

# How is Translation Possible?: The Secret of Maurice Blanchot

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*To keep the secret, it is evidently saying as non-secret, inasmuch as it is not sayable.<sup>1</sup>*

Translation, whether inter- or intra-linguistic, ever bears the weight of an excess, a silence or absence, of the untranslatable. Language, and we with it, bear witness to this unspeakable excess which bears no witnesses with the expression of every word. But what is this excess of untranslatability which marks language as its “silent secret”?<sup>2</sup> What might be said, through the saying of language<sup>3</sup> (carried over and carried out in language translated beyond itself), of this witnessing without witness, this unspeakable testimony?

What shall be undertaken in what follows is a reading, a translation perhaps (though certainly neither final, total, nor complete), of a fragmentary narrative or *récit* by Maurice Blanchot entitled “(A Primal Scene?).”<sup>4</sup> By reading this short passage in relation to some of the scattered remarks Blanchot makes upon what he calls “the disaster,” remaining vigilant towards its relation to silence and to secrecy, we shall attempt to testify to the infinitely unsaid, the impossible silence, the secret which expresses the untranslatable in keeping it withheld. For every work of translation, translation *itself*, not only testifies to this secret untranslatable (in the silence of its attestation, the silent disavowal marking its avowal in its fault), but ever remains, necessarily (however paradoxically, excessively, impossibly), bound to this refusal of translation, its impossibility, which conditions the possibility of translation as its impossible (absence of) origin. Translation bears the mark of its impossibility, its fault, in every word, as the unsaid secret which is testified to in the absence of testimony, in the silent faltering by which translation fails to say what *must* fail to be said – the untranslatable, the impossible, from which the inscription of every translation (and is what is said in every word of every language not a translation, carrying over from silence into speech?) takes its mark; from the beginning already suffering the wound of the disaster; having forgotten “itself” in constituting itself in what is said of its saying, as translation. Translation bears its secret, hidden in the open – might we not open what is hidden, translate without translating the exigency of the untranslatable? This is the task to which we essay, remaining watchful in following the demand of another fragment from a different work by Blanchot: “Express only that which cannot be expressed. Leave it unexpressed.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us first read the *récit*, the testimony of an untestifiable (non-)experience of the absence of origin which marks language and translation, conveyable only through the medium of fiction or literature.<sup>6</sup>

“(A primal scene?) *You who live later, close to a heart that beats no more, suppose, suppose this: the child – is he seven years old, or eight perhaps? – standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through the pane, gazing. What he sees: the garden, the wintry trees, the wall of a house. Though he sees, no doubt in the manner of a child, his play space, he grows weary and slowly looks up toward the ordinary sky, with clouds, grey light, the day dull and without distance.*

*What happens then: the sky, the same sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as by the broken pane) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost*

*therein, to the point that there is affirmed and dissipated the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected of this scene (its interminable trait) is the feeling of happiness that immediately submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can only testify by tears, an endless streaming of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He said nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will cry no more.<sup>7</sup>*

It is all there: the rupture, the refusal, the disaster, the silence, and the secret. All, that is, except, perhaps, translation. Though it is not explicitly presented, translation remains essential to the presentation (of the unpresentable)<sup>8</sup> which this *récit* figures through the figure of the *infans*, the “unfigurable figure”<sup>9</sup> which appears in its death, its non-appearance (“it cannot appear”<sup>10</sup>) as the unspeaking *in-fans*. This all remains to be explained and explicated, in an unfolding of the secret which is borne unsaid, testified without word, in the saying of this cryptic *récit*.

As Leslie Hill notes, though Blanchot never published any translations, in the course of his writing he would often engage in translation himself, and the question of translation (in both the restricted and general sense) ever remained close to the heart of his thinking.<sup>11</sup> For translation, as an operation, explicitly enacts the movement of writing and language itself: the carrying over of the unsaid into the said by opening the possibility of saying. Denis Hollier remarks, in light of this, that every written text, the target of the work of translation to be translated, “is already itself something like a foreign language,”<sup>12</sup> prior to its encounter with another language. Literature, the work of writing, is always already a translation – an attempt at carrying over from silence and into words what it is possible to say. Every work of writing (Blanchot, in his later works, will move away from the term ‘literature’ (*la littérature*), towards the use of the term ‘writing’ (*l’écriture*) is thus always already, “according to the expression Maurice Blanchot borrows from Joë Bousquet, translated from silence.”<sup>13</sup>

It is in this sense that Hollier will claim that “literature is pure translation.”<sup>14</sup> Its “purity” is derived from the fact that it has *nothing* to translate (in the most simple, yet rigorous, sense of this phrase). What it seeks to say is not something said elsewhere, in another language, but to translate what, for any language, for language itself, *is* nothing. It is thus that literature touches upon the heart of translation, translation in its purest form – for it (re)enacts, calls forth, the originary instance of translation to repeat itself. But herein does literature bear its ineluctable and necessary fault, marking the *faux pas* of its transgression which it cannot take as a step (its *pas au-delà*). For translation’s originary instance is no event, occurring in no instant as origin or *arche*; faced with its absence of origin, this absence at its origin (having *nothing* to translate), translation betrays its own impossibility (to play upon the well-known relation between *traduire* and *trahir*). Literature may thus stage, set the scene, of the betrayal of translation, by setting it into the scene of a *récit*. And this is precisely what Blanchot does with “(A Primal Scene?),” through the passage of a *mise en abyme*, saying the unsayable while leaving it unsaid, figuring (re-presenting) the secret of translation by translating it in secret. The secret is betrayed in withholding it, and thus keeping it, just as the betrayal of translation evinces the silent secret at its heart, its perpetual exposure of and to its impossibility – the untranslatable.

But we must stop for a moment to reflect upon this complex phrase, “the betrayal of translation.” It bears within itself, carrying over to us – translating – a plurality of senses. First, we note that ‘betrayal’ can signify either a traitorous or disloyal action in relation to a person or thing, as well as the giving over or revelation of something hidden or withheld (most often unintentionally). In addition, the ‘of’ in this phrase might be read in both the subjective and the objective genitive. For these reasons, the *betrayal of translation* bears a fourfold signification: translation as disloyalty to the untranslatable in the attempt to translate it; the disclosure of the (mis)translation, the interpretive re-figuration, the fault of translation

which marks the default of the untranslatable in its absence, its untranslatability; the presentation, in translation, that the work of translation is, as a rendering possible; and the fault or betrayal of its origins which translation bears in its very expression, marking its own failure or weakness. The betrayal of translation is thus not a contingent or circumstantial chance occurring in the work of translation; rather, it is traced in the very essence of translation itself, insofar as the “essence” of translation is the disappearance or effacement of its own essence. The essence of translation disappears into the untranslatable, the presence of absence, of impossibility, marking out the fault before the very beginning of the work of translation, its absence of origin. Translation betrays itself, essentially, as translation, transgressing itself before initiating itself, as thus interdicting “itself” (essentially) *as* translation. This, then, is the secret of translation – the disaster of translation. Translation, contested in its very constitution as translation by the agony (the *agon*) of the untranslatable, is always already disastrous in that it bears, from before its beginning, before being said, the fault (in default) of never being able to say what disappears, effaces itself, in the saying that every translation will have said. Its testimony is ineluctably marked by the faltering failure of testifying – for it bears witness to nothing (to what is a nothing less than nothing, less than nothing as no-thing, as the non-being opposed to being). The (absent) essence of translation, translation in the void of its purity (devoiding itself of any pure work of translation, any absolute or total product of translation), through the exemplary exposure of literature and writing, returns us to “(A Primal Scene?)” by way of its essential detouring. The work of translation, like this *récit*, is thus “placed *under the sign of the disaster*.”<sup>15</sup> But what is this disaster of which we have been speaking, which binds the *récit* to translation in their mutual expressions, their unwinding – their silences and their secrets?

The disaster – an impossible thought. Perhaps the most complex and slippery of Blanchot’s obscure words or “terms.” We do not pretend to undertake a complete explanation here (an impossible endeavor); rather, we will note the elements of this impossible thought, this disaster of thought, that bear directly upon the secret of translation. As Lacoue-Labarthe explains, “‘disaster’ is not a *name*.”<sup>16</sup> It does not refer to anything, to any event which could be said to occur in any present. If it names or translates anything, it would be the interruption, the disaster, of all attempts at translating into a name, of having said what no name can ever say. A radical nothing, neither named nor wholly unnamed (in the “neither... nor...” which marks the *neutre*, another improper name...<sup>17</sup>), it acts as a password, a response to grant access to this unknown outside of or foreign to all knowledge. ‘The disaster’ acts as a shibboleth, a word which lets pass by that which cannot be named, but passes silently beneath the ruins of the name – streaming, endlessly (like the child’s “endless streaming of tears” from “(A Primal Scene?)”; ‘shibboleth’ itself being “translated” or carried over from the Hebrew word for a stream or torrent), in the turning-away, turning everything away from itself, returning it to the void, the nothing that “is what there is,” which precedes all language and all thought, conditioning it while at once suspending it, in the silence of an infinite caesura.<sup>18</sup> Thus is the disaster unknown, as Blanchot says early on in *The Writing of the Disaster* – the unknown which is unknown to and by any name (including ‘the unknown’); “it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking it, distancing us by proximity.”<sup>19</sup> Thought which turns away and turns us away from thought – a thought of refusal and a refusal of thought. And like translation, moving with this thought in its *faux pas*, its false step, what is carried over is not what was borne; what is said (*dit*) is not what was to say (*dire*). A distance, internal to the saying, to the movement of translation, is opened up by translation itself – the betrayal of translation is the disaster of translation, we might say. This distance, this gap or *écart*, which opens up in the movement of translation, *as* the (faltering) movement of translation, maintains, in the presence of an absence (“close to a heart which beats no

more”), a relation to what is excluded, dismissed, separated (all borne in the French *écarter*), to that which never is or was (in being) yet which haunts, remains, in the trace of withdrawing itself, diverging and deviating reflexively (*s’écarter*) from the very attempt to present or translate it. Might ‘the disaster’ be the shibboleth, the word of passage, marking the unknown name of the nameless which refuses every name, yet which remains, silently, behind every name, every word, as though one only needed (impossibly) the drawing of the curtain?<sup>20</sup> But, were this curtain to be drawn, what would present itself to us, what is drawn forth? Nothing – nothing that could be said, certainly. Nothing beyond, and yet the imperative, the exigency, to attempt to speak to it, to translate it. Translation, its necessary failure and betrayal, reveals its secret while keeping it, letting it withdraw in the disastrous fragmentation which marks its work<sup>21</sup> – that “when all is said, what remains to say [*reste à dire*] is the disaster, ruin of words, failure by writing, rumor which murmurs; what remains without remaining [*reste sans reste*] (the fragmentary).”<sup>22</sup>

Translation bears this secret, openly, in silence. In this secret does it live, living on, living beyond (*survivant* and *sur-vivant*), living off of, this ordinary fault which it holds close (in its own internal distance) and withholds. There remains, in translation, *as* translation (translation being the mark of a passage and an impasse from before its very beginning), a remainder without remains, which never remains as present but only as the absence (*of a saying, of every saying*) which silence marks. “There remains,” Blanchot writes, “the unnamed in the *name* of which we keep silent.”<sup>23</sup> We keep silent, or, perhaps better, we remain vigilant, keep watch over, remain wakeful to (in the senses of *veiller* and *s’éveiller* which bear so much significance for the discretion of Blanchot, and the discretion that his thought and writing demands) the silence which we are demanded to keep (though never as “our own,” as proper to us, or as a possession). But this silence is not kept or guarded (*garder*) by not speaking, by not translating. Paradoxically, what is demanded of us, in order to keep the secret, to keep the secret *secret*, is to say it by not saying it, to translate it by failing to translate it. For it is in the failure of what is said or translated that the fugitive “essence” of translation betrays itself – what is said in the faulty saying gives to the discreet and discrete reader, hearer, or respondent a reflexive presentation (*in absentia*) of the necessarily un-said. To keep the secret, as our epigraph attests, is to testify (via its silence, its “non-secret”) to the unsayable, the unavowable, in bearing witness to it in the fault, the failure, of the very attempt to say it, to translate it into words or speech (*paroles*).<sup>24</sup>

Returning to “(A Primal Scene?),” we have touched on the relation of fiction or literature to translation, the work of “pure” translation, but it remains to connect the disaster to the “scene.” Evidently there is a strong connection between this thought without thought, this name in the place of the unnamed, and “(A Primal Scene?),” for the latter appears (and reappears, in differing expressions and allusions) throughout the work devoted to the disaster and its writing, *The Writing of the Disaster*. We may find this connection, perhaps, in the secret attested to (though never avowed) in the *récit*. The secret of the disaster, perhaps, as well as the disaster of the secret – in the turning and turning away in which the child will henceforth live.

Where, in “(A Primal Scene?),” is the disaster? One must answer, paradoxically in relation to what we have just been noting: *nowhere*. Within the *récit*, the disaster does not appear, it is not shown – responding to the refusal of giving itself which the disaster would be, in that it “is not an event (the proper [*le propre*] of what happens [*arrive*]) – it does not arrive [*n’arrive pas*],”<sup>25</sup> but marks the passing (and perhaps the passing over) of a silence to which we referred before in relation to the secret, here denoted as “writing (or Saying [*Dire* – note the capitalization to which Blanchot refers in the quotation from note 24, above]) preceding every phenomena, all manifestation: all appearing.”<sup>26</sup> The disaster does not appear in “(A Primal Scene?),” though it is perhaps figured, translated – faultily, necessarily

– in the turn (the volta or the caesura) of the paragraph break, around which the rupture of the sky, of the experience, of the *récit*, are all focused in a streaming out in the wake of this withdrawal from all attestation, leaving the child, abandoned, in its secret, awakened to watching over its silence, its inability to be expressed, translated to another, to be recalled or remembered. A primal scene, then – though the origin, the primal *arche* remains void and openly absent, and the scene fails to evoke the disaster which provokes and yet destitutes all translation and attestation. The disaster, coming “before” (“A Primal Scene?”) anterior to it (for it, in its confiding to us, confiding itself to language and the trust in language (*confiance dans le langage*),<sup>27</sup> in asking us to “suppose, suppose this,”<sup>28</sup> is already a testimony, a recollection, *après-coup*), remains outside its attestation – and yet, like the untranslatable of translation, its essential absence, it marks the outside which ruptures the interiority of the narrative (“as by the broken pane”), which marks itself in the secret of the “scene” (the secret of which the scene speaks, and the secret which the scene withholds). It is, like the *infans* and the death of the *infans* which marks the entry into language, and which has been remarked as a potential frame for this *récit*,<sup>29</sup> conspicuous in its absence from the scene<sup>30</sup> (for, as spoken or written, as attested to, this “scene” occurs (to us, for us) through language, and thus necessitates this anterior death, this “impossible necessary death”<sup>31</sup> which is reflected, *en abyme*, in “(A Primal Scene?)” itself). The disaster, and its translation, do not appear in “(A Primal Scene?)” – they do, however, appear *through* the writing, and its attestation, as the silent secret of writing, of this Saying, of which the only remainder in what is said “in” the “scene” is but its silence (the absent, dead heart around which the paragraphs turn in their break, marking the caesura, denoting the silence, of what remains ever anterior to the work of writing; to what we might hazard to refer to as the writing of the disaster). The secret of the *récit*, like the secret of translation, is borne silently on its very face, in the absence of what the word or words present, as the absence which the word and all words fail to present.

A final word on the secret, and its relation to the untranslatable, before drawing to a close. What is left to us, this testimony “*testifying for the absence of attestation*,”<sup>32</sup> is what is left to us in the disaster and its secret marking “(A Primal Scene?)” as “language’s ‘secret’.”<sup>33</sup> And what is this secret? What more can we say of it, translate of it, without betraying the unavowability which renders it necessarily secret?

As David Applebaum expresses it, “the secret is empty, contains nothing [to say], has nothing to tell, as if there were no secret. Therein lives the secret.”<sup>34</sup> The secret (of the disaster, of “(A Primal Scene?)”, of translation) is *nothing* – nothing that can be said, bound to the silence of the saying as its interminable un-said (“nothing is what there is, and nothing beyond”). Applebaum’s suggestion that the secret is that there is no secret is an echo of the reading (the betrayal) that Lacoue-Labarthe made in composing his short, poetic response to “(A Primal Scene?)”, entitled “Dismay” [*L’émoi*], written in 1976, and published (with various revisions) in 1978, 2000, and 2011.<sup>35</sup> This text, dedicated to Blanchot, bears the following phrase: “*there is no secret, but that remains unavowable*.”<sup>36</sup> The secret, he suggests, is that one cannot avow that there is no secret – one cannot say this nothing, this absence, attesting to it by translating its untranslatable remainder of silence. When, in 1980, Blanchot republished “(A Primal Scene?)” within the central pages of *The Writing of the Disaster*, he also included some reflections upon the *récit*, many pages later, in the form of a discussion between anonymous speakers. And it is here, in the words of this anonymous, neutral voice, this person who is no-one (*personne*), that Blanchot responds to Lacoue-Labarthe, writing that “*the secret which is alluded to is that there is none, except for those who refuse to avow*.”<sup>37</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe had noted that there is no secret, but that this could not be avowed or attested to. And Blanchot responds that yes, there is no secret – *except* for those that refuse to avow, to attest to the secret. For those who refuse to attest,

the secret remains, lives on, *survivant*, in and through them – just as they, like the child, live henceforth in it (in the silence of its secrecy, unavowed, neither wholly said nor not said).

Later still, near the close of the book, another anonymous dialogue is staged, upon the question of the secret. The interlocutors raise the phrase from “(A Primal Scene?),” “He will live henceforth in the secret,” and one of the interlocutors responds that they best “*leave to silence this phrase which wants perhaps only to say [dire – unitalicized in the text] silence.*”<sup>38</sup> To say silence – is this impossible task or demand, like the representation of the unrepresentable in “(A Primal Scene?),” not the very “essence” of translation which we attested to above? To say silence, which is akin to leaving it unsaid, but, as suggested before, not in saying nothing, but rather in saying everything which would be or would translate what would be the nothing of silence, of which silence *is not*, nothing of which bears the failure of silence in its failure to say it in what is said. Silence, saying the secret, remains unsaid. Refusing to avow, to testify to the secret, the secret is kept *as secret*, as unavowable in any and every testimony, but which allows it to speak of itself, in withdrawing or withholding “itself.” It is in this attempt at saying silence that the child (no one, everyone, every one of us) must henceforth live, and, failing, die.

Is this interdiction, this demand for secrecy, an injunction against translation? Certainly not; rather, it demands of us that we testify to, keep watch over, this secret of translation, which can only be undertaken by means of the interminable (though hopeless, faulted, impossible) attempt at further translation (of the secret). Not that this un-said could ever be said. Rather, we must watch over and preserve the trace remainder of the silent element in every saying, of this alterity which escapes from every expression, through the wakeful discretion of the perpetual work of translation, of writing. This work (along with its attendant unworking) is infinite, without beginning or end. It marks our existence, finitude rupturing itself upon the infinite, the infinite ever breaking in upon the finite which gives it its infinitude. “Wakefulness [*La veille*],”<sup>39</sup> Blanchot writes, “is without beginning nor end. To wake [or ‘to watch,’ *Veiller*] is in the *neutre* [*au neutre*].”<sup>40</sup> To remain wakeful and watchful, in saying, in translating, not in the first person, as “I” (“*Je*”) or ego (*moi*), but as the anonymous no one who speaks for or through everyone, every person (*personne*) – the neutral and neuter saying of language itself, “it” “itself,” *le il*. “If I say:” Blanchot remarks still later, “the disaster keeps watch, it is not in order to give a subject to the vigil; it is to say: the watch does not pass under a sidereal sky.”<sup>41</sup> Who watches, remaining wakeful? Who translates, and thus bears the burden of carrying over its weight, the greatest weight? No one, and yet us all, though never as “ourselves.” The disaster makes sure of this, by displacing and ruining all assurance and certainty, in the nameless name of the secret.

Translation is thus a demand and the response to that demand, infinitely oscillating between the two in the faltering steps which re-sign and remain as the ashes marking the self-immolating passage of translation in its secret. Maurice Blanchot figures this translation at the heart of saying and its silence through the rupture and interruption of the figure (of the self, the subject, and the *récit* itself) in “(A Primal Scene?).” This text, as Christopher Fynsk acknowledges, “is also the awakening to a watch that will never be wakeful enough, that can never penetrate the night to which it opens.”<sup>42</sup> He refers here to the closing lines of one of the anonymous dialogues upon the “scene” within *The Writing of the Disaster*, in which one of the interlocutors says the following: “*Consequently, waiting and watchful [attendant et veillant], since suddenly wakened [éveillé] and, knowing it henceforth, never wakeful [or ‘watchful,’ éveillé] enough.*”<sup>43</sup> We may never be fully awake, fully watchful, lucid in seeing and knowing everything, being able to say, to have said, everything in the saying which could exhaust it and leave it without secret, with nothing left of its untranslatable *nothing* to remain. And thus we must continue to translate, in bearing witness to, watching over, the fault which marks our existence in relation to language. We must win ourselves

in the impossible game of translation and the untranslatable, wherein we always lose (ourselves). This is the disaster of translation, in the infinite translation of the disaster. This we must awaken to, so as to watch over – in the interminable attempt to translate the untranslatable, and thus leave it untranslated, to radiate in its disastrous absence.

Let us then, as we must, leave the space, the void, in translation, ever yet to be spoken, without a final word, as we turn to and return to silence. For we must bear witness to the ineluctable finitude of our existence exposed to infinity, the finitude of existence “itself” in the faceless face of the infinite translation of language. We, as no one, as everyone, live in the secret of this dying existence, translating between a life and a death equally impossible on either side of this untraversable field of neutrality that exists between, yet outside of, being and non-being. Let us keep the secret, in keeping to the secret. Said otherwise: let us translate, infinitely. For there ever remains, in excess, in all words and their silences, the mark of an impossible, necessary translation. Without remaining (in being), smoldering at the edges dividing the possible from the impossible. Cinders, the ashes of nothing (no ashes now remain, taken by the wind of infinite breath; and yet they remain, without remaining, in the circulation of words), remain as a testament to this demand of translation upon us all, bearing the secret, silently, upon every breath, of a memory in excess of all memory, of a forgetting which we cannot know, remember, any more than we can forget. Of a primal scene (a primal scene?) which never was, was never principle, primary, or original, and never appeared in or as a scene to be (re)presented. All remains, as ever, to be said – still suspended, in question, as upon the vacillation of a breath. In and out, repeating the silence which it bears, unbearably, in the refusal of the translation attendant to the betrayal of translation which marks the “essence” of all translation. Burning, burning itself out, burning up the words which would bear it forth. All that remains in the work of translation – silence, and ashes. “*Silence des cendres épandues sur une plaine.*” “Silence of ashes spread across a plain.”<sup>44</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nevada Press, 1995), 133 (translation altered); *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 203. Hereafter cited as *WD* and *ED*, for the English translation and French original respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *WD*, 92 / *ED*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay, in following Blanchot's reflections and elaborations in *WD/ED*, Emmanuel Levinas' distinction between the saying (*le dire*) and the said (*le dit*) shall be employed [See Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981); *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (the Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978)].

To put it all too simply, saying is the verbal enactment of expression, while the said is what is received, heard, and understood in the saying. It is important to note that the saying always exceeds every possible said – that saying can never be wholly reduced to what is said. Saying always bears an excess, an un-said, or a pure saying, which shall below be linked to the untranslatable of every translation; the silence and the secret which ever remains in abeyance, un(re)presentable in any said or any translation.

<sup>4</sup> For an examination and explanation of the transformation that the suspended and questioned title of this “scene” underwent before being (re)published in *L'Écriture du désastre*, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Ending and Unending Agony,” in *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 71–74.

- <sup>5</sup> *Awaiting Oblivion*, trans. John Gregg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1997), 16; *L'Attente l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 27.
- <sup>6</sup> For considerations and questions of "(A Primal Scene?)" as a testamentary text, see Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 333; Lacoue-Labarthe, "Ending and Unending Agony," 81; and David Applebaum, *In His Voice: Maurice Blanchot's Affair with the Neuter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 31.
- <sup>7</sup> *WD*, 72 (translation altered) / *ED*, 117.
- <sup>8</sup> See *WD*, 114 / *ED*, 176, where Blanchot attests to how the term "scene" is ill-chosen, for "what it supposedly names is unrepresentable," escaping the figurable. Cf. Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 52, on the problem of "staging" this "scene."
- <sup>9</sup> See Christopher Fynsk, *Infant Figures: The Death of the 'Infans' and Other Scenes of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 72. Cf. *WD*, 71-2 / *ED*, 115-17.
- <sup>10</sup> Fynsk, *Infant Figures*, 70.
- <sup>11</sup> Leslie Hill, "A Fine Madness: Translation, Quotation, the Fragmentary," in *Blanchot Romantique: A Collection of Essays*, ed. John McKeane and Hannes Opelz (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 211-231.
- <sup>12</sup> "Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation," *Paroles Gelées* 15.2 (1997), 14.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>15</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, "Ending and Unending Agony," 81-2.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. Cf. *WD*, 74 / *ED* 120.
- <sup>17</sup> An elaboration of *le neutre*, as well as the untranslatability of this term, would take us beyond the limits of this essay. For a concise accounting of the *neutre*, and the reasoning behind leaving it untranslated, see Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 127-142.
- <sup>18</sup> Leslie Hill writes that the disaster "marks the very articulation of the possible," (and, we would add, the possibility of articulation) it is not transcendental, however, but rather the mark or wound which mars the transcendental as condition of possibility, as the disaster "necessarily interrupts that movement of possibility like a caesura characterized only by its own impossibility." *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, 332.
- <sup>19</sup> *WD*, 5 (translation altered) / *ED*, 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf., in "(A Primal Scene?)," the child's "drawing the curtain" prior to his vertiginous experience (without experience) – his "*écartant le rideau*" (*ED*, 117). We might also hear in this word, 'rideau,' a blind, or even, perhaps, a veil.
- <sup>21</sup> Many pages after "(A Primal Scene?)" in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot will reflect on "the void of sky" from the "scene" in relation to the disaster and its withdrawal: "*the disaster as retreat outside of the sidereal shelter*" (*WD*, 133 (translation altered) / *ED*, 202; italics in original). This further brings the disaster into relation with "(A Primal Scene?)," which we will return to below.
- <sup>22</sup> *WD*, 33 (translation altered) / *ED*, 58.
- <sup>23</sup> *WD*, 87 (translation altered) / *ED*, 138. Italics in original.
- <sup>24</sup> Blanchot elsewhere notes that the secret would be "something still to say, when all has been said; the Saying (with its glorious capital) always in excess of everything said." (*WD*, 137 (translation altered) / *ED*, 208). This "Saying" or "*Dire*" is that Levinasian notion referred to above, in note 3. I have chosen (with much difficulty) to remain silent on the status of the anonymous dialogues which appear at points throughout *WD/ED*, and from which this remark is excised, as the question extends far beyond the limits of this paper.
- <sup>25</sup> *WD*, 5 (translation altered) / *ED*, 13.
- <sup>26</sup> *WD*, 11 (translation altered) / *ED*, 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 38/66.
- <sup>28</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe stresses that this text "is quite simply *confided*; it calls upon a faith and a fidelity." ("Ending and Unending Agony," 81). Fynsk also bears much discretion to the question of supposition which the text imposes in its opening; see, in particular, *Infant Figures*, 73-75.
- We would also direct this question of confiding and trust (of *confiance*), and the faith which it demands (beyond all hope) in relation to the question of death and the absolutely other, to a remark which Lacoue-Labarthe made in 1970, concerning this very question (of death and/as absolute alterity, as well as the fault of names): he writes of a necessity to "accept what cannot be



- accepted and try to be faithful to what tolerates only infidelity.” (“The Fable (Literature and Philosophy),” trans. Hugh J. Silverman, in *The Subject of Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 13).
- <sup>29</sup> Exemplarily by Lacoue-Labarthe and Fynsk. Blanchot himself suggests the reading, while never wholly affirming it, in *WD/ED*, in the fragments where he speaks to Serge Leclair’s psychoanalytic conception of the *infans*. An elaborate exploration of this figure and the relations between Blanchot’s “scene” and Leclair’s conception of the death of the *infans* goes beyond the realm of this essay, though Fynsk’s book offers much in the way of thoughtful explication and exploration.
- <sup>30</sup> Fynsk explicitly notes that “the *infans* does not appear in the “scene” we are invited to suppose,” and, moreover, that “it cannot appear.” (*Infant Figures*, 70).
- <sup>31</sup> *WD*, 67 / *ED*, 110.
- <sup>32</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 76 (translation altered); *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 107.
- <sup>33</sup> Fynsk, *Infant Figures*, 58.
- <sup>34</sup> *In His Voice*, 37.
- <sup>35</sup> See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable sur Maurice Blanchot: Suivi de L’émoi* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2011); *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- <sup>36</sup> “Dismay,” 111. Italics in original.
- <sup>37</sup> *WD*, 114 (translation altered) / *ED*, 177. Italics in original.
- <sup>38</sup> *WD*, 137–8 / *ED*, 208. Italics in original.
- <sup>39</sup> This untranslatable term might also be rendered as ‘the watch,’ ‘the wake,’ or ‘the eve.’ On the relation of this plurivocal term in relation to writing, the night, and the death of the first-personal subject, see Roger Laporte, *La Veille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); and, in relation to Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre*, Roger Laporte, “C’est le désastre obscur qui porte la lumière,” in *A l’extrême pointe: Proust, Bataille, Blanchot* (Paris: P.O.L., 1998), 85–95.
- <sup>40</sup> *WD*, 48 (translation altered) / *ED*, 82.
- <sup>41</sup> *WD*, 50 (translation altered) / *ED*, 85. Cf. note 21, above.
- <sup>42</sup> *Infant Figures*, 60.
- <sup>43</sup> *WD*, 116 (translation altered) / *ED*, 179. Italics in original.
- <sup>44</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 205; *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1992), 188.

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