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Bruns, Gerald L.

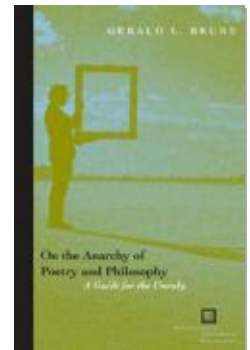
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Bruns, Gerald L.

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PART



## *Anarchist Poetics*



## Anarchic Temporality: Writing, Friendship, and the Ontology of the Work of Art in Maurice Blanchot's Poetics

Does Literature exist?

—Stéphane Mallarmé, “La musique et les lettres”

The poem is the truth of the poet, the poet is the possibility of the poem; and yet the poem stays unjustified; even realized, it remains impossible.

—Maurice Blanchot, “René Char”

*Poetry as Unhappy Consciousness.* It is well known that in Maurice Blanchot's early criticism writing appears to be less a productive activity than a self-reflexive movement. For example, at the outset of “Littérature et la droit à la mort” (1947–48) he remarks that literature begins when it becomes a question for itself (PF.293/WF.300–301). What sort of question, exactly? Evidently not Jean-Paul Sartre's “What is literature?” which like all “what is . . . ?” questions carries a demand for justification. Inquiring after the nature of a thing is a way of asking why there is such a thing at all, on Leibniz's principle that nothing is without reason (for essences are reasons, and everything is something). Or, again, it is a way of asking literature to identify itself by locating itself in a scheme of things. For example, how does poetry stand in relation to prose, where prose, on Sartre's description, is basically a prosthetic attachment to subjectivity? The writer, Sartre says, “is invested with words. They are pro-

longations of his meanings, his pincers, his antennae, his eyeglasses. He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body which he is hardly aware of and which extends his action upon the world.”<sup>1</sup> As Hegel said, “An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action.”<sup>2</sup> Prose is a mode of action. Sartre says: “The word is a certain particular moment of action and has no meaning outside it.” Prose is (as it certainly was for Sartre) an alternative to group action. Prose is the way the free individual grasps the world and shapes it into something for others (QL.26/WL.35). Prose knows itself in knowing what it can do: it is a project of world-making in which the writer first of all makes himself real (if himself is the word) by becoming immanent in his effects. Poetry meanwhile does not use words; it contemplates them from the outside as if they were things—but to what purpose? There is a good chance that poetry does not know what it is, much less what it is for. It cannot be traced back to a reason. It is very likely a condition of what Hegel called “unhappy consciousness [*unglückliche Bewußtsein*]” (PhG.144–45/PS.126–27): It exists in the form of a question, inaccessible to theory or redemption, divided against itself (without identity), opaque, gratuitous, and *unwirklich*. Whoever enters into this condition enters into an absolutely singular mode of existence, one that cannot be separated into a before and after or subsumed into contexts, categories, or totalities of any kind. So who can call it real?

*The Impossibility of Writing.* In what follows I want to try to clarify this state of affairs and to extract from it something like Blanchot’s conception of the ontology (or perhaps the ontological peculiarity) of the work of art. My thought is that anything that shares this ontology—no matter how trivial or commonplace the thing or however it was materially produced—can claim the status of a work of art. The difficulty is that this excludes very little, almost nothing, not even people. So at the very least we are once more up against the old modernist’s question of what counts as art. Blanchot speaks of “the challenge brought against art by the most illustrious works of art in the last thirty years” (PF.294/WF.301). Is Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*, in which typography replaces syntax as a way of piecing words together, a poem? By what criteria? Modernist works define themselves by the negation of criteria. Blanchot cites “surrealism as a powerful negative movement” that rejects all definitions of what counts as art. This is not just nihilism, however, “because if literature

coincides with nothing just for an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist" (PF.294/WF.301–2). This is all that modernism means: all criteria are negated and anything is possible; nothing is to be excluded—there is nothing that cannot count as a work of art. Modernism is aesthetic anarchy, a moment of pure negative freedom in which anything can happen. However, for Blanchot, it is precisely here, at what we might think of as modernism's conceptual center, that literature calls itself into question: under anarchic conditions in which there *are* no conditions—no stipulations, no rules or principles, no models or genres, in short no logical conditions of possibility and therefore no starting point (*archē*)—how is literature possible?

This is the paradoxical question that occupies much of Blanchot's early critical writings, starting with *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* (FP.92–101/FP.76–84).<sup>3</sup> Blanchot inherited from Mallarmé the idea that poetic writing is not a mode of lyricism but an exercise of language, where language, however, is *not an instrument under my control* (not, *pace* Sartre, a prosthetic device). As the surrealists became aware, "words have their own spontaneity. For a long time language laid claim to a type of particular existence: it refused simple transparency, it was not just a gaze, an empty means of seeing; it existed, it was a concrete thing and even a colored thing. Surrealists understand . . . that language is not an inert thing; it has a life of its own, and a latent power that escapes us" (PF.93/WF.89). So writing for me is not a pure possibility but limited or finite; it is always in some sense or to some extent impossible. The idea here is that language limits my power in the very moment that I try to extend it, and this is what happens in literature: "literature consists in trying to speak when speaking becomes most difficult" (PF.25/W.F17).<sup>4</sup>

It is thus possible to think of poetry as an experience of the *resistance* of language to the designs that we place upon it. This was Heidegger's topic in "Das Wesen der Sprache" (1957): what he calls an "experience *with* language" occurs not when we speak but when words fail us. "In experiences which we undergo *with* language, language itself brings itself to language. One would think this happens anyway, any time anyone speaks. Yet at whatever time and in whatever way we speak a language, language itself never has the floor." It is only when language ceases to be a form of mediation that an experience with language is possible: "Language speaks itself as language . . . when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, or oppresses us. Then we leave unspo-

ken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being." Moreover, having such an experience is what makes the poet. The poet, Heidegger says, "is someone compelled in his own way—poetically—to put into the language the experience he undergoes with language."<sup>5</sup> But if the failure of language is a condition of such experience, how is poetry possible? Or is it that, as Sartre complained, "Poetry is a case of the loser winning"? (QL.43/WL.334). Writing is never a possibility that can be experienced (it is a "limit-experience").<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that my intentions cannot be realized because they exceed my capacity—it is not that they are too grandiose. It does not even mean that I cannot write something. It is rather that in writing I always discover that I cannot be fully myself: my subjectivity is, in a certain sense, not a plenitude; there is something lacking, a weakness where there should be strength, a destitution where there should be power. Sartre will say that it is precisely language that enables me to take up the slack of subjectivity and to make something of it. But Blanchot would answer that in this event when I speak I can no longer say "I" without a bad conscience, since it is not just "I" who speaks but also that part of my subjectivity that belongs to language (and who knows to what more besides?). In writing I experience that part of my subjectivity that does not belong to me; I experience, in other words, the *malheur* of a divided consciousness (I am myself and also another), a state in which, as Hegel showed, I fall short of being in the world (PhG.146–47/PS.129). For Blanchot the locus classicus of this state is to be found in Kafka's *Diaries* where being in the world and writing are incommensurable forms of life—two different orders of existence, two different spatial and temporal registers in which I am nevertheless compelled, simultaneously, to comport myself. We might want to say that to write requires a transition from the one order of being to the other; but this is a movement that no longer belongs to the time of actions that I might undertake (the cross-over time of possibility where one thing follows another for a reason). Rather it is a movement in which the "I" is turned inside out and is no longer in the position of agency. Blanchot says—a statement he repeats again and again in his early criticism—"Kafka grasped the fecundity of literature . . . from the moment that he felt literature was the passage from *Ich* to *Er*, from I to He" (PF.28–29/WF.21). However, to enter into this passage is not at all to travel from one point to another. It is rather to enter into a zone of temporality, a caesura, in which nothing

happens. The writer is outside the time of possibility. What once were passages to be traversed are now more like rooms than corridors—rooms, moreover, that are no longer places of habitation (“Poor room, have you ever been lived in?” [AO.13/AwO.4]).

*Outside the Subject.* It is in Kafka’s *Diaries* that Blanchot uncovers the internal link between writing and dying. Both are movements in which I lose the power to say “I”—lose self-possession, mastery, disappear into the event itself. “I am dying” has the grammar of “It is raining” and the mode of being of Levinas’s *il y a*. In any case I am turned out of my house. It is never given to me to say “I am dead” or “I am finished.”<sup>7</sup> Both writing and existence are interminable—this was, Blanchot says, Kafka’s experience: “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 on to) 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” (PF.17/WF.9). Interminability is one of the faces of anarchy, where anarchy is to be understood in its etymological sense as that which is on the hither side of beginning, the *an-archē* whence things begin only to begin again, and then again, without possibility of coming to a point. Mallarmé had asked: “Is there a reason for writing? [*Très avant, au moins, quant au point, je le formule:—A savoir s’il y a lieu d’écrire*].”<sup>8</sup> Likewise Blanchot: “What we want to understand is, why write?” (PF.25/WF.17). But the truth is that writing is without why; it is more event than action—as much an interruption of discourse as a species of it, which is why the fragment (which is not a form) becomes for Blanchot the instance or event of writing par excellence.

In “The Paradox of Aytré” (1946) Blanchot asks, “Where does literature begin?” (PF.73/WF.68), and to answer he cites Jean Paulhan’s story of a sergeant named Aytré who is asked to keep the log-book of a colonial expedition as it proceeds across Madagascar. “There is nothing extraordinary in this log, we arrive, we leave; chickens cost seven sous; we stock up on medicine; our wives receive magazines, etc.” (PF.73/WF.68). But then “the writing changes”: “The explanations rendered become longer. Aytré begins to go into his ideas on colonialization; he describes the women’s hairstyles, their locks joined together on each side of their ears like a snail; he speaks of strange landscapes; he goes on to the character of the Ma-



lagaches; and so on. In short, the log is useless. What has happened?" (PF.73/WF.68). Suddenly writing has become gratuitous, a nonproductive expenditure, an excess of the limits of genre (genre is always purposeful and just; it is writing that is susceptible to formal description and differentiation from an ensemble of alternative possibilities). Writing is at all events no longer under Aytré's control; it now appears of itself, without reason and without end (in principle Aytré could be writing still, like Beckett's *Unnamable*, of whom Aytré is certainly a prototype). It seems worth remarking that, however gratuitous, Aytré's writing never ceases to be descriptive; it is made of predicates. There is no sign of a schizophrenic's word-salad. One has to say that his writing never ceases to be true of the world. It is only that categories like true and false that define the world's discourse no longer have a coherent application. What categories should one apply to Aytré's writing? It is in fact perfectly ordinary writing but it no longer belongs to the world that it describes with such unexceptionable precision. The writing is absolutely singular, refractory to all categories: outside all possible worlds.

*Anarchic Temporality.* What threshold did Aytré cross? One answer is that he has entered what Blanchot calls "the essential solitude," which is an obscure zone of existence that turns subjectivity inside out—reverses polarities, so to speak, so that the writer who holds the pen is suddenly "gripped" by it, which is why Aytré cannot stop writing:

The writer seems to be the master of his pen; he can become capable of great mastery over words and over what he wants to make them express. But his mastery only succeeds in putting him, keeping him in contact with the fundamental passivity where the word, no longer anything but its appearance—the shadow of a word—never can be mastered or even grasped. It remains the ungraspable which is also unreleasable; the indecisive moment of fascination.

The writer's mastery is not in the hand that writes, the "sick" hand that never lets the pencil go—that can't let it go because what it holds doesn't really hold; what it holds belongs to the realm of shadows, and it's itself a shade. Mastery always characterizes the other hand, the one that doesn't write and is capable of intervening at the right moment to seize the pencil and put it aside. Thus mastery consists in the power to stop writing, to

interrupt what is being written, thereby restoring to the present instant its rights, its decisive trenchancy. (EL.19/SL.25)

Mastery: the ability to stop writing! Here certainly is what Sartre is reacting against, namely writing that turns the world of freedom and the exigency of tasks upside down. As Blanchot says in one of his texts on Kafka, "It is not a matter of devoting time to the task, of passing one's time writing, but of passing into another time where there is no longer any task; it is a matter of approaching that point where time is lost, where one enters into the fascination and solitude of time's absence" (EL.67/SL.60). What is this other time—this time outside of time? Blanchot explains: "Time's absence is not a purely negative mode. It is the time when nothing begins, when initiative is not possible. . . . Rather than a purely negative mode, it is, on the contrary, a time without negation, without decision, when here is nowhere as well, and each thing withdraws into its image while the 'I' that we are recognizes itself by sinking into the neutrality of a featureless third person. The time of time's absence has no present, no presence" (EL.26/SL.30). A Sartrean would have us imagine a hole in existence through which time drains away instead of progressing toward the future in its usual fashion. Or perhaps time is now passive; it does not cease or come to an end but merely pauses, more or less indefinitely, as in the time of waiting. Time in this event is no longer productive of a future. The trick is to understand that this is not altogether a bad thing.

Let me try to elucidate this temporality with a series of glosses:

1. It may have been Mallarmé who discovered this hiatus in which time ceases to pass (without alluding to any eternity). Recall *Igitur; ou, La folie d'Elbebon*, in which a young man is required (at midnight) to descend into the crypt of his ancestors in order to perform a ritual throw of the dice. But the descent takes him across a threshold into a different order of things. Igitur says: "I have always lived with my soul fixed upon the clock"; "The clock has often done me a great deal of good" (OC.439–40/SPP.97). But midnight on this occasion does not belong to the schedule of clocks. Midnight is "a room of time," not a passage of it (OC.438/SPP.92). As Igitur descends the stairs he enters another temporality, a moment of "pure time or *ennui*," a vigil in which, in the end, nothing was to have taken place. Midnight is a pure present. It disappears into itself, evacuates itself, instead of moving on (the figure is of midnight passing through a mirror). So there is no transition of the future into the past, nor any

*Aufhebung* of the past into the future (OC.440). There is a similar moment in Mallarmé's "Mimique" in which a mime's performance occurs in an absent present, an absolute caesura between any before or after: "This—'The scene illustrates but the idea, not any actual action, in a hymen (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment, perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present*. That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual illusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction'" (OC.310/SPP.69). The scene is an interruption of mimesis as a project of bringing something back or anyhow into the present: it is a mimesis without intentionality (it is not *of* something). More exactly, it is a pure performance in which the mime mimes miming: the imitation itself is the thing being imitated. (We'll come back to this.)

2. In a text dating from 1927, this being evidently the unfinished second part of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger takes up Aristotle's conception of time, with its focus on the paradoxical temporality of the "now"—paradoxical because the "now" is both foundational for clock-time and uncontainable within it. "The now," says Heidegger, "has a peculiar double visage. . . . Time is held together within itself by the now; time's specific continuity is rooted in the now. But conjointly, with respect to the now, time is divided, articulated into the no-longer now, the earlier, and the not-yet-now, the later." In other words, the now is nothing in itself. It is a fold in time: "the now that we count in following a motion is *in each instance a different now*." That is, "the now is always another, an advance from one place to another. In each now the now is a different one, but still each different now is, as now, always now. The ever different nows are, *as different*, nevertheless always exactly *the same*, namely, now." But this sameness is always a difference in itself: "nowness, being-now, is always *otherness, being-other*."<sup>9</sup> One can imagine that the "now" is the time of unhappy consciousness.

3. Emmanuel Levinas, in "Realité et son ombre" (1948), remarks that in conventional phenomenology the image is understood as a form of mediation on the model of the sign, the symbol, or the concept. We suppose it to be a transparent looking glass onto the world of things. But Levinas proposes that the image is simply an event of resemblance, where resemblance is not merely a relation between an image and its original; it is an *event*, "the very movement that engenders the image": "Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. . . . Here

is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the 'old garments' of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a 'still life.' And yet all this is . . . is the thing. There is then a duality in . . . this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. We will say the thing is itself and its image. And that this relationship between the thing and its image is resemblance."<sup>10</sup> A thing is what it is but it also disappears behind its appearance. It has a kind of double ontology: it is "that which is, that which reveals itself in its truth, and, at the same time, it resembles itself, is its own image. The original gives itself as though it were at a distance from itself, as though it were withdrawing from itself" (IH.133/ CPP.6). A good example of an image in this sense would be the cadaver. An image is, so to speak, a materialization of being: it is an event in which the essence of the thing withdraws from it, leaving behind a remainder that no longer belongs to the order of things but which, of course, is not just nothing. The cadaver is a being that has, one might say, lost its being. Its existence is gratuitous. Its time has stopped: its past no longer continues into the future because it no longer has a future. But it is not nothing. What Levinas wants to know is: What is this "mere" resemblance, this stoppage of time? A statue appears to belong to this order of things: namely, to a peculiar temporality. "A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future. Its duration is not really an instant. It does not give itself out here as an infinitesimal element of duration, the instant of a flash; it has in its own way a quasi-eternal duration. . . . An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come. The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence. It will never have completed its task as a present, as though reality withdrew from its own reality and left it powerless" (IH.138/ CPP.9). The temporality of the statue is like the temporality of dying: "In dying, the horizon of the future is given, but the future as a promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval." In this temporality, the being of things has been interrupted. It is not that nothing exists; but what exists falls short of being—remains in some fashion on the hither side of being in a between-world that is neither one thing nor the other, in a temporality of the pure *now* that is at once no longer and not yet. Levinas calls this the "meanwhile"

(*entre-temps*): “never finished, still enduring—something inhuman and monstrous.” This interval in being is what art brings about: the mode of existence of the work of art is this between-time or *now* that the movement of time is unable to traverse (IH.143/CPP.11). The *meanwhile* is the time of vigilance, waiting, dying—and (as we will see in the next chapter) art.

4. The movement of time (that is, clock-time) cannot traverse the interval of being because, as Blanchot says, time in this event is no longer dialectical. It is a “time without negation.” This means (among other things) that it is outside the order of conceptual determination in which a merely natural thing is transformed into something essential—an object of consciousness, a thing of the spirit, an identity or universal: an object in the full sense of objectivity (*pour soi*). However, whereas Levinas sees the interval of dying as something “inhuman and monstrous,” Blanchot sees it as something affirmative or, more exactly, as an affirmation outside the dialectical alternatives of positive and negative, namely an interruption of the “death” in which we make sense of things by objectifying them as this or that theme of predication. In “Littérature et la droit à la mort” Blanchot cites Hegel’s line: “‘Adam’s first act, first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)’” (PF.312/WF.323). Reference, designation, predication: Blanchot doesn’t hesitate to call it murder: “I say, ‘This woman.’ Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, ‘This woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost its being—the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious right” (PF.312/WF.322). To speak—that is, to predicate this of that, to bring things under the rule of identity—is to destroy their singularity or alterity as existing things by integrating them into the order of the same. However, literature, which is to say writing, is not structured on the model of “I speak.” The passage from *I* to *He* that makes writing possible is not a dialectical movement: “It is no longer this inspiration at work, this negation asserting itself, this idea inscribed in the world as though it were the absolute perspective of the world in its totality. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself:

it is the presence of things *before* the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists” (PF.317/WF.328). Literature is the refuge of what is singular and irreducible. It “is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence; literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence” (PF.319/WF.330). This is a presence, however, that now belongs to the interval between past and future: it is the time of the nonidentical, the now which, as Heidegger says, “is *always otherness, being other,*” irreducible to the traversal of this-as-that.

5. Literature belongs to the temporality of *difference in itself*, that is, the dimension of singularity outside the logic of differentiation that distributes things along the plane of identity and difference. In *Logique du sens* (1969) Gilles Deleuze calls this the temporality of the *Aion*, which in contrast to the chronological progress of “interlocking presents” is an event that breaks ad infinitum into “elongated pasts and futures,” that is, dimensions that move apart rather than together into some sort of unity, continuum, or totality. Deleuze writes (and notice that he cites Mallarmé’s “Mimique” as an example of what he has in mind):

The Aion endlessly divides the event and pushes away past as well as future, without ever rendering them less urgent. The event is that no one ever dies, but has always just died or is always going to die, in the empty present of the Aion, that is, in eternity. As he was describing a murder such that it had to be mimed—a pure ideality—Mallarmé said: “Here advancing, there remembering, to the future, to the past, under the false appearance of a present—in such a manner the Mime proceeds, whose game is limited to a perpetual illusion, without breaking the mirror.” Each event is the smallest time, smaller than the minimum of continuous thinkable time, because it is divided into proximate past and imminent future. But it is also the longest time, because it is endlessly subdivided by the Aion which renders it equal to its own unlimited line.<sup>11</sup>

The Aion is the pure event, irreducible to a segment in a chain. It is the time of the absolutely singular—what Deleuze and Guattari elsewhere refer to as a *haecceity*, which is never an instance of anything but itself: for example, five o’clock this evening, but one’s whole life would do as well so long as one does not imagine such a

thing, Aristotle-like, as a totality with a plot. It is rather an absolutely random and contingent event. It is historicity itself. "We are all five o'clock in the evening, or another hour, or rather two hours simultaneously, the optimal and the pessimal, noon-midnight, but distributed in a variable fashion. . . . A *haecceity* has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines. It is a rhizome."<sup>12</sup> So a *haecceity* is always a fragment—not a part broken off from a whole, but something uncontainable within any totality or structure, a testimony to an ontology without integration in which the aleatory—the happening outside of any sequence (or anarchy for short)—gives the definition of reality.

6. In "La double séance" (1970) Jacques Derrida reads Mallarmé's "Mimique" against some passages from Plato's "Philebus" in order to distinguish two orders of *mimesis*: (A) a first order in which *mimesis* is always linked to truth in the sense that *mimesis* is always about "what is"—it is important to stress that *everything* (truth, reason, the order of things) depends on the "discernibility" between "what is" and its imitation, where the one comes first in the order of the things and the other second, and where the one is simple and the other is double (multiplies or supervenes upon the one);<sup>15</sup> and (B) a second order, which we might call "*mimesis* in itself," resulting from the fact that (as Derrida reads it) Mallarmé's mime simply mimes. "There is no imitation. The Mime imitates nothing. And to begin with, he doesn't imitate. There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him. No present has preceded or supervised the tracing of his writing. His movements form a figure that no speech anticipates or accompanies. They are not linked with *logos* in any order of consequence."<sup>14</sup> To be sure, it is not that the mime is actually *doing* something, although of course he is not *not* doing anything, either. Derrida tries to sort out the difficulty as follows: "*There is* mimicry," he says. It is just that in this case "we are faced . . . with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference. . . . This speculum reflects no reality; it produces 'reality-effects'" (Di.234/D.206). So what have we got? "In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without a reference [that is, a difference indifferent to any identity, or difference in itself], or rather a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wander-

ing about without a past, without any death, birth, or presence” (Di.234/D.206). What the mime discloses is a pure *between*, a caesura in being that interrupts the logic of identity and difference, real thing and image, single and double, same and other. Derrida notices that “the word ‘between’ has no full meaning of its own” (Di.250/D.221). One thinks of Blanchot’s favorite words (“common words,” he calls them)—“perhaps,” “almost,” “maybe,” “unless,” “meanwhile” (PD.15–16/SNB.7). Derrida tries to locate this *between* with words like *différance*, *tympan*, *hymen*, *pli* or “fold”—spatial metaphors for what Blanchot figures temporally when he locates writing in the interval between *archē* and *telos*, design and completion, past and future: the *entre-temps* of dying, suffering, waiting, Igitur’s “midnight,” and so on. This interval is outside the order of reasons in which productions can be accomplished and justified—outside the order of *this* as *that* (or *this* for *that*, or *this* about *that*): outside any subsumptive order that places one thing in the service, branch, or business of another. The singular belongs to this *between* or caesura that disengages the relation of universal and particular. The singular is difference in itself, the one thing that is unlike anything: the nonidentical, unrepresentable, absolute alterity outside all relations of the one and the two, the same and the other, this and that.

***Ontology of the Snow Shovel.*** In light of the foregoing, consider (once more) Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades—for example, the mundane snow shovel, which he buys at a hardware store and then exhibits in his studio (in a glass case!) under the title, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. What is the relation between the snow shovel in the hardware store and the shovel in the studio? In chapter 5 we tried to resolve this question in terms of change-of-place: whatever is recontextualized exhibits itself or places itself between quotation marks. The collector’s item, for example, is no longer the mere thing it happens to be but is, in Benjamin’s sense, auratic. Now we have the resources to think in terms of a change of temporality as well. The shovel is now both itself and not itself, that is, it lags behind itself in an interval that will never pass, on the hither side of an imminence (or, indeed, coincidence) that will no longer take place. Duchamp himself introduced the term “delay” to suggest a work that is refractory, free of touch, self-identical or, better, nonidentical: Deleuze’s difference in itself or absolute singularity.<sup>15</sup> It is to all appearances your typical shovel, but it is in excess of what it seems. Levinas would say it is



*hypertrophic*, thickened to the point where it no longer has the transparency or self-evidence of what Heidegger calls “things-at-hand.”

One can put this in a slightly different way. Duchamp’s shovel proved to be as ephemeral as any temporal thing. Like his famous urinal and, indeed, like all of his Readymades, it vanished without a trace, or rather with only the trace of a photograph. Nevertheless, Duchamp’s shovel remains an original both as an event as well as a “work”; it can be replicated, but there can be no duplicate—no substitute identical with what is missing.<sup>16</sup> As Marjorie Perloff puts it, “The works in [Duchamp’s] repertoire are now understood to be completely unique. Not, of course, literally unique in the sense of one of a kind; in almost every case the original has been lost and there are a number of replicas. Rather, their uniqueness, their *aura* is conceptual: the idea, for example, of taking a snow shovel, hanging it by its handle in a glass case—which is hardly the way we normally see shovels—and giving it the witty title, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*.”<sup>17</sup> A Readymade, in other words, is a commercial product but also something else: a *conceptual artifact*. The one belongs to the everyday temporality of oblivion (recall Ponge’s crate from chapter 5); the other, like any work of art, possesses a history and, indeed, a title that situates it within the temporality of the proper name (which can outlive the one who bears it).<sup>18</sup>

In an essay on “La parole quotidienne” Blanchot makes the argument that the everyday as such falls beneath the threshold of history. The everyday is “existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—at the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence and regularity.” Of course, Blanchot, existentialist that he is, is thinking of the everyday subject, that is, one of us—one of Heidegger’s “they” (*das Man*): the one who is no longer a subject (no longer says “I,” has no proper name, is no longer even a “who”). “The everyday escapes. Why does it escape? Because it is without a subject. When I live the everyday, it is any man, anyone at all who does so; and this anyone, properly speaking, is neither me nor, properly, the other; he is neither the one nor the other and, in their interchangeable presence, their annulled irreciprocity, both one and the other—yet without there being an ‘I’ or an ‘alter ego’ able to give rise to a *dialectical recognition*” (EI.364/IC.244). But this only means that at the level of the everyday the subject “does not belong to the objective realm. To live it as what might be lived through a series of technical acts (represented by the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, the refrigerator, the radio, the car) is

to substitute a number of compartmentalized actions for this indefinite presence, this connected movement (which is, however, not a whole) by which we are *continually*, though in the mode of discontinuity, in relation with the *indeterminate* set of possibilities" (EI.364/IC.244). The point would be that Duchamp's shovel is no longer interchangeable with any other once it enters into the conceptual context that Duchamp constructs for it when he places it in his studio.<sup>19</sup> Heidegger would say that it now has the density or materiality of the *thing* rather than the presentness, transparency, and graspability of an object. It is "free of touch."

*L'amitié*. Here we come upon the boundary that Blanchot shares with Emmanuel Levinas. Can people materialize in the way that the words of writing do? And, if so, how does this happen? As we have seen, they can become cadaverous. Less drastically, or perhaps more, to materialize is to cease to be a thing of the spirit or affair of consciousness; it is to be reinserted into the world as a porous and vulnerable subject rather than as a philosophical subject who, anyhow, only exists on paper. Levinas clarifies this state of affairs by way of sensibility, which is to say my exposure to the other who approaches me outside every context that I have for appropriating the world; in the same stroke the other interrupts my self-relation, turns "I" into "me." I am no longer a cognitive subject; I am my skin ("The ego [*moi*] is not in itself like matter which, perfectly espoused by its form, is what it is; it is in itself like one is in one's skin, that is, already tight, ill at ease in one's own skin. It is as though the identity of matter resting in itself concealed . . . a materiality more material than all matter—a materiality such that irritability, susceptibility or exposedness to wounds and outrage characterizes its passivity, more passive still than the passivity of effects").<sup>20</sup> Levinas calls this condition of exposure, of subjectivity outside the subject, "ethics" (or, more exactly, "the ethical"). Blanchot calls it, among other things, friendship—or, more exactly, the relation of "one for the other" that occurs in the *between* or *entre-temps* between friends (or, for all of that, between lovers).

The crucial thing is to understand that for Blanchot friendship is not an intersubjective relation. It is not a side-by-side relation of collaboration in which we act or exist as one, as if sharing things in common, whether a language, a world, or a sense of identity or purpose. Friendship for Blanchot entails foreignness or separation as one of its conditions. It is an ethical rather than fraternal relation, a

face-to-face relation in which I am responsible to and for the other and not just for holding up my end or keeping my side of the bargain. So, in contrast to Aristotle, Blanchot does not think of friendship on the model of logical integration in which the bond between myself and my friend, my sense of oneness with him as if we were interchangeable, can become foundational for a more comprehensive order of things. In other words friendship is not utopian — not an incipient or exemplary community (unless in Bataille's anarchic sense of "a community for those who have no community"). It is on the contrary a relation without terms, a relationship of dissymmetry and nonidentity. One inhabits this relation not as a sovereign "I" but as a "who" or a "me"—a mode of being in the accusative rather than executive or declarative position.

For example, in "L'amitié" (1971), Blanchot says that the "I" of Georges Bataille's writings is

very different from the ego that those who knew him in the happy and unhappy particularity of life would like to evoke in the light of a memory. Everything leads one to think that the personless presence at stake in such a movement introduces an enigmatic relation into the existence of him who indeed decided to speak of it but not to claim it as his own, still less to make of it an event of his biography (rather, a gap in which the biography disappears). And when we ask ourselves the question "Who was the subject of this experience?", this question is perhaps already an answer if, even to him who led it, the experience asserted itself in this interrogative form, by substituting the openness of a "Who?" without answer for the closed and singular "I"; not that this means that he had simply to ask himself "What is this I that I am?" but much more radically to recover himself without reprieve, no longer as "I" but as a "Who?", the unknown and slippery being of an indefinite "Who?"<sup>21</sup>

In this respect there is an internal coherence between friendship and writing (*l'écriture*). Like writing, friendship is less an executive performance than a temporality into which one is drawn that deprives one of all the various familiar possessions and initiatives (like the ability to begin or end). Friendship is what Blanchot calls a relation of the third kind, which is neither a relation of cognition nor an "I-Thou" relation of philosophical dialogue but rather "a relation without relation" (EI.104/IC.73)—one can think of it as a kind of ecstatic relation outside the alternatives of identity/difference, same/other,

presence/absence, being/nonbeing, past/future. It is “a pure interval” (EI.98/IC.69), “an interruption of being” (EI.109/IC.77), that suspends us together in what Blanchot calls “the infinite conversation”—an example of which prefaces *L’entretien infini*. Two old men, or at any rate two people no longer young who, for who knows how many years, have been talking together much the way Aytré writes:

*“I asked you to come . . .” He stops an instant: “Do you remember how things happened?” The interlocutor reflects in turn: “I remember it very well.” —“Ah, good. I was not very sure, finally, of having initiated the conversation myself.” —“But how could I have come otherwise?” —“Friendship would have sent you.” He reflects again: “I wrote to you, didn’t I?” —“On several occasions.” —“But did I not also call you on the telephone?” —“Certainly, several times.” —“I see you want to be gentle with me. I am grateful. As a matter of fact it is nothing new; the weariness [fatigue] is not greater, only it has taken another turn.” —“It has several, I believe we know them all. It keeps us alive.” —“It keeps us speaking. I would like to state precisely when this happened, if only one of the characteristics of the thing did not make precision difficult. I can’t help thinking of it.” —“Well, then we must think of it together. Is it something that happened to you?” —“Did I say that?” And he adds almost immediately, with a force of decision that might justly be termed moving, so much does it seem to exceed his resources of energy: “Nothing that has happened,” yet along with it this reservation: “Nothing that has happened to me.” —“Then in my eyes it is nothing serious.” —“I didn’t say that it was serious.” He continues to meditate on this, resuming: “No, it’s not serious,” as if he perceived at that instant that what is not serious is much more so.” (EI.xiii/IC.xv)<sup>22</sup>*

Obviously this is not a philosophical dialogue of the kind Gadamer recommends—namely, two friends, more or less identical, engaged in a disinterested give-and-take that tries to elucidate a subject matter (*die Sache*). Like the dialogue between the lovers (if that is what they are) in *L’attente l’oubli*, Blanchot’s “infinite conversation” does not have a logical structure, a *logos*; neither has it an *archē* or a *telos*. It cannot be made intelligible by comparison either with the logical proposition, which is why it does not appear to be about anything, or with the dialectic, since it doesn’t go anywhere. It has the structure of waiting. Of the lovers in *L’attente l’oubli* it is said: “There is no real dialogue between them. Only waiting maintains between what they say, a certain relation, words spoken to wait, a waiting of words”

(AO.52/AwO.25). Waiting is how one inhabits the anarchic temporality of friendship (or of writing, suffering, fatigue, dying).

Blanchot emphasizes the opacity of the friend (or lover) who is a presence that cannot be comprehended, who is “radically out of my reach” (EI.98/IC.69) and whose intimacy does not dissipate the strangeness between us. So I am not privy to my friend, about whom I must therefore remain discreet—“discretion” captures in one word the basic idea of Blanchovian ethics: “We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship, this relationship without dependence, without episode, yet into which all of the simplicity of life enters, passes by way of the recognition of common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them” (A.300/F.291). Hence the idea that friendship is an ethical relation on the hither side of or beyond being. It is also a relation that “exposes me to death or finitude” (CI.44/UC.24); that is, friendship belongs with writing to the temporality of dying, or to the interval of art in which my relation with the other is always shadowed, even constituted, by the imminence of his death (if his is the word). In *La communauté inavouable* Blanchot writes:

Now, “the basis of communication” is not necessarily speech, or even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but the exposure to death, no longer my own exposure, but someone else’s, whose living and closest presence is already the eternal and unbearable absence, an absence that the deepest mourning does not diminish. And it is in life itself that that absence of someone else has to be met. It is with that absence—its uncanny presence, always under the prior threat of disappearance—that friendship is brought into play and lost at each moment, a relation without relation or without relation other than the incommensurable. (CI.46/UC.25)

This is certainly strange, but it recalls Levinas’s reworking of Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s self-awareness as Being-toward-death. For Heidegger this awareness is (says Levinas) “a supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility”—Heidegger’s notion of authenticity is shaped entirely by the ontology of the Greek hero (as the German romantics imagined him) who confronts his destiny in a history set apart from everyday life. “It [*Sein-zum-Tod*] is,” says Levinas, “Dasein’s assumption of the uttermost possibility of existence, which

makes possible all other possibilities, and consequently makes possible the very feat of grasping a possibility—that is, it makes possible activity and freedom.”<sup>23</sup> For Levinas, by contrast, my death, however much it hovers and looms, is the plain and simple limit of my virility precisely because it is always (like the friend!) outside my reach as a cognitive subject; like the Messiah it is an impossibility, an event in which “something absolutely unknowable appears” (TA.58/TO.71). My death, such as it is, is more Kafkaesque than Homeric: always premature, it will come too late for me to experience it. I am gone in the very instant it arrives. Think of Kafka’s K. Everyone will be privy to my death but me. Death is the end of discretion.

It turns out that this is for the most part Levinas’s point as well. Before everything else it is the death of the other that stares me in the face, weighs upon me and thus constitutes me as an ethical subject: “In its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other . . . were my business. It is as if that invisible death, ignored by the Other . . . were already ‘regarding’ me prior to confronting me, and becoming the death that stares me in the face. The other man’s death calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become the accomplice of the death to which the other, who cannot see it, is exposed; and as if, even before vowing myself to him, I had to answer for this death of the other, and to accompany the Other in his mortal solitude.”<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, it is a condition of roughly this sort that the narrator of Blanchot’s *L’arrêt de mort* (1948) inhabits: his love affairs are prolonged, cadaverous experiences of mortality; he himself meanwhile appears to embody the impossibility of dying: “What makes it happen that every time my grave opens, now, I rouse a thought there that is strong enough to bring me back to life? The very derisive laughter of my death.”<sup>25</sup> As if exposure to death became a kind of interminable vigil.

In *L’instant de ma mort* Blanchot recalls, or imagines a Blanchot-like narrator recalling, “a young man—a man still young—prevented from dying by death itself.”<sup>26</sup> During the Occupation he is hauled out of his château one evening and placed before a firing squad:

I know—do I know it—that the one at whom the Germans were already 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. Henceforward he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship. (IM.5)