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## Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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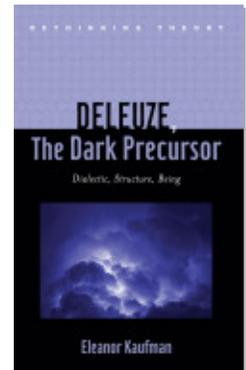
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## Midnight, or the Inertia of Being

THERE IS HARDLY A MORE consistent thinker than Maurice Blanchot. His work is disarming in its weave of fiction and philosophy, in its timeless anonymity, its undoing of the dialectic, and the affirmation of worklessness and the community of those who have nothing in common. Though in a sense elusive, this work is also infinitely substitutable. Almost any paragraph of Blanchot's is quintessentially Blanchotian. It is daunting, then, if not impossible, to suggest and delineate a fissure that runs through Blanchot's oeuvre, a fissure between the liminal, atemporal, fleeting instant and the more weighty inertia of presentness, the inertia of being. It is this fissure that also marks a profound yet barely palpable divide between the thought of Blanchot and Deleuze, especially with regard to the realms of temporality and ontology. While Blanchot's notion of Midnight resonates most strongly with a Deleuzian insistence on temporal becoming (as opposed to present being), it also gestures to a state that is beyond becoming in that it is too unworkable, too inert. It is my claim that this inertia, rather than marking a lesser or pathological state, may point to a new path for ontology.

Midnight would seem to be always to come, or always just past. It is never purely present, but another time composed of the interplay of past and future, the time of infinite becoming. As we have seen, Deleuze terms this time of becoming Aion, as opposed to the static being of present time, or Chronos. Indeed, Deleuze evokes Blanchot's separation between "personal and present death" (the death the self chooses to die) and "impersonal and infinitive death" (the Other death that chooses you, where there is no longer a self to choose) in the process of elaborating how the atemporal time of Aion is, like the Other death, at odds with an immobile presentness.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Midnight's "out-of-timeliness" marks a strong convergence between Deleuzian and Blanchotian formulations of an atem-

poral temporality, a state of becoming as opposed to being that conjoins past and future but is outside of present, static, chronological time. It would seem, too, that Deleuze and Blanchot coincide in their mutual eschewal of the dialectic insofar as it stands in for a present and positive ontology (or at least in so far as Deleuze would seem to disavow the present and Blanchot the positive). If there is a difference at stake between Blanchot and Deleuze, it is a difference that centers on ontology's movements, or lack thereof. If Deleuze redeems being by perceiving its hidden potential for movement, Blanchot affirms being by perceiving its disarming potential for inertia.

It is hard to be, really, in the presence of inertia. Inertia is deceptive in that it might appear to be going somewhere (I am working to clean up the house and move out of here), while at the same time quietly asserting itself in its active inaction. As discussed above, Deleuze writes of American literature that "the becoming is geographical. There is no equivalent in France. The French are too human, too historical, too concerned with the future and the past. . . . To flee is not exactly to travel, or even to move. . . . Flights can happen on the spot, in motionless travel."<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that, among their mobile contemporaries, Deleuze and Blanchot stand out as two great twentieth-century French thinkers who did not travel, did not move. Yet, if there is a difference to be distilled between these two thinkers, and even within Blanchot's corpus, it is to be found around the issue of movement. As we have seen, always at issue for Deleuze is a movement of thought, which is a movement of becoming, even if one does not travel, even if one stands still. In this regard, although both Blanchot and Deleuze look askance at the dialectic, there is nevertheless a hidden dialectic punctuated by the uneasy relation between movement and stillness: even if there would seem to be a stoppage of physical movement, there is still the potential for a movement of thought.

On the one hand, Blanchot is quite close to Deleuze, though in what follows I seek to locate a distinct space of difference. In the vein of Deleuze, it would seem that all of Blanchot's work hinges on the enunciation of a type of textual movement. This is a movement of circularity and repetition that characterizes both Blanchot's critical work and his fiction and that is articulated with particular clarity in *The Space of Literature*. The movement of Blanchot's thought is one of excessive repetition; yet this

repetition is always slightly displaced—it is not repetition in the strictest sense but rather a movement that doubles back upon itself in a circular fashion. A series of sentences from a three-page span of *The Space of Literature* illustrates this circular movement:

To write *is* to surrender to the fascination of time's absence. The time of time's absence has no present, no presence. . . . The time of time's absence *is* not dialectical. . . . The reversal which, in time's absence, points us constantly back to the presence of absence. . . . The dead present *is* the impossibility of making any presence real. . . . Here fascination reigns . . . and fascination *is* passion for the image. . . . Fascination *is* solitude's gaze. . . . To write *is* to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens.<sup>3</sup>

Blanchot explicates, in a definitional way, a series of terms that are related yet metonymically displaced. Here, this chain of displacements circles around the word “fascination,” though almost all of Blanchot's sentences could be mapped in a similar fashion onto other sentences which they repeat and enhance through the same circular movement of displaced repetition. This formal movement indeed mirrors the content of Blanchot's statements, for, like “the time of time's absence,” it would appear not to be dialectical, to have no presence as such, no temporality as such, just a reign of fascination. Blanchot's writing, his phrasing, is at one with the theme of movement that does not move, that reverberates as a central tenet of Blanchot's thought, and that also resonates so clearly with Deleuze.

Certainly Blanchot's insistence, at the level of the verb, on the ontological in the form of the “is,” is of a piece with the slightly displaced repetition of his writing style. His incessant repetition of the verb “to be,” usually in the form of the word “is” (emphasized in the quote above), is simultaneously a stylistic and a theoretical motif in his writing, one of the many points where the form and the content of his work merge. Blanchot frequently relates a certain idea of being, one encapsulated by the words “it is,” to his notion of literature or the work of art. He writes that “the work—the work of art, the literary work—is neither finished nor unfinished; it is.”<sup>4</sup> Also, “the poem—literature—seems to be linked to a spoken word which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it is.”<sup>5</sup> This “isness,” this ontology of the work of art, is also its impossibility, for its supreme moment of becoming is also its dissolution:

But this exigency, which makes the work declare being in the unique moment of rupture — “those very words: *it is*,” the point which the work brilliantly illuminates even while receiving its consuming burst of light — we must also comprehend and feel that this point renders the work impossible, because it never permits arrival at the work. It is a region anterior to the beginning where nothing is made of being, and in which nothing is accomplished. It is the depth of being’s inertia [*dé-soeuvement*].<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, this “is” marks the juncture of being and becoming, that point where being becomes nothingness. Such a juncture is also the space of Blanchot’s text. Marked by the recurrent “is” of being, Blanchot’s writing propels this “is” along in a circular and repetitive movement that is the mark of becoming. This is a type of movement that never really attains a goal or even a concrete expression of thought. If anything, the movement works to obscure thought, but in this act it illustrates thought of another order, an even more exterior form of thought (what Foucault would term “thought from the outside”). Yet, on the other hand, is “the depth of being’s inertia,” being’s seeming unworking, not also beckoning to an ontology of its own, even while resisting such a fixedness of being? Is this, moreover, the slight difference between the “it is” and the “there is” (*es gibt, il y a*)? While both express an ontological encounter, the *il y a*, with all its Heideggerian and Levinasian inflections, would evoke a being toward something, an ontological state where some form of movement is at issue, whereas the “it is” is what stops movement, is much more emphatically inert, all that there is (like the *en-soi* or in-itself).

This interpretative bifurcation is nowhere better emblemized than in the Blanchotian figure of Midnight. For all its fleetingness, Midnight’s ever-receding presence nevertheless suggests an ontology of the present that is to some extent at odds with the tenor of Blanchot’s oeuvre. Midnight, which Blanchot discusses in *The Space of Literature* in his chapter on Mallarmé’s *Igitur*, serves as a figure for the circular movement of Blanchot’s thought. Midnight marks both the repetitiveness and the perpetual displacement of time. Midnight indeed recurs every day, comes back around in a circular motion — actually the motion of a double circle — but it is never the same midnight as the day before. Some midnights are more officially commemorated than others, such as the midnight that is

New Year's Eve, and these midnights signal the passing of a greater expanse of time, recalling as they do the previous year's midnight instead of the previous day's. But in all its forms, midnight is a unique entity that punctuates the repetitiveness, the doubling back, and the circularity of time. In this regard, it serves as a *mis en abyme* for the movement of Blanchot's thought, which is characterized by the same patterns. Blanchot himself comments on the import of the circular nature of thought: "Whenever thought is caught in a circle, this is because it has touched upon something original, its point of departure beyond which it cannot move except to return."<sup>7</sup>

Midnight thus bears witness to the convergence of being and becoming that is registered in Blanchot's use of "is." Midnight is, in a sense, always in the process of becoming. It is something that, except for the briefest instant, is either about to happen or already just past. As Blanchot writes, "Midnight is precisely the hour which has never yet come, which never comes, the pure, ungraspable future, the hour eternally past."<sup>8</sup> This evocation of Midnight is remarkably similar to Deleuze's depiction of Aion, the time of the event, discussed previously:

The event in turn, in its impassibility and impenetrability, has no present. It rather retreats and advances in two directions at once, being the perpetual object of a double question: What is going to happen? What has just happened? The agonizing aspect of the pure event is that it is always and at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something which is happening.<sup>9</sup>

The instant of Midnight's being is the momentary present of pure nothingness. Midnight is not the marker of anything tangible — there is nothing out there but darkness and night — yet, because of this daily moment of nothingness, time is made to repeat its continual circle of becoming. Midnight itself never really "is"; it is an absent presence, one that is only registered as presence because of the movement of its becoming. In this, it would seem to be the pure parallel of Blanchot's writing.

Yet alongside this incessant becoming lurks an almost uncanny persistence of being ("the agonizing aspect of the pure event"?), for the nothingness of Midnight inaugurates and mediates the movement of time and in this respect enables time's presence to be measured. This presence that comes from absence leads to an affirmation that is not counterbalanced by

negation. Blanchot explicates this in his reading of Mallarmé and once again gestures to a hidden ontology:

One can say that Mallarmé saw this nothing in action; he experienced the activity of absence. In absence he grasped a presence, a strength still persisting, as if in nothingness there were a strange power of affirmation. . . . It is in unreality itself that the poet encounters the resistance of a muffled presence. It is unreality from which he cannot free himself; it is in unreality that, disengaged from beings, he meets with the mystery of “those very words: it is.” And this is not because in the unreal something subsists . . . but because when there is nothing, it is this nothing itself which can no longer be negated. It affirms, keeps on affirming, and it states nothingness as being, the inertia of being [*le désœuvrement de l'être*].<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, Blanchot is at his most Deleuzian in that he repeatedly emphasizes the power of affirmation over negation, the affirmation of nothingness. Yet here, in muffled resonance with Sartre, this affirmed nothingness is also being in its most pure and elusive state.<sup>11</sup> This being is signaled by the “mystery” of “it is.” However, this being is also something beyond movement, beyond an ever-fleeting march and retraction of time. It is precisely, once again, “the inertia of being.” And yet, how is this inertia also an affirmation of nothingness? For isn't inertia in some sense a surplus of presence, a plenitude of “stuckness,” and in this sense not entirely nothing?

The inertia of being is dramatized throughout Blanchot's fiction, which, if such a narrative-defying oeuvre can be categorized according to any one narrative rubric, is constantly restaging a scenario in which people are stuck in living spaces—houses, apartments, infernal institutions, hotel rooms. Often they just walk in and stay put, as in *Aminadab* and *When the Time Comes*. Sometimes we don't entirely know how they got there, as in the strange concentrationary institution of “The Idyll” or the elongated hotel room of *L'Attente, l'oubli* (*Awaiting Oblivion*). But in almost every case, the most striking thing is that they don't or don't want to or cannot leave, even when it seems like that wouldn't be the hardest thing to do (reminiscent of Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*). It is never clear why the narrator of *When the Time Comes* appears unannounced one day at the apartment of his friend Judith and her friend Claudia, whom he has not met

before, and just stays there, barely acknowledging that there is a world outside (not unlike Robinson's "otherless" world with Friday in Tournier's fiction). In one of the rare moments where there is any mention of a space outside the apartment, the narrator rather incongruously maintains that he could just walk out the door and join this outside world:

If it hadn't been so great, the deception would have been final. I would have left. I, too, would have gone into the front hall, and from there re-joined the tranquil flow of the rue de la Victoire and gone down towards the Opéra, which I liked at that hour, and I would have been happy.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, like the dinner-party guests in *The Exterminating Angel* who remain unable simply to cross the threshold and leave the space of the imprisoning house, Blanchot's narrator remains stuck behind the immaterial boundary of the space of the apartment, too immobile to leave despite his perception that he might happily do so.

It seems that what makes the characters and situations in Blanchot's *récits* so disarming is that they don't leave when they might, that they are driven by a relentless yet almost lighthearted inertia. As noted above, this is one reason Blanchot's fiction is sometimes evoked alongside the likes of Beckett or Melville's "Bartleby," for who can surpass these writers in portraying such incredible stuckness so calmly? What is disarming in these writers is that the customary weight of such profound immobility also has such a lightness, even though, as in Bartleby's case, it may be deadly. One might even say there is a mobility or affirmation or becoming to this stuckness. But does that mean it can then be located in the atemporal time of Deleuze's Aion, of the past-future disjunction? While to some degree it does partake of the temporality of Aion, this stuckness conjures more nearly an arrested, endless present over and above a convergence of past and future. Such an endless present marks a dwelling in being, a sticking with being, far beyond the ordinary. In other words, great stuckness seems to be, if anything, an excess of being — pure, immobile, profound being. For usually being is not this stuck and not this pure. Usually being is grounded in a narrative, in a task at hand, in something that makes it unstuck and undead. If Midnight is always arriving and always past, yet never exactly there, Blanchot's characters are on the contrary minimally arriving and never leaving, always entirely there, so much so that they

might paradoxically seem not to be, because their “thereness” is hard to fathom. Like Bartleby, who moves in to his boss’s office and refuses to vacate the premises, this intensity of not leaving is its own form of aggressive passivity.

It is easy to comprehend movement. Globalization and cosmopolitanism and travel and exile may be subjected to and incorporated into a range of critical positions, but on a fundamental level, they are not challenging to understand. One might debate the stakes and goals and nexus of power behind such movements on the global scale, but the fact that movement happens, and that movement is basically a good thing even if it is the product of bad forces, would seem to be the unstated assumption behind the logic of globalization. But what about people who fall outside this framework? (There is, to be sure, a whole ecological world — trees, rocks, etc. — that falls outside this framework, but since it doesn’t bother most people that a tree or a rock, as opposed to a human being, would be stuck and not moving, I will leave aside this line of speculation).<sup>13</sup> People who don’t move, whether willfully or not, form the least examined aspect of cosmopolitan discourse. Though much attention may be given to the question of the local, it is generally not at the level of the phenomenology of what it means to inhabit the local, for anyone trying to analyze or write about that realm is almost necessarily, and by definition, not in it.

We are trained not to look for immobility or, if we find it, not to stare at it in the face. If someone never leaves his house or crosses his state line, it seems like a lesser way of being, at least from the world of the mobile intelligentsia. But could it be that what such a form presents is not so much a state to be pitied but a state that is too challenging to look at because it represents a fullness of being that we are not accustomed to encountering, at least we in the classes of the largely mobile community of scholars? Deleuze writes of Herzog’s films that they comprise two forms, the Small and the Large (just as he argues that Melville’s fiction portrays the greatly good and the greatly evil).<sup>14</sup> He notes:

In both cases — the sublimation of the large form and the enfeeblement of the small form — Herzog is a metaphysician. He is the most metaphysical of cinema directors . . . When Bruno asks the question: “Where do objects go when they no longer have any use?” we might reply that they normally go in the dustbin, but that reply would be inade-

quate, since the question is metaphysical. Bergson asked the same question and replied metaphysically: that which has ceased to be useful simply begins to be. And when Herzog remarks that “he who walks is defenseless,” we might say that the walker lacks any strength in comparison with cars and aeroplanes. But, there again, the remark was metaphysical. “Absolutely defenseless” is the definition which Bruno gave of himself. The walker is defenseless because he is he who is beginning to be, and never finishes being small.<sup>15</sup>

What I wish to suggest is that there is yet another bifurcation apart from that between the big and the small, or between the past and the future. It is that very weightiness of an endless present, that state that Deleuze describes as “beginning to be,” that is the unthought and underside of the big/small and past/future disjunctions. It is not so much the oscillation between the small and the large that is crucial but the fact that at either extreme, one is more proximate to a realm of pure being. In this regard, the crucial split is not between the opposing terms of becoming (becoming smaller, becoming larger) but between the movement of becoming they both invoke and the realm of being that is their (utopian or dystopian) limit.

This bifurcation between becoming and being resides at the spatial margins of Thomas Carl Wall’s beautiful chapter on Blanchot in *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*. In his reading, which is focused in particular on Blanchot’s *L’Arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence*), Wall emphasizes at several junctures that there is no present but only a disjunction of past and future in the time-space of Blanchot’s récits. He writes:

Not a plural text, *L’Arrêt de mort* is a text emptied of all presence and, what is more, it violently empties time of all presence. Put more simply and more abruptly, *L’Arrêt de mort* destroys time. The past — the things that happened to the narrator in 1938 — are not offered to the reader, to the present, but instead offered to a futurity whose coming our reading already echoes. The récit is absolutely indifferent to “my time,” “my death.” It skips over the present moment.<sup>16</sup>

These sentences reach to the heart of Blanchot’s thought, for surely, if anything, it is a thought that upends any chronological or ordinary notions of time and space. If for Wall the death of J. in *L’Arrêt de mort* defies

chronological time,<sup>17</sup> then the narrator's strange noninhabitation of his apartments is equally defiant of spatial "presentness."

Wall analyzes the extraordinary example of the narrator's drive to simultaneously rent or sublet several apartments at once as a way of deflecting his presentness in his space, of being proximate to himself rather than present to himself. Wall writes the following in his gloss of Blanchot:

For example, one day I may return home with a strange desire to move to another apartment and, after a few weeks, I may do just that. But then I may wish to move to yet another apartment, and then yet another, and another, and so on and so on — until I am no longer able to "return" "home." I may even, like the narrator in *L'Arrêt de mort*, maintain three or four flats at the same time. What can compel someone to maintain several apartments at once, since he or she cannot inhabit them all simultaneously? I may give in to this mad impulse because in any one of my apartments I could enjoy my absence from it as well, and at the same time. . . . By virtue of taking pleasure in the possibility of his flight from room to room, the narrator encloses himself in himself and he enjoys the separation of subjectivity. The enjoyment is precisely that each "here" is also an "elsewhere." It is not the presence of this room in its actual particularity that contents him, but his savoring of its proximity to each other room he rents out. That which he enjoys is not present, is not consumed or used up, not even partially.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Wall succinctly touches on the core of Blanchot's otherworldly sense of spatiality, especially the spaces of apartments and houses. The inhabiting of several apartments simultaneously so as to better appreciate the proximity of habitation and nonhabitation, to perceive oneself in the nonhabitation of one's space, and thus outside oneself, beyond oneself, to achieve through disjunction a continuity of perception — this Blanchotian motif is, once again, not only echoed throughout Blanchot's oeuvre but is also in strong resonance with the work of Deleuze. Yet do these emptyings of the present of space and time also foreclose an equally Blanchotian motif, one that addresses, albeit in a fashion so similar that it might not seem really to be distinct, the opposite temporal and spatial dimension, that of staying inexorably put in one space and time?

Wall touches on this dimension when he writes about the question of a pure possibility of history. Here, he comments on the fact that in *L'Arrêt de mort*, the narrator notes that the larger political events of the late 1930s dominated every aspect of life, yet strangely in the aftermath of the war, it was those seemingly trifling and mundane aspects of daily life that lingered with him more than the large-scale historical events that he participated in in his work as a journalist:

While the events of the war years are dead, these inconsequential happenings have managed to live on and remain undead and unrecorded by virtue of their insignificance. . . . They are what the journalist did not write about at the time because they were inessential events, of secondary importance, mere everyday life. They were already supplementary to the time of the coming war. . . . But in a certain sense, these everyday events are purely historic. They are history purged of historic events, or, the everyday as the pure possibility of history.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Wall's formulation of "history purged of historic events," or "the everyday as the pure possibility of history," is subtly at odds with his nonlocalizable and nonpresent notion of Blanchotian time and space. Indeed, what makes for pure history is the fact of a strange stability of locale and present daily life in the midst of such worldly upheaval. How is such a being in the mundane present to be represented against the omnipresent sense looming in the late 1930s of an ominous futurity and the retrospective vantage point that would necessarily situate this time within what would be its dominant (wartime) context? To remember above all the aspects of daily life would seem to be a blasphemous form of narrating history. While the two might blend together — the dailiness of the present and the more grandiose future anterior of the event — they must also and even more emphatically be at odds.

I now turn briefly to another work of fiction, written in the early 1950s just before Moroccan independence, that is focused so intently on the daily lives of the inhabitants of a small rural village that it was accused of being negligent of the larger and more dominant world events and therefore improperly historical. This work is Mouloud Mammeri's *La Colline oubliée* (The forgotten hill), which details the intricate social dynamics of an Arabo-Berber village in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco during World War II. What is most striking is that this narrative refuses to engage with

the war — a war that takes the men away from the small village and brings back only some of them — except in the most perfunctory of ways. Instead the villagers are preoccupied primarily with a local case of potential wife repudiation.

In one of the novel's early passages, when news of the imminent outbreak of World War II has just reached the small village of Tasga where the story is set, the narrator describes a sense of listlessness in the village, an anxious waiting for something to happen, whatever the results of the awaited event — where even the outbreak of war seems to be more desirable than nothing at all. The narrator characterizes this state of waiting as an unnamable malady:

Indeed for a long time our city suffered from a strange, imperceptible malady. It was everywhere and nowhere; it seemed to disappear for several months, then it would rise up abruptly, terribly, as if to seize the short respite it had left us. We tried all remedies; nothing worked, and even worse no one knew exactly what caused the ailment.<sup>20</sup>

According to Mammeri's critics, the imperceptible and unnamable malady described in this passage should be designated in a more absolute fashion and given the name of colonialism.<sup>21</sup> However, the most challenging part of the narrative is that it is precisely this sense of the absolute that is being put into question. Whether it be named colonialism or World War II, it seems that Mammeri is at least putting forth the possibility of there not being a recognizable change in the community at Tasga, whether or not World War II breaks out, whether or not Morocco gains its independence. It is this possibility of there not being a noticeable difference, or there not being an absolute standard for decidability, that is the real point of crisis. As Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "I will not say that the disaster is absolute; on the contrary, it disorients the absolute."<sup>22</sup> It is this sense of disorientation, one brought on by an excessive, even obscene focus on the everyday, that Mammeri captures most forcefully in this first novel.<sup>23</sup>

This might be reformulated in the words of Ann Smock, who glosses Blanchot's notion of disaster in the following fashion in her introduction: "That there should be no difference (no difference as difference is ordinarily understood) between disaster and none at all: this is the disaster."<sup>24</sup> It seems that the community in question retains a state of quiet

explosiveness whether or not many of its central members are present, and whatever the outcome of the larger political events. The fact that the community of Tasga itself contains its own possibility for dissolution is, more than anything, the unpronounceable disaster.

To return, then, to Wall's reading of the pure history of the everyday that emerges alongside the overdetermined events of World War II, at issue once again is the repressed question of being, and being static. Wall writes eloquently of "the time of radical divergence of past from future" and how "this discontinuity or radical uncertainty insinuates itself into continuous time"; indeed "this void-time is the very hollowing out of time that makes continuity possible in the first place."<sup>25</sup> I would concur, following Deleuze and the German mathematician Dedekind, who put it in stronger form, that this radical disjunction is indeed what makes the thought of continuity possible.<sup>26</sup> And one need not go any further than this. Yet when all is said and done, I would claim that to think the pure history of the everyday in the face of larger events — to think staying in one apartment all the time rather than inhabiting several simultaneously — to really think these things is to venture to a different and perhaps more vexed domain that is not squarely the atemporal domain of the past-future disjunctive synthesis. For this vexed domain is not on the order of becoming; rather, it is unbecoming, and unbecoming so deeply stuck that it ventures on being itself.<sup>27</sup>

As noted above, this is not far removed from Sartre's in-itself in *Being and Nothingness* and his practico-inert in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, terms that Sartre subjugates to the more properly political and dynamic notions of the for-itself and praxis respectively.<sup>28</sup> These debased terms are challenging because they fall short of the proper, just as it is improper to live in a small rented apartment for forty-five years and not leave it or fix it or buy property or work at a job or go anywhere or straighten up the avalanche of accumulated papers. This would seem to be the irredeemable marker of a life gone awry. Yet I would propose that this is the outpost or limit of the Blanchotian universe, which is first and foremost that disarming atemporal and aspatial terrain that Wall and others so forcefully describe. And that Blanchotian terrain, marked as it is by a disjunction of past and future, the ability for the narrator to distance himself from himself by renting multiple apartments, is both striving toward and conditioned by that other singularity where there is only one apartment that is never left, only one time that is endlessly present, only one death and one

night and one midnight that shimmer behind the doubleness of Blanchot's two nights, Blanchot's two deaths.

If the desire to be proximate to oneself by inhabiting multiple spaces is one of *becoming*, then how different is it really from the *being* still of the Bartlebys who inhabit with exclusivity their home or their office? Perhaps they are just two sides of the same operation in that the ones who remain in one place are also proximate to the space across the street, just by staying put where they are. Surely in this way becoming and being access the same thing. But to strive for proximity is nonetheless different from being proximate, even if the difference seems indiscernible. Blanchot must be credited, in addition to his Orpheus-like striving and losing, for also being, in his silent retreat, beyond that striving, maybe not superior to it, but nonetheless dwelling in a realm of being that is beyond, not because it is immune from becoming, but because it has wholly incorporated, wholly become, becoming. To perceive this distinction, not sustainable and even against the very fiber of Blanchot's thought, is nonetheless to perceive that the one trapped in becoming aspires to the utopia of being, while the one in that latter ethereal realm can only speak of it unsentimentally as a prison to be someday escaped. But the perception is to see that maybe becoming will never reach its utopia of being, and being will never leave the dystopia at which it long ago arrived. Is the perception of this enough to sustain serenely the force of it, which would seem also to be shattering?

By way of conclusion, I consider this question of the difference or indifference between becoming and being as it is simultaneously evoked and foreclosed by two critics attuned, very much in the fashion of Wall's *Radical Passivity*, to the phenomenology of passivity and inertia. In *What Is There to Say?* Ann Smock describes with characteristic finesse the suspension of the fissure I have been at pains to outline between becoming and being. She poses it in terms of a choice at stake in Melville's *Billy Budd*, the choice to speak or to kill, which is also one that, for Smock, links Melville and Blanchot and, later, Louis-René des Forêts:

Blanchot has scarcely stated the bleak choice — either speak or kill — when he adds that speech founds this very alternative. To choose speech (when the sole choice is between speech and murder) turns out not to consist in choosing so much as in maintaining the wavering, un-

decided movement of the either-or. . . . What concerns me, in other words, is an opposition abruptly neutralized. When human beings draw near to one another, the difference is sometimes suddenly suspended between the impatience and the inertia in them.<sup>29</sup>

This notion of choice that is also an infinite suspension of choice or difference is the recurrent Blanchotian motif of Smock's study. Yet it also raises the question of whether it then might be possible to choose to not suspend, to let the suspension go, so that it is no longer a matter of suspension between impatience and inertia but just inertia itself. Is this possible, and does it look any different?

Smock herself gives an example of what this might look like, one taken from des Forêts's story "Un Malade en forêt." Here, a stranded South African pilot who will betray himself if he speaks, because his English will betray him to the Germans, becomes so ill that it is not clear whether he will remember the prohibition against speaking. Playing dead so that he won't have to speak, he turns out, to the surprise of his comrades, actually to be dead. As Smock glosses the occurrence,

Indeed, there is something striking in the still body of the dead RAF pilot — in the indisputable presence, lying flat on a stretcher in the sun by the side of the road, of the verdict that rules any such verdict out. The South African's motionless form can just fleetingly be felt to embody the insignificance of the gravest sentence — the one that decides, once and for all, but not anything. One feels in this motionless person the gravity that is proper to the perfectly inconsequential alone.<sup>30</sup>

There are so many words in these lines that indicate weightiness, stillness, gravity, inertia: "something striking in the still body," "in the indisputable presence," of the "motionless form," "lying flat," "the gravest sentence," "the gravity that is proper," and "in this motionless person." Unmoored slightly from their context — one that emphasizes suspension and hanging — these words point to something beside suspension, to an inertia that is here the inertia of deadness caught by surprise. Such a surprised deadness is paradoxically all the more alive for the very fact of the startle it produces, for the fact that it catches the comrades and the reader off guard, but off guard in a way that, as Smock indicates, precludes any verdict being reached. If we linger not so much on the absent verdict but on the

present inertia, then it would appear that obliquely, quietly, alongside the choice that is not a choice, there is also a parousia of inertia so full it must announce its own singular ontology in the very process of seeming to undermine it. My claim, then, is that standing beside, indeed enabling, the suspension of difference that Smock reads in Blanchot and Melville and des Forêts is an unsuspected ontology of inertia.

This very phrase is echoed in another critical essay that focuses on a certain languid strain of American literature, specifically on a “Hawthornesque lassitude” that is transmitted even while being questioned and rejected by Melville and James. In “Postponing Politics in Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*,” Christopher Diffie situates *The Scarlet Letter* as a nodal point in a trajectory of lethargic writing. If this lethargy comes to infect the likes of Melville and James (and one can certainly see the resonances, as Diffie points out, not only in “Bartleby” but also in James’s “The Altar of the Dead” and “The Beast in the Jungle”), they nevertheless distance themselves from it to locate it all the more squarely with Hawthorne alone. As Diffie writes, citing Melville, “Melville charges Hawthorne with being neither harmless nor profound but in having ‘too largely developed’ his undevelopment, hence not veiling what he did not do and so appearing to be ‘a sequestered, harmless man, from whom any deep and weighty thing would be [*sic*] hardly be anticipated.’”<sup>31</sup> If Hawthorne eschews weightiness or, according to Diffie’s gloss of James on Hawthorne, “Hawthorne’s essence is itself inessential,” there is a paradoxical momentousness to the very lack of weightiness, to the inessential itself.<sup>32</sup> As with Smock, this paradox permeates Diffie’s very text. In discussing James on Hawthorne, he writes:

James’s final word about Hawthorne’s imagination is to pronounce it essentially sterile and arid, a passivity so withdrawn as to become a ghostly absence. . . . Reluctant to “produce himself,” even hesitation fails to end but lingers on — in observation, expectation, contemplation — reproducing in parenthetical aside what falters as sense. The oddity of Hawthorne emerges not through a positive assertion — as if there could be an ontology of inaction — but when one is put in the awkward situation of realizing a fondness for absence “on almost any occasion.”<sup>33</sup>

Once again, there is a torrent of terms indicating a plenitude of stillness and absence: “essentially sterile,” “a passivity so withdrawn,” and “even

hesitation fails to end but *lingers on*" (my emphasis). Given this, it seems incongruous that Diffie characterizes Hawthorne's oddity as not emerging through positive assertion. To be sure, this lack of positive assertion accurately captures a certain essence of Hawthorne's (and Melville's and James's and Blanchot's) oeuvre, but it also belies the full-blown absoluteness of a passivity that lingers to the point of becoming an essence in its own right. It is odd, then, that Diffie would place "an ontology of inaction" in a twisted conditional — "as if" there could be one (but surely there is not) — for it seems that such an ontology of inaction is precisely what Diffie's reading, along with Smock's and Wall's, captures but does not claim as such, preferring not to maintain any sort of pure being when it can be credited to something else. But isn't the emphatic preferring not, as in the case of *Bartleby*, so antithetical to the presumed passivity that the passivity is itself ontologized into action?

All the more striking in Diffie's analysis is the network of texts that he reads, the attenuated inertia at the heart of the classics of the American canon. Blanchot (and all the more so des Forêts) might seem like an esoteric and obscure writer, even within the French tradition, and the questions of radical passivity, of being and becoming, to which his oeuvre gives rise, might seem peculiarly French and not universalizable questions. However, if one perceives that this inertia of being is also at the heart of the national literature that would seem to be the most movement-focused (portraying endless road trips and mobility, as discussed above), then it might lead one to conclude that perhaps such movement, such infinite becoming, is equally the mask for the inertia that is so entrenched as to become invisible. The ones who have no choice but to inhabit this inertia fully are the unwitting and disrespected guideposts to an ontology that is so present as to seem pathological, or not to seem at all.