ambiguous relationship that the Thermidorian phase of the French Revolution had to Robespierre and the Terror that was instituted at his behest: "the problem of ending the Terror was far from settled. On 10 Thermidor, the Convention triumphantly announced the victory of its self-stylized 'happy revolution'; with the fall of the 'tyrant' and his acolytes the Republic had been saved and the oppression ended. At the end of Year II the established fact was clear: *ending the Terror* was not an *act* but a *process*, tense and with an uncertain issue. The Terror was not brought to an end by the fall of Robespierre; it was a road to be discovered and travelled" (33-34). If the Revolution was to be salvaged from the moral repugnance of the Terror that delivered the former to fruition, then it was clear to the post-Terror Thermidorians that in spite of their best historiographical efforts to re-appropriate and re-define the juridical

mechanisms and political discourses of the Terror, the resiliency of the system that Robespierre had put into place would not without remainder (or remarketed repetition) accept being liquidated from historical memory.

The historical irony of the Terror is that it lives on through the hypothesis of being decommissioned. More than this, the Thermidorian desire to cease the Terror and demonize it as the political offspring of Robespierre ineluctably served to accrue to it an intensified resiliency. Yet the Terror was also forced to forfeit its systematic influence over the political calculations of the Thermidorian government. Rather than banish the Terror to the same historical fate as Robespierre and Louis XVI, Thermidor merely enacted a historiographical translation of Terror into alternative forms of discursive expression. With the arrival of the nominal “end” of the Terror, the *process* of its historical criminalization could commence. Its trajectories were certainly multiple, but two of these that are of interest here include its entry into philosophical and into literary zones of representation.

Badiou and the Philosophical Intelligibility of Terror

With this historical and historiographical spadework completed, let us turn our attention back to Badiou and the distinctively philosophical problematic of thinking the exigencies of terror. It is worth quoting at length the explanation Badiou gives about why terror cannot be sequestered as a philosophical object of critique independently of its exposure to the conservative historiographical discourse of Thermidor:

When all is said and done, ‘Thermidorian’ is the name for that which, whenever a truth procedure terminates, renders that procedure unthinkable. We have just seen how this constitution of the unthinkable can have a long-lasting power. It provides the historical matrix for a destitution of thought. Bearing this in mind, let us return to the Terror. In reality, when considered in isolation, ‘terror’ functions as one of the disarticulated terms of the unthinkable. The attempt to ‘think terror’ is impractical as such, because the isolation of the category of terror is precisely a Thermidorian operation (as is the attempt to think the socialist States solely on the basis of their terroristic dimension). It is an operation designed to produce something unintelligible and unthinkable. Considered in isolation, terror becomes an infra-political datum, one that is politically unthinkable, thereby leaving the terrain wide open for moralistic preaching against acts of violence. [...] What is subtracted from the Thermidorian operation is something other than a clumsy attempt at justifying or elucidating the nature of terror considered ‘in itself’. To proceed in this way would be to accept the unthinkable realm inhabited by the Thermidorian. We must examine the revolutionary

work as a homogeneous multiplicity wherein terror functions as an *inseparable* category, and specifically as one that is inseparable from virtue (138; italics in original).

This is a perplexing argument to make. What Badiou is saying is that to conceptually predicate terror *as such* independently of the revolutionary constellation of which it is an historically indissociable part is to already be guilty of a Thermidorian repetition and philosophical injustice. Terror is precisely what interrupts the consistency and regularity of a mode of thinking, and thus to think terror conceptually is to think conceptually radically anew without recourse to supposedly immutable laws (transcendental conditions of possibility) of philosophical or political intelligibility. “Thermidorian” signifies a blindness to the impossibility of return to a present that pre-dates the subtractive intervention of terror. The paradox that Badiou proposes, in other words, is that subscribing to the possibility of the thinkability of terror is to automatically endorse the Thermidorian hypothesis, thoroughly ideologically compromised as the very essence of conservatism, of terror’s constitutive unthinkability. Simply put: there is no universalizing concept of terror; terror constitutively denotes a conceptual particularity irredeemably subsumed under the universalism of revolutionary politics.

However, as a way of challenging the conclusion Badiou draws from the inextricable link that capitulates the discourse of terror to the all too prevalent historiographical legacy of Thermidor, can we not propose that the Thermidorian monopoly over terror is precisely what philosophy must wrestle with subverting? If terror is *unthinkable*, or rather unthinkable “in itself” independently of the constellation of revolutionary political discourse, does that not signal all the more reason to *think* it as a concept that does not of necessity have to answer to either the ideological demands of Thermidor or of Robespierist revolutionary politics? Does deriving its revolutionary function out of the principles of justice and virtue not obscure the conceptual horizon of terror to a mere juridical mechanism aimed at channeling the passions of the revolutionary citizens of the French Republic? Why does the “historical matrix for a destitution of thought” automatically cater to the “unthinkable realm inhabited by the Thermidorian”? Are there no other discursive sites of the unthinkable wherein the unintelligibility of terror might be worked out? Despite the thesis about the philosophical unthinkability of terror, there is nevertheless scattered throughout Badiou’s work various discussions and comments regarding the significance and signification of terror. Before we can begin responding to the questions listed above it is undoubtedly worthwhile to spend some time working through Badiou’s writing

to see if something like a *thinking of terror* nevertheless emerges that does not lapse incoherently into the Thermidorian oblivion of the unthinkable.

When Badiou proceeds to defend his philosophical investment in the political rationality of revolutionary violence he adds an important caveat against the modern tendency of decrying the ambitions of such revolutionary sequences for their supposedly inherent affinity (and genealogical complicity) with the destructive paths of twentieth-century totalitarian and fascistic politics: “I would not want you to take these somewhat bitter reflections as yet more grist to the mill of the feeble moralizing that typifies the contemporary critique of absolute politics or ‘totalitarianism’. I am undertaking the exegesis of a singularity and of the greatness that belongs to it, even if the other side of this greatness, when grasped in terms of its conception of the real, encompasses acts of extraordinary violence” (*The Century* 53). The difficulty and ambition of what Badiou is trying to accomplish is present, if however implicitly, in these remarks. Badiou is trying to defend the supposedly anachronistic concept of political universality, and so if the French Revolution is to be philosophically valorized as a model of universality in action, as Badiou desires it to be, the terror that accompanied it cannot be ignored or misrepresented, in the style of Thermidor, as a fanatic and idiosyncratic anomaly of the putative dictatorship of Robespierre. If Badiou cannot establish a qualitative difference between the terror of the French Revolution and the “acts of extraordinary violence” that swallowed the grand political narratives of the twentieth century, then he would have to admit that the French Revolution, too, would have ended in similarly disastrous fashion had the government of Thermidor not stepped in and put an end to Robespierre’s revolutionary passion. Badiou can only do this by demonstrating that the terror of Robespierre was installed, according to the singular demands of the situation’s homogeneous multiplicity, as an unavoidable juridico-political device for measuring and restraining the intense violence required for the Republic’s emergence out of the sphere of influence of the anti-revolutionary discourse and politics of royalism. The wager is that *without* the institution of the Reign of Terror the French Revolution would have descended into an *unmeasured* world of revolutionary purification and violence²⁶. Robespierre’s terror saved the

²⁶ Sophie Wahnich concurs: “Establishing the Terror had the aim of preventing emotion from giving rise to dissolution or massacre, symbolizing what had not been done in September 1792 and thus reintroducing a regulatory function for the Assembly. [...] Contrary to the prevailing interpretations today, then, the Terror was thus aimed at establishing limits to the sovereign exception, putting a brake on the legitimate violence of the people and giving a public and institutionalized form to vengeance” (*In Defence of the Terror* 64-65).

virtue of the Revolution, and it is for this reason that terror as such cannot be submitted as an object of philosophical conceptualization independently of the revolutionary principle of virtue. Robespierre puts the matter succinctly in a speech on political morality in February 1794: “virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is powerless” (115). When on 25 December 1793 Robespierre vehemently defends the unavoidably turbulent perpetuation of revolutionary government as the indefinite segue into the stable politics of constitutional government of the Republic,²⁷ he is likewise effectively advocating on behalf of restraining the premature arrival of a new political real (i.e. a figure like Napoleon). Read into Badiou’s core constellation of concepts, Robespierre’s association of terror with virtue performs the work of an historical instantiation of the ethics of subtraction (Badiou’s term for a non-destructive principle of political negation), which for Badiou is the formal pathway of the truth procedure that guarantees it does not end up in disaster and/or denial. What stands in the way of Robespierre becoming the veiled royalist that his enemies spuriously decried him for nevertheless becoming, and thus of inhabiting the void space of the real, is the system of terror that his government installed as a mechanism for safeguarding the passage of the revolutionary principles of the constitution. Had terror not accompanied the revolution, in other words, it surely would have been stillborn from its very conception²⁸, and as a consequence representative of what Badiou disparagingly refers to as a form of the reactive politics of Thermidorians and democratic materialists alike (*Logics of Worlds* 54-58).

Badiou recognizes the necessity of defending the categorical difference between the exercise of terror under the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin, for instance, and the Reign of

²⁷ Robespierre: “The goal of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it. [...] Revolutionary government needs extraordinary activity, precisely because it is at war. It is subject to less uniform and less rigorous rules, because the circumstances in which it exists are stormy and shifting, and above all because it is continually forced to deploy new resources rapidly, to confront new and pressing dangers” (99).

²⁸ One of the more remarkable speeches of Robespierre occurs in the context of deciding whether or not to hold a trial for Louis XVI. In this speech of 3 December 1792, just eighteen months after having condemned the use of the death penalty in France, Robespierre is nevertheless adamantly against the very idea of a trial for the king on the grounds that the revolution has radically reconfigured the political and juridical sensibility of the historical situation: “Louis was king, and the Republic is founded: the famous question you are considering is settled by those words alone. [...] Proposing to put Louis on trial, in whatever way that could be done, would be to regress towards royal and constitutional despotism; it is a counter-revolutionary idea, for it means putting the revolution itself in contention. [...] Peoples do not judge in the same way as courts of law; they do not hand down sentences, they throw thunderbolts; they do not condemn kings, they drop them back into the void; and this justice is worth just as much as that of the courts” (*Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* 59-59).

Terror as implemented by Robespierre during the French Revolution: “Understand by terror, here [totalitarian terror], not the political concept of Terror, linked (in a universalizable couple) to the concept of Virtue by the Immortals of the Jacobin Committee of Public Safety, but the pure and simple reduction of all to their being-for-death. Terror thus conceived really postulates that in order to let [the] substance be, *nothing* must be” (*Ethics* 77; italics in original). Badiou’s parenthetical reference to the “universalizable couple” of terror and virtue is the master trope for unlocking the subtle formal difference between the revolutionary violence of 1792-95 and the totalitarian violence of the twentieth century, which is typically cited by moralizing figures like François Furet as the inevitable historical destination of the terroristic system of violence of the French Revolution. A couple is “universalizable” when it congeals two opposing ideological (or aesthetic) vectors into a single work of political invention that is accessible to all regardless of any particular attributes (i.e. hereditary or educational privileges). Virtue, not property, literacy, or political and economic influence²⁹, counts as the only currency of political inclusion during the period of revolution, and it is precisely this universal form of political accessibility and enthusiasm that the terror aimed at defending. In the case where a political sequence is driven solely by humiliation, purification, and exclusion, what results is a boundless imperative for the maximization of death and destruction: “our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways – and not just in politics – been the century of destruction” (54). National Socialism and Stalinism are guilty of destruction for the simple reason that their crude principles of superiority ultimately came to over-determine the measure of their success as a quantitative function of their capacity to produce forced labour and death – a grisly politics of numbers. The same cannot in good historical and philosophical conscience be said about the revolutionary government of Robespierre, which was closer to what Badiou wants to call a politics of subtraction as opposed to a politics of destruction and disaster.

One of the more fundamental innovations that Badiou pursues throughout his philosophy of the event is the difference between destruction and subtraction. Destruction was the term used in *Theory of the Subject*, very much a text that belongs to the period of Badiou’s post-68 commitment to Maoism, to describe the trajectory of an event as a process of absolute negation

²⁹ Badiou cites Saint Just asking rhetorically, “‘What do those who want neither terror nor virtue really want?’ The Thermidorians gave the response: the end of the revolution, the reign of corruption, and suffrage only for the wealthy” (*Polemics* 18).

with respect to the hegemonic ordering of structures of the state. By the time of *Being and Event*, however, Badiou makes a sharp distinction between destruction and subtraction. Subtraction is more closely related to novelty and invention, whereas destruction is associated with political nihilism and totalitarian terror. Examples from the world of politics abound, but it is Badiou's appropriation of Kazimir Malevich's supreme minimalist aesthetics that emphasizes what is involved, and also at stake, in advocating the logic and value of subtraction over that of destruction. For our purposes here, moreover, Badiou's reading of Malevich brings the constellation of terror, subtraction, destruction, and disaster closer to the discursive site of Beckett's literature and prose, where the transition from a program of destruction and terror to one of subtraction and happiness is developed most instructively with patience, precision, and fidelity. Badiou finds in Malevich's *White on White*, however,

the origin of a subtractive protocol of thought that differs from the protocol of destruction. We must beware of interpreting *White on White* as a symbol of the destruction of painting. On the contrary, what we are dealing with is a subtractive assumption. The gesture is very close to the one that Mallarmé makes within poetry: the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference; the difference between the place and what takes place in the place, the difference between place and taking-place. Captured in whiteness, this difference is constituted through the erasure of every content, every upsurge. Why is this something other than destruction? Because, instead of treating the real as identity, it is treated right away as a gap. The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap is itself real. The white square is the moment when the minimal gap is fabricated (56).

Just a few pages earlier Badiou had cited the dialectical concatenation of absolute-freedom and terror in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel explicates his own version of the "real/semblance relation" in light of the infamous "Law of Suspects" and the impossibility of definitively differentiating between traitors of the revolution and its most loyal servants. Badiou explains that in the context of revolutionary politics "the traitor is both the leader and, ultimately, oneself. In these conditions, what is the only certainty? Nothingness. Only the nothing is not suspect, because the nothing does not lay claim to any real" (54). Again, where the difference between subtraction and destruction is concerned with respect to terror is in the idea that there can be two distinct types of negation that provoke the exposure of the ontologically permanent gap of the Real in our ideologically mediated sense of reality. Implicit in the categorical distinction between subtraction and destruction is an awareness of the possibility, evident in fact in *White on White*, of a logic of subtraction performing the task of negation in a way that is

inventive and revelatory without necessarily being destructive and exclusionary. Terror is a concept that is capable of participating in both sides of the negating process of revolutionary politics (is there any other kind, Badiou would ask?). Consequently, there is undeniable analytical value in being able to decipher (and whether or not this is possible is still far from having been decided) between terror as subtraction and terror as destruction. Pointing to Malevichian aesthetics is a productive step in the direction of *thinking the concept of terror* independently of either Thermidorian historiography or the revolutionary virtue of Robespierre. Before we turn our focus to the conceptual logistics of thinking terror, however, let us return one last time to the site of politics where Badiou continues to develop his understanding of the concept and phenomenon of terror. Doing so will further sharpen our critique of the elusive philosophical representation of terror.

Readers of Badiou will no doubt remember that in *Manifesto for Philosophy* Badiou does not shy away from trying to understand the “the essence of terror”, though here he is once again referring to what happened under Stalin and Hitler (as destruction), and not Robespierre (as subtraction). Badiou risks donning the cap of the Thermidorian in attempting to think the essence of terror through the destructive form of an event of nihilistic rupture. As we have already tried to insist, understanding the difference between totalitarian terror and revolutionary terror is as philosophically as it is politically and aesthetically significant, and so it is worth taking the time to pause once again to investigate how and why this difference is continually constructed and maintained in Badiou’s philosophical writing. Badiou writes:

The essence of terror is to pronounce the must-not-be of what is. Philosophy, when it is driven out of its operation by the temptation wielded upon it by the idea that Truth is substance produces terror, just as it produces ecstasy of the place and the sacred of the name. It is exactly this triple knotted effect, of ecstasy, the sacred and terror, which I name *disaster*. It is a matter of *thought’s* own disaster. Every disaster has at its root a substantialization of Truth, that is, the ‘illegal’ passage of Truth as an empty operation to truth as the befalling-to-presence of the void itself [...]. There are potent and identified forms of such philosophemes. Stalinian Marxism’s new Proletarian Man, National Socialism’s historically destined German people are philosophemes, taken to unheard-of effects of terror against what does not have the right to be (the traitor to the cause, the Jew, the Communist...), and pronouncing the ecstasy of the place (the German Land, Socialism’s Homeland) and the sacred of the Name (the Fuhrer, the Father of the peoples). (131-132).

The philosophemes that take as their proper name the signatures of Stalinism and National Socialism are situated in Badiou’s lexicon as exclusivist structures of thinking that are

dogmatically sutured to their politico-historical embodiments. In the history of philosophy the most notorious (and clichéd) example of the suturing of philosophy to politics would be the voluntary enlistment of Heidegger's ontology in the intellectual ranks of National Socialism (though Paul de Man seems to be getting much of the dubious press on this subject lately). Badiou's conceptual network of terror, disaster, thought, subtraction, destruction, place, void, etc. includes several complex and at times disconnected relations that are no doubt worth dwelling upon, but it is the relation that involves the division and distribution of terror between the concepts of disaster and subtraction that is of primary interest here, the latter of which is associated, as we have already seen, with invention and novelty as opposed to the destructiveness of the former. In the passage above, terror is clustered together with ecstasy of place and sacredness of the name, and collectively these phenomena constitute the ingredients of disaster. Terror operates in this particular constellation as the imperative for the absolute negation of what is excluded by the restrictive criteria for belonging to the soil and blood or to the party and to history, but it is only when it is coupled with the sacralisation of a proper name and a passionate dedication to the finitude of place that terror passes from imperative to praxis, and therefore becoming a participant in the false event of a properly unthinkable disaster. Terror, in other words, is the *active* ingredient, the energizing core of the deadly imperative of the performance of a disaster. Ecstasy of place and sacredness of the name would be impotent ideologies if they were not yoked to the terroristic imperative for unrestrained destruction and negation.

All of this is to say that when Badiou discusses either the political or philosophical experience of terror as a concept with positively identifiable attributes and characteristics, he does so firmly within a discursive space legislated over by the historiographical dictate of Thermidor: that the "in-itself" of terror is unthinkable. This, he argues, is strictly philosophically speaking unavoidable, and it is only by identifying terror with the juridical complement of revolutionary political virtue and justice or subsuming it under the tripartite sub-schema of political disaster that terror enters the philosophical space of conceptual singularization. Terror "in itself" is incomprehensible without acknowledging the necessity of these two categorical caveats: an ingredient of disaster or a necessary condition of revolutionary possibility. Even so, thinking the concept of disaster still results in "*thought's own disaster*", and accordingly we are left to wonder what the conceptual difference in fact is, the difference as it relates to the act of thinking and its affinity with nihilism, between a thinking of terror and a thinking of disaster. If

the difference is *nil* then we would be right to conclude, moreover, that trying to think disaster returns thought to the unthinkable limit of terror. We should, in other words, be cautious of Badiou's rhetorical manoeuvre of sliding terror under the categorical umbrella of disaster given that such a gesture risks eliding the singularity of the concept of terror so as to render it less traumatic and more practicable. Badiou betrays a repressive impulse towards terror in those places where he tries to subordinate its conceptual identity to categories that are more workable and, as it were, less disastrous for the conceptual "pseudo-couples" he is trying to maintain. Badiou's failure to convincingly mitigate the disaster to thinking that arises in the encounter with terror results in the persistence of terror as the inassimilable alterity of his philosophical writing. Terror castrates the tools – the concepts – of philosophical seizure, and despite Badiou's various attempts to escape this phenomenon he inevitably suffers a similar fate as Kant and Hegel when trying to *safely* incorporate the imperative of terror into the dwelling-house of his philosophical project.

To think the concept of *disaster*, Badiou seems to be suggesting, it is necessary to first reflect on the disaster of *thinking* vis-à-vis thought's capitulation to the uncompromising imperative of the negativity of terror. Given that the audience being targeted by *Manifesto for Philosophy* is more general than specialist, it is not surprising that Badiou does not develop in any great detail many of the ideas and concepts being proposed in this text. *Manifesto for Philosophy* is presented as a beginner's manual of sorts for a much larger, denser, and nuanced philosophical project that runs from *Theory of the Subject* to *Being and Event* and culminates (at least for the moment) with *Logics of Worlds*. Badiou is nevertheless able in this condensed space of writing to return to philosophy the courage to engage with universal modes of thinking. The price for this "re(turn) to philosophy *itself*" is a re-engagement with the inherent possibility, realized in the case of Heidegger and perhaps even Sartre, that philosophy will provide the conceptual foundation of a disaster (113): "the desire can emerge to name the unnameable, to appropriate the proper in a nomination. What I decipher in this desire, *which every truth puts on the agenda*, is the very figure of Evil. [...] We shall call this disaster. Evil is the disaster of a truth" (*Conditions* 126-127; my emphasis). Such a re-engagement is necessary, though, insofar as the truths that interest philosophy the most invariably operate somewhere within the parameters of a negativity – the space of terror – that it is demarcated between destruction (nihilistic negations) and subtraction (creative negations). Without acknowledging philosophy's

inherent affinity with the phenomenon and logic of disaster, Badiou's renewal of the discourse of philosophical thinking in light of contemporary historical events risks forfeiting the ethical and conceptual armature that is required if it is to guard the existence of truth(s). A blunt disavowal of philosophy's complicity in the history of the disaster of thinking will not suffice for ensuring that philosophical discourse does not repeat the Heideggerian misstep of sacrificing its intellectual integrity to the demands of a politics of identity, an ideology, in many cases, of an autochthonous path to nihilism. In its contemporary configuration philosophy is nevertheless compelled to neither repress its desire for universality and truth, nor succumb to the misleading ease of truth's imminent accessibility and the power wielded by its fragile possession. Badiou recognizes all of this. However, and this is the point that needs to be emphasized, the role accorded to terror in Badiou's polemical battle with post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and the postmodern obsession with vitalist ontologies of finitude (which are far too easily attributable to Deleuze), ultimately and paradoxically fails to wrest terror away from being used as moral fodder for the ethics of anti-philosophy while simultaneously struggling to militate it, as in the case of Robespierre, as a *realpolitik* complement to a subject's subtractive fidelity – its virtue – to an event. Terror continuously re-emerges as an ambivalent and inconsistently articulated concept in Badiou's lexicon of the truth procedure, and so if his philosophy is to be comprehensively precise (and precisely comprehensive), as it surely wants to be, about when an event is on the verge of engendering destruction or subtraction, it is through the conceptual prism (prison?) of terror that it must unavoidably pass.

Badiou and Dialectics

As it turns out, defending the philosophical dignity of the concept of truth(s), and so too of the concept of terror, thus calls, *contra* Heidegger and Nietzsche, for “a violent *forgetting of the history of philosophy*” (*Conditions* 5; italics in original)³⁰. Badiou is quick to qualify this statement by insisting that “this imperative to forget is a matter of method and of course not at all

³⁰ I think we are dealing here with yet another pseudo-couple (though admittedly its importance to Badiou's overall philosophy is not very significant): forgetting/remembering. Forgetting, as Badiou knows, precedes the phenomenon of remembering, and so his call to “forget history” is operative as a requisite step to *remembering* the dignity of philosophy, to re-memorializing it, as it were, in its service to truth(s).

of ignorance of this history. Forget history: this means, above all, making *decisions of thought* without turning back towards a presupposed historical meaning that has been set for these decisions. It is a matter of breaking with historicism so that we may endeavour, like a Descartes or a Spinoza, to produce an autonomous legitimation of discourse” (5; italics in original). The implications of this proposal for the contemporary intellectual culture of post-Heideggerian (post-disaster) philosophy, which would include, according to Badiou’s polemical reading of the anti-philosophers, the work of Adorno, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Blanchot, and Agamben, should be clear enough: subscribing to a theoretical disposition that demonizes disaster by presenting its multiple avatars (Auschwitz, Soviet gulags, Mao’s labour camps, etc.) as limits that thinking must not risk crossing if it is to preserve its ethical integrity (understood through the Levinasian language of not violently treading over the alterity of the other) is equivalent to espousing the philosophical destruction of *thinking* as such. The line that Badiou is trying to walk is fine indeed. What he is in search of is a method of thinking that is immune from entanglement in the dialectical contradiction of disaster and truth, but that simultaneously retains the right to unabashedly affirm the philosophical integrity of the concepts that comprise the generic truth procedures. Terror, insofar as it operates as an “imperative without concept”, is inseparable from the dialectical contradiction that Badiou’s philosophical method of thinking cannot strictly speaking embrace without in turn giving up on the intellectual principle of the formation and affirmation of concepts of universality (*Conditions* 261). The consequence of refusing to call terror a concept and to enter into the dialectical quagmire of its inherent contradiction with the ethics of forcing the existence of truths, however, is that this time it is the category of the *concept* as such that seriously risks getting stripped of the right to confer onto particular discursive sequences the philosophical prestige of universality. The escape mechanism built into Badiou’s philosophical system is that philosophy is not responsible for either producing or implementing truth procedures, and so as long as philosophy respects the limits that distinguish its discursive space from the space of the four generic conditions of truths, both terror and disaster do not need to be integrated into the philosophical matrix of what Badiou comes to label as the materialist dialectics of his methodology of thinking; rather, it is sufficient that terror and disaster are axiomatically excluded from the philosophical narrative of the truth procedure to be similarly excluded from the singular philosophical act of thinking in the language of concepts. Terror persists as either a Thermidorian image of philosophical unintelligibility, or it is held up

through the cultural hegemony of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and the ethics of poststructuralist discourse as a reminder to philosophy not to push the Hegelian agenda of universal thinking too far lest philosophy itself devolve into a subject of disaster (which in any case is the ironic consequence of Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian thinking as it dogmatically denies the existence of truths beyond the fictive context of their hermeneutical recovery). Either way, the “in itself” of terror never quite ascends into the dignified ranks of concepts worthy of philosophical reflection. Terror, according to the implications of Badiou’s analysis, delineates a set of experiences and languages that the discourse of philosophical thinking has no business trying to render intelligible as anything other than the very paragon of the unthinkable and the essential ingredient of disaster, and this in spite of his persistent attempt at trying to account for terror as it stubbornly inheres in the generic conditions of truths.

Badiou is indeed hesitant to subject either the concept or phenomenon of terror to philosophical analysis. Its only significance, so it seems, is as an invention of Thermidor, an ingredient of disaster and evil, or a complement to revolutionary virtue. However, his appraisal of terror also involves a refusal to endorse the philosophical methodology whereby a political sequence is identified through the perspective and ideological investment of what proceeds from its termination. As he elaborates on his disdain for the contemporary vogue of chastising the revolutionary discourse of terror in line with the resigned politics of Thermidor, Badiou inevitably faces the larger problem of alternatively deciding on an appropriate philosophical methodology that would protect sequences like the revolutionary terror from being obscured by their historiographical conflagration. Perhaps an analysis of terror can only proceed *after* an appropriate methodology has been constructed that is able to think terror as a concept independently of virtue and disaster, and so Badiou’s inability or unwillingness to do so consistently is really just an instance of the cart being put before the horse. Unfortunately, Badiou does not provide a positive definition of what such a methodology would look like, but what he does provide is a negative assessment of why the philosophical logic of dialectical synthesis is at once intellectually dissatisfying and methodologically inappropriate insofar as it is an extension of the political ideology of a distinctively Thermidorian historiographical representation of terror. “Against the notion of dialectical synthesis,” he writes, “it is necessary to invoke here Sylvain Lazarus’ thesis that a political sequence should be identified and thought on its own terms, as a homogeneous singularity, and not in terms of the heterogeneous nature of

its empirical future. Specifically, a political sequence does not terminate or come to an end because of external causes, or contradictions between its being and the methodology of its becoming, but rather through the strictly immanent effect of its capacities encountering the limit of their exhaustion. It is precisely this exhaustion that Saint-Just refers to when he notes that: ‘the Revolution is frozen’” (127). Because Badiou consistently styles his philosophical project as a commitment to the rare existence of singular truths at the discursive sites of politics, art, science, and love, we are firmly within our rights as secondary readers of his work to ask how he intends to seize philosophically on truths that are “frozen” in the materialist and conceptual indeterminacy of their evental becoming, particularly if some of the truths that he recognizes most enthusiastically are mired in terror. Moreover, if his philosophical interpretation of events and the ontological schematization of their generic becoming eschew the analytical resources of a dialectics of mediation and sublation, then what form of philosophical methodology does Badiou propose as a more finely tuned substitute for representing the evental narrative of subtractive ruptures? The mathematical ontology developed in the course of *Being and Event* will seemingly not suffice for the simple reason that it is axiomatically detached from presiding over pre-evental worlds and the networks of relation that give them their phenomenological complexity and situational consistency. So again, what is the alternative philosophical methodology that Badiou proposes as a way to accommodate the ways in which particular discourses and sequences think the conditions of their own immanent reality? If we can distil a philosophical methodology of thinking from Badiou’s later work that was not available during his earlier discussions of terror, then perhaps it will be possible to return to these discussions and think the concept of terror from a more refined philosophical perspective.

Badiou’s Revised Philosophical Methodology in Logics of Worlds

Without a doubt the most relevant place to look for an answer to this question is Badiou’s third *magnum opus* and sequel to *Being and Event*³¹, *Logics of Worlds*, where he gives a

³¹ On the question of methodology, *Being and Event* would lead us, and rightly, to believe that the ontological insights of Cantorian set theory have been firmly adopted by Badiou as his primary methodological matrix. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to look more closely at how his methodological paradigm is structured according to this particular type of mathematics.

somewhat surprising definition of the methodology animating the discursive structure of his philosophy to date: “Philosophy, in its very essence, elaborates the means of saying ‘Yes!’ to the previously unknown thoughts that hesitate to become the truths that they are. [...] After much hesitation, I have decided to name *materialist dialectic* the ideological atmosphere in which my philosophical undertaking gives vent to its most extreme tension” (3). Badiou’s inversion of the more familiar term, dialectical materialism, accomplishes more than just a side-stepping of the ideological and political baggage that this term undoubtedly carries with it. After all, was Louis Althusser not “among the last nobly to make use of the phrase ‘dialectical materialism’, not without some misgiving?” (3). Badiou’s revival of the methodological virtues of dialectical thinking must then defend itself against complicity with what has otherwise unfolded as an historically false conceptual paradigm of a philosophical mediation with the world. If it can do so then we may just have a methodological framework dexterous enough to manage a concept like terror, otherwise we will have to look elsewhere than the philosophy of Badiou in order for this to be done.

As Badiou makes clear, the version of dialectics that he wishes to adopt is resistant to the dominant trend in readings of Hegel that subordinate the hermeneutical incorrigibility of negativity – negativity *qua* event as vanishing mediator of worlds – to the classical dialectical matrix of mediation, synthesis, and sublation. Indeed, the Hegelian influence on Badiou’s latest philosophical development cannot be ignored: “Let’s agree that by ‘dialectic’, following Hegel, we are to understand that the essence of all difference is the third term that marks the gap between the two others. It is then legitimate to counter democratic materialism [the cultural ideology of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and poststructuralism] – this sovereignty of the Two (bodies and languages) – with a materialist dialectic, if by ‘materialist dialectic’ we understand the following statement, in which the Three supplements the reality of the Two: *There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.*” (4; italics in original). Badiou pays close attention to the syntax of this sentence, where the “except that” clause is traceable to the influence of Mallarmé’s “Throw of the Dice” and *Monologue of a Faun* on Badiou’s understanding of the instability and potentiality (for subtractive truths) embedded in a given situation. The worlds that we inhabit ontologically and historically undeniably consist of the finitude of bodies and languages, concedes Badiou, and this general network of relation can simply be referred to as *what there is* of embodied existence. Truths, however, are neither

supplements to “what there is” (which would subject Badiou’s event to a categorical equivalence with theological miracles), nor do they interrupt the phenomenological ordering of situations as a more perfectly conceived synthesis between bodies and language, i.e. “truths as the self-revelation of bodies seized by languages” (4). The dialectical emphasis of Badiou’s latest logical apparatus is placed on the affirmation of a negativity that at once *exceeds* bodies and languages and that also exposes the immanent restlessness of their diverse ontological distribution amidst the possibility of being realigned in the retroactive aftermath of the appearance of an event. The syntactical violence that this formula – *except that there are truths* – performs on “what there is” expresses two things: 1) Badiou’s newly piqued interest in the pre-evental phenomenology worlds; 2) that there is a difference between the real violence perpetrated by discourses of destruction, on the one hand, and the messianic violence that is implicit in the subtractive creativity and patience of evental interruptions, on the other. This depiction of the syntagmatic violence of truths is not the exclusive discovery of *Logics of Worlds*, but the dialectical methodology that informs its phenomenological operation is new indeed, and it just might help us negotiate the concept of terror in a way that Badiou’s philosophical apparatus prior to *Logics of Worlds* was either not able or willing to do. Focusing now on the phenomenological immanence of subtractive exception opens a space where terror might not automatically be appropriable by discourses – Thermidorian and totalitarian – that rely on it for purely utilitarian and nihilistic purposes. If this is to be the case, Badiou will need to place a sharper dialectical eye on the space between evental rupture and the fleeting immanence of its subjectivization, since it is here, in the minimal difference separating the interruption of an event and the decision (on the unnamable) to proclaim the existence of its novel presence, that the imperative of terror emanates as a symptom of the potentially catastrophic desire for the event’s horizon of truth.

Whereas *Being and Event* treated the eternal presence of the inconsistent void of situations and the post-evental logic of subjective commitment as structurally distinct categories that are nevertheless contiguous within the larger paradigm of the ontology of the event, *Logics of Worlds*, in pursuing a dialectical perspective on how the appearance of a world can be said to undergo a radical interruption of its mode of appearing, aims to bridge these categories more explicitly and systematize their interdependency within a greater, still oddly Platonic, intra-worldly phenomenology of subtraction. “I give the name ‘truths’”, writes Badiou, “to real processes which, as subtracted as they may be from the pragmatic opposition of bodies and

languages, are nonetheless in the world. I insist, since this is the very problem that this book [*Logics of Worlds*] is concerned with: truths not only *are*, they *appear*. It is here and now that the aleatory third term (subject-truths) supplements the two others (multiplicities and languages). The materialist dialectic is an ideology of immanence” (9-10). Badiou signals his readers to a newly discovered sympathy with thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, and Fredric Jameson³² in attempting to revise, though to a lesser degree, the contemporary reception of Hegel’s dialectical project as one merely of synthesis or supplement. For Badiou’s part, the revival of Hegel’s dialectic is used to better frame the immanent splitting of a world without either obscuring or sublating the line of indiscernibility and indecision within which the becoming-universal of its post-evental reality is played out. Dialectics thus infuses Badiou’s innovative phenomenology of worlds with the language and the logic it requires in order to map out the topography of indiscernibility wherein the elements that comprise a world are displaced under the post-evental gaze of a newly imposed logic of appearance. *Logics of Worlds* thus tries to be dialectical by performing “an immanent grasp of the parameters of being-there, a local survey of the figures of the true and of the subject, and not a deductive analytic [cf. *Being and Event*] of the forms of being” (8). To perform an “immanent grasp” or a “local survey” of truths and subjects amidst the being-there of their worlds entails that Badiou’s philosophy must not remain content with the orderly and static realm of sets and situations (however infinitely multiple is their being), but instead summon the resources that will allow it to take residence in the far more dynamic and relational world of the materialist intensity of phenomenological appearances and ideological fictions. Although Badiou does not explicitly draw the connection between his renewal of a Hegelian dialectic and the problematic of how and where to inscribe terror at the centre of the historical sequence that begins with revolution (Robespierre) and ends in restoration (Thermidor), nevertheless the formal properties of the materialist dialectic open the door for us to think terror in a way that Badiou himself does not seem to permit in the context of his earlier writings. Returning to our focus on Beckett’s prose, there appears to be in *Logics of Worlds* the possibility of thinking, thanks largely to a renewed interest in dialectics, about how a “world” that begins in one condition possesses immanently the materialist traces that would

³² Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. Trans. Jason Smith and Jason Miller. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002; Fredric Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectics*. London: Verso, 2010; and Slavoj Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, 2013.

explain its transformation into another condition entirely, such that the passage from one world to another is susceptible to the hermeneutical interrogation of what in the immanence of a world's prior existence permits it to exist – to appear – strikingly anew. Surely it is not a hermeneutics of immanence that Badiou intends to inscribe by reviving dialectics and devising a phenomenology of appearance that is in sync with his ontology of the event, yet by invoking dialectics in the first place he cannot prevent the preceding consequence from being drawn out of the text of *Logics of Worlds*. Hermeneutics might be salvageable after all.

Let us not lose sight of what we are trying to identify at this early stage of our analysis of terror, particularly as it relates to a reading of Beckett's immediate post-war prose: the critical and theoretical resources requisite for translating terror as an "imperative without concept" into the language and *logos* of a workable theory of literature and philosophical representation. Badiou's appropriation of a dialectical vocabulary and methodology operates as a possible site where such resources can be excavated, even and especially as the multiple encounters in his work with trying to think the concept of terror has resulted in terror being distributed across several discursive registers. If we follow Blanchot's diagnosis of the impression that terror has left on the history of modernity and culture, then Badiou's confrontation with terror at multiple discursive sites is precisely what exposes the interdisciplinary scope of its contemporary significance. This is Blanchot's point (and we will be returning to the context and implications of this idea in the next chapter): "The Terror, as we well know, was terrible not only because of its executions, but because it proclaimed itself in this capital form, it making terror the measure of history and the *logos* of the modern era. The scaffold, the enemies of the people who were presented to the people, the heads that fell uniquely so they could be shown, the evidency (the grandiloquence) of a death that is null – these constitute not historical facts but a new language: *all of this speaks and has remained speaking*" (*Infinite Conversation* 355; my emphasis). Badiou's encounter with terror at multiple discursive sites (notwithstanding his inability or refusal to disambiguate the language and *logos* of terror that the Terror was the first historical sequence to announce), in other words, is unavoidable and is part and parcel of what makes his encounter with terror so productive and illuminating. However, without simply conceding that terror is an irrevocably particular phenomenon that cannot be subsumed under a conceptual constellation that would be responsive to the language and *logos* that it singularly expresses, we are obliged to ensure that all possibilities to the contrary have been exhausted. Because it is with

Badiou that we have started, it is likewise with Badiou that we must continue if we are to arrive at alternative bodies of work more amenable to identifying a conceptual constellation of terror. Even if what we eventually discover are the resources for a negative point of commencement into the conceptual accessibility of terror, Badiou is nevertheless a highly productive thinker simply by confronting the concept and phenomenon of terror in several of its seemingly impenetrable guises. Again, let us keep this in mind as we return to Badiou's methodological discoveries in the philosophical history of dialectics, particularly as Blanchot too is dependent on Hegel's (and Sade's) encounter with terror for constructing a theory of literature in the influential essay "Literature and the Right to Death", which will be instrumental to our continuing analysis of terror in the next chapter.

When Badiou finally gets around to engaging directly with Hegel, he notes the apparent contradiction between their respective points of departure:

One could argue that whereas we launch a transcendental theory of worlds by saying 'There is no Whole', Hegel guarantees the inception of the dialectical odyssey by positing that 'There is nothing but the Whole'. It is immensely interesting to examine the consequences of an axiom so radically opposed to the inaugural axiom of this book [*Logics of Worlds*]. But this interest cannot reside in a simple extrinsic comparison, or in a comparison of results. What is decisive is following the Hegelian idea in its movement, that is at the very moment in which it governs the method of thinking. This alone will allow us, in the name of the materialist dialectic, to do justice to our father: the master of the 'idealist' dialectic (141).

Although Badiou and Hegel disagree on the subject of a transcendental theory of the consistency of worlds, they nevertheless agree on one point that is of prime significance to each of their systems. What they agree on is the inestimable value of the *movement* of the dialectic, which "governs the method of thinking" (irrespective of either its materialist or idealist orientation). The movement of the dialectic is indeed integral to Badiou's insistence regarding the materialist substratum "of the plurality of eternal truths" (141) and to Hegel's belief in the infinitely dynamic non-contradiction of the part and the whole. Distilling the gestures and rhythms of this movement into a workable methodology of thinking is of utmost interest to our investigation into how best to disseminate the heterogeneity of the concept and phenomenon of terror, which as a dialectical variable in Badiou's philosophical apparatus can begin to mediate on behalf of either subtraction or destruction (141). Before Badiou can develop the resources for approaching terror as a political and/or philosophical site of dialectical mediation, in other words, philosophy itself must be subjected to the conditions whereby it similarly grasps *itself* in mediating the act of

thinking the concept of terror (which perhaps unavoidably precipitates the “terrorist demand” of the imperative of writing to which Blanchot and Beckett subscribe). Certainly philosophy remains conditioned by the four discourses of truths – political, scientific, artistic, and amorous – but in order to think these generic conditions without ceasing the “dialectical odyssey” and becoming sutured to their dogmatic slogans and discoveries, philosophy must conduct a rigorous self-assessment and decide to what extent it is able not to relent on enabling the subtractive negativity of truths to be in dialectical conversation with the destructive negativity of disasters. If the intellectual history of the twentieth century has taught us anything it is that losing contact with the phenomenon of disaster is the quickest way to substituting disaster for discourses of subtractive novelty. Because the terms of this dialectical relation – subtraction and destruction – are more closely aligned to one another through their shared complicity in a logic of negativity, it is more suitable to refer to the structure of their relation as a pseudo-couple rather than a contradiction. Saying this is, of course, a dialectical strategy of representing apparently contradictory positions as transitional moments *en route* to a higher order structure of co-determining reciprocity and increasingly rational development, but given that Badiou consistently refers to both subtraction and destruction as variations of the logic of negativity, we can be safe in supposing that the dialectical strategy invoked above is not being too violently administered. Its benefit, more importantly, is that it opens the door to subjecting all of the concepts and phenomena that Badiou associates with destruction and subtraction to a similar representation of their non-contradictory relation in what otherwise only *appears* as a relation of contradiction.

Contradictions thus turn out to be pseudo-contradictions, the kind of pseudo-couples that Beckett uses to keep his protagonists and narrative voices in states of ambiguous and oftentimes violently unstable co-dependence with each other. By working at the level of Badiou’s methodological encounter with dialectics, we are able to subsequently work backwards into redistributing the terms that circulate the conceptual economy of Badiou’s philosophical apparatus. Consequently, in those places where the contingent rupture induced by an openness to an event was used to mediate between two separately constituted logics of worlds, the fictional reign of terror permeating *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, on the one hand, and the reign of happiness and love that connects *How It Is* with *Worstward Ho*, on the other, for instance, reading Badiou’s dialectics against its intended grain raises the intriguing prospect of eliding this

subtractive separation, this eventual rupture in Beckett's orientation in literature and fiction, and questioning whether or not what we were initially dealing with in the ending with *Texts for Nothing* and the beginning with *How It Is* was in fact two distinct logics of fictional worlds. The implications of this consequence on our analysis of terror in Beckett's prose, as we have just suggested, would be that terror persists into and across the impasse of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, and so it would be the imperative of this persistence that makes *How It Is* a part of what we might begin to understand as Beckett's lasting encounter with a literature of terror. But how is this argument to be made even more convincingly in view of what Badiou has rendered possible through his engagement with dialectics?

When we look closely at Badiou's self-assessment of the implications of his axiomatic inversion of the Hegelian conceptualization of universality, the "ideology of immanence" that he invoked previously (*Logics of Worlds* 10) is conspicuously absent from the materialist dialectical method that results throughout the course of *Logics of Worlds*. Immanence becomes in this later section a moment solely of the Hegelian dialectics of thinking, or more pejoratively stated, of the Hegelian dialectics of the thought of the Whole. Badiou insists that "the Hegelian challenge can be summed up in three principles": a) "the only truth is that of the Whole"; b) "the Whole is a self-unfolding, and not an absolute-unity external to the subject"; and c) "the Whole is the immanent arrival of its own concept" (142). It is odd that the problem of immanence is ascribed to the Hegelian dialectic, whereas previously it was Badiou's materialist dialectic that acquired the notion of immanence as its privileged phenomenological sphere of articulation. Is the event not also the "immanent arrival of its own concept"? Or are we once again being subjected to a simple inversion of the Hegelian problematic, in which case Badiou will substitute the thesis of the non-Whole with the Whole of Hegel's dialectic? If so, however, does Badiou's dialectical materialism not risk becoming formally indistinct from the Hegelian image it has of its idealist counterpart? Or is Badiou's identification with Hegel a strategy for masking the non-dialectical analytic of events, subjects, and worlds that *Logics of Worlds* proposes to mediate?

In his outline of the "Hegelian challenge" Badiou implicitly alludes to the affinity with disaster that the Hegelian Whole approaches as it charts the movements whereby substance becomes subject, the unnameable is named. Hegelian dialectics is on a slippery slope towards disaster at the point where it expresses fidelity to the punctual and presentist arrival of the plenitude of truth, but this does not mean that it does not continue to exemplify the kind of

movement of thinking that is productive for exposing the truth of the non-Whole of the event. The dialectical method that Badiou is after is one that remains dialectical, and thus adept at thinking logics of relation, at the same time that it does not endorse the *telos* of dialectical mediation and synthesis. Once again it is by way of an inverted comparison with the implicit dangers of his own philosophical endeavour that Badiou attempts to capture what is both troubling and commendable within the Hegelian dialectic: “If the challenge for us is not to slip into relativism (since there are truths), for Hegel, since truth is the Whole, it is not to slip either into the (subjective) mysticism of the One or into the (objective) dogmatism of Substance” (141-142). Presumably, where Hegel is at greatest risk of lapsing into mysticism or dogmatism, and Badiou acknowledges Hegel’s recognition of these dangers, quoting him on how to avoid them *via* the failures to do so, respectively, of Schelling and Spinoza, is in the inherent temptation of any method of thinking to cease its operation and begin valorizing the definitive conclusion of either its success or failure. This is the signature of the disaster of thinking. The value of Hegel is that the movement of his dialectical mode of thinking is salvageable from its potentially nihilistic and totalitarian results: “Consequently, what displays the Whole within thought is nothing other than the path of thinking, that is its method. Hegel is the methodical thinker of the Whole” (142). Paradoxically, then, for the Whole to consist in the “immanent arrival of its own concept” and for Hegel to simultaneously remain “the methodical”, as opposed to dogmatic or mystical, “thinker of the Whole”, it is imperative, in part also for guaranteeing the ontological exquisiteness of the being of the Whole, that the conceptual arc of its self-actualization – the immanent arrival of its own concept – never punctually or squarely arrive at its destination: the flaw in the dialectic is the mark of its beauty. Badiou’s discovery is that because the third term of mediation for his materialist dialectic – subject-truths – is set into motion according to the local contingencies of an intra-wordly evental procedure, there is no way of formalizing how the Whole will become actual other than in the idealist world of the phenomenology of its appearance. Truths are irreducibly singular and immanent to the situations in which they arrive and are announced by the subjects of their poetic fictionalization. Again, this is odd. Does Badiou’s materialist dialectic not preclude him from predicating the *ontological* existence of an event on the basis of the *phenomenological* representation of its appearance? Has “the ideology of immanence” been sacrificed to the transcendental arrival of an event, which would entail presupposing *apriori* that an event has taken place and that its contingent consequences are

philosophically enumerable? There seems to be little space in Badiou's ontological schema of the event for deploying the phenomenological "movement of the dialectic" and continuing vigilantly along with the "dialectical odyssey" of thinking. In spite of his most valiant attempts at reinvigorating his ontology of the event with a phenomenological sensitivity to the appearance of the worlds against which events intervene and retroactively reorganize, Badiou does not manage to evade the viewpoint that holds two worlds mediated by an event in contradictory relation to their respective logics of appearance. The speculative conclusion from this, paradoxically, is that Badiou's reading of Beckett's *oeuvre*, which interprets it as divided around the impasse of terror, is still valid in light of this failed phenomenological supplement of the logic of worlds. For all of the dialectical innovations that Badiou has made to understanding the ontological matrix of events and their articulation in the phenomenological relationality of pre- and post-evental worlds, there remains the problem of accounting for those concepts and phenomena – terror in particular – that do not lend themselves to being easily subsumed under the logical aegis of radical subtraction and aleatory evental separation.

As Badiou articulates his disagreement with Hegel, it is worth paying attention to the conspicuous betrayal of immanence, which is reserved almost exclusively for the Hegelian dialectical synthesis of the thought of the Whole. Badiou presents the juxtaposition of two logical sequences predicated contradictorily on the axioms of the Whole (Hegel) and the non-Whole (Badiou): Hegel outlines "what we could call the triple of the Whole: the immediate, or the-thing-according-to-its-being; mediation, or the-thing-according-to-its-essence; the overcoming of mediation, or the-thing-according-to-its-concept. Or again: the beginning (the Whole as the pure edge of thought), patience (the negative labour of internalization), the result (the Whole in and for itself)" (144). Badiou is absolutely correct to highlight the patience of negativity in the role of mediating the poles of the dialectic, but he needs to go one step further and, through a closer reading of the more youthful *Phenomenology of Spirit*, concede that the dialectical Whole is entirely contained within the movement of the intervallic space of the negative. Instead, Badiou immediately, and without venturing into a self-reflexive critique of his reading of Hegel, formulates for us his opposing dialectical construction of the truth procedure: "The triple of the non-Whole, which we advocate, is as follows: indifferent multiplicities, or ontological unbinding; worlds of appearing, or the logical link; truth-procedures, or subjective eternity" (144). In other words, while Badiou is busy demonstrating his diametrical opposition,

point by point, to the stages of the Hegelian dialectic, while continuing to share “with Hegel a conviction about the identity of being and thought”, he loses almost entirely the core component of what makes Hegel’s phenomenological rehearsal of the dialectic so astoundingly resilient to the catastrophic arrival in the materialist and metaphysical present of the concept of the Whole. Badiou aptly recognizes that “the Whole is this history of its immanent reflection”, but somewhat tellingly he misunderstands, or does not even bother to consider, how the temporality of this particular form of “history” might be made to operate in the Hegelian context (144). Mediation and patience are not as easily sublated in the supposedly completed history of the concept of the Whole as Badiou would like to suggest, and so what remains to be done, according to a less Kojévian reading of Hegel’s dialectic, is to circle back to the point of immanence and re-assess where the totalizing arc of conceptual mediation inevitably, *by definition*, goes awry. The consequence of all this for the struggle to think the concept and phenomenon of terror is that perhaps Badiou has inadvertently misdirected the *logos* of terror away from its dialogical ally in the negative dialectics of Hegel and relocated it in a philosophical universe (his own) where the contradiction between disaster and truth, the imperative and concept of terror, is either hastily resolved, to cite Badiou again, as “yet more grist to the mill of the feeble moralizing that typifies the contemporary critique of absolute politics”, or sidelined as a non-philosophical site of impossible intelligibility that has already been thoroughly monopolized by the intellectual legacy of Thermidor (*The Century* 53).

For all of the algebraic complexity and theoretical nuance that Badiou summons in order to demonstrate how the immanent becoming of an event retroactively alters the transcendental order of the world in which the event intensifies the degree of its appearance (from minimal to maximal intensity of restlessness and interruption), the dialectical method that accounts for the philosophical seizure of this process is perhaps too eager to invest its energy of reflection in an evental interruption that always already has taken place in the retroactive present of its transcendental consequences. Put simply, although Badiou has widened the philosophical net used for confirming the existence of evental sequences, supplementing set theory with various models of algebraic geometry (topos and sheaf theory) in order to include within his philosophy the phenomenological ordering of worlds prior to (and after) their interruption by an event, his dialectical method nevertheless remains abstractly detached from the materialist world where subjects and ideas are enmeshed in overcoming the lived contradictions that over-determine the

structures (ideological and ontological) of their existence. Badiou's dialectics turns out to be not all that dialectical after all, ultimately disregarding immanent matrices of relation in favour of transcendental structures of appearance. Badiou has perceptibly diagnosed the contradiction at the heart of terror as an imperative without concept, but it is not entirely convincing that the philosophical strategies Badiou provides are able to think this contradiction *immanently* without the fail-safe of an eventual interruption on the horizon: Badiou is therefore not exempt from confirming the metaphysical misrecognition of immanence that in this dissertation's introduction was diagnosed so succinctly by Deleuze and Guattari, *viz.* "that immanence is a prison (solipsism) from which the Transcendent will save us" (*What is Philosophy?* 47)

In characteristically concise fashion Peter Hallward concludes that "it is precisely in order to compensate for the consequences of his enthusiastically simple if not simplistic conceptions of being (without beings), of appearing (without perception), of relation (without relation), of change (without history), of decision (without alternatives), of exception (without mediation), that Badiou must develop such an elaborate and laborious theory of logical worlds" ("Order and Event" 120). If Hallward's criticism is on target, and unfortunately it is, then we are certainly correct in pursuing a re-appraisal of exactly what style of dialectical thinking Badiou has ended up adopting in trying to work through the philosophical complexity of the pseudo-couples that his project proposes. As we will remember, Badiou is suspicious of deploying the critical methodology of dialectical synthesis for judging the historical and political identity of revolutionary terror, contending that to do so is to consolidate the historiographical hegemony of Thermidor and its commitment to non-philosophical modes of thinking. Insofar as Badiou's own dialectical method does not provide a convincing alternative for thinking the immanent *logos* of terror, we are left wondering how the conceptual and phenomenological problematic of terror is to be posed and interrogated. This returns us to why Badiou is being invoked in the first place, namely because he is one of the few thinkers in whose work terror is, even if only implicitly, an abiding threat and concern. Badiou does not always have the best answers, but he does give new and exciting expression to questions that have been far from resolved.

One final remark on the question of dialectical method. A standard criticism of Badiou's philosophical project is that the narrative of the truth procedure is conspicuously expert at coercing its predictions to come true, particularly when Badiou reads works of art and literature through his patented philosophical lens. Jean-Jacques Lecercle distils this criticism

most pointedly: “Badiou’s reading method always yields the same result, whatever the poem or literary text he reads: that it finds what it wanted to find, namely the event and its naming, at the cost of ‘bending’ the text to its demonstration” (137). The problem, however, as we have already seen, goes deeper than just the charge that Badiou is an interpretive opportunist. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson outlines three distinct ways that the dialectic has been used since its Hegelian inception, relying on his signature tropes of synchronicity and diachronicity to illustrate the first two. He writes: “The first of these directions involves reflexivity, or thinking itself: perhaps it can be described as a relatively synchronic form of the dialectic. The second raises problems of causality and historical narrative and explanation (and is thus more diachronic). Hegel and Marx are the obvious places in which these first two aspects of the dialectic are the most richly expressed” (280). Part of Badiou’s philosophical ingenuity, it seems to me, is to have integrated the second of these “directions” into a materialist reconstruction of the first. For instance, Badiou endorses “with Hegel a conviction about the identity of being and thought. But for us this identity is a local occurrence and not a totalized result” (*Logics* 143). Badiou’s hybridization of these two dialectical directions thus enables for the paradoxical insistence that philosophy is singularly responsive to the universality of truths, but is not sutured to any one truth procedure as its condition of legitimacy (this is the job of militant subjects embedded in the immanence of events). Badiou can tell us *how* truths will logically unfold once their existence has been faithfully announced, but not *that* they will unfold in any particular way for a particular context; truths are universal, yet contingent. The limitation of Badiou’s hybrid dialectical method, however, is that it loses the interpretive and conceptual dexterity that a more loosely controlled style of dialectical analysis would otherwise possess. Jameson’s description of the third “direction” can be seen as supplementing, though of course this was not his intention in *Valences of the Dialectic*, the interpretive rigidity of Badiou’s handling of certain concepts – i.e. terror – as well as certain literary texts – i.e. Beckett’s. Jameson derives the lesson of this third direction of the dialectic from the modernist theatre of Bertolt Brecht:

The third feature or aspect of dialectical thinking does not seem to offer a model (as these first two might seem to do), as rather to isolate the fundamental feature of the operation itself: this is, indeed, the emphasis on contradiction as such, and we may honor Brecht for his insistence on this requirement, and for his lesson in a great variety of contexts and forms, that dialectical thinking begins with contradiction at the heart of things and seeing and reconstructing them in terms of contradictions, or (if you prefer) that the various forms of non-dialectical thinking can always be identified as so many strategies for containing, repressing,

or naturalizing contradictions as such. This is a less exclusive formula than the first two, and (while not exactly a method) perhaps offers the most practical hints for the applications and identification of the dialectic alike (280-281).

Badiou betrays his understanding of Hegel as primarily a philosopher of idealism when he endorses the idea that the movement of the dialectic determines *a priori* (tautologically?) the “method of thinking” (141). What Jameson is trying to say in the excerpt above is that there is no method of thinking *as such*, but that indeed there are consciously responsive dispositions of thinking that react to contradictions either dialectically or non-dialectically (which is not necessarily to say *anti*-dialectically). Regardless of the term we wish to confer onto the style of thinking Jameson is trying to advance, the important thing to focus on is the priority of contradictions as catalysts of thinking. To begin and end in the immanence of contradiction is difficult to do, and it is something that the philosophical mode of thinking from Hegel to Badiou has not always been able to manage successfully. Badiou is arguably not an exception here. As we consider more carefully the question of *where* and *when* thinking commences and *how* and *why* it proceeds in a particular way, we could certainly do worse than take a page out of the Jamesonian playbook and draw on the aesthetic example of modernist literature and art for access into a more advanced style of thinking under the philosophically unbearable influence of *imperatives without concepts*. As we are about to see, Badiou does not want to vigilantly think the dialectical immanence of terror lest his philosophical subjectivity get trapped in the same ineluctable condition as the narrative voices of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*.

Beckett’s Cartesian Terrorism

Writing prior to Badiou’s publication of *Logics of Worlds*, Andrew Gibson argues that “Badiou is a profound figure partly because what we see developing throughout his work is the narrative of the closing agonistics and the final demise of Hegelianism. [...] There are no objective, dialectical, material laws to man’s struggle to master nature and organize his productive powers. Badiou pursues at least one of the consequences of the end of dialectics with the most inflexible rigour: from now on, we ‘depend on the event’” (274). Even though Gibson understandably underestimates Badiou’s investment in a dialectical logic of the being and becoming (appearing) of events, he is nevertheless right that the obverse side to Badiou’s pre-

Logics of Worlds repudiation of dialectics is that there is little room in his representation of “man’s struggle” for what Gibson, riffing on Bataille and François Proust, calls the “useless negativity” of an “unsublated world” (275). Badiou has attempted to make up for this dialectical shortcoming by orchestrating a return to a revised and philosophically up-to-date Hegelianism, one that is able to accommodate the phenomenology of worlds, which are over-determined to varying and unpredictable degrees (“intensities”) by non-evental negativities. Unlike Bruno Bosteels, who has more recently argued that grasping Badiou’s return to dialectics is primarily a question of his political investments – “which politics, in other words, condition Badiou’s renewal of the materialist dialectic?” – Gibson is on a more productive track by posing Badiou’s complicated relation with dialectics as a problem of philosophical methodology *before* it is a problem of politics (*Badiou and Politics* 17). Badiou admits as much in one of the endnotes to *Logics of Worlds*, where he orients his entire philosophical *oeuvre* around the lessons he has learned (or thinks he has learned) through his long-time encounter with the poetry of Mallarmé and the prose of Beckett: “To Mallarmé I owe a sharper understanding of what a subtractive ontology is, namely an ontology in which evental excess summons lack, so as to bring forth the Idea. I owe Beckett a comparable sharpening in my thinking of generic truth, that is the divestment, in the becoming of the True, of all the predicates and agencies of knowledge. [...] Perhaps the only goal of my philosophy is to fully understand these two stories” (548). This is not to suggest that Badiou has in some way lost the prevailing interest in politics that has otherwise been his central concern from the very beginning of his Maoist commitments. The point is rather that as Badiou confronts the need to negotiate the increasingly convoluted implications of the ontological and phenomenological relations that his philosophy is attempting to weave around the immanently exceptional knot of truth(s), it is through the discursive registers of literature and aesthetics that he derives the requisite balance of complexity and precision for giving expression not only to the “extreme tension” that surrounds their vanishing appearance, but also to the “atonic” melancholy of all those pre-evental worlds that are devoid of the appearance and intervention of truths (420). So far we have looked at the role of terror in Badiou’s struggle to think the ethics of subtraction and the nihilism of destruction that are invoked by the formal coming into existence of an event. The instant that Badiou permits terror to enter the stage of his philosophical engagement with the complex onto-phenomenology of events, however, several problems arise, which by and large reflect Badiou’s insistence on the

conceptual incomprehensibility of the unsublatable imperative of terror. However, perhaps there is an exception to this conceptual myopia when Badiou arrives at the prose of Beckett.

The destructive and ultimately unsustainable valence of terror is indeed most pronounced when the Cartesian model of philosophical subjectivity is transcribed within the solipsistic prison-house of Beckett's immediate post-war prose:

Beckett stressed that if the 'I think' comes to mark its own thinking-being, if thinking wants to grasp itself as the thinking of thought, then a reign of terror begins. [...] The 'I think' presupposes terror, which alone constrains the voice to over-extend towards itself in order to withdraw, as much as possible, towards its point of enunciation. *As with all terror, it is also given as an imperative without concept*; it imposes a repetitious insistence that does not let up and admits of no way out. This imperative, which is indifferent to all possibility, this terrorist commandment to have to maintain what cannot be, concludes *The Unnamable*: 'I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'" (*Conditions* 261; my emphasis).

Contextualized within the larger framework of Badiou's analysis of the destructive composition of disaster (the tripartite schema of terror, ecstasy, and sacrality) and its position as the negative counterpart to subtraction (terror hyphenates this pseudo-couple), his reading of the operation of terror in Beckett's *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* situates terror firmly on the side of disaster and destruction (whereas the logic of subtraction is more apparent in *How It Is*).

Beckettian terror is understood in Badiou's analysis as the operator of a disaster of thinking, particularly the type of thinking that is exemplified in modern philosophy by the work of the Cartesian cogito. Intrinsic to the Cartesian birthplace of modern philosophical subjectivity, Badiou suggests, is a complementary affinity with the self-reflexive imperative of terror. Beckett exposes this complementary relation by pushing the Cartesian mode of subjectivity to the absolute limit of its reflexive extension. If the absolute limit of the Cartesian subject is to think the selfsame subject that thinks – the act whereby thinking grasps "itself as the thinking of thought" – then the consequence of reaching this limit can be nothing less than the substitution of the transcendental "I think" with the immanence of the suicidal and terror-driven subject of solipsistic self-reflexivity.

What first enables this consequence, however, is a distinctly Beckettian devastation of the operability of conceptual mediation between the narrating voice of a textual subject and the narrative space of the fictional world of its phenomenological appearance. The arrival of terror onto the scene of Beckett's prose is not simply a spontaneous event. It is predicated on a tightly constructed "fictional apparatus" that stages the necessary conditions for witnessing "the closure

of the *cogito*" (259). Representing "the best-known part of Beckett's work", claims Badiou, "this apparatus is that of the motionless voice, of the voice that is *assigned to residence* by a body. This body is mutilated and captive, reduced to being no more than the fixed localization of the voice" (259-260; emphasis in original). *The Unnamable* reads in Badiou's interpretation as a precisely controlled experiment set on investigating the resiliency of the cogito when it is isolated not only from the world outside the confines of its hermetic perspective, but even more painfully from the *knowledge* that it has been hermetically sequestered within the finite limits of its bodily extension. Beckett gives the cogito only one avenue of escape from the inhuman conditions of its imprisonment: to capture in speech and imagination the cogito's very own primordial "point of enunciation" (260). The cruelty of this hope inheres in the naked truth that what is thus being searched for is the inaccessible enunciation of silence. Badiou is by no means the only reader to articulate this relation between silence and speech in Beckett writing, but what saves his reading from being facile is the presentation of the idea that the inaccessibility of silence by speech cannot be explained away simply as a "formal paradox, that is, from a necessity according to which the condition of being of all naming is itself unnameable" (260). Beckett exploits the literature's singular tools of signification to masterful effect by submitting this paradox of enunciation to a narrative representation of the life of the voice that must enact it. Not only does Beckett frame the conditions of a passive existence in language that is forced to submit to its own incessant demand to be revealed as a being *outside* speech and language, but the voice of the unnamable is simultaneously obliged to be the active subject for ensuring that the only existence inhabitable is irreducibly inscribed *inside* speech and language as well. However, if these were the only two orientations available to the voice of the unnameable, we would indeed be dealing with little more than a formal paradox, which Badiou believes is what explains the limitation to Beckett's cinematic work in *Film* – the exclusive focus on the object/eye pseudo-couple. With *The Unnamable*, on the other hand, "we start to see that the situation of the cogito is far more complex" (260).

Having the solipsistic voice of the Beckettian cogito confront the impasse of silence does not automatically divest this cogito of its power to speak and think and therefore also divest it of the horizon of its power to exist as the subject of a narrative world. Only where Beckett subjects the voice to the imperative of bombarding this impasse again and again with the demand for its transcendence does a "reign of terror" commence. As the voice of the unnamable is self-

inundated by an “insistence without hope” that drives it to violently and relentlessly penetrate “the silent being of all speech” (260), it becomes increasingly apparent that the unnameable is only present in the “fictional apparatus” of *The Unnamable* so that the “terrorist commandment” of the cogito can be given an outlet of expression (261). By uncovering the unspeakable and perhaps unthinkable presupposition of the solipsistic voice of the cogito, namely the presupposition of terror as an “imperative without concept” (261) and as an “insistence without hope” (260), Badiou believes to have discovered the underlying cause for “the truth of a situation, namely Beckett’s at the end of the 1950s: what he had written until this point could not *go on any further*” (263-264; italics in original). The conclusion Badiou draws from witnessing in *The Unnamable* the intolerable existence of a cogito locked into the repetition of its failure to seize the silence on which its existence is tragically predicated is that if literature cannot rise above this predicament of immanence (thinking in the immanence of thought) then it too is ineluctably driven to disaster by submitting its existence to the tyrannical weight of imperatives without concepts. Because Beckett’s orientation of thought is enthralled to a repetition of terror, his writing is precluded from breaking with this repetition and chancing upon the shores of subtraction and truth. The terror that we find operative in Beckett is the terror of disaster and destruction, and so it is a terror that will need to be surpassed if Beckett’s writing is not to suffer the same impossible fate as the unnameable. What Beckett’s writing sorely needs to do, Badiou suggests, is to be introduced to the aleatory world of the “hazardous supplement”, precisely the kind of supplement that Badiou locates in Mallarmé and that “interrupts repetition” (123). Fortunately for Beckett, Badiou posits, with *How It Is*, the text that signalled his return to prose after the impasse of *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, his writing began to demonstrate the ability to “set out from entirely different categories, namely, that of the ‘what happens’ (which was present in his work from the beginning but is reworked here), and that, above all, of alterity, of the encounter, of the figure of the Other, which fissures and displaces solipsistic imprisonment” (264). The secret behind the rejuvenation of Beckett’s work in prose thus turns out to be its rupture with the imperative-without-concept of terror. This conclusion is spurious. Nevertheless, Badiou’s reading of Beckett opens a provocative avenue through which to pursue the problem of the thinkability (or not) of terror in the immanence of the space of literature, and so it is through this opening, and particularly through its expansion in the work of Blanchot, that we will continue to travel.

Chapter 2

Maurice Blanchot and the Fragmentary Imperative of Terror

It is the duty of the revolution to encourage its adversaries: works of art.

(Jean Genet)

The thesis that this chapter advances can be stated very simply: the literature of modernity is constitutively responsive to the fragmentary imperative of terror. In the previous chapter we saw that, for Badiou, the imperative of terror is antagonistic to its sustained implementation within the space of literature (and also within the spaces of the philosophical and the political). Maurice Blanchot, on the other hand, harbours no such reservations concerning literature's constitutive accessibility to exigencies of terror. In order to better understand the consequences and to reverse the negative judgment over what Badiou dismissively explicates as the "insistence without hope" and the "imperative without concept" that terror imposes on acts of literature and philosophy, the inquiry this chapter undertakes consists in articulating what it calls the *fragmentary imperative of terror* as a conceptual antidote to Badiou's literary and philosophical devaluation of terror. It does this by following Blanchot through those places in his work not only where he approaches a definition of fragmentary speech and writing, but also where he traces the lines of transmission that led from the political discourse surrounding the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, this most singular and radical of historical and discursive beginnings, to its aesthetic appropriation in the space of literature by the Jena Romantics and the Marquis de Sade, who is perhaps the most indispensable antecedent to the burgeoning climate of literary modernity in the avant-garde movements of twentieth-century literature. Accordingly, this chapter strives to accomplish far more than just giving just tacit approval to Blanchot's idea that modernist literature originates with the transhistorical migration of the language and *logos* of terror into the space of literature. It seeks also to force the historical discourse of terror and the fragmentary imperative of writing and speech that overdetermines the essential acts of literature into dialogue with one another so as to make the ahistorical dimensions of the fragmentary historically resonant and to translate the nonaesthetic horizons of terror into a conceptual and imagistic idiom that speaks directly to art and literature. Whereas Badiou leaves very few openings in his work that would point to the possibility of making terror

a productive category for advancing works of literature and philosophy into the subtractive territory of novelty and creation, the conceptual and affective constellations that circulate throughout Blanchot's writing constitute potentially fertile ground for remaking terror into the secret behind what advances works of literature beyond the limits of representation and discourse and what motivates acts of philosophy and critique to transgress the ideological boundaries of thinking. Extracting the concept of the *fragmentary imperative of terror* from out of an admittedly selective juxtaposition of Blanchot's writings sets the hermeneutical stage for establishing how Beckett's *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* are works of literature that would have read very differently if not for their immersion in the historical and aesthetic ground of a terror that infiltrates so much of the narrative space that they occupy.

As Christopher Fynsk's reading of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" points out, though only in passing, "the Terror, [Blanchot] suggests, represents for literature that specular, speculative moment where literature 'contemplates itself', 'recognizes itself', and 'justifies itself' in the realization of absolute freedom. In the Terror, literature passes into the world" ("Crossing the Threshold" 71). Taking as his point of reference Blanchot's critical review essay of Jean Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, "How Is Literature Possible?", one of Blanchot's earliest essays devoted to explicating a concept of literature in the post-war cultural and political climate of the Fourth Republic of France (which implemented its own version of state terror and systematic purges of anyone suspected of having been Nazi the collaborationists or sympathizers), Leslie Hill similarly observes that for Blanchot, in the process of radicalizing the central argument of Paulhan, "Terror is in fact the essence of literature as such" rather than "a simple romantic aberration" (*Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* 74). It would thus be fair to say that for Blanchot terror, particularly as it originates with the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution and is then transmitted all the way down through modernity (*via* Hegel, Jena Romanticism, and Sade) to the aesthetic and political projects of the twentieth century, is both a privileged philosophical concept and a radicalizing condition of historical experience that is far from irrelevant to explicating not only the formation of the modern political state, but perhaps more provocatively to engaging as incisively as does Blanchot with the discourse and genealogy of the literature of modernity. However, even as several of the more notable Blanchot scholars have appreciated the significance of terror to Blanchot's immediate post-war efforts at conceptualizing the notoriously amorphous discourse of literary modernity, their emphasis

usually falls on the connections Blanchot ultimately makes (particularly evident in the second half of “Literature and the Right to Death”) between the space of literature that in 1955 Blanchot associates with an “essential solitude”, “solitude of the work – the work of art, the literary work”, and the pre-ontological dimension of what Levinas, in his 1947 publication of *Existence and Existents*, designates as the phenomenological experience of horror in the solipsistic immanence of the *il y a*, which for Blanchot is revealed by “the horror of existence deprived of the world, the process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be, whatever is forgotten is always answerable to memory, whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying, whatever seeks to attain the beyond it always still there” (“Literature and the Right to Death” 52). Blanchot concedes that on the “two slopes” of literature (poetic and prosaic), writing “really has only one subject”, and this subject is the exigency of the *il y a* (51-52). The scholarly preference for regarding the *il y a* as the conceptual touchstone for Blanchot’s onto-phenomenological critique of literature receives its most sustained and comprehensive articulation in secondary works like Simon Critchley’s *Very Little...Almost Nothing* and Rodolphe Gasché’s excellent critical review essay of Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death”, “The Felicities of Paradox”. For Critchley, “the experience of literature has its source in ‘the primal scene’ of what Blanchot variously calls ‘the other night’, ‘the energy of exteriority prior to law’ or ‘the impossibility of death’, and this experience can be understood with reference to Levinas’s notion of the *il y a*” (89-90). More recently still, in Leslie Hill’s second major work on Blanchot, *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism*, we discover that terror has now been almost entirely expunged from Hill’s presentation of Blanchot’s critical vocabulary, even and especially where it is derived from Blanchot’s reading of the Marquis de Sade: “the *il y a* corresponds to a crucial, unspoken moment in Sade’s writing, to which the work itself is forced to respond, without being able to formulate it as such, since it is what is always already presupposed by the work. While saying all there is to say, then, the work necessarily leaves something unsaid. An unresolved tension, ambiguity, or contradiction, never susceptible of resolution, weaves its way like some ghostly remainder through all Sade’s writing, prompting its every word and gesture, while itself remaining necessarily unspoken” (170-171).

Hill’s representation of the *il y a* in Blanchot’s interpretation of Sade is particularly surprising given that in both “Literature and the Right to Death” and in *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot is far more explicit that it is insofar as Sade enthrones *terror itself* as the organizing

principle for the prison-chamber of his solitude and writing, which is ultimately not reducible to what Levinas perceives as the *horror* of dwelling in the *il y a*, that he is lauded by Blanchot as the “writer *par excellence*” and who embodies most perfectly all of the contradictions that encapsulate the insurrectionary madness of nocturnal literature. Blanchot consistently addresses the direct impact of terror on shaping the space of literature, insisting in several places that with the official introduction of terror onto the historical stage of revolutionary modernity, an observation that implicitly associates the beginnings of modernity with the eruption of terror,³³ it was literature, and not necessarily the post-revolutionary (Thermidorian) political discourse of Restoration France, that inherited what it was of the seductive presence of terror that was responsible for accruing to revolutionary discourse the power and the vision to implement a state of absolute-freedom-and-terror all-in-one. The revolutionary discourse of terror survives not in its Thermidorian exile to a synonym for political bankruptcy and unenlightened fanaticism, but in what Blanchot goes on to conceptualize as the modernist discourse of literary fiction and narrative. Accordingly, this chapter will try to supplement and offset the overly pronounced degree of critical attention that has been given to Blanchot’s investment in the Levinasian *il y a* and the felicitous paradoxes of writing that it produces by taking more seriously that other investment of Blanchot’s critique of literature: literature’s constitutive responsiveness to the fragmentary imperative of terror.³⁴

Romanticism and Terror

Blanchot explicitly cites two sources for the transmission of political terror into the aesthetic space of literature: 1) Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and the Jena circle of German Romanticism, and 2) “the writer *par excellence*”, the Marquis de Sade (“Literature and the Right

³³ Eagleton implores us not to forget that “terrorism and the modern democratic state were twinned at birth” (*Holy Terror* 1).

³⁴ Rodolphe Gasché appends an indispensable endnote to “Felicities of Paradox”, stating that “to suspect that Blanchot’s discussion of revolutionary terror refers covertly to his own association with right-wing movements in prewar France and that it is a late attempt to come to grips with it misreads completely the status of the fourth temptation. Blanchot takes up the theme of terror for the same reason that he has discussed the three temptations of stoicism, skepticism, and unhappy consciousness and the dialectic between talent and work, work and individual, namely, because he borrows his themes from Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, following at times even that latter’s order of exposition” (372).

to Death” 40). Both of these points of reference are united in notoriety through their complicity in the inauguration of the encounter of literature with the fragmentary imperatives of terror. While it would be undoubtedly foolish to try (or even want) to argue that *all* of modernist literature is directly responsive to the historical phenomenon of the imperative of terror, which was systematized during those turbulent years of 1793-1795 in France, the impact that the experience of terror has had, specifically, on Blanchot’s conceptualization of literature and literary criticism, predicated in part on a literary-historical perspective that begins with the ambitious failures of romanticism and with the insufferable repetitions of libertine desire perpetrated under the pen of the Marquis de Sade, cannot be so easily dismissed. Terror is the common denominator in Blanchot’s genealogical understanding of modernist literature, which takes as its two most impressive and exhilarating points of origin the work of Jena romanticism and the Marquis de Sade, and then culminates with the incomparable literary achievements of such figures as Hölderlin, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Rilke, Breton, Kafka, Char, Artaud, Duras, Camus, Joubert, Gide, Dostoyevsky, and of course Beckett, whose work “in every way reminds” Blanchot of “every profound speech, speaking without beginning or end” (*The Infinite Conversation* 343).

German Romanticism in Jena is presented in the annals of French literary criticism as the site where, as Blanchot puts it, “literature (by which I mean all its forms of expression, which is to say also its forces of dissolution) suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself, and, in this manifestation, has no other task or trait than to declare itself. Literature, in short, declares it is taking power” (354). Similar to his argument in “Literature and the Right to Death”, which we will be looking at shortly, in *The Infinite Conversation* one of the topics that Blanchot is interested in researching is the birthplace of modernist literature, and he does so in light of the recognition that literary modernity is inseparable from the context of historical events that inevitably overdetermine the course of philosophical and political modernity as well. This qualification, i.e. that literature is mediated by politically, philosophically, and historically complex networks of discursive cross-fertilization, is not an insignificant characteristic of how Blanchot understands modern literary history. Blanchot is not exceptional in this respect. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy take up a similar line of inquiry in *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, which the authors make no secret about being indebted to Blanchot’s incredibly concise interpretation of romanticism and the

peculiar theoretical contours – fragmentary and paradoxical to the extreme, detailed and conscientious almost to a fault – that animate his overall thinking of literature. They are just as interested as Blanchot in placing, for their part, the finger of early German romanticism on the erratic pulse of twentieth-century politics, philosophy, art, and literature: “what interests us in romanticism is that we still belong to the era it opened up. The present period continues to deny precisely this belonging, which defines us (despite the inevitable divergence introduced by repetition). A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernible today, in most of the central motifs of ‘modernity’” (*The Literary Absolute* 15; italics in original). As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue, in agreement with Blanchot (and more contemporaneously with Comay and Derrida), historical modernity and modernist literature are born out of a multiplicity of crises (metaphysical, ethical, political, cultural, and philosophical) that continue to overdetermine the contemporary phase of their interminably incomplete genealogies and developments (in the sense that each new work of literature or philosophy, each new event of politics, rewrites the significance of the texts and events that came before and that will come after them). These crises were expressed not only in the outwardness of their political, cultural, social, and philosophical manifestations, but collectively and in a singular form of representation, so Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy would like to insist, in the fragmentary writings and (self-) criticism of Jena romanticism. At the very real risk of fetishizing this collection of writings, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy nevertheless proceed to advance the thesis that the writings of Jena Romanticism “will not be a literary project and will open up not a crisis in literature, but a general crisis and critique (social, moral, religious, political: all of these aspects are found in the *Fragments*) for which literature or literary theory will be the privileged locus of expression” (5). The crisis to which they refer is both specific to literature but also a defining characteristic of the general historical crisis set off by late eighteenth-century revolutionary France. Such a crisis designates not so much that the institution of monarchical sovereignty was under threat or that the spirit of the enlightenment was gaining ground as the de facto ideology of European consciousness, but that phenomena like terror were being produced as seemingly unavoidable symptoms both of secularism and of enlightenment politics and philosophy. This crisis, it should be noted, began specifically as a French crisis, which is to say that from the German perspective, for instance, it was indeed possible to have enlightenment and enlightened politics without recourse to violence and terror. Because the French aimed to realize their aims of secular and enlightened politics here and now,

without patiently traversing a slow revolutionary sequence like the Reformation that patiently swept through Germany, it was only natural that violence, fury, and terror would be their crime no less than their punishment.

However, because the revolutionary political experience enacted in France advertised itself to the rest of Europe so spectacularly and enthusiastically, both its symptoms and its aims became conjoined as inseparable conditions of the high price that needed to be paid if European consciousness was to extricate itself once and for all from persistent ideological structures of irrationality and myth, structures that the slow movement of the reformation project was ill-equipped and too timid for snuffing out without remainder. Even though this crisis originated in France, then, it nevertheless spread to virtually all corners of Europe, ending up as an unavoidable source of the anxiety and the passion for intellectuals and writers, particularly in Germany and England,³⁵ who saw in the revolutionary terror the precedent and alibi they needed for breaking radically free from the ideological chains of the past. Although our concern here is with the influence of revolutionary terror on Jena romanticism and, once we get to Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death", the philosophical writings of Hegel, it is not only at Jena or with Hegel that such an analysis is relevant; the French Revolution did not only exert its seductiveness over the Jena circle of romanticism or the philosophical writings of Hegel or even Kant. Jacques Rancière, for instance, argues that William Wordsworth, one of the foremost representatives of English romanticism, refines his poetics of walking and psychological journeying by venturing forth into landscapes of revolutionary France. While the Jena romantics are registering the aesthetic significance of the revolution, Wordsworth, too, develops a revolutionary poetics while walking along "the roads of France, in that summer of 1790," where "no image" can be found that "imitates any model, no idea can be found to be allegorized" (17). Rancière goes on to argue, "more profoundly, [that] the poet/traveler to the country of the

³⁵ Kant's famous remark about the philosophical and moral significance of the French Revolution is apropos in this context, where he hesitates to endorse it as an "experiment" that any nation other than France would reasonably "resolve to make" even as he finds in the widespread enthusiasm for its "spectacle" the source of "a moral predisposition in the human race": "The revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry; it may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a sensible man, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such cost – this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race" (*The Conflict of the Faculties* 153).

Revolution grasps the point of identification between the modern aesthetic revolution and the modern archipolitical utopia”, thereby participating in the realization of terror’s transdiscursive reserves (18). Regardless of how Wordsworth decides to respond to the convergence of aesthetics with politics, and indeed Rancière portrays him through an affinity with political (though not necessarily aesthetic) conservatism borne out of the desire not only to “put an end to the Revolution”, but to “put an end to it with writing”, the fact remains that post-revolutionary literature is to a significant degree responsive to the political and historical exigencies unleashed by the multiple imperatives of revolutionary terror (20). All of this is to say that when Blanchot pays especially close attention to the relevance of terror on the development of modernist literature and thinking, he does so not just in the spirit of an idiosyncratic obsession, but through an astute consideration of what many writers and thinkers who came before him already intuited and what many writers and thinkers who came after him continue to acknowledge today.

The point that warrants underscoring here is that it is through consciousness of romanticism that the ambiguously programmed space of writing and thinking about “something” absolute called literature, a “something” that first erupted in the revolutionary explosion of the European project of modernity – “the romantics never really succeed in naming this something: they speak of poetry, of the work, of the novel, or ...of romanticism,” and “in the end, they decide to call it – all things considered – *literature*” – that the tensions and crises that comprise this infinitely unfinishable project are given their most comprehensive, nuanced, and ambitious expression *without* succumbing to the false philosophical and aesthetic hubris of having invented strategies for their resolution and transcendence (11). On the contrary, it is *crisis itself* that is invested by the romantic discourse on literature and literary criticism (conceived in the sovereign terms of the absolute of writing and thinking) with the fragmentary language and speech that they deemed most appropriate to the singular form of its necessarily (by something we might consider as a mimetic fiat) interrupted representation and the deferred articulation of its critique. Even though Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are compelled to admit that it is “not by chance that it originated in philology and criticism” (10), nevertheless in order for the poets and philosophers of romanticism to honor their commitment to expressing the inexpressibility and fragmentary dimension of the historical and philosophical crises and contradictions of the modernity they had just inherited, it was not sufficient that they stop their aesthetic experimentations at the discovery of either the modern concept of “‘literature’ (they invent the concept) nor simply a ‘theory of

literature' (ancient and modern). Rather, it is *theory itself as literature* or, in other words, literature producing itself as it produces its own theory. The literary absolute is also, and perhaps above all, this absolute *literary operation*" (12; italics in original). The consequences of this manoeuvre – of bequeathing to literature the sovereign power over deciding theoretically on its conditions of possibility as a discourse of crisis – are not lost on Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, nor do they go unacknowledged by Blanchot or even by the romantics themselves. By placing responsibility for the crisis of modernity (a crisis that resonated most poignantly with the literal execution of divine sovereignty) in the *operations* of literature and literary criticism, romanticism guaranteed that *crisis itself* was to be enthroned as the ineradicable symptom of the fact that the revolutionary ideology of modernity – reinforcing crisis and contradiction at every turn – was all of a sudden and for the foreseeable future the new measure of historical and aesthetic consciousness. This unbridgeable separation between the works that literature produces and their repetition as works of the theory of literature emblazons onto the crisis of modernity the blueprint of its infinite exacerbation. Literature and literary criticism, like modernity, are failed enterprises from the very beginning, steeped as they are in the irreconcilable crisis of their incompleteness and deferral. This would be of little consequence to anyone not residing in the imaginary republic of letters that romanticism established were it not also the case that they advanced the hypothesis (Adorno revamps it after the catastrophe of Auschwitz) that only with literature and literary criticism does the redemption of historical crisis have at the very least a chance of being envisioned.

What is perhaps the most admirable, but also, in Simon Critchley's estimation, the most "naïve" thesis of Jena romanticism is that the antinomies of revolutionary politics, its embrace of Terror and the concomitant bid for Absolute Freedom – Robespierre identifies this antinomy as the irreconcilable mandates inherited by "constitutional" and "revolutionary" forms of government (*Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* 99) – can only be resolved by being transplanted onto an aesthetic, and specifically literary, plane of dissemination and critique. Critchley has this to say about the "deepest naïveté of romanticism": "if the artwork is a sensuous image of freedom, then it provides us with an image of what the world might be like if freedom were realized – it is through art that we intimate the dimensions of a politically transfigured everyday life" (91). Moreover, what Carl Schmidt sees as romanticism's "metaphysical narcissism", Critchley reminds us, "where there can be no reference to an authority or source of legitimation

outside the play of subjective imagination”, is an ideology that romanticism extrapolates from the revolutionary promise of sovereign self-governance as it is vouchsafed by the politics of the terror and then converts into the basis of resolving the contradictions between the concept and experience of freedom that revolutionary modernity promised as a real utopian possibility. The universal scope of this project, however, turned out to be what fed directly into its imminent collapse from within. That the after-effects of romanticism’s failure and demise did not disappear along with its venue of publication – *The Athenaeum* – is precisely what allows Benjamin, Blanchot, and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy to discern within its tentative configuration traces of what we still only dimly perceive as the horizon of “this absolute *literary operation*”. It should therefore come as little surprise that in order to retrieve the indispensable role that terror plays in Blanchot’s conception of literature it is with his reading of romanticism and the confrontation that romanticism facilitates between the fragmentary imperative of terror and the exigency of *crisis itself* constitutive of modernity that our analysis will advance.

Blanchot begins his essay “The Athenaeum” simply by cataloguing the various ways that romanticism has been appropriated and subsequently perverted in the twentieth century to serve multiple ideological agendas. As such, the essay converges with *The Literary Absolute* in resisting the temptation of “engaging in an archival enterprise”, i.e. “a monumental or antiquarian history” (*The Literary Absolute* 2). Closer to the mid-twentieth-century frame of reference, Blanchot notes, romanticism has been enlisted by Nazi literary theorists, disparaged by figures like Lukàcs as “an obscurantist movement” (351), celebrated and repackaged by Surrealism, excavated by “French Germanists” like Albert Béguin and Henri Lefebvre for having undeniably exerted so profound an influence on the young Hegel and Marx, and denounced by the radical right in France “because it is romantic and because it is German: irrationalism threatens order; reason is Mediterranean; barbarism comes from the North” (351). Whether for reasons political or aesthetic, by intellectuals and ideologues on the Right or on the Left, French or German, romanticism is ultimately confirmed in its “vocation of disorder – menace for some, promise for others, and for still others, futile threat or sterile promise” (352). The “truth” of Romanticism is, in other words, an exclusive function of the ideological and epistemological perspective from which its interpretation and assessment just happens to be launched. Accordingly, deciding on what romanticism accomplished and represented in “that brief, intense, and brilliant *moment of writing*” satisfies far more than a scholastic or archival curiosity over

what was published and said within the few short pages of a journal that seemed to exhaust its momentum from the instant that its aphoristic and self-consuming pronouncements entered the official channels of cultural circulation (*The Literary Absolute* 7). To assess the truth of romanticism is therefore to collate all the perspectives on romanticism that the cultural and political landscape of the twentieth century was able to fashion. The fragmentary poetics of romanticism, therefore, acts as a prism of critique into the crises of twentieth-century modernity, fragmenting in its wake, as it were, so many of the interpretations and judgments that have been levied over what romanticism was and what its lessons will have been in the historical present of the twentieth century.

Blanchot discovers the perfect embodiment and anticipation of these contradictory and occasionally incoherent reactions to romanticism in Friedrich Schlegel, whose biographical self-betrayal serves as legitimate justification for the charge that romanticism inevitably engenders inconsistency and irrationalism:

Friedrich Schlegel is the symbol of such vicissitudes: as a young man he is an atheist, a radical, and an individualist. The freedom of spirit he displays, the intellectual richness and fantasy that each day lead him to invent new concepts, not irreflectively but in the high tension of a consciousness that wants to understand what it is discovering [...]. Some years pass: the same Schlegel, converted to Catholicism, a diplomat and journalist in the service of Metternich, surrounded by monks and pious men of society, is no longer anything but a fat philistine of unctuous speech, lazy, empty, his mind on food, and incapable of remembering the young man who had written: 'A single absolute law: the free spirit always triumphs over nature.' Which is the real one? (352).

Blanchot leaves very little room for reservation in deciding over which Schlegel secures his admiration, but the point of cataloguing these self-antagonistic images of a man split between youthful vitality and the maturity of intellectual decay is to take seriously the objective awareness that both dispositions inhere in the same individual and perhaps even in the same philosophical and aesthetic struggle that this individual poet-philosopher advocates and ultimately (by dialectical necessity?) betrays. The contradiction that is Schlegel is as irresolvable and irrefutable as it is unverifiable and bewildering. At no discrete point in time does Schlegel suddenly wake up out of his youth and begin living his life afresh as a bourgeois philistine. There seems to be nothing like a Pauline event of conversion here. The Schlegel empty of ideas is perfectly consistent with the Schlegel bursting with enthusiasm and genius, Blanchot reluctantly admits. This simple observation nevertheless obliges that Blanchot's question, "which is the real

one?”, be accorded a maximum of analytical sincerity. For by trading in poetry for journalism, individuality for cronyism, and passion for cynicism, it is entirely plausible that the Catholic Schlegel of Vienna embodies the dialectical authenticity of the atheist Schlegel who was energetically living, writing, thinking, and pontificating in Jena over the virtues of the literary absolute of a fragmentary poetics and criticism. The dialectical logic underwriting Blanchot’s inquiry into the truth of Schlegel is indeed excruciatingly manifest in his presentation of the questions that are in need of answering if the promise and collapse of romanticism is to be digested philosophically: “Is the later Schlegel the truth of the first? Does the struggle against a bourgeois who is banal engender no more than a bourgeois who is exalted, then weary, and finally only contribute to an exaltation of the bourgeoisie?” (352). To not confront the objective reality of Schlegel’s departure (spiritual as much as geographical) from Jena is in some sense to arbitrarily suspend the “literary operation” of the fragmentary writing of *The Athenaeum* just prior to its dismantling from within. To break commitment with the literary operation of the fragmentary absolute in this way is tantamount to jettisoning the entire project of romanticism, or at least that part of it, insist Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, that is worthy of contemporary rehabilitation and critique: the *crisis* of romanticism itself. By following the literary operation of the romantics and allowing it to pursue its trajectory to the limit of its exhaustion, i.e. in the betrayal of Schlegel, Blanchot is able to avoid being mesmerized, like so many theoreticians in Germany and France, by either its eventual failure or its initial success. Indeed, it is neither the failure nor the success of the project of romanticism that interests Blanchot. This is what makes his analysis ideologically disinterested and therefore philosophically incisive. Deciding on which Schlegel is the “real” Schlegel is no doubt a superfluous pursuit, yet by posing the question in complete recognition of its indeterminacy, Blanchot is able to approximate the truth of romanticism that the romantics themselves could intuit only in aphoristic modes expression and incomplete outbursts of poetic productivity that they perceived as symptomatically unavoidable by virtue of the heterogeneous and fragmentary totality that this truth represented.

These reflections lead Blanchot to ask yet another series of questions, which are directly tied to those he has just asked of Schlegel but that now pertain specifically to the literature and theory of romanticism: “Where is romanticism? In Jena or in Vienna? Where it manifests itself, rich in projects, or where it dies out, poor in works? Where it is master of a productivity without impediment (according to Schelling’s definition)? Or there where it seems that the sublime

capacity to produce, precisely by its refusal of impediment, has produced nearly nothing, while the pure creative force that has not remained pure has nonetheless still not created anything?” (352). The syntactical and conceptual density of this final question acts as the formal complement to the thesis Blanchot is on the verge of advancing *vis-à-vis* the totality that speaks through romanticism insofar as it is a totality that is silenced at the threshold of its fragmentary communication. This pure creative force that romanticism believes itself to be exploiting, a mode of poetic expression that communicates through the revisions and denials of what it has expressed (its essential incompleteness), turns the writing of romanticism against itself and converts its unmediated conceptual access to the truth of what it has produced into the impetus behind its total disintegration. Assessing the legacy of romanticism turns out to be a frustratingly paradoxical endeavour insofar as nothing that the works of romanticism say and think are allowed to persevere beyond the instant of having been said and thought. Blanchot recognizes that a straightforwardly interrogative approach to the mysteries and confusions that inevitably arise in the retrospective encounter with romanticism is an insufficient strategy for entering into the literary and critical operation that the romantics seem to have succeeded in jump-starting. Blanchot reassesses the strategy of his critique, looking at what is negative and indecisive in romanticism as sources for its philosophical and aesthetic affirmation as the poetic progenitor of twentieth-century avant-garde modernism.

After enumerating several of the sites of ambiguity that a serious interrogation of romanticism is forced to approach, Blanchot is ready, perhaps even compelled by the logic of the analysis, to instigate a new pathway of inquiry, where “everything turns around” (352):

Romanticism, it is true, ends badly, but this is because it is essentially what begins and what cannot but finish badly: an end that is called suicide, madness, loss, forgetting. And certainly it is often without works, but this is because it is the work of the absence of (the) work; a poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act, an affirmation without duration, a freedom without realization, a force that exalts in disappearing and that is in no way discredited if it leaves no trace, for this was its goal: to make poetry shine, neither as nature nor even as work, but as pure consciousness of the moment” (352-353).

The legacy of romanticism is the announcement that irrespective of the conceptual incoherence of its program and the initial impoverishment of its creative capacities, its literary operation of self-reflexivity and self-criticism – *pure consciousness of the moment* – has irreversibly usurped control over the content and form of whatever work it succeeds in producing. Yet the problem persists: *of what, exactly, is literature conscious?* Once Blanchot’s interrogation of the successes

and failures of romanticism is conceptualized as an irresolvable contradiction, at which point “everything turns around”, he is able to reconfigure his analysis and look more closely into what is pressuring the voices and minds of romanticism to speak and think so unreservedly in the impractical, unsustainable, and fragmentary language of sovereignty and freedom. Romanticism then becomes the symptom of what it struggles to represent, and not the absolute discourse of a literature that begins at the zero degree of its inviolable aesthetic autonomy (“poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act”). No longer is it a question of achieving a reconciled correspondence between manifesto and work. Romanticism is to be judged according to its capacity to capture itself in the spectacle of its own excess, to measure itself, in other words, according to the immeasurable criteria of its conceptual exuberance: “Romanticism is excessive, but its first excess is an excess of thought” (353). If romanticism is immune from the sterile criticism that it betrays the letter of its manifesto, then it is because criticism always lags behind the judgment that the literature that romanticism prescribed always already inveighs against the work of its own completion. Acquiring a more acute understanding of the particular fragmentary imperative driving the excesses of romanticism represents for Blanchot the possibility of penetrating into literature’s mysterious jurisdiction over modernity’s constitutive discourse of crisis and contradiction.

The irony of Blanchot’s analysis is that by granting literature the prerogative over all measures of its critique, he has simultaneously stripped his own critical perspective of the metaphysical distance (a perspectival distance separating the work from the critique of the work) and authority required for deciding when works of literature have gone awry or when their operations have succeeded in accomplishing the romantic project of reconciliation (between the romantic image of the world and the world as it is). The unacknowledged presupposition of this transfer of power, however, is that the work of literature is autonomous enough to sustain the responsibility that this power entails. This is far from certain. As it vacillates between satisfaction and disappointment with the balance it strikes between the idea of the work and the work itself, romanticism reveals that its aesthetic project is a project of the melancholic undecidability that is to be expected of a discourse that removes all distance between itself and the nonaesthetic world outside it. Blanchot is quick to point out how dangerous this is for the survival and possibility of literature precisely where it “declares it is taking power” (354):

The poet becomes the future of humankind at the moment when, no longer being anything – anything but one who knows himself to be a poet – he designates in this knowledge for which he is intimately responsible the site wherein poetry will no longer be content to produce beautiful, determinate works, but rather will produce itself in a movement without term and without determination. To put this differently, literature encounters its most dangerous meaning – that of interrogating itself in a declarative mode – at times triumphantly, and in so doing discovering that everything belongs to it, at other times, in distress, discovering it is lacking everything since it only affirms *itself* by default. (354-355).

Through the immediacy of literature's revolutionary seizure of sovereign power it gains as much as it loses. Literature finds that it has become the limit of the universe it has usurped, and yet as quick as literature becomes the master of a universe frozen in self-consciousness – “it only affirms *itself* by default” – does Blanchot recognize that “a very curious exchange” is underway between the “declarative demand” that literature become the consciousness of its absolute freedom of self-expression and the irreversible onset of revolutionary terror from which it is historically derived.

Blanchot is uncharacteristically blunt about the politico-historical ground on which romanticism rests, and the argument that he puts forth in this section of *The Infinite Conversation* concludes that romanticism owes virtually everything it knows and practices to the “*revolution in person*” that it reincarnates in the space of literature:

There is no need to insist upon what is well known: the French Revolution is what gave the German romantics this new form constituted by the declarative demand, the brilliance of the manifesto. Between these two movements, the ‘political’ and the ‘literary,’ there is a very curious exchange. When the French revolutionaries write, they write, or believe they are writing, as the classical writers do; thoroughly imbued with respect for the models of the past, they in no way wish to interfere with the traditional forms. It is not, however, to the revolutionary orators that the romantics will turn for lessons in style, *but to the Revolution in person*, to this language become History that signifies itself through declarative events. (355; my italics).

Whereas the Thermidorians convinced themselves of having dispatched into historical oblivion the revolutionary terror together with the decapitated corpse of Robespierre, romanticism facilitates the aesthetic reincarnation of what Robespierre represented and thereby rehabilitates the asymptotic aspiration for absolute freedom that revolutionary terror forcibly and violently unleashed into the nascent world of modernity. Not only is the literature of romanticism all of a sudden speaking in the fragmentary language that it has sovereignly decreed as singularly appropriate for its post-terror aesthetic agenda, but the radical act of speaking in this way – in a movement without term and without determination; an *imperative without concept*, we might say

together with Badiou – forces it into dialogue with the historiographically silenced discourse of revolutionary terror, i.e. that part of “this language become History” that harnesses the legislative power (not necessarily without the bounds of law) and the requisite measure of violence necessary for making this language signify “through declarative events”: “the Terror, as we well know, was terrible not because of its executions, but because it proclaimed itself in this capital form, *it making terror the measure of history and the logos of the modern era*. The scaffold, the enemies of the people where were presented to the people, the heads that fell uniquely so they should be shown, the evidency (the grandiloquence) of a death that is null – these constitute not historical facts but a new language: all of this speaks and has remained speaking” (355; my emphasis). Romanticism played an integral role in overseeing the passage into modernity from the policies of the Terror as they were implemented under the legislative auspices of Robespierre (Terror as proper noun) to a language and *logos* of terror that speaks incessantly and irrepressibly long after the Reign of Terror officially ceased. Pointing out romanticism’s reincarnation of the *revolution in person*, detecting in the fragmentary poetics of romanticism a sudden fluency in the discourse of terror that speaks and has remained speaking since the traumatic birthplace of modernity, leads Blanchot to advance the thesis of the intimate and inextricable relation between the language and *logos* of terror and advanced works of post-romantic literature.

The literary-historical provenance of what Blanchot conceptualizes as the “fragmentary imperative, linked to the disaster” is contained *in nuce* here at the fragile and tenuous site of Romanticism (*Writing the Disaster* 60). Its courage as the *de facto* heir of revolutionary France inhered in its frenzied rush to affix a positive sign, to paraphrase Blanchot, to the *revolution in person* and to use the authority granted to it by the image of this personification as the model of the “new man” of consciousness it desired so desperately to promulgate at the onset of the nineteenth-century. After all, it was the *revolution in person*, the disembodied revolutionary spirit that speaks and that continued speaking the language of terror long after the revolutionary government of Robespierre arrived (bloody and decapitated) at its nominal end, on which romanticism could model their aspirations to aesthetic and theoretical sovereignty. Romanticism did this by mimetically reproducing the post-terror work of infinitely constructive self-effacing movements of discontinuity, reflexivity, and fragmentation, techniques of composition and critique expressly adopted for romanticism’s ambitious pursuit of the universal self-consciousness of the literary absolute itself. Crucially, what Blanchot detects in Romanticism’s

aesthetic adherence to the political and historical imperatives of terror is not so much an infinite reserve of inventive power and authority, but a powerlessness and an unwanted encounter with humility that, thanks to terror's disintegrative protocols of negativity, pushed romanticism in the irreversible direction of incompleteness and failure. The powerlessness that attaches itself to Romanticism as it reincarnates in literature the *persona non grata* of revolutionary terror is inextricably tied to an experience of radical ambiguity and anxiety that precludes Romanticism's literature of terror from putting a stop to the infinite repetition of "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered", as the Beckettian unnamable phrases it, that the language and *logos* of terror catalyzes (*The Unnamable* 285). Not knowing which Schlegel is the real Schlegel – "once again, everything turns around" (352) – is directly symptomatic, in other words, of this ambiguity and this anxiety. Together, they express the aporetic conundrum that in Romanticism there is an inherent tendency to aspire to totality only through the questionable aesthetic pathway of fragmentary writing; a drive to advance the sovereignty of individual expression only through deferring to the indefatigable conservative authority of the aesthetic state (genre) of romanticism itself; and a commitment to defending the ethical and ontological integrity of the particular only by reverting back to a modality of writing and literary self-critique that resurrects the metaphysical spirit of the universal. This slippery slope slides both ways: from totality back to fragment, from state back to individual, from the universal back to the particular, *ad infinitum*. Romanticism's appropriation of the discourse of terror means that it is constrained to proceed without any centre of metaphysical gravity orienting its aesthetic and philosophical movements: collapse masquerades as construction; ruin is interchangeable with success – contradiction and crisis reign supreme as the order of the aesthetic workday of Romanticism. Determining whether or not Romanticism, in reviving the *revolution in person*, becomes either a powerful or an impotent aesthetic ideology (its short-lived existence does not bode well for choosing the former), is an impossible choice to make precisely because decision and judgment as such are no longer epistemologically viable in the claustrophobic spaces in which the literature of romanticism works itself out. The fragmentary imperative of terror legislates an essential ambiguity at the heart of literature that cannot be circumvented from within the absolute and sovereign immanence of writing and criticism that Romanticism was perhaps the first aesthetic movement to advertise and adopt with so much confidence and conviction.

In Blanchot's estimation, Romanticism does not adequately acknowledge its affinity with the inoperative negativity of terror, overly confident as it is in relaying, through fragmentary writing, the metaphysical torch of absolute subjectivity and spirit into the post-revolutionary cultural consciousness of European modernity. Literature, however, in having identified so completely with the *revolution in person*, in having adopted so enthusiastically the language and *logos* of terror, is insidiously at odds with Romanticism's thoroughly ideological optimism in the prospects of its aesthetic and cultural success. Blinded by their ingenious inheritance of revolutionary power and sovereignty, the Romantics failed to see the Trojan horse that revolutionary terror unleashed into the space of literature that their writing and thinking demarcated. Romanticism failed to predict the degree to which committing to the language and *logos* of revolutionary terror precluded in advance the possibility of their witnessing an aesthetic event of reconciliation and non-theological transcendence. The problem, more precisely, was not that romanticism failed, but that it remained blind to the bitter end to exactly why it failed in the way that it did. Blanchot's criticism of the romantic project is rooted in the observation that the romantic aspiration to the fragmentary absolute of literature never successfully translated into consciously establishing the fragmentary as the imperative *par excellence* of post-terror literature; they intuited that the fragmentary imperative translates into the demand that writing continuously express itself in "discontinuous form", but they then proceeded to operate under the mistaken assumption that this demand could be implemented according to a coherently developed aesthetic program of dialectical programmability (358). Blanchot's enthusiasm for the fragmentary inventions of Jena Romanticism only goes so far, then, and he admits that while the romantics were the first to discover literature's singular subordination to the fragmentary imperative of writing, they did not push this discovery to its most extreme conclusion: "In truth, and particularly in the case of Friedrich Schlegel, the fragment often seems a means for complacently abandoning oneself to the self rather than an attempt to elaborate a more rigorous mode of writing. [...] It remains nonetheless true that literature, beginning to become manifest to itself through the romantic declaration, will from now on bear in itself this question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form" (359). Blanchot's emphasis is on the *question* of discontinuity as the limit that literature is obliged to surpass, whereas for the romantics

discontinuity was instantiated as a presupposition of an advanced dialectical totality, and thus a limit that once reached would proclaim the successful completion of literary work.³⁶

Against the hubristic dialectical perspective that romanticism stakes out on the question of discontinuity, which time and time again resulted in the expediency of thinking that “it is enough to replace the continuous with the discontinuous, plenitude with interruption, gathering with dispersion”, Blanchot revamps the concept of the fragmentary as a fleeting instant of rupture, an unpredictable eruption of contingency and disorder, a detour into the timeless unknowability of a language and a speech that signifies only the anonymity of thinking and speaking from beyond subjectivity and reason (156). No philosophical or aesthetic movement can descend into the abyssal space of the fragmentary and return with a prediction or articulation of what the fragmentary is and was, and of what it will be like the next time that it occurs. The possibility of the future in its most radically unpredictable arrival, in other words, is predicated entirely on the possibility of the fragmentary, and when the fragmentary is foreclosed (prematurely or belatedly), as Blanchot begins to think that it was in the works and the ideas that romanticism began to produce, it is the future that is conservatively foreclosed as well. The fragmentary is therefore a pure and interminable site of divergence, interruption, and effacement between the encounter of the poetic and the philosophical, the subject and its subjectivity, transcendence and immanence, God and “man”, without however sign-posting in advance (logically or prophetically) where and when this divergence, this interruption, and this act of effacement will begin and end. As Hill explains it,

in so far as fragmentary writing or writing according to the fragmentary is necessarily marked by interminability and incompleteness, any fragmentary text, even any text at all, is always already a waiting for what has yet to occur. But what speaks in fragmentary writing for Blanchot is not only the anticipation of the future; what exerts its demand over Blanchot in the fragmentary went much further, for it was the impossible infinity of the unthinkable. ‘The thought of waiting’, explains one of Blanchot’s Festschrift fragments: ‘the thought that is the waiting for that which does not let itself be thought [*ce qui ne se laisse*

³⁶ Christopher A. Strathman underscores the significance of discontinuity in Blanchot’s attempt to exceed the fragmentary writing endorsed by Romanticism and push the work of literature into the undiscovered and indeed undiscoverable territory of the “outside” of literature, the “outside” where the fragmentary *imperative* holds absolute sway. Strathman writes: “the fragmentary exigency is opposed to the relative autonomy of the romantic fragment (think of the hedgehog). Instead of affording seclusion or refuge, the peace and solitude of the ruined landscape or the bucolic garden, the fragmentary exigency represents an unsettling opening onto something new and unpredictable, a space of risk or trauma, *within* the ordinary world” (*Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative* 156).

pas penser], the thought that is borne by waiting and adjourned in that waiting.’ (*Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing* 114).

The key to precluding his discourse on the unthinkability of the fragmentary from lapsing into contradiction – violating what is unthinkable by thinking it *as* the unthinkable – is Blanchot’s resilience in never letting the fragmentary be articulated as anything other than a timeless site of juxtaposition, a vital movement of becoming predicated on discontinuity and pluralism and wherein echoes “a speech that is other, separate from discourse, neither negating nor (in this sense) affirming, and yet allowing the unlimited in difference to play between the fragments by its interruption and arrest” (*The Infinite Conversation* 154). The fragmentary imperative is a demand for a movement and a speech of separation that disjoins continuity and interrupts the domineering spirit of metaphysical unity and oneness, all the while without exhausting itself in reinstating the dialectical bringing-together of opposites, the restoration of the same, and the neglecting of difference. “Fragmentation” is “that which has no relation whatsoever with a center and cannot be referred to an origin: what thought, as a consequence – the thought of the same and of the one, the thought of theology and that of all the modes of human (or dialectic) knowledge – could never entertain without falsifying it” (157). Patience in the fragmentary intermittence of discontinuity is foreign to dialectical reasoning. Blanchot tirelessly reiterates that such reasoning cannot tolerate the posture of immobility that the fragmentary imperative prescribes; the fragmentary imperative “does not arrest becoming; on the contrary, it provokes becoming, calls it up in the enigma that is proper to it” (157). The paradox of the fragmentary imperative of terror is that it inclines against fragmentary immobility, and thus the impatience betrayed in romanticism’s seeking to exit the fragmentary space of discontinuity

is not explained by the simple failings of personalities that are too subjective or too impatient to reach the absolute. It is also explained (at least in the original sense of this verb, and more decisively) by the orientation of history, which, become revolutionary, places at the forefront of its action work that is undertaken in view of the whole and the dialectical search for unity. It remains nonetheless true that literature, beginning to become manifest to itself through the romantic declaration, will from now on bear in itself this question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form – a question and a task German romanticism, and in particular that of *The Athenaeum*, not only sensed but already clearly proposed – before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future. (359).

Romanticism exhausts its energy in the same way and for the same reasons that the revolution lapsed into restoration and inevitably sponsored the repetition of the past: a disavowal of the fragmentary imperative of terror. Romanticism translated the question of discontinuity that it

inherited from revolutionary terror into the aesthetic method of the fragmentary imperative. Blanchot is interested in seeing how this fragmentary imperative of terror outlasted its exhaustion in the hands of romanticism and was consigned to the philosophical and literary modernity that romanticism left behind. The value of terror when it is at its most radical is that it institutes the phenomenological, epistemological, and metaphysical subtractions – it preserves “man” in the suspended existence of his disappearance – that are the speculative no less than the materialist preconditions for carrying out the Nietzschean program of the *transvaluation of all values*. The fragmentary imperative of terror demands vigilance in “the perpetuity of an interruption without stop and of a pursuit without attainment: neither the progress of time nor the immobility of a present – a perpetuity that perpetuates nothing, not enduring, not ceasing, the return and the turning aside of an attraction without allure: Is this world? Is it language? The world that cannot be said? Language that does not have the world to say? The world? A text?” (167).

The Dialectical Road to Terror in “Literature and the Right to Death”

Now that we have looked closely at the instrumental role played by romanticism and the revolutionary discourse of terror in Blanchot’s genealogical critique of literature, the next challenge will be to see how Blanchot had already outlined a phenomenological critique of literature in “Literature and the Right to Death”. Here Blanchot commenced his phenomenological critique of literature with the presupposition that “literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (21). On the basis of this presupposition, his argument then continued through to the more provocatively affirmative proposition, discarded almost axiomatically by Badiou, that “literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when”, and here Blanchot quotes enthusiastically from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’ in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the ‘question’ that seeks to pose itself in literature, the ‘question’ that is its essence” (41). Prior to several of the essays collected in *The Infinite Conversation* that juxtaposed the question of speech and literature with the question of discontinuity and terror, it was Blanchot’s essay “Literature and

the Right to Death” that represented his most explicit attempt at developing a concept and a critique of literature predicated on literature’s proximity to the phenomenological and historical exigency of terror. Before Blanchot can arrive in this essay at anything resembling a nuanced and persuasive account of how literature is responsive to the fragmentary imperative of terror (or later on in the essay to the interminable horror of the *il y a*), however, his analysis must first take seriously the hypothesis, as Adorno will later repeat, that nothing guarantees – certainly not the historical experience and the phenomenological exigency of terror – that either the work of literature or the subjectivity of writing exists *apriori*. Unlike Adorno, who in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* interrogated the existence of the artwork from largely literary-historical and sociological vantage points, Blanchot is more interested in approaching the question of literature’s existence using Hegel’s phenomenological methodology of critique as a way into inquiring into the reciprocal conditions of the possibility of the work of writing and the subjectivity of the writer. Blanchot is therefore more explicitly Hegelian than is Adorno in the context of conceptualizing literature’s right to existence, but in a gesture that foreshadows Adorno, Blanchot uses the Hegelian phenomenological apparatus for positioning the work of literature in a relation of irreconcilable negativity – the negativity of terror – with the post-enlightenment historicity of modernity.

The version of “Literature and the Right to Death” with which Blanchot’s contemporary readership is most familiar was originally published as two separate essays in the journal *Critique* in 1947 and 1948. Blanchot titled the 1947 essay “The Animal Kingdom of the Spirit”, a somewhat transparent allusion to the chapter in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* called “The Spiritual Animal Kingdom and Deceit, or the ‘Matter in Hand’ Itself”. Blanchot’s indebtedness to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, however, goes much deeper than just a pilfering of one of its chapter headings. As Simon Critchley observes, “Blanchot *mimics* the dialectical procedure of the *Phenomenology*, insofar as one cannot read ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ as defending a particular position, as much as letting truth unfold in the totality of possible positions. Blanchot works in the spirit, if not the letter, of Hegel (and incidentally reads Hegel as literature, which means – as was so common in France at this time – privileging the *Phenomenology* over the *Logic* or the *Encyclopedia*) by engaging in a phenomenology of the various temptations available to the writer and articulating them in terms of the categories of the *Phenomenology*” (50). This influence is most heavily reflected, Critchley suggests, where Blanchot proceeds to discuss the

“four temptations” (which precede the more widely discussed “two slopes” of literature that Blanchot details in the second half of the essay) that the writer must face when trying to produce the “literary Thing” as such (22). It soon becomes clear that what Blanchot is attempting to construct is an analytical space that takes nothing about the object of literature or the subjectivity of writing for granted prior to the work of their supposed dialectical completion through the negativity of the other. The underlying presupposition of “Literature and the Right to Death”, in other words, is that if the analytical encounter with literature cannot suspend the ideology that prescribes an *a priori* existence to literary works of art, then it will have immediately overlooked what makes the existence of literature so exquisitely impracticable and aleatory to begin with. To better understand the eventual implications of this argument, however, it is necessary to follow Blanchot’s reading of Hegel closely, particularly as it progresses from the phenomenological consciousness of writing to writing according to the fragmentary imperative of terror.

Writing in the “Epilogue” to his *Readings in Interpretation*, Andrzej Warminski, like Critchley, insists that understanding Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death” requires a tangential understanding of Blanchot’s reworking of the Hegelian experience with the dialectical narrative of phenomenological negativity. For Warminski, Blanchot’s oblique and idiosyncratic appropriation of Hegel is perhaps the key to grappling with his enigmatic account of how literature exists in relation to the interminably deferred experience of death – death as the impossibility of dying³⁷ – that literature exposes in language: “Such a rewriting of Hegel’s negative in another place, to the side, is what takes place in Blanchot’s readings of Hegel in the 1940s – in particular “Literature and the Right to Death” – and what accounts for the peculiar ‘distance’ from the text of the *Phenomenology* as formulated in the essay’s first footnote: ‘It should be understood that the remarks that follow are quite remote from the text of the *Phenomenology* and make no attempt to illuminate it’” (*Readings in Interpretation* 185). That being so, Warminski goes on to insist that “in order to determine the other place, to the side, in which moments of the *Phenomenology* as diverse as Hegel’s remarks on death in the Preface, the

³⁷ Death as the impossibility of dying means that “there is in death, it would seem, something stronger than death: it is dying itself – the intensity of dying, the push of the impossible, the pressure of the undesirable even in the most desired. Death is power and even strength – limited, therefore. It sets a final date, it adjourns in the sense that it assigns a given day [*jour*] – both random and necessary – at the same time that it defers till an undesignated day. But dying is un-power. It wrests from the present, it is always a step over the edge, it rules out every conclusion and all ends, it does not free nor does it shelter” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 47-48).

dialectics of work, of universal freedom and Terror, the unhappy consciousness, master and slave, etc., can all be read as though on the same level and rewritten into parables of writing,” it is pertinent to “begin with Blanchot’s rewriting of Hegel on (the) work and Hegel on death: what takes place (and where), what difference does it make, when work and death are read as writing” (185-186).

Warminski highlights Blanchot’s transposition of Hegel’s dialectic of individuality and consciousness onto a similarly reflexive dialectic of the phenomenological work of literature. Both Hegel and Blanchot are attentive to the double bind whereby the only way for a subject of consciousness to perform a rational act of freedom (of writing) is by using what the act is supposed teleologically to reveal – the *a priori* freedom of consciousness – in order to achieve as the catalyst for its commencement (i.e. freedom is an act of men and women already free and thus of those who consciously set out to implement their freedom in reality; the written work of a writer is what confirms that the writer had been borne in the act of writing, but the writer can only complete a work of writing by having always already had the talent to write). Only by acting immediately and without pre-established justification or precedence does the individual of rational self-consciousness stand a chance of breaking through the dialectical morass of mediation, which otherwise promises that the given circumstances of any act always already contain within them the means and rationale for achieving the desirable end result, thus operating as an obstacle to conscious subjects performing radical acts of reason, writing, and freedom. To become a writer presupposes the talents to write, although from the point of view of the work of literature, to become a writer means that one had already written a work. As Warminski explains, “taking immediate action is the means that mediate between the individual’s circumstances and interest, what it finds and what it posits, in itself and for itself, immediacy and mediation” (186). Blanchot begins “Literature and the Right Death” with a similar problematic, except that Blanchot’s object of focus is not the abstract individual of rational self-consciousness, but the abstract writer of literature. “And yet,” Warminski insists, “substituting ‘writer’ for ‘individual’ here makes all the difference to the resolution of the double bind, to how one breaks the circle and begins to take action or to write” (186). Unlike the universal subject of freedom and consciousness aimed at in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the writer of “Literature and the Right to Death”, the essay’s conceptual protagonist as it were, does not enjoy unmediated access to the dialectical entryway of immediacy, but fortuitously it is by embracing this limitation that

the writer becomes exceptionally distinct from the phenomenological subjects of consciousness that it so closely resembles: the writer must die as an individual, and so it is death and the interminable experience of dying that mediates the phenomenological subjectivity the writer loses in the act of writing and the work of literature that the writer gains without being present for its enjoyment. The intractable difficulty that inheres in the possibility of writing is to be dialectically re-conditioned as the fatal source of writing's possibility. Writing is the product of a writer who no longer exists; the writer exists only in the deadly act of writing. For Warminski, Blanchot owes virtually everything that is philosophically non-dialectical – that is to say, neutral and fragmentary – about “Literature and the Right to Death” to Hegel's reflections, paradoxically, on the dialectics of work and finitude.

While Blanchot's post-war rapprochement with the Hegelian phenomenology of consciousness is undoubtedly instrumental for understanding the logical steps Blanchot takes in locating the subjectivity of writing in the phenomenologically fatal work of literature, the emphasis in the paragraphs below is on tracking Blanchot's dialectical engagement with literature through Hegel's commentary on revolutionary terror and the contribution it singularly makes to Blanchot's conception of literature and the unlikely conditions of literature's possibility. Contemporary scholarship on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for instance Jonathan Strauss's *Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self* and Rebecca Comay's *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, have started to recognize that Hegel's phenomenological interrogations of consciousness and subjectivity – of consciousness *becoming* the self-consciousness of its rational existence in the world – is a calculated supplement to the failure of modernity to somehow grow out of – to be healed of its “mourning sickness”, as Comay cleverly describes it – its traumatic birthplace in the political and philosophical rupture of historicity in the reign of terror. Comay reads Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a coded intervention into the historiographical battlefield surrounding the question of how modernity was to mediate the apparent inseparability of revolution and terror. Hegel seeks to extract the rational kernel of revolutionary terror without simply affirming it as a strategic necessity nor disavowing it as the madness of the revolution's misguided architects. The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, accordingly, reads in this way as the philosophical counterpart to the fragmentary discourse of romanticism, which intuited the degree to which the revolutionary exigency of terror firmly installed crisis and contradiction as the unsurpassable linchpins of the entire project of modernity

as such. In “Literature and the Right to Death” Blanchot systematizes this analogous relation in arguing that, independently of historical coincidence, the phenomenological trajectory that begins with the absence of the work and ends in the work’s completion forces the work of literature to converge with the fragmentary imperative of terror at the limit of the work’s most advanced apotheoses (in Sade, in Kafka, in Beckett).

The Four Temptations of Writing

Blanchot’s phenomenological passage through the four temptations of writing – stoicism, scepticism, the unhappy consciousness, and terror – begins by readily admitting that literature “is unquestionably illegitimate, there is an underlying deceitfulness in it. But certain people have discovered something beyond this: literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity it may constitute an extraordinary force, a marvellous force” (21-22). Condemning literature for aligning itself with the power – the “marvellous force” – of negativity and nothingness, the underlying sources of the “bad faith” that condition its solipsistic isolation in the spatial and temporal interregnums of narrative and fiction, is to accuse it of what it knows and practices all too openly. The phenomenological act of literature and writing is self-consciously predicated on self-negation and bad faith, which makes the desire on the part of aesthetic judgment and criticism to condemn it on these grounds redundant to the extreme. However, the redundancy of this condemnation does not reduce the pressures of what Blanchot reads elsewhere³⁸ as the anxiety and dread that the subjectivity of writing experiences when it is immersed in literature’s “extraordinary” matrix of negativity and solitude. Because the negativity and bad faith implicit in the work of literature suspends the existence of the subjectivity of the writer,³⁹ who by entering the secluded space of the work has assumed

³⁸ Blanchot writes in “From Dread to Language”, taking his cue from Kierkegaard, that dread “deprives” the writer “of the means by which he could have some relation to another, making him more alien to his reality as a man than if he had suddenly been changed into some sort of vermin; but once he has been stripped in this way, and is about to bury himself in his monstrous particularity, dread throws him back out of himself and, in a new torment that he experiences as a suffocating irradiation, it confounds him with what he is not, turning his solitude into an expression of his communication and this communication into the meaning assumed by his solitude and drawing from this synonymy a new reason to be dread added to dread” (15).

³⁹ In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot elaborates on the logic of narrative self-effacement, arguing that “if, has been shown (in *The Space of Literature*), to write is to pass from ‘I’ to ‘he,’ but if ‘he,’ when substituted for ‘I,’ does

responsibility for its performance precisely as a work of negativity and deceit, Blanchot, in accordance with Hegel's dialectical narrative of self-conscious reflection, will associate the first temptation of literature with stoicism. For Blanchot, stoicism encapsulates the idea that both the objectivity of literature and the subjectivity of the writer are torn apart from one another by the work's irreconcilable tendencies toward conducting the reciprocal affirmation and negation of the existence of the work and the subjectivity of writing as such. The disjunctive practice of literature, accordingly, precludes not only the possibility of developing a conceptual understanding of what is involved and presupposed in the precarious labour of writing; it precludes also the subjectivity of the writer, which is, in a very real sense, entirely predicated on the performance of the work of writing that, though demarcated by its singularity and immanence outside the onto-phenomenological boundaries of worldly subjectivity, is nevertheless headed in the dreadful direction of a self-negation that the work authoritatively prescribes. Accordingly, stoicism represents that moment in the possibility of literature when the subjectivity of writing is forced to undergo the same movement of self-negation that applies constitutively to the literary work. The disappearance of the work of literature, its self-negation, means that the subjectivity of writing has begun to take seriously the idea, as Adorno put it at the opening of *Aesthetic Theory*, that "it is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, *not even its right to exist*" (1; my emphasis). Only by subscribing wholeheartedly to the "nullity" of literature, Blanchot seems to be saying almost two decades before Adorno⁴⁰, can it reasonably be expected that the subjectivity of the writer will be afforded access to the consciousness of its existence precisely as it is predicated on the "marvellous force" of literary work. Becoming a subject of stoicism, which signals the paradoxical denial of any access to the objectivity of literature and therefore also to the existence of the subjectivity of writing, is the first temptation that the writer must endure in order to begin the production and to secure the affirmation of the work of literature:

not simply designate another me any more than it would designate aesthetic disinterestedness [...] what remains to be discovered is what is at stake when writing responds to the demands of this uncharacterizable 'he'" (380).

⁴⁰ There has been surprisingly little written on the undoubtedly multiple points of convergence between Blanchot and Adorno. One of the few exceptions to this oversight, however, is Vivian Liska's excellent essay "Two Sirens Signing: Literature as Contestation in Maurice Blanchot and Theodor W. Adorno", which is part of a collection of essays on Blanchot edited by Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*.

“this difficulty illuminates, from the outset, the anomaly which is the essence of literary activity and which the writer both must and must not overcome” (23).

Blanchot’s phenomenological critique of literature soon discovers that it too must acknowledge and confront the temptation of stoicism – stoicism is a temptation of literary theoretical hermeneutics and critique as much as it is of the work of writing and literature. Consequently, before Blanchot’s critique has the chance to begin it is presented with the second-order temptation that if it can arrive at an exposition of the question of literature that places the fragile subjectivity of the writer unambiguously before the act of writing, an exposition that would redeem the existence of literature by revealing its hidden accessibility to the intentional self-consciousness of the writer’s now post-aporetic subjectivity (in the sense that arriving at an affirmation of the *unquestioned* existence of the work of literature – i.e. a completed work of literature – would represent and secure the reconciled existence of the writer as well), then it will have done all that can be asked given that it will have accounted for the impetus behind the question that animated the enactment of the critique in the first place: an account of literature’s right to existence and a representation of the subjectivity of writing. However, this will have been the result of a miscalculation of the object of Blanchot’s phenomenological critique – the ambiguity surrounding the existence of the work of literature: “If reflection, imposing as it is, approaches literature, literature becomes a caustic force, capable of destroying the very capacity in itself and in reflection to be imposing. If reflection withdraws, then literature once again becomes something important, essential, more important than the philosophy, the religion or the life of the world which it embraces. But if reflection, shocked by this vast power, returns to this force and asks it what is it, it is immediately penetrated by a corrosive, volatile element and can only scorn a Thing so vain, so vague, and so impure, and in this scorn and this vanity be consumed in turn” (22-23). Literature is unapproachable as a concept of reflection and critique; it ruins itself and reflection in forcing a reply to the question of its existence and its possibility. When left alone to produce works outside the watchful eye of critical reflection, however, literature appears to have little problem in conducting the work that did not seem possible when it was being closely inspected and interrogated, and in doing so it becomes an object of fascination – the source of a seduction and a temptation – that philosophical modes of critique, such as Blanchot’s, are powerless to leave unquestioned (the predicament here reappears in the myth of Orpheus and his incapacity not to gaze on the retrieval of Eurydice – through the power

of song – from out of the nocturnal depths of the underworld). Once the act of literature succeeds in presenting the world with a *bona fide* work of literature – “it is a fact; literature exists” (*Faux Pas* 80-81) – it cannot but revive its precipitation into impossibility and ruin by inviting the ordeal of its ascetic self-reflection to recommence continuously anew. No sooner does the work of literature appear than is it called into question by its self-suspicion and by the stoicism of external reflection.

The stoicism of an ambivalent and disjointed consciousness of literary work would therefore appear to be unsurpassable for the simple reason that the “corrosive” force of literature makes stoicism the only available option for inhabiting the space of literature. Because the existence of literature is unavailable as an *a priori* object of reflection and critique, the subjectivity of both writing and criticism are, at least in the first instance, compelled to embrace the phenomenological attitude of stoicism. In the context of “Literature and the Right to Death”, stoicism stands in for a consciousness that is steadfastly committed to honoring literature’s unassailable sovereignty – *literature declares it is taking power* – over defining (and in the process continually occluding and delegitimizing) the conditions of its singular and immanent existence. Stoicism is simply the *recognition* of this conundrum and this situation, an awareness of the freedom to think the mere conditions of its essential intractability, and nothing more. Because stoicism, as Robert Pippin reads it, particularly in the Hegelian variation Blanchot is drawing upon, “results in a sweeping, abstract, and indeterminate (and so finally unsatisfying) appeal to mere ‘thinking’ as such”, it does not provide a blueprint that in the end can assist Blanchot in envisioning a way out of literature’s intrinsic devotedness to an objectivity shrouded in secrecy and solitude (*Hegel on Self-Consciousness* 96-97). The impasse of stoicism guides Blanchot’s phenomenological critique of literature to a confrontation with the second temptation of writing, the temptation of scepticism, and it is in this temptation that the work of literature begins to actively dissolve all affirmations and negations about what literature is and how the subjectivity that is required for its possibility can happen to materialize in the person of the writer. Scepticism represents the crucial moment in Blanchot’s phenomenological critique of writing when the only option available on the threshold of stoicism is to jump wholeheartedly and blindly into the aporetic chasm circumscribed by the space and the work of literature. Scepticism *is* the aporia of writing, in other words, and writing requires the writer’s sudden leap into scepticism in order for it to begin commencement on the infinite work of literature.

Scepticism converges with a pure negativity that precedes all dialectical expectation and consciousness (unhappy or otherwise). This is the scepticism that Blanchot begins to revise as a form of nihilism in *The Infinite Conversation* and *The Writing of the Disaster*. Its defining characteristic is that, unlike in Hegel, it does not serve the inevitable production of the work of literature precisely because literature's existence is always already predicated on having converged with scepticism (as the uncanny precipitation into of nihilism). Crucially, there are two forms of scepticism that Blanchot develops throughout his *oeuvre*: dialectical and fragmentary. Dialectical scepticism is an act of suspension enacted in order to clear the way for an affirmation of the consciousness of literature; fragmentary scepticism is the act of holding suspension itself in permanent abeyance, without giving in to the work's threat of success or failure. Beginning in "Literature and the Right to Death", Blanchot extricates scepticism from its exclusively dialectical role in a phenomenological critique of literature, thereby making scepticism a redoubled temptation that exceeds all faith in the dialectical progression from the commencement of writing to the completion of the work of literature. What makes scepticism an ingredient *par excellence* of the fragmentary imperative of literature is that scepticism is made powerless to accommodate any and all knowledge or intuition of the existence of literature, obliging the subjectivity of writing to advance only in blindness and uncertainty of where it began and of where it is heading on the infinite way to the work of literature. The overcoming of scepticism instigates its very renewal in the face of the act of writing. The subjectivity of writing is retroactively inscribed in the space of this renewal. Accordingly, Blanchot suggests that scepticism is the phenomenological equivalent of literature's essential milieu – neutral language – for both scepticism and language operate on the basis of never for one instant sanctioning the confidence of having gone beyond language and scepticism. Literature cannot escape what Beckett calls the "terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface" just as surely as the subjectivity of writing cannot bypass its own inevitable convergence with the phenomenological suspension of scepticism (*Disjecta* 172). Blanchot cites Levinas confirming this diabolical truth about literature and writing, a truth which precludes literature from turning its back on scepticism: "*Language is in itself already skepticism*" (77; italics in original). In "Literature and the Right to Death", however, Blanchot provisionally subscribes to the dialectical form of scepticism so that the phenomenological critique of literature that he is performing can indeed reach its destination in terror, though even here there is evidence in support of the assertion that

at the threshold of scepticism the dialectical experience of literature bifurcates, sending the subjectivity of writing into the nocturnal solitude where dialectical knowledge and relation with the work of literature fades into inoperative darkness and obscurity.

Nevertheless, after the temptation of scepticism comes the temptation of the unhappy consciousness. Blanchot reluctantly adheres to the Hegelian dialectic of consciousness into its next phase of development as well, tentatively concluding that as scepticism coalesces with a particularly intransigent experience of nihilism, the writer finally begins to have an experience of the anticipatory anxiety involved in the absolute freedom that sceptical disempowerment prescribes. Writing's consciousness of scepticism marks an ambivalent advance into the phenomenological territoriality of the unhappy consciousness. According to Hegel, in marking its passage through scepticism, the unhappy consciousness has

advanced beyond pure thinking in so far as this is the abstract thinking of Stoicism which turns its back on individuality altogether, and beyond the merely unsettled thinking of Scepticism – which is in fact only individuality in the form of an unconscious contradiction and ceaseless movement. It has advanced beyond both of these; it brings and holds together pure thinking and particular individuality, but has not yet risen to that thinking where consciousness as a particular individuality is reconciled with pure thought itself. It occupies rather this intermediate position where abstract thinking is in contact with the individuality of consciousness qua individuality. The Unhappy Consciousness *is* this contact (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 130; italics in original).

Hegel is no longer, as in the case of stoicism and scepticism, interested in expounding the characteristics of mere dispositions of a divided consciousness. With the introduction of the unhappy consciousness, however, the previous fragments of a consciousness divided along the lines of stoicism and scepticism are consolidated into a single, though not (yet) unified, representation and inhabitancy of a consciousness on the precipice of its reflexive rationality. The unhappy consciousness, Pippin explains, represents for Hegel the moment in which consciousness has plunged itself into “a state of self-division and self-contradiction that cannot be coherently or practically maintained” (97). Now, although Blanchot will accord scepticism a far more prominent position in his overall critique of the work of literature than might otherwise be derived from Hegel's remarks cited in the block quotation above, he nevertheless transposes the passage from scepticism to the unhappy consciousness onto the phenomenological plane of the experience of literature to make a calculated point about how the writer exists relative to the work and to the world. The writer, Blanchot wants to say, inhabits a peculiarly liminal existence

of self-dividedness in relation to the freedom guaranteed by the space of writing and the prospect of implementing this freedom when the work of writing is called upon to interact with the outside world where a multitude of ideological points of mediation unavoidably predominate. Having acceded to the phenomenological state of the unhappy consciousness, Blanchot now asks, “what is the author capable of?” (35). Blanchot responds: “Everything – first of all, everything” (35). Forged in the image of the unhappy consciousness, the writer moves one small step beyond, but also of course a step *not* beyond, scepticism (a step beyond scepticism signals, more precisely, a step *not* beyond nihilism). Writing amidst the unhappy consciousness, which is only barely distinguishable from writing amidst scepticism, the writer is “fettered, he is enslaved, but as long as he can find a few moments of freedom in which to write, he is *free* to create a world without slaves, a world in which the slaves become masters and formulate a new law; thus, by writing, the chained man immediately obtains freedom for himself and for the world; he denies everything he is, in order to become everything he is not” (35; italics in original).

Emerging from the depths of scepticism and nihilism compels the writer to confront an existence predicated on a promise of having attained the absolute freedom of action before an historical world and reality – the perennially unfinished project of modernity – that otherwise nullifies this promise of all of its content and substance. Nothing is simply “given” to literature by the grace of its existence. Literature is perpetual struggle for the right to an existence in the absolute freedom promised by writing and death. While this observation says very little on its own, its significance for Blanchot is as a springboard for pushing his critique of literature from out of the insulated and imaginative existence of scepticism and nihilism and into the relation with the world of history, politics, and culture, precisely where the unhappy consciousness suffers its more matured and more dialectically advanced experience of writing. Denying “everything he is” so as to “become everything he is not”, the writer transcends the imaginatively sceptical world of literature. The writer does this “not because he deals with what is unreal but because he makes all of reality available to us. Unreality begins with the whole. The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole” (36). Literature begins *not only* at the moment when literature becomes a question; rather, literature begins at the moment when the world is made in *the image of the question of literature*. The writer’s unhappy consciousness is the sole resident of just this world in just this moment.

We arrive now at a point where a complete summary of the three temptations of writing will help set the stage for introducing the fourth and final temptation – literature as the fragmentary imperative of terror. Blanchot's Hegelianism, which overdetermines the first section of "Literature and the Right to Death", follows the dialectic of phenomenological consciousness through to its extension in the dialectic of historical consciousness that is the driving-force behind the second part of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Presuming that readers of "Literature and the Right to Death" are sufficiently versed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Blanchot nonchalantly states that "as we know, a writer's main temptations are called stoicism, scepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. These are all ways of thinking that a writer adopts for reasons he believes he has thought out carefully, but which only literature has thought out in him" (37). Under the phenomenological aegis of these "main temptations", writing is the work of the prisoner and the nihilist, the genius and the incompetent; it precipitates in the writer the passion and the enthusiasm for success and prestige and the dread and the despair of failure and obscurity. Literature is all of these things insofar as "literature begins when literature becomes a question", and the writer only writes by embodying each of these dispositions in the dialectical advancement of the work of writing. Blanchot does not go so far as to say that the writer's subjectivity is excluded from communicating with discourses outside of literature and with subjects outside the subjectivity of writing. On the contrary, insofar as literature is defined according to the dialectics of a self-negating reflexivity, and here we are reiterating the role of the unhappy consciousness, it is inextricably connected with the world outside of literature, which stubbornly resists being re-modeled after literature's experience of freedom in the contradictory modalities of its singular (and singularly utopian) existence.

Blanchot is once again very close to Adorno in presenting literature as the space where the asocial truth of the social, the ahistorical truth of history, or the apolitical truth of politics, are negotiated precisely as the negative truths embodied in literature and aesthetics. As Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*, art's "contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: It is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated. At the risk of its self-alienation, radical modernity preserves art's immanence by admitting society only in an obscured form, as in the dreams with which artworks have always been compared. Nothing social in art is immediately social, not even when this is its aim" (226). Blanchot, however, is less interested

than Adorno in advocating literature and art for their capacity to construct a reconciled dialectics of experience and consciousness that, according to Adorno (and Horkheimer), modernity otherwise obstructs as part of a perverse suicidal commitment to cruelty, violence, and to the obsessive return to pre-Enlightenment irrationality and barbarism. For Blanchot, the historical truth content of art and literature consists more restrictively in the contact it sustains with “this language that speaks and has remained speaking” ever since the revolutionary origins of modernity, and so if art and literature are going to be invested with a perspective of redemption in the future always already to come of an enlightened and reconciled historical world, it will have to be through its continuous rapprochement with the discontinuous space of rupture and its adherence to the fragmentary imperative of terror that locked modernity into the project of crisis and incompleteness in the first place.

Stoicism, scepticism, and the unhappy consciousness do not therefore exhaust all the modes of existence and all the temptations of writing in which literature participates: “there is one other temptation” (37). This other temptation is unlike the first three, and indeed it does not even occur on the same phenomenological plane of discourse – the language of literature – as they do. When writing enters into the fourth temptation of literature its addressee is no longer the attitude of stoicism, the language of scepticism, or the phenomenological maturity of the unhappy consciousness where the ambiguity and contradiction internal to the world of writing turns the writer onto the world without; with the onset of the fourth and final temptation, literature speaks to the *revolution in person*, as Blanchot provocatively phrases it several years later in *The Infinite Conversation*, its most uncompromising and demanding interlocutor and conspirator. With this in mind, Blanchot asks in “Literature and the Right to Death” that we “acknowledge that in a writer there is a movement which proceeds without pause, and almost without transition, from nothing to everything. [...] It is at this point that he encounters those decisive moments in history when everything seems put in question, when law, faith, the State, the world above, the world of the past – everything sinks effortlessly, without work, into nothingness” (37-38). The nothingness into which literature sinks when it asserts its right over “everything” is no longer the kind of nothingness that could be easily digested by what some commentators see as the phenomenological existentialism that has supposedly dominated

“Literature and the Right to Death” up to this point⁴¹. The fourth temptation of literature, already operative during the short-lived tenure of *The Athenaeum*, takes writing and literature away from the phenomenological context of subjectivity and consciousness, however divided and split Blanchot makes them out to be in the three “main” temptations of literature, and hands it over to the prerogatives of the fragmentary imperative of terror, i.e. to the *revolution in person that speaks and has remained speaking*. This is not an insignificant development in Blanchot’s argument. One of its implications is that the question of literature is addressed not only to the neutrality of language and the phenomenological subjectivity of the consciousness of writing, on the one hand, but also and more problematically (and far more ambitiously) to the revolutionary discourse of terror, which, as we have already noted, constitutes for Blanchot “the measure of history and the logos of the modern era” (*Infinite Conversation* 355). It is precisely the integral role played by the discourse of revolutionary terror in determining the question of literature, and not necessarily or exclusively the role played by language’s neutral inscription in the space of the *il y a*, which in any event has received abundant attention within the community of Blanchot scholarship, that needs to be underscored in order to better appreciate in a comprehensive way what “Literature and the Right to Death” has to say about the genealogical provenance of advanced works of literature.

As Fredric Jameson acknowledges, Blanchot’s enthusiastic reference to “the French revolutionary tradition and in particular Hegel’s description of the Terror” – “Hegel’s Terror is in fact absolute, a pure revolutionary freedom which threatens the content of all individual lives universally and thereby those of its instigators and the very life of the Revolution itself as well” – is what condones, surprisingly and paradoxically, the thoroughgoing insistence throughout “Literature and the Right to Death” that the concept and experience of literature be “promoted”

⁴¹ According to Tilottama Rajan, “Literature and the Right to Death” exposes “Blanchot’s critical kinship with Sartre”, and also Heidegger (*Deconstruction and the Reminders of Phenomenology* 80). Specifically, Rajan reads Blanchot’s essay as a thoroughgoing critique of Sartre’s highly influential 1947 text *What is Literature?* Not only does Blanchot offer an alternative perspective on the relation between the world of literature and the world of politics, but he does so “through a working back to an earlier Sartre whose focus on ‘nothingness’ had much in common both with Bataille’s ‘inner experience’ and with what Foucault calls Blanchot’s ‘thought of the outside.’” (81). To be sure, Rajan is no doubt justified in drawing out the Sartrean points of contact with Blanchot, but nevertheless I think this relation is somewhat overstated at the expense of grappling with the Hegelian agenda of Blanchot’s essay, not the least of which exposes Blanchot’s conception of literature to Hegel’s complicated and deeply ambivalent reading of the Terror.

to “something like a supreme value” as this was so spectacularly and enduringly embodied in the language and *logos* of revolutionary terror (188):

Blanchot’s greatness lies in this absolute excess, whereby the logic of the autonomous and the intrinsic is pushed to its ultimate limit and its ultimate meaninglessness (without, however, the pathos of thematization, and without threatening to undermine the aesthetic position itself, as it risks doing in de Man or Adorno). [...] [T]he very content of the existential and the political categories will be imperceptibly withdrawn and volatilized by their aesthetic analogue, leaving an ambiguous situation in which modernist affirmation can still be endowed with political or existential justification when need be, but where existential commitment and political praxis to come (May ’68) are somehow already suspiciously ‘aestheticized’, as Benjamin put it in a memorable pre-war moment. (*A Singular Modernity* 188).

Jameson is correct to alight on Blanchot’s intention to affirm something like an autonomous ideology of modernism and literature by invoking the Terror, that singular catalyst for the historical consciousness of an absolute experience of freedom devoid of the limiting and limited dimensions of finitude and death. Life in the intervallic historicity of revolutionary terror is lived outside the temporal limits of finitude as these are demarcated by the irrepressible phenomenological horizon of death. Where death means nothing, where undergoing the death of your pre-revolutionary subjectivity and self is precisely what the revolution expects you to have retroactively undergone from the start, the certainty and significance of death as one’s “ownmost possibility” is discarded for its complicity in anti-revolutionary ideology. The Terror, in other words, is a remarkable moment in history because it actualized the antinomial self-destruction of absolute freedom and phenomenologically accessible consciousness. According to Blanchot, the modern concept of literature wrested the discourse of the antinomy of freedom and consciousness away from the revolution, from “this language become History that signifies itself through declarative events” (355), and installed it as the commencement point of aesthetic modernity in order to declare that it, too, is “taking power” as the sole legislative authority and voice of judgment over how the political history of modernity was to unfold (354). Again, Jameson is right to detect in this thesis that signature of “Blanchot’s greatness”, but where Jameson risks misreading Blanchot is where he thinks that Blanchot’s association of literature and terror is committed to attributing to the discourse of the political the ideology of its subsequent aestheticization. Jameson diagnoses a movement that goes from the politics of terror to the aesthetics of literature and then *back to* the political dimension of revolutionary discourse. This reading of Blanchot, however, is too overtly synthetic (in a dialectical sense), and misses

the opportunity to persist with Blanchot as the unpredictable consequences of literature's alignment with terror continue to resonate throughout the literary history of post-terror aesthetic modernity. Because Jameson restricted his reading of the aesthetic significance of the Terror to Blanchot's 1948 essay "Literature and the Right to Death", thereby ignoring Blanchot's later reflections on terror in *The Infinite Conversation*, he underestimates to what degree Blanchot is resistant to "applying" the aestheticization of terror particularly to the post-war horizon of revolutionary political praxis in post-Collaborationist France up to the events of May 1968. Terror signifies for Blanchot a language and a concept that is and continues to be singularly appropriate to the fragmentary demands of literature.

As the fascinating project of Romanticism makes clear for Blanchot, "revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature" (38):

The passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute. Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world. Revolutionary action also has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but that it is itself the ultimate goal, the Last Act. This last act is freedom, and the only choice left is between freedom and nothing. This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is *freedom or death*. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being (38; italics in original).

It should be pointed out that the thesis according to which the coming-into-being of the aesthetic reign of terror occurs through the opening of only two choices for how the writer is to proceed – freedom *or* death – converges more precisely with the imperative of the revolution and not yet the imperative of terror. Indeed, that there remains the semblance of a choice between freedom *or* death is a luxury of revolutionary action prior to its over-determination by the reign of terror. Revolution is not yet Terror so long as people can still decide between freedom or death. Terror, on the other hand, erupts at the moment when the revolution decides universally that the choice between freedom or death falsely presupposes that the revolution has not always already decided in advance that at the end of the day death – which translates in the language of literature as the experience of a narrative voice that "always tends to absent itself in its bearer and also efface him as the center" (386) – is the only unimpeachable expression of absolute freedom. The unspoken manifesto of the Revolution, signed by the fragmentary imperative of terror, unapologetically declares that freedom *is* death, symbolically if not, in the final analysis,

concretely, and that to die is to step into the freedom betokened by the anonymity of a truly revolutionary (narrative) existence. Absolute freedom is thus the prize to be won by the vertiginous experience of a radical subjectivity that is stripped of the traces and signs of a pre-revolutionary subjectivity that would otherwise have obstructed its desired fidelity to uncompromised and incorruptible revolutionary action. Consequently, when in 1793 the revolution fuses with the juridico-political imperative of terror, which legislates over the symbolic and indeed all too real death of pre-revolutionary existence and ideology, it is an abstract and therefore absolute experience of freedom that becomes exclusively available for possession by revolutionary subjectivity. Terror divests freedom of its phenomenological substrate in pre- and post-revolutionary historicity, thereby converting it, like the freedom between-two-deaths of Antigone, into the abstract horizon of a fictionalized existence in uncertainty and contingency, that aleatory revolutionary horizon of consciousness that cannot yet contemplate itself as anything other than in the modality of the work of infinite incompleteness and deferral, contradiction and crisis. Acquiring an existence in the historical vicissitudes of revolutionary terror is tantamount to securing for oneself an existence that death cannot touch, and thus an existence that retroactively discovers itself to have always already had contact with the *outside* of death's ontological provenances and prerogatives.

Blanchot sees all of this clearly and chillingly enough: the Reign of Terror translates the phenomenological experience of finitude and death into “the very operation of freedom in free men” (39):

When the blade falls on Saint-Just or Robespierre, in a sense it executes no one. Robespierre's virtue, Saint-Just's relentlessness, are simply their existences already suppressed, the anticipated presence of their death, the decision to allow freedom to assert itself completely in them and through its universality negate the particular reality of their lives. [...] The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own death, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they are conscious of their death which they realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other people, but like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history (39).

What could be more perfectly conceived than an existence that cannot be sacrificed or killed because it is retroactively predicated, from the inevitable instant of its death, on the logic that, beginning therefore with its very first breath of free air (which coincides with the political and physical decapitation of transcendental – monarchical – sovereignty), it becomes the living

abstraction of revolutionary freedom itself? Only by an extreme act of misplaced modesty and self-preserving blindness – like Odysseus sailing through the Siren’s song⁴² – would literature and writing not be enamored with the prospect, validated by the Reign of Terror, of emptying the language and experience of finitude and death of every last trace of its everlasting ontological ingredients. The “main temptations” of writing, in one way or another, are aimed at disempowering death as well, but it is only in the fourth temptation of literature – to be in possession, *almost without transition*, of everything and nothing instantly and simultaneously – that the convergence of power and impotence, subjectivity and anonymity, the infinite and the finite, subject and object, seems finally to have become operative – “the Reign of Terror and revolution – not war – have taught us this” (40). This also explains why “the writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history. It is his truth. Any writer who is not induced by the very fact of writing to think, ‘I am the revolution, only freedom allows me to write,’ is not really writing” (40). The literature that concerns Blanchot the most and that he admires so enthusiastically conspicuously derives from the revolutionary terror that so influenced Jena Romanticism and that made possible the unsurpassable subjectivity of the Marquis de Sade, the writer closest to the Terror:

of all men he is the most alone, and yet at the same time a public figure and an important political personage; forever locked up and yet absolutely free, theoretician and symbol of absolute freedom. He writes a vast body of work, and that work exists for no one. Unknown: but what he portrays has an immediate significance for everyone. He is nothing more than a writer, and he depicts life raised to the level of passion, a passion which has become cruelty and madness. He turns the most bizarre, the most hidden, the most unreasonable kind of feeling into a universal affirmation, the reality of a public statement which is consigned to history to become a legitimate explanation of man’s general condition. He is, finally, negation itself: his oeuvre is nothing but the work of negation, his experience the action of a furious negation, driven to blood, denying other people, denying God, denying nature and, within this circle in which it runs endlessly, reveling in itself as absolute sovereignty (40-41).

⁴² This is one of the central arguments to Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they read Odysseus as the mythical progenitor of modernity. The lesson of Odysseus as he ties himself to the ship’s mast and stops the ears of his sailors with wax so that they can sail past the song of the sirens is a disconcerting one that, through Odysseus, “is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity. The human being’s mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions – in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved” (43).

Blanchot's exuberant celebration of Sade has nothing whatsoever to do with a simple enjoyment of the bounded and copied works of literature handed down from Sade through the centuries. "To say, I like Sade, is to have no relation at all to Sade", Blanchot reminds us in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "Sade cannot be liked, no one can stand him, for what he writes turns us away absolutely by attracting us absolutely: the attraction of the detour [...], the grand dissimulation where all is said, all is said again and finally silenced" (45). Because Sade is closest to the Terror, it is in Sade's writing that the fragmentary imperative of terror is most insistent and where it has resonated across the last three centuries the loudest: "that is why, as we listen to it, we tend to confuse it with the oblique voice of misfortune, or of madness" (*The Infinite Conversation* 387).

Sade and the Terror of Literature

Articulating literature's responsibilities before the fragmentary imperative of terror would be an incomplete exercise if the indomitable presence of the Marquis de Sade were left out of account. Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Roland Barthes, Jean Paulhan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jacques Lacan have all produced substantive essays on the literary value and continuing aesthetic and political relevance of that notorious and notoriously lettered prisoner of the Bastille prison and Charenton asylum, the Marquis de Sade. Blanchot is no outlier when it comes to the responsibility of confronting the Marquis de Sade and the impact his writing has exerted over the trajectory and genesis of modernist literature. If we adhere closely to the syntax and language of Blanchot's criticism of Sade, it becomes clear that Sade's writing is imprisoned in the madness of the same illimitable sovereignty of self-consciousness that capsized the ambitions of romanticism. That Sade, even more so than the Jena romantics, is a contemporary of the Terror is an essential observation for Blanchot's assessment of Sade's mastery at surpassing the formal limitations and aesthetic good taste of the literature and politics of his time. The influence of Sade's contemporaneity with Terror swings both ways: "Something of Sade belongs to the Terror, as something of the Terror belongs to Sade" (227). Blanchot's chiasmic representation of Sade's proximity to the Terror obliges that the philosophical no less than the hermeneutical encounter with Sade's writing cannot evade having to traverse an analytic of terror. If romanticism is conditioned by its reincarnation of the *revolution in person*, then the

Sade who writes *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and *120 Days of Sodom* is none other than its flesh and blood personification.

What is this “something” of the Terror that belongs to Sade? Caroline Weber, commenting on Sade’s privileged perspective on the political reality of revolutionary France before and during the implementation of terror right outside the window of his cell at the Bastille (where he was perched right above a guillotine), has argued that “whereas the monarchy at least made no bones about its arbitrary judicial practices – shamelessly reveling, as the Montagnards themselves argued at Louis’s trial, in despotism and bloodlust – the revolutionaries justified their killings in the abstract, joyless language of public interest. To witness countless scenes of death and suffering: not a problem. But to watch these slayings carried out, in Mantel’s phrase, ‘with no passion at all’ and in the name of a polity that construed passion itself as a threat to liberty: this, perhaps, was to Sade the Terror’s ultimate outrage” (173). When parceling out what it is of the Terror that for Blanchot belongs to Sade we need to be careful not to conclude prematurely that just because Sade’s literature is riddled with extreme (and extremely boring) scenes of violence and torture (sexual or otherwise), exhaustive recitations of libertinage and debauchery, and blasphemies of all stripes and persuasions, does not automatically suggest that it is straightforwardly predisposed to the revolutionary discourse and acts of the Terror. If Sade’s relation with the Terror is beset by an aversion to and distrust of its dispassionate spectacularization of death and desire on the public platform of the guillotine – as is the case with most spectacles, the purges quickly lapsed into the banality of their daily repetition – then in order to salvage Blanchot’s interpretation of Sade we will have to consider what the spectacle of the Terror occludes such that what is *not* banal and *not* dispassionate and repetitive in the experience of terror is destined for migration to the literary space of Sade’s writing. If “something” of the Terror belongs to Sade, in other words, then surely it is not its exhausting spectacles or the passionless bureaucratic sterility of the discourse of Robespierre. As Blanchot reads him, Sade is perhaps one of the first major representatives of modern literature (alongside Jena Romanticism) to deterritorialize the Terror and to metamorphose its most conceptually discordant imagery and provocative aesthetic ideality into a principle of the possibility of literature and writing in the historical aftermath of revolutionary modernity. Let us now consider in what this “something” might consist.

Blanchot insists that Sade's "liberation from prison does not free him from this madness that was acquired in prison, or at least came in prison to be what it is, an always clandestine and subterranean force; liberty rather redoubles it by another madness that will make him believe that such a madness can be affirmed in the light of the day and as the reserve or the future of a common possibility. Thus for an instant, the moment when revolution encounters philosophy in chains, these two hiatuses in history, certainly very different, coincide; the one founding an era and opening history, the other being that from which history will always want to close itself off" (*Infinite Conversation* 221). Blanchot's inscription of Sade in the fault line that divides in two equal halves the violence and virtues that constitute two sides of the same coin of modernity goes a long way to explaining why it is that Sade insists so compulsively on relying on reason and logic to give expression to the most unreasonable and hyperbolic expressions of sexual desire and libidinal fantasy. What in *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot calls the "madness" of writing "proper to Sade" (220) is already nothing less and nothing more than what in *Lautréamont and Sade* he calls "Sade's Reason" (7): "This is Sade's primary and main peculiarity: [...] everything said is clear, but seems at the mercy of something unsaid, which a bit later is revealed and is again incorporated by the logic, but, in its turn, it obeys the movement of a still hidden force. In the end, everything is brought to light, everything comes to be said, but this everything is also again buried within the obscurity of unreflective thought and unformulatable moments" (9). Sade embodies the state of exception to the revolutionary society that interred him in prison. The madness that reigns in the solitude of imprisonment is the mirror-reflection of the rationality being implemented in the name of liberation and freedom on the outside. It is through literature that Sade externalizes this madness in insurrectionary protest of a political and philosophical ideology conveniently blinded to its essential contradictions and hypocrisies. Sade's compositional *modus operandi* is the fetish of rationality, the uncanny capacity for pushing reason to its furthest limits and conclusions; it is precisely the faith in reason that the supposedly enlightened society around him believes to have been the instrument of their liberation from the violence and barbarism of the historical epoch that their scientists and their philosophers (and even their priests) had helped them to surpass. In the repression of desire, there is the passion for violence; in the triumphalist pursuit of progress and reason, there is the regression into employing more mechanized and efficient methods of barbarism and destruction. But Sade does not judge: all of these contradictions and these impulses are presented in the

Sadean universe as mere facts of a cultural consciousness newly intent on reproducing itself as second nature. If Sade's tactics are deplorable, it is because they mimic too closely the tactics of the enlightenment; if Sade's pornographic imagery makes us shudder, it is because we have so passively and irrationally capitulated to sexual repression. It is by wholeheartedly subscribing to modernity's disavowed spirit of contradiction that Sade is positioned as the most faithful heir of the irresistible aura of terror that revolutionary modernity explicitly if not belatedly consolidated. Literature is the key to making these contradictions manifest in the hyper-fictionalization of their exhaustingly exacerbated consequences (extreme violence fosters liberation, radical suffering subtracts us from conservatism, and passion is borne out of our powerlessness). Through literature, Sade is able to blunt the instrument of his critical assault on the hypocrisies of modernity and the strictures it placed on the possibilities of libidinal enjoyment only to make the wound that much more unhealable, forgettable, and perhaps even pleasurable. Thanks to Sade, we can pursue the hypothesis that literature is the rightful progeny of revolutionary terror and is thus singularly responsive to the logic and phenomenon of terror's continuing historical persistence. As Bataille reminds us, "it took a revolution – the crash of the gates of the Bastille – to deliver Sade's truth to us", which from out of the darkness of Sade's solitude and imprisonment, "where Sade did his writing [...], the conscious limitations of being were slowly destroyed by the fire of a passion prolonged by powerlessness" (*Literature and Evil* 125). The emphasis Bataille places on Sadean powerlessness represents one side of what obliges Sade's commitment to the spirit of the fragmentary imperative of terror (and also what positions the writing of Sade as an intimate conversant with the writing of Beckett); Blanchot emphasises the *passion* for an insurrectionary modality of writing that is singularly prolonged by this powerlessness, and it is this passion that makes Sade a true contemporary of the Terror.

Blanchot consistently reiterates the idea that the exceptional status of Sadean literature consists in that it tirelessly inheres in the fissure of modernity that was opened up with such determined force by a desire for revolution, a desire that was quickly (and for the most part pragmatically) refurbished as the indefinite demand for terror. Why is the demand for revolutionary terror indefinite? The answer to this question brings us to the heart of the inquiry into the relation between revolutionary terror and literature, a relation that exposes both these discourses to their respective appeals to political sovereignty and historical perpetuity. Sade converges with Robespierre through a suicidal subscription to the permanence of revolutionary

fidelity: “Sade calls this permanent state of the republic insurrection”, and it applies as much to the *political* republic as it does to the *literary* republic that Sade was in the process of establishing (222). Again, Sade is only in tacit agreement with Robespierre on what the measure of revolutionary virtue requires: “revolutionary vigilance excludes all tranquility, thus the only way to preserve oneself henceforth is never to be conservative, that is to say, never at rest. A situation that Sade judges irreconcilable with ordinary morality, which is no more than inertia and sleep” (222). When Blanchot refers to the madness proper to Sade, then, it is to be understood according to the madness of the demand for maintaining an unwavering receptivity to the exigency for restlessness (in one’s writing and in one’s revolutionary commitments), a madness that is articulated through the degree to which in one’s behaviour and in one’s very existence one has succeeded in throwing off the shackles of institutionalized standards of morality and (philosophical and aesthetic) judgment. As Robespierre reminds the Assembly during its debate on the trial of Louis XVI, those committed to the revolutionary demands of the day “do not judge in the same way as courts of law” or according to any other pre-revolutionary criteria of judgment. (58-59). Likewise, reading Sade’s literature cannot take recourse to those standards of comprehension or criticism that this literature exists solely to annul. To read Sade is to be locked into the terror of reading, the terror that begins when reading has no standards or values to fall back on, the terror that reproduces literature as the dialectically intransigent anxiety of its very existence. Sade’s writing cannot therefore be so easily dismissed as what Simon Critchley refers to as the “masturbatory writing” of his *oeuvre*, if only because, according to Blanchot, one of things it succeeds in giving birth to, and this is no small achievement, are just the faintest outlines for the outside of reading in which literature, too, looks for confirmation of its improbable and self-negating existence. What, then, do we read when we read (or not) the writing of Sade? We read the possibility of literature as the fragmentary imperative of terror.

The insurrectionary vigilance made manifest in Sade’s writing, a vigilance without which “the revolution would have been deprived of a part of its Reason”, adds Blanchot (222), is indebted, on the one hand, to recognizing what it is that the revolution requires of all who desire to exist under the sovereign auspices of its historico-political stewardship; on the other hand, the vigilance of Sade’s writing is also the result of the intuition that to correct the wrong of one’s ontological complicity in a life of violence and injustice – Louis is king, therefore he is guilty – it is necessary to abruptly sever one’s ties with the historical context where one’s existence is lived

(Sade was forced to do this *via* his radical embrace of indefinite imprisonment and exile to solitude). All the states and persons that

want to govern themselves as republics are not only threatened by violence from without, but also, because of their past, are themselves already inwardly violent or, according to the terminology of the time, criminal and corrupt. How can they surmount this somber inherited violence if not by a violence that is stronger and also more terrible because it is without tradition and, in a sense, originary? The virtue that all its legislators place at the basis of the Republic would be in keeping with it only if we were able to achieve it without the past – outside history and beginning history with it. But he who is already in history is already in crime, and will not escape from it without increasing both the violence and the crime (222-223).

Blanchot's surprising and paradoxical analysis of what it is about the historical moment that motivates Sade's commitment to the madness of insurrectionary writing explains simultaneously what it is that the discourse of revolutionary terror registered with perfect clarity and resolve, *viz.* in the notorious words of Saint-Just, *let us be terrible so that the people do not have to be*. The road to the redemption of historical violence is paved with the imperative for more decisive and originary forms of violence, a violence that some have called "messianic" (Benjamin) or "subtractive" (Badiou) and that would extricate the political body of the state as well as the subjectivity of the subject from the perpetual life of a participation in the injustice to which their historical existence keeps them riveted. Sade's madness is committed to the civility that has hitherto only been dreamed of in the enlightened childhood of modernity. The central difference between Sade and Robespierre, we could say, is that Sade has the imaginative capacity and vitality of spirit not to be dogmatically blinded by the admittedly real historical necessity to literalize – on the guillotine and in the prisons – the imperative of revolutionary terror and justice. To advance the thesis that literature is singularly responsive to the imperative of revolutionary terror requires that this distinction between Sade and Robespierre be recognized and maintained. Sade's translation of the imperative of terror through the insurrectionary madness of writing gives to terror an alternative space of expression and impact, a space that takes aim at supplementing the violence of history with the incessant refusal not to acquiesce to the melancholic perception of history's otherwise permanent irredeemability. The role of literature and writing in all of this is to defend an infinite reserve of insurrectionary creativity and resistance – formulated through an infinite and infinitely interrupted conversation between reading and writing, subject and world, suffering and liberation, powerlessness and passion – which also tells us about the paradoxical truth of the enduring existence of literature (the

unendurable condition *par excellence*): “to live without a lifetime – likewise to die forsaken by death.... To write elicits such enigmatic propositions” (*Writing the Disaster* 136).

Blanchot’s most sustained reflections on Sade in *The Infinite Conversation* culminate with the intriguing suggestion that with the “instant of prodigious suspense for which Sade reserves the title revolutionary” (226), a suspense in which “all laws are silent,” the true significance of Sade’s writing is most powerfully illuminated. Sade’s writing delivers us to the limits of the reason of literature and history alike: “this reason is certainly dangerous, terrible, and, *properly speaking, terror itself* [my emphasis], but nothing ill-fated is to be expected from it – on condition, however, that one ‘*never lack the force necessary to go beyond the furthestmost limits.*’ As Saint-Just says, with a word that trembles in its brevity: ‘*A republican government has as its principle virtue, if not terror*’” (227). Blanchot can easily be accused of bad faith or of administering a theoretical sleight of hand in this passage. Two pairings, two pairings that double as two disjunctions – the terror of literature and the terror of the political – are immediately apparent as the ingredients called upon by Blanchot to communicate what in the literature of Sade, as much as in the historical operability of revolutionary politics, circulate around a central concept and trope – *terror itself*. It is *terror itself* that acts as a hinge for the circulation and distribution of a reason that is as concretely threatening in the sphere of politics (it “is certainly dangerous”) as it is historically disarmed in the space of literature (“nothing ill-fated is to be expected from it”). To paraphrase the language of Badiou, what Blanchot is after is an explanation for what makes terror destructive in the space of politics, and an imperative and precondition for creative subtraction in the space of literature. This disjunction becomes less intransigent, however, once Blanchot proceeds to supplement the first stage of its formulation with the added caveat – “on condition” – that what is responsible for the danger and the sterility of this reason – the reason of *terror itself* – derives its force from somewhere other than what the already established limits of historical and aesthetic judgment declare. Inside history, inside the literary tradition as any historical moment knows and understands it, this power to persist in the fragmentary excess of the furthestmost limits is strictly speaking unimaginable and unthinkable, i.e. it is simply not pragmatic or practicable to advance the imperative of terror as the answer to the question of literature. A limit only exists as a limit insofar as what it demarcates precludes precisely the prospect of going beyond its borders (and therefore there is no such thing as a limit *per se*). To speak about a reason that is somehow dangerous in a paradoxically sterile kind of

way – terror nevertheless *is* the answer to the question of literature – is to speak about the possibility of an *outside* of history and of an *outside* of literature. These two outsides are in no way alien to one another, either; rather, their interdependence, dependent, that is to say, on *terror itself*, means that to begin navigating the reason of literature as it is personified in the *oeuvre* of Sade is to already be engaged in mapping out the reason of history in terms of how it is reincarnated in literature as the *revolution in person*.

Without terror there cannot be a suspension or a rupture with the dialectical exigencies of the present. This is indeed one side of the thesis that Blanchot is attempting to communicate with respect to the historical and literary significance of Sade’s incomparable acts of writing and desire, and it is a significance that extends far beyond just the biographical Sade and migrates all the way into the transcendental conditions of history (as future) and literature that, from *Faux Pas* all the way up to *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot is unceasingly laboring to coordinate. Precisely because it is terror that is responsible for the most radical suspension that history has ever experienced, a suspension that cut the secular world from its theological moorings (enacted symbolically and perhaps even literally in the decapitation of the divine institution of monarchy), it is terror as well that is enlisted whenever literature glimpses the opportunity to suspend the laws of its possibility and of its very existence: “With Sade – and in a very high form of paradoxical truth – we have the first example (but is there a second?) of the way in which writing, the freedom to write, can coincide with the movement of true freedom, when the latter enters into crisis and gives rise to a vacancy in history. A coincidence that is not an identification. For Sade’s motives are not those that had set the forces of revolution into motion; they even contradict them. And yet without them, without the mad excess that the name, the life, and the truth of Sade have represented, the revolution would have been deprived of a part of its Reason” (222). If we can refer to Sade as the subject of a revolution in literature, this writer who put to himself the impossible task to speak the unspeakable, incessantly, and to think the unthinkable, perversely, then it is because in the flashing instant of the historical disruption that Sade witnessed and in which he participated, his writing demonstrates for literature that it too can have its revolution, though only if it never lacks the courage to enter into a quasi-Faustian bargain that it knows from the beginning that it cannot outwit. Literature must continuously reinforce the terror of its self-annulment and asceticism if it is to have a relevant existence as the

rightful historical heir to the radical suspension that the revolutionaries of France carved into the future forever to-come of the political modernity that they were instrumental in creating.

Blanchot reminds us “that, in modern literature,” and here the imprint and legacy of Sadean writing is unmistakable, “the preoccupation with a *profoundly* continuous speech is what first gave rise – with Lautréamont, with Proust, then with surrealism, then with Joyce – to works that were manifestly scandalous. An excess of continuity unsettles readers, and unsettles the reader’s habits of regular comprehension” (9; italics in original). Sade accomplishes exactly this by flooding the space between decency and perversion, the *fort* and *da* of dialogue and violence, with a writing that is perfectly exchangeable with the silences and taboos that it ceaselessly shatters. As Blanchot notes, “Sade’s major impropriety resides in the simply repetitive force of a narration that encounters no interdict (the whole of this limit-work recounting the interdict by way of the monotony of its terrifying murmur) because there is no other time than that of the interval of speaking [l’entre-dire]: the pure arrest that can be reached only by never stopping speaking” (221). Sade, in other words, represents for Blanchot the first successful instance (he identifies Beckett as a candidate for the lone second) of how the continuity of speech is to be translated according to the fragmentary imperative of discontinuity and terror: infinite continuity and repetition becomes indistinguishable from infinite interruption and dispersal. No dialectical dialogue is permitted with Sade because his writing accords no respect or recognition of the logics and the authorities that exist outside his writing. The ethics and the very practice of reading presuppose that through its exploitation of language and the dialogue it implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) strikes with its interpretation, works of literature, even those as taxing and imposing as the Marquis de Sade’s, nevertheless inscribe spaces and pauses in their composition, entry-points and intervals into the formal architectures of their design, set up points of contact and encounter with the world outside of literature through which reading has the chance of commencing a “meaningful” and illuminating conversation with the works that it reads and judges either morally, aesthetically, philosophically, or politically. Sade refuses these moments and possibilities of exchange, and in so doing sets a dangerous precedent for the enterprise of criticism that modernist writers will later similarly exploit to the detriment of easy reading.

“Yes,” the books of the Marquis de Sade are “unreadable – capable of putting into question the honest act of reading” (328) – but “nevertheless they are read, read outside reading.

Let us say, perhaps, that works such as these, and first of all Beckett's, come closer than is customary to the movement of writing and to the movement of reading, seeking to combine them in an experience that, if not common to both, is at least scarcely differentiated – and here we meet up again with the idea of indifference, of a neutral affirmation, equal-unequal, eluding all that would give it value or even affirm it" (329). The idea that Sade gives to modernist literature is the idea of the fragmentary imperative that his witnessing of the Terror no less than his enduring imprisonment inside the walls of the Bastille taught Sade how to harness as a constitutive principle of insurrectionary literature. This principle, the fragmentary imperative of terror, only works if the insurrectionary desire for revolutionary subtraction it unlocks is continuously and repetitively exacerbated anew without regard for the dissolution of judgment and comprehension that a relentlessly continuous speech and writing inevitably induces in the experience of reading and criticism. In Sade, continuity is the repetition of the discontinuous, of the fragmentary imperative of writing. In style and tone, Sade could not be further from the romantics at Jena, and yet this does not stop Blanchot from associating both of their *oeuvres* with being locked into conversation with the language and *logos* of terror (yet another example of how a radical arrest of (historical and political) continuity engenders a repetitious proliferation of discontinuity – the discontinuous speech of terror that speaks and has remained speaking). This conversation between the continuous and the discontinuous, which is symptomatic of writing's being practiced in the sovereign immanence of literature, is nevertheless perceptible from the excluded perspective of criticism and reading because, paradoxically, it is a conversation that occurs *outside* all laws and standards of criticism and reading. Precisely because reading and criticism must devise new laws and standards for how they listen to and interpret the discontinuous speech that speaks incessantly out of the literature and narrative of works like Sade's, reading and criticism too find themselves face to face with the terror of having to traverse an *ex nihilo* pathway of conceptual and hermeneutical orientation relative to the fragmentary imperative of terror. What is true of Sade is true of romanticism is true of criticism: reading and writing, criticism and literature exist as singularly and sovereignly responsive to the fragmentary imperative of terror, and as a consequence must devise new laws of knowledge, imagination, technique, perspective, and responsibility if they are to move radically forward beyond the inertia of their prior instantiations.

Existing in this way means that literature does not have to answer to whatever it is from the outside that would disrupt its right to sovereign and autonomous control over what gets written and said through the interstitial spaces of its language, its images, and its silent aggrandizement of phenomenologically dispossessed narrative voices. Sade is the “writer *par excellence*” because in his writing the anticipatory anxiety induced by terror collects all the temptations of writing and ends by repetitively producing a text that can only be read *outside reading*. Modernist literature repeats the lessons of Sade and romanticism only where what it produces gets projected precisely into this space *outside reading*, so long as we understand the discourse of the particular modes of reading that Sade’s writing was the first to shun so aggressively – reading according to “the habits of regular comprehension” – as the inherited capacity for understanding and judgment that tend always to precede the novel eruption of authentic literary work, work that paradoxically demands *new* discourses of interpretation and critique for its completion as the absolute of literature. Accordingly, reading becomes the negative locus of measurement for how expertly literature has approximated the fragmentary imperative of terror, which is to say whether or not a writer or a work of literature has succumbed without remainder or reservation to the four temptations of writing. We do a disservice to Sade and to the modernist writers his work preceded if we believe *in advance* that their writing is accessible to prior perspectives of reading and criticism, particularly insofar as one of the constitutive dimensions of the fragmentary imperative of terror is that it annuls everything that is thinkable or practicable “in advance” of the aleatory arrival of the event of literature (and of the political).⁴³

There are any number of writers and thinkers on whom Blanchot devotes much time and energy expounding on their idiosyncratic commitments to the fragmentary imperative of

⁴³ In questioning what Derrida means by the idea of an event of the work literature, which for Derrida would depend “on the work’s ability to ‘(hyper-) totalize’ and to establish its own law or, in other words, in terms of the work’s ‘economical’ and ‘juridical’ force”, and questioning as well whether or not such a concept has any bearing on the aesthetic world of Beckett, Asja Szafraniec acknowledges that “this notion of the singular literary event appears to be in sharp contrast to the functioning of the (absence of a) unique event in the work of arguably the most ‘eventless’ writer ever: Samuel Beckett. A characteristic feature of Beckett’s project is that of generating a world in which nothing happens: there are no dates, no events, and no places that would pretend to have character in any way” (22). Insofar as she ultimately does want to make the case of reading Beckett through the lens of an event of literature, it is according to this more Blanchot-inspired version of an event that Derrida reworks in his own idiosyncratic encounter with literature and literary works. See in particular chapters 5 and 6 of Szafraniec’s *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* for an indication of what Derrida contributes to the philosophical-hermeneutic discourse of events, and above all, events in Beckett.

literature. In the concluding section to *The Infinite Conversation*, “The Absence of the Book: the neutral, the fragmentary”, which prior to *The Step Not Beyond* represented Blanchot’s most comprehensive collection of writings devoted exclusively to explicating the conceptual pairing of “the neutral, the fragmentary”⁴⁴ – the paratactic syntax of this formulation belies the constitutive difficulty in Blanchot’s mind of straightforwardly either disjoining or conjoining “the neutral, the fragmentary” – Blanchot reads (silent) echoes of the fragmentary imperative and (invisible) traces of the speech of the neuter in the poetry and poetics of Jena Romanticism (Schlegel and Novalis); René Char, the one “with a more vigilant relation than any other to the ‘night leisurely recircled’ of the neutral” (307); Antonin Artaud and his theatre of cruelty⁴⁵, “a major document that is nothing other than a treatise on poetics” (295); in the desolation of narrative in the novels and letters of Franz Kafka; in the insurrectionary madness of the Marquis de Sade; and in Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is*, “our epic, a narrative of the first citation in three parts, with stanzas and verses, the back and forth that by nearly regular interruptions gives us a sense of the necessity of this uninterrupted voice” (329). To be sure, it is Blanchot’s inclusion of Beckett, and particularly Beckett’s fragmentary achievements in *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is*,⁴⁶ in this pantheon of fragmentary writers and thinkers that, for the purposes of this dissertation, deserves to have the last word at this point in Blanchot’s overall reflections on fragmentary literature.

What makes Beckett stand out in this part of *The Infinite Conversation* is precisely the fragmentary rapprochement with reading and criticism that Beckett’s writing facilitates. Blanchot sketches a direct line of literary-historical flight that leads from the “unreadability” of the Marquis de Sade, that other contemporary of the Terror along with Romanticism, all the way

⁴⁴ Cf. Christophe Bident’s essay “The Movements of the Neuter” for an emphasis on Blanchot’s ambiguous identity as a philosopher who, as Deleuze defines the role, invents concepts: “If the work of a philosopher, as Deleuze puts it, consists in creating concepts – true ones – then the neuter, along with two or three other words, such as friendship, disaster, community, might be enough to make it possible for us to treat Blanchot as a philosopher. At the same time, however, we should realise that Blanchot did not in truth define the neuter as a concept; [...] migrating restlessly from literature to philosophy, from philosophy to literature, it is ultimately neither a concept nor a percept: *neither the one nor the other*” (13; italics in original).

⁴⁵ Blanchot acknowledges in an endnote to the chapter on Artaud, “Cruel Poetic Reason”, that the wide-spread currency of this term – the theatre of cruelty – fulfilled what it was that Artaud feared most, namely “that madness, speech, and the cry, immediately dispersed, would be no more than the elements of a strategy” (458).

⁴⁶ Blanchot had already published his critical review essay on *The Unnamable*, “Where Now? Who Now?” in the October 1953 issue of the journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. It was subsequently anthologized in *The Book to Come (Livre à venir)*.

to Beckett, whose books, if they are indeed like Sade's, as Blanchot contends they uncannily are, are only ever "read outside reading" (328; 329). Any demand, any imperative, is always already on the verge of locking is respondent in a prison-house of terror, and this is so even and especially if what is being demanded is a continuous and continuously unsatisfactory reply to an imperative for the fragmentary. That Beckett shares with Sade a protocol of writing that locks reading as well as writing into the threatening demand of the fragmentary is, in a way, in excess of what writers and thinkers after Sade and preceding Beckett accomplished in subordinating writing and reading to the dual imperatives of "the neutral, the fragmentary". It is Beckett's conjugation of the fragmentary imperative on the side of both writing and reading that makes of his work the most intransigent refusal of either writing or reading laying claim to "the last word" in the fragmentary movements of literature and of literature's *infinite conversation* with criticism (326). The fragmentary demand of terror that infiltrates the narrative voices of Beckett's prose – above all in *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing*, *How It Is*, and *Company* – is a demand that neither thinking nor reading in the Beckettian space of literature can escape, and it is a demand that emanates not only out of point of convergence where language becomes literature, speech becomes silence, and the visible becomes the invisible such that seeing best amounts to seeing ill; it is also a demand and imperative for infinite fragmentation that first entered into the space of literature through the Romantic and Sadean reincarnation of the historical experience of terror. The reign of anxiety and the sentencing to phenomenological abjection that logically result at the limits of the insane demands of the fragmentary imperative are proxies for the reign of terror that according to Blanchot subsumes the totality of literary experience and speech. "To think the way one dies: without purpose, without power, without unity, and precisely, without 'the way'" (*Writing the Disaster* 39): this is the injunction that Beckett's writing imposes on the activity of reading and of coming into hermeneutical contact with the narrative voice, specifically, that is uttering interminably, suffering interminably, dying interminably, through the wasteland of voices like the one that speaks in Beckett's *The Unnamable*.

Chapter 3

Suffering the Terror of Thinking in Beckett's *The Unnamable*

Suffering and thinking are secretly linked.
(Maurice Blanchot)

If the mind is the most terrible force in the world, it is, also, the only force that defends us against terror.

(Wallace Stevens)

Think, pig!

(Samuel Beckett)

Beckett Studies and the Resistance to Blanchot

From the very first pages of *The Unnamable* the reader is made aware that the narrative voice of the text is immersed in a radically sceptical and unforgiving reflexive encounter with virtually all the prerequisites of its narrative existence: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on” (291). The difficulty of these opening lines, as readers of Beckett’s work have long since recognized, is that the narrative voice that speaks them has, from the start, hijacked the labour of interpreting the work’s formal and thematic components that readers standing outside of the fictional world of *The Unnamable* require if they are to engage critically with the text. *The Unnamable* immediately presents itself, in other words, as a self-hermeneutic enterprise dead-set on discerning the limits and conditions of a life in narrative. One of the drawbacks of this compositional strategy is that the ironic self-doubt and negating force of these opening lines precludes in advance the possibility of authenticating that the voice is present as the witness or author of the testimonial fictions that the narrative’s inhuman architecture compels it ceaselessly to give. The rhetorical status of the first three questions, which is underscored by the subsequent assertion, “Unquestioning”, leaves the reader virtually paralyzed with having to consent to the implication that there is no definite “where” situating the narrative voice, that there is no identifiable “who” grounding the voice’s narrative subjectivity (and thus also authorizing the veracity of its speech), and perhaps most damagingly to the coherence of the entire narrative structure, that there is no trace, no archival evidence of “when” the stories and

events of which the voice speaks, “knowing that it lies”, could be said ever to have occurred (301).

Blanchot was perhaps the first serious reader of *The Unnamable* to critically respond to the implications that these questions have on the work as a whole: “Who is speaking in the books of Samuel Beckett? What is this tireless ‘I’ that seemingly always says the same thing? Where does it hope to come? What does the author, who must be somewhere, hope for? What do we hope for, when we read?” (“Where now? Who now?” 210). Blanchot is right to pause on these opening questions. Noting the threatening position *The Unnamable* assumes in reducing the methods and aims of literary interpretation and critique to little more than exercises in meta-hermeneutical redundancy, Blanchot goes on to propose that “what speaks” in *The Unnamable* is a form of neutral speech – outside subjective or narrative frames of reference – that is radically indifferent to what it is that language and literary forms of representation seek to communicate once they signal their entrance onto the phenomenological horizon of consciousness and memory, onto the dialectical plane, that is to say, of negativity and meaning. For Blanchot, *The Unnamable* signals the zero degree level of literary and narrative speech, and it is through the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* that language *as such* speaks. In *The Unnamable* “language does not speak, it is; in it nothing begins, nothing is said, but it is always new and always begins again” (216). Accordingly, Blanchot argues, with *The Unnamable* we are privy to a work of narrative that contains within its discursive structure the *alpha* and *omega* of literary narrative. *The Unnamable* opens itself onto “the pure approach of the impulse from which all books come, of that original point where the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores the endless pointlessness in it, but with which it must also maintain a relationship that is always beginning again, under the risk of being nothing” (213)

According to Bruno Clément, the risk that Blanchot’s reading of *The Unnamable* runs is that it does little more than transplant the work’s proliferating series of aporetic advancements and dialectic manoeuvrings – “how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?” (*The Unnamable* 285) – into a lexicon and rhetorical style of critical prose (idiosyncratically Blanchot’s) that is left mesmerized by the seductiveness of *The Unnamable*’s self-deconstructive narrative discourse. Blanchot’s face-to-face with *The Unnamable*, Clément suggests, consists in translating, hermeneutically, what it is that the unnamable is trying to say and think into a form of critical expression that does not lose

sight of the fact that the text spoken by the unnamable effectively erases any critical distance between writing and reading on which literary criticism relies in order to say something about the text that the text under consideration has not already said and anticipated. Blanchot cedes interpretive authority to *The Unnamable* itself, such that what emerges out of Blanchot's critical review of Beckett's novel is symptomatic of what *The Unnamable* always already says and knows about the narrative discourse it grounds. Wolfgang Iser is implicitly sympathetic with Blanchot's approach, particularly where he detects in modernist works of literature a pervasive and indeed constitutive hostility to the external perspective of criticism, a characteristic that climaxes with Beckett and that is registered so conspicuously in Blanchot's critical review essay on *The Unnamable*. Iser: "the fictitious-reader perspective is deprived of its traditional attitudes, because ultimately the reader is to be locked *out of* the text. It might almost be true to say that the more 'modern' the text, the more will it fulfill its 'minus functions'. This brand of modernity has perhaps reached its peak in the prose of Samuel Beckett" (*The Act of Reading* 208; italics in original). In the modernist context Iser describes, literary criticism must re-conceive precisely what it means *to think its encounter* with literature, or more specifically with the literature that Beckett's narratives exemplify.

It is precisely within an interpretive context of the "fictitious-reader perspective" being "locked *out of* the text" that Blanchot's encounter with *The Unnamable* is staged. Rather than adopt the notoriously evasive silence of Derrida in his quixotic reflections on Beckett's writing in the interview with Derek Attridge, which was collected in *Acts of Literature*, Blanchot instead works to merge his theoretical perspective on the phenomenological metaphysics of literature with a reading of the narrative voice that for Blanchot is responsible for driving the text of *The Unnamable* so deeply and inexorably into interpretive oblivion. Blanchot's reading of *The Unnamable*, in other words, in correspondence with the situation of modernism diagnosed by Iser, complies with the suspended façade of epistemological distance that the "point of view of the detached reader" desires to possess in its encounter with modernist texts like Beckett's (213). Consequently, Blanchot's reading of *The Unnamable* is a demonstration of how Beckett's writing simultaneously unveils and suspends both the laws of literature and the laws of literary criticism and critique by which these discourses operated so successfully in the past as aesthetic and critical mediums of representation committed to the advancement of epistemological

systems of value (the hitherto unimpeachable value, popularized by New Criticism, of attaining “knowledge” of finite works of literature).

The lasting consequence of Blanchot’s reading of Beckett, so Clément wants to claim, is that criticism of *The Unnamable* is forced to overcome being similarly disempowered of a voice that is not already anticipated or “ventriloquized” by the text itself. Blanchot’s critical review essay of *The Unnamable* suffers the paradoxical fate, then, of leading the way for the kind of “mimetic criticism” of Beckett’s work that came to dominate its reception in France in the 1960s and 1970s: “In this famous text [“Where now? Who now?”], which was to provide the tonality of Beckettian studies for a long time, one realizes with the passing of time that the critic is, so to speak, ‘ventriloquized’ by the text about which it claims to be saying something. [...] Few, very few readers succeed in refusing a full and complete legitimacy to this metatextual voice of Beckett’s texts, which denies them any pretension to stating the truth about the work in question” (120). While there is justification for Clément’s argument that in the case of Blanchot’s “Who now? Where now?” there is a minimum of critical distance between the conceptual discourse of Blanchot and the literary prose of Beckett, nevertheless his reading of Blanchot’s Beckett refuses to defend its polemical dismissal with anything resembling a comparative re-reading of *The Unnamable* beyond what Blanchot’s limited and admittedly limiting commentary on Beckett’s novel is able to contribute *via* the work of literary criticism. Rather, Clément’s explicit motivation in rehearsing the history of the “mimetic criticism” inaugurated most famously by Blanchot is to highlight what he sees as a “manifestly different” style of criticism that has taken root beginning, “let us say, since 1992” (120): “Simplifying a good deal, one could say that we have passed, little by little, from a mimetic criticism, of the type practiced by Blanchot (and to which the work, in general, made one say about it if not what it wanted, at least what it said) to a philosophical criticism (that can give the impression of making Beckett’s oeuvre do, sometimes against its expressed desires, exactly what the criticism desires it to do)” (120). The Blanchot-inspired era of “mimetic criticism” has been firmly eclipsed, Clément explains, by the philosophical encounters with Beckett’s work that we find in thinkers as philosophically diverse as Badiou, Deleuze, and Didier Anzieu. What Clément labels as the “philosophical criticism” of Beckett’s work consists in a strategy, not of reconstructing the significance of the intertextual references and allusions to philosophers and philosophical images and concepts scattered throughout Beckett’s oeuvre (which is unfortunately the kind of work that many contemporary

Beckett scholars continue to perform today, particularly with the critical hegemony presently enjoyed by archival or biographical readings of Beckett), but with a strategy of reading that begins with the pre-eminently Deleuzian axiom that “rather than literature and thought constituting two distinct orders, literature, by itself, thinks (I mean without its being necessary for it to refer to a given system of thought located outside of itself)” (122). The post-mimetic phase of philosophical criticism distinguishes itself by positing the discourse of literature that Beckett so singularly represents as a space where the essential questions encountered by, say, philosophical and historical discourse are re-articulated and re-framed in a language – the language of literature – that the discourse of philosophy and history cannot perfectly translate into the language and logic of the concepts and (linear) narratives that they understand best. For instance, literature has no generic business articulating concepts of immanence or transcendence independently of a philosophical paradigm of expression. As Deleuze and Guattari understand the distinction, philosophical discourse in particular thinks exclusively in the language of concepts, whereas literature and art think exclusively in the language of sensations (percepts and affects).⁴⁷ Blanchot’s reading of Beckett is hindered precisely by its pretensions to enacting a one-to-one translation, a mimetic re-presentation of the language of literature into the conceptual language of philosophy and criticism. Badiou, Deleuze, and Anzieu have no such pretensions, says Clément, and as a result their readings of the Beckettian *oeuvre* are able to conjure up “multiple ‘Becketts’, which are very different from each other, and undoubtedly the reading of the oeuvre has been deeply renewed by this” (120).

Beckett and the Renewed Rapprochement with Blanchot

The close affinity between Beckett and Blanchot is indeed something that Beckett scholars have long since acknowledged and appreciated. Why, then, does it need to be revisited

⁴⁷ The question and indeed the enigma – the image of thinking – of how separate discourses engage in the act of thinking had been an abiding preoccupation of Deleuze’s beginning with *Difference and Repetition* and lasting all the way to his collaborative work with Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* Rodolphe Gasché treats this dimension of the Deleuzian *oeuvre* in impressive detail in *The Honor of Thinking*, where in the chapter titled “Thinking Within Thought”, which is devoted entirely to this question of thinking and to how it was reworked over the long and meandering course of Deleuze’s philosophical career, he argues that whereas *Difference and Repetition* was “intent on demarcating true philosophical thought from any image of thought, old and new”, “*What is Philosophy?* by contrast, seems to reconsider the previous condemnation of the image. [...] But if Deleuze can thus reconsider the status of the image, is it not because the image of thought as ‘what thought claims by right’ now characterizes all philosophy, old and new? Is Deleuze not led to recognize in this later work that at least a minimal element of the nonphilosophical is essential to philosophical thought as such and that all philosophy thus comes with an image of thought?” (251).

here? The pragmatic answer is that with the recent publication of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956*, we have evidence that prior to and during his writing of *The Unnamable*, Beckett had been favorably exposed to Blanchot. Responding to a letter from Georges Duthuit dated 28 October 1948, Beckett thanks Duthuit for his “kind letter with the Blanchot article” (107). It is not entirely certain which of Blanchot’s articles Beckett had read (the editors point out that Blanchot had published five articles in 1948 alone), but in another letter to Duthuit, dated 3 January 1951, it is clear that it is Blanchot’s essay “Sade’s Reason”, which originally appeared as the second part of *Lautréamont et Sade* (later re-titled *Sade et Lautréamont*), that has piqued Beckett’s interest, so much so, in fact, that at Duthuit’s behest he began translating sections of it into English: “I have finished with the Blanchot. [...] What emerges from it is a truly gigantic Sade, jealous of Satan and of his eternal torments, and confronting nature more than human-kind” (219). Even more instructive for re-establishing the relevance of Blanchot for an understanding of *The Unnamable* and the difficulties it presents to the interminable labour of its interpretation is Beckett’s own praise for Blanchot’s critical review essay of *The Unnamable*, “‘Where now? Who now?’”: “On *Molloy* Maurice Nadeau and Georges Bataille seem to me the best. I also liked Nadeau’s general critique (I forget what in). But the big thing, for me, is the recent piece by Maurice Blanchot on *L’Innommable*” (442).

If we were to adhere to the history of Beckettian criticism outlined by Clément, then we would have to say that the trajectory of Beckett studies has moved from the “mimetic criticism”, or “poststructuralist criticism” of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, to the “philosophical criticism” of the 90s and early 2000s, and today seems to be dominated by a wave of genetic, archival, biographical and even digital modes of criticism, encouraged in large part by the increasing dissemination of Beckett’s letters, as already mentioned, and an overall academic interest in returning literary criticism to the historical and cultural contexts where works of literature (Beckett’s included) are undeniably produced. Within this latter strand of contemporary Beckett studies, we see a concerted effort to read Beckett either comparatively or directly through historical, political, nationalist, and postcolonial veins of interpretation, with Patrick Bixby’s *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* leading the charge on the latter of these interpretive fronts. However, if we pause for a moment on the institutional narrative told to us by Clément about the trajectory of Beckettian criticism, we might wonder whether there is a missed opportunity of convergence between the mimetic and philosophical styles of criticism exemplified by figures like Blanchot

and Deleuze, respectively. Is there a way of mobilizing the critical oeuvre of Blanchot, together with, say, the philosophical oeuvre of Deleuze in a reading of Beckett that does not have to make a hard and fast decision over whether or not criticism of Beckett's writing must be *either* mimetic *or* philosophical if it is to be intellectually invigorating and academically contemporary? Can a thoroughly philosophical reading of *The Unnamable* also be unapologetically mimetic? If so, then the burden of proof will fall on demonstrating that the contribution Blanchot is poised to make to contemporary Beckett studies does not inhere only in what he has published exclusively on Beckett's work, i.e. on *The Unnamable* in "Where now? Who now?", or in the section on *How It Is* in *The Infinite Conversation*, "Words Must Travel Far". The constellation of concepts and literary-critical sensibilities that Blanchot's oeuvre interweaves, from his early work in "Literature and the Right to Death" all the way through to *The Writing of the Disaster* and *The Instant of My Death*, are ripe for helping readers to continue and to deepen the experience and understanding of their encounters with Beckett's writing, in particular, and with modernist literature more generally.

The purpose of this chapter is to mobilize the conceptual resources of Blanchot (and to a smaller extent of Deleuze) in order to develop a combined mimetic-philosophical perspective of literary critique that is suited specifically for understanding how it is that *The Unnamable* stages the limits and establishes the preconditions for its narrative voice to become embroiled in its convergence with the terror of suffering and the terror of thinking in the space of literature. The phenomenon of suffering in *The Unnamable* is not reducible to an experience or an image that the work's narrative voice is in a position to communicate analytically or internalize and represent phenomenologically. What readers of *The Unnamable* have to contend with is the epistemo-phenomenological impasse that the narrative voice erects to understanding the "how" and the "why" of this "labyrinthine torment that can't be grasped, or limited, or felt, or suffered, no, not even suffered" (308).

Things would be altogether easier if Beckett had made *The Unnamable* adhere to the generic requirements of a personal narrative or a testimonial account of a traumatic experience, a survivor's recollection of an event that is separated temporally by the distance that ordinarily obtains between *the traumatic event that happened then* and *the memory – narrative – of the event that is happening now*. This erasure of epistemo-phenomenological distance sets up a situation where the suffering that the unnamable remembers and is presently experiencing within

the solipsistic confines of its consciousness and subjectivity is indistinguishable from the suffering that the unnamable undergoes in its failure to successfully translate the memory and experience of suffering into a dialectically manageable discourse of narrative: the *failure* to narrate suffering doubles as the suffering that instigates the event of narrative in the first place; the loss of its capacity to speak – to discourse in the language of Mahood – is what precludes its arrival – in the company of Worm – in the murmuring abyss of silence. It remains to be determined just why it is that this erasure operates so pervasively and unstopably in the narrative world of the unnamable, and also just why the unnamable is riveted to the tragic position of overseeing and experiencing – tormentor and victim simultaneously – this unendingly repetitive metamorphosis of narrative into suffering and suffering into narrative. In other words, what is the nature of the suffering that the unnamable can neither remember nor communicate, the suffering, it comes to pass, of the failure to remember (or forget) and the impossibility to communicate (or be silent)? The emphasis on the unnamable's ambivalent and intransigently ambiguous encounter with suffering is ubiquitous in the text, so much so that a close reading of *The Unnamable* would simply be irresponsible if it did not address the question of how and why the unnamable suffers so intensely and irredeemably. The question of suffering, however, is not the exclusive provenance of Beckett's zone of writing and literature. Blanchot, too, is keenly aware that the question of suffering is one that pertains to all works of literature that in the post-war cultural climate of Europe and France take their historical and metaphysical responsibilities (and freedoms) seriously. For Blanchot, moreover, thinking through the question of literature is *perhaps* inextricably linked to thinking through the question of suffering. To think literature is to think suffering. The diabolical twist of this neat formulation is that it is precisely the dialectically incommensurable relation between literature and suffering, in Blanchot's estimation, that subverts thinking's dogmatic commitment to the metaphysical values of reason, remembrance, and representation and replaces it with a commitment to a post-metaphysical affirmation of blindness, forgetfulness, contingency, and unknowability. Beckett and Blanchot are equally concerned with what happens to thinking – literary and philosophical – when it converges with radical forms of suffering. Ultimately, this chapter concludes that the relation of non-relation between suffering and thinking in Beckett and Blanchot itself becomes thinkable to the degree that it is forced to merge with the constellation of terror that overshadows the presence of Beckett's writing of *The Unnamable* in the post-war space of literature.

Radical Suffering and the Possibility of Writing and Experience

In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot posits the existence of “a suffering that has lost time altogether. It is the horror of a suffering without end, a suffering time can no longer redeem, that has escaped time and for which there is no longer recourse; it is irremediable” (172). As with so many other concepts and notions in Blanchot’s work, “suffering” becomes a relevant category for understanding the singularity of literature and narrative when it is divested of reference to a conscious subjectivity that experiences and contemplates suffering in the space and in the time of suffering’s phenomenological and indeed physiological apprehension. This “suffering without end” is not a worldly or bodily form of suffering. It is not derivative of physical suffering and does not have bodily or psychological afflictions as its cause and manifestation. Accordingly, it is imperative that we distinguish between two forms of suffering that inform Blanchot’s research on the subject, particularly as it is the more radical form of suffering, suffering that is not immediately accessible to historical and phenomenological consciousness and that for Blanchot represents a site that it is the singular responsibility of literature and narrative to reflect.

Despite the prevailing consensus of literature’s cathartic value and efficacy (Martha Nussbaum is at the forefront of this bland humanist diagnosis of literature), literature as such has relatively little to say about the psychological and physical suffering that so many of the world’s population experience daily. As Beckett writes in response to a (missing) letter from Aidan Higgins, “I don’t know what you mean by helping people, what has writing to do with that?” (544). Blanchot puts the matter in more grandiloquent terms, arguing that “those who are alone in their hunger”, for instance, “and live deprived of justice in the midst of a world still happy or tranquil have a chance of being committed to a violent solitude, to the sentiments we call evil – envy, shame, the desire to take revenge, to kill oneself or another – where there is still hope” (172-173). This promise of hope, however, is not something that literature protects or advances. The suffering that pervades historical and psychological experience is suffering that demands political redemption, and it is here, in the space of politics, Blanchot suggests, *where there is still hope*. There is nothing mysterious or particularly philosophically challenging about articulating the suffering that Blanchot still believes is not without hope of redemption and that Beckett outright dismisses as none of literature’s business. It is the suffering, rather, that Fanon’s wretched of the earth desire to mobilize as the motivation of revolutionary violence. It is the suffering that Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* hears screaming from out of the wreckage of

modernity, the suffering that makes “not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself the depository of historical knowledge” (260). This suffering is the suffering of the dialectic, the suffering of the messianic. It is the suffering of the slave who wins because he vigilantly struggles against the power of the master, against the uncontested authority of the law, and against the ideology of historical progress. The radical suffering that is literature’s responsibility, however, is not of the same metaphysical or ethical order as these experiences of suffering, which otherwise call for analysis and redemption from non-literary horizons of political and social mobilization.

The radical experience of suffering that occupies Blanchot’s research into narrative and literature, however, is not detached altogether from the suffering that interests historical and phenomenological consciousness; they are not “worlds apart”, as it were. “The horror of a suffering without end” does not substitute or negate, and it certainly does not minimize the stakes involved in the ethical imperative to alleviate the finite experiences of suffering that dialectical critique so successfully manages to expose in their diverse political and historical exigencies. Rather, radical suffering, like Blanchot’s later concept of the disaster, denotes a paradoxical experience and witnessing of affliction that Blanchot maintains “is outside history, but historically so” (*Writing the Disaster* 40). The point that Blanchot emphasizes in juxtaposing these two forms of suffering – radical and finite – is that the radical suffering without end, the suffering bereft of temporality and detached from all hope of redemption or expiration, only becomes operational where its migration from the historical world of finitude and consciousness goes unnoticed precisely by the subject whose suffering has hit such an extreme pitch of weariness and affliction that this selfsame subject “is no longer there to undergo [its suffering] in the first person” (173). The conceptual trajectory that Blanchot sketches from ordinary suffering in finitude to the infinitely more radical *limit*-experience of suffering where, translated into Hegel’s dialectical idiom, the radical suffering of slavery “consists in the absence of the slave, a bondage of shadows, [...] a destiny without weight and without reality” (173), indices in Blanchot’s work how something that is marked by temporality and consciousness – suffering always begins and always ends, knowingly and intensively (sometimes even traumatically), for the subject that suffers – can also be approached as a situation that is always already marked out by its displacement from between the ontological poles that subjectivity and alterity inhabit in dialectical (phenomenological and ethical) relation.

Radical suffering is positioned, for Blanchot, according to a synchronic and fragmentary context that subtracts from its ontological oversight the space-time of the present, and in this modality of subtraction it deconstructs the phenomenology of diachronic experience that is at the root of linking before with after, and where subjectivity and alterity play the dialectical game of representation and consciousness:

if I had recourse to the thought of such suffering, it was so that in this un-power, the I excluded from mastery and from its status as subject (as first person) – the I destitute even of obligation – could lose itself as a self capable of undergoing suffering. There is suffering, there would be suffering, but no longer any ‘I’ suffering, and this suffering does not make itself known in the present; it is not borne into the present (still less is it experienced in the present). It is without present, just as it is without beginning or end; time has radically changed its meaning and its flow. Time without present, I without I: this is not anything of which one could say that experience – a form of knowledge – would either reveal or conceal it (*Writing the Disaster* 14-15).

Blanchot’s positioning of radical suffering as an ex-sistent temporal phenomenon excluded from the temporality of presence – radical suffering, that is, exceeds historical and temporal consciousness inasmuch as it is immanently historical and temporal – begs the question of how it could ever be ordered or articulated by either historical, philosophical, or narrative modes of representation. By what methodology of critique could the existence of something so phenomenologically defensive be positioned such that there could be either a revelation or, in negativity, a concealment of the experience of radical suffering? Is there a way of establishing a dialectical line of communication between radical suffering and the suffering of historical and political injustice and psychological trauma? So long as thinking is constrained by seizing conceptually the objects of investigation that it encounters, radical suffering is by definition an unthinkable concept. Thinking philosophically through the dialectical language of negativity and the concept requires that a phenomenon like radical suffering somehow be borne into the present, assigned a beginning and directed towards an end, precisely where it could be set into relation with any or all of the metaphysical accoutrement that are necessary for transforming things into objects of knowledge and predicates of experience. This should not be a difficult procedure, given that Blanchot does not want to say that radical suffering is something with no historical or phenomenological basis whatsoever. Nevertheless, because Blanchot’s thinking is restricted in this case by the strange phenomenological and narrative properties of radical suffering – *there is suffering, there would be suffering, but no longer any ‘I’ suffering, and this suffering does not*

make itself known in the present – there is little he can do except turn to alternative modes of practicing critique that are free from the generic limitations placed on thinking when it operates philosophically on objects like radical suffering through the conceptual machinery of negativity and representation.

In “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony”, Derrida discloses the autobiographical background to Blanchot’s 1994 publication, *The Instant of My Death*, and although it “takes up just a few pages and appeared less than a year ago”, Derrida notes, he nevertheless insists that it stands in Blanchot’s *oeuvre* as nothing less than an “enormous text” (43). Derrida confides in his audience that he received a letter “from Blanchot last summer, just a year ago, almost to the day, as if today were the anniversary of the day on which I received this letter [...]. Blanchot wrote me thus, on July 20, first making note of the anniversary date: July 20. *Fifty years ago, I knew the happiness of nearly being shot to death*” (52; my italics). The plot of Blanchot’s “enormous” little text is straightforward enough. It opens with a narrative voice recollecting, in the first person – “I remember a young man” (3) – a harrowing incident that befell the text’s unnamed protagonist at his home in the French countryside during the Second World War: “In a large house (the Chateau, it was called), someone knocked at the door rather timidly. I know that the young man came to open the door to guests who were presumably asking for help. This time, a howl: ‘Everyone outside’. A Nazi lieutenant, in shamefully normal French, made the oldest people exit first, and then two young women” (3). Once outside, the Nazi lieutenant (who turns out to be an officer with the Vlassov army, our narrator reveals later) ordered the young man to stand against a wall and ready himself for execution. After calmly requesting that the soldiers not subject his family to the grisly spectacle of his execution by firing squad, the young man passively accepts his fate “as if everything had already been done” (5). It is at this point that the narrative presents this young man encountering immortality precisely at the threshold of death, where dying has become an impossibility for this young man *as if it had already been done*.

As this young man encounters death as the impossibility of dying, the text’s narrator struggles to descend with him, like a shadow of Orpheus, into the intimacy of this experience that dissolves the subjective presence of the one who is there to experience it:

I know – do I know it – that the one at whom the Germans were aiming, awaiting but the final order, experienced then a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however) – sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death? In his place, I will not try to analyze. He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead – immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. *Rather the feeling of compassion for*

suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal. Henceforth, he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship (5; my emphasis).

With the autobiographical dimension hanging so heavily over our reception of this text, as well as the historical markers that it invokes in situating it quite precisely in an historico-political context – France in the dying days of the Nazi Occupation and Terror – that cannot simply be glossed over as the mere “setting” of the work, there is much that remains to be said about “what is at stake” in this short narrative *récit*. The reality of the experience in the fiction is decidedly more complicated and inaccessible than what Blanchot, as autobiographical subject writing fifty years after the fact, is able to admit in a letter to Derrida. After a short series of “perhaps” – “perhaps suddenly invincible”; “perhaps ecstasy” – the narrative risks deciding on what it was that conferred onto “this young man” a “feeling of extraordinary lightness” (5). What the young man experienced, what dislodged him, however momentarily, from the context of the living and from the consciousness of his biographical subjectivity, was nothing less than “the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity” (5). What turns out to be Blanchot’s most personal work of narrative fiction is also the text that speaks for the generic humanity *from which* Blanchot, in historical fact and through the depersonalizing voice of fiction, is subsequently violently exiled. *The Instant of My Death* is the testimony of the one who has passed from existence to fiction (death as the impossibility of dying), from finitude to immortality, yet in these lines reclaims a passion that is only accessible to consciousness and memory in being “bound to death by a surreptitious friendship” (5). What is the nature of this friendship that transposes suffering onto happiness? How is this friendship tied to the peculiar experience of death whereby the narrative’s protagonist, this “young man”, is “prevented from dying by death itself” (3)? Above we concluded that if Blanchot is to propose a critique of radical suffering then it will have to be through a mode of investigation that does not take philosophical recourse to dialectical negativity or to the representational praxis of conceptual thinking. Blanchot’s return to fiction and narrative in what would end up being his last publication with *The Instant of My Death*, a fiction and a narrative framed amidst an unmistakable historico-political exigency, is perhaps an indication of what generic modes of thinking are best equipped for circumscribing radical suffering within the space of its possible critique.

The provocative association of this narrative with the aftermath of the Nazi Occupation of France demands that Blanchot’s autobiographical remark, disclosed in his July 20 letter to

Derrida, not be summarily dismissed. *The Instant of My Death*, regardless of its fictional status as a published narrative work, acts as fiction *and* testimony, even as the generic identity of the one interrupts and confuses the generic identity of the other. The question that Blanchot forces us to confront – *via* Derrida in 1994 – through the events that took place fifty years before the publication of *The Instant of My Death* and that ostensibly serve as its non-literary point of origin is the perhaps unanswerable one of why certain kinds of testimony and experience demand translation through fiction and narrative. To begin formulating a response to this question it is first necessary that we consider once again instances of dialectically incommensurable experiences of suffering where testimony and fiction converge. Why is it that certain extreme forms of experience and suffering can only be talked about and remembered by not being directly talked about and remembered, only talked about and remembered obliquely? The answer, Blanchot suggests, has less to do with the frailty of consciousness and the general lack of descriptive power and more to do with what Blanchot calls radical suffering and extreme affliction. The point about the incommensurability of these two forms of suffering is rather a deconstructive one: the person who is here now retrieving the memory of radical suffering – instantiating the temporality of writing – necessarily betrays the illusion that they were not the person who was present when the suffering was happening. More radically still: the ex-temporal presence of radical suffering precludes the presence of the subjectivity and the consciousness that would survive for the future of suffering's recollection and remembrance. The presence of suffering is not a presence sublated into the diachronic past, and thus neither is the one who undergoes radical suffering a subject of the temporality that in any event radical suffering precludes.

Can suffering this radical be inscribed in the texture of narrative? Does writing expose suffering without countermanding the sentence of suffering's exile and estrangement from the world of dialectics and subjectivity? What are the conditions of possibility for carrying out a narrative of suffering and for doing so without violating the law of the disempowerment of subjectivity that suffering always already induces in the suffering subject? Although it would be simplifying things to attribute suffering as the ontological precondition of narrative in a comparable way to saying that rage or grief are the preconditions of tragedy, an attribution which would carry the implication that suffering, for Blanchot, doubles as the timeless origin of literature and writing, it is nevertheless the case that in the horror of the suffering that interests

Blanchot, just as much as in “the neutral space” of narrative, “the bearers of speech, the subjects of the action – those who once stood in the place of characters”, in the afflicted bodies of Hegelian slaves – “fall into a relation of self-nonidentification. Something happens to them that they can only recapture by relinquishing their power to say ‘I’. And what happens has always already happened: they can only indirectly account for it as a sort of self-forgetting, the forgetting that introduces them into the present without memory that is the present of narrating speech” (*Infinite Conversation* 384-385). Suffering and narrative converge at the point where they expose us to the abyssal recesses of times we cannot record and experiences we can neither remember nor forget. In suffering and in narrative we are withdrawn from the world but denied the gift of death:

Let us (on a whim) call [the narrative voice] spectral, ghostlike. Not that it comes from beyond the grave, or even because it would once and for all represent some essential absence, but because it always tends to absent itself in its bearer and also efface him as the center: it is thus neutral in the decisive sense that it cannot be central, does not create a center, does not speak from out of a center, but, on the contrary, at the limit would prevent the work from having one; withdrawing from it every privileged point of interest (even afocal), and also not allowing it to exist as a completed whole, once and forever achieved. (386).

The relation between suffering and narrative that Blanchot is implicitly (and sometimes not so implicitly) articulating in *The Infinite Conversation* by illustrating the conceptual specifications of each according to the power they wield in disempowering the continued use of personal pronouns in literary space is one that plays out along two relational trajectories, “two slopes” of literature, as he puts it in “Literature and the Right to Death”. It is radical suffering that introduces us into a relation, not with the exuberant affirmation of Heideggerian finitude nor with the insatiable productivity of Hegelian negativity, but a relation with and in the outside of all possibility, a relation with the impossibility of dying that an existence suddenly thrust into *death itself* opens up. Blanchot’s metaphysics of literature, and I admit that I think the word is not too strong here, is counter-intuitively a metaphysics of historical immanence. Literature owes virtually everything to experiences of death’s impossibility (the experience of non-experience, the experience of the *il y a*), and so there should be little surprise that Blanchot is obliged to be concerned with what in “War and Literature” he calls “the accelerated confirmation” that literature discovers in “fundamental” times of historical and trans-historical “crisis” (109). An event like the “The Second World War”, for instance, “was not only a war, a historical event like any other, circumscribed and limited with its causes, its turns, and its results. It was an *absolute*.

This absolute is named when one utters the names of Auschwitz, Warsaw (the ghetto and the struggle for liberation of the city), Treblinka, Dachau, Buchenwald, Neuengamme, Oranienburg, Belsen, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, and so many others” (*Friendship* 109; italics in original). It is in the memory of these historical *absolutes* (note the plural) that “the suffering of our time” is inscribed and essentially forgotten (*Writing the Disaster* 81). “We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know” (82). The ontological self-confidence of bourgeois and metaphysical subjectivity is irreparably eviscerated when it encounters such absolutes, and yet somehow life goes on living and radical suffering, refusing to be silenced into oblivion, migrates “behind the scenes”, as it were, into the “outside, the night”, of cultural memory and solipsistic self-consciousness. Read in a certain way, Blanchot can be interpreted as rooting literature in historical crisis, tasking literature with the unenviable responsibility of giving voice to what speaks only the idiom of silent affliction and madness. However, to interpret Blanchot accordingly would be to falsely subordinate literature and narrative to devices that serve the conciliatory ends of memorialization and remembrance. The vocation of the narrative voice is far more disorienting and enigmatic than this, even and especially as it is forcibly and irreversibly enlisted in performing the therapeutic cultural duty of these mnemonic operations.

Radical suffering is an object of critique reserved only for the discourses of literature and narrative. This becomes clearer still in Blanchot’s encounter in *The Infinite Conversation* with Robert Antelme’s concentration camp memoir *L’espèce humaine*.⁴⁸ What Blanchot says of Antelme’s narrative of suffering in *The Infinite Conversation* is pertinent for mapping out the relation between historical suffering and the suffering in and of literature insofar as both forms of suffering emanate out of an exclusion from the onto-phenomenological ground of dialectical

⁴⁸ Christopher Fynsk reminds us that this section of *The Infinite Conversation* on Antelme, which Blanchot titled “Humankind” is “coupled to another bearing the subheading ‘Being Jewish’ (‘Être juif’) – the latter constituting what is one of Blanchot’s most significant statements on Judaism. The essays are joined with the chapter title, ‘The Indestructible.’ Since ‘Being Jewish’ may be construed as the description of a *form of existence* that bears witness to the exigency to which I have referred, the meaning of Blanchot’s gesture of coupling the essays should give us pause” (*Last Steps* 35). Fynsk is right to read “Humankind” and “Being Jewish” as (possibly) disjunctive statements on a single question – what is *autrui*? – and thus his work serves as an important reminder that Blanchot’s reflections on the concept of “the indestructible” are part of a larger context and discussion that unfortunately this chapter does not have the space or indeed the mandate (as a reading of *The Unnamable*) to pursue.

critique⁴⁹. Moreover, it is this relation that will best equip us for entering into Beckett's *The Unnamable* and encountering the suffering that Beckett's writing submits to the non-philosophical discourse of thinking suffering in the space of literature and narrative. After all, what is being said here about Blanchot and about Blanchot's reading of Antelme is intended as heuristic groundwork for entering hermeneutically into Beckett's *The Unnamable* with an ear to the imperative of the terror of thinking that Beckett's text issues forth (silently or otherwise). So although Beckett approaches radical suffering from another angle altogether than that which guides Antelme's autobiographical reflections on the suffering experienced (first-hand in the case of Antelme) in the camps, nevertheless with the assistance of Blanchot we can begin to see that there are points of convergence where the suffering that the narrative voices of literature speak, the voices in particular of Beckett's fiction, partake in analogously impersonal experiences of affliction that concentration camp memoirs like Antelme's struggle to represent out of the violent and dehumanizing margins of historical immanence and materiality.

It is in this sense, for instance, that Adorno is not far off the mark when he says that, precisely in being enmeshed "in the realm of life and death, where it is no longer possible even to suffer" ("Trying to Understand *Endgame*" 285), Beckett's writing constitutes "the only truly relevant metaphysical productions since the war" ("Selections from *Metaphysics*" 442). With respect to assessing the post-war significance of Antelme, though, Blanchot considers that Antelme's is a lesson that was not possible to teach or anticipate prior to the ontological and metaphysical crisis of suffering (a crisis that is immanent to suffering as such) brought on by the events of World War II. The enigmatic lesson that Blanchot draws from Antelme's

⁴⁹ Lars Iyer perceptively picks up on a scene in Antelme's *The Human Race* as a moment of terror in Antelme's experience. Iyer: "Antelme recalls marching with four thousand other prisoners, led by the SS, on a track through the woods. They hear a deluge of shots; the prisoners do not turn. One of their number has been shot. The column moves ahead. In the silence they hear 'the sound of solitary fear and nocturnal, diabolical terror'" (97). Why is the silence that reverberates after the shots the sound of terror? Iyer explains, explicitly invoking Blanchot's idiom of "death as the impossibility of dying", of death happening to no one in particular even (and especially) as it has already befallen them all: "Terror: someone will die in your place, just as you might die in the place of another. It is the possibility of this mortal substitution which allows each to feel solidarity with the other. But is it the chance of this same substitution, where one prisoner might be taken for the Other, where each comes to resemble no one in particular, that offers the chance of a kind of hope? [...] The prisoners fear death, but the SS fear the prisoners. Terror and fascination are mixed, which is why, on the march, they neither kill everyone at once nor let them go. They are bound to them, the SS, even as they know the war will be lost. But to whom are they bound? To the ones they might become, the Other" (98). The prisoners, in other words, already inhabit the radical outside into which any of us, including the SS, might fall at any instant, and it is this radical outside that literature calls its home away from home, its home in being exiled from the day and night of possibility and rest.

autobiographical reflections of his internment in Dachau and Buchenwald is that “man is the indestructible. And this means there is no limit to the destruction of man” (135). Put more aphoristically, the lesson is that “man is the indestructible that can be destroyed” (130). To be sure, the lesson Blanchot derives from reading Antelme, we might begin to speculate, can be mobilized as the premise to Beckett’s writing of *The Unnamable* in such a way that what remains of the metaphysical subject of modernity and the metaphysical ethics of humanism in the Nazi aftermath of this indestructible-destructible antinomical relation, circumscribed to be sure within the space of historical interruption brought on by the camps, is retrospectively affirmed as the irreducible trace of humanity – the ubiquitous non-presence of *autrui* – that no act of violence nor movement of negativity can erase or disclose. Benjamin’s permanent catastrophe of the historical is translated and transposed in Beckett’s writing as the permanent catastrophe of subjectivity and consciousness, the permanent catastrophe, moreover, of the narrative logic of temporality whereby subjectivity and consciousness make themselves available for representation in the first place, and again, this does not portend an ontological detour that subjectivity and consciousness were forced to take in response to extreme historical circumstances; rather, the permanent catastrophe of the subject is what humanity always already was, and it is in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* that this realization is submitted to the most damaging and irreversible procedures of metaphysical and phenomenological critique. The result is that there is not even a subject present enough, no subject with a metaphysical perspective sharp enough, that it could integrate this, its permanent catastrophe, into the redemptive machinery of a dialectics leading temporally (i.e. narratively) toward historical or philosophical sublation. With this catastrophe and crisis, this violence and power, then, there can be no decision taken one way or the other – the abyss of antinomical indecision cannot be crossed – on the question if humankind is indestructible or if it can be destroyed. What is indestructible about humanity is that when humanity is destroyed, and history bears out the recognition that the total destruction of the person and of the humanity of the person is an all too real possibility, its destruction preserves the trace of what in humanity was never present to begin with – the anonymous and persistent “little murmur of unconsenting man”, as Beckett’s unnamable puts it, murmuring “what it is their humanity stifles, the little gasp of the condemned to life” (319). The indestructible is a reflection of the incapacity of destruction to destroy *autrui* precisely to the degree that destruction becomes totalizing. The more destructive is the situation into which

subjectivity enters, the more will it be confronted with the indestructibility of the voice and trace of *autrui* that speaks and persists in the disappearance of the subjectivity thus destroyed.

Blanchot's conclusion upon reading Antelme is that humankind is infinitely destructible precisely and paradoxically because it can be reduced to nothing more and nothing less than the nameless and absent presence of *autrui*, the *autrui* that never ceases to speak even when there is no person left to give embodiment to the voice of *autrui*. It is imperative, then, that we "understand how heavily such a knowledge weighs. That man can be destroyed is certainly not reassuring; but that because of and despite this, and in this very movement, man should remain indestructible – this fact is what is truly overwhelming: for we no longer have the least chance of seeing ourselves relieved of ourselves or of our responsibility" (130). Between indestructibility and destruction, then, is the being of radical suffering, the unlivable and unlived experience of the affliction of being. *Autrui* testifies to the provenance of historical and phenomenological interruption that radical suffering inscribes whenever and wherever the destruction of humankind is carried all the way to its fatally limitless conclusion. "Humans, then," as Leslie Hill explains, "could be destroyed; and yet a trace or inscription survived, not as an entity, not in the form of anything necessarily human or non-human, but as that which testified to the impotence of the negative, and therefore resisted, beyond all power" (*Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing* 46). And thus it is, to come back to Benjamin, that buried in the past is "a temporal index by which [the suffering of *autrui*] is referred to redemption" and to the "weak messianic power" of a materialist historical consciousness. However stifling are the torture chambers of the oppressed and beaten, the concentration camps of the imprisoned and the starved, violence and destruction can never impose a lasting order of silence on *autrui* and on the echoing of injustice that it implants into the suppressed memory to-come of historical consciousness.

In principle, Blanchot's affirmation of *autrui* and of the ultimate impotence of destruction in the face of *autrui* logically permits the correlative affirmation of the indestructibility, in destruction, of the species-being of humankind, which for Blanchot, in tacit agreement with Levinas, is the inhuman foundation of something we might hesitantly call a post-metaphysical reincarnation of humanism. However, Blanchot's commitment to scepticism on all fronts of his thinking risks turning a decisive and final affirmation of *autrui*'s transcendence of violence and destruction, as occurs in Antelme and again in Levinas, into an ethical ideology potentially complicit in "radical nihilism", an extreme form of nihilism that inheres in the metaphysical

blunder of positing that the space and speech of something like radical suffering always already harbours within it the conditions for the possibility of its transcendence (135). Blanchot, in other words, is simply not able to comply with the ethical peace of the “situation” of pure speech that Levinas, on the contrary, is relatively quick to access through the conceptually permeable “gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the other (*autrui*)” (*Totality and Infinity* 24). To see how Blanchot arrives at this unsettling scepticism, a refusal to compromise in the face of transcendence, it is necessary to look more closely at how his thinking progresses through its reading of Antelme.

Blanchot’s reading of Antelme develops according to three interpretive movements of critique. The first involves tracing the descent of subjectivity, of “*ego cogito* (understood as the inalienable foundation of every possibility of being alienated)” (130), into the phenomenological darkness of radical suffering, a movement which passes in its first account as a straightforward critique of finite affliction. Blanchot cites Antelme as a biographical index of the subjectivity – the person and prisoner named Robert Antelme – reduced at the hands of the SS to this subject of the narrative of suffering that remains when all remnants of Antelme’s pre-war subjectivity had been eviscerated by the gradual intensification of what he was forced to experience in the camps. This first movement begins with (the strategic ideological illusion of) admitting the relative stability of Antelme’s pre-war subjectivity as a productive citizen of France and ends with Antelme’s arrival at an existence of utterly abject inhumanity. “In affliction – and in our society affliction is *always first* the loss of social status – the one who suffers at the hands of men is radically altered” (131; emphasis added). Names are reduced to numbers, faces are deprived of personality, and humans are denied their belonging to humanity. In this regard Antelme, who was imprisoned not as a Jew (Antelme was French Catholic), but as a member of the Resistance to the Nazi Occupation of France, was no exception to what subsistence in the camps entailed. Indeed, the nightmarish transformation that the SS sought to perform was of persons deported from their homes and communities in cities and societies all across Europe (and perhaps eventually the world) to what Blanchot reads as “essentially deported” persons. The “essentially deported person”, Blanchot explains, is “the one who no longer has either a face or speech, the work he is forced to do is designed to exhaust his power to live and to deliver him over to the boundless insecurity of the elements. Nowhere any recourse: outside the cold, inside hunger; everywhere an indeterminate violence. ‘*The cold, SS,*’ Antelme says profoundly” (131).

What Blanchot concludes next is perhaps difficult to digest in the post-deconstructive culture of postmodernism that we continue presently to inhabit. Once the “essentially deported person” arrives where there is no longer any reason or prospect to seek shelter from the harshness of the natural elements, when the violence of the elements is indistinguishable in its irrationality and relentlessness from the physical violence and neglect meted out daily by the SS, “at this moment when he becomes the unknown and the foreign, when, that is, he becomes a fate for himself, his last recourse is to know that he has been struck not by the elements, but by men, and to give the name *man* to everything that assails him. So when everything ceases to be true, ‘anthropomorphism’ would be truth’s ultimate echo” (131). At the bottom of Antelme’s degradation, which relates inversely to the apex of the violence and inhumanity of the SS, all that remains is this presence of “man” in which coheres the penchant of humanity for executing radical violence and the vulnerability – the poverty, the simplicity of a presence that is the infinite of human presence” (132) – that humanity represents and confronts as the victim of this very same violence. The common denominator between Antelme and the SS is simply this category called “man” that can suffer as much as it can cause to suffer. While there is a vast ethical divide between Antelme and the SS, we need hardly point out, ontologically speaking they are indistinguishable. Movement one of Blanchot’s reading of Antelme, then, concludes with the ambivalent reverberation of anthropomorphism that neither the SS nor Antelme can evade: the SS, the violence of anthropomorphism; Antelme, the anthropomorphism that cannot be stripped away in the suffering imposed by the violence of the SS.

Before continuing on to the second movement of Blanchot’s reading and critique of suffering, it is worthwhile here to remember that what prompts Blanchot’s reflections on Antelme is the question, “Who is ‘*Autrui*’?” (130). As it is beginning to come clear, Blanchot does not envision an answer to this question arising out of an ethical inquiry into the dialectical movement of the encounter between Self and Other, master and slave. Nor does Blanchot believe that the question, “Who is ‘*Autrui*’?” is first and foremost a question asked of the interpersonal Other from the totalizing perspective of the solipsistic Same. Here there is no dialectical community, however oppressive, unequal, or unjust, being circumscribed in the fight between the concentration camp prisoner Antelme and the Nazi SS. In the radical suffering that Antelme’s autobiographical writing circumscribes in the unfathomable spaces of its narrative transmission the dialectical positioning of the Self and the Other in relation to suffering are

suspended and the one afflicted so radically that he cannot remember what the experience of this suffering truly involved is faced with the phenomenologically unworkable realization that it is “man alone who kills him” and “man” alone that he irreducibly remains: “the nature of affliction is such that there is no longer anyone either to cause it or to suffer it; at the limit, there are never any afflicted – no one who is afflicted ever really appears. The one afflicted no longer has any identity *other than the situation with which he merges* and that never allows him to be himself; for as a situation of affliction, it tends incessantly to de-situate itself, to dissolve in the void of a nowhere without foundation” (131-132; my italics). This is the end-point of the first movement that guides Blanchot’s reading of Antelme, and which of course signals the transition of his reading into the second movement. There is no doubting that “man” can be destroyed, that there is no finite limit to the quantity and degree of suffering that “man” can be made to undergo, “*But, there is no ambiguity*”, and here Blanchot turns things over to Antelme, that “*we remain men and will end only as men.... It is because we are men as they are that the SS will finally be powerless before us...[the executioner] can kill a man, but he cannot change him into something else*” (130; italics in original). The “situation of affliction” that grounds the limitless destruction of man exposes us to the hardly consolable recognition that it is only the anthropomorphic facticity and the physical and psychological presence of humankind that is simultaneously vulnerable and prone to domination and violence. The “situation of affliction” that Blanchot is gesturing towards points rather to an exigency that is outside of where anthropomorphic subjectivity and consciousness are phenomenologically and ontologically situated.

While there is no dialectical transfer of power from the torturer to the victim, from the master to the slave in the universe of the camps, nevertheless in the “situation of affliction” the limitless force of violence and torture cannot altogether negate “the simplicity of a presence that is the infinite of human presence” (132). It is in this, the second movement of Blanchot’s reading of Antelme, that we are privy to a non-anthropomorphic human presence to which the ontologically ex-static situation of radical suffering gives voice. What violence and torture cannot annihilate or extort is the indestructability of what makes humankind so vulnerable to destruction in the first place: the spectral (non-) presence of *autrui*. This we have already discussed. Man can always be made to speak and to scream. This is man’s fundamental human right, Adorno tells us in *Negative Dialectics*, but it is a right and a basic physiological fact that is forever positioned as grist for the mill of a violence that capitalizes on the inexhaustibility of

man's ontological susceptibility to destruction. As we will see at length in later paragraphs, the Beckettian unnamable is doubly instantiated in the positions of victim and tormentor in this relation of an extorted subjectivity and of the inquisitor that extorts the speech of this subject's alterity. One of the more dominant thematic concerns of *The Unnamable* is indeed this thematic of extortion that exposes existence to the indestructibility of *autrui*, the vulnerability of *autrui* to the limitlessness of its destruction and silencing.

The victim – the closest we come to encountering the vulnerable and self-effacing subjectivity of *autrui* – that is forced by extreme acts of violence to speak and suffer can be made to speak and suffer *again and again* so long as it remains present to the consciousness of its torture:

Hence the furious movement of the inquisitor who wants by force to obtain a scrap of language in order to bring all speech down to the level of force. To make speak, and through torture, is to attempt to master infinite distance by reducing expression to this language of power through which the one who speaks would once again lay himself open to force's hold; and the one who is being tortured refuses to speak in order not to enter through the extorted words into this game of opposing violence, but also, at the same time, in order to preserve the true speech that he very well knows is at this instant merged with his silent presence – which is the very presence of *autrui* himself. (132).

The persistent and inviolable trace of *autrui*'s indestructibility, which cannot be extorted from the victim of affliction for the simple reason that it is not a presence or a discourse that either the victim or the torturer can possibly understand or possess, is the persistence of the “true speech” that merges with the threshold of radical suffering precisely where radical suffering gives voice to the “silent presence” of *autrui*. Blanchot up to this point is still in tacit agreement with Levinas on the value that *autrui* represents. It is this indestructible presence of the voice and trace of *autrui* that logically, for Blanchot, “bears in itself and as the last affirmation what Robert Antelme calls *the ultimate feeling of belonging to mankind*” (132; emphasis in original). In this second movement of Blanchot's reading of Antelme we see how “man” merges with the limit-situation of radical suffering and in this situation is exposed to the affirmation of its ultimate indestructibility, the radical imperative of *autrui* not to disappear without a murmur or a trace, as it were. This second movement, in other words, details the transformation of the biographical subject that says “I”, Robert Antelme, into the anonymous voice of *autrui* that has merged irreversibly in the margins of Antelme's narrative with the radical situation of its suffering.

Blanchot's diagnosis of the situation of *autrui* turns in this second movement on the recourse that the prisoner Antelme takes to an impersonal attachment with *need*. With this development in Blanchot's reading of Antelme we find ourselves in territory likely familiar to readers of *The Unnamable* and to Beckett's aesthetic program as it is famously laid out in the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit". Like *autrui*, the eponymous narrative voice of *The Unnamable* ceaselessly speaks and continues to think in spite of all because of the extreme and non-locatable obligation it is under simply and inexorably to think and to speak (and to write): "you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on" (407). And like *autrui* and the unnamable, Beckett writes in the "Three Dialogues", the modern artist too is beholden to the obligation, to the unending confirmation of *need*, to give voice to "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, *together with the obligation to express*" (*Disjecta* 139; my italics). For his part, Blanchot delves into the ambivalent perseverance of obligation and need after one of the interlocutors in *The Infinite Conversation* asks the very pragmatic question in the context of Antelme's suffering: "what happens nonetheless to the one who is no longer a presence – a terrifying transformation – in the first person? Destroyed as a Subject, that is, in this sense, essentially destroyed, how can he respond to this exigency that is the exigency of the presence [of *autrui*] in him?" (132). It is one thing to speak coherently about the convergence and substitution of one's identity with the unnamable and unknowable personality of *autrui*, but it is another thing entirely to return these considerations back into the historical and phenomenological (experiential) contexts where they in fact originated and are ceaselessly played out and negotiated. Blanchot tentatively holds that this can be accomplished through a second-order critique of obligation and need, since it appears that through its commitment to obligation and need, *autrui* keeps in contact with the world and returns to acts of violence and destruction the indestructible remainder that proves the lie of their totalizing successes.

"Here again", Blanchot writes, "Antelme's book gives us the right response, and it is the book's most forceful truth. When man is reduced to the extreme destitution of need, when he becomes 'someone who eats scraps,' we see that he is reduced to himself, and reveals himself as one who has need of nothing other than need in order to maintain the human relation in its

primacy, negating what negates him” (132-134). This pure reduction of suffering subjectivity to the alterity inscribed in need reinforces need in its most radical form. Devoid of pleasure, devoid of the excesses of living that make of need a conduit to satisfaction and enjoyment, the need that Antelme recollects “is immediately” and exclusively “the need to live” (133). Such a feeling of need becomes not “my” need, but the abstracted need of all who participate in Antelme’s ultimate feeling of belonging to humankind *via* precisely this indestructibility of need. This need, stubbornly attached to “*an egoism without ego*”, is a need that “becomes the impersonal exigency that alone bears the future and the meaning of every value or, more precisely, of every human relation” (133). When the desire to satisfy need can be manifested exclusively in the obligation to keep need alive, when need as such becomes the only end in sight, it is then that it is not *I* that need sustains, but the *I*’s obligation and responsibility to this neutral need of *autrui* that the *I* has all of a sudden and without knowledge of its metamorphosis become. This affirmation of need, which coincides with the limit-situation of radical suffering, represents the second movement of Blanchot’s reading of Antelme, and with the emphasis that it places on the indestructible exigency of obligation this interpretive movement alone would suffice to legitimate a comparative reading of Antelme and Beckett, both of whom are writing in the midst and in the aftermath of the Nazi Terror (though Beckett, like Blanchot, was never personally present to the horror of the camps). The structural affinities between the obligation that Antelme internalizes to somehow continue existing through an (unwilled) act of convergence with the need of *autrui*, on the one hand, and on the other the obligation that keeps Beckett’s the unnamable trapped in narrative, the unnamable “I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little”, circulate interminably around the affirmation of this strange presence of *autrui* that simply subsists in the depersonalizing situations of radical historical suffering and unredeemed narrative anonymity.

However, with Blanchot, and the same goes for Beckett, things are never as simple as submitting to Antelme’s one “last affirmation” of belonging to humankind through merging one’s subjectivity with the spectral universality of need – the indestructible presence of *autrui*. To Antelme’s heroically depersonalized affirmation of belonging, in spite of all, to humankind, one of Blanchot’s interlocutors in *The Infinite Conversation* again raises the objection that “for such a movement to begin truly to be affirmed, there must be restored – beyond this self that I have ceased to be, and within this anonymous community – the instance of a Self-Subject: no

longer as a dominating and oppressing power drawn up against the ‘other’ that is *autrui*, but as what can receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true *speech*” (133-134). This reservation brings us to the third and final movement of Blanchot’s encounter with Antelme, and in this movement Blanchot is hesitant to locate in radical suffering the grounds for one final affirmation of the true speech that would confirm once and for all a belonging to humankind. Blanchot’s consistency as a thinker inheres in this uncompromising refusal not to enlist his thinking on the road to transcendence, however appealing it looks in the philosophically competent and historically wizened hands of Antelme. Where affirmation verges on the possibility of overcoming subjective destitution and suffering, Blanchot never tires of suspecting, is where nihilism begins and begins to make its metaphysical presence permanent. Blanchot’s interlocutor is therefore right to ask if after all that has been said about radical suffering, it is now in a position to present radical suffering as a form of knowledge and as a phenomenological concept of experience. Blanchot concludes his reading of Antelme with the following indecisive exchange between his two interlocutors: “That man is the indestructible that can be destroyed? I continue to be wary of this formulation. / – How could it be otherwise? But even if we are to delete it, let us agree to keep what it has most plainly taught us. Yes, I believe we must say this, hold onto it for an instant: man is the indestructible. And this means there is no limit to the destruction of man. / – Is this not to formulate a radical nihilism? / – If so I should be quite willing, for to formulate it would also perhaps already be to overturn it. But I doubt that nihilism will allow itself to be taken so easily” (135).

The point of Blanchot’s insistence on the enigmaticalness of radical suffering is that it is immune to being articulated and discovered according to verifiable sites of narrative and phenomenological inscription, otherwise it would no longer be *radical* suffering that is being subjected to critique. To perform a critique of radical suffering as something that exists historically *outside history*, it is necessary that there be a route other than the historical one that is responsible for letting radical suffering subsist, and therefore of obstructing its proximity to radical nihilism, according to its own idiosyncratic economy of presence. What is so epistemologically disorienting about Blanchot’s encounter with radical suffering in the autobiographical writing of Antelme is that positing it as accessible to thinking has to presuppose that thinking has crossed the threshold of what is thinkable, otherwise radical suffering would quickly revert back to its dialectical form of knowable and finite affliction. However, because

radical suffering, as we have already seen Blanchot insisting in *The Writing of the Disaster*, is strictly speaking as unthinkable as it is unspeakable, Blanchot is logically committed to searching out a new protocol of thinking that can encounter radical suffering without doing so *via* recourse to dialectics. The reason is that it would inadvertently subject radical suffering to radical nihilism and the philosophical violence of transcendence. The problem first and foremost, then, is this: what is a non-philosophical protocol of thinking, a protocol that remains a protocol of *thinking*? Only if Blanchot can first unearth a non-philosophical form of thinking can he then block the consequence of radical nihilism that a critique of radical suffering, and of the indestructible presence of *autrui* that radical suffering provokes, logically risks entailing. This movement of thinking outside of the philosophical (and it is indeed a *movement*, a tireless labour of thinking) is imperative if thinking is to avoid being guilty of committing an epistemological “affront to affliction” that Blanchot warns us of in *The Writing of the Disaster*, guilty, that is to say, of the “obscenity of understanding” that Claude Lanzmann likewise cautions us to avoid in the face of such historical absolutes as the horror of the camps. Again Blanchot: “We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know” (*Writing the Disaster* 82).

Blanchot uses the occasion of commenting on Antonin Artaud’s fascinating epistolary exchange with Jacques Rivière to suggest that what Artaud’s writing says, which places his work in the literary constellation that is formed around Blanchot’s pantheon of writers that include Sade, Hölderlin, Mallarmé, Kafka, Joubert, Char, Celan, and Beckett, “is of an intensity that we could not bear. Here speaks a pain that refuses all profundity, all illusion, and all hope, but that, in this refusal, offers to thought ‘the ether of a new space’” (40). Blanchot continues teasing out the broader implications that Artaud’s writing has on its encounter with the act of thinking which, under the pragmatic illusion of the phenomenological and hermeneutic distance that separates thinking from the object of its encounter, desires to read in this writing something other than the impossibility of reading and thinking, something other than the anguish that these activities experience the instant that they confront, as they do in Artaud, “what one is forbidden to read” (*Writing the Disaster* 10):

the act of thinking can only be deeply shocking; what is to be thought about is in thought that which turns away from it and inexhaustibly exhausts itself in it; suffering and thinking are secretly linked, for if suffering, when it becomes extreme, is such that it destroys the capacity to suffer, always destroying ahead of itself, in time, the time when suffering could be grasped and ended, it is perhaps the same with thought.

Strange connections. Might it be that extreme thought and extreme suffering open onto the same horizon?
 Might suffering be, finally, thinking? (*The Book to Come* 40).

Without simply conflating the difference that obtains to the relation of thinking and suffering, which even if thinking and suffering are synonymous, it is a relation of veiled symmetry that is maintained by the dissymmetry of a repetition (thinking *becomes* suffering in the act of thinking), Blanchot is nevertheless adhering faithfully to the limit that radical suffering imposes on the approach of thinking. The intermediary status of writing in the dissymmetrical repetition of thinking as suffering cannot be ignored or downplayed. Artaud's poetic expression of suffering does not permit thought's withdrawal into a narcissistic obsession with delineating the metaphysical boundaries of "what it means to think", and particularly of "what it means to think" the exigency of radical suffering. Thinking is suffocated by its encounter with literature and writing, and in this suffocating encounter it is inextricably linked to radical suffering. Even before Blanchot comes up against the experience of suffering that mobilizes the indestructible surplus of *autrui* in Antelme's autobiographical text, it is *perhaps* the case that without this more intrinsic encounter with radical suffering that Artaud's writing exposes, thinking *as such* could not possibly commence as an approach onto the space of literature and into the margins of the historical that Antelme's memoir straddles. Perhaps the threat of radical nihilism that works to undo all of the advancements Blanchot makes into his reading of Antelme is predicated on his failing to reconsider in his essay on Antelme what he learned from reading Artaud – namely that extreme suffering and extreme thinking (is there any other kind of thinking?) perhaps converge around "the same horizon". Perhaps, in other words, it is not so much the case that radical suffering is unthinkable and unspeakable, so much as it is that thinking as such *is* the exigency of radical suffering. In the same way that Antelme's narrative of suffering reveals anthropomorphism as "truth's ultimate echo" (131), so too does the act of thinking merge with the interminable exigency of radical suffering *in always destroying ahead of itself, in time, the time when THINKING could be grasped and ended*.

The Limits to Thinking and Suffering in The Unnamable

Whereas Blanchot's critique of suffering in Antelme develops according to successive logical movements that culminate in the impasse of thinking the exigency of suffering in a

philosophically responsible way, the reading of Beckett's *The Unnamable* developed here unfolds first by juxtaposing two contradictory modalities of an existence in suffering – Mahood and Worm – and then, second, by suggesting that the reason why the suffering experienced by the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* is so aporetically resistant to representation and conceptualization is that it unveils precisely this “strange link” between suffering and thinking that Blanchot first diagnosed in the poetics of Artaud. *The Unnamable* stages the terrifying convergence of the imperative of suffering with the imperative of thinking, a convergence that implicates the hermeneutical encounter with Beckett's writing in this imposing constellation as well.⁵⁰ Accepting the argument that thinking and suffering are “secretly linked” and advancing with the hypothesis that this link explains much that is going on in *The Unnamable*, in other words, entails that the hermeneutical encounter with Beckett's writing is obliged to negotiate the consequences and effects of the unavoidable necessity that it too undergo a metamorphosis through the suffering of thinking. Thinking the literature of Beckett is to experience the suffering of thinking, and when this relation is accepted as the *apriori* of authentically thinking in the space of literature, of exposing the hermeneutical encounter with Beckett's writing to the suffering of thinking that Beckett's writing precipitates, we finally begin to approximate what Beckett means when the unnamable explicitly states that thinking begins only by crossing the threshold of *the terror* of thinking. Developing a critique of the image of thinking that is operative in the narrative context of *The Unnamable* therefore demands a parallel critique of terror. The terror of thinking and the terror of suffering converge around the constellation of what I am here calling the terror of literature. If the narrative voice of the unnamable is to be taken at its word (a perilous yet necessary condition of reading Beckett), then a critique of the terror of literature will double as a critique of the reciprocating terror of suffering and thinking in *The Unnamable*, and *vice versa*. This task of critique presupposes, however, the possibility of assuming precisely the monstrous hermeneutical consciousness of a mimetic-philosophical approach to thinking literature that Clément denies to Blanchot (the mimetic reader of Beckett)

⁵⁰ In his chapter on *The Unnamable* in *Interpreting Narrative in the Novels of Samuel Beckett*, Jonathan Boulter alerts us to a section in Beckett's *Proust* where Beckett insinuates a relation between suffering and interpretation: “As Beckett suggests in *Proust*, suffering is more than a mere existential condition. It is a condition that tempers and perhaps articulates interpretation, the hermeneutical experience itself: suffering initially is a heuristic ‘device’. [...] Suffering – suffering of the Proustian character, the Beckettian character, the writer – thus articulates its own aesthetic, its own framing of specific experiences” (95).

as much as he does to Deleuze (the philosophical reader of Beckett). Transforming the hermeneutical consciousness involved in reading Beckett according to the stipulations and conditions that are outlined above requires a reciprocal transformation in how the critical horizons of interpreting literature that are sketched out in the work of Deleuze and, in particular, Blanchot are adopted for addressing the specific challenges of saying anything at all that is decisive and illuminating about Beckett's fiction and prose.

There will be violence in reading *The Unnamable* from the philosophical side of the mimetic-philosophical paradigm of interpretation proposed here, but on the mimetic side of this paradigm there will also be an acceptance of the passivity of thinking that the hermeneutical encounter with the radical suffering of the unnamable's ontological and phenomenological liminality demands. What I propose to call *the terror of thinking* in the context of reading *The Unnamable* is the superimposition of these two demands – the violence and passivity of thinking – onto a single hermeneutical plane of critique. When Blanchot concludes his reading of Artaud with the suggestion that thinking and suffering are secretly linked, perhaps to the point of being metaphysically synonymous, he leaves out of account the instant at which thinking must begin to think *something*, even as this *something* turns out to be the unthinkable exigency of radical suffering. In the limit-experiences of (historical and phenomenological) subjectivity where radical suffering substitutes for thinking (the passivity of thinking) and thinking takes over for the experience of radical suffering (the violence of thinking), thinking *as such* is led to trespassing onto the *terra incognita* of what it has never before been permitted to think precisely with the subjectivity that is constitutively denied, in radical suffering, the ambivalent metaphysical gift of accessing philosophical images of thinking. Deleuze, inspired as is Blanchot by Artaud's "terrible revelation of thought without image", the discovery that "thinking is not innate but must be engendered in thought" (147), helps us to supplement the relation between radical suffering and the passivity of thinking when he writes that "thought is primarily trespass and violence [...]. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think" (139). Blanchot's reflections on Artaud, particularly when they are juxtaposed with Deleuze's damning critique in *Difference and Repetition* of the images of thinking endemic to the philosophical history of modernity, enjoin us to consider that it is an existence in radical suffering that simultaneously

opens and forecloses this Deleuzian encroachment onto a pre-philosophical and contingent plane of thinking *without* classical images of thinking as guides to the question, *what does it mean to think?*. Although both Blanchot and Deleuze elucidate their critiques of thinking in the context of commentaries on Artaud, the wager here is that Beckett's *The Unnamable* operates as an indispensable supplement to framing the question *what does it mean to think?* from the literary perspective that neither Blanchot nor Deleuze, writing philosophically and therefore conceptually, were in a position to intuit. The contingent encounter that Beckett stages in *The Unnamable*, to come back to Deleuze, is the encounter of the narrative voice with the exigency of its radical suffering, and it is this encounter that exposes Beckett's writing to aiding philosophical critiques of the question of thinking by posing it anew from the point of view of literature.

Insofar as Beckett approaches the exigency of radical suffering from an exclusively literary and narrative perspective, rather than from an autobiographical (Antelme) or hermeneutical-philosophical perspective (Blanchot)⁵¹, the problematic of radical suffering that this perspective negotiates is positioned so as to take the insight that radical suffering dispossesses subjectivity of its power to say "I" as its *apriori* point of departure and not as a conclusion or conceptual epiphany in some kind of final analysis or reflection. Radical suffering and the narrative voice of literature, Blanchot suggests in *The Infinite Conversation*, converge precisely around the ontological site of the dispossession of subjectivity. Assuming that what Blanchot calls "radical suffering" is indeed an apt characterization of the modality of existence of the Beckettian unnamable, then perhaps a productive way to begin an interpretive critique of the image of thinking operative in *The Unnamable* is to ask what is a frustratingly unanswerable question: *after "radical suffering," what comes next?* One of the signature traits of radical suffering is that it throws the metaphysics of temporality into irredeemable confusion. Accordingly, framing the question of what comes after radical suffering must be done outside of the metaphysical strictures of a beginning and end paradigm of narrative temporality (i.e. a teleological paradigm of redemption): "One can be before beginning, they have set their hearts on that" (346). This is where Blanchot's suggestion about a "secret link" between suffering and thinking becomes relevant for a reading of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, where there is indeed a

⁵¹ Notwithstanding Blanchot's fictional *récits*.

subtle and perhaps even untraceable narrative transition from out of the unnamable's immersion in radical suffering and its sudden appearance before the problematic of what it means to think amidst the onto-phenomenological consequences of becoming the subject of the subjectivity of suffering. The impasse of radical suffering imperceptibly doubles as the catalyst of thinking, but because the unnamable remains beholden to the metaphysical caveat that thinking cannot go on without a subject, thinking itself becomes predicated on the unnamable directly encountering *the terror* of its suffering existence. The phenomenon of radical suffering and the image of thinking converge around the terror that overshadows the afflicted and silence-driven subjectivity of the narrative voice of the unnamable. The aim of interpreting *The Unnamable* within these conceptual coordinates is not only to provide them with the conditions and consequences of their immanent textual possibility, but also to elaborate on what their significance is in the intellectual and cultural context of Blanchot's post-war critique of literature. What Blanchot never fully got around to formalizing was precisely the hypothesis that suffering and thinking are intimately linked. This chapter continues with the express desire of naming this linkage – *the terror of literature* – and demarcating the limits of the rapprochement it supports in what is surely one of the most philosophically unforgiving and interpretively hostile works of twentieth-century fiction – Beckett's *The Unnamable*.

Blanchot concludes his reading of Antelme, as we have already seen, with the suspicion that through the conceptualization of radical suffering as the revelation of an insistent anthropomorphism, the only avenue that remains for philosophical critique to take in moving past this anthropomorphic reduction is the metaphysical avenue of transcendence, the avenue of radical nihilism, which promises the redemption of suffering on the epistemological basis of understanding, from the distance of analysis and critique, how it works and what its causes are in historical and phenomenological reality. A philosophical critique of radical suffering can only go so far, then, before it precipitates the nihilist appetite for redemption and transcendence and the leaving-behind of historical and phenomenological immanence. Beckett, however, by working in the space of literature and not in the conceptual milieu of philosophy, does not have understanding or transcendence as his inevitable horizon of success, and is thus not constrained by the almost impossible task of having to fight off the impending advances of these unavoidable philosophical desires. Achieving for his readers an adequate representation or understanding of suffering, or formulating for them the promise of how to set the experience of suffering on the

redemptive path to its transcendence, would constitute on the contrary a horizon of ideological and aesthetic catastrophe in the Beckettian universe of literature.

The endgame of *The Unnamable* is not one of playing out or giving testimony to the experience of suffering at its most radically traumatic or post-traumatic historical and psychological extreme. With very little historical or geographical points of reference in his writing, indeed without allowing a stable protagonist or disengaged narrative voice to take its position in *The Unnamable*, the suffering, trauma, and above all the terror that Beckett's writing no doubt reflects is negotiated using a literary perspective that is not subordinated to the business of recording or reconciling "real" historical configurations of catastrophe and ruin. The contribution that *The Unnamable* makes to the discourse on radical suffering inheres in its experimentation with the unnerving possibility that in the exigency of radical suffering not only can there be no return to the presence of non-radical or "worldly" forms of suffering, but radical suffering represents the ontological condition *par excellence* of the existence that a life lived exclusively in the non-historical margins of literature and narrative retroactively exposes⁵². Behind the endless repetitions and disavowals of discourse and words, the incessant production and negation of images and concepts in the imagination of the unnamable, stands a narrative existence that is forever riveted to the inhospitable space of literature. The subjectivity to which the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* desperately yet reluctantly clings is predicated on the imperative of speaking and thinking in a time and in a place where speaking is reduced to sounds signifying little more than babble and where encounters with the contingency of thinking are subordinated to the subject's submission to exhaustive regimes of rote regurgitation and memory: "I shall submit, more corpse-obliging than ever" (343).

This situation leads the unnamable to describe itself as a caged beast whose existence is predicated solely on the dual impositions of the inexplicability and inescapability of its equally unthinkable and inexpressible life in suffering. Without ever coming into phenomenological proximity with the exigency of its suffering – "where I am there is no one but me, who am not"

⁵² This is not to say that writing in the "non-historical margins of literature and narrative" commits Beckett to an anti-historical conception of suffering. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" is helpful for underscoring this distinction, particularly as they argue that literature's contribution to subverting the dominant ideology of a repressive society and political is to instruct on the possibility of inhabiting its language and its culture as a "stranger *within*" (*Kafka* 26): "this is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path?" (19).

(348) – the unnamable is nevertheless left to conclude, and it is a conclusion that serves only to perpetuate its suffering indefinitely, that its life in suffering is inextricably intertwined with the words and images it uses to fumble its way through understanding how it suffers in the way that it suffers:

I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage, in a word like a beast, in one of their words, like such a beast, and that I seek, like such a beast, with my little strength, such a beast, with nothing of its species left but fear and fury, no, the fury is past, nothing but fear, nothing of all its due but fear centupled, fear of its shadow, no, blind from birth, of sound then, if you like, we'll have that, one must have something, it's a pity, but there it is, fear of sound, fear of sounds, the sounds of beasts, the sounds of men, sounds in the daytime and sounds at night, that's enough [...]. (380).

The terror that Beckett's writing unleashes into the narrative world of *The Unnamable* is remarkably captured in these lines (which are, in my view, some of Beckett's most lyrically beautiful and haunting). What this excerpt entails, by forcing into view the image of this caged beast that is the progeny of caged beasts that are no sooner dead than born, is that the suffering experienced by the unnamable does not begin prior to the brute fact of an existence in suffering, nor does its coincidence with suffering end once this suffering has run its course and is interrupted by the death of the unnamable, by the impossibility of its encounter *pace* Blanchot with death as the impossibility of dying – in dying the caged beast is born, “born in a cage and then dead in a cage”.

The particular modality of suffering that the unnamable must negotiate and endure – a suffering that neither begins nor ends – thus forecloses in advance interpretive strategies aimed at tracing genealogically its non-literary sites of origination and resemblance. The secondary though no less significant consequence of this strange phenomenon of suffering is that it inscribes a form of suffering that is inexplicably severed from the phenomenological context and expectation that the unnamable's experience with suffering be interpolated as an object of thinking and subjected to the analytical scrutiny of its philosophical and conceptual critique. The problematic of suffering is therefore a problematic of thinking insofar as thinking gnashes its

conceptual teeth, as it were, against the phenomenologically impenetrable phenomenon of suffering in *The Unnamable*. Again, what foregrounds the problematics of suffering and thinking is Beckett's ambivalent narrative achievement of throwing so irreparably into confusion the metaphysics of temporality necessary for demarcating either the beginning or the end of suffering, on the one hand, and on the other the unnamable's transition from a subject of suffering and torture to a subject that freely and without coercion engages in speaking, writing, and thinking. Beckett's writing operates a dual symptomology of suffering and thinking that is all the more nuanced and courageous (like Blanchot, Beckett rarely if ever compromises on transcendence) for its forfeiture of the supposition that the beginning of the narrative events of suffering and thinking is a temporal point of commencement inscribed punctually in the past and that the end of suffering and thinking is portended teleologically somewhere in the future. Determining whether or not there was an event in the unnamable's autobiographical past that triggered its descent into this narrative space of suffering, or determining whether or not this narrative space of suffering came into existence in order to accommodate the representation of the unnamable's pre-narrative suffering, are not determinations, unfortunately, that the text will permit to be made: "it would help me, since to me too I must attribute a beginning, if I could relate it to that of my abode. Did I wait somewhere for this place to be ready to receive me? Or did it wait for me to come and people it? By far the better of these hypotheses, from the point of view of usefulness, is the former, and I shall often have occasion to fall back on it. But both are distasteful. I shall say therefore that our beginnings coincide, that this place was made for me, and I for it, at the same instant" (290).

The Unnamable does not hide the fact that its speaker is in perpetual contact with suffering: "No one asks him to think, simply to suffer, always in the same way, without hope of diminution, without hope of dissolution, it's no more complicated than that" (361). Suffering speaks through the unnamable's speech with the pain of the one who is compelled to speak by an unidentified and indeed unidentifiable spirit of violence that demands nothing less of the unnamable than the torturous continuation of its unlivable narrative existence. It is important that we not misunderstand or devalue what is entailed by the Beckettian phenomenon of a voice that cannot go silent. Having lost the capacity to go silent, yet still being enlisted in the act of speaking the words that fiercely demand nothing less than to make speech become silence, the unnamable's very existence *as such* is the ceaseless reminder that there is no recourse to death as

the limit to the suffering through which its life in narrative obliges the unnamable to persevere. According to Blanchot, Socrates was the first to invest the enlightened use of speech with the civilizing power to “get the better of violence: that is the certainty he calmly represents, and his death is heroic but calm, because the violence that interrupts his life cannot interrupt the reasonable language that is his true life and at the end of which we find harmony, and violence disarmed” (*The Book to Come* 152). If logocentric civilization, all the cultural expressions of “that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism”, insists Derrida, commences with the philosophical speech of Socrates, it hits its climax and aggressively begins to disintegrate in the radical suffering of the Beckettian unnamable (*Of Grammatology* 11). In the inhuman world of the unnamable, where the ontological barrier that divides the within from the without, life from death, signified from signifier, speech from voice, tormentor from victim, is as “thin as foil”, and where, as a consequence, the unnamable thinks and speaks from “neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness”, there is implanted in each and every word that the unnamable speaks a constituting violence whose force is exponentially redoubled by the intractably repetitive movement of the work’s narrative inertia (*The Unnamable* 376). Suffering in *The Unnamable* is not, therefore, an ethical or epistemological anomaly that arises because its speaker has not yet “let them put into my mouth at last the words that will save me, damn me” (362). Suffering is not a transitional pathway to redemption here, nor is it the refuge of the damned who at least have the knowledge, and thus do not threaten the ethical order of judgment, guilt, reason, and hope, that their punishment is the etiological consequence of their crimes: “my crime is my punishment, that’s what they judge me for” (362). Rather, the unnamable contends with the truly unimaginable reality of a situation that balks at the very metaphysics of a causality of suffering, a situation that “reasonable language” cannot recuperate, a situation wherein “reasonable language” cannot overpower the suffering of the unnamable because the unnamable itself is that which eludes the dialectics of salvation that since Socrates has been the promise made by negativity and death, speech and death.

In the space of literature that the unnamable stoically inhabits, then, what speaks is a narrative voice whose fictional reality precludes predication by the metaphysical and phenomenological modes of existence requisite for a redemptive critique of suffering. To suggest otherwise would be to commit a fundamental misreading of the Beckettian literary immersion in the unthinkable, unspeakable exigency of radical suffering. Evidence of the sorts of misreading

that an inadequate critique of suffering produces can be found in the work of such eminent Beckett scholars as Mary Bryden. Bryden claims to be able to rescue Beckett's suffering narrators and protagonists from the radical modality of their suffering, thus enabling us to see in what way Beckett's writing is ceaselessly able "to generate a kind of recursive energy" capable of implementing "a switch of focus which brings sufficient relief" from suffering and pain ("That or Groan": Paining and De-Paining in Beckett" 211). The alleviation of suffering *via* what Bryden describes as a "continuance despite all odds" is, unfortunately, not an equation that *The Unnamable* can unproblematically endorse given the particular and extreme modality of suffering that plagues the situation of its narrative voice (211). While there is undoubtedly a thematic of continuation operative throughout the narrative discourse of the unnamable – "there is silence, from the moment the messenger departs until he returns with his orders, namely, Continue" – there is little evidence in definitive support of the claim that the path on which the unnamable's discourse continues is one that is any way traversable as a teleological route to the alleviation or redemption of suffering and pain by the narrative's end (363). Seeing the Beckettian negotiation of suffering as a problematic immanent to literature precludes joining Paul Sheehan in believing that from the "therapeutic heroism" of even something as ethically charged as Beckettian humour "it is but a small step to an ethic of redemption" (*Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* 153).

Against Bryden and Sheehan, then, Garin Dowd is more on track in arguing that although "in many respects Beckett's oeuvre is an appropriate candidate for inclusion in Scarry's category of literary words adding to the sum of a *shared* examination of pain and suffering", nevertheless "one does not find in it the utopian opening which Scarry [and Bryden] believes resides in the redemptive power of literature" ("Beckettian Pain, in the Flesh" 87). The closer we get to wrapping what is particular about radical suffering in the universalizing grip of its conceptualization (transcendence), the more radical suffering causes conceptualization *as such* to asphyxiate on what it is about radical suffering that conceptual thinking cannot digest: "I've got nowhere, in their affair, that's what galls them, they want me there somewhere, anywhere, if only they'd stop committing reason, on them, on me, on the purpose to be achieved, and simply go on, with no illusion about having begun one day or ever being able to conclude, but it's too difficult, too difficult, for one bereft of purpose, not to look forward to his end, and bereft of all reason to exist, back to a time he did not" (378). Narrative immobility and the permanence of suffering are

what the unnamable is made “to make the best of”, but if the narrative goes nowhere, if it circles back endlessly to the melancholic site of its departure from the world of reason, memory, hope, and emotion, if suffering is as bad and as inscrutable today as it was yesterday and as it will be tomorrow, then the image of the existence that the unnamable projects becomes unworkable as a subject for literary and narrative dissemination. Bryden falsely presumes that from one end of the narrative temporal structure of *The Unnamable* to the other, the suffering of its eponymous protagonist will either get worse or (hopefully) get better. The problematic so central to the narrative architecture of *The Unnamable*, the problematic that eludes Bryden, is that the *kind* of suffering that the unnamable endures is not the suffering experienced in the historical and empirical world outside of literature (hence the recourse she takes to Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*), the suffering that commences, Blanchot explains, with “the loss of social status” and the onset of physical and psychological pain (131). However, this is not to say that *The Unnamable* permits of no recognition of historical and finite suffering; on the contrary, the problematic of narrative here is precisely that it is historical and finite suffering that the unnamable struggles so desperately and futilely to experience. The ontological catch in all of this is that it is only radical suffering that the unnamable, *qua* narrative voice dispossessed of the power to say “I”, experiences and knows, and such radical suffering, as Blanchot defines it in *The Writing of the Disaster*, is “suffering such that I could not suffer it. [...] There is suffering, there would be suffering, but no longer any ‘I’ suffering, and this suffering does not make itself known in the present; it is not borne in the present (still less is it experienced in the present)” (14-15).

Paraphrasing from Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death”, we can say that Antelme and Beckett represent “two slopes” of the pathway to and from radical suffering (51). Blanchot’s reading of Antelme maps out for us the first of these slopes, the slope that begins in the painful light of affliction, the “loss of social status” that elicits falling “not only below the individual, but also below every real collective relation” (*Infinite Conversation* 131), and ends in the nocturnal darkness without end of radical suffering, where “the person no longer exists in his or her personal identity. In this sense the one afflicted is already outside the world, a being without horizon” (131). Beckett sketches the narrative outline of what we might call the second slope of suffering, the slope that commences in the permanence of radical suffering and that seeks to reverse its trajectory and genesis by reclaiming the etiological integrity of temporality

and restoring to the subjectivity of affliction the phenomenological security of consciousness that radical suffering by definition destroyed and keeps on destroying.

Writing on this second slope is arguably more terrifying and untenable than writing on the first. Because radical suffering precludes the faith that a subject can traverse radical suffering with its subjectivity intact, once radical suffering has been activated there is, logically speaking, no place or time for the subject of suffering to go. The problematic of suffering on this second slope is therefore an incredibly ambiguous and “delicate” one to negotiate:

suppose, instead of suffering less, as time flies, he continues to suffer as much, precisely, as the first day. That must be possible. And but suppose, instead of suffering less than the first day, or no less, he suffers more and more, as time flies, and the metamorphosis is accomplished, of unchanging future into unchangeable past. Eh? Another thing, but of a different order. The affair is thorny. Is not a uniform suffering preferable to one which, by its ups and downs, is liable at certain moments to encourage the view that perhaps after all it is not eternal? [...] Agreed then on monotony, it's more stimulating” (360-361).

Although the unnamable foregrounds the possibility of distinguishing between two forms of suffering, of suffering “less and less” on the way to an “unchanging future”, or suffering “more and more” from an “unchangeable past”, its adoption of the second person pronoun to diagnose the temporality one way or the other of how “he” suffers, automatically precludes that the unnamable’s “preference” for its modality of suffering will possess any transformative power or relevance over how the *narrative situation* of suffering is in fact determined. The unnamable’s suffering, in other words, cannot be subjectively mediated through its consciousness and its volitional preference. The phenomenon of the unnamable’s pronominal splitting implicitly draws attention to an impersonal form of suffering that cannot be controlled, pacified, or even intensified from either of the grammatical subject-positions – from the “I” or from the “he” – of the unnamable itself. The concrete narrative exigency of its suffering is permanent and permanently inscrutable precisely because it dissolves the metaphysics of the subject and the metaphysics of temporality required for attributing to suffering a definite beginning and a definite end. The impasse of suffering articulated above explains why it is necessary to distinguish, at the level of criticism, between the narrative situation of suffering, which is subtracted from the metaphysics of the subject and of temporality, and the narrative voice that records its suffering from the vantage of point of presuming that suffering has not always already dissolved the metaphysical foundations of its subjective and narrative existence. The hermeneutical perspective of reading and thinking about the phenomenon of radical suffering is

therefore at odds with the narrative perspective of the unnamable. Whereas the hermeneutical task of criticism and reading is to think suffering according to the logic and imagery afforded by its narrative representation, the unnamable experiences its life in narrative as the imperative to get out of radical suffering and experience the phenomena of its affliction and pain from the standpoint of their memory (their beginning) and the optimistic expectation of their end. This dialogue or dual between the suffering that interpretation tries to conceptualize and redeem and the suffering that the unnamable tries to leave behind and forget (so that it can remember as belonging to the past) means that the writing of this Beckettian narrative and the reading of the literary discourse it constructs will forever be in contestation over what is and what can be said about the phenomenon of suffering inside the text of *The Unnamable*. Reference to the multiplicity of meta-narrative digressions that the unnamable takes throughout its journey through *The Unnamable* – “Where now? Who now? When now?” being the most visible and immediate instance of this – is incomplete if it does not take note of how these digressions are symptomatic of the unnamable expending so much energy not to let radical suffering overdetermine absolutely the exigency of its life in narrative (knowing all along and in the final analysis that its radical suffering does exactly this).

The unnamable’s attempted escape from radical suffering (by converting radical suffering into finite suffering) is instigated in response to the imperative that it tell stories, that it write fictions. These stories, if they are not to further entrench the unnamable in the suffering that it can neither experience nor properly communicate, must be about another narrative existence other than that of the unnamable itself (assuming that the unnamable can be referenced at all as a singular narrative entity). These stories, in other words, must stake out a measure of distance between the teller and the told of the fictions and stories that the unnamable struggles to construct. The unnamable is driven in these efforts by an avowed (and therefore misleading) desire for escape and redemption, to be sure, just as fervently as it is held back by the knowledge that escape and redemption are not conditions that it can generate for itself *ex nihilo*, out of thin air – these must be gifted to it from elsewhere (assuming that there is such a thing as “elsewhere” outside of the “here” of the narrative), like the sack of provisions in *How It Is*. Where the unnamable precipitates the appearance of Mahood and Worm into its narrative confinement, it is confronted with two (alas, mutually exclusive) avenues of escape from its existence in radical suffering. The problem is that in order to do this – to be birthed into the suffering of the living so

that it can begin its salvation in the rush toward death – the unnamable is in need of another’s judgment and gaze to be reflected back onto itself in confirmation that its punishment and its subjectivity are empirical and real, that however anonymous its identity remains in the liminal space of its radical suffering, however innocent it is of the crime of its indestructible existence, coming face-to-face with another unlike itself will engage it in the dialectics of recognition that will proclaim the death sentence that the work’s narrative order otherwise refuses to finalize.

Mahood is the first “vice-exister” that the unnamable foists into the pathway of the encounter with recognition that it so desperately desires⁵³: “Here, in my domain, what is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here? There I am launched again on the same old hopeless business, there we are face to face, Mahood and I, if we are twain, as I say we are. I never saw him, I don’t see him, he has told me what he is like, what I am like, they have all told me that, it must be one of their principal functions. It isn’t enough that I should know what I’m doing, I must also know what I’m looking like” (309). The introduction of Mahood signals the ease with which the unnamable capitulates to an imaginary narrative authority in order to acquire independent recognition – from the perspective of knowing “what I’m looking like” – of its narrative existence. Mahood enters the narrative and very quickly adopts the role of storyteller that interpolates the unnamable as protagonist of his tale. Because all judgments of the unnamable’s existence are left undetermined as to their ultimate veracity, the unnamable is perpetually left wondering if it has “been in the places where [Mahood] says I have been, instead of having stayed on here, trying to take advantage of his absence to unravel my tangle” (309). The unknowability attached to what Mahood says about the unnamable, the unknowability that surrounds Mahood’s existence as dependent or independent of the unnamable’s imagination, means that what the unnamable does in fact know is that whatever enters its narrative perspective as having come from Mahood cannot be disregarded as false. So long as the possibility persists

⁵³ There is also of course the earlier episode where the unnamable posits the presence of Malone and considers imagining for him a companion, as in “the pseudocouple Mercier-Camier. The next time they enter the field, moving slowly towards each other, I shall know they are going to collide, fall and disappear, and this will perhaps enable me to observe them better” (290-291). Accordingly, it may be mistaken to say that Mahood is the unnamable’s first companion. However, it is not mistaken in the sense that in the case of Malone, who with his hypothetical companion, is positioned to enter “into collision before me” (291), imagines the unnamable, what the unnamable is projecting is an encounter that he observes – “in a word, I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I only see what appears close beside me, what I best see I see ill” (291) – but in which he does not directly participate. That Mahood is posited as a “vice-exister” with the unnamable is therefore not an insignificant detail of how, precisely, Mahood is positioned in the narrative context of *The Unnamable*.

that what Mahood says of the unnamable is true, that Mahood's existence can be independently verified as distinct from the presence of the unnamable, the unnamable has no choice except to subscribe wholeheartedly to the illusion that all is not false in the discourse of Mahood. This places the unnamable in the restrictive position of being the object of Mahood's narrative experiment, "the programme", which consists in dressing up the unnamable as a convincing character in the story of his life. With characteristic meta-narrative insight, the unnamable considers its situation of temporary subservience to "Mahood and Co." accordingly:

The poor bastards. They could clap an artificial anus in the hollow of my hand and still I wouldn't be there, alive with their life, not far short of a man, just barely a man, sufficiently a man to have hopes one day of being one, my avatars behind me. And yet sometimes it seems to me I am there, among the incriminated scenes, tottering under the attributes peculiar to the lords of creation, dumb with howling to be put out of my misery, and all round me the spinach blue rustling with satisfaction. Yes, more than once I almost took myself for the other, all but suffered after his fashion, the space of an instant. (309).

Like the "dupe of every time and tense" that the narrative voice becomes in *Texts for Nothing*, here the unnamable expressly acknowledges the illusoriness of the existence that Mahood is in the throes of imputing to it (85). Upon denigrating Mahood and Co., the "poor bastards", for the farcical faith they have in being able to weave for the unnamable a fiction in which it could truly believe, the unnamable nevertheless musters enough modicum of passivity to go along with the narrative that Mahood produces – "sometimes it seems to me I am there". Through the questionable though no doubt appealing storytelling powers of Mahood, then, the unnamable is suddenly transformed into the protagonist of a fiction that involves him in circling around a home and a family, which produces the added benefit of transposing the unnamable from the meta-narrative heights of its tortured soliloquy – like a caged beast, in one of their words – to the fictional discourse of Mahood's familial narrative.

Undertaking a close reading of the Mahood and Worm episodes is necessary if we are to responsibly investigate the possibility that the unnamable could begin accessing phenomenologically – vicariously through the (opposing) narrative perspectives of Mahood and Worm – the narrative ordeal of its suffering. Within the first site of the unnamable's attempted extrication from suffering – the site of Mahood – there is a concerted effort to convincingly make the unnamable resemble something more ontologically substantive than the empty cipher of the anonymous subjectivity that otherwise prevails throughout the narrative. In the first instance in the fairy-tale of Mahood, which ultimately leads to "the panic of the moment" that triggers the

introduction of Worm, the narrative orientation that the unnamable adopts figures as an erratic, inverted, and horizontally distributed spiral laboriously closing around a traumatic space populated by the rotting corpses of the unnamable's family. The purpose of this movement is to get the unnamable to cross the threshold of the subjectivity that radical suffering denies it from possessing, the subjectivity that was destroyed by the unnamable being "alone, in the unthinkable unspeakable" exigency of radical suffering (328). This movement, we are told, adheres to the promising teleological line of an "inverted spiral":

I had already advanced a good ten paces, if one may call them paces, not in a straight line I need hardly say, but in a sharp curve which, if I continued to follow it, seemed likely to restore me to my point of departure, or to one adjacent. I must have got embroiled in a kind of inverted spiral, I mean one the coils of which, instead of widening more and more, grew narrower and narrower and finally, given the kind of space in which I was supposed to evolve, would come to an end for lack of room (310).

The narrowing spiral projects the image of an ideal point of narrative subtraction that would permit the unnamable to come to that blessed "end for lack of room". This story is remarkable in the overall narrative context of *The Unnamable* because it is guided by a teleological line of flight. The story would come to an end if only the unnamable, taking "myself for Mahood" (311), could join its family in the comfort of its home, that is to say, if only the unnamable could convincingly retrieve "the historical existence" it ostensibly left behind upon its entry into the meta-narrative desert of *The Unnamable* (312). The affinities with the epic journey of Odysseus are perhaps too obvious to rehearse here, but what bears underscoring is that with the guidance of Mahood the unnamable is given the chance to account once and for all for the identity that its life in narrative has so far precluded it from (re-) possessing: "without being quite sure I had seen it before, I had been so long from home, I kept saying to myself, Yonder is the nest you should never have left, there your dear absent ones are awaiting your return, patiently, and you too must be patient. It was swarming with them, grandpa, grandma, little mother and the eight or nine brats. With their eyes glued to the slits and their hearts going out to me they surveyed my efforts" (311). This movement proves to have been undertaken in vain, because "according to Mahood I never reached them, that is to say they all died first, the whole ten or eleven of them, carried off by sausage-poisoning, in great agony" (312). What matters here are not the details of this story; rather, it is that Mahood is up to one of his "favourite tricks, to produce ostensibly independent testimony in support of my historical existence" (312). The unnamable is even willing to go along with the ruse, but only so far as nothing other than the imperative to "keep

going on” in the direction that leads irreversibly out of radical suffering is expected of it. Needless to say, there is no basis to conclude that Mahood is something other than just an avatar of the unnamable, the fictional representative of an existence that the unnamable concocts to give itself company amidst the solitude that speaking and thinking through the radical suffering of the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* obliges it to inhabit.

The story that Mahood tells of the unnamable consists in a journey of the unnamable returning home and being reunited with his wife, children, and parents. This story begins by detailing the exhausting experience of the unnamable struggling to approach his (soon-to-be-dead) family: “After each thrust of my crutches I stopped, to devour a narcotic and measure the distance gone, the distance yet to go” (310). Hardly has the story progressed beyond the point of introducing its protagonist’s struggles and goals and their culmination in the untimely death of the unnamable’s family than the unnamable steps outside of the fictional purview of Mahood to remind us that this story is being retold on the basis of Mahood’s testimony, which Mahood whispers into the ear of the unnamable so that the unnamable can repeat it as accurately as is within his power to do. That Mahood is the author of this fiction is something that the unnamable feels compelled to repeat and that we should therefore be cautioned not to trivialize as an insignificant detail of the narrative: “According to Mahood” (312); “Still Mahood speaking” (314); “Mahood must have remarked” (315); “(Mahood dixit)” (315); etc.. The unnamable is at the mercy of Mahood’s fictional conjectures only up until the point where Mahood all of a sudden goes “silent, that is to say his voice continues, but is no longer renewed” (319). Here the unnamable breaks free from the influence of Mahood and expresses his contempt over the recognition that “they consider me so plastered with their rubbish that I can never extricate myself, never make a gesture but their cast must come to life” (319). No sooner is the unnamable transported into one of Mahood’s family fairy-tales than does it find itself trying to get out and return back to the space of radical suffering from which it was speaking before Mahood crossed into the narrative territory of its imagination.

Before this hostility toward Mahood asserts itself, however, the unnamable permits that Mahood’s fiction exercise a powerful hold over the images and words it selects in constructing its memory and existence in the text. The unnamable is all too aware – as is Beckett – that the subjectivity of whatever existence it adopts in the narrative will have to be constructed using words, images, concepts, and metaphors, there being nothing else with which to construct a life,

particularly a life in narrative, and so whichever of these it inherits from Mahood will be just as convincing and meaningful as any that it may derive from the consciousness of an autobiographical subjectivity. Whether its memories are embedded in its consciousness and are merely awaiting their retrieval in the narrative present, or if it is Mahood that implants them in the unnamable's imagination and then violently brings them to the surface of their narrated recollection, the resultant conclusion is the same. Inducing and implanting memories and recollections is tantamount to the imposition of a situation of suffering. The point, then, is not to attribute a distinct ontological presence to Mahood, one that either substitutes for the unnamable or demotes it to the position of protagonist. Mahood is a projection of the unnamable's imagination, a reflection of the unnamable's insatiable ontological desire to "suffer like true thinking flesh" (347). The unnamable even admits that while playing at being "Mahood I felt a little, now and then", only to ask rhetorically if "that can be called a life which vanishes when the subject is changed?" (347). Inventing Mahood as the teller to the unnamable's told gives the unnamable a momentary glimpse into what it would be like to experience suffering *like true thinking flesh*, what it would be like to be the proprietor of a subjectivity obliged to encounter, remember, and mourn the violent and painful death of his entire kith and kin. Mahood is supposed to represent an existence substantive and solid enough to present the unnamable with the possibility of transcending radical suffering by adopting the subjectivity, in narrative, of a subject that suffers with the memory intact of what its suffering and affliction has cost it. All that the unnamable desires is simply to suffer in accordance with all who remember their suffering and all who can have their suffering memorialized in historical and historiographical consciousness. Mahood represents the possibility (but only the possibility) of achieving this insofar as he operates as the unnamable's only hope (so far) of transcending its existence and standing in as witness to the unnamable's suffering. The fictional testimony that Mahood promises to provide of the suffering that the unnamable experiences in encountering the death of its family, however, never materializes, and this because the unnamable is ontologically complicit in its failure to suffer "like true thinking flesh".

At the instant in Mahood's family narrative where the unnamable is expected to be repelled by "the misfortune experienced by my family and brought to my notice first by the noise of their agony, then by the smell of their corpses", where it is supposed to turn around and set out on another journey, the journey of mourning what it has just lost, is precisely where the

unnamable refuses to cooperate any longer with Mahood: “from that moment on I ceased to go along with him. I’ll explain why, that will permit me to think of something else and in the first place of how to get back to me, back to where I am waiting for me, I’d just as soon not, but it’s my only chance, at least I think so, the only chance I have of going silent, of saying something at last that is not false, if that is what they want, so as to have nothing more to say” (315). The reasons that the unnamable subsequently gives for its momentary abandonment of Mahood’s “tricks” have everything to do with its reluctant optimism that if it swallows the stories of Mahood lock stock and barrel, it will be assimilated into the historical existence that Mahood’s very presence in the narrative suggests it is possible for the unnamable to possess.

Whatever historical existence the unnamable inherits from Mahood will be purely an illusion of metaphysical convenience and comfort. To be sure, in the ontologically inverted world of the unnamable the illusion of its real historical existence cannot last long. There is no second long enough that would make the unnamable forget, with a memory that, alas, it is denied from having, that “in my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that’s what I’ve had to make the best of” (389). The unnamable cannot therefore sincerely tolerate what it is that Mahood says it must acknowledge and internalize: “that the bacillus botulinus should have exterminated by entire kith and kin, I shall never weary of repeating this, was something I could readily admit, but only on condition that my personal behaviour had not to suffer by it” (316). There are two options for interpreting this “condition”. Either the unnamable refuses to admit the extermination of his “entire kith and kin” because the act of narrating this traumatic event would automatically entail its integration into the re-traumatizing event of narrative itself, or the unnamable is ontologically incapable of suffering in the ways and with the tears that its historical existence expects it to suffer. The unnamable is incapable, according to this second interpretive option, of being affected by the misfortune of his ostensible family insofar as the suffering that would interrupt his “personal behaviour” arrives too late, arrives after the unnamable’s “personal behaviour” has always already been interrupted in the radical mode of suffering that neither Mahood’s discourse nor Worm’s murmurings (obviously) can articulate. This tragic event cannot move the unnamable to commence a post-traumatic narrative of suffering because the type of existence that the unnamable possesses is disconnected so inexorably from the personality that its family, ostensibly independent proof of its historical existence, knows and remembers. The event of the

unnamable's family's death cannot cause the unnamable to trace the trajectory that Mahood has set it on, i.e. toward the subjectivity of a subject that experiences its suffering as an historical and psychological phenomenon.

Becoming the subjectivity of a worldly form of suffering, of rebuilding the metaphysical structures presupposed by the capacity for mourning the deaths of this sausage-induced atrocity, would be to fulfill the expectations of what the unnamable once learned about how to belong to humanity. The unnamable even begins to recall the instructions it was given about the particulars of this belonging, which directs our attention to an unspecified biographical moment in the unnamable's youth when the narrative shape of its existence may still have been that of an autobiographical *bildungsroman*: "the lectures they gave me on men, before they even began trying to assimilate me to him" (318). Earlier in the text the unnamable says that "I remember little or nothing of these lectures. I cannot have understood a great deal. But I seem to have retained certain descriptions, in spite of myself. They gave me courses on love, on intelligence, most precious, most precious" (292). We may presume that in the context with Mahood the unnamable is being faced with one of those "occasions" when "some of this rubbish has come in handy [...], I don't deny it" (292). Mahood gives to the unnamable not more lessons on humanity, but rather the pedagogically expedient occasion of having to put these lessons into practice in light of the demand of emotion that the unnamable express its humanity amidst the horror and trauma into which Mahood has placed it. This too fails. Instead, the unnamable invites us to "consider what really occurred" once it retracted its consent to be the mouthpiece of Mahood's autobiographical fiction and the eternal pupil of its lessons on love, its lessons on intelligence and on belonging to humanity:

Finally I found myself, without surprise, within the building, circular in form as already stated, its ground floor consisting of a single room flush with the arena, and there completed my rounds, stamping under foot the unrecognized remains of my family, here a face, there a stomach, as the case might be, and sinking into them with the ends of my crutches, both coming and going. To say I did so with satisfaction would be stretching the truth. For my feeling was rather one of annoyance at having to flounder in such muck just at the moment when my closing contortions called for a firm and level surface. I like to fancy, even if it is not true, that it was in mother's entrails I spent the last days of my long voyage, and set out on the next. No, I have no preference, Isolde's breast would have done just as well, or papa's private parts, or the heart of one of the little bastards. But is it certain? Would I have not been more likely, in a sudden access of independence, to devour what remained of the fatal corned-beef? How often did I fall during these final

stages, while the storms raged without? But enough of this nonsense. I was never anywhere but here, no one ever got me out of here (317-318).

Balking at Mahood's not-so-secret intention of initiating it as a loving and caring, indeed a mournful son, grandson, husband, and father, the unnamable revels in its utter incapacity to suffer, think, and feel as "they" expect it to suffer, think, and feel, as it is expected to suffer, think, and feel by all those who wittingly or unwittingly consent to belonging to humanity: "it's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them" (318), murmuring "what it is their humanity stifles, the little gasp of the condemned to life, rotting in his dungeon garrotted and racked, to gasp what it is to have to celebrate banishment" (319). With these remarks Mahood's humanizing experiment comes to a close and the unnamable turns its attention elsewhere in pursuit of resisting its condemnation to radical suffering.

Before turning to the unnamable's encounter with Worm, we should not overlook the degree to which Mahood comes tantalizingly close to succeeding in providing "independent testimony" of the "historical existence" that the unnamable, alas, cannot inscribe for itself from the narrative position of pupil and protagonist of its suffering. One of the "tricks" of Beckett's writing, explicitly rendered through the figure of Mahood, is that the landscapes and contexts that it engenders and recalls in constructing its narrative and dramatic settings approximate so closely actually existing historical sites without ever permitting the imputation of a one-to-one allegorical correspondence between the literary and the historical. Perhaps the uncanniest of these is the "vast yard or campus" that Mahood has the unnamable circle in the spiralling approach to the rotting corpses of his family. David Houston Jones takes this image as further evidence that "the dominant narrative mode [of *The Unnamable*] is once more one of concentrationary camp innuendo: the allusion to a yard of 'dirt and ashes' suggests a camp or compound, but subsequently softens into the unverifiable 'campus'" (32). Jones concludes that, "once again, unlocalisable reference and indeterminate viewpoint combine the work's unsituated suggestions of atrocity with a distressed ontology" (32). The proximity of *The Unnamable* to historically determinate events of suffering and disaster, particularly the suffering associated with the concentration and extermination camps of the Nazi Terror, is justification for reading *The Unnamable* as a text that is very specifically historically inscribed even as it refuses any

straightforward historical references and scoffs at the temptation of ascribing definite geographical locations to the narrative existence that the unnamable is ceaselessly (though futilely) at pangs to acquire. Jeff Fort thus exaggerates the degree of the attenuation of geographical historicity in *The Unnamable* when he writes that “in *The Unnamable* we are finally *nowhere at all*, certainly not on earth or in the light of day, but in an indeterminate space that is both enclosed and limitless, all-encompassing and featureless” (321-322; emphasis in original). Not only, then, would it be a mistake to deny that the historical resonances and geographical allusions that are in fact littered throughout *The Unnamable* should not be taken seriously as factoids poised to help readers better understand *The Unnamable* in the context of geography, history, and of Beckett’s biography,⁵⁴ but as Jones convincingly demonstrates, what is of greater philosophical significance is how the textual and narrative composition of *The Unnamable* frustrates the pretension to “truth-telling” that the juridical and political discourses of witness and testimony intuitively uphold. Insofar as the Beckettian narrative subordinates “the narration of the event” of atrocity to “the event of narration” *as such*, Jones is right to emphasize the ontological limits and the inherent ontological dissonance, or “distress”, of witness and testimony that Beckett’s writing foregrounds (35).

If there is a problem with Jones’s reading of the Mahood section of *The Unnamable* it is that he takes the atrocity narrative that Mahood tells to the unnamable, and that the unnamable passively (if not self-consciously) dramatizes in the role of its witness, too literally and too exclusively relative to what supersedes it, for instance, in the unnamable’s subsequent encounter with Worm. What Jones does not adequately consider is the fact that the material that comes out of the Mahood episode, and particularly its relevance for positioning the unnamable in the aporetic impossibility of bearing testimony to an unnamed trauma and atrocity that it was never present to witness in the first place (cf. the paradox of survivor testimony diagnosed by Primo Levi and Agamben), represents only a single stage in the overall narrative edifice of the text. This interpretive omission carries with it the consequence of regarding the unnamable only in its testimonial guise as a witnessing subjectivity forever struggling with the shame of desiring the

⁵⁴ Reference is made, for instance, to the coast of Java and the Pacific and Indian Oceans (311); to “the Bay of Naples, or Aubervilliers” (327); to Beckett’s own residence in Paris on Rue Brancion and to “my island home” (337); the Haitian revolutionary, Toussaint L’Ouverture (343); Killarney (353); “the Sahara, or Gobi” (359); Montmartre (364).

recuperation of the presence of a past trauma: “Realising that his narration has achieved nothing but a perpetuation in the narrative present of the trauma of the past, the narrator [of *The Unnamable*] angrily demands ‘give me back the pains I lent them and vanish, from my life, my memory, my terrors and shames’. Shame, then, is the privileged figure of this deposition, associated with the desire ‘to witness it’ and giving rise to an identification which is, in Agamben’s terms, both ‘absolutely foreign and perfectly intimate’” (31).⁵⁵ The image of the unnamable that Jones constructs is that of an archival machine or belated witness to an event that never makes its way definitively into the memory-text of the narrative. The unnamable’s “shame” projects his vision and his consciousness irreversibly into the past, except that with the introduction of Worm into the narrative, the unnamable’s backward-gazing attention is disrupted and realigned and the thematic structure of witnessing and testifying is supplemented with an affirmative attitude toward its suffering and the possibility that a direct encounter with its sufferer will trigger a commencement, in terror, of the act of thinking. In focusing exclusively on the phenomenon of shame as the dominant affective condition of the unnamable’s testimony, Jones misses out on reading the phenomenon of terror in the unnamable’s struggle to start thinking and stop suffering. Unlike the discourse on terror, which is indissociable from its revolutionary genealogy in the history of modernity, shame is productive only of exposing limits to what should be said and what should (and can) be known. Terror, moreover, is the affective and historical counterpart to what Russell Kilbourn articulates as the apophantic logic of “denegation” in *The Unnamable*, which is responsible for overseeing the double imperative of refutation and invention in the narrative (“*The Unnamable: Denegative Dialogue*” 65). As such,

⁵⁵ Although there is not enough space available here, there would nevertheless seem to be value in juxtaposing Blanchot’s association of terror as the impetus *par excellence* to the event of literature and the act of writing, on one hand, and on the other with Deleuze’s rhetorical provocation in *Essays Critical and Clinical*: “The shame of being a man – is there any better reason to write?” (1). Timothy Bewes provides an incisive gloss on this statement of Deleuze’s in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* in a way that places it in close discursive proximity to terror: “‘The shame of being a man,’ a phrase Deleuze associates with [Primo] Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved* (although it doesn’t actually appear there), is a condition not of being ‘responsible’ for the depths to which man has shown himself capable of sinking – for Nazism, say – but of having been ‘sullied’ by them. Whereas responsibility or guilt would presuppose an ontology of the subject, shame is an experience of the subject’s dissolution, of the fundamental complicity that, in the modern world, constitutes living. As in Primo Levi, we subsist only on the basis of perpetual compromises with ‘the values, ideals and opinions of our times.’ For Deleuze, what is shameful is not just the world in which we happen to find ourselves, but the very regime of *what exists*, the logic of ontology and of everything that attends it: expression, identity, subjectivity, volition. This logic or the set of logics is the substrate of fascism, and it amounts to an ‘ignominy of the possibilities of life’ which, however, we cannot help but be intimately familiar with: it is the very condition of existence” (28; italics in original).

it is a far more dynamic concept for tracking what is not an exclusively negative, self-contradictory, or static movement in the discourse and narrative of *The Unnamable*. By basing his interpretation of *The Unnamable* almost exclusively on what transpires throughout the unnamable's encounter with Mahood, Jones succeeds in providing an intelligent and penetrating analysis of only one part of the unnamable's relation to the exigency of its suffering. Again, the consequence of this omission is that it ignores the fertile philosophical and hermeneutical ground the unnamable sows in its encounter with Worm, which demands that we interrogate how it is that the question *what does it mean to think* becomes heavily implicated in the overall narrative and conceptual architecture of *The Unnamable*. Ultimately, Jones mobilizes his reading of *The Unnamable* as a stepping-stone to invoking the figure of the "vanquished" in Beckett's *Lost Ones* as a further illustration of how "Beckett anticipates a key strand of Agamben's argument in *Remnants of Auschwitz*", particularly "Agamben's account of the impossibility of testimony [which] refers not only to the inevitable betrayal of the dead, who can no longer bear witness and are 'spoken for' by survivors, but, more specifically, to the figure who incarnates that impossibility. That figure is the 'Muselmann', the concentration camp inmate who expresses death in life and the contamination of the human by the inhuman" (36). Surely with respect to *The Unnamable*, however, the subjectivity of suffering that the Beckettian oeuvre produces is not as innocent in its responsibility for the ordeal of its suffering as Jones makes it out to be. It is with Worm that we will see how this is the case and what some of its consequences are for acquiring a more comprehensive idea of what is involved in the unnamable's contact with suffering.

The unnamable fails with Mahood insofar as it pursues a dialectics of recognition and a nostalgic retrieval of its historical existence as strategies for exiting radical suffering. The narrative significance of the introduction of Worm is that Worm represents for the unnamable the possibility of disavowing altogether his search for a strategy of exiting radical suffering, and in its place pursuing the knowing embrace of the non-historical and non-phenomenological existence that in Blanchot's diagnosis radical suffering constitutively prescribes. Worm is fundamentally unlike Mahood, then, and so we should be cautious in identifying the transition from Mahood to Worm as a linear or consecutive passage through what Paul Stewart calls the "wretch-circuit" of the unnamable's failed series of identifications (142). According to Stewart, "the Unnamable cannot entirely cohere with the identity of Mahood, as we have seen, and this

gap in identification spurs him on to a further attempted identification with Worm in the hope that this will complete the project of being Mahood. The series is then fixed, with each new attempted identification set in motion by the failure of the last. The disjunction in identification between the Unnamable and his surrogates activates the necessity for yet further failed surrogates” (143). There is little point disputing that the unnamable’s attempted identification with Worm does in fact lapse into yet another failed identification like the one with Mahood, which occasions the unnamable’s admission that “at no moment do I know what I’m talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why, but I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit, that I know, without knowing what it means” (332). Arguing that the unnamable fails at being Worm just as he failed at being Mahood, that failing to be Worm he fails to finally be Mahood, is stated explicitly and repeatedly enough in *The Unnamable* so as to be rendered a moot point of continuing on with the work’s interpretation and critique. What matters, then, is not the conclusion that the unnamable fails throughout the series of its attempted identifications (with Mahood, Worm, etc.). Instead, we can extract far more critical mileage out of focusing on the possibilities for a critique of suffering and of the subjectivity of suffering that these identifications present *precisely at the instant* that they erupt onto the scene of the narrative, that is to say, precisely where the unnamable is confronted *pace* Deleuze with the contingency of an encounter (with Mahood, with Worm) against which it has not yet had the chance of “committing reason” (378).

After the ontological debacle with Mahood, the unnamable comes into contact with this other unnamable not entirely unlike itself, but since there is apparently “nothing doing without proper names”, the unnamable decides to “baptise him Worm” (331):

I don’t like it, but I haven’t much choice. It will be my name too, when the time comes, when I needn’t be called Mahood any more, if that happy time ever comes. Before Mahood there were others like him, of the same breed and creed, armed with the same prong. But Worm is the first of his kind. That’s soon said. I must not forget I don’t know him. Perhaps he too will weary, renounce the task of forming me and make way for another, having laid the foundations. He has not yet been able to speak his mind, only murmur, I have not ceased to hear his murmur, all the while the other discoursed. He has survived them all, Mahood too, if Mahood is dead (331).

In a narrative that places so much emphasis on aporetic imperatives like being before beginning, dying after death, speaking the unspeakable, thinking the unthinkable, and suffering in the exigency of radical suffering, the relatively coherent distinction on which the unnamable insists

in the excerpt just quoted between the murmuring of Worm and the discoursing of Mahood is worth bracketing off before the narrative continues on and threatens to elide the significance of this distinction in favour of Worm's eventual convergence on the circuit with Mahood. Worm operates as the representative of the pure passivity of existence that only needs to be conceived in order to be. Accordingly, we are made to presume that when Worm speaks, it is from the pre-linguistic and pre-ontological space of existence, the space of the *il y a* of pure being, where the existence of things that words and concepts invariably annihilate is still intact and pristine in the incoherence of their pre-ontological singularities. This is why Worm calmly murmurs and Mahood clumsily discourses, except that the instant Worm appears in the narrative – “Worm is, since we conceive him, as if there could be no being but being conceived” (340) – the peculiar singularity of his existence, “the first of his kind”, risks being violated by being enlisted in the ongoing dialectical desire for recognition, the satisfaction of which the unnamable had already tried to extort out of its encounter and convergence with Mahood.

Acting against the irrepressible impulse to speak and to name, the unnamable elicits the non-existence of Worm as an antidote to the failed convergence with the existence of one like Mahood. Even as he inadvertently engages in the dialectics of substituting Worm's non-existence with the existence of Mahood, an action that is once again initiated in the service of acquiring some form of conceptual or phenomenological mastery over the exigency of its suffering, the unnamable continues to optimistically insist that becoming Worm will lead it to glimpsing the horizon of transcendence on which the promise of Mahood failed to make good:

Tears gush from [his eye] practically without ceasing, why is not known, nothing is known, whether it's with rage, or whether it's with grief, the fact is there, perhaps it's the voice that makes it weep, with rage, or some other passion, or at having to see, from time to time, some sight or other, perhaps that's it, perhaps he weeps in order not to see, though it seems difficult to credit him with an initiative of this complexity. The rascal, he's getting humanized, he's going to lose if he doesn't watch out, if he doesn't take care, and with what could he take care, with what could he form the faintest conception of the condition they are decoying him into, with their ears, their eyes, their tears and a brainpan where anything may happen. That's his strength, his only strength, that he understands nothing, can't take thought, doesn't know what they want, doesn't know they are there, feels nothing, ah but just a moment, he feels, he suffers, the noise makes him suffer, and he knows, he knows it's a voice, and he understands, a few expressions here and there, a few intonations, ah it looks bad, bad, no, perhaps not, for it's they describe him thus, without knowing, thus because they need him thus, perhaps he hears nothing, suffers nothing, and this eye, more mere imagination. (353).

In this excerpt, the unnamable goes through the motions of its hypothetical convergence with Worm, tracing the movement whereby Worm's tears are first observed and conclusions that can be drawn about Worm based on this simple observation of the particularity of Worm's suffering. We can say that Worm is immersed in a situation of terror on the basis that as of yet "nothing is known" about why or from whence Worm suffers. His suffering, his tears, are a fact of his existence, and it is this fact – "the fact is there" – that is responsible for positioning Worm in the vulnerable position of being extorted into acquiring an existence in the humanity that his non-existence otherwise refuses to accommodate. It is this invalidation of attributing an origin or a cause to Worm's tears that justifies us in saying that his situation is one of terror. However, there is far more going on in this excerpt than simply a representation of Worm's vulnerable existence in narrative spectrality. Terror's denegative capacity is activated in this excerpt precisely at the point where the unnamable's tone shifts around the exclamatory phrase *ah but just a moment*. Suddenly Worm is saddled with all the suffering, the affects, the thinking, and the speech that his spectral non-existence in terror denied him from possessing. Since Worm is reduced to the passivity of the *il y a*, anything and everything can hypothetically be said about and attributed to him so long as he continues to occupy an existence always already torn down to its nothingness. Terror becomes productive at the point of acknowledging this situation of absolute negativity, and furthermore it is at this point also that terror becomes threatening and confident that mobilized strategically and decisively it can begin to humanize "the rascal" by "decoying" him into the existence that he is expected to have, "because they need him thus". Here the absolute terror of the situation intervenes yet again and the unnamable allows that, although "it looks bad", perhaps it is not, "for it's they describe him thus". Extorted speech, extorted thinking, and extorted existence can only be extracted by the subject that embodies the instant of terror having given up on standards of the authenticity and truth of what its strategies and techniques of violence extract. The ceaselessness of terror thus further entails that the movement of negation and invention is likewise interminable, and thus the unnamable, not knowing whether or not it is Worm in this scenario, or whether or not it is its own "mere imagination" that is subjecting Worm to the humanizing violence that Worm's ontological vulnerability invites, is logically obliged to conclude that perhaps, after all, Worm "hears nothing, suffers nothing", continuing to murmur what it is – the exigency of radical suffering – that the discourse of Mahood has not yet failed at miscomprehending.

According to Blanchot, when literature is composed on the second slope of writing, the slope that mirrors a literature that commences in radical suffering and that seeks escape from the terror appended to it, it plunges its narrative voice into the depth of an existence that “is neither being nor nothingness and where the hope of doing anything is completely eliminated. It is not explanation, and it is not pure comprehension, because the inexplicable emerges in it. And it expresses without expressing, it offers its language to what is murmured in the absence of speech” (58). The concept and image of a murmuring speech is conspicuously foregrounded in *The Unnamable* through the narrative presence of Worm. It is on the basis of Worm’s non-discursive murmurings (non-discursive in relation to Mahood), and not on Worm’s susceptibility to the unnamable’s terroristic methods of extortion, that the unnamable does not regard Worm as the representative of “another trap to snap me up among the living”, a trap to “make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs” (339). On the contrary, according to the unnamable it is through the murmuring presence of Worm that the unnamable acquires the perspective of one who does not need to feel as the affective prerequisite of belonging to humanity in order simply to exist and suffer on the first slope of literature, to exist and suffer, in other words, with the biographical personage of one like Mahood or Antelme. Worm’s spectral existence is appealing because, in stark contrast to Mahood, as the unnamable explains (with a terminology echoed in the excerpt cited above),

feeling nothing, knowing nothing, [Worm] exists nevertheless, but not for himself, for others, others conceive him and say, Worm is, since we conceive him, as if there could be no being but being conceived [...]. Come into the world unborn, abiding there 195nnameab, with no hope of death, epicentre of joys, of griefs, of calm. Who seems the truest possession, because the most unchanging. The one outside of life we always were in the end, all our long vain life long. Who is not spared by the mad need to speak, to think, to know where one is, where one was, during the wild dream, up above, under the skies, venturing forth at night. The one ignorant of himself and silent, ignorant of his silence and silent, who could not be and gave up trying. (340).

As in the radical suffering of Antelme, here too suffering forces a recourse to an affirmation of the anthropomorphically irreducible phenomenon of need. Whereas Antelme experienced hunger as need, experienced the ubiquity of pain – the elements, the SS – as the need of one who continues to feel and to emphatically affirm his humanity on the basis of continuing to need pure and simple, here Worm is not spared – whether through extortion or impulse, the difference matters little – from the “mad need to speak, to think”. The mad need that overtakes Worm is not

autonomously generated by Worm himself, but is the desire of the “others” who “conceive him” and who, because of having to occupy with Worm so radical a state of ontological affliction and suffering, need to see in Worm a reflection of the existence that they too possess. The unnamable is the representative of these “others” in this context, and what he needs to get out of Worm is simple: to acquire irrefutable proof, a neat formulation of the fact that an existence in radical suffering is not something that can be redeemed or transcended, simply suffered “outside of [the] life we always were in the end”. Although the anonymous voices that whisper into the ear of the unnamable the words that announce the presence of Worm and that speak as if they are fixated on getting the unnamable “to be he, the anti-Mahood” (340), the project of existing in the spirit of Worm stalls before it begins, not only because the project has nowhere to go, no telos to guide its forward narrative movement, but also because “having no ear, no head, no memory” the unnamable is not in a position to broker the continuity of the murmuring of Worm with the discourse of Mahood: “I’m Worm, no if I were Worm I wouldn’t know it, I wouldn’t say it, I wouldn’t say anything, I’d be Worm. But I don’t say anything, I don’t know anything, these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me. Who make me say that [...] since I couldn’t be Mahood, as I might have been, I must be Worm, as I cannot be. But is it still they who say that when I have failed to be Worm I’ll be Mahood, automatically, on the rebound?” (341).

With Worm, the unnamable reconfirms its earlier suspicion that its presence in the narrative world of *The Unnamable* boils down “solely [to] a question of voices, no other image is appropriate. Let it go through me at last, the last one, his who has none, by his own confession” (340-341). So long as the unnamable’s attention is focused on becoming Worm it is Worm that the unnamable decidedly cannot be. Worm’s existence is predicated purely by contingency. He materializes in the memory and consciousness of the unnamable as it remembers and thinks in the narrative time of the present:

Yes, now that I’ve forgotten who Worm is, where he is, what he’s like, I’ll begin to be he. [...] Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing. Until the instant he hears the sound that will never stop. Then it’s the end. Worm no longer is. We know it, but we don’t say it, we say it’s the awakening, the beginning of Worm, for now we must speak, and speak of Worm. It’s no longer he, but let us proceed as if it were still he, he at last, who hears, and trembles, *and is delivered over, to affliction and the struggle to withstand it*, the starting eye, the labouring mind. (342; my italics).

What prevents the unnamable from becoming Worm, first and foremost, is that the unnamable is convinced of beginning to hear and understand the murmurings of Worm, murmurings “that will never stop”. To listen and above all to hear the constant droning of Worm’s murmurs is to be implicitly convinced that such murmurings can be translated into the discourse of their communication and expression, and thus to hear Worm amounts to not being Worm: “I’m Worm, that is to say I am no longer he, since I hear” (343). The pretension to existing as Worm exists is symptomatic of the illusion that momentarily convinced the unnamable of its existence in the fictional world and in the fictional mode of that of Mahood, which saddled it with a family, a home, and a mission amounting to a life’s work. The virtue of Worm is that the peculiarity of his spectral narrative presence does not permit the unnamable to go along with the ruse of identification for such an extended length of time as it had under the authorial auspices of Mahood: “let us call that thing Worm, so as to exclaim, the sleight of hand accomplished, Oh look, life again, life everywhere and always, the life that’s on every tongue, the only possible! Poor Worm, who thought he was different, there he is in the madhouse for life” (342). It is with the unnamable’s confession, delivered in this ironic and sarcastic tone, that he can never converge with the non-existence of Worm with his memory and consciousness intact of diagnosing what Worm’s non-existence entails phenomenologically, that ends the project of experiencing the suffering of Worm’s incapacity to experience his suffering. Although the unnamable cannot pronounce this conclusion, nevertheless it is at this point certain that the unnamable, despite its desires and its capitulations, is very much in an analogous situation as Worm insofar as it too is not able to stave off the mad need to speak and to think amidst its seeming inability to do either outside of the mute presence of its suffering.

Anthony Uhlmann summarizes the unnamable’s predicament in a way that is more conscious of the dialectical aporia overdetermining it than is the account of the Mahood-Worm episode that we saw in Stewart. As Uhlmann explains, “Worm cannot properly speaking be said to exist until he comes to feel (and at this point he stops being Worm, who does not feel, who is only conceived). The opposite problem to that of Worm plagues Mahood. Mahood feels but, finally, he is no longer conceived, the others fail to believe in him and so he ceases to exist” (*Beckett and Poststructuralism* 159). The virtue of Uhlmann’s reading of this section of *The Unnamable* is that it emphasizes and therefore respects the ontological incompatibility of Worm with Mahood. The non-existence of Worm, Uhlmann insists, is not synonymous with the non-

existence of Mahood (Mahood, too, is “more mere imagination”). Conversely, the *existence* of Worm, as a fictional construct in a narrative situation composed of nothing but fictional constructs, is fundamentally different than the fictional existence of Mahood. Were the unnamable to go on continuing believing in the fictions of Mahood, it would not end up existing in the way of Worm, passing from one fictional node on the circuit of non-existence to another. And conversely yet again, were the unnamable to give up absolutely on the prospect of existing like Mahood, murmuring “what it is their humanity stifles” in the idiom of Worm, it would not be able to reconcile this existence with the discourse that continues on as the property of Mahood. The aporetic impasse border-posted by Mahood and Worm is unbreakable. The unnamable cannot fail at one project of identification without reviving the other in its absence, and this oscillation between Mahood and Worm opens up the space in the narrative for claiming that what the unnamable does not know, what it cannot possibly know, is that its narrative existence is synonymous with the embodiment of a suspension that is only ever revealed in a past that was never present. The unnamable’s existence and subjectivity are situated in the absent time and spoken from the absent speech of the space and voice of the terror that plagues its life in literature and narrative.

What thus forces the conclusion that there are neither any positive nor negative propositions issued forth in the discourse of the unnamable’s speech that would untie the knot of the unnamable’s ontological inexplicability is that what the unnamable is searching for is the possibility to begin an existence and to acquire a subjectivity that betrays no false illusions or pretenses of returning to the subjectivity and of commencing the existence that preceded its sudden and suddenly eternal intrusion into the narrative space of radical suffering. Worm’s presence forecloses the desire to experience and recollect the subjectivity of suffering instigated by the humanizing fictions of Mahood. Worm has nothing to do with memory and experience; Worm does not experience and has no memory of an existence that never was. When reading *The Unnamable* it is therefore imperative to recognize that the movements the unnamable makes through the narrative are evocative of its confrontation with new and contingently unpredictable problematics of suffering, subjectivity, speaking, and thinking, problematics that, while advancing the discourse of the text in new directions, do not simply invalidate earlier problematics (like the episode with Mahood) that are nevertheless so quickly rendered anachronistic: “Mahood I couldn’t die. Worm will I ever get born? It’s the same problem. But

perhaps not the same personage after all. The scytheman will tell, it's all one to him" (345-346). Whether the unnamable exists in continuity with Mahood, on the one hand, or as the narrative avatar of Worm, on the other, remains irrevocably undecidable, but because this indecision results in a situation for the unnamable whereby it is forced, by logical necessity, to inhere in the continuity of an ontological state of radical discontinuity, in relations of non-relation between suffering and existence, speaking and thinking, in short in the exigency of radical suffering, it cannot evacuate the desire for the violent *shock* that will disengage it from the liminal non-existence that its non-relational non-identity in radical suffering prescribes. Such a shock, however, cannot come from the unnamable itself: "That's why there are all these little silences, to try and make me break them. They think I can't bear silence, that some day, somehow, my horror of silence will force me to break it. That's why they are always leaving off, to try and drive me to extremities" (342).

To expect of the unnamable that it will say something that will unlock the aporetic and dialectical impasse of the text, that buried somewhere within its murmuring and discourse is the letter or word that would fill in the blanks with which the unnamable began its narrative misery, is to abdicate a responsibility that has no busy being transferred onto the voice of the unnamable: "What doesn't come to me from me has come to the wrong address. Similarly my understanding is not yet sufficiently well-oiled to function without the pressure of some critical circumstance, such as a violent pain felt for the first time" (343-344). The violent shock that the unnamable desires as the catalyst for it to commence thinking and suffering "for the first time" is a shock that the unnamable is as yet powerless to induce by provoking the entrance of either Worm or Mahood into the narrative. The unnamable cannot begin thinking and suffering for the simple reason that only through the already established and already confirmed experience of thinking and suffering would it know and feel that what it is doing is what is called thinking and suffering: "they say I suffer like true thinking flesh, but I'm sorry, I feel nothing" (347). In *The Unnamable* Beckett ties a negative symptomology of suffering to a negative epistemology of thinking as the only conditions of the unnamable's existence that are visible inside the narrative architecture of the text, and so responsibility for overcoming the irreducible negativity of these endeavours falls irrevocably on the external perspective of criticism engaged in coming to terms with the fact and in overriding the paralyzing grip, as we have Iser putting it earlier, of *being locked out of the text*. The event of literature, the event of thinking *in* literature can only be

instigated at the site of the aleatory encounter with the critical circumstance that would unhinge the unnamable from its immanent narrative incapacity to think and to suffer. Where this encounter is hostile to literary critique and properly indeterminate as to what literary criticism expects literature to do is precisely where there is the possibility of thinking in the encounter with literature without reliance on the dogmatic generic strictures of something like what Deleuze disparagingly refers to as philosophically and ideologically inherited (and largely unnoticed and therefore unquestioned) *images of thinking* and of *experiences of suffering* that have already been witnessed, remembered, and processed in our cultural obsession with memorialization and reconciliation (regardless of the success of either of these gestures).

Thinking in the Excessive Suffering of Terror

At this point in our reading of the narrative there is little choice in moving forward except to take the unnamable at its word when it says that “*I only think [...] once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded*” (344; my italics). There are few affirmations in *The Unnamable* more plausible and provocative than this. The question that we must answer as we advance toward developing a critique of the terror of literature is whether or not *The Unnamable*, qua unresolved narrative of radical suffering, represents, from a meta-narrative perspective, the maximal intensification of terror requisite for us to say that the unnamable is embroiled in the literary event of thinking. The wager here is that a critique of the image of thinking in *The Unnamable*, which is inextricably linked to the preceding critique of the image of suffering, doubles as a critique of the terror of literature. The performance of this double-sided critique will not only advance our understanding of Beckett’s writing in *The Unnamable*, but also help us to situate *The Unnamable* more squarely in the literary archive of terror constitutive of the commencement and collapse of the historical discourse of modernity. The terror of thinking is paradigmatic of what thinking begins to look like when it is evacuated of all horizon and ground of presupposition and possibility. Once again, here we see the radical suffering of the unnamable converge with the suggestion that in having failed to transcend radical suffering *via* the avenues of escape promised through Mahood and Worm, and thus set the narrative on a pathway toward radical nihilism, the unnamable has inexplicably crossed over into a post-terror site of thinking. The paradoxical requirement of performing a critique of thinking in *The Unnamable* is that the

narrative's provocation of terror is not punctuated or sign-posted by a one-off event or catalyst; rather, its provocation of terror is structurally symptomatic of a narrative sequence that begins and ends nowhere with nothing, and from this *tabula rasa* of subjectivity and speech, proceeds through aleatory repetitions of negativity and disavowal, circling endlessly around multiple transcriptions of the textual and phenomenological exigencies of the suffering that such a narrative situation – the narrative situation *par excellence* – automatically inscribes for the unnamable, the work's narrative voice and protagonist.

Nowhere in *The Unnamable* does an event transpire – it is not without reason that in *Being and Event* Badiou sees in Beckett a “patient watchman of the void” – that would demarcate a temporal or even thematic transition from suffering to thinking, from murmuring to discourse. The unnamable insists that its vigilance in the face of suffering is not a question of endurance but of condemnation, and it is an experience of condemnation that links its consciousness and its speech with the discursive prerogatives of terror: “In their shoes I'd be content with my knowing what I know, I'd demand no more of me than to know that what I hear is not the innocent and necessary sound of dumb things constrained to endure, but the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence” (348). As always, what drives the unnamable forward after paralyzing pronouncements such as these is its utter disbelief that what it says about itself and about its situation are true. Reduced to being nothing more than the narrative voice of the “condemned to silence”, restrained by its condemnation to speak only the “terror-stricken babble” of a language that none can understand except the terror that provokes it, the unnamable can nevertheless not discredit the intuition that it is not alone, and that if it is not alone then there is still hope that its condemnation will come to an end and that the babble that it speaks will be substituted and salvaged by the discourse of the company that surrounds it. The unnamable turns to language and to the grammatical freedom that language bequeaths in order to try and extricate itself from its suffering: “I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical. I shall put in its place whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. Anything to please them” (348). Even as the unnamable admits straightaway that grammatical substitution “will make no difference”, it adds to this narrative of suffering the third-person perspective of the tormentor that pins the unnamable to its existence of torment. Looking down at itself from this third-person perch, the unnamable wonders aloud about what it looks like in its situation and about the observations that can be made about how it makes its way through the narrative. However, the

survey the unnamable provides about its physical characteristics devolves into a reflection on what is occurring from the perspective of its imaginary tormentors and keepers, who observe the unnamable in what can only be described as a cage fit for the caged beast that the unnamable later in the narrative becomes:

There he is now with breath and nostrils, it only remains for him to suffocate. The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he'll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn't breathe yet, he'll never breathe. Then what is this faint noise, as of air stealthily stirred, recalling the breath of life, to those whom it corrodes? It's a bad example. But these lights that go out hissing? Is it nor more likely a great cackle of laughter, at the sight of his terror and distress? To see him flooded with light, then suddenly plunged back into darkness, must strike them as irresistibly funny. But they have been there so long now, on every side, they may have made a hole in the wall, a little hole, to glue their eyes to, turn about. And these lights are perhaps those they shine upon him, from time to time, in order to observe his progress. [...] No, in the place where he is he cannot learn, the head cannot work, he knows no more than on the first day, he merely hears, and suffers, uncomprehending, that must be possible (348-349).

That the unnamable “suffers, uncomprehending” (or at least the possibility persists that this is how it suffers), should not produce the conclusion that suffering and thinking, contrary to what Blanchot surmised, are somehow disjoined and reciprocally antithetical. Here it is imperative that we entertain the idea that Beckett selects his words carefully, and that “thinking” does not necessarily equate with “comprehending” in the narrative context of *The Unnamable*. Rather, Beckett is here in the process of implicitly enacting Adorno's conviction that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream”, all the while taking seriously the post-war implication that the “perennial suffering” instigated by the mid-twentieth century proliferation of totalitarianism and violence razed in its wake (so the Frankfurt School's history of late modernity goes) virtually all the metaphysical accoutrements and presuppositions that expression had historically and philosophically relied upon for its representational, epistemological, and communicative success (*Negative Dialectics* 362). Activating the terror of thinking is a way for literature to obliquely target the silencing of expressions of suffering.

Terror is an ambivalent concept aimed specifically at brokering the experience of perennial suffering and the ethical imperative of its expression, indeed the imperative of expressing the possibility of thinking and speaking in extreme post-metaphysical exigencies as the radical suffering described by Blanchot. After all, there is immense suffering in situations of historical and psychological terror, but when thinking *as such*, indeed when the entire

philosophical and cultural horizon of thinking *as such*, is swept up in a situation that has stepped across the precipice of metaphysical law and ontological order and entered irreversibly into the contingency and blindness of terror, it automatically seeks to implement the Deleuzian thesis that “the conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself” (*Difference and Repetition* 139).

While Deleuze’s enthusiasm over having discovered a formula for what thinking as such *is* commendable and no doubt philosophically enticing, i.e. in having schematized the conditions for thinking outside the oppressive philosophical and ideological auspices of the classical images of thought, it is not a formula that is easily welcomed into the conceptual and narrative universes of Blanchot and Beckett. Blanchot’s prescient philosophical rejoinder to Deleuze consists in mobilizing the exigency of suffering implicit in Artaud’s “I cannot think” and wedging it firmly at the point of the transition where a “true critique” metamorphoses into a “true creation”: Artaud’s “‘I cannot think, I cannot manage to think’ is a summons to a more profound thought, a constant pressure, an oblivion that, never allowing itself to be forgotten, always demands a more perfect oblivion. Henceforth thinking is this step always to take backwards” (*The Book to Come* 39). Thinking, in other words, always steps backwards into the suffering from which it had occasion to emerge in the first place. If thinking forgets that it is beholden absolutely to suffering, then in this forgetting thinking will have signed the warrant of its annihilation and capitulated to the ideologies of representation and knowledge so pervasive in our world of mediocrity and violence. Deleuze’s philosophical enthusiasm for advocating an authentic act of thinking is counter-balanced (in advance) by Blanchot’s melancholic philosophical scepticism according to which thinking is always already suffering, and when these two perspectives on *what it means to be thinking* – absolute creativity and absolute suffering – are set in dialogical proximity it is precisely the structure of terror that is assembled. Beckett stages such an assembly in *The Unnamable*.

In her explication of how Hegel’s phenomenological project is a veiled response to the historical and philosophical legacy of revolutionary terror, Rebecca Comay writes that already with his 1807 publication of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* “Hegel is starting to rehearse the antinomies of the modernist avant-garde” (144): “There is no beginning that is not already a repetition, no repetition that is not the retrieval of a beginning, no action that is not also the

theatrical re-enactment of an erasure. In this fiction lies the revolutionary promise of absolute knowing – at once its artifice, its hypocrisy, and its infinite undoing” (148). The tragedy of the Beckettian unnamable is that in its narrative existence it has been unknowingly thrown into this repetitive cycling and recycling of the destructiveness of terror and of terror’s blinding invitation to thinking that it disavow, at each new beginning and conclusion of a critique (sometimes bloody, sometimes not), that what is produced is not a new creation, as critique cannot resist affirming, but in fact a repetition of what critique had supposedly dismantled and disfigured. In *The Unnamable* there is no genesis of thinking, but this does not mean that the unnamable ceases to be committed to the destruction of images of thinking (and speaking, remembering, and existing) *without* confirming its accomplishment “of the act of thinking in thought itself”. Through its tortured relationship to thinking, through its being painfully split between the subject that extorts the act of thinking with multiple techniques of critique and installing itself as disinterested, impartial, and objective witness to the images and ideas that thinking generates, the unnamable is effectively locked in the aporetic nightmare where, as Blanchot puts it *apropos* of Artaud, its “powerlessness” on both fronts of thinking is “never powerless enough, the impossible is not the impossible. [...] And everything begins again” (*The Book to Come* 39-40):

But how can you think and speak at the same time, how can you think about what you have said, may say, are saying, and at the same time go on with the last-mentioned, you think about any old thing, you say any old thing, more or less, more or less, in a daze of baseless unanswerable self-reproach, that’s why they always repeat the same thing, the same old litany, the one they know by heart, to try and think of something different, of how to say something different from the same old thing, always the same wrong thing said always wrong, they can find nothing, nothing else to say but the thing that prevents them from finding, they’d do better to think of what they’re saying, in order at least to vary its presentation, that’s what matters, but how can you think and speak at the same time, without a special gift, your thoughts wander, your words too, far apart, no, that’s an exaggeration, apart, between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be, where you are” (*The Unnamable* 367-368).

Whereas Deleuze gives us an image of thinking outside exigencies of suffering, gives us an image of thinking that violently severs its relation to the philosophical regime of the classical “image of thought”, and whereas Blanchot gives us an image of suffering *as* thinking, thinking as the inescapable exigency of suffering, Beckett establishes the coordinates for us to go one step further on this topic by inscribing the subjectivity of the unnamable precisely in between

suffering *à la* Blanchot and thinking *à la* Deleuze, in the terror of thinking that, at its most extreme and in its most radical, is conceptually indistinguishable from the exigency of radical suffering and the violence of true critiques/true creations. The terror of literature is precisely this *in-between* of suffering and thinking.

The conceptual complacency to be avoided in this interpretation of *The Unnamable* is first of all that of refusing or forgetting to differentiate between the terror of suffering and the terror of thinking. The terror of suffering in *The Unnamable* is what accounts for the multiple encounters with narrative and phenomenological impasse that the unnamable experiences as it struggles in vain to extricate itself from radical suffering, using the perspectives of Mahood, Worm, and even the grammatical third-person as vehicles of this doomed-from-the-get-go project of silence, death and redemption. The terror of thinking, conversely, is what traps the unnamable in the position of never being present as the witness to the torture-sessions of its obsessive self-critiques and unremitting scepticisms, particularly as these become unhinged from their dialectical commitment of actively thwarting the extrication of the unnamable from the situation of its narrative and phenomenological inertia. As a symptomatic expression of terror, the unnamable's embodiment of the desire for *thinking* is just as responsible for the suffering of the unnamable itself as are the more visible perpetrators of this violence, the anonymous third-parties of the narrative who speak in their "dying voice accusing, accusing me, you must accuse someone, a culprit is indispensable, it speaks of my sins, it speaks of my head, it says it's mine, it says that I repent, that I want to be punished, better than I am, that I want to go, give myself up, a victim is essential" (404). The terror of the unnamable's *situation* is that its intimacy with the zero-degree level of speaking and thinking opens it up to the undecidable vulnerability of becoming the victim of the violence of thinking and speech or of becoming the subject that wields the violence of thinking and speech in order to radically transform the world that surrounds it. Blanchot articulates the discomfiting logic of this relation to violence and suffering in the formula of "belonging to humankind" articulated in the essay on Antelme: "man is the indestructible. And this means there is no limit to the destruction of man" (135). Christopher Fynsk's commentary on this statement perspicuously captures what is at stake in this proposition:

what is devastating in the phrase is what it communicates of an exposure to violence, or a vulnerability: the fact that the presence of the indestructible *delivers man to infinite destruction*. [...] A reader could have

expected the interlocutor to turn from the terrible testimony it gives as the dialogue reaches its conclusion; that is to say, they might well have anticipated after ‘man is the indestructible,’ something on the order of: ‘and therefore cannot be touched even as he is subject to endless destruction.’ Instead, we have an assertion that reinforces the vulnerability that is given each time in the encounter: man is the indestructible and this means (‘*cela signifie*’ – and how *literally* may we read the reference to signification here?) there is no limit to the destruction of man. (52).

What we might call humankind’s noble vulnerability to limitless destruction can never be a characteristic or a condition that realizes itself in the midst of humankind’s destruction. Nor can it be manifested in the midst of humankind realizes its constitutive penchant for violence and for causing the limitless suffering and destruction of any and all who together belong to humankind. Blanchot can barely conceptualize this relation in philosophical terms without inviting the approach of philosophical transcendence and the intervention, into philosophical thinking, of radical nihilism. Beckett’s writing of *The Unnamable* supplements for these restrictions by sacrificing its narrative voice and protagonist to the experience of being on either side of this destructible-indestructible framework of humankind’s vulnerability to suffering and committing violence. In suffering, committing itself to the violence of thinking is the unnamable’s exclusive chance of extricating itself from its situation; in succeeding to think violently, as Deleuze prescribes, the unnamable is suddenly thrust into the suffering that its vulnerability to suffering ceaselessly invites. The unnamable’s impotence before praxis, which reflects the deference that is owed to such extreme situations of violence and suffering, demands recognition that all it has at its disposal not to let destructibility convert into absolute annihilation, is to exploit the intrinsic resources of thinking and of the imagination without any illusions about the complicity of these resources in the terror it is presently experiencing. Literature is the preeminent space where this experiment with thinking in the face of the powerlessness to be extricated from suffering can be undertaken, and it is Beckett’s writing of *The Unnamable*, in particular, that carries this experiment forward to its most undecidable and terrifying extreme. That Beckett’s writing of *The Unnamable* is immersed so deeply and uncompromisingly in what I have termed the terror of literature is precisely what makes this novel so laborious, so incomprehensible, so visceral, and yet so utterly pleasurable (the pleasure of *jouissance*) and rewarding to read.

Chapter 4

Repetitions of Terror in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*

*True terror is a language and a vision.
There is a deep narrative structure to
terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter
consciousness in ways that writers used to
aspire to.*

(Don DeLillo).

*The bourgeois want art voluptuous and life
ascetic; the reverse would be better.*

(Theodor Adorno).

Escaping the Disintegration of Narrative after The Unnamable

It is no secret that Beckett found himself at an impasse following the writing of *L'Innommable*. In a letter to Barney Rosset dated 21 August 1954, Beckett remarks that “I think my writing days are over. *L'Innommable* finished me or expressed my finishedness” (*Letters* 497). *Texts for Nothing* was supposed to be the immediate attempt to escape from this impasse. This proved not to be the case. As Beckett indicates later in the 1956 interview with Israel Shenker, shortly after the publication of *L'Innommable* in 1953 (but which was written during the period 1949-1950 and then translated by Beckett into English in 1958 as *The Unnamable*), “[t]he very last thing I wrote – ‘Textes pour rien’ – was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration [the impasse of *The Unnamable*], but it failed” (*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* 148). While it is quite possible that Beckett’s reference to “failure” here could be ironic (since when is failure a bad thing in the world of Beckett?), it is just as likely that it expresses a genuine feeling that his writing of *Texts for Nothing* and his capacity to productively move forward labouring in the “terror-stricken” work of literature was inescapably being held hostage by the impasse of *The Unnamable*⁵⁶ – “I have ten or so little texts written recently, the afterbirth of *L'Innommable* and not to be approached directly” (300).

⁵⁶ It is worth mentioning that *The Unnamable* is not a direct translation of *L'Innommable*. To be sure, there are significant differences between them. The same caveat applies to Beckett’s other English works translated from the French, *Texts for Nothing* included.

As a consequence of Beckett's reliance in *Texts for Nothing* on the structures and mechanisms of disintegration derived from *The Unnamable*, one of the many challenges of reading *Texts for Nothing* involves determining precisely this work's significance as a transitional moment (or not) within Beckett's *oeuvre*. H. Porter Abbott has made a compelling case for reading *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* as complementary projects in Beckett's commitment to continually reinventing his work in literature after the impasse of *The Unnamable*. Accordingly, Porter Abbott refers to *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* as Beckett's sustained attempt to realize a post-narrative work of literary fiction, such that *The Unnamable* is assessed through its stubborn adherence to what Porter Abbott sees, for all intents and purposes, as a traditional narrative sequence. Rejecting the last residue of the teleological narrative form that remained operative in *The Unnamable* – Porter Abbott argues that “the *Texts [for Nothing]* is Beckett's deliberate abandonment of the very practice that had worked so well in the trilogy and given it so much of its power – its masterful deployment of the quest” (109) – allows Beckett to pass from what in 1953 Beckett dubs an “attitude of disintegration,” the realization in the figure of the unnamable of the utter unworkability in prose of a fragmented narrative subject (or voice) effaced of its narrated subjectivity, to what Porter Abbott calls an “aesthetic of recommencement” (109). In his introductory remarks to the publication of *The Complete Short Prose*, S.E. Gontarski similarly maintains that *Texts for Nothing* and the “Four Novellas”, “to use the current historical markers, [...] represent a leap from Modernism to Post-Modernism, from interior voices to exterior voices, from internality to externality” (xxv), an argument that relies on Beckett's presumed ability to continuously “make it new” after impasses like the one his writing confronted at the exasperated conclusion of *The Unnamable*. Placed within the boundaries of Beckett's career in prose, these readings, which to a large extent extricate *Texts for Nothing* from the suffocating clutches of *The Unnamable*, discourage efforts at reading *Texts for Nothing* as itself being a critical intervention *into* the impasse of *The Unnamable*, and this in spite of Beckett's avowed recommendation to the contrary.

Writing in the pages of the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Paul Sheehan bucks this early though no doubt influential trend of separating *Texts for Nothing* from *The Unnamable* and adopts the perspective that *Texts for Nothing* indeed intensifies the narrative paralysis that likewise engulfed the speaker of *The Unnamable* in the aporetic density of its speech, its unfulfillable desire for silence, and its sceptical affirmation ultimately of the ontological

soveriegnty of nothingness. In so doing, his interpretation of *Texts for Nothing* is, on the one hand, similar to that of Badiou, for whom *Texts for Nothing* and *The Unnamable* are genetically inseparable in their fatally nihilistic commitment to the terror of phenomenological reflexivity in the space of literature. Unlike Badiou, however, Sheehan sees the relation of disintegration that pins *Texts for Nothing* to *The Unnamable* in positive terms, i.e. as that which makes *Texts for Nothing* such an extraordinarily advanced work of literature. For Sheehan, *Texts for Nothing* can “easily be seen as a condensed version of the *Trilogy*” (“Nothing is More Real” 93): “The *Texts for Nothing* are the doubtful underside hinted at all through the *Trilogy*, the necessary emission generated by the suspicion that the earlier work has not plunged far enough down into its dark” (102). Beckett, Sheehan explains, turns to a musical conception of nothingness, articulated most famously in Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing”, as a more appropriate aesthetic strategy for penetrating into the nothingness that resides beneath the “veil” of language (*Disjecta* 171). This is a legitimate and compelling argument to make, and demonstrates the broadening of Beckett’s aesthetic imagination as it aimed to encompass techniques and ideas drawn from painting, music, theatre, and philosophy so as to plunge deeper than literature permits into the nothingness that language exposes only to frustratingly occlude.

If there is a problem with Sheehan’s analysis, however, it does not consist in the observation that *Texts for Nothing* intervenes into the aporetic space of speech, silence, and nothingness with a more acutely refined sense of the aesthetic and ontological urgency of breaking through the “veil” of language than is otherwise apparent in Beckett’s writing of *The Unnamable*. Its limitation, rather, is that this argument leads Sheehan to conclude all too safely and anticlimactically that “the kind of theorist Samuel Beckett is, in the works that established his name and philosophical outlook, is an explorer of nothing, where nothing operates as both a disrupter of certainty and a shaper of experience. The experience of nothing, in the early works and in the *Texts*, is the experience of theory” (101). These kinds of conclusions and the theoretical presuppositions that they predictably defend – nothingness as the ontological translation of negativity – exemplify the caricature of philosophical readings of Beckett that end in the conceptually unworkable affirmation of a nothingness that is but a thinly veiled

capitulation to nihilism.⁵⁷ There is a conspicuous lack of direct and sustained hermeneutical engagement with the texts that are supposed to legitimate this kind of philosophical conclusion of literary interpretation. Sheehan's reading, in other words, is symptomatic of far too many philosophical interpretations of Beckett, which tend to be overly-reliant on *non*-hermeneutical encounters with works like *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, encounters that protect the interpretive subjectivity of philosophical criticism from succumbing to the disintegration of comprehension and consciousness that the Beckettian protagonists and narrative voices are not so lucky as to pretend is not happening in the narrative worlds that they are made to endure.

The reading of *Texts for Nothing* developed in this chapter involves a hybridization of the two approaches that have, in large part⁵⁸, dominated its critical reception: *Texts for Nothing* occupies, in the view of this dissertation, a space of writing and of thinking that at once resists disavowing the sincere intractability of the impasse of *The Unnamable*, but that also resists the accusation of being merely a repetitive confirmation (a repetition *without* difference) of this impasse or a fatal capitulation to its nihilistic horizon as well. This incessant doubling and re-doubling of compositional strategies and ends that stand in contradiction to one another at the same time that they are reciprocally self-sustaining is a mainstay of the Beckettian *modus operandi*. We could say, then, in the spirit of Blanchot, that *Texts for Nothing* performs a *step/not beyond* the impasse of *The Unnamable*, at once a prohibition against continuation, and a transgression of this very same prohibition⁵⁹. Rather than regard *Texts for Nothing* as either the culmination of a project that inevitably delivered Beckett's writing over to the failure of narrative paralysis (as in Badiou), or the breaking point inaugurating a re-invigorated phase for Beckett on

⁵⁷ Alysia E. Garrison is therefore correct to argue that "as the historicist turn in Beckett studies attests, it is not enough to suggest" that what Beckett is after in the post-war phase of his writing "is simply a dramatization of nothingness and absence" (89).

⁵⁸ Jonathan Boulter's "'Wordshit, bury me': The Waste of Narrative in Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*" would be the most notable exception to the dominant trend in readings of *Texts for Nothing*. Acknowledging the value of those readings that share an affinity with Porter Abbott, Boulter insists that neither strands of interpretation "take into account that Beckett's own assessment of *Texts for Nothing* is not necessarily dismissive but may in fact be a canny diagnosis of the work: that is, 'failure' is not a negative critical term but functions as a theoretical assessment that may provide a valid starting point in our own critical reading of the work" (2).

⁵⁹ In *The Step/Not Beyond* Blanchot writes that "the law", by which he means the law as it is articulated by the fragmentary demand of writing, "cannot transgress itself, since it exists only in regard to its transgression-infraction and through the rupture that this transgression-infraction believes it produces, while the infraction only justifies, renders just what it breaks or defies. The circle of the law is this: there must be a crossing in order for there to be a limit, but only the limit, in as much as uncrossable, summons to cross, affirms the desire (the false step) that has always already, through an unforeseeable movement, crossed the line" (24).

the possibilities latent in the medium of prose (Porter Abbott and Gontarski), or even the theoretical success of a thorough narrative exploration of nothingness (Sheehan), perhaps it is time to be a little more precise and patient in negotiating the hermeneutical complexities of these highly enigmatic and fragmentary collections of writings and narratives. To do this will involve a willingness to accept the possibility that when the Beckettian narrative unfolds through the disintegration of language and phenomenological consciousness inside the text, it is the language and consciousness of hermeneutics that undergoes the threat and anticipatory anxiety of its disintegration as well. The conceptual framework of this chapter once again owes much to Blanchot, who was perhaps one of the first to intuit that the experience of reading and the experience of writing are reciprocally overdetermined by what in Chapter Three this dissertation extracted and diagnosed out of Blanchot as the “fragmentary imperative of terror”.

That the critical reception of *Texts for Nothing* should have inspired so much irreconcilable disagreement surrounding how best to situate it relative to the unworkable aftermath of *The Unnamable* is perhaps symptomatic of modernity’s consistent incapacity to distinguish between sites and phenomena of beginnings and endings. Blanchot wrestled with the question of where Romanticism begins and ends through the aesthetic and biographical identity-changes of Friedrich Schlegel, “the symbol of such vicissitudes” (*The Infinite Conversation* 352). The question of beginning and ending is no doubt a question still struggling to be answered with respect to the beginning and the ending of the revolutionary sequence in France as well. Importantly, however, the indecision surrounding questions of beginning and ending is not just a nineteenth-century literary-historical or historiographical phenomenon, nor is it relegated only to the secondary literature of Beckett’s post-war prose; rather, the epistemo-phenomenological entanglement of beginnings and endings erupts in the twentieth century as one of the defining features of the rifts and antagonisms that, on one hand, effectively tore this century so violently and irreparably apart, and on the other animated the explosively creative and confrontational aesthetic projects of its avant-garde modernisms. How the ambiguous thematics of where and how a radical sequence begins and where and how (if at all) it ends is a profoundly twentieth-century problematic, a problematic that is registered symptomatically in the critical indecision that applies to assessing Beckett’s apparently fervent and feverish attempt with *Texts for Nothing* at getting beyond the impasse of *The Unnamable* and beginning a new protocol of thinking and writing in the space of literature and narrative, one that would ostensibly (according to Badiou)

sustain his literary project into *How It Is* and all the way through to *Worstward Ho*. What Beckett's post-war prose has in common with twentieth-century modernity, in other words, is this anxiety surrounding the question of beginning processes of subtraction and ending processes of destruction,⁶⁰ of beginning events of justice and ending acts of violence (in language), and of beginning experiences of radical thinking and ending experiences of radical suffering in the nocturnal presence of literature. Because Beckett is forced to work out these questions in the inherently disorienting space of literature (after all, he is good for nothing else but writing, as he puts it), the anxiety that attaches to the encounter and everlasting persistence with these questions is not something that Beckett can reasonably expect to circumvent.

“Ultimately”, argues Badiou, “the problem of the [twentieth] century is to exist in the non-dialectical conjunction of the theme of the end and that of the beginning. ‘Ending’ and ‘beginning’ are two terms that, within the century, remain unreconciled” (37). Because “ending” and “beginning” constitute an irreconcilable opposition, and because the twentieth century set for itself the single-minded task of reconciling the irreconcilability of “ending” and “beginning”, it inevitably confronted the question of how to distinguish between authentic beginnings and the semblance of beginnings (i.e. repetitions of endings). What Badiou diagnoses as the “passion for the real” that subsumed the subjective energy of virtually all of the political, scientific, and artistic projects of the twentieth century consisted in actualizing a reconciliation of the semblance of the real and of the real’s unmediated authenticity.⁶¹ Standing in the way of

⁶⁰ Richard Begam takes up a similar line of argumentation in his *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, where he introduces his work as “focusing on the five major novels Samuel Beckett wrote between 1935 and 1950: *Murphy*, *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. It will be my claim”, Begam writes that these novels provide the earliest and most influential literary expression we have of the “end of modernity” (3). The implication here is that Beckett, in signalling the “end of modernity”, inaugurates through literature the beginning of poststructuralism and postmodernism, discourses *par excellence* of the impossibility of ever “ending” the past decisively and without remainder. Thus where Begam invokes the image of the “tympnum” in *The Unnamable*, he is able to argue that “to occupy the interspace described here, the ‘without’ that is also the ‘within,’ is to acknowledge that one never arrives as a point of absolute or final transcendence” (177). Unfortunately, Begam halts his reading at *The Unnamable*, and does not consider in any meaningful way whether or not Beckett’s post-*Unnamable* prose gets beyond the inertia of ontological liminality and philosophical indecision.

⁶¹ Robert Buch gives a concise description of what Badiou intends by the twentieth-century formula of the “passion for the real” and also of what some of its implications are for the contemporary present, which to a large degree is devoid (at least in the first decade of the twenty-first century) of what Badiou means by “passion”: “Placing the twentieth century under the ‘passion for the real’ is to set it against a present that supposedly partakes of no such passions anymore. Passion, as in the passionate commitment to a cause, is what is lacking in the current age, ‘after’ the twentieth century. But passion also implies a lack itself, a desire for something that is missing, something one does not have. Calling this something the real, in turn, suggests that the given, and possibly even reality itself, is somehow not real. [...] For Badiou the real is a political, and indeed an ethical, category, but what it indicates, above

reconciliation, Badiou argues, was the irreconcilable obstacle of the semblance of the real, though coming into consciousness of the real's semblance had only the consequence of impelling its forced reconciliation all the more obsessively. For Badiou, "the crucial point (as Hegel grasped long ago with regard to revolutionary Terror) is this: the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real" (52). Transcending the being-fiction of the real (a consequence of an inexcusable ontological myopia) is for Badiou the signature of a violence that is on the verge of engendering the bad infinity of destruction and of precipitating the forced reconciliation of a world divided always already from within (and thus a violation of the world as such). Beckett's singular achievement with *The Unnamable*, at least if we are willing to assent to Badiou's reading of the historiographical immanence of the twentieth century, was to open up this space and this surface of the fictional real (the vanishing mediator behind the semblance-character of the real and all the ideological variations of its authenticity) out of its narrator-protagonist's tireless pursuit of the punctum of silence where all its words would converge and where it too would sink into the peacefulness and the void of an end that coincides perfectly with its beginning (such is a summary of the "plot" of *The Unnamable*). Conversely, the value of *Texts for Nothing* in this context and according to this logic and reading of the twentieth century is signalled by its *repetition* of this fictional real and of its revelation of the impossibility for literature and writing not to be seductively drawn in again and again to the unfulfillable prospect of the real's reconciliation and transcendence.

Adorno takes the philosophical motif of reconciliation (of the particular by the universal, of the other by the same, of the "saying" by the "said, of the image by its representation, etc.) to be the ideological underpinning of modernity's most pernicious self-delusions and its most catastrophic political and technological projects, particularly the Nazi catastrophe that aimed at the comprehensive liquidation of whatever and whomever it deemed irreconcilable with its conception of authenticity and the real. Badiou strikes a less mournful and pessimistic

all, is a lack in and of reality, a kind of ontological shortcoming. The twentieth century felt this lack acutely, and its defining passion was to counter it" (*The Pathos of the Real* 2-3).

(defeatist?)⁶² tone than Adorno in his interpretation of the varied aesthetic negotiations of the semblance-character of the real that made the twentieth century the century of ceaseless artistic invention. The supreme aesthetic discovery of the twentieth century, what solidified its participation in art's inherent status as a truth-procedure, was that there is no reconciliation with authenticity that is not the *semblance* of reconciling with authenticity, and it is this semblance-character of the real and of its reconciliation that makes literature's prerogative over fiction so instrumental in comprehending how the century operated and what an historically immanent transcendence of semblance would have to look like:

What is at stake is the fictionalization of the very power of fiction, in other words, the fact of regarding the efficacy of semblance as real. This is one of the reasons why the art of the twentieth century is a reflexive art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process, an art that wants to visibly idealize its own materiality. Showing the gap between the factitious and the real becomes the principal concern of facticity. For the Marxists, it is clear that a dominant class needs an ideology of domination, and not just domination alone. If art is an encounter with the real channelled through the exhibited means of the factitious, then art is everywhere, since every human experience is traversed by the gap between domination and the dominant ideology, between the real and its semblance. 49-50.

Badiou's thesis is that the twentieth century is the aesthetic century of semblance and fiction, the century of ideology and misrecognition, and thus the century of the aesthetic imagination. Because of this imagination and its trapping between semblance and the real, the twentieth century singularly exposed itself to the fact that there is no possibility of knowledge of the historical and political present, no unmediated access to being in the presence of the real, except through ceaselessly purging and dissolving the semblances and the fictions through which the presence of the real is unavoidably mediated and thereby constituted. The aesthetic century was as creative and inventive as it was violent and bloody, and these two sides of the twentieth century's accomplishments originate in the desire to expose the reality of authenticity to the authenticity of its semblance.

⁶² Amanda Anderson describes this as Adorno's (and Lionel Trilling's) "governing bleakness of outlook that is best understood as a postcatastrophic response to the war, to fascism, and to the disappointment of the Soviet experiment" ("Postwar Aesthetics: The Case of Trilling and Adorno" 419). While I think that assessments of Adorno's "outlook" such as Anderson's overstate the bleakness of Adorno's view almost to the point of a caricature, in light of a comparison with Badiou Adorno does indeed appear as a pessimist and political and philosophical defeatist, notwithstanding of course the slight glimmer of optimism he holds out for the truth-character of advanced works of art (pre-eminently Beckett's).

This is why the indecision that circulates around the question of how *Texts for Nothing* stands in relation to *The Unnamable* says more about the relation of Beckett's writing to twentieth-century modernity and its "passion for the real" than it does perhaps even about these works themselves. The improbability of deciding once and for all where *The Unnamable* ends and where *Texts for Nothing* begins is unconsciously implicated in situating Beckett's post-war literary project in uncomfortably close proximity to what Badiou diagnoses as the "passion for the real". The strength of Badiou's ambitious reading of "how the century thought itself", "how the century thought its own thought, how it identified the thinking singularity of the relation it entertained with the historicity of its own thought", is that it locates and isolates discrete instances where the "passion for the real" is repetitively transcribed at multiple sites of thought – in the century's thinking on love and sexuality, its thinking of politics, its thinking of scientific discovery, and its thinking of aesthetic inventiveness. Badiou's capacity for detecting *repetitions* of the "passion for the real" is therefore indispensable for demonstrating that the heterogeneous multiplicity of texts, events, and figures that made the twentieth century into the century that it was are not merely coincidentally interrelated, but are symptomatic of a philosophically identifiable condition. In other words, the secondary literature on Beckett's post-war writing does itself a disservice (Badiou's philosophical criticism of Beckett included) by thinking the links between, say, *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* as nothing more than an idiosyncratic obsession of Beckett's uncompromising commitment to literary advancement (in the aesthetic, and not in the commercial sense of this term). Through *The Century* Badiou gives us a philosophical alibi to think that *something like* a twentieth-century *zeitgeist* may have been at work in the Beckettian impasses and disintegrations of narrative, in the *repetitions* of impasses and disintegrations of the narrative voices and worlds that his writing facilitated. The argument that this dissertation has been advancing all along is that what is at work in the seemingly unworkable disintegration of the Beckettian space of literature is the fragmentary imperative of terror that was diagnosed so provocatively and decisively by Blanchot, Beckett's most kindred contemporary. Insofar as *Texts for Nothing* represents a repetition of this imperative, a singular recognition of its sincere intractability, it does so as a symptomatic reflection of the "passion for the real" that Badiou diagnoses as sometimes destructively, and sometimes subtractively constitutive of the twentieth-century modernity that Beckett and Beckett's writing inherited.

Terror as the "Soul" of Literature

In his introduction to Pascal Casanova's *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, Terry Eagleton reduces the poststructuralist tradition of Beckett criticism to little more than the "Blanchot-ing of Beckett" (3). Casanova, like Eagleton and Clément, is also suspicious of the critical hijacking of Beckett's work by Blanchot's short review essay of *The Unnamable*, "Where Now? Who Now?", which Casanova accuses of having become "in France the sole authorized commentary [on Beckett], helping to 'fabricate' a tailor-made Beckett, hero of 'pure' criticism" (11)⁶³. Perhaps more surprisingly, it is Andrew Gibson who echoes this assessment of Blanchot's hyper-abstracted criticism of Beckett and the consequences of its supposedly anti-historical motivations: "Like the Gaullists, Bataille⁶⁴ and Blanchot were concerned to sever connections with a recent history to which they felt uncomfortably close. They had a positive interest in not thinking Beckett historically" (*Samuel Beckett* 166). It would be foolish to deny that any reading of Beckett that draws on Blanchot for theoretical support is in danger of recapitulating much that has already been said *vis-à-vis* the Beckett/Blanchot interface (particularly in the French context of Beckett criticism, though this does not necessarily apply to the Anglo-American context where this dissertation is placed).⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is difficult not to concede that behind Beckett's work in literature, behind the anonymous voices that speak an

⁶³ The recent publication of Beckett's *Letters* includes from Beckett's own pen some highly suggestive comments regarding the significance of Blanchot's criticism. Writing to Peter Suhrkamp on 9 January 1954, Beckett exclaims that "On *Molloy* Maurice Nadeau and Georges Bataille seem to me the best. I also liked Nadeau's general critique (I forget what in). But the big thing, for me, is the recent piece by Maurice Blanchot on *L'Innommable*" (442).

⁶⁴ Bataille's review essay of *Molloy* appeared in the journal *Critique* (which he founded) in May 1951, and was titled "The Silence of Molloy". Jean-Michel Rabaté has recently commented on Bataille's appraisal of Beckett, and also their subsequent meeting and friendly exchange of letters, in the *Journal of Beckett Studies*. He writes: "From the start, Bataille felt that he had found in Beckett an artist close to his heart: here was someone, who, like him, found himself alone after having belonged to a group (*transition* for Beckett, the Surrealist dissidence of *Documents* for Bataille), they both had escaped from the horrors of the war, and their tentative groping in the dark had generated an experimental prose that debunked all values. Both were attempting to think at the limit of the human" ("Bataille, Beckett, Blanchot: From the Impossible to the Unknowing" 56).

⁶⁵ Duncan McColl Chesney represents one of the few exceptions to the anti-Blanchot sentiment prevailing across Beckett studies today, though he does so whilst continuing to adhere to a perspective on Blanchot that maintains his purportedly "ahistorical" commitments to literature. Chesney assesses Blanchot's relevance as a commentator on Beckett according to the opinion that "Blanchot has a more mystical-ontological understanding about what literature really is – what the work of writing consists in – and a non-dialectical (or half-dialectical), a-historical sense of what a writing is that succeeds in its task (as against a 'literature' that accepts, affirms, and reproduces literary conventions" (113). Chesney's acceptance of the "ahistorical" horizons of Blanchot's understanding and advocacy of literature, even if for Chesney this does not automatically relegate Blanchot to a position of critical irrelevance relative to reading Beckett, says more about the prevailing critical dogma surrounding the reception of Blanchot in contemporary critical theory (and in Beckett studies in particular) than it does about Blanchot's actual nuanced positioning of literature relative to the dead and traumatized historical discourse of late modernity.

interminable language that is without origin or destination, behind those Beckettian protagonists abjected into worlds that admit of no solace to their affliction or no escape from their solitude, there resonates the disastrous collapse of writing and speech into the spaces of what Blanchot detects as the constant and constantly inscrutable murmuring of the *il y a*. It is this fragmentary dimension of language and literature, which preserves the distance in Beckett's writing between the inaudibility of narrative speech and the obscured phenomenological presence of the narrative voices from which this speech originates, that produces an experience of writing and reading – the essential experiences of literature and literary criticism – that is infinitely interrupted and ravaged by the hermeneutical horizons of ambiguity and indecision which the murmuring presence and speech of the *il y a* symptomatically provokes:

Above all, the *il y a*, because neutral, mocks the questions which bear upon it: when interrogated, it ironically absorbs the inquiry which cannot oversee it. Even if it lets itself be vanquished, it does so because defeat is its disadvantageous advantage, just as the bad infinitude of its endless repetition determines it as true to the extent that it (falsely) imitates transcendence, thus exposing the essential ambiguity of transcendence and the impossibility that this ambiguity be measured according to truth or legitimacy. (*The Writing of the Disaster* 65).

As Blanchot suggests, behind the attempt to elucidate either the epistemological or phenomenological properties of the *il y a* is the necessity for it to be framed as an *object* of interrogation and critique, and as a consequence the process of its inquiry is susceptible to mockery precisely by the *il y a* insofar as it is framed in this way. We are all familiar with discussions about the necessity to think outside the suffocating limits of subject-object relations, but this necessity rarely goes beyond its triumphant and merely programmatic declaration. Blanchot's handling of the *il y a*, however, is an unparalleled exception to the abiding philosophical failure not to orient one's thinking according to the epistemo-phenomenological economy of subject-object relations. Inquiring into the accessibility of the *il y a*, accordingly, cannot help but be plagued by the caveat of disorientation and incomprehension that obstinately insists against the possibility of accessing the presence of the *il y a* through the epistemological modes of elucidation and exegetical abstraction. Blanchot refuses to subscribe amidst his encounter with the thought and image of the *il y a* to an unambiguous horizon of conceptual transcendence (a horizon of transcendence not steeped in immanence) by rejecting the standpoint of subject-object interrogation and instead by inscribing his thinking and writing squarely and

mimetically in a discourse of ambiguity and interruption where the *il y a* has the exclusive chance of being momentarily glimpsed.

The *il y a* is the traumatic thread of the unspeakable and the unthinkable that meanders through the heart of ontology and that formalizes the ruptured and fragmented speech that echoes so distinctly in the Beckettian space of literature. Beckett's unparalleled capacity for exposing the presence of the *il y a* in the cracks and crevices of narrative, and particularly his capacity to confront the *il y a* head-on without giving in to a Levinasian repulsion into ethical transcendence, is what directly instigates the captivated silence through which literary criticism is forced to wade in passing judgment and facilitating comprehension and hermeneutical significance in its encounter with the Beckettian text. Beckett, too, in other words, seeks to give indirect expression to what resides beneath the foundations of literature and writing, profaning the sanctity of relations between narrative and death, memory and knowledge, light and darkness, judgment and redemption, voice and silence, epistemology and phenomenology, all the while having ungrounded the metaphysical presuppositions that have hitherto grounded the relational operability of these pairings. The difficulty Beckett faces, and Blanchot touches on this in the excerpt above, is that the approach towards a point of pure relation, the pure speech of the *il y a*, an approach that is motivated, moreover, by "the passion for the real" and programmed by the fragmentary imperative of terror, quickly becomes the only relation worth striving to identify (and identify with) insofar as it is the only relation that is absolutely resistant to representation in the fictional space of literature, on the one hand, and on the other to representations of semblance in the ideological reality of the real. One of the differences between *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing vis-à-vis* the specific problem of a narrative economy of relation is that *The Unnamable* takes aim at the point of the *il y a*, the tympanum-space of the unnamable's indiscernible identity as a being of speech (as a narrative voice in Blanchot's more technical sense), as the asymptotic horizon of the "beyond" of language and the closure of narrative. Insofar as *Texts for Nothing* signals a step (not) beyond *The Unnamable*, it is as a reflection of Beckett's sudden epiphany that language not necessarily operate, as Carla Locatelli believes it does in *The Unnamable*, "only as a source of alienation" (*Unwording the World* 227). As a supplement to Beckett's aesthetic vision in *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing* signals perhaps that the condition of alienation prompted both by the vicissitudes of language and the disintegration of narrative is rather the negative ground of language and narrative's intrinsic

power of resistance to their otherwise intrinsic passion for the suppression of alterity and text. *Texts for Nothing* is thus Beckett's most faithful treatment of the paradox of alienation in and by language to date, viewing the condition of alienation at one and the same time as the cause and the effect of the subjective experience of textual disfiguration and displacement that a life in language and narrative produces. Calling the space in which this paradox plays itself out the *il y a* is at one level heuristically pragmatic for appreciating the thematic and formal seductiveness of abjection and alienation in Beckett's work, but what it fails to capture is precisely the impulse and the passion of stepping *beyond* abjection and alienation, suffering and anxiety, in the space of literature. Accordingly, reading *Texts for Nothing* through the fragmentary imperative of terror can perhaps better capture Beckett's desire to facilitate escape from the disintegration and suffering of the narrative voice that otherwise motivated its persistence in the immanence of violence that pervaded the narrative economy of *The Unnamable*.

Posing hermeneutical questions to the narrative voices of Beckett's texts time and again directs the hermeneutical consciousness of criticism into being "absorbed" (this is the attractive power of the *il y a*) by the epistemo-phenomenological disintegration of language and subjectivity that Beckett exacerbates in works like *Texts for Nothing*. The proximity of the Beckettian text to the neutral presence of the *il y a*, in other words, which for Blanchot is one of the constitutive signatures of literature *as such*, is paradoxically an historically punctual commitment symptomatic of the post-war epoch of late modernity around which Beckett's writing turns. If reading Beckett through Blanchot has tended to produce ahistorical readings of his novels, short stories, and plays, then this is perhaps as a consequence of the criticism of Blanchot being similarly blind to the historical horizon pressuring Blanchot's own thinking – both in the multiples directions it takes and the series of impasses and interruptions it consistently erects. Accordingly, it is by excavating the interpretive resources buried in the conceptual archive that has begun to form around the historical phenomenon of terror that this chapter, like the one preceding it, eludes repeating a so-called "tailor-made Beckett" fabricated by an equally "tailor-made" Blanchot. Terror is a concept and an experience that Badiou, who consistently polemicizes against the academic hegemony of poststructuralist critique, applies negatively to *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*. This we have already discussed. But terror is also a concept that is used in an affirmative mode by Blanchot to express the constitutive agony and intellectual hardship of having to endure – as both writer and reader – the experience

of literature in the presence of modernity's ongoing devastation and ruin. Reading Beckett with Blanchot, and reading both of their work according to the language and *logos* of terror (which precludes either Beckett or Blanchot from being implicated in purely ahistorical modes of writing and criticism) holds out the possibility of giving new significance to *what speaks* in Beckett's texts.

Beckett's writing of *Texts for Nothing* is exemplary of the movement from what Blanchot terms "ordinary language" to "literary language" insofar as it embodies a form of speech that expresses the dread of continuing to tell a story and to desire death despite its speaker, its voice, having been abjected into a world where the ontological supports of narrative and finitude are no longer available. *Texts for Nothing* gives us the desolation of speech in a world where death has lost the power to function as the ultimate horizon of metaphysical value and experience. "This is a speech," Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, "of which we are not directly aware and, it must be said again, a speech that is infinitely hazardous, *for it is encompassed by terror*" (187; my emphasis). Blanchot signals our attention in this section of *The Infinite Conversation*, provocatively subtitled "You can kill that man", to an argument that had already been intuited in some of his previous writings. Not only is the concept and historical experience of terror instrumental to his argument in "Literature and the Right to Death", which traces the genealogy of the Levinasian *il y a*⁶⁶ all the way back to the Reign of Terror as it was seen through the eyes of Sade and Hegel, but also in the critical review essay of Paulhan's *Flowers for Tarbes*, "How Is Literature Possible?", that was part of the essays collected in *Faux Pas*⁶⁷.

In the post-1945 historical present, terror was far from being an antiquated historical and political phenomenon associated only with the revolutionary turbulence of 1793. Blanchot's pre-war endorsement of the tactics of terror in an article he published in the July 1936 issue of the journal *Combat*, "Le Terrorisme, method de salut public", made it clear, in no uncertain terms,

⁶⁶Blanchot follows Levinas's argument in *Existence and Existents* that literature induces the "horror" of the *il y a*. "The rustling of the there is [*il y a*]...is horror. [...]To be conscious is to be torn away from the there is, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of existence, that is, to some extent a master of being, already a name in the anonymity of the night. Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'. Not in lulling it into unconsciousness, but in throwing it into an *impersonal vigilance*, a *participation*" (55).

⁶⁷As the recent publication of Beckett's *Letters* from 1941-1956 shows, Beckett had read and considered translating into English selections from this collection of Blanchot's essays.

that a strategic and measured recourse to violence is sometimes necessary in order to reinvigorate the historical and political passions of a nation that had slipped into a state of what Leslie Hill calls “parliamentary complacency” (*Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* 39):

It is important to note that the purpose of such violence was self-evidently not to install fascist dictatorship in France nor to impose a small nationalist clique in government, but rather to interrupt a specific type of oppressive parliamentary politics and thus to allow the possibility of a different political future. So if Blanchot endorsed acts of terror in the piece, it was solely in order to deliver, as he put it, to the very people who might be ready to condemn them – the French electorate at large – the benefits of such an interruption. [...] [I]t was no doubt a calculated move on the writer’s part that the acts of terror he advocated in the article were justified – at least in Blanchot’s presentation – by an unmistakable reference back to the memory of Danton, Robespierre, and St-Just, those earlier revolutionaries of 1793, who, in similar times of national crisis, set up a more famous Comité du Salut Public, or Committee of Public Safety, to defend the nation against the challenge from within and aggression from without, and eventually embarked on a campaign of terror whose purpose was the saving of the Jacobin revolution. If Blanchot’s article espouses terrorism, it was in order to effect a political hiatus; indeed, such a hiatus was indispensable if politics was to be refashioned anew. (39-40).

The event of historical and political hiatus would indeed arrive in Europe and France, but it was not the progressively subtractive hiatus that Blanchot early on envisioned. The hiatus – the interruption, the suspension – that occurred originated in Germany, not France, and its political provenance was the increasingly sprawling epicentre of twentieth-century fascism and not a repetition of France’s revolutionary inheritance. Blanchot’s watershed pivot away from politics and into literature was neither spontaneous nor opportunistic; rather, it was a strategic decision reflective of the new historical and political exigencies that the fascist appropriation of the tactics of terror imposed on the post-war present that Blanchot only barely escaped the war to inhabit. Through literature, the revolutionary energy of terror is kept alive, but it is simultaneously, by virtue of what literature is and of what literature demands – the fragmentary imperative of writing – stripped of any pretensions to enabling and/or enacting events of transcendence – of absolute freedom – as it ostensibly once had in inaugurating the historical discourse of modernity and the romantic invention of the literary absolute. Hill explains further the significance of Blanchot’s intellectual itinerary pivoting around the language and *logos* of terror: “For if it is true that literature, like death, seizes paroxystically within the immediacy of a paramount moment of absolute freedom, as the rhetoric of terror would suggest, it is also the case that literature, like death, is an encounter with the limitless impossibility of that moment, and with the

lack of power that leaves writing forever suspended as an absent event that can never properly come to be, since the only domain it occupies is the domain of worklessness, impotence, and disaster” (47-48). Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death” is obviously the place where terror’s migration into the space of literature is most conspicuously and comprehensively mapped out, but it is in his critical review essay of Jean Paulhan’s *Flowers for Tarbes* where Blanchot elevates terror to the status of something like a new post-war absolute of literature (complete with all of the fragmentary imperatives and impulses that its presence in the space of literature compels).

Blanchot, commenting on Paulhan, associates terror with an approach to language that intends to dissolve both its intermediary status as a vehicle of representation as well as its symbolist status as directly productive, and thus not merely representative, of the images, values, and meanings it calls into reality. The terrorists of language are those who desire it purified of its everyday banalities, vulgar commonplaces, worn out clichés, and unmediated romantic idealisms. They intend to “rid language,” explains Blanchot, “of the words, symbols, and turns of phrase that made it resemble a means of exchange or a precise system of substitution” (80). To approach language as a destructive and alien space that nevertheless contains within it the secret of what has not yet been thought or expressed is to similarly demand a means capable of approaching it in this way, “but this demand,” worries Blanchot, “could be nothing but all-consuming” (80). Literature intervenes into language as the means of unveiling the metaphysical secrets that language hides, but it cannot perform its duty if all that it has at its disposal are the techniques and forms that the aesthetic and literary tradition has already devised and subsequently over-used. Literature implies, like language, its own commonplaces and clichés, and so literature, if it is to truly *be* literature, must also disrupt the aesthetic language that it knows and practices all too comfortably. “The writer,” this “terrorist” of language and literature alike, “thus has the duty to break with these conventions, a kind of ready-made language [of literature], more impure than the other [ordinary language]. If he can, he must free himself from all intermediaries that custom has fashioned and, delighting the reader, place him in direct relationship with the veiled world that he wishes him to discover, with the metaphysical secret, the pure religion whose pursuit is his true fate” (80). The hostility that the writer shows to language and to literary forms presents a number of difficulties for maintaining the belief that literature is practicable. Blanchot’s enumeration of all the presuppositions literature must negate

if it is to begin approaching the secret of language succeeds in rendering literature *inconceivable* as a concept and as a practice. Literature is saturated here by a suspicion and hostility towards its material (language and words), its tradition, its purpose, and its very existence. Terror designates the dread that flows from beneath the pressure of this suspicion, the interiority of this hostility, and from within the aporia of understanding that circulates the rarity of the literary event.

Blanchot advances “two rather serious remarks” about the relation that links literature with language and *logos* of terror:

The first is that the concept that we have just learned to know under the name of Terror is not any aesthetic or critical concept whatsoever; it covers the entire field of letters; *it is literature, or at least its soul*. The result of this is that when we call Terror into question in order to refute it or to show the consequences of its logic, it is literature itself that we question and drive towards nothingness. Moreover, we are forced to state that aside from a few famous exceptions, writers of one or the other kind, even the most severe ones, the ones most attached to their ambition, have not renounced either language or the form of their art. It is a fact; literature exists. It continues to exist despite the inherent absurdity that lives in it, divides it, and makes it actually inconceivable (80-81; emphasis added).

That literature exists at all immediately strikes Blanchot as a counter-intuitive proposition. If literature is sustained by a dual internal movement of self-revelation and self-destruction, which together secures its continual disappearance from the world of discourse, then the indisputable fact of its existence suggests that where literature does begin to exist, it is because it has ceased its agreement with the ideal of its conceptualization: “literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (“Literature and the Right to Death” 21). Literature inherits the relentless drive of suspicion and purgation that had likewise rendered the Reign of Terror inconceivable from the perspective of its historical and political continuation. What is this perspective? For Blanchot it is the perspective of *fascination* that penetrates obsessively and hysterically into an abyss of nothingness residing at the *soul* of literature. As Blanchot remarks in “Literature and the Right to Death,” nothingness is literature’s “greatest creative ambition, because if literature coincides with nothing for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!” (22). Blanchot, of course, has little interest in resurrecting a theological or metaphysical discourse around the event of literature with “nothingness” as its transcendent saviour (as it otherwise appears to be for Sheehan). His express invocation of terror in works like *The Infinite Conversation*, “Literature and the Right to Death”, and *Faux Pas*, is designed to resist this insofar as it associates the discourse of literature with the

primal historical scene of political modernity – the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution⁶⁸. Moreover, just as the revolutionary perpetuation of the Reign of Terror, writes Rebecca Comay, “can elaborate itself only as the repetitive production of nothing – the empty negativity of an unworked death” (*Mourning Sickness* 76), so too does literature, *pace* Blanchot, arise only in a movement that “brings death to the inhuman,” for it is literature that comes to be, *via* the Marquis de Sade, “in possession of nothingness and destruction” (*Infinite Conversation* 182). If Blanchot’s analysis of the historical legacy of terror is correct, namely that modern literature inherits the problematic and paradoxical language and *logos* of a terror that “speaks and has remained speaking”, then given that the impasse of *The Unnamable* and its continuation in *Texts for Nothing*, as Badiou suggests, is oriented around the presupposition of terror in the Beckettian “I think”, surely *Texts for Nothing* can be read through the interpretive matrix of a symptomology of terror that surpasses the work of *The Unnamable* precisely through its vigilant repetition. Even so, that the narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing* inexplicably doubles as the subject and object of the discourse it destroys, that it is embroiled in what Boulter reads as the “failure to continue to cease speaking (and it is indeed a paradox of *continuing to cease*)”, remains nothing short of terrifying for trying to organize a hermeneutical response to the questions of how and why *Texts for Nothing* is written in the way that it is in the aesthetically apocalyptic aftermath of *The Unnamable* (“Does Mourning Require a Subject? 333; italics in original).

The difficulty of reading *Texts for Nothing* is first and foremost that of establishing a space of interpretation capable of translating the work’s double movement of speech and nothingness into a conceptual image that does not betray this movement’s fundamental untranslatability. To perform such a critical translation entails that the discursive movements of the narrative voice, the movements that sustain the heterogeneity of its spectral (re-) appearance

⁶⁸ This is not to suggest that the Terror of the French Revolution enjoys exclusive rights to the historical origin of the political modernity of the West. Fredric Jameson, for instance, locates (at least) “fourteen proposals” for this dubious distinction, and “one can be sure that many more are lurking in the wings” (*A Singular Modernity* 32). Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to deny that the French Revolution has not been accorded pride of place in much of the philosophical and historiographical studies of modernity. Even closer to our concerns here, i.e. Beckett’s proximity to the language and logos of terror, we find Andrew Gibson, in his concluding chapter to *Beckett and Badiou*, writing that “modernity begins with the French Revolution, the first great historical experience of the void underlying established structures, and therefore of the possibility of the tabula rasa and radical transformation” (257). Gibson goes on to explain how “the aesthetic (and scientific) domain”, starting with Mallarmé, “catches up with the political domain” (*ibid.*).

from one end of *Texts for Nothing* to the other, be situated in relation to the conditions and consequences of their fragmentary performance. To argue that the Beckettian text continually locates itself on the verge of silence and collapse (catastrophe) requires a patient hermeneutical sensitivity to the myriad of ways that this is rendered possible through the tortured medium of literature. The concept, image, and experience of terror designates an historical precedent that conveniently echoes with the world of *Texts for Nothing* in those moments where it continually sinks “to a single sound, the impossible confused memory of a single confused sound, lasting all night, swelling, dying, but never for an instant broken by a silence the like of this deafening silence” (129). In drawing heavily on Blanchot’s understanding of literature as the discourse responsible for the nothingness and silence that consumes its immanent horizon of possibility, the intention of the proceeding argument is not only to supplement the enigmatical structure of *Texts for Nothing* with a semblance of interpretive coherence (circumscribed around the concept of terror), but more provocatively to insist on the value of an affinity between the experience of reading *Texts for Nothing* and the experience of the unnamable subjectivity (the anonymous voice of the work’s narration and enactment) that consolidates its terror-stricken existence from within the space of narrative.

Terror, to say it once again, arises and is suppressed from the political origins of modernity as the space and the language that instigates the interruption of metaphysical systems of relation and existential dependencies on finitude. Reading *Texts for Nothing* for evidence of its hostility to interpretation turns on exposing the repetitions of non-relation that force its reading into the conceptual paralysis of interruption. If there is a common language that can be used to interact with the narrative voice buried in plain sight in *Texts for Nothing* then it is the language and *logos* of terror cited in Blanchot. The present chapter is concerned with measuring this space of dialogue and articulating its conceptual viability as a medium through which interpretation communicates (or not) with the Beckettian space of literature. Of particular interest in the following analysis is the peculiar image of death that converts itself into the spectral nullification of its (hypothetical) arrival, and also the violent metaphysical reaction (forced redemption) that threatens to intervene into the discursive reality of the narrative voice in the wake of death’s concomitant inaccessibility. It is perhaps not very difficult to imagine a corner of existence where death translates as death’s impossibility, but of greater effort of the critical imagination is to devise a language and a logic that is able to converse with a subject, the

narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing* in this case, that has lost the personal form of its subjectivity, that has been forced to persist in a space where death is of no more consequence, as Hegel puts it commenting on the Terror, than “cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water”, and that where being condemned to existence becomes more traumatic than being sentenced to annihilation (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 360).

The general thesis of this chapter, in short, is that the interpretive encounter with *Texts for Nothing* demands the conceptual elaboration of a methodologically appropriate and text-sensitive space that is attentive to its fragmented networks of interruption and non-relation. The specific thesis is that *Texts for Nothing* forces the act of its interpretation into a space where both literature and interpretation come into contact with the terror that modernity has conspired to suppress ever since its advent, quite literally, in the death of the (sovereign) subject. Life at the extreme limit of what is (un-) liveable is imposed in *Texts for Nothing* as the permanent reality of its protagonist. This is an existence and a poetics of terror. Moreover, it is the apparently uninterrupted sense of terror pervading *Texts for Nothing* that allows it to function as a work that continually interrupts the critical desire for its discursive and conceptual gentrification. If, following Leslie Hill, all literary criticism is (perhaps) a conservative enterprise, and if all literary criticism is tangentially complicit in the Thermidorian logic of modernity, then it may be by way of recovering literature’s archive of terror that criticism could break with its own inherent limitations. Before it can begin to do this, however, it is necessary that criticism first pass through an instance where a literature of terror is uncompromisingly on display in order to gauge just how difficult it is to resist reproducing the concepts that are ready-made for expressing our experiences with literature. As a repetition of the “attitude of disintegration” inoperatively consolidated in *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing* is, in this dissertation’s estimation, one such instance of a literature of terror, and this chapter tries to explain how this is so and why it is important that we thoroughly recognize it accordingly. Let us now consider how *Texts for Nothing* arises as a work of literature that exists only to the degree that its narrative voice speaks according to the imperative of terror: “he finds himself as it were under glass, and yet with no limit to his movements in all directions, let him understand who can, that is no part of my attributions” (119).

Repetitions of Terror in Texts for Nothing

Text 1 of *Texts for Nothing* announces a process that derives from a failure to secure a measure of phenomenological distance between the narrative voice and the place (including the voice's own supposed ego) from which it suddenly finds itself speaking. It is a process that is concerned with the poetic decorum of a speaking presence and the preparation of a narrative ground that the voice must secure if it is to confidently and coherently move forward into the projected world of the work's imagined construction. *Texts for Nothing* opens, in other words, with a curious suppression of the most basic prerequisite of narrative: the spatio-temporal distance of a perspective situated between event and narration. The voice's immediate and unwelcome appearance in the opening sequence of Text 1 is quickly taken over by a description of its narrative surroundings that it claims, curiously, is "unimportant": "I'll describe the place, that's unimportant" (100). What follows, with apparent disregard for its avowed lack of importance, is a bland description of an imagined place that quite clearly has no resemblance to the inhospitable dwelling in which the voice finds itself suddenly immersed. Text 1 denies the narrative voice the luxury of a discursively consistent and punctually located identity, and so casts into doubt the textual viability of either a first, second, or third-person narrative that the voice could begin to inhabit and/or propel. Nevertheless, the voice is quick to rehearse its narrative options, erratically adopting first, second, and third person instantiations as it desperately searches for its place in the text. The narrative stalls before it encounters the possibility to begin, and yet it has begun, precisely, by narrating the denial of any subjective coherence to a voice that is already in the midst, it seems, of performing a narrative function. The voice "knows" this, and with this knowledge it arrives at the first instalment of its attempt to overcome the ontological impotence of its existence in narrative, saying

to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I am far from all that wrangle, I shouldn't bother with it, I need nothing, neither to go on nor to stay where I am, it's truly all one to me. I should turn away from it all, away from the body, away from the head, let them work it out between them, let them cease, I can't, it's I would have to cease (100).

Already, then, the voice expresses its desire to leave this place in all of its spatial, grammatical, and ontological confusions by giving up on the twin illusions of embodiment and consciousness. The inconsistencies and inhospitalities of what it vaguely calls its "dwelling-place", however, are

not so easily forgotten or ignored (101). The voice is riveted to its dwelling-place, unfortunately, as a fragmented cipher of its subjectivity “gathered together for life” (101). Text 1 reads as a work of narrative and subjective preparation, presupposing that the voice is compelled (by the generic dictate of narrative) to consolidate its subjective presence if it is to enter into the temporal sequence of a narrative and into the spatial coherence of an identity. Text 1 is experimental in this respect, which poses, somewhat surprisingly, very little difficulty for trying to decipher the relation between voice and narrative, text and interpretation, that it is in the process of establishing, albeit unsuccessfully. The relation that it is trying to establish, indeed, is a relation between the placement of the voice within a narrative sequence and within accessible proximity to the comprehending gaze of hermeneutical criticism that takes this sequence as an object of analysis.

However, things get more complicated when the voice arrives at a formulation that is, this time around, “all-important”: “And what I’m doing, all-important, breathing in and out and saying, with words like smoke, I can’t go, I can’t stay, let’s see what happens next” (102). The disembodied voice of *Texts for Nothing* is complemented here by the transparent materiality of language (“like smoke”), opening the door for its transmission into the words that will come to comprise its purpose and its reality here in the text. It is not simply the case that the voice speaks with words, though of course it does this too, but rather that it breathes them, lives in them, and relies on them if it is to have any existence at all. Deferring its existence to “words like smoke” means that if we, readers of *Texts for Nothing*, are to discover a speaking presence it will be by observing how the voice materializes and coalesces around the words that it causes, and that also cause the voice, to appear. Because *Texts for Nothing* is quite explicit that whatever words are spoken by the voice will be as tangible and fleeting as smoke, effaced in the instant of their iteration, the critical desire to discover evidence of a relation between narrative subject and narrated subjectivity cannot but recognize that it, too, is faced with not knowing if the words and concepts it uses to communicate its understanding of the text are not likewise subject to the dissimulating and deconstructive power of smoke. Reading *Texts for Nothing* and translating its ambiguities into concepts amenable to comprehension cannot but seriously entertain the possibility that the impasse of the voice (to exist in words like smoke) is the impasse of hermeneutical criticism as well.

So as not to get ahead of ourselves, it is worth pointing out that the voice has not yet revealed that its spectral diffusion into a multiplicity of selves and words is concentrated around a textual space where the existence of temporality is just as uncertain and ambiguous as is the existence of the narrative voice itself. Its instruction to “see what happens next” is contextually relevant only up to a point, and indeed this point is illuminated as quickly as it is overshadowed by the declaration that here, in the hermetic inescapability of its “dwelling-place”, “all mingles, times and tenses” (102). Suddenly, the voice is flooded with scenarios of its death that could only be arrived at from within a functional sequence of narrative temporality: “I’ve given myself up for dead all over the place, of hunger, of old age, murdered, drowned, and then for no reason, of tedium, nothing like breathing your last to put new life in you” (103). The narrative voice is trapped in a world that can only permit death, ostensibly as an event *outside* language, if death passes *into* language as a discursive event of absolute negation. Language, though, is precisely what ensures that negation cannot be absolute. This is not all. Because death presupposes the finite existence of the life that it negates, and because in *Texts for Nothing* no such presupposition obtains, whatever it is of the voice’s existence that is susceptible to negation will undoubtedly survive as the discursive trace that it was all along, which it will then be the task of the narrative voice to negate yet again and always if it is to realize the dream of living a life in finitude (and not in the interminable horror of the *il y a*). Because language has been divested of its subjective and temporal supports – “time has turned into space and there will be no more time, till I get out of here” (132) – it too has lost all ontological authority over legislating what belongs inside and outside of discourse. The loss of the power to separate language from subjectivity, words from voice, smoke from life, death from existence – “nothing like breathing your last to put new life in you” – consigns the narrator-protagonist to a textual space of everlasting immanence where it is obliged to repeat what it nevertheless registers as the logical contradictions and metaphysical illusions that only an existence in temporality could rescue and sublimate. Where “all mingles, times and tenses” the voice can neither presume that it is speaking and breathing *inside* language (in immanence), nor that it is speaking and breathing from a space that is clearly *outside* of language (the horizon of transcendence). Only death and the temporality of finitude could provide it with the certainty of how it is ontologically situated relative to language, but given that the “time” of narrative, death, and finitude is not accessible to the voice, is not welcome inside the dwelling-place of *Texts for Nothing*, it will have no choice except to

persist and actively participate in the repetition of an existence given “up for dead all over the place”. Beckett’s staging of repetition, “unworked death”, subjective anonymity, and narrative paralysis, all of them ingredients of the speech and *logos* of terror that Blanchot diagnoses as the inconceivable condition of literature, reproduces *Texts for Nothing*, as early as Text 1, as a work that provokes the act of its interpretation to penetrate deeper than is customary into the crevices and inconsistencies of its composition.

Text 2 returns the voice to the nocturnal scene of its dwelling-place expunged of the delusional belief that entry into a recognizably functional narrative sequence is possible. The voice is reminded that “above is the light, the elements, a kind of light, sufficient to see by, the living find their ways, without too much trouble, avoid one another, unite, avoid the obstacles [...]. Here you are under a different glass, not long habitable either, it’s time to leave it. You are there, there it is, where you are will never long be habitable. Go then, no, better stay, for where would you go, now that you know? Back above? There are limits” (105). The voice of Text 1, it seems, re-appears in Text 2 deprived of whatever metaphysical sustenance it may have received from resting under the light of “that ancient lamp” (104), forced now to find its way “under a different glass” (105). Where the voice is now, “down below”, is not to be confused as the nocturnal imprint of “up above”, as though *Texts for Nothing* were proposing a simple dichotomy between a reality that is clear and distinct and one that is opaque and obscure. Knowledge of “life above” does not give the voice any practicable hope of liberation from where it presently resides. This is odd. We would assume that the textual reference to an “outside” of *Texts for Nothing* would permit the voice to coordinate the dimensions of its dwelling-place as the negative image of “up above”, in which case the “limits” would apply to an ontologically distinct point of separation between above and below. If the voice’s reference to a “limit” does indeed apply to the ontological distinction between life in the light above, where “the living find their ways” (105), and life in the darkness below, where phenomenological experience is obscured “by the excessive light of night” (105), then it would have discovered a potential opening (a distinctly identifiable surface to the tympanum) capable of delivering it into the ordinary world of temporality, the ultimate “destination” of which is the “tomb, to be trod without a word” (137). Text 2 demonstrates that the voice has access to memories and ideas of “life above”, though it is far from certain whether these have any functional value with respect to the hope of constructing a narrative of its subjective identity by which it would commence/return

to a liveable life. Whatever knowledge or recollection the voice might possess concerning memories of “Mother Calvet” (105), “the cliffs and the sea” (105), “Mr. Joly...in the belfry” (107), “Piers pricking his oxen o’er the plain” (107), or “the farm of the Graves brothers” (107), can no longer be said to form an integrated part of the life and world it presently inhabits: “but one more memory, one last memory, it may help, to abort again” (107). These memory-scrapes offer no traction for the beginning of a narrative that the voice could begin to call its own. The voice has not lost the memories of a life once lived; rather, it has lost the very capacity to exist as a subject around whom such memories could be gathered together in order to define. “Here at least none of that”, we are reminded, “no talk of a creator and nothing very definite in the way of creation” (107).

Even if an opening into “life above” were visible and accessible from where the voice is inscribed, passing through such an opening would still be provisional on the voice overcoming what in Text 3 is presented as an insurmountable obstacle of its spectral ontology: “is it possible to sprout a head at last, all my very own, in which to brew poisons worthy of me, and legs to kick my heels with, I’d be there at last, I could go at last, it’s all I ask, no I can’t ask anything. Just the head and the two legs, or one, in the middle, I’d go hopping [...], what’s wrong with that? I don’t know, I’m here, that’s all I know, and that it’s still not me, it’s of that the best has to be made. There is no flesh anywhere, nor any way to die” (113). The absence of all that would confirm the voice’s identity as a subject (a head, legs, etc.) does not mean, then, that there is an absence of what constitutes the subjectivity of its (impossible) role as subject. The voice is in some way present to the images of a corporeal self that continually allow it to “brew poisons worthy of me”, but what keeps it cut off from inhabiting such images is precisely the ontological constraints that the “here” exercises over the passage into such an identity. Learning to read the contours of this disconnection is the key to envisioning how a so-called post-metaphysical discourse can be implemented as a critical rejoinder to the philosophical residues of humanism that continue to persist well beyond their expiry date in the catastrophic events of the twentieth century. As Adorno famously puts it in his reading of *Endgame*, the task of interpretation in the case of Beckett is to think through the implications of a philosophical and historical context in

which the metaphysics of the subject are, if not irredeemably *caput!*⁶⁹, then at the very minimum reduced to the residual “caput mortuum of a studious youth” (145)⁷⁰. The voice of Text 3 seems to have outlived the dream of brewing such poisons, but what is interesting is that its repudiation of the lessons it learned as a “studious youth” is a consequence of dwelling in the terror of “here” rather than dwelling in the epistemological safety of a phenomenologically secure consciousness: “it’s terror makes me say it”, as the unnamable puts it.

Texts for Nothing is a labyrinth of the openings and closures of a narrative that never quite takes foot. The voice is tormented by the compulsion to perform the discursive ceremonies that serve little more than to confirm the unapproachable limits of its entrapment in the immanence of terror. Unfortunately for the voice, the ceremonial repetition of its torment becomes its exclusive and ambivalent haven of consistency in a world that is shot through with contingency and denial: “Utter, there’s nothing else, utter, void yourself of them, here as always, nothing else. But they are failing, true, that’s the change, they are failing, that’s bad, bad. Or it’s the dread of coming to the last, of having said all, your all, before the end, no, for that will be the end, the end of all, not certain” (106). The failure of any recognizably coherent narrative to commence is the structural consequence of the voice having to so thoroughly and completely depend on narrative if it is to acquire the type of subjective persona on which narrative, too, ineluctably depends. Such co-dependence is disastrous for the voice’s desire of transcending its intimacy with a world that strikingly corresponds with the unliveable space of suffering and terror. Relying on narrative to consolidate the heterogeneity of the voice, to quell the play of contingency and uncertainty that overwhelms its dwelling-place, and to impute onto its words and language the saving grace of value and meaning is destined to failure insofar as narrative is just as dependent on these things having already been faithfully envisioned and presupposed if it

⁶⁹ In his essay “Trying to Understand Endgame,” Adorno writes that “In *Endgame*, a historical moment unfolds, namely, the experience captured in the title of one of the culture industry’s cheap novels, *Kaputt*. After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one’s own damaged state useless” (262).

⁷⁰ L.A.J. Bell points out that the Latin translation of *caput mortuum* “designates the worthless, irreducible chemical deposit left behind after the process of distillation” (38). Adorno’s characteristically hyperbolic pronouncements about the end of the subject, history, and culture, though issued for their own rhetorical purposes, should thus not be taken as absolute principles in the context of either Beckett’s writing or drama. Beckett is ultimately, particularly in the late stages of his *oeuvre*, trying to work through the minimal difference of what in *Worstward Ho* is called “the unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leasening words say least best worse. For want of worster worst. Unlessenable least best worse” (106).

is to properly commence toward their (inevitable) realization. The absence of a storyteller, to put it crudely, means that there is no story to be told; likewise, the absence of a story in the atemporal context of *Texts for Nothing* means that there is no storyteller to do the telling. What emerges out of this narrative stalemate is an unstoppable outpouring of words, memories, and reflections over which the voice of *Texts for Nothing* is powerless to either obstruct or take ownership: “and beauty, strength, intelligence, the latest, daily, action, poetry, all one price for one and all. If only it could be wiped from knowledge” (106). The stalemate between the narrative voice and the acquisition of a distinct narrative subjectivity, in other words, is surprisingly dynamic and productive of the very discourse this stalemate would seek to deny, and it is one of Beckett’s gifts, and perhaps even his curse, that despite the immobility and decay of the narrative sequences and personas that his writing produces they do not, as a result, conclude in a state of ontological and narrative paralysis.

Texts for Nothing asks of its interpretation that if the terror-stricken site of narrative is to be taken as a serious problem, as of course it must, then so too must the fragmented site of language. Having confronted the voice with the impasse of a life in narrative, an existence outside the immanence of terror, the next step taken by *Texts for Nothing* is to also bombard language with the voice’s impossible desire to escape into a world where the temporality of finitude that connects birth with death, sign with concept, is once again metaphysically and phenomenologically viable. Text 2 exposes the ideological veil that covers over how language, too, is as dependent as is narrative on the acquisition of a non-terrorized subjectivity (the ontological *apriori* of metaphysical humanism) if it is to practice the dialectical law of negativity that all representation requires. In *Texts for Nothing*, however, both narrative and language are held in abeyance insofar as the “the subject” that is responsible for sustaining the narrative implementation of its subjectivity “dies before it comes to the verb” (106). Provided solely with words, the voice of *Texts for Nothing* is condemned to seek its existence in the very language that perpetuates its exclusion from life amongst the living. Because language misfires by both exceeding and disappointing its intended use and meaning, it fails to avoid the suspicion that with each word spoken another is required to supplement its impotence; with every word spoken another is required to restrain its referential promiscuity. One of Beckett’s more recognizable stylistic strategies is to link each and every proposition and image with its immediate retraction. If no word or image can definitively rule out its negation, however, then the voice can begin to

look, *hypothetically*, outside of language and text for the traces and materials of a tolerable post-traumatic existence. The notoriously Beckettian impulse towards silence and nothingness is what would afford the narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing* its avenue of escape and transcendence *out of* the poetic context of terror and *into* the “life above” of a post-terror world. Its tragic condition, however, is that being made of words, having its being reside in them as a purely fictional entity, the voice cannot so easily ignore or escape what Frederic Jameson aptly names the prison-house of language, and thus it is obstructed from projecting its hope for finitude into an ontological schema grounded in the murmuring silence and nothingness of the Levinasian *il y a* – i.e. the ontological prerequisite to ethical transcendence. Nothing like Levinas’s ethical event of transcendence, for instance, or Badiou’s faith in the subtractive transcendence of the Event, will suffice to cut the narrative voice off from its impossible existence in the terror of language and words. More fundamental than the voice’s inseparability from the narrative sequence that it can cause to neither end nor begin is thus its intimacy with the structural and aporetic hermeticism of its linguistic output. Lacking access to an ontological framework uncontaminated by traces of language and narrative (silence, nothingness, and anonymity, for instance), the voice remains suspended between the subject it cannot become and the consciousness it can never possess. The entire drama of *Texts for Nothing* will turn on how deep the narrative voice is capable of descending into the aporetic vicissitudes of its failure to exist and/or expire other than as a subject of suspicion and terror: “Did I try everything, ferret in every hold, secretly, silently, patiently, listening? I’m in earnest, as so often, I’d like to be sure I left no stone unturned before reporting me missing and giving up. In every hold, I mean in all those places where there was a chance of my being, where once I used to lurk, waiting for the hour to come when I might venture forth, tried and trusty places, that’s all I meant when I said in every hold” (127). It is part of our job as readers of *Texts for Nothing* to see just how vigilant the voice has been in the enterprise of its ferreting.

“If true language is to begin,” writes Blanchot, “the life that will carry this language must have experienced its nothingness, must have ‘trembled in the depths; and everything in it that was fixed and stable must have been shaken’” (43). The voice of *Texts for Nothing* is not the voice of “true language”, at least not yet, but it is a voice that trembles compulsively where language, subjectivity, and narrative have been so relentlessly submitted to disempowerment so as to have lost the capacity for coherence and closure. Without the power to cease, the power to

begin, the power to go silent or depart, the voice is forced to vigilantly embrace the vulnerability that its ontological impotence creates. Experiencing its vulnerability as the disintegration of the hope – “a pity hope is dead” (108) – for a life safe from the negating power of language is what opens the horizon where the negativity of language, and not the alterity of an existence that language cannot touch (as is the case in the horror of the *il y a*), becomes the privileged site for resisting, immanently as it were, the discursively violent power that language continuously exercises over all that would identify as “this woman” or “this man”, for instance, i.e. as a distinctively worldly subjectivity.

The voice’s refusal to naïvely deny its subjection to language is emblematic of how literature similarly mounts resistance to the destructiveness of language’s universalizing tendencies:

leave, I was going to say leave all that. What matter who’s speaking, someone said what matter who’s speaking. There’s going to be a departure, I’ll be there, I won’t miss it, it won’t be me, I’ll be here, I’ll say I’m far from here, it won’t be me, I won’t say anything, there’s going to be a story, someone’s going to try and tell a story. Yes, no more denials, all is false, there is no one, it’s understood, there is nothing, no more phrases, let us be dupes, dupes of every time and tense, until it’s done, all past and done, and the voices cease, it’s only voices, only lies. Here, depart from here and go elsewhere, or stay here, but coming and going (109).

The question that guides our reading of *Texts for Nothing* does not immediately relate to how the subjectivity of the voice is to be predicated (or not) in relation to the narrative it has constructed (or not), but in response to the quotation above it concerns instead the significance of the work’s speaking presence having committed itself to semantic as well as figural immobility in the immanence of terror. Can language accommodate the voice’s stubborn adherence to anonymity? In Text 3 the voice projects its use of language towards retrieving the subjective accoutrement of its existence – limbs, organs, head – in a way that short-circuits the path of trying to endlessly recuperate and represent what is otherwise irrecoverable of its life in narrative: “start by stirring, there must be a body, as of old, I don’t deny it, no more denials, I’ll say I’m a body, stirring back and forth, up and down, as required. [...] I’ll call that living, I’ll say it’s me, I’ll get standing, I’ll stop thinking, I’ll be too busy, getting standing, staying standing, stirring about, holding out” (109). By so vigilantly embracing its impotence as a point of departure for realizing its hope to “get standing”, the voice is able to undermine the metaphysical conviction that it is only by way of the negation of alterity that our identity in the world can be said to appear. “Holding out” is

not easily reducible in *Texts for Nothing* to an inert refusal of representation. To “stay here, but coming and going” is precisely what the logic of negativity cannot tolerate, and so it is precisely this kind of posturing, this refusal of negativity, that is required if ordinary language, language based on negativity and on the possibility of destruction, is to be shaken at the core of its application. The narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing*, accordingly, is forced to embrace an inhuman form of existence if it is to somehow function with this idea of “true language” on its horizon: “what matter how you describe yourself, here or elsewhere, fixed or mobile, without form or oblong like man, in the dark or the light of the heavens, *I don't know, it seems to matter, it's not going to be easy*” (110-111; emphasis added). However, because the representation of an inhuman existence is dependent on being excluded from familiar forms of representation, and also because the voice cannot be perpetrator, witness, and judge of its inhuman representation simultaneously, determining how an inhuman discourse is practicable can only be conducted by first determining *how* and *where* it can appear in the text. Recalling Blanchot's argument of the essential relation between literature and the inhuman, it is not without relevance to the overall analysis of a poetics of terror that we discover how this relation, between literature and the inhuman, is constructed through the language of *Texts for Nothing*. *It's not going to be easy* precisely because in *Texts for Nothing* language is implicated as a site for a poetics of terror just as harshly as is the site of narrative.

Beckett's obsession with topographies of space is as palpable, precise, and disorienting in *Texts for Nothing* as it is in “Imagination Dead Imagine”, *Company*, “The Lost Ones”, and even *Quad*. One of the formal innovations Beckett begins to perfect after *Watt* is the migration of the narrative voice from domestic and institutional spaces (the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, Mr. Knott's house, Lousse's garden) where the Beckettian subject still has some modicum of purchase on the phenomenological determinants of its subjectivity, to more abstract spaces (ivory dungeons, flattened cylinders, tracks of mud) where the narrative voice is disconnected from whatever can be said to remain of the corporeality of its body or the memory of a “life above”. Deciding on how to predicate the textual space of Beckett's prose takes priority in this case over how to predicate the identity of its speaking subject. The question, in other words, is one of *where* the narrative is occurring/failing more than it is of the identity of *who* the narrative is trying to reveal. This is especially evident not only in *Texts for Nothing*, but also in “The Calmative”, where the narrator-protagonist insists that “what I tell this evening is passing this

evening, at this passing hour. I'm no longer with these assassins, *in this bed of terror*, but in my distant refuge, my hands twined together, my head bowed, weak, breathless, calm, free, and older than I'll have ever been, if my calculations are correct. I'll tell my story in the past none the less, as though it were a myth, or an old fable, for this evening I need another age, that age to become another age in which I became what I was" (62; emphasis added). Contained within this passage is the hypothesis of another space, "my distant refuge", where the narrator could tell his story without having to suffer the visceral marks that the act of its discursive inscription "in this bed of terror" would otherwise induce. The protagonist is in search of a method and space of narration whereby it could exist, to borrow from the idiom of *How It Is*, as a victim of narrative *without* having to experience the infliction of violence that narrative victimization demands. What we inevitably discover in *Texts for Nothing* is a similar hypothesis of the voice wanting to experience inscription without the uncontrollable intrusion of violence, except that such an hypothesis is immediately exposed to the conceptual limits of its viability as a space of literature. The voice of *Texts for Nothing*, accordingly, can do little else but transfer the hypothesis of a non-violent inscription *back onto* "this bed of terror", where its words, all those little assassins, threaten to return it to under the inhospitable light of representation, subjectivity, and narrative. Its vigilance outside the reciprocal discourses of narrative and negativity, then, converts it into a victim of its own success: "And to start with stop palpitating, no one's going to kill you, no one's going to love you and no one's going to kill you, perhaps you'll emerge in the high depression of Gobi, you'll feel at home there. I'll wait, for you here, no, I'm alone, I alone am, this time it's I must go" (110). The instant that the voice feels comfortable adopting the second person perspective over its emergence in the extravagant desert of "Gobi", is the instant that death is re-introduced into the narrative fabric and where its subjectivity is most susceptible to being re-humanised ("re-educated") in a suicidal pact with language. To be "at home there" is to be ready for death and the negativity that language wields, but alas it is "here", in the space of terror, in the space that the voice otherwise wants to speak of (but cannot) as if it were "there", where "I alone am" (110) and where "I've given myself up for dead all over the place" (103). Amidst all the voice's displacements and wanderings in *Texts for Nothing* it invariably returns to a space, call it the imagined space of Gobi, ultimately indistinguishable from this "bed of terror", that renders it susceptible to the assassination attempts that language intends to perform on the "untenanted" residues of its subjectivity (150).

Depending on where the voice finds itself at any one moment during its navigation of the text, indeed where we, readers of *Texts for Nothing*, decide to locate it in its “distant refuge” or “this bed of terror”, will determine to what degree Beckett has escaped the impasse whereby the narrative voice is condemned to repeat the refrain “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414) that is the motor-force behind its ceaseless repetition of utterings...*nothing but a voice murmuring a trace*. That such a determination ultimately comes down to an arbitrary decision on where, when, and how it can possibly be made relative to what the text of *Texts for Nothing* will permit is precisely the point. In its obsessive and structurally determined arbitrariness we can detect echoes in *Texts for Nothing* of the logic according to which the Reign of Terror, as Comay describes it once again, “kept feeding on what it destroyed and annihilating what nourished it”: “The Terror betrays the virulence of a rationality enthralled by the fanaticism it keeps trying to beat down. Such reactivity – abstract negativity at its most truculent – had condemned the culture of the French Enlightenment to an unceasing symbiosis of myth and self-mystifying disenchantment” (56). I can scarcely think of a more concise description of how *Texts for Nothing*, a work that this dissertation has in no uncertain terms decided to portray as a microcosm of the logic and rationality of terror, derives its energy and momentum from the reciprocal reinforcement of impotence and negativity that language and narrative perpetrate against one another. The impotence intrinsic to language and narrative that Beckett exposes is what keeps his writing captivated to their irresistible deployment. The coincidence of rationality and fanaticism that Comay associates with the Reign of Terror is what makes the prolongation of revolution and freedom a contradiction at the level of the ongoing desire for both. As the desire for a rationality disjointed from myth enters into the paradigm of its practicability, the law of dialectical reversal intervenes and out of the rationalization of myth we end up, as Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrated so convincingly, with the mythologization of rationality⁷¹. Beckett is implicated in a similar experience of reversal as his writing of *Texts for Nothing* cannot resist replicating a subject borne in narrative and language and thus subsequently reproduced as the fanatical repetition of its continual effacement. Indeed, it is this degree and type of hyper-rational fanaticism – to create and destroy in the same breath – that preserves the Beckettian voice in a

⁷¹ Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, and in particular “Excursus I: Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment”.

poetics of ceaseless self-annihilation – *nothing like breathing your last* – and ever-diminishing renewal – *to put new life in you*.

So far the concern in our reading of Texts 1 through 3 has been to show that the compulsion to narrative in lieu of the impossibility of narrative requires a similar compulsion to language, also in lieu of its impossibility – “name, no, nothing is namable, tell, no, nothing can be told, what then, I don’t know, I shouldn’t have begun” (144). The interruption of narrative causes the voice to confront a similar interruption at the site of language, which only serves to exacerbate the necessity of reviving the illusory anticipation of narrative for the voice’s acquisition, *via* language, of anything resembling an identity or an existence that could place it, alas, in suicidal possession of its subjectivity. Confronting the impossibility of narrative, in other words, places a greater emphasis on the necessity of acquiring language as a medium for the recognition of one’s existence, and the impossibility of language emphasises, in its infinite turn, the necessity of narrative to perform the same. Herein lies the vicious circle of a life immersed in the inhuman immanence of terror. That there is nevertheless “something” that is speaking and communicating from out of the pages of *Texts for Nothing*, even if this “something” is only the in-existent alterity of “a voice murmuring a trace”, obliges that we situate its presence in the text as precisely as is possible in order that we do not let ourselves succumb to something as disastrous as this infernal repetition (152). The decision to conceptualize the voice’s position in *Texts for Nothing* according to a poetics of the fragmentary imperative of terror intends to avoid this by conjoining the textual and interpretive experiences of narrative impasse – on the one hand, of a voice condemned to the solitude of inexistence, and on the other, the interpretive desire to penetrate and articulate the inner workings of this confinement – around a common point of intelligibility. This “bed of terror,” as it is called in “The Calmative,” points us in the direction of a precise spatial disposition that effectively communicates how the voice of *Texts for Nothing* relates to the repetitive (self-) disintegration of its subjectivity.

What does a poetics of the fragmentary imperative of terror look like in *Texts for Nothing*? Text 4 continues to map the topographical coordinates of terror at the syntactical level of the voice’s internment. Text 4 begins by interrogating the influence of spatiality on the voice’s capacity for a transcendental inquiry into the reality of its situation: “where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it’s me?” (114). It is not enough that the voice finds itself immersed, suddenly, in this “bed of

terror”, “in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours” (114), if it is to outwit the negativity of language that would have it “dead like the living” (114), but it must *perform* its immersion in this inhuman space of terror as well. A poetics of terror is only possible where its performance is given some semblance of representation, yet it is in the performance of terror that all forms of representation become unsustainable. At issue is the possibility of representing a subjective presence while simultaneously taking seriously the disseminating effects of language on a subject of textuality. In light of the argument being advanced here, the transcendental opening of Text 4 is a reflection of the necessity to ensure the voice’s ongoing interpellation by a narrative context, but as the voice of *Texts for Nothing* is not a typical character that is always already interpellated within a narrative sequence, nor for that matter does it act as a unified voice whose memory and speech are its own, it is denied from coinciding with the category of the subject that all transcendental critiques (Kantian, Husserlian, Heideggerian) and performances believe themselves to have permanently exposed. By exposing what it is that conditions the possibility of meaning, thinking, and representation, transcendental critique is inevitably implicated in restoring unity between contingencies of existence and narratives of redemption that religion, art, and philosophy, more generally, have historically conspired in similarly devising. Beckett’s work intends to subtract the art and style of his prose from this conspiracy. His use of a poetics of terror, then, which unfolds through the myriad of ways that solipsistic reflexivity is both psychologically and conceptually intolerable, is able to generate a post-narrative sequence of prose where the categories of narrator and character are evacuated of all power (i.e. the power to tell and live a story) and consistency (i.e. the continuity of the being of either).

Beckett’s writing occurs, to speak somewhat hyperbolically, at the zero degree level of literature where the discourses of language, narrative, subjectivity, and world are given only as the demand for their interminable interrogation and thoroughgoing critique. This is, moreover, in keeping with Blanchot’s insistence that literature begins in the passion of its inquisition. With this juxtaposition of a poetics of terror alongside a transcendental critique of narrative and subjective possibility, the Beckettian voice is fragmented and splintered into an infinite number of pieces that betoken the inconceivability of being made whole either again or for the first time. It is terror, in other words, that obstructs the momentum and *telos* of the transcendental desire animating conceptual thinking and discursive representation. Beckett’s rather explicit thematization in Text 4 of the limits to transcendental (re-) inscriptions of meaning and value is

successful in gesturing to the event of literary self-suspicion, and this in spite of its own ultimate untenability as a coherent program of writing. Beckett exemplifies the Sartrean predicament, as Jameson is fond of quoting, where winner loses. Beckett's relentless insistence on allowing his writing to be carried along by the contingencies and variations of its own performance, then, is what leaves *Texts for Nothing* paralyzed between the agony of its repetition and the fascination over its inexhaustibility. It is the voice embedded in *Texts for Nothing*, however, that carries the ultimate burden of paralysis by suffering and perpetrating the space that governs the intolerability of such residence. If this dissertation is correct by assuming that in *Texts for Nothing* Beckett is continuing the assault on the limits of the suffering of the narrative voice that was similarly the target of *The Unnamable*, then it is requisite of the interpretation of this work to describe how and where the assault is carried out and what is supposed to remain after its completion. Is Beckett's intention to produce a work of narrative fiction freed from the fiction of narrative? A subject freed from the suffering of its abjection from subjectivity? Can the discourse of humanism that is the ostensible target of this assault⁷² be subverted only by exposing it to the terror of its own inhumanity?

“Sometimes standing in the void, sometimes shivering in the open” (*Essays* 159), as Deleuze would say, the voice's abandonment by first, second, and third person designations – “if at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments, not he, he'll be satisfied with nothing less than me, for his me” (115) – means that implementing a transcendental critique of its subjectivity is exposed to the contradictory requirement of its self-exclusion from the critique at hand – *who says this, saying it's me?* There is no discursively neutral perspective that the voice of *Texts for Nothing* could begin to inhabit without abdicating from the textually decreed position of its anonymity. Only the divine *logos* of language could afford it such an all-seeing perspective, but there is certainly no divine power operating in the Beckettian world. Despite or because of its exposure in the void of subjectivity and narrative, the voice nevertheless discovers the (unliveable) context of its interpellation in and through the repetitive re-confirmation of its anonymity. It is not wholly present as a speaking and thinking

⁷² In his 2002 publication of *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, Paul Sheehan offers a comprehensive and convincing account of the ways in which twentieth century literary modernism, particularly through the writings of Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf, and above all Beckett, begins to radically dismantle the humanist ideology it had inherited through the philosophical work of Darwin, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.

subject, but nor is it wholly absent as one, either, and as a result of its contingent position relative to its use of language and thought, the voice of *Texts for Nothing* can speak and think *at one and the same time* as object of reference and subject of utterance, doubling as the inhabitant of both. Thus the subjectivity of the voice unfolds, precisely and paradoxically, in the process of exhausting the syntactical limits to the designation of its anonymity as such:

when he had me, when he was me, he couldn't get rid of me quick enough, I didn't exist, he couldn't have that, that was no kind of life, of course I didn't exist, any more than he did, of course it was no kind of life, now he has it, his kind of life, let him lose it, if he wants to be in peace, with a bit of luck. His life, what a mine, what a life, he can't have that, you can't fool him, ergo it's not his, it's not him, what a thought, treat him like that, like a vulgar Molloy, a common Malone, those mere mortals, happy mortals, have a heart, land him in that shit, who never stirred, who is none but me, all things considered, and what things, and how considered, he had only to keep out of it (115).

As the voice repetitively encounters avatars of its anonymity, avatars, that is, that are the products of an imagination intensified by terror, its subjectivity becomes, let us say it again, a syntactical function of what a transcendental critique cannot include – the perspective of its own implementation. This does not mean that the voice loses all ontological credibility; rather, a life somewhere between his and mine, a life that is not his, not mine, begins to assert its feasibility by the simple fact that a life that is neither his nor mine, and never matter Molloy's or Malone's, does not simply dissolve into *none at all*. Where the figures of vigilance and anonymity accompany the transcendental adventure of Text 4 as critical reminders that the desire for narrative and ontological (re-) inscription is what legitimates and restores the philosophically conservative relations between existence, death, and redemption (i.e. relations of transcendence), it is important to explain how vigilance and anonymity do not simply replace, as formally negative equivalents, what they are supposed to be resisting. “Yes, there are moments, like this moment, when I seem almost restored to the feasible. Then it goes, all goes, and I'm far again, with a far story again, I wait for me afar for my story to begin, to end, and again this voice cannot be mine. That's where I'd go, if I could go, that's who I'd be, if I could be” (116).

Through its subtraction from the temporality of past and future, together with the unliveable context of the present, whatever can be said about the vigilance of the voice and the repetition of its anonymity is structurally precluded from being inserted into a relation with identity, death, and/or redemption. There is no future world set to redeem the Beckettian voice with a story of its vigilance or a eulogy of its expiration. There is no story of a life set in the past from which the

Beckettian voice has lapsed, cut off now from the world of the living and held back from the world of the dead. What is being called a “poetics of terror” is an attempt to give conceptual coherence to an experience and a context that can deny neither their opacity nor their impracticability: “there’s my life, why not, it is one, if you like, if you must, I don’t say no, this evening. There has to be one, it seems, once there is speech, no need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life, that’s the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough” (116).

A poetics of terror is detectable where the syntactical contradictions, reversals, and repetitions of the narrative voice’s being-in-*Texts for Nothing* begin to reflect and reinforce the dread of having to stand trial for an existence and a life that can be neither possessed nor tolerated. Text 4 entertains a stage of belief where purely organic living is thought to be exempt from the horrors of existing in such close proximity to a poetics of terror: “What counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial, so long as one is on earth. To breathe is all that is required, there is no obligation to ramble, or receive company, you may even believe yourself dead on condition you makes no bones about it, what more liberal regimen could be imagined, I don’t know, I don’t imagine” (116). In the face of what seems to be the voice’s unliveable destitution within the textuality of Beckett’s prose it never ceases to confirm that it has not yet disappeared into the void of language. The *not yet* of the refusal to go silent signals that there is still the possibility of life *beyond* language and *beyond* narrative, indeed, of life *beyond* terror. Aligning the possibility of its existence with the physical gesture of breathing would be a tenable solution to the problematic of inhering in the immanence of inexistence and terror were it not the case that it immediately leads to the contradiction of death without bones, i.e. death without traces of the existence that has ceased. Text 4 circles back to Text 1, as it were, where the voice comments that its breathing emits “words like smoke” (102). Is the breathing the voice performs in Text 4 of a different substance than the words of Text 1? What we are trying to determine here is whether or not all possibilities of life *beyond* have not already been subsumed by a series of logically consistent contradictions that instantiate the voice as always already *beyond* the possibilities of life, death, and subjectivity. Insofar as the objective of hermeneutical criticism is to understand how the subjectivity of the voice is rendered sensible and recognizable according to the demanding context of *Texts for Nothing*, the act of reading needs to take place where sensibility and recognition have not yet been evacuated in the way that “words like smoke” have

always already been. Unfortunately, if such a space of reading is to be found in the specific encounter with *Texts for Nothing* it can only be where interpretation's strategies of comprehension are interrupted, thereby interrupting in turn the epistemological function of conceptual thinking, which otherwise ordinarily consists in the suppression of images of irrationality, contingency, and non-identity that are circumscribed in the silent catastrophe of the Beckettian narrative. The subjectivity of the voice can thus be read as an infinite performance of its refusal towards (self-) understanding and (self-) representation, i.e. as the performance of its refusal to enter into a meaningful encounter with criticism's hermeneutical consciousness outside the space of literature.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's use of terror in his essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", which appears in *The Inhuman*, is pertinent at this point of the analysis, particularly as it conceptualizes terror according to a phenomenon of privation that is similarly exacerbated in *Texts for Nothing*. What Lyotard finds so menacing in the experience of the sublime is nothing as innocuous as a Kantian disagreement between the faculties, but instead the real yet properly unimaginable "threat of nothing further happening" (99). Lyotard reaches all the way back to the 1757 publication of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry* for insight into how the prospect of *nothing further happening* can infect the mind with imminent collapse. While the aesthetic terminology (spirit, beauty, soul) Lyotard draws on to radicalize the concept of the sublime is arguably philosophically anachronistic, its intuition of a solipsistic experience of anxiety and panic in the face of nothing further happening is not only central to his discussion of avant-garde interrogations of temporality, but can be read as relevant for a reflection on Beckett's writing as well. "Terrors," writes Lyotard, "are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening" (99). The emphasis on terror as the common denominator in the multiplicity of deprivations that the contingency of *It happens that* is able to induce is an effective interpretive model for coming to terms with *what is happening*, if anything at all, in the solipsistic world of *Texts for Nothing*. As we begin to enumerate the various ways that the Beckettian voice is isolated in the spectre of its dissolved subjectivity it is clear that the hermeneutical encounter with *Texts for Nothing* is itself under threat of immobility and impotence at the prospect of nothing further happening other than the repetition of "this

thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words” (125). However much arrested is the repetition of anonymity and privation in the life-world of the voice, there is little hope that either the voice or its reader will find calm or security in what is presented according to the repetitions of the exigencies of terror in *Texts for Nothing*. The voice of *Texts for Nothing*, and it is this that we are interested in understanding, is kept alive by adhering to a poetics of terror insofar as it causes language to annihilate (unsuccessfully) the traces of subjectivity on which its access to language ineluctably depends. Inhabiting a silence that is not silence, in this case, can more accurately be described as inhabiting the silence and solitude of terror, and it is precisely here that the prospect of *nothing further happening* acquires the full density of anticipatory anxiety and dread in the solipsistic horizon of its actualization. Comay’s reading of terror in Hegel’s reaction to the French Revolution, which has already been drawn on during the course of this chapter, dovetails quite nicely with the logic of privation we witness in Lyotard. The point to underscore about the dynamic of terror, particularly as it is operative as a concept of literature, is the affective movement whereby it encapsulates and propels a “fetishistic circle of self-reifying negation” (*Mourning Sickness* 61). Taking this definition of the paradoxical movement of terror as an interpretive point of reference for tracing the textual performance of the Beckettian voice and the relation it has to the narrative horizon of its subjectivity, places Beckett’s writing within a larger, though still largely under-analyzed, context of philosophical and historical concern. Beckett’s writing, when viewed through the lens of terror, becomes a space of radical conceptual alterity that it is our job as thinkers of literature to risk approaching without the faith that it will accommodate our demands for comprehension and knowledge.

Vigilance in the Immanence of Terror

Whereas Text 4 performs an exhaustive refusal of a transcendental critique by which the voice would be rescued from the immanence of terror and “restored to the feasible,” Text 5, with its invocation of a pervasive juridical presence, lays an infinite judgment of guilt and punishment over the voice’s continual desire to elude the grip of terror on which its textual dwelling relentlessly insists:

I’m the clerk, I’m the scribe, at the hearings of what cause I know not. There it goes again, that’s the first question this evening. To be judge and party, witness and advocate, and he, attentive, indifferent, who sits and notes. It’s an image, in my helpless head, where all sleeps, all is dead, not yet born, I don’t know, or before my eyes, they see the scene, the lids flicker and it’s in. An instant and then they close again, to look

inside the head, to try and see inside, to look for me there, to look for someone there, in the silence of quite a different justice, *in the toils of that obscure assize where to be is to be guilty*. That is why nothing appears, all is silent, one is frightened to be born, no, one wishes one were, so as to begin to die (117; emphasis added).

Of particular importance to the present analysis is the reference in this excerpt to “that obscure assize”. If it is the case that the subjectivity of the voice is bound to the contingencies implicit in the ongoing performance of its inexistence in the immanence of terror, this does not mean that *Texts for Nothing* is a site of pure chaos, disorientation, and suffering. What remains constant throughout, other than the detached anonymity of the voice, is the “obscure assize,” the “bed of terror” and judgment, that the voice of *Texts for Nothing* is struggling to control and outwit. Text 5 reverberates, in this case, with an aggressively suspicious tonality that is absent from Text 4. More inquisitorial than inquisitive, in other words, Text 5 signals an abrupt indictment of Text 4’s transcendental voyeurism. The incapacity of Text 4 to restore feasibility to the metaphysical link between the subject and its subjectivity – “then it goes, all goes, and I’m far again, with a far story again, I wait for me afar for my story to begin, to end, and again this voice cannot be mine” – opens the door for the events of negativity and death to reassert their discursive prerogative over whatever enters into the textual field of iteration and consciousness. Just because the voice is trapped in a liminal zone of inexistence, then, does not mean that it is exempt from the mortifying effects of its textual representation. The failure of the voice in Text 4 to be restored to the world of narrative feasibility and representation means, furthermore, that it has no other choice than to relinquish its claim over the responsibility for its textual existence. Text 4, in this scheme of things, had taken the obligation seriously that something, anything, must of necessity happen to the voice that would restore it to the feasibility of a phenomenological narrative subject, though the responsibility for this “something”, this “anything”, could really only have been derived from what the voice itself was capable of producing. It was trying, in other words, to be the giver of the gift of existence: God. Text 5, on the other hand, proceeds on the basis of the voice having forfeited the responsibility for its representation as either subject (speaker) or object (character) of a narrative sequence, and so is a more serious reflection on the ontological consequences of *nothing further happening*, of the voice forever inhabiting the domain of its inexistence. Text 5 does this by universally condemning the very idea of the voice’s ontological credibility – *to be is to be guilty*.

The scene of Text 5 offers a panoramic view of the voice's agonizing transition between obligation and contingency, tormentor and victim, judge and party and witness and advocate, all the while refusing the unity of perspective that the voice can intuit, iterate, and to some degree internalize, but never satisfactorily acquire: "Ah yes, I hear I have a kind of conscience, and on top of that a kind of sensibility, I trust the orator is not forgetting anything, and without ceasing to listen or drive the old quill I'm afflicted by them, I heard, it's noted. This evening the session is calm, there are long silences when all fix their eyes on me, that's to make me fly off my hinges, I feel on the brink of shrieks, it's noted" (118). What state of mind is the voice of *Texts for Nothing* capable of possessing? To call it madness, psychosis even, is not far off the mark, were not the case that the voice anticipates and deflates the diagnosis with a disarmingly parodic nod of indifference – *it's noted*. The problem, then, is not one of deciding on the plausibility of any number of conclusions about what the voice is doing or what it is trying to become in the world of *Texts for Nothing*, but of why attaching value, significance, or finality to any conclusion whatsoever is ill-advised and irrelevant. Taking *to be is to be guilty* as an *apriori* indictment of representation and consciousness is a way for Beckett to arrest metaphysical redemption before it has the chance to pass from desire to praxis. What we have here, in other words, is a contradiction that is both ontological and metaphysical: the instant that a decision of guilt is made, the question of the path to forgiveness and redemption automatically follows suit. The compactness of the formula *to be is to be guilty*, however, precludes by way of syntactical concentration what its semantic import logically includes by way of connotation: redemption. Text 4 did not go far enough in foreclosing the desire for narrative, and thus metaphysical, feasibility, and so the next logical step is to short circuit all the ways that the life-story of the voice is exempted from feasibility and to simply assert that were it to suddenly become feasible (i.e. metaphysically redeemable and phenomenologically self-present) it would be subject to the harshest forms of violence that a life in literature is able to sustain.

Text 5 is pivotal, then, in constructing a poetics of terror insofar as it brings to fruition the ontological equation of appearance and illusion that had hitherto been granted only a restrained influence on the tone of the work up to this point. The textual identity of the voice is, perhaps, a cipher of pure illusion, of the subjectivity that Blanchot envisions as *without* any subject. The underlying supposition here is that in order for an object, i.e. the narrating presence of the voice, to accede to the discursive world of feasibility and appearance it must have already precipitated

what Blanchot understands as “that deferred assassination which is what my language is” (“Literature and the Right to Death” 43). Text 5 works to suspend the mortifying temporality of ontological deferral in order to preserve the traces of non-appearance that language necessarily suppresses as it translates the heterogeneity of existence into the negativity of what is acceptable for representation. Beckett’s fondness for obliging the protagonists of his writing to persist in the immanence of the contradiction of existence/non-existence is especially evident in *Texts for Nothing*, where the only image of existence that the voice is permitted to articulate with any degree of confidence, ultimately, is the image of “nothing but a voice murmuring a trace” (152). The thesis of Text 5, then, is that filtered through the narrative lens of representation, objects, subjects, voices, and images can either participate in appearance or in non-appearance, in continuity or in discontinuity, and it is through the definitive representation of either that a crime against what clings to non-representation can be said to have been committed.

To ask how the Beckettian voice can function as something other than the spectre of its inexistence, as other than a voice murmuring a trace, cannot escape from the question of why it is desirable that the voice exist *otherwise* than in this way. Beckett seems to be presupposing an idea of reading and interpretation as a hysterical mode of dialogic expectation. The voice, too, would like nothing else than to “tell a story, in the true sense of the words, the word hear, the word tell, the word story, I have high hopes, a little story, with living creatures coming and going on a habitable earth crammed with the dead” (126), but the problem is that it cannot attain the subjective consistency required to sustain the temporality of narrative. Regardless of whether it is the voice or its listeners, the text or its interpretation, that is ultimately responsible for the fact that a narrative sequence fails to commence with any real semblance of continuity or control, “the burden” from the perspective of the voice, “is the same” (123): “I have no more success dead than dying” (123). We can articulate the consequences of this conclusion as the basic paradox of criticism when it presumes to have meaningfully encountered or proclaimed a judgment of knowledge over a work of literature: every interpretation must be interpreted and judged in its turn, and is thus always a gesture that necessarily implies its own ultimate alienation from the context in which it intervenes. Between one reading and the next, one affirmation and/or negation and the next, is where the Beckettian voice is situated, and it is from here that it, too, derives the permanence of its liminal reality. Beckett’s own insistence in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* that “the experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence,

communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, [...] his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory,” reaches its most tortured apogee through the voice of *Texts for Nothing* where, as was already detectable in *The Unnamable*, the space of the interval acquires a density and dread analogous to what prevails in the immanence of terror (*Disjecta* 49). No postmodern fetishization of undecidability will suffice here; rather, what we are dealing with is more akin to what Hegel precisely correlates as a condition of “absolute freedom and terror” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 355). It is this correlation that gives Beckett the freedom to write *Texts for Nothing* after the impasse of *The Unnamable*, but also what ensures that the impasse truly is an impasse of intolerable dimensions.

To be sure, Beckett directs the voice of *Texts for Nothing* to confront the fissure that cuts just as harshly through its subjectivity as it does through the critical encounter with the work in its entirety. Text 7 sets this fissure into relief by further exacerbating the syntactical dissymmetry of the voice’s dwelling-place. It relies heavily on a nocturnal imagery of disorientation and blindness that foreshadows Blanchot’s discussion of the *other* night that supplies writing with its disorienting dose of forgetfulness, silence, and alienation. The first type of night is the kind that ends with the arrival of the day. In this night, Blanchot insists, “one can die; we reach oblivion. But this *other* night is the death no one dies, the forgetfulness which gets forgotten. In the heart of oblivion it is memory without rest” (*The Space of Literature* 164). Blanchot is careful to emphasize that the experience of dying permitted by the first night, by the night that is all too often passed over in the torpor of sleep, is permitted only insofar as the ordinary night, the darkness that bookends the light of day, is a prelude to the morning that begins ever anew: “In the night, to die, like to sleep, is one more of the world’s present moments, another of the day’s resources” (164). From the perspective of the day, repose in the night of sleep is expected, desired, and above all restorative. The interesting thing about the existence of the *other* night, however, is that regardless of its enigmatic obscurity it is not inaccessible to daytime consciousness. The paradox of the *other* night, and here the signature of Blanchotian logic is unmistakable, is that it is perfectly *comprehensible* to the diurnal subject that says “I”, the subject that wields the critical power to decide between sense and nonsense, order and contingency, good and evil. The idea of the *other* night discloses an experience that can be talked about, conceptualized, and discussed all day long, as it were. In the night that opens and closes the passage of the day, though, there sometimes occurs the *experience* of the nocturnal outside as

something altogether different than what we experience and understand as sleep or as dream. It becomes the night that has no purchase on the day and that has severed all ties with the mechanical movement of the clock: “the other night is always other. Only in the day does it seem comprehensible, ascertainable. In the day it is the secret which could be disclosed; it is something concealed that awaits its unveiling. [...] But in the night it is what one never joins; it is repetition that will not leave off, satiety that has nothing, the sparkle of something baseless and without depth” (168). Passing from ordinary night to the *other* night is a metaphorical analogue for the transition from ordinary language to the language of literature. The night of literature, which *drags you down into its dark*, is plagued and haunted by this *other* night insofar as the idea of its arrival is perfectly accessible to consciousness. Consciousness, though, does not encapsulate the experience of literature, and as the experience of the *other* night is what annuls the possibility of its translation into the consciousness of its experience, it is clear that for Blanchot the space of literature inheres precisely in this *other* night of thought’s blindness. There is no “I” that speaks from the perspective of the *other* night of literature, and no subjective presence that is immune from the temporal and spatial decay that it sets in motion. In the presence of the *other* night, the “I” that speaks and writes in the historical world is dissimulated into a mere voice, an imagined and imagining voice that has been divested of all power, repeats Blanchot, to say “I”:

If night is suddenly cast in doubt, then there is no longer either day or night, there is only a vague, twilight glow, which is sometimes a memory of day, sometimes a longing for night, end of the sun and sun of the end. Existence is interminable, it is nothing but an indeterminacy; we do not know if we are excluded from it (which is why we search vainly in it for something solid to hold onto) or whether we are forever imprisoned in it (and so we turn desperately toward the outside). This existence is an exile in the fullest sense: we are not there, we are elsewhere, and we will never stop being there. (*The Work of Fire* 8).

What Blanchot has contributed to our theoretical understanding of reading is on par with what Beckett offers as the perspective of writing: that each proceeds according to a principle of exile, alienation, and blindness. We read because we do not yet know all that it is possible to know; we write because we have not yet exhausted all that it is possible to write. It is this “not knowing” that makes reading and writing such exhilarating yet dreadful experiences. By discussing Beckett in proximity to Blanchot, then, we begin to understand more clearly that the abyss of not-knowing (the epistemology behind ill-seeing and ill-saying comes to mind, of course) that literature and interpretation intend to cross can only be accomplished if it is precisely the abyss

that is re-encountered from within. We should remember that “reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty – at bottom it doesn’t exist; you have cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 10).

The voice of *Texts for Nothing* is closest to its predicament in the immanence of terror when it is reflecting on the obsessively logical yet impenetrably obscure conditions of its own peculiar access to alienation and blindness. The syntactical contortion that Beckett performs in Text 7 is revealing of what it is to experience the *other* night as the descent into the void of phenomenological blindness: “In that case the night is long and singularly silent, for one who seems to remember the city sounds, confusedly, sunk now to a single sound, the impossible confused memory of a single confused sound, lasting all night, swelling, dying, but never for an instant broken by a silence the like of this deafening silence” (129). There is in this passage a subtle movement from syntactical comprehensibility to incomprehensibility at the site where silence inexplicably doubles as the powerful audibility of the sound’s *in*-audibility – silent yet deafening. Silence does not break the “single sound” because this sound has suddenly morphed into the memory, and therefore the narrative, of its once sonorous tonality. The sound the voice hears is now only the remainder of a sound that resonates indistinctly with the silence that forced it into remembrance. The conflation of sound and silence into a “single sound” not only restructures the *semantic* value of sounds and silence, but perhaps even more problematically the *syntactical* dynamics of the “single confused sound” and its relation to the memory that frames it and the silence that reflects it. Prior to this conflation, the syntax of the sentence adhered briefly to a diachronic logic of narration whereby the categorical distinction between the immediacy of reflex and the belatedness of memory still held good – the *presence* of silence (an absence of sound) is corroborated by the memory of a *past* sound that is no longer heard in the present. Because the voice occupies space without time, its construction of images, affects, memories, and thoughts is susceptible to semantic as well as syntactical incomprehensibility. As if forced by the pressures of the voice’s immersion in solitude, the syntax becomes responsive to this chiasmic superimposition of silence over sound, the sound of silence over the silence of sound, rendering the sound that is “never for an instant broken” inversely proportionate in terms of durational and tonal intensity to the “silence the like of this deafening silence” (129). The syntactical priority given to silence crosses with the propositional priority given to sound, and

while it may be tempting to conclude that they are one and the same in the imagination of the voice (deafening and permanent – permanence *is* deafening), there remains nevertheless the dissymmetry of their imagined identity. Regardless of how strenuously the voice asserts the commensurability of phenomena (sounds and silences) that *appear* in contradiction to one another, the syntactical delivery of its discourse will betray, as it has all along, an incongruity that forever remains in excess of its powers of consciousness and understanding. Nothing could be more transparent nor opaque than listening to a voice condemned to speak with words that signify little else except the silent and confused sonority of their syntactical excretion: “First I didn’t hear it, then I did, I must therefore have begun hearing it, at a certain point, but no, there was no beginning, the sound emerged so softly from the silence and so resembled it” (“First Love” 37). If the problematic of Text 6 derives from the aporia of naming words that will “name my unnamable words”, of being able to “tell a story, in the true sense of the words”, then Text 7 re-inscribes and re-doubles this aporia at the order of syntax: with what syntax shall I structure my unstructurable syntax? The multiple aporetic texture of *Texts for Nothing* renders its interpretation dynamically elusive insofar as attempting to unravel one aporia works to intensify another. Beckett’s so-called “minimalist aesthetic,” which L.A.J. Bell is right, however partially, in attributing to Beckett’s recognition of “the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of telling a story, of communicating, of sharing an experience,” is inseparable from the syntactical *excessiveness* that over-determines, and is reciprocally over-determined in turn by, the entire textual edifice of *Texts for Nothing* (“Between Ethics and Aesthetics” 32). To be sure, what makes *Texts for Nothing* so uncomfortably situated within Beckett’s *oeuvre* is that it resides somewhere between what Bell sees as the “accumulation of stories that constitutes the locus of the trilogy (*Malloy-Malone meurt-L’Innommable*)” and the 1960 period that signals “a different approach, which relies on the paring down of the writer’s means of expression, the written word” (33): *Tetes-mortes*, “Sans” – “D’un ouvrage abandonne” – “Assez” – “Imagination morte imaginez” – “Bing”. Like the narrator-protagonist of *Texts for Nothing*, the work itself can be classified as a vanishing mediator of sorts, nowhere stably present but nevertheless responsible for the possibility of continuing writing and thinking in the aftermath of the impasse of *The Unnamable*.

If the reading that is being offered here appears to progress linearly, it is in order to replicate the contradiction between the communicative need to sequence the propositional

content of criticism and the recognition that the conceptual image of sequentiality is precisely what is being undermined in the interpretive encounter with *Texts for Nothing*. This is not to say, however, that *Texts for Nothing* is devoid of thematic and propositional content. As we move from Text to Text the shape and sound of its thematic constellation is continuously thickened and realigned in concert with the work's variegated concerns. For instance, the thematic of guilt permeating Text 5 reappears in Text 8 at the site where the circle of self-reflexivity is newly set askew. *To think*, more precisely, rather than *to be*, becomes the target of ontological indictment in Text 8: "if I'm guilty let me be forgiven and graciously authorized to expiate, coming and going in passing time, every day a little purer, a little deader. *The mistake I make is to try and think, even the way I do, such as I am I shouldn't be able, even the way I do.* But whom can I have offended so grievously, to be punished in this inexplicable way, all is inexplicable, space and time, false and inexplicable, suffering and tears, and even the old convulsive cry, It's not me, it can't be me" (132-133; my emphasis). Let us not underestimate the significance of substituting *thinking* for *being* as the locus of ontological condemnation, for what it does is allow for the transfer of the responsibility for narrative from writing and speaking to reading and hearing. Hermeneutical consciousness confronts the imperative of integrating thinking *as such* into the destructive aporetic machinery of *Texts for Nothing*. Insofar as Text 5 is centred on an ontological obstacle, it is an obstacle that is a distinctive component of the dwelling-place in which the voice appears, and not necessarily a component of what it means to encounter *Texts for Nothing* with the desire to make sense out of its apparent non-sense. That the voice emerges, again and again, as an anonymous representative of the existence and narrative it cannot possess ensures that it is left vulnerable to a far more pernicious and ambiguous form of instantiation: "begging in another dark, another silence, for another alm, that of being or of ceasing, better still, before having been" (135). Presenting itself to the eyes and ears of understanding (of his, of our's, the difference matters little) means that it is susceptible to being forcefully removed from the inconceivable context that *Texts for Nothing* has assigned as its dwelling-place. The inconsistent ontology that prevents the voice from either "being" or "ceasing" is evocative of what we would expect of a figure that exists only to the degree that its "keepers" are able to confirm it accordingly. To place the determination of one's existence in the hands of another, of the voice's in the hands of its "keepers" – "my keepers, why keepers, I'm in no danger of stirring an inch, ah I see, it's to make me think I'm a prisoner, frantic with corporeality, rearing to get out

and away” (122-123) – is to invite an endless interrogation of another’s power and authority to do so. Beckett’s writing cannot be understood independently of the context, as Adorno puts it, of *trying to understand* it. There is evidence throughout *Texts for Nothing* of the voice giving itself over to the understanding only to immediately retreat before the moment of its being made available to its conceptual retrieval. Just as much as the Beckettian voice is compelled to negotiate the ontological limits of its dependency on language, so too must the position of interpretation and thinking negotiate its dependency on the selfsame language that holds *Texts for Nothing* prisoner to the incomprehensibility of the narrative it cannot become. Epitomizing the frustrating experience of reading Beckett is that not even impotence and misunderstanding can be valorized as the “secret” to thinking through his textual constructions: “the vacancy is tempting, shall I enthrone my infirmities, give them this chance again, my dream infirmities, that they may take flesh and move, deteriorating, round and round this grandiose square” (134). Marooned somewhere *beyond* the void of understanding, begging in Text 8 *in another dark*, divested yet again of the hope of being, the voice can neither die nor be killed by the assassin’s touch of representation. What happens to reading and understanding when they are forced to fabricate death and meaning (meaning *as* death) on behalf of a work that actively blocks such fabrication: “what variety and at the same time what monotony, how varied it is and at the same time how, what’s the word, how monotonous. What agitation and at the same time what calm, what vicissitudes within what changelessness” (137)? The effacement not only of the power *to be* but also, in Text 8, of the power *to think* has dire consequences for the prospect of transcending the multiplicities of deadlock and interruption that *Texts for Nothing* has established. If the trajectory of Beckett’s writing is towards an excess of terror then surely it is with *Texts for Nothing* that the destination has been intuited.

Texts for Nothing thus appears irretrievably destined for the purgatorial repetition of “affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered” (*The Unnamable* 291), and thus for recapitulating *The Unnamable*’s attitude of disintegration, unless of course its invocation of a textualized state of terror can be appropriated interpretively and sustained as an epistemological haven of hermeneutical possibility. The onus of responsibility for the crucial task of sustaining an existence in interruption and dread falls to interpretation and the extent to which it is willing to accommodate the steadfastness of non-relation (the irreversible dwelling in the immanence of terror) permeating *Texts for Nothing*. The reading of Beckett’s tarrying with the interruption of

literature in the immanence of terror (the interruption and the terror that *is* literature) that this chapter is pursuing here finds its validation in the syntactical dissymmetry of the work's continual self-erasure. The problem that has occupied this chapter all along is the seeming impossibility of locating a space of interpretation in *Texts for Nothing* that has not already been explored, exhausted, and invalidated by the work's narrative voice and logic. Trying to beat the voice at the same impossible game of hitting "on the right ones, the killers", is destined to repeat the implacable desire to "hear a story, tell a story, in the true sense of the words, the word hear, the word tell, the word story," but does this mean that we are permitted to simply throw our hands in the air in an act of critical humility, indecision, and defeat (126)? Not necessarily.

Text 9 proceeds on the basis of exhausting the limits to what remains possible with the voice speaking from where it is "dead and getting born, without having ended, helpless to begin, that's my life" (138). Text 9 emits an accelerated tone of desperation on behalf of the voice as it is in the midst of evading its own spectral presence. How can the voice die in and with the words where death now signifies only the impossibility of dying? "That's right," says the voice of Text 9, "wordshit, bury me, avalanche, and let there be no more talk of any creature, nor of a world to leave, nor of a world to reach, in order to have done, with worlds, with creatures, with words, with misery, misery. Which no sooner said, Ah, says I, punctually, if only I could say, There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, then all would be said, it would be the first step on the long travelable road, destination tomb, to be trod without a word" (137). It is *this* freedom from death, the freedom to be dead without having died, of having been dead without having lived, that the voice of *Texts for Nothing* would like to transcend, except that having (always already) arrived in a space that signifies only the impossibility of dying, it is no longer possible to traverse the poles of a relation leading from a beginning to an end, the beginning that would signal "the first step" of its journey to a tomb, and thus of the journey out of the uninhabitable and terror-stricken domain of its anonymity. Levinas, drawing on Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* as exemplary of a literature of the *il y a*, recognizes in such liminal conditions of existence "the horror of immortality," the "necessity of forever taking on its burden" (59). In this "presence of absence, the *there is* is beyond contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense being has no outlets" (*Existence and Existents* 60). If there is to be transcendence into the secure ontology of finitude, into a narrative that climaxes with "the graveyard", indeed where it is possible to "see the beauties of the skies, and see the stars again,"

as seems to be the intention of the voice in Text 9, it will be transcendence without phenomenological subject and barred from enjoyment by the narrative voice of literature, which in this context would be a very strange form of transcendence indeed (140). Blocking the voice from coinciding with the expression of its anonymity is precisely the illusion that here, in the absence of any teleological momentum, death can still be appropriated as an event that shelters the fragility of the finite subject (being-towards-death). Anonymity and finitude are constitutively incompatible as predicates of the subject, yet it is because of the endlessly returning traces of subjectivity as they are spurned forth by the ceaseless compulsion to “hear a story, tell a story” that all hopes of reasoning, writing, and reading are not lost, however much they are unavailable *here and now*: “but there is reasoning somewhere, moments of reasoning, that is to say the same things recur, they drive one another out, they draw one another back, no need to know what things. It’s mechanical” (136). Is a life contradictorily divided by anonymity and finitude the only condition that is consistently demonstrated throughout the pages of *Texts for Nothing*? It is this question that needs to be articulated if what is *ineluctably* “mechanical” about *Texts for Nothing* is not to be reduced to what is *merely* mechanical. If we recall the discussion on Hegel, the feedback loop of negativity that places freedom in a hyphenated relation with terror does indeed betray a mechanical and fatalistically dialectical continuity. By evacuating temporality from the movement of negativity whereby freedom is connected with terror (revolution with violence), Beckett succeeds in re-presenting the historically traumatic deadlock of freedom and terror as a spatially distinct form of impasse in the fragmentary space of narrative and literature. If there is a way, then, to stress the “freedom” of Hegel’s “absolute freedom and terror,” without of course pretending to have overcome the necessity of “terror” that underwrites the historical and phenomenological radicalism of this formulation, then it is only through the performance of the impasse at the level of its conceptual and narrative immobilization – hence the proposition of a *poetics* of terror. The wager of this entire project is that Beckett’s literature helps us do this thanks to its fervent commitment to traversing a poetics of terror. It is *Texts for Nothing* that best represents, in this sense, a literature for the archive of terror circulating through the project of modernity.

In Text 10 we are told that there are “no souls, or bodies, or birth, or life, or death, you’ve got to go on without any of that junk, that’s all dead with words, with excess of words” (142). We are therefore compelled to ask the question of what is behind the compulsion to deny the

predicates of subjectivity – souls, bodies, birth, life, death, etc. – in order that it still be possible to “go on.” One possible explanation, and it is the explanation, as we have already discussed, chosen by Shane Weller, is that the speaker of *Texts for Nothing* has been tasked with dissolving the existential coordinates that put being and death into a discursively meaningful relationship – existence in finitude – so that the ubiquitous “murmuring” of language might flow unceasingly, thus stripping finitude of its sovereignty over death (and, by extension, over life). How does a finite being, put differently, become infinite? How does the human become inhuman, and thus become the very truth of its humanity? Beckett attacks the categorical subject of finitude, humanity, and subjectivity at the very place where it is most powerful and yet most vulnerable: its capacity to know, to speak, and to die. The difficulty is that the desire for knowledge, speech, and death persists, and thus what *Texts for Nothing* is embroiled in is the tension that erupts between the obstinate persistence of “a voice murmuring a trace” and the narrative finality that is no longer possible amidst anonymity’s exception to finitude. There is nothing that prevents the voice from ceasing to speak, ceasing to be, in which case it will “have done nothing, nothing but go on, doing what, doing what he does, that is to say, I don’t know, giving up, that’s it, I’ll have gone on giving up, having had nothing, not being there” (143). If there is an obstacle to perseverance – a demand that it cease going on giving up – it is not to be found in the idea that the voice has exhausted the energy to speak, the desire to die, but that the voice now inhabits the transparency of interruption that renders its “committal to flesh” structurally synonymous with its committal to death (142). The absolute freedom to not be tied down by discursive structures of subjectivity is the terror of having to exist where precisely these structures of subjectivity engender the proxies of their self-annulment. It is entirely possible that this is all literature can hope to achieve if it is honest about the repercussions of language having been divested of any transcendent referential authority beyond its own immanent capacity for significance. Beckett reads such an immanent capacity, it seems, the only capacity that language can fulfill without taking recourse to a figure of transcendence, as little more than the capacity for “lies”: “I’ll be able to go on, no, I’ll be able to stop, or start, another guzzle of lies but piping hot, it will last my time, it will be my time and place, my voice and silence, a voice of silence, the voice of my silence” (143). Beckett’s thorough exhaustion of what could be enlisted in the service of a thematic hope for “a better idea, to put in the negative, a new no, to cancel all the others,” inevitably succeeds in reproducing the content of such a hope as the negative image of what it

would be if things were different, *i.e.* non-catastrophic and extant from the immanence of terror. Forfeiting a positive conception of hope for the negative image of what it can no longer promise is the paradoxical ingredient for refusing to adhere to modernity's destructive pact with nihilism.

Let us see how Text 11 returns specifically to the origin of language, the origin that demands of thinking that it provide an account of its discursive operability from the perspective of its discursive *inoperability*: "When I think, no, that won't work, [...] and it's still the same old road I'm trudging, up yes and down no, towards one yet to be named, so that he may leave me in peace, be in peace, be no more, have never been" (144). With the disappearance of the voice into the pure beyond of all identity and negativity, where the revelation that in the pages of *Texts for Nothing* the work of negation is impotent begins to exert its disconcerting effect on the view to its critical interpretation, and where death coincides with the interminable disaster of existence, there nevertheless flickers, however dimly, a conceptual light of possibility. So as not to emulate Levinas and his impatiently conceived "*transcendence in immanence*," as Hent de Vries calls it,⁷³ though, it is necessary that a concept of what can only be a paradoxical horizon of redemption not be superficially imposed between the work and its interpretation, the voice and its silence, the silence and its voice (*Minimal Theologies* 391):

something better must be found, a better reason, for this to stop, another word, a better idea, to put in the negative, a new no, to cancel all the others, all the old noes that buried me down here, deep in this place which is not one, which is merely a moment for the time being eternal, which is called here, and in this being which is called me and is not one, and in this impossible voice, all the old noes dangling in the dark and swaying like a ladder of smoke, yes, a new no, that none says twice, whose drop will fall and let me down, shadow and babble, to an absence less vain than inexistence (147).

Not being able to emphatically say "No!" to what is "awful" is, properly speaking, the historical paradigm from which modernity was supposed to have freed us. For as long as the voice is

⁷³ In fact, de Vries detects two movements in Levinas's lifelong philosophical struggle in reclaiming metaphysics in the name of the Other: "In the early essays *On Escape, Existence and Existents, Time and the Other*, and 'Reality and Its Shadow' this critique [of philosophical totality *a la* Husserl and Heidegger] digs its way downward, *transcendence in immanence*, as it were. In the texts surrounding *Otherwise than Being* it works its way upward, *via eminentiae*, in what constitutes a similar movement or figure of thought, namely, that of a *transcendence in immanence*" (*Minimal Theologies* 391; italics in original). Blanchot, on the other hand, does not have as strict a commitment to philosophical transcendence – "*transcendence in immanence*" – as does Levinas. Blanchot never claims to be doing much more than tarrying with literature, and this allows him to dwell a little longer amidst the horror of the *il y a* that philosophy cannot tolerate. Living with this space and the horror that it commands becomes the exclusive prerogative of a subjectivity stripped of its subjective and conceptual form, which, like in the myth of Orpheus, the myth of the artist *par excellence* for Blanchot, entails being plunged into the abyss of that *other* night where living with the promise of death is replaced by the aleatory encounter with death as the impossibility of dying.

multiply divided from one absence to the next, one word to the next, it will continue to displace the temporal coordinates on which all redemptive forms of relation rely. The metaphysics of negation is nothing if not the simple power to say “No!” to what is unliveable *from the perspective* of what is unliveable. If there cannot be a relation (of non-relation) established between the voice and silence, the voice and death, then *Texts for Nothing* will, conversely, remain condemned to a place and a time that give access to neither the freedom nor the terror that would help it escape. It is not simply because the narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing* is unknowable and unnamable as a subjective persona that it cannot be re-assigned to an absence less vain than inexistence, which for Adorno figures as the “haven of hope” that inscribes itself in “the no-man’s land between the border posts of being and nothingness” (*Negative Dialectics* 381). Instead, the problem of how to position the voice conceptually turns on how it is positioned *vis-à-vis* the subjectivity of what prolongs the unknowability and unnameability of a life trapped in the irredeemable space of the immanence of terror.

The questions the narrator-protagonist asks of itself in Text 11, then, are more sincere and pertinent than rhetorical statements confirming a fact of its ambiguous existence. They direct our focus to the structural dilemma of time, place, subjectivity, and poetic form that in our reading of Text 10 was claimed to be precisely where the *problem* of *Texts for Nothing* needs to be posed and traversed: “where am I, to mention only space, and in what semblance, and since when, to mention also time, and till when, and who is this clot who doesn’t know where to go, who can’t stop, who takes himself for me and for whom I take myself, anything at all, the old jangle” (146). Here the narrator-protagonist requests an inquiry not only into spatiality, but temporality as well. This request can be understood only insofar as it is yet another instance of the self-contradictory logic that a poetics of terror is capable of inculcating. Perhaps, in other words, it has been the question of temporality all along that we should have worried about explicating, instead of tacitly presupposing that the narrator-protagonist was trustworthy in its observation that temporality is an alien phenomenon to the poetic landscape of *Texts for Nothing*. We gain very little, it should be clear, by trying to play the obsessive game of deciphering between what is true and what is not true in the unforgiving discourse of this text. There are no words that are more valid than any others just as in a musical composition there are no notes that resound more authentically than

any others⁷⁴. What retain significance are how these words and these notes attain their particular constellation of expression. Accordingly, the critical discourse of validity is conceptually anachronistic to thinking our way out of the impasse that *Texts for Nothing* reflects and repeats at several levels simultaneously. By the very gesture of placing thinking in proximity with the traumatic totality of *Texts for Nothing* we set to ruin the horizon of truth and understanding that the discourse of thinking and understanding have hitherto invested with uncompromising faith. With *Texts for Nothing* Beckett has produced a work that unendingly concludes where its conclusion is left wanting, that revises its revisions with strategies that rely on the logic of their incompleteness, and that is constructed with a language that denotes its disintegration into the silence that it prevents itself from possessing.

Text 12 is a distinct addition to the sequence of preceding Texts. It aims at consolidating the voice's resignation to the ontological apathy that has thrust its (in)existence into the unceasing inertia of terror: "what a blessing it's all down the drain, nothing ever as much as begun, nothing ever but nothing and never, nothing ever but lifeless words" (151). The voice is in words, it is made of them, but these words are as lifeless as the pronouns are uninhabitable. Its punishment for the unforgivable crime of desiring existence is to inhabit the emptiness of language and to have the null image of its alterity vigilantly reflected in all the "babble of homeless mes and untenanted hims, this other without number or person whose abandoned being we haunt, nothing. There's a pretty three in one, and what a one, what a no one" (150). Installed as the haunting presence of an empty space is, for the voice, the closest it ever comes to climbing into a body and attaining the hope that it, too, might someday be dead like the living. *Texts for Nothing* articulates a number of problems, whether aesthetic, historical, or philosophical, but if there is one that stands out it is perhaps the interrelated problem of *how* and *where* an interpretive perspective is to begin communicating with a discourse that is permanently undergoing its own self-erasure. Just as disastrous as the conceptual coupling of revolution and violence is to politics, the virtually indecipherable relation that *Texts for Nothing* maintains between voice and silence effectively denies all optimism that the work's ambiguities and aporias can be disentangled and communicated coherently. To maintain a semblance of narrative

⁷⁴ Stanley Cavell is thus misguided in his claim that "Beckett shares with positivism its wish to escape connotation, rhetoric, the noncognitive, the irrationality and awkward memories of ordinary language, in favor of the directly verifiable, the isolated, the perfected present" (120 *Must We Mean What We Say?*).

progression that at every turn re-confirms a narrative of inertia is no small or inconsequential achievement. Of even greater consequence and interest, though, is that such a narrative of inertia, a narrative that we have rightly been refusing to identify as a straightforward narrative sequence, does not therefore lapse into a blind affirmation of nothingness and despair, otherwise there would be no point at all in Beckett's obsessive conviction to keep writing beyond *The Unnamable*.

Text 13 is typically regarded as the summation of what remains of a voice that has exhausted all avenues of coinciding with the verb "to be". What we "learn" is that "there is nothing but a voice murmuring a trace" (152). However, what the language and logic of terror instructs here is that the voice is no more to be privileged in *Texts for Nothing* than is the poetics of its dwelling-place. Its dwelling-place is one of terror, and the voice is both symptom and custodian of this terror. If Blanchot's Levinasian appeal to "speak of a *subjectivity without subject*" is to be accurately applied to thinking through the peculiar identity of the Beckettian voice and the poetics of terror that it inhabits, then the preservation of the "space," or cipher, of the absent subject must also be taken into account (*Writing of the Disaster* 30). They are perhaps indistinguishable, the voice and its dwelling-place, the subject and its subjectivity, but nevertheless it cannot be denied that there is, at the very least, the semblance of a workable distinction between them: "unfortunately it is not a question of elsewhere, but of here, ah there are the words out at last, out again, that was the only chance, get out of here and go elsewhere, go where time passes and atoms assemble an instant, where the voice belongs perhaps, where it sometimes says it must have belonged, to be able to speak of such figments. Yes, out of here, but how when here is empty, not a speck of dust, not a breath, the voice's breath alone, it breathes in vain, nothing is made" (153). To identify the distinction between voice and dwelling-place as a mere semblance of difference, though, which optimistically opens the door for concluding on the slight possibility that the voice is identical with the place and the silence from which it speaks, that its homeless mes and untenanted hims are not so homeless and untenanted after all, is not to defer the responsibility of articulating precisely what separates the voice from its dwelling-place, the (absence of) subject from (the murmuring trace of) its subjectivity. The *semblance* of difference is what ensures, as a principle of structural necessity, the voice's resistance to the dialectical foreknowledge that forever places negation in succession of affirmation, and *vice versa*. If all differences in *Texts for Nothing* circle endlessly around the suspicion of semblance,

then no pronouncement escapes the suspicion of beginning to falsely legislate over the distribution of its value and coherence. “Tire myself out that’s the point,” utters the speaker of “The Image” (165). Similarly in *Texts for Nothing*, the very last semblance of a difference between voice and silence collapses into a syntactical fold of unending in-differentiation, precisely because this difference, what contemporary theory is fond of calling a “minimal difference”, has been localized in a space that exhaustively recomposes whatever it is that enters into its boundary (165):

Is it possible, is that the possible thing at last, the extinction of this black nothing and its impossible shades, the end of the farce of making and the silencing of silence, it wonders, that voice which is silence, or it’s me, there’s no telling, it’s all the same dream, the same silence, it and me, it and him, him and me, and all our train, and all theirs, and all theirs, but whose, whose dream, whose silence, but it’s ended, we’re ended who never were, soon there will be nothing where there was never anything, last images (154).

What we find in this passage is an image-space left open by a topography of smoke, of words like smoke, into which the last images, traces, and residues of the voice are destined to fade. Nothingness does not descend with any apocalyptic vigour here, since the site of its arrival is the nothingness that has not ceased the repetition of its descent. And yet the image-space of pure semblance, of terror without repose, remains as the *only* “haven of hope” for literature and interpretation, piling nothingness upon nothingness and compelling the voice to speak one last time as if it were the first, as if it were “now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs” (154).

Conclusion

Deleuze, Beckett, and the Figural Subtraction of Terror

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze reads into Francis Bacon's famous portraits of screams the signature of a fundamental distinction in the formalist history of contemporary painting between three paths of composition, which Deleuze delineates according to the path of abstraction of Mondrian, the path of abstract expressionism of Pollock, and the diagrammatic path of Bacon. It is this third path that Deleuze is concerned with explicating, and it is this third path as well that communes Bacon's tortured experimentation on forces and figurations with the aesthetic laws that oversee the space of literature in Kafka and Beckett. According to Deleuze, Bacon's greatness inheres in the courage his painting shows in saving figuration from chaos and catastrophe and the restraint his painting demonstrates in refusing to let the figuration overshadow the Figures that dominate his compositions. This courage and this restraint are nowhere more apparent than in the scream-portraits, where Bacon resists the aesthetically immature impulse to paint the spectacles and images of the horror behind the screams, and instead commits to the more aesthetically advanced desire of painting the pure invisible forces of the scream subtracted from the visibility of the horror that violently compels it. Deleuze explains: "if we could express this as a dilemma, it would be: either I paint the horror and I do not paint the scream, because I make a figuration of the horrible; or else I paint the scream, and I do not paint the visible horror, I will paint the visible horror less and less, since the scream captures or detects an invisible force" (51). There is therefore very little in Bacon's paintings that can be traced back to the historical world wherein the horror that inspires their composition is located. Bacon paints Figures of horror because they are what the composition calls for, what horror looks like when it is encased in the surface and the depth, the contours and the lines of the space of painting.

Deleuze extends this distinction between painting horror figuratively, and painting the horror behind the Figure of the scream – "Innocent X screams, but he screams behind the curtain, not only as someone who can no longer be seen, but as someone who cannot see, who has nothing left to see, whose only remaining function is to render visible these invisible forces that are making him scream, these power of the future" (51-52) – to the no less diagrammatically claustrophobic arenas of narrative and narrative voices in Kafka and in Beckett: "the same homage should be paid to Bacon that can be paid to Beckett or Kafka. In the very act of

‘representing’ horror, mutilation, prosthesis, fall, or failure, they have erected indomitable Figures, indomitable through both their insistence and their presence” (53). Deleuze’s exegesis of this distinction – figuration and Figure – gets directly at the heart of the polemic that this dissertation has everywhere struggled to put forward *vis-à-vis* Beckett’s ascetic and programmatically clandestine commitment to the fragmentary imperative of the terror of literature. The horror, the trauma, and above all the terror that *speaks through* the sheer thickness and depth of the Beckettian narrative is not given over to either an aesthetics of abstraction (*à la* Mondrian or Pollock) that would deprive the terror-stricken voice of its figural and physiological – corporeal and psychic – pain, nor is it given over to an aesthetics of figuration that would displace the onus of its articulation and critique outside its imprisonment in the space of literature. If the voice of terror succumbed to an aesthetics of figuration, in particular, it would become the mouthpiece of an image suddenly made available for the sorts of sociological, anthropological, political, and historicist critiques that contemporary critical theory (and contemporary Beckett studies) seeks to derive out of its selection and instrumentalization of (traumatized and traumatic) literary texts.⁷⁵ Deleuze says that “Bacon reproached himself for painting too much horror, as if that were enough to leave the figurative behind; he moves more and more toward a Figure without horror [...], the violence of sensation more than the violence of the spectacle” (52). The same logic of subtraction should be applied to Beckett: in narrating subjects stripped of their subjectivities – to paraphrase Blanchot’s Levinasian formulation of “what speaks” through the onto-phenomenological darkness and decrepitude of the disaster⁷⁶ – Beckett exposes an exigency of terror subtracted from events and spectacles of terrorism, even as, precisely through the proximity this exigency traces (through the movement of subtraction) with the world outside of literature, it symptomatically invokes the horror and the trauma that

⁷⁵ “Beginning with the discovery of a literary”, the methodological orientation of critical theorists like Cathy Caruth tends toward an interdisciplinary exchange of strategies of knowledge and mourning, “between and beyond disciplines, [...] extending beyond the realm of psychoanalysis proper to the thinking of politics, philosophy, and literary theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries”, of the traumatized past (post-Holocaust, post-Pinochet, post-9/11 and the War on Terror, etc.) and the repetitious return of trauma in the future (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 92).

⁷⁶ Boulter is emphatic (in his graduate seminars and in print) on the appropriateness of this formula to “what speaks” in Beckett’s narratives: “subjectivity, I have argued, in Beckett is the body; subjectivity inheres in the body. But this is a radically compromised subjectivity: this is, to borrow from Blanchot – who is my point of departure for a consideration of the posthuman/posthumous subject in Beckett – a subjectivity without any subject” (“‘We have our being in justice’: Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*” 174).

flanked virtually all sides of historical consciousness and perspective after the war. Beckett's writing coordinates spectral movements and fictions of violence, trauma, and pain that are subtracted from historical and biographical scenes of their spectacularization and concretion. Paradoxically, it is through this narrative movement of subtraction, which climaxes with *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* and is subsequently modulated to varying intensities in works like *Endgame* and *How It Is*, that the spectacles, events, and experiences of historicized terror are exponentially intensified by being subjected to Beckett's radical fictional protocols of thinking in narrative and literature. Beckett is uncannily like Bacon in this respect, who "says that he himself is cerebrally pessimistic; that is, he can scarcely see anything *but* horrors to paint, the horrors of the world. But he is nervously optimistic, because visible figuration is secondary in painting, and will have less and less importance" (52).⁷⁷

If what Beckett's writing produces is an image of terror that could only be produced as such in the narrative dimensions that the fragmentary imperative of terror minimally, yet intensively, affords, then it is an image in the sense that the quintessential Beckettian image "is precisely this" according to Deleuze: "not a representation of an object, but a movement in the world of the mind" (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 169).⁷⁸ In the terror of literature, then, there is a movement of terror that can only be registered dynamically in the inexhaustible spaces of reflexivity and despair, through the incessant voices and silences that are audible only by virtue of the tone and pitch of their inaudibility, and in the phenomenological experience of a terror that arises from never being phenomenologically present – the exigency of radical suffering – for the escape from the fragmentary imperative of terror that literature, in *becoming* literature, inscribes against the ideological censorships and the epistemological conceits that work daily and

⁷⁷ Adorno's frames the problematic of perceiving and expressing horror as a problematic that is necessarily interwoven with the destructive (not subtractive) infinity of "a terror without end": "He who relinquishes awareness for the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end" (*Minima Moralia* 250).

⁷⁸ It is worth mentioning that in *How It Is* a poetics of movement is expressly foregrounded in a way that it is not in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, particularly in the circulation of subject positions that pass from victim to tormentor in "vast stretch of time" (7) where "each one of us is at the same time Bom and Pim tormentor and tormented pedant and dunce wooer and wooed speechless and re-afflicted with speech in the dark the mud" (140). As this dissertation continues to grow beyond its present iteration, it will extend the analysis of terror into the image-space of *How It Is*, arguing that it is with *How It Is* that Beckett inscribes (with a force analogous to that applied by the fingernails of Pim) precisely an *image* of terror in his literary *oeuvre*. It is also a poetics of movement, a poetics of exhaustion, that Deleuze highlights in Beckett's post-1960 work as the expression of an infinite circumnavigation of the *any-space-whatevers* that Beckett establishes in such works as *How It Is*, "The Lost Ones", and *Quad*.

diligently – through the metaphysical and cultural consciousness of our supposedly enlightened modernity – to restrict our knowledge and our expectation of what the world is capable of doing to us and of what the limits are – and alas, they are impermeable – to our creative powers of subtraction from it. In Beckett, there is no representation *per se* of terror, precisely because terror only articulates itself processually rather than discretely. This dissertation began by conceptualizing terror in these terms, and by demonstrating Beckett’s biographical proximity to personal and historical experiences of terror in post-1945 France. From here, however, the emphasis switched to reflecting on terror from distinctly philosophical and literary-historical perspectives through the work of Badiou and Blanchot. Both Badiou and Blanchot present the problematic of terror as not only a problematic of how to continue living in a world saturated with violence and paranoia,⁷⁹ and in fact they hardly consider it in these terms at all, but first and foremost as a problematic of the very possibility of thinking as such (philosophically and in literature). Once literature makes contact with the fragmentary imperative of terror to which it was always already committed ever since the post-revolutionary declaration of its aesthetic sovereignty (through the words and the spirit of Romanticism and the Marquis de Sade), it comes face to face with the imminent prospect of its dissolution from within the voids and interruptions that its sovereign expressivity opens up in language, imagination, and consciousness, even as the very possibility of literature as such is constitutively predicated on its opening up of precisely these sites of fissure and negativity. This dissertation has been about exposing images of terror in Beckett, and of making the case that it is through these images, through the adherence of Beckett’s writing in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* to the fragmentary imperative of terror, that Beckett’s writing is the closest thing to an absolute of literature and of thinking in literature that post-war modernity has witnessed.

⁷⁹ Adorno asks, only somewhat hyperbolically, “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living” (*Negative Dialectics* 363).

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- Master of Arts in English Literature 2007-2009
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Peer-Reviewed Articles and Book Chapters:

- “The Terror of Literature in Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*.” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 61:2 (2015). Forthcoming.
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Selected Presentations:

“Compassion for Suffering Humanity: Reading Derrida Reading Blanchot.” *Mosaic Conference: A Matter of Life/Death*. Winnipeg, Manitoba. October 2014.

“Wallace Stevens and the Poetics of Violence in Late Modernism.” Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA). Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. April 2014.

“Modernity and the Language of Terror: Blanchot, Sade, Kafka.” 20th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). Paris, France. July 2013.

“Beckett, *Stories*, and the Cultural Politics of Post-War France.” Samuel Beckett: Form and History Conference. Halifax, Nova Scotia. June 2013.

“*Texts for Nothing* and the Terror of Literature.” 41st Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900. Louisville, Kentucky. February 2013.

“Beckett, Blanchot, and the Disaster of Literature.” 23rd Annual Colloquium of the Centre for Comparative Literature (University of Toronto). Toronto, Ontario. March 2012.

“‘Cease to exist in order to be’: *Worstward Ho* between Badiou and Deleuze.” Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA). New Brunswick, New Jersey. April 2011.

“Parataxis and Torture in Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*.” International Beckett Symposium: Back to the Beckett Text. Sopot, Poland. May 2010.

“Presenting the Political: Badiou, Derrida, and the Event of Politics”. Future Theory, Present Praxes. Guelph, Ontario. February 2010.

“‘The clotting which is you’: Adorno, Faulkner, Modernism.” Southern Writers/Southern Writing. Oxford, Mississippi. July 2009.

“The Commodity Character of Art in Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*.” University of New Brunswick, Department of English Graduate Student Conference. Fredericton, New Brunswick. September 2008.

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