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Erotic Scenographies:
Blanchot, Nietzsche & the Exigency of Return

by

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Preface & Acknowledgements

Some 400 metres above the unbroken azure of the Mediterranean coast, the narrowest of paths leads one upwards, around spires of eroded rock and boulder, to the walls of a medieval village perched high atop the summit. The path itself is not only steep but treacherous – carved out over many hundreds of years, it once led mules laden with cargo, rather precariously, from the port below, to the gates of a chateau, whose ruins still overlook the sea with a bruised, if undeterred, stateliness.

A fort in Roman times, the town fell to the advancing Moors in the year 900, and the evidence of Moorish influence upon the town's architecture and design remains, even today, clearly discernable. Its streets are narrow, winding pathways adorned uniformly with flowering vines and greenery; its buildings, ornamented with red brick and terracotta roof tiles. Cafes and antiques shops are ubiquitous, here, as are the tourists, many of whom, especially in recent years, have been affluent Russians, drawn to the town on account of its famed *jardin exotique* and its close proximity to the roulette wheels of Monte Carlo.



It was in June of 2007, that I first came here, to this village of Èze, just outside Nice, to ascend that treacherous pathway from the sea.

I still remember the day. It was overcast and the sky hinted at rain. –

“Le chemin de Frédéric Nietzsche,” I had replied, when an employee of the local hostel, a girl with red hair, came to ask me where I was headed with my hiking boots and canteen.

“I will show you.”

So we left Nice in a cab, and arrived, not long after, at the railway station in Èze-Borde-Mer, only steps away from the base of Nietzsche's path. Pausing at regular intervals to fill our parched lungs with smoke, it took us several hours until we finally arrived upon the village walls. It was then, looking down upon the conquered terrain, the blue of the sea, that those famous words, written in the pages of *Ecce Homo*, first began to come alive for me:

“Many spots and heights in the countryside around Nice have been sanctified for me through unforgettable moments [*unvergessliche Augenblicke*],” Nietzsche writes, “that decisive section [of *Zarathustra*] which bears the title “On the Old and New Tables” was composed during the arduous ascent from the station to the marvellous Moorish rocky haunt of Èze.”¹

In the very space where I was now standing, Nietzsche had once stood. It was, here, amidst the silent companionship of these rocks, these boulders, that he had come to conceive, in the winter of 1883-4, nothing less than the entire Third Part of his remarkable text, the very portions of the text which concern themselves most intensively, as we know, with the thought of eternal recurrence, that weightiest and most formidable of thoughts.

If it had been possible to stand there longer, in his shadow, I would have. The air felt strangely charged, there, almost electric, atop this precipice.

The wind rustled like so many whispers. I tried to conjure thoughts.

Then waves below us swelled.

Suddenly it began to rain.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Ecce Homo and The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Clifton P. Fadiman. New York: The Modern Library, 1927. 102.



For nearly an hour and a half we waited in a crowded restaurant (the *Auberge du Troubadour*) with other patrons seeking to escape the deluge. The rain was pelting the roof relentlessly, and I was secretly thankful because it precluded us (the red-haired girl and me) from the awkwardness of a forced conversation.

Soon, it grew dark outside – and as the rain was still falling with imperturbable force, my heart began to sink. For it had not been merely in pursuit of Nietzsche’s path (or his legacy) that I had come here to the rocky cliffs of Èze. It had not been merely to place my boots on the very soil he had walked upon, or to breathe the salty air which had once filled his lungs, that I had ascended to these heights.

It was also – as I proceeded to explain to Béa – for another reason. I had also come here in hopes of seeing, in this *very same village*, the place where Maurice Blanchot, for several years during the late 1940s and fifties, had once resided.

I had come with hopes of visiting that modest house on the Rue due Bournou, in the heart of the medieval village, where Blanchot had encountered, without either seeking or desiring it, the “essential solitude” of a writer – a solitude as mysterious as it was impenetrable, and to which his writings unceasingly bear witness.

I had come, moreover, with the hopes of entering that small room overlooking the Cape Ferrat and the vast, shipping channels of the Mediterranean where so many of his most prescient and enduring essays and fictional texts were written; a room in which there had once hung, as he tells us, “the likeness of a girl they called ‘The Unknown Girl from the Seine,’ an adolescent with closed eyes, but alive with such a fine, blissful (but veiled) smile, that one might have thought she had drowned in an instant of extreme happiness.”²

² Maurice Blanchot. *A Voice From Elsewhere*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 5.

All of this I had hoped to witness, all of this I had hoped to see. But now it was growing dark, and the rain was heavier than ever. Here we were, stuck inside a restaurant high atop the proverbial eagle's nest. My somewhat ridiculous dream of taking Nietzsche's path to the step of Blanchot's front door was quickly collapsing.

Indeed, with every minute that passed, it became increasingly apparent to me that I had fallen, here, for the seductive trap of the anecdote. I was succumbing to nothing less than a naïve and dangerous idolatry: biographical fetishism. And yet, the *disappointment* nevertheless could not have resounded more audibly as I told the red-haired girl that it was time to get a cab and head back to Nice. It wasn't worth waiting any longer for the weather to clear. It was already night, anyways.



The next thing I remember, perhaps in a dream, was sitting in the backseat of a taxi, listening to Béa rather methodically relaying directions to the driver in French. The car then swerved awkwardly several times. I then distinctly recall seeing her head swing back, toward me, and her voice chirping excitedly as she pointed out the window: “This is the Rue due Bournou. That is the house...”

It was nearly pitch black. The rain was slanting in through the open window, soaking Béa's heavy sweatshirt. I couldn't see anything out there. Maybe an outline, a roof, a door. That's all. A few seconds later, the driver accelerated, and we were gone.

I mentioned earlier that all of this happened on my first visit to Èze. I say “first” in a spirit of optimism, for I have not yet had the chance to return there.



It is difficult to say what, if anything, this brief little story has taught me. It is not, in any case, an allegory. Nor is it something which I cling to as one of my more precious memories. If anything, it is a bit embarrassing. An anecdote which others perhaps can identify with.

And yet, I relate it, here, because it was this encounter (a missed encounter, it seems) which ultimately came to inspire, in a decidedly indirect manner, the very study at hand. A missed encounter which was perhaps all the more poignant, for me, on account of what it lacked.

What follows, then, is by no means an attempt to extract some meaning from this event, or to elevate it, within the gaudy shrines of nostalgia, to some symbolic primacy.

Let me say it again: the encounter was valuable because of what it lacked. And to that extent, perhaps, it is eminently instructive. – For what it announces (to me) is nothing less than a beginning which has always already been effaced.



Whilst undertaking research for this project I was greatly aided by the Houghton Library at Harvard University which graciously made available for my consultation an early manuscript copy of Blanchot's L'entretien infini. I am similarly indebted to the Butler Library at Columbia University for allowing me generous access to its research facilities and materials.

The project could not have been successfully formulated or completed without the support and guidance of Keith Ansell Pearson and Leslie Hill.

Introduction

“The empty heart of repetition”

Blanchot & Nietzsche: Between Eroticism and the Return

The Provocation

It is undoubtedly one of Kafka's finest erotic scenes – the description of K.'s furtive tryst on the tap-room floor. –

Wrapped in Frieda's arms, he rolls back and forth through small puddles of beer and rubbish, her small body burning in his reluctant hands. "Hours passed there," writes Kafka, "hours breathing together with a single heartbeat [*gemeinsamen Herzschlags*], hours in which K. constantly felt he was lost or had wandered farther into foreign lands [*der Fremde*] than any human being before him..."¹ What makes this passage so compelling is the manner in which Kafka, in four short lines, manages to distil everything ambiguous and terrifying about the erotic relation into a scene which, otherwise, could almost pass for sentimental.

On one hand, the image of two bodies intertwined, "breathing together with a single heartbeat," suggests to us an unparalleled intimacy. And yet, at the same time, the reader is left to contemplate K.'s profound alienation and estrangement from the world – his sensation of having wandered into foreign lands where, as Kafka proceeds to tell us, he must "inevitably suffocate."² In this manner, we are transported imperceptibly from the throes of passion to the threshold of ruin; from mingled breaths to an awareness of irremediable disaster.

All of this is played out in less than half a page – and even attentive readers could almost be forgiven for breezing past it, much like I did the very first time I beheld Kafka's text. Indeed, it was not until several years later, once I had had the good fortune of reading

¹ Franz Kafka. *The Castle*. Translated by Mark Harman. New York: Schocken Books, 1998. 41.

² *Ibid.*

Milan Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed*, that it occurred to me how important the scene in the tap-room truly was – not only to the history of modernism, or literature in general – but to me as well. Or, rather, to the thesis which I had just begun to write.



Everything begins, we might say, as a question of translation. And certainly, within the pages of Kundera's book, the arduous work of translation is presented front and centre as a perennial source of both fecundity and disappointment. In the case of Kafka's French translators, however, what begins with the perils of semantic slippage, quickly assumes the appearance of a wilful betrayal. Examining various French translations of Kafka's work, Kundera discovers what he terms an unsettling "indifference to the author's aesthetic wishes."³ Everywhere we look, paragraphs are shortened, rendered more numerous, as if to transform Kafka's writing into something more logical, more rationally organised. Moments of dialogue are separated off from the main body of the text – presumably in a feeble attempt at dramatisation. The effect of all this, Kundera argues, is to alter irreparably Kafka's text by imposing upon it the very form and structure which it tries so doggedly to subvert.⁴

Even more egregious, however, is that this perversion of Kafka's literary legacy is further compounded by a number of glaring inconsistencies in the translation itself. To prove his point, Kundera selects a single passage from Kafka's text and then re-prints, side by side, multiple French translations of it. The specific tutor text which Kundera selects for this exercise in comparative reading – is none other than the tap-room scene from *The Castle*, the very text which we began this introduction by quoting.

³ Milan Kundera. *Testaments Betrayed*. Translated by Linda Asher. New York: Harper, 1996. 119.

⁴ In addition to all this, Kundera criticises the editors of the Pléiade edition for appending some five-hundred pages of supplemental and commentary. "I find not a single sentence [in Kafka's works] which justifies this," he writes. See pp. 118-9.

Reading it over and over, in German, I found myself increasingly drawn to the spare, unembellished beauty of the phrase “*gemeinsamen Herzschlags*” – a beauty which the French translations all seem uncertain of how to replicate. Alexandre Vialatte, Kafka’s earliest French translator, employs the phrase: “*de battements de coeur communs*,” whilst Claude David prefers: “*de battements de coeur confondus*.”⁵ Still more recently, in Bernard Lortholary’s version, we find: “*de coeurs battant ensemble*.”⁶

For a scholar of Kafka’s work, or an expert on literary translation, such nuanced distinctions must remain a source of endless provocation and anxiety. For me, however, the provocation engendered by these words was of an entirely different kind. Indeed, what I immediately noticed about all three of these renderings was their striking similarity to a number of phrases encountered within Blanchot’s own work – phrases which had remained, for the longest time, all but impenetrable to me.

Let us consider the following excerpts from *L’entretien infini* and *Le pas au-delà*:

“The word too many [*Le mot de trop*]: it would come from the Other [*l’Autre*] without ever having been heard by a Self [*Moi*]...less to disperse or break him than to respond to the breaking [*brisure*] or dispersal [*dispersion*] that the ‘I’ conceals, making of itself a self by this very movement of hiding [*ce mouvement de dérober*] that seems the beating of an empty heart [*le battement d’un coeur vide*].”⁷

*

“It is like a figure that he doesn’t see, that is missing because it is there, having all the traits of a figure that would not figure itself and with which the incessant lack of relation [*l’incessant défaut de rapport*], without presence, without absence, is a sign of a common solitude. He names it, although he knows that it has no name, even in

⁵ Ibid. 119.

⁶ Ibid. 120.

⁷ Maurice Blanchot. *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 312-3.

his language, this beating of a hesitant heart [*ce battement d'un coeur hésitant*].”⁸

Not only do the diction and syntax of the phrases “battement d'un coeur vide” and “battement d'un coeur hésitant” bear a certain likeness to Vialatte’s “battements de coeur communs” – but all three extracts are similarly drawn from a context pervaded by the rhetoric of a profound estrangement. Take, for example, K.’s aforementioned awareness of the strange and irreducible distance which separates him, even at the very height of amorous passion, not only from Frieda, but from himself as well. Do we not find Blanchot evoking something very similar to this when he describes an “incessant lack of relation” which nonetheless doubles as a solitude to be shared in common?

These are fascinating similarities, to be sure. But why, we must ask, should it be the figure of the *heart* which comes to assume, for both Kafka and Blanchot, the rhetorical burden of expressing all this? Why should both these authors (setting aside, for the moment, the question of influence) voluntarily make recourse to this same trope? The heart, after all, is a symbol traditionally suggestive of passion or adoration. Yet, in each of the passages cited above, it seems to operate, instead, as a figure marking the very limits of intimacy – as if gesturing toward a space where our ability to relate to another person is somehow radically suspended.



Impelled by the force of this initial provocation, I set out to begin chronicling the usage and dissemination of heart-rhetoric throughout Blanchot’s texts. And as I soon discovered, references to the heart were by no means infrequent within his work, though the complete lack of critical material devoted to exploring either their significance or

⁸ Maurice Blanchot. *The Step Not Beyond*. Translated by Lycette Nelson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. 63.

inter-textual resonance, might certainly have suggested otherwise.

Indeed, as early as his first published work of fiction, Blanchot already shows himself capable of deploying this particular trope with both variability and sophistication. In the opening chapters of *Thomas l'obscur*, for instance, we find the text's protagonist "invaded by the feeling of being at the heart of things [*au coeur des choses*]." ⁹ Then, slightly later in the same text, we are told that "a heart empty and dead [*un coeur vide et mort*]" ¹⁰ is all that remains for Anne, his female interlocutor, once she has sacrificed her autonomous existence for the "nothingness of love [*néant d'amour*]." ¹¹

We cannot help but notice that the words, "*un coeur vide et mort*," used in relation to Anne, immediately call to mind the phrase, "*le battement d'un coeur vide*" – the very phrase which, just moments ago, we encountered in a passage from *L'entretien infini*. Between these two passages, written some twenty-five years apart, the recurrence of the empty heart suggests a connection which is difficult to overlook – even if its meaning, at least for now, remains less than clear.



What we *do* know, is that the more closely we examine Blanchot's texts, the more references to the heart we seem to uncover. Consider, for example, the following passage from an essay entitled, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," first published in March 1954: "When the absolute of separation [*l'absolu de la séparation*] has become relation

⁹ Maurice Blanchot. *Thomas the Obscure* in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. Edited George Quasha. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999. 74.

¹⁰ Ibid. 104.

¹¹ Ibid. Between these two examples, different as they are, we can already sense a common thread: the emergence of a nascent, Blanchotian double-voice which seems to take back what it gives – even prior to the moment of bestowal. In the case of Thomas, this is expressed through the feeling of invasiveness which accompanies him into the heart of intimacy; whilst for Anne, it is implied by the nothingness which she must attain in order to be loved.

it is no longer possible to be separated. When desire [*désir*] has been awakened by impossibility and night, desire can indeed come to an end and the empty heart [*le coeur vide*] turn away from it...”¹² To this reference, we can then also add another, slightly earlier one, from June 1953, in which Blanchot explicitly links the “beating heart” to “the intimacy of absence.”¹³

And this, as it turns out, is only the beginning. –

For, what we ultimately come to find, throughout the 1950s, is the rhetoric of the heart asserting itself with an ever-growing prominence and visibility within Blanchot’s writings. In *Au moment voulu*, for instance, Blanchot makes reference to both the “radiant heart [*coeur rayonnant*]” as well as the “vertiginous heart of things [*coeur vertigineux du temps*].”¹⁴ Phrases which emerge, as we will later show, at moments of supreme importance within the pages of his text.

Then, only several years later, we find Blanchot twice invoking, in the pages of *Le dernier homme*, the image of what he calls “the eternal heart [*le coeur éternel*]”¹⁵ – a figure so mysterious that, at one point, he even insists we not name it. When a description finally does emerge, it is rather predictably shrouded in paradox and obscurity:

“Memory that I am, yet that I also wait for, toward which I go down toward you, far from you [*loin de toi*], space of that memory, of which there is no memory, which holds me back only where I have long since ceased to be, as though you, who perhaps do not exist, in the calm persistence of what disappears, were continuing to turn me into a memory and search for what could recall me to you, great memory in which we are both held fast, face to face, wrapped in the lament I hear: *Eternal, eternal*; space of cold light into which you have drawn me without being there and in

¹² *The Infinite Conversation*. 192.

¹³ Maurice Blanchot. *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. 111.

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot. *When the Time Comes* in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. Edited by George Quasha. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999. 250 & 232.

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot. *The Last Man*. Translated by Lydia Davis. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 73 & 86.

which I affirm you without seeing you, knowing that you are not there, not knowing it, knowing it. Growth of what cannot grow, vain waiting for vain things, silence, and the more silence there is, the more it changes into clamour. Silence, silence that makes so much noise, perpetual agitation of the calm – is this what we call the terrible thing, the eternal heart [*le coeur éternel*]?”¹⁶

Here, in the course of evoking this “memory of which there is no memory” and “the calm persistence of what disappears,” there can be little doubt that Blanchot seems to be linking the figure of the heart, rather overtly, to a rhetoric perhaps more suited to philosophical than literary discourse. And it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that it was precisely around the time that I first encountered these references to the heart, particularly the ones found in the pages of *Au moment voulu* and *Le dernier homme*, that I began to wonder, rather seriously, whether there might in fact be some connection between the persistence of this frequently recurrent trope – and the philosophy of Nietzsche.

This possibility became even more difficult to ignore when I then proceeded to discover, in the days that immediately followed, *an additional* pair of references, from around the same period of Blanchot’s writing, which seemed to render all but unmistakable the philosopher’s influence. In a key essay from the summer of 1952, published a little over a year after *Au moment voulu*, one finds a rather telling reference to “the empty heart of eternal repetition [*le coeur vide du reassassement éternel*]”¹⁷ – a reference which seems to link, in the clearest of terms, the figure of the heart with the vertiginous movement of Nietzsche’s thought of thoughts.

Shortly after, I stumbled upon yet another excerpt of prime importance, this time in the pages of “Passage de la ligne,” Blanchot’s seminal 1958 essay on Nietzsche. Here, in the context of a discussion on the eternal return, Blanchot comes to pose the following question: “Having thus recovered the...love of the eternal [*l’amour de l’éternel*]...does it

¹⁶ Ibid. 86.

¹⁷ Ibid. 246.

not seem that we are definitively sheltered from nihilism?”¹⁸ A question with vast consequences, not only to our understanding of Nietzsche’s thought, but also to our appreciation of Blanchot’s role in appropriating and reinscribing it.

And though the precise impetus for this question, as well as its broader significance within the context of Blanchot’s engagement with Nietzsche, will later be examined in great detail – it is the simply the answer itself which interests us for the time being. For what Blanchot proceeds to tell us, in a most striking and remarkable manner, is that Nietzsche’s “love of the eternal,” his affirmation of the eternal recurrence itself, far from sheltering us from nihilism, actually transports us to its very heart: “We are at the heart of nihilism [*au coeur du nihilism*],”¹⁹ Blanchot writes. A fascinating turn of phrase – which of course noticeably reinscribes, once more, the figure of the heart.

Indeed, when we take into consideration each of Blanchot’s various references to this particular trope, from around 1941 onward, an unmistakable pattern cannot help but emerge. For in nearly every case, we find the figure of the heart, the erotic trope *par excellence*, coming to be portrayed as either empty [*vide*], or linked explicitly with the notions of distance, disappearance, or absence. It is almost as though Blanchot were somehow wilfully attempting to recode, to configure, this most recognisable, most venerable trope, of the Western erotic tradition, by purposefully and obsessively reinscribing it in contexts where only its scintillating poverty, its glimmering emptiness, would be made manifest. –And indeed, what then makes all of this so particularly fascinating is the fact that this rather obsessive pattern of reinscription, and recoding, seems to be taking place, at nearly every turn, *under the very sign of the eternal recurrence*.

But how, exactly, are we to understand this relationship between the figure of the heart and Nietzsche’s most vaunted, most difficult of thoughts? Is it a liaison, we might ask, which is unique to Blanchot’s text, or one which might already be discerned, perhaps

¹⁸ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

with great consequence, in Nietzsche's own? And what are we to make, moreover, of this emphasis upon emptiness, or absence, which seems to pervade and perhaps even circumscribe its ascendancy within the Blanchotian tableau?



These, one might say, are the very questions toward which our investigation is ultimately aiming. But if the figure of the heart, in Blanchot's writings, seems to announce itself, here, with a truly bewildering elusiveness, a resistance to facile interpretation – then much the same can surely be said about the philosophical thought alongside which it comes to be deployed. Indeed, it seems hardly coincidental that Blanchot should elect to link, so intimately, his rather mysterious evocations of the heart with the rhetoric of eternal recurrence, for as we know, it is precisely *this* aspect of Nietzsche's discourse which has remained, almost since the very hour of initial revelation, perhaps its most enigmatic, most obscure, feature.

Density of Silence

The notorious difficulty in making sense of Nietzsche's eternal return and integrating its conflicting tendencies into a seamless, comprehensible whole has long beguiled even Nietzsche's most astute interlocutors. And yet, the fact that this most challenging and potentially transformative of thoughts should find itself somehow radically resistant both to doctrinal stabilisation and declarative transparency has only added to its already considerable mystique. In considering Nietzsche's various attempts at articulating the thought within both his published and unpublished works, we are confronted by the

suspicion that in every case, his longing to reveal an ultimate truth, a doctrine, a secret – seems to have been perpetually stifled. The allure of this indefinitely withheld answer is undoubtedly intoxicating. But what if, rather than continuing to search for some solution *beyond* this movement of endless deferral, we were to begin interrogating the nature of this deferral itself? Might such a strategy offer us, at last, some means of approaching that which otherwise admits of no proximity?



This is the very suggestion – as audacious as it is revelatory – which we find tacitly inscribed in various places throughout the pages of Maurice Blanchot’s *Infinite Conversation*. Though the aporetic movement of *retour* can be found in various configurations throughout Blanchot’s work from the early 1940s onward, it is in the essays which comprise *The Infinite Conversation* that we encounter arguably his first sustained attempts at exploring the privileged role which Nietzsche assigns it within his philosophy. Whilst much attention will need to be paid both to the context for Blanchot’s remarks and the stylistic specificity which they ultimately assume, let us introduce – in a rather preliminary manner – two passages from *The Infinite Conversation* which will be of great significance to the chapters which follows. The first passage is taken from an essay entitled, “Crossing the Line,” which was originally published in the September, 1958 issue of *La Nouvelle Revue française*.²⁰ The second passage, which is much longer, appears toward the end of an essay entitled, “On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return.” Though the first half of this essay was published in April, 1960 – the latter half, from which our passage is drawn, is generally

²⁰ The vast majority of essays compiled in *The Infinite Conversation* had been previously published as stand-alone pieces in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Prior to their inclusion within *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot made revisions of varying importance and magnitude to nearly all the essays. His revisions to “Crossing the Line” were some of his most extensive. In the passage which we will cite, however, Blanchot makes only a single modification upon to the original NRF format: a deletion of the adjective “fort” in the opening sentence.

thought to have been written only months before *The Infinite Conversation's* publication in 1969, making it one of Blanchot's final additions to the text. Here are the two passages in question:

“Enthusiastically and with categorical clarity, Zarathustra announces the overman; then anxiously, hesitatingly, fearfully, he announces the thought of eternal return. Why this difference in tone? Why is the thought of the eternal return, a thought of the abyss, a thought that in the very one who pronounces it is unceasingly deferred (*sans cesse ajournée*) and turned away (*détournée*) as though it were the detour of all thought (*le détour de toute pensée*)? This is its enigma and, no doubt, its truth.”²¹

*

“Throughout *Zarathustra* Nietzsche maintains a zone of silence: everything is said of all there is to say, but all the precautions and resources of hesitation (*hésitation*) and deferral (*atermoiement*) that one writing knows (with a disquieting lucidity) are necessary, if he wants to communicate that which cannot be communicated directly... If, however, between the thought of the Eternal Return and its affirmation, Nietzsche interposes intermediaries always ready to allow themselves to be challenged (the animals, Zarathustra himself, and the indirect character of a discourse that says what it says only by taking it back); if there is this silent density (*épaisseur de silence*), it is not due simply to ruse, prudence, or fear, but is also because the only meaning of *news* such as this is the exigency to differ and defer that bears it and that it bears (*cette exigence de différer qui la porte et qu'elle porte*): as though it could be said only by deferring its saying. The deferral (*L'atermoiement*) therefore does not mark the waiting for an opportune moment (*un moment opportune*) that would be historically right (*historiquement juste*); it marks the untimeliness of every moment (*l'intempestivité de tout moment*) since return is already detour – or better: since we can only affirm the return as detour, making affirmation what turns away from affirming and making of the detour what hollows out (*creuse*) the affirmation and, in this hollowing out (*creusement*), makes it return from the extreme of itself back to the extreme of itself, not in

²¹ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

order to coincide with it, but rather to render it again more affirmative at a mobile point of extreme non-coincidence (*un point mobile d'extrême non-coïncidence*).”²²

In both of these passages Blanchot seeks to draw our attention to the so-called “silent density [*épaisseur de silence*]” which permeates Nietzsche’s discourse on the eternal recurrence. But how is this density to be understood? The noun which Blanchot uses, *épaisseur*, is related to the verb *épaissir* – which means “to thicken.” Thus, when Blanchot writes of the *épaisseur de silence* we are led to imagine a palpability of absence, a void in which the unspoken reverberates unceasingly.²³ What remains unspoken, in this case, is the systematic articulation of the doctrine: Zarathustra’s definitive, final word.²⁴ Rather than revealing, once and for all, the meaning behind his most abyssal thought – Nietzsche chooses to make recourse to “all the precautions and resources of hesitation [*hésitation*] and deferral [*atermoiement*] that one writing knows.” Indeed, it is Blanchot’s important suggestion that these detours and postponements, rather than simply shielding us, momentarily, from the weightiest of thoughts, might actually, in some obscure and aporetic manner, comprise the very truth of the thought itself – as if bearing witness to its perennial untimeliness.

Along these lines, the indirection which characterises Nietzsche’s writings on the eternal return should not be considered some merely contingent feature of his discourse which might, in due course, come to be surmounted. Rather, it serves as evidence that the eternal return, through the movement of ungrounding which it engenders, has already displaced and dislocated every moment of presence from which it might be announced. To affirm the eternal return, according to Blanchot, is to affirm the endless movement of

22 Ibid. 275-6.

23 Edmond Jabès, in his *Book of Margins*, seems to describe something not altogether different when he writes of “words born of the possibility and impossibility of others...silent words that mark the silence only to break it.” Edmond Jabès. *The Book of Margins*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 132.

24 For an interesting, more recent, account which touches upon some of these themes, see Chapter III of Harold Alderman’s text, *Nietzsche’s Gift*. Alderman chronicles, in detail, how Nietzsche comes to use both silence and laughter as “restraining devices” (38) within the pages of Zarathustra. He claims that Nietzsche’s laughter “is itself a form of silence (it says nothing) which silences solemnity, dogmatism, and ponderousness...” (54) What laughter entails, then, is a general suspension of symbolic teleology. It contests the self-righteous pretension of any systematic claim to truth. Harold Alderman. *Nietzsche’s Gift*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977.

indirection whereby even this very affirmation is carried away toward a point of extreme non-coincidence with itself.

And whilst this prioritisation of detour and deferral unquestionably calls to mind the play of Derridean *différance*²⁵ – it is important to note that the first passage cited above was written nearly a decade before the publication of Derrida’s first major works.²⁶ That is not to say, of course, that Blanchot’s remarks – for all their novelty – are completely without precedent. Prior to September, 1958, the radical incommunicability of the eternal return had already appeared as a prominent trope in the writings of both Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski, among others.²⁷ Indeed, Bataille’s 1945 text, *On Nietzsche*, might be profitably read as a sustained meditation upon the very nature of this incommunicability in its relation to the ecstatic and aleatory “summit” of Nietzsche’s thought. “Like Kafka’s castle,” Bataille writes, “the summit is inaccessible. It slips away from us until...we stop speaking.”²⁸

Following on from this, in his seminal, 1957 lecture, “Nietzsche, Polytheism, and Parody,” Klossowski likewise acknowledges the seeming incommensurability which exists between the thought of eternal recurrence and the possibility of its discursive articulation. “The experience of the eternal return of all things could not be...the object of a rationally constructed elucidation,” he argues, “any more than the lived, inexpressible, and therefore incommunicable experience could ground an ethical imperative.”²⁹ The reason for this, according to Klossowski, resides within the

25 Combining the parallel movements of deferral (temporalisation) and differing (spatialisation), *différance* is “more originary” [23] than all the concepts of ontology and metaphysics which would seek to define it, and is thus resistant to conceptual coding. At the same time, as Derrida claims, “one would no longer be able to call [*différance*] itself an ‘origin’ or ‘ground’...” [23] for the movement of differentiation which it engenders has the precise effect of withdrawing every stable foundation and replacing it with the trace of already operative difference. As a result, the signified, in any semiotic code, is “always already in the position of the signifier.” [73] The supposed intelligibility of every sign already presupposes its difference (and distance) from itself. Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*.

26 These would include *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena* – all published in 1967.

27 As early as the 1930s, Bataille and Klossowski (who knew each other) both recognised in Nietzsche’s oeuvre a conceptual repertoire capable of displacing the Hegelian-Marxist repertoire of teleological completion. A broader discussion of their influence on Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche may be found in the later chapters of this book.

28 Georges Bataille. *On Nietzsche*. Translated by Bruce Boone. London: Athlone, 1992. 39.

29 Pierre Klossowski. “Nietzsche, Polytheism, and Parody.” *Such a Deathly Desire*. Translated by Russell Ford. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 114.

fortuitous singularity of thought itself, which is compromised, irreparably, by any attempts at translating it into discursive language. There is, in other words, a fundamental disconnect between the ecstatic rapture of Nietzsche's lived experience and his "desire to legitimate [it] by means of a demonstration."³⁰

In electing to emphasise the play of *atermoisement*, *hésitation*, and *détour* within Nietzsche's scenography of eternal recurrence, Blanchot is also rehearsing, more generally, a number of themes developed concurrently by his illustrious German interlocutors Karl Löwith, Martin Heidegger, and Eugen Fink. Within the context of their respective studies, all three thinkers had previously assigned an elevated hermeneutical importance to the rhetorical and stylistic nuances inherent to Nietzsche's various, abortive presentations of the thought. "The *how* of Nietzsche's communication is initially more important than the *what*,"³¹ remarks Heidegger, in the opening pages of his monumental 1937 seminar. Indeed, if each of Nietzsche's three published accounts of the eternal return ultimately fail to present us with a unified "theoretical, scholarly, or scientific doctrine"³² – this is because the manner in which they are communicated necessarily precludes "perfect comprehension."³³ As Heidegger claims, all of Nietzsche's published accounts of the eternal return are both minimal and "cryptic."³⁴ In comparison with the modicum of clarity offered by some of Nietzsche's *Nachlaß* fragments on the same topic, these published accounts more closely resemble a kind of "veiling."³⁵

This point is further developed in Eugen Fink's 1960 text, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*,³⁶ where the eternal return is at one point likened to "a sombre prophecy or an oracular

30 Ibid.

31 Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche: Volumes I & II*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. London: Harper Collins, 1991. 32.

32 Ibid. 68.

33 Ibid.. 17.

34 Ibid..

35 Ibid.. 14.

36 Fink's text was published a year and a half after Blanchot's "Crossing the Line" appeared in the *NRF* – thus, like Heidegger's Nietzsche lectures and Derrida's work tout court, there can be no talk of its influence upon the first of the two Blanchot-passages quoted above. The

revelation rather than a rational conception.”³⁷ Indeed, as Fink notes, Nietzsche himself seems “almost afraid to articulate it.”³⁸ Rather than attempting a systematic elucidation of this most provocative vision, he continually hesitates and “conceals his secret behind increasing walls.”³⁹ But *what*, precisely, is it that compels Nietzsche to “speak in riddles”⁴⁰ – to dissimulate his deepest truth, and in some cases, to refuse communication altogether? For Blanchot, as we have just suggested, the reason for this hesitancy lies within the very nature of the thought itself – insofar as its “meaning” is nothing other than “the exigency to differ and defer that bears it and that it bears.”⁴¹ But if this reading is, in fact, justifiable – it nevertheless leaves unanswered the question of precisely *why* Nietzsche should have elected to espouse and tacitly promote this regimen of deferral in the first place?



In chapter four of *Beyond Good and Evil*, amidst his so-called “Apophthegms and Interludes,” Nietzsche offers us – perhaps in anticipation of our query – a golden thread, a spark of scintillating clarity in the darkness. It takes the form of a single sentence, inscribed in the text’s proverbial margins and suffused with a brevity which belies its suggestive force. “One no longer loves one’s knowledge sufficiently,” writes Nietzsche, “after one has communicated it.”⁴² These words, taken from *Beyond Good and Evil* §120, extinguish themselves almost as quickly as they are illumined. And yet,

second passage, however, bears some traces of Fink’s influence and indeed his name is explicitly referenced in the concluding footnote to the section of Blanchot’s text entitled “Nietzsche and Fragmentary Writing.”

37 Eugen Fink. *Nietzsche’s Philosophy*. Translated by Goetz Richter. London: Continuum, 2003. 80.

38 Ibid. 74.

39 Ibid..

40 Ibid.. 80.

41 *The Infinite Conversation*. 275.

42 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil* § 120. Translated by Helen Zimmern. Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc. 1997.

they offer us an indispensable insight into the relationship between the tragic wisdom of the philosopher and the mysterious movement of *Eros* which, since the age of Empedocles, has formed its inseparable complement.⁴³ If one can no longer love, with sufficient ardour, a truth which has been disclosed, then might the philosopher – insofar as he remains a true “lover of wisdom” – necessarily avow the practice of indirection and deferral as his most sacred exigency? And might this be the reason why a density of silence so thoroughly pervades much of Nietzsche’s work?

For all of its revelatory potency, it crucial to note that the lover’s wisdom expressed in *Beyond Good and Evil* §120 is actually borrowed, quite explicitly, from a socio-historical context which had, by Nietzsche’s own time, seemingly been relegated to the most irretrievable of pasts. This context, so magically rekindled in Nietzsche’s apophthegm, is the tableau of 12th century courtly eroticism. As it turns out, the words of *Beyond Good and Evil* §120 reinscribe, with eerie verisimilitude, both the tenor and content of a famed, medieval love code: “Whoever knows not how to conceal, knows not how to love...Love disclosed seldom endures.”⁴⁴ Nietzsche’s exposure to this maxim, which so closely resembles his own, would almost certainly have come about during his readings of Stendhal –“who he admired like few other nineteenth-century writers.”⁴⁵ In the appendix to his work, *On Love*, Stendhal included a transcription of this code, alongside various other rules for amorous conduct related to the cultivation and refinement of virtue.

What is so striking about this code is the unmistakable emphasis which it places upon the nobility of discretion and its indissoluble link to the regimen of relentless striving undergone by the poets of the medieval court. That Nietzsche admired these

⁴³ According to Nietzsche, “[Empedocles] is the tragic philosopher...the most unique thing about him is his extraordinary pessimism...his life’s mission is presented as being to make good what had been worsened by strife, and to proclaim and even aid the idea of oneness in love inside the world of strife...” Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*. Translated by Greg Whitlock. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 109-113.

⁴⁴ Stendhal. *Love*. Translated by Gilbert and Suzanne Sale. London: Penguin Books, 1975. 278.

⁴⁵ Richard H. Weisberg. “It’s a Positivist, It’s a Pragmatist, It’s a Codifier: Reflections on Nietzsche and Stendhal.” *Cardozo Law Review*. September, 1996. Issue 18. 3. Some contemporary critics, such as Sarah Kofman, have even gone so far as to name him Nietzsche’s “veritable précurseur.” Sarah Kofman. *Explosion I: De l’Ecce Homo de Nietzsche*. Paris: Galilée, 1992. 317.

troubadours, and even considered them his true “kindred spirits,”⁴⁶ is well known – but could it be that their influence upon his thinking was ultimately far greater than we could have ever previously imagined? Could it be, in other words, that the density of silence which Blanchot identifies as the secret to Nietzsche’s discourse on the eternal return might ultimately have its origins in an exigency of amorous reticence dating back to the 12th century?

There can be no doubt that Nietzsche’s fascination with tableau of medieval, courtly eroticism extends far beyond the limited confines of *Beyond Good and Evil* §120. A further consideration of Nietzsche’s work dating back to the early 1880s reveals that the entire project of *The Gay Science* not only takes its name, but also its guiding inspiration, from “the Provençal poet-cavaliers...those brilliant, ingenious men of the ‘gai saber,’ to whom Europe owes so much, and almost owes itself.”⁴⁷ Moreover, the *Songs of Prince Vogelfrei*, which accompany the published text of *The Gay Science*, were initially intended, by Nietzsche’s own admission, as an explicit evocation of medieval “Provençalism.”⁴⁸

The roots of Nietzsche’s interest in the Provençal poet-cavaliers, it seems, may likely be traced back to their “explicit rejection of previous social mores.”⁴⁹ As Nietzsche himself confirms, in a statement from 1888, the courtly troubadour embodies more fully than anyone else “that unity of *singer, knight, and free spirit*...[who] dances over morality.”⁵⁰ With lightness of step and gaiety of wit, these troubadour poets managed to create a code of chivalry drawn “in direct opposition to the morals of the church.”⁵¹ They became law givers and legislators unto themselves, giving birth to a new erotic ideal based

46 Kathleen Marie Higgins. *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 16.

47 *Beyond Good and Evil* § 260.

48 Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 123.

49 *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science*. 18.

50 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 123.

51 *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science*. 18.

entirely upon the pursuit of an ever-unsatisfied, ever-increasing desire.⁵² Indeed, as Nietzsche suggests in *Beyond Good and Evil* §260, it was here, within the supremely affirmative context of the medieval courtly society, that the notion of “love as a passion [*die Liebe als Passion*]”⁵³ first became possible.



In the pages that follow, we will offer a sustained and rigorous account of how this notion of “love as passion” came to influence, in a profound and unmistakable manner, the development of that most enigmatic and alluring aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy: the thought of eternal recurrence.

Beginning with a general overview of the courtly erotic scenography, we will show how any number of its key tropes found themselves subtly absorbed into Nietzsche’s thinking – a process of absorption profoundly accelerated and intensified, as we will show, by his formative exposure to the overbearing pathos of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. For as we will show, it was precisely in this opera, a work of art which Nietzsche would not cease to praise even unto the collapse in Turin, that he came to discover nothing less than the paradigmatic exemplification of *both* the decadent eroticism of the consummatory ideal *as well as* a means of provocatively contesting this very ideal. Indeed, all of this will finally lead us, by the mid 1880s, to Nietzsche’s attempted rehabilitation of erotic

52 In *Beyond Good and Evil* §211, Nietzsche distinguishes between “real philosophers” and mere “philosophical workers.” The criterion for distinction here is the capacity to actually create new values: “the realm philosophers...are commanders and lawgivers.” Thus, the courtly troubadour (insofar as he posits his own ethos) is actually closer to the Nietzschean prototype of a real philosopher than either Kant or Hegel, who merely “fixed and formalised” previously established determinations of value.

53 *Beyond Good and Evil* §260..

distance; a project in which the thought of eternal return will come to emerge as a stunning and provocative rejoinder to the impasse of Tristanian nihilism and the pervasive dominance of the consummatory, or teleological, ideal.

What we will then proceed to show, in later chapters, is how the transference and reinscription of the eternal return, from Nietzsche to Blanchot, might ultimately be seen as predicated upon this (counter-Tristanian) eroticisation of distance which is generated and sustained through the inexorable movement of deferral and dissimulation wherein sexual love, like dying itself, remains hopelessly unconsummated.

Indeed, it will then be here, in the very context of this discussion, that the profound, and previously unheralded, significance of the heart, in Blanchot's writings (as well as in Nietzsche's own), will gradually become clear to us – allowing us to appreciate, perhaps for the first time, the importance of this trope which emblematises, more provocatively than any other, the latent eroticism proper to Nietzsche's thought of thoughts.



Chapter I

Courtship & Despondency

On Wagner and the Decadence of the Consummatory Ideal

“...quite consciously I perform many actions whilst my heart says to me: ‘all is useless.’ ”

Guilhem IX of Aquitaine

Sensuousness of Distance

If every scenography harbours a secret: the trace of some palpable silence, nurtured and sustained in the intimacy of the very space it inhabits, then perhaps nowhere is this felt more prominently than in the tradition of medieval courtly romance. Indeed, it was here that the *preservation of the secret* – as an exigency inseparable from the practices of love itself – assumed, for first time in the history of the Occident, an indisputable priority within erotic life. For the amorous couple, “caught in a field of tension between the insistent demands of the court and the inescapable power of their love,”¹ any failure to conceal this secret “would cost them their reputations or even their lives.”² As a result, the virtues of reticence, discreteness, and indirection came to be extolled here as never before.³ What followed from all of this was an unprecedented *stylisation of amorous discourse* leading to the development of a new poetry born of silence and restraint. But how, precisely, did this eroticism, predicated almost entirely upon secrecy and danger, come to influence Nietzsche’s way of thinking? And in what sense might we discover, within the scenography of eternal recurrence, a critical transposition and reinscription of its central tropes? If an answer to these questions is what we seek, then our first task must be to elucidate, as carefully as possible, the relational dynamics proper to the courtly tableau.

1 James Alfred Schultz. *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006. 138.

2 Ibid. 137.

3 Ibid.. 138.



From the outset, it is important to note that the tradition of courtly romance, from its beginnings in twelfth century Provence, operated strictly outside the narrowly-delimited economy of institutionalised marriage. The reasons for this, according to Denis de Rougemont, were wholly pragmatic. “It is well known,” he writes, “that the nobles in the twelfth century made of marriage simply a means of enriching themselves.”⁴ As a result, marriage had little to do with romantic fulfilment, and even less with the mystical communion of souls. Rather, it was understood as an obligatory act of socio-economic expedience, endowed with a legal and social function rather than a merely erotic one.⁵

This apparent marginalisation of the erotic, however, demanded to be rectified – and it is here, precisely, that we encounter the origins of *domnei*: “the vassal-relation set up between a knight-lover and his lady, or *domina*.”⁶ In comparison with the sovereign legality of marriage, *domnei*, or courtly love, comprised a kind of higher law radically irreducible to any form of matrimonial constraint.⁷ As Rougemont describes it, “courtly love established a *fealty* that was independent of legal marriage and of which the sole basis was love.”⁸ The suspension of marital propriety engendered by the courtly relation soon led to the fabrication a new erotic ideal

4 Denis de Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*. Translated by Montgomery Belgion. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. 33.

5 Woman, in feudal society, “is nothing more than a correlative of the functions of social exchange.” Jacques Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Translated by Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992. 147.

6 *Love in the Western World*. 34. The word *domnei* corresponds to the verb *domnoyer* which means “to caress” or “to play around.” The phrase *amour courtois* – or “courtly love” – is a much more recent appellation. It was first introduced by Gaston Paris, a French philologist, around 1880.

7 In the famous words of Marie, Countess of Champagne, “Love cannot exist (*extendere*) between married people.” See John W. Baldwin. “Consent and the Marital Debt: Five Discourses in Northern France Around 1200.” *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*. Edited by Angeliki E Laiou-Thomadakis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. 265. On the subject of *domnei*, Stendhal notes that “The laws of love...took no cognizance of the sacred rights of husbands.” Stendhal. *Love*. Translated by Gilbert and Suzanne Sale. London: Penguin Books, 1975. 165. Marc de Kesel, however, suggests that it would have been necessary for the courtly-knight to hold his *domina*'s husband in “more than the usual esteem,” for it would be only at his invitation that the knight would be admitted as a guest within the feudal court. Indeed, it is this latter scenario which we shall rediscover, in slightly transposed form, when we undertake an excavation of Nietzsche's involvement within the Wagnerian scenography at Tribschen. Marc de Kesel. *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*. Translated by Sigi Jottkandt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 177.

8 *Love in the Western World*. 34.

predicated entirely upon the glorification of “a love which is beyond all bounds.”⁹ In opposition to the Biblical teachings which stress the sanctity of the marital vow, courtly love replaced the pursuit of Christian virtue with the deification of yearning itself. Thus, it constituted, in the words of Bernard O’Donoghue, “a pseudo-religion of an explicitly anti-Christian, heretical kind.”¹⁰ For quite unlike Christian love, with its model of charity toward one’s neighbour, *domnei* recognised only love both of and from a distance (*amor de lonh*).¹¹ The quintessential exemplar of this, as we will show, is Tristan’s courtship of Isolde, the unattainable lady, who commands her lover’s full adoration whilst remaining inaccessible to him. Within the scenography of their romance it is never an eroticism of immediacy which comes to prevail, but rather, an undying love for that which radically exceeds one’s grasp.¹²

We find this ideal enacted, rather famously, at the beginning of the twelfth century, in Heloise’s first letter to Abelard, where she “rejects the title of wife (*uxor*) with its coercive bonds (*vinculi nuptualis, matrimonii foedera*) for the name of *amie*, or concubine, strumpet, or even whore under which designation she could express her unconditional love for Abelard without compulsion.”¹³ The story of Abelard and Heloise is instructive insofar as it exemplifies a discrete subversion of the marital covenant in favour of an implicit glorification of obstruction and postponement. Despite the fact that Abelard and Heloise were, of course, clandestinely betrothed, the trajectory of their romance was largely bereft of proximity and repeatedly interrupted by the detours and deferrals characteristic of *domnei*.¹⁴ For Abelard and

9 „Letter I: Heloise to Abelard.” *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Translated by Betty Radice. London: Penguin Books, 1974. 113. A similar sentiment is echoed within Byron’s famous quip, rehearsed by Kierkegaard in the pages of *Either/Or*, that “love is heaven, marriage is hell.” Søren Kierkegaard. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Translated by Robert Bretall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. 84.

10 Bernard O’Donoghue. *The Courtly Love Tradition*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1982. 11. On this point, also see “The Heresy of Courtly Love, in which Alexander J. Denomy argues that *domnei* “is amoral in the sense that it is wholly divorced from Christian morality.” *The Heresy of Courtly Love*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965. 28.

11 The prioritisation of proximity in Christian love can be seen, for example, in the repeated exhortation: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” which is found in Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39, and Mark 12:31.

12 Nietzsche, of course, explicitly advocates something strikingly similar to this in the First Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he counsel his readers to neglect love for what is nearest in favour of what he calls *Fernsten-Liebe* – “love of the farthest.” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 54.

13 John W. Baldwin. “Consent and the Marital Debt: Five Discourses in Northern France Around 1200.” *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*. Edited by Angeliki E Laiou-Thomadakis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. 265.

14 These detours and deferrals can, of course, take any number of forms – as we shall come to discover in the sections that follow. The key point, however, is that the *domina* is always introduced into the courtly tale, as Lacan says, “through the door of privation or of inaccessibility...she is surrounded and isolated by a barrier.” *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. 149.

Heloise, “the daily unending torment”¹⁵ of living in forbearance, inexorably separated from one another, conjured a *sensuousness of distance* which both purified and distilled the ardour of their desire. Indeed, the impossibility of fulfilment which haunted them, and which we find famously rendered in the romance of Tristan and Isolde, is an impossibility which comes to be extenuated indefinitely, returning time and again within tales of courtly love.

As we attempt to elucidate this “everlasting return of an ardour continuously being thwarted,”¹⁶ we must remember to keep in mind that the protagonist of the courtly drama, despite his frequent insistence to the contrary, seeks neither the full possession of a desired object, nor the realisation of some felicitous end; but rather, only the unrelenting intensification of desire itself. Indeed, “it is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool.”¹⁷ Consequently, everything which leads to the augmentation of erotic longing is sought by courtly knight *as if* it were an end in-itself, whilst everything which diminishes this longing, especially the act of coitus, is carefully avoided.

Because the courtly lover understands that the attainment of his *domina* will necessarily lead to an attenuation of his desire for her, he valorises, above all, the carefully choreographed play of detour and deferral by which she continually eludes his grasp. He endeavours, moreover, to sustain and prolong the courtship as long as possible, even indefinitely, expending his energy and resources but always “without an end in sight...without orgasm.”¹⁸ *Domnei*, then, is simply the name given to this practise of performatively valorising the *coitus reservatus*. It entails an affirmation of the indefinite deferral of release – even to the point of extreme suffering.¹⁹

15 Letter Four: Abelard to Heloise. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. 146.

16 *Love in the Western World*. 285.

17 Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990. 31.

18 *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. 73.

19 Hence the frequent claim which we encounter in literatures devoted to courtly eroticism that its “point of departure” resides in its status as an “unhappy love.” *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. 146.

That is not to say, of course, that the trials and tribulations undergone by the courtly lover are not, on occasion, met with the hesitancy of an ambivalent heart. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find, within the courtly tableau, frequent intimations of both uncertainty and hopelessness;²⁰ but rather than detracting from the purity of the lover's amorous devotion to his *domina*, these sentiments only serve to intensify it. For, with the introduction of every new crisis, and the extenuation of every delay, the romantic stakes are progressively raised, until the summit of erotic tension becomes inextricable from the abyss of sheer despondency.²¹ Having been compelled, by the cruellest exigencies of fate, to indefinitely postpone the moment of coital release, the amorous couple receive no succour or consolation for their torment beyond the flickering incandescence of their anguished cry: "Everything disconcerts our plans, everything disappoints our expectations...sad victims of a mocking hope, shall we endlessly draw near fleeing pleasure without ever reaching it?"²²

What *Fails* to Happen

With all of this emphasis upon obstruction and postponement, we might be forgiven for assuming, at least *prima facie*, that there exists more than a superficial similarity between the scenography of the courtly relation and key aspects of the schema formulated by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is Freud's claim,

20 Consider the testimony of Guilhem IX of Aquitaine [1071-1127]: "Quite consciously I perform many actions while my heart say to me: all is useless" *The Courtly Love Tradition*. 143.

21 We only seek to introduce, here, this theme which shall come to assume great importance within the context of our subsequent reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

22 Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *La Nouvelle Héloïse: Julie, or the New Eloise*. Translated by Judith H. McDowell. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968. 120.

of course, that “under the ego’s instincts of self-preservation”²³ the so-called reality principle intervenes in psychic life to regulate and redirect libidinal discharge – reigning back the ego’s seemingly boundless impetus for pure pleasure through a series of diversions and sublimations. The reality principle “does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure,” according to Freud, “but merely demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction...the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure.”²⁴

The temporary displacement of the pleasure principle described in these passages unquestionably bears a certain resemblance to *amour courtois*; nevertheless, it would be a great mistake to conflate the two scenographies in question. For, despite its apparent prioritisation of indirection and detour, Freud’s model still ascribes to the attainment of consummatory release a teleological grandiosity which, despite being made subject to momentary abeyance, remains incontrovertible – “it always aims at coming back to the pleasure that has been deferred.”²⁵ Indeed, the postponements which separate us from achieving erotic satisfaction are, for Freud, little more than pernicious contingencies which might, over the course of time, come to be eliminated. For the courtly lover, by contrast, the performative affirmation of inexorable deferral entails, *tout court*, the foreclosure of all erotic teleology. The desire for pleasure is displaced from its position at the centre of erotic life and replaced by the affirmation of unending forbearance.²⁶

Understood in this light, courtly romance opposes itself to the *satisfaction* of erotic longing as much as to matrimony.²⁷ As Rougemont writes, “he who wants to possess his lady knows nothing of *domnei*...for whatever turns into a reality is no longer

23 Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961. 7.

24 Ibid.

25 Jacques Derrida. “Différance.” *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1982. 19.

26 Perhaps nowhere is this described with greater poignancy than in the following anecdote from Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*: “A mandarin fell in love with a courtesan. ‘I shall be yours,’ she told him, ‘when you have spent a hundred nights waiting for me, sitting on a stool, in my garden, beneath my window.’ But on the ninety-ninth night, the mandarin stood up, put the stool under his arm, and walked away.” *A Lover’s Discourse*. 40.

27 Consider the words of Guiraut de Borneil, a troubadour poet from the late 12th century, who writes: “I am the man who loves best and most fully; yet I do not embrace or hold or kiss [*no manei, ni tenh, ni bais*].” *The Courtly Love Tradition*. 129.

love.”²⁸ Consequently, we find, in tales of courtly romance, a seemingly endless accumulation of obstacles and crises, all of which serve to keep the amorous pair indefinitely separated.²⁹ As Rougemont writes, “obstruction is what passion really *wants* – its true object.”³⁰ These obstructions, which keep the lovers suspended, inexorably, within the *atopia of despondency*, are the means by which desire incessantly replenishes itself. As Charlotte says to Werther, “It is only the impossibility of possessing me that makes your desire for me so strong.”³¹

What often matters most, then, within the courtly scenography, is not what actually occurs, but rather what *fails to happen*, especially in those crucial moments when the attainment of erotic release comes to be cruelly postponed.³² For within the courtly narrative, every approach must be coupled with a subsequent distancing; every moment of proximity must be given over to the tortuous inevitability of alienation.³³ The passion which *domnei* elicits is “forever expanding and retracting, forever seeking to realise itself and forever being frustrated.”³⁴ Thus, the courtly lover is continually borne back upon a recurring lamentation: “Deprived of you, I remain without resource, without support, without hope...my restless heart seeks you and finds nothing.”³⁵ Indeed, it this procession of failures and disappointments which compels the narrative to perpetuate itself endlessly, extenuating the deprivation of unmediated intimacy.

28 *Love in the Western World*. 34.

29 See Constant’s *Adolphe* – a semi-autobiographical tale structured around a veritable constellation of courtly motifs. At one key point in the text the narrator admits: “I had implored Heaven for some insurmountable obstacle to come between Ellenore and me...All my impatience had gone, and in its place there was an unacknowledged desire to postpone the fateful moment.” Benjamin Constant. *Adolphe*. Translated by Leonard Tancock. London: Penguin Books, 1964. 112.

30 Rougemont. 42. Also, see Part I of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, where Rousseau’s Julie remarks: “I foresee only absence, anxiety, troubles, and obstacles.” *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. 44.

31 *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. 106.

32 “After all, there is nothing but failure.” Thomas Bernhard. *Yes: A Novel*. Translated by Ewald Osers. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992. 35.

33 Indeed, this is only further exacerbated by the frequent interposition of the third-party which renders the attainment of erotic proximity all the more elusive. “I must warn you,” writes Julie to Saint-Preux, “that we shall not go together into the arbour without the inseparable cousin.” *La Nouvelle Héloïse: Julie, or the New Eloise*. 51.

34 Ernest Newman. *Wagner Nights*. London: Bodley Head, 1988. 222.

35 *La Nouvelle Héloïse: Julie, or the New Eloise*. 180 & 193.

Loquela, or the Rhetoric of Degradation

Perhaps the most noticeable consequence of this deprivation is that amorous couples, within tales of courtly romance, find themselves subjected to a precarious and mediated form of relationality situated, more often than not, within the tremulous space of written discourse. “Whilst I am denied your presence, give me at least through your words – of which you have enough and to spare – some sweet semblance of yourself,”³⁶ writes Heloise to Abelard. Indeed, this emphasis upon the written word as an *ersatz* for physical immediacy comprises one of the most frequently recurring tropes within the courtly tableau. To the extent that the amorous couple find themselves bound to the cruel and unamenable “law of distances,”³⁷ they have little choice but to bestow upon the courtly missive an amplified significance. Not only does epistolary correspondence come to offer a crude, though nonetheless indispensable, approximation of immediacy; it also facilitates, just as importantly, the aestheticisation of the lover’s amorous sentiment. With each letter, the suffering writer seeks to draw forth, from the depths of his “eternal privation,”³⁸ a rhetorical testimony to the immensity of his longing.

In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes borrows from Ignatius of Loyola the term *loquela* to describe this “flux of language”³⁹ through which the courtly lover “tirelessly rehashes”⁴⁰ the extremity of his duress. For the courtly lover, every page becomes a chronicle of exquisite tortures which crystallises, through a rhetoric of degradation, the hopelessness of his plight. Consider, for example, the words which Rousseau’s protagonist, Saint-Preux, writes to his beloved: “My restless heart seeks you and

36 Letter 1: Heloise to Abelard. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. 116.

37 *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. 197.

38 *Ibid.*. 72..

39 *A Lover’s Discourse*. 160.

40 *Ibid.*. 160.

finds nothing...the sun rises and no longer gives me hope of seeing you.”⁴¹ The transmutation of amorous suffering into hyperbolic diction which we find in this passage constitutes, as numerous critics have noted, one of courtly love’s most instantaneously recognisable features.⁴² “The hallmark of the courtly lover,” writes Marc de Kesel, “resides in the degree of artistry with which he is able to express his desire for his inaccessible Lady.”⁴³ Bernard O’Donoghue goes ever further, claiming that “in nearly all cases, it seems that the courtly poet is more concerned with his feelings and the form he gives to his expression of them than with the object of his love in herself.”⁴⁴

The great irony, of course, is that despite its seeming ability to express the most unequivocal of amorous sentiments – even generating a semblance of real intimacy – the *billet-doux* remains ultimately powerless to overcome the distance which necessarily separates a writer from his addressee. As even the most cursory reading of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or *The Sorrows of Young Werther* makes abundantly clear, each love-letter only serves to reinforce the very persistence of mediation which it attempts to suppress. With every turn of phrase and tortured exclamation, the courtly lover can do no more than “perpetually circle *around* his Lady...constantly groping for still more signifiers”⁴⁵ in hopes of simulating, ever more closely, the bliss of physical contact and the torment of its incessant denial. Thus, the act of writing becomes inseparable from the movement of yearning itself, and the epistolary correspondence conducted between the amorous couple invariably assumes the tragic Lawrencean configuration: “...so many words, because I can’t touch you.”⁴⁶ It is this impossibility of *touching* – of sharing his beloved’s *pneuma* and consummating the act of love in a moment of absolute and eternal presence – which confirms for Saint-Preux the unremitting pathos of his endeavour. “A hundred times,” he claims, “I picked up and flung down my pen.”⁴⁷

41 *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. 193.

42 Hence Lacan’s claim that courtly love constitutes “a form of aesthetic sublimation.” *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. 142.

43 Marc de Kesel. *Ethics and Eros: Reading Jacques Lacan’s Seminar VII*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.. 177.

44 *Courtly Love Tradition*. 5.

45 *Ethics and Eros: Reading Jacques Lacan’s Seminar VII*. 183.

46 D.H. Lawrence. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. London: Penguin, 1961. 317.

47 *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. 159.

“The fulfilled lover would have no need to write..”

Even on the basis of these brief remarks, we can already begin to discern how the courtly ideal, or *cortezia*, differs radically from, say, the classical form of eroticism propagated by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. According to the latter account, amorous couples were originally unified, inextricably, in a single bodily form. Zeus, however, was jealous of the lovers' strength and power, and became further incensed when they mounted an insurrection against his authority. As punishment for their insubordination, the lovers' bodies were cruelly sundered into separate halves.⁴⁸ It is on this basis, then, that erotic longing within the classical tradition comes to be characterised by the nostalgic pursuit of a lost wholeness. Indeed, according to Aristophanes, the ultimate desire of every lover is to “melt together with the one he loves, so that one person might re-emerge from the two.”⁴⁹

This emphasis upon the restoration of a primordial unity stands in sharp contrast to the valorisation of inexorable deferral which we have identified with the courtly erotic scene. Whereas the amorous couple, within Aristophanes' myth, seek to reactualise a forgotten state of consummatory bliss, the courtly lover affirms the continual postponement of satisfaction as a means toward perpetuating his desire. As it turns out, the distinction between these two models of erotic relationality can be further drawn through a comparison of the differing values which they ascribe to speech and writing.

As we have just suggested, written correspondence plays an incredibly important role within the courtly scene. This is a result, quite naturally, of the injunction against immediacy which carefully circumscribes all encounters between the lover and his *domina*. “At the moment that social distance...increases to the point of becoming

48 Plato. *Symposium*. Translated by Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989. . 26.

49 *Ibid.*. 29.

absence, writing becomes necessary.”⁵⁰ Indeed, if presencing, as Jacques Derrida has painstakingly demonstrated, entails the simultaneity of thought and speech, *pneuma* and *logos* – then this is precisely what courtly eroticism denies us.⁵¹ It abjures the “eternal present”⁵² of the consummating word, substituting in its place a never-ending, proliferating series of detours and deferrals entrusted with prolonging the courtship.⁵³ And as long as this regimen of unfulfilment prevails, the lover’s compulsion to write remains irrepressible, with the importance of each written word seemingly increasing in direct proportion to the magnitude of distance which separates him from his *domina*.

Unsurprisingly, then, within the ideal state of consummatory immersion which Aristophanes so famously depicts, the intimacy of the spoken word, whispered amongst lovers eternally conjoined, would relegate the written signifier to redundancy. For, complete and utter proximity, such as the kind evoked by Aristophanes, expunges the very deficit of presence which necessitates the dissemination of amorous correspondence within the courtly tale. “Would not two souls so intimately united be able to have immediate communication between them?”⁵⁴ Indeed, finding himself engulfed within the absolute immediacy of his *domina*’s eternal embrace, “the fulfilled lover,” as Barthes suggests, “would no longer have any need to write.”⁵⁵

50 *Of Grammatology*. 281.

51 *Ibid.*. 18-21.

52 *Ibid.* 73.

53 André Gide’s *Strait is the Gate* develops this point in detail. Interestingly, Gide assigns to the traditionally passive *domina* the more assertive role within the romance; it is she (Alissa) who maintains and perpetuates the deployment of detours and deferrals entrusted with inexorably postponing the moment of consummation. She writes to Jerome: “I should be sorry to give you pain, but I have come to the point of no longer wanting your presence...” (71) Her priority, instead, is “to deliberately prolong [the] time of waiting.” (72) In her journal Alissa writes: “...I ask myself whether it is really happiness that I desire, so much as the progress toward happiness. Oh, Lord! Preserve me from a happiness to which I might too easily attain! Teach me to put off happiness...” (111) And in a final letter to Jerome: “As the day of our meeting comes near, I look forward to it with growing anxiety, almost with apprehension. I seem now to dread your coming that I so longed for; I try not to think of it; I imagine your ring at the bell, your step on the stairs, and my heart stops beating or hurts me...And whatever you do, don’t expect me to be able to speak to you.” [my emphasis] (76) André Gide. *Strait is the Gate*. Translated by Dorothy Bussy. London: Penguin Books, 1985. We cite these passages not because they belong within the inter-textual thread of works linking the Tristan myth to its transposition within the pages of Zarathustra (Gide’s novel was published nine years after Nietzsche’s death), but merely because they feature exemplary instances of courtly rhetoric. The use of silence as an impediment, or obstruction, within Alissa’s final letter to Jerome is particularly interesting given the fact that Nietzsche makes recourse to this very same courtly trope within the context of his various (abortive) presentations of the eternal return.

54 *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. 246.

55 *A Lover’s Discourse*. 56.

There can be no doubt, then, that the status of the written signifier is persistently devalued within the tableau of consummatory love. To borrow from Derrida, we might say that it is assigned only a *secondary* and *provisional* importance in comparison with the glorified primordially of pure speech. It is secondary, “due to the original and lost presence from which [it] derives”⁵⁶ – and provisional, “as concerns the final and missing presence toward which [it] is but a movement of mediation.”⁵⁷ In other words, the written signifier’s importance is limited to its ability to function as a compensatory stand-in for lost presence until the originary state of consummatory bliss can be regained.⁵⁸ Once the absolute proximity of the lover to his beloved is achieved, the signifier is rendered surplus to requirements and falls away, leaving only the naked transparency of the spoken voice.

This is further clarified in the following passage from *Speech and Phenomena*, where Derrida writes: “Ideally, in the teleological essence of speech, it would be possible for the signifier to be in absolute proximity to the signified aimed at within intuition and governing the meaning. The signifier would then become perfectly diaphanous due to its absolute proximity to the signified.”⁵⁹ To transpose Derrida’s semiotic lexicon into another register, we might say that the teleological coincidence of signifier and signified evoked in this passage is mirrored closely by the state of erotic reconciliation depicted within Aristophanes’ tale. In both cases, we encounter the elimination of all distance and the subsequent consolidation of pure presence. The ceaseless movement of courtly deferral, it seems, is vanquished.

And yet, as Derrida claims, this mythical proximity, which seems so imperious within the annals of Western eroticism, comes to be broken “at the very moment I see myself write.”⁶⁰ For the act of writing, through the very movement of differing and

56 “Différance.” 9.

57 Ibid.

58 This phrase: “the originary state of consummatory bliss” refers obliquely to both the plenitude of the signified and the fulfilment of erotic release. Insofar as both are characterised by absolute presence, they may be considered interchangeable for the remainder of this study. Cf. Derrida’s claim that “the formal essence of the signified is presence, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as phonē is the privilege of presence.” Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 18.

59 *Speech and Phenomena*. 80.

60 *Speech and Phenomena*. 80.

deferral which it engenders, destabilises the very heart of presence, displacing the presumed authority of the undivided voice and suspending its facile allocation of meaning.⁶¹ This movement, moreover, has always already been in play. Its anteriority with respect to every origin means that every signified “is always already in the position of the signifier.”⁶² Difference, as we have suggested in an earlier footnote, is then responsible for both conditioning *and* dislocating every supposed origin, casting it back, ceaselessly, into the anarchic.

Though much more could, and indeed shall be said on these matters, let us not be detained by them any further at the moment. Suffice it to say that *if* we accept, at least provisionally, the theses outlined above, our earlier depiction of the courtly lover, as an author of amorous correspondence, must now be importantly amended on at least one account. We have previously suggested that the lover’s compulsion to write arises as a direct response to his separation from his beloved. Now, however, we find that the act of writing itself *generates* this very distance which extenuates his torment. What follows from this is that the courtly lover might be seen to write *in response to the very distance* which he himself perpetuates – as if the hand which twisted the thorn inside him were ultimately his own. Indeed, this is precisely the strange and abyssal form of recursivity which characterises both the courtly lover’s plight *and* privilege: to write, as a concerted response to the deprivation of presence engendered by writing...



To summarise, then, the suspension of teleology inherent within the preceding account means that there can belong to courtly love no ultimate end or meaning beyond the inexorable and futile process that constitutes it: neither the sanctity of the marital vow nor the bliss of erotic consummation are ever granted. As a result, courtly lovers, if they are true to their name, unconditionally affirm the inexorable

61 “Différance.” 7-8.

62 *Of Grammatology*. 73.

forbearance of all fulfilment. They are relentless in pursuit of the impossible, toiling without repose – like authors of a work which incessantly unravels itself, precluding any completion.⁶³ Seduced by the promise of yearning’s indefinite intensification, the courtly lover awaits, with unyielding patience, the moment which never comes. Indeed, to the extent that they undergo a waiting exonerated from every teleological constraint, the amorous couple must be understood to remain faithful, ultimately, to nothing other than the incessant play of detour and deferral which prolongs the courtship. Absolute, unwavering faithfulness to the scenography of endless waiting – this is the highest, most ineluctable exigency for the practitioner of *domnei*.

And in the opinion of Denis de Rougemont, there is no myth or legend within Occidental culture which accords all of this a more stunning, paradigmatic sweep than the romance of Tristan and Isolde.⁶⁴ It is a startling concurrence, then, that of all Wagner’s works, it was precisely *Tristan and Isolde* which Nietzsche rated most highly. But what, precisely, was the nature of Nietzsche’s attraction to this piece of music? What was it that compelled him, in the final weeks of 1888, on the very eve of his *Umnachtung*, to declare it Wagner’s “*non plus ultra*,”⁶⁵ a work of incomparable genius “which has no parallel, not only in music but in all the arts?”⁶⁶ And, most importantly, to what extent can we discover within Nietzsche’s various aporetic configurations of the eternal return a critical transposition and scenographic staging of its central themes? In attempting to address these questions, we have at our disposal an extensive repertoire of published statements and anecdotal accounts spanning the length of Nietzsche’s adult life which incontestably demonstrate his profound and enduring fidelity to Wagner’s *Tristan* – a fidelity which would, of course, far outlast Nietzsche’s devotion to Wagner himself.

63 “I wanted the impossible,” admits Constant’s protagonist, rather succinctly, near the end of the text. *Adolphe*. 115.

64 Rougemont’s claims pertaining to the exemplarity of the Tristan myth may be found in *Love in the Western World*. 18-19.

65 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 93.

66 *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Christopher Middleton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969. 341.

This Anguish of Waking

By the time Wagner first encountered the Tristan myth in the mid-1840s, it had already passed through numerous iterations. In its earliest form, the story can be traced back to a pair of the twelfth century poems by Béroul and Thomas, neither of which has been preserved in its entirety. Toward the end of the twelfth century these two versions were consolidated into a single German text by Eilhart d'Oberge, a Saxon vassal of Henry the Lion, Duke of Brunswick.⁶⁷ It was then on the basis of this work that Gottfried von Strassburg, having “combined a little of the Eilhart with the main Thomas form,”⁶⁸ assembled the standard rendering of the Tristan romance upon which most of its modern adaptations, including the version compiled by Hermann Kurtz, were based.

It was through Kurtz's modern German rendering of Strassburg's tale that Wagner, during his perusal of mediaeval literatures in Dresden, first familiarised himself with the story of Tristan and Isolde.⁶⁹ Like many texts derived from lost or obscured sources, Kurtz's adaptation deviates, at times rather indulgently, from the versions which preceded it. It constitutes an “artistic rearrangement,” to use Rougemont's phrase, “of an archetype it is impossible to trace.”⁷⁰ Indeed, the exigencies of poetic license had compelled Kurtz to create “an ending of his own for the unfinished original”⁷¹ – and it was this very ending, suggestive of a “tremendous tragic drama,”⁷² which would so forcefully come to strike “light and fire into Wagner's imagination.”⁷³

67 Scholars have determined that in its details the Eilhart text “agrees more with that of Béroul than with that of Thomas.” See *Wagner Nights*. 182.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.* 200.

70 *Love in the Western World*. 19.

71 *Wagner Nights*. 200.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*

If the opera's ending remains to this day as legendary as it is genuinely evocative, then perhaps this is because the final words of Isolde's *Liebtestod*, the famous "*Unbewusst, höchste Lust*," resonate with an air of ecstatic, metaphysical finality which is truly unmatched within the storied lineage of German tragic drama. Nevertheless, it will be our claim, in the pages that follow, that far from presenting us with an unequivocal vision of consummate release, the final bars of Wagner's opera comes to evoke a scenography pervaded by radical indeterminacy and unresolved dramatic tension. As we will show, even the transfiguring moment of death which Tristan and Isolde so ardently desire remains somehow powerless to contain and arrest the tireless movement of courtly deferral.

Let us begin to unfold these ideas in greater detail. To begin with, it is important to note that the interest bestowed upon the legend of Tristan and Isolde by both Wagner and later by Nietzsche serves as testimony, among other things, to its unsurpassable *plasticity* as an erotic myth. The characterisation which we discover within the Tristanian scenography is minimal and flat, whilst the story's narrational trajectory remains, at all times, strictly episodic – in other words, there is seemingly no plot development which fails to serve the purpose of intensifying, in one form or another, the lovers' yearning and subsequent despair. All of this combines to engender a story which is both easily appropriable and eminently mutable. What matters is not the precise circumstances which augment the lovers' yearning, but simply the fact that it remains utterly unfulfilled. In developing this theme, Wagner deploys an incomparably extensive repertoire of courtly tropes, each one precipitating a range of exquisite failures and impossibilities which all serve the single purpose of endlessly postponing the tale's denouement and extenuating the lovers' suffering.

Even from the earliest stages of Wagner's opera, we find Tristan and Isolde hopelessly ensnared within an erotic scenography predicated upon distance, obstruction, and the irremissible futility of continuous deferral in which every grasping is coupled with an inevitable relinquishing.⁷⁴ "Destined for me, lost to me

74 Tristan: "How to grasp, how to relinquish, this bliss..." (Act II, Scene 2)

[*mir erkoren, mir verloren*],⁷⁵ exclaims a listless Isolde, in Act I, bound to a love which, for any number of reasons, cannot be satisfactorily consummated. There is, of course, the issue of her marital debt to King Mark, as well as the continual intrusion, especially early in the opera, of the third person who invariably forecloses any prospect of intimacy – but these narrational contrivances only mask the deeper cause of Isolde’s constant suffering: the inescapable irreducibility of her spatio-temporal individuation which precludes her from achieving, along with her lover, the desired moment of unmediated erotic consummation. After imbibing the *Liebestrank*, the amorous couple are left powerless in the face of a truly unrestrainable longing which seeks to flow beyond all bounds. And it is for this very reason that spatio-temporal individuation is so incredibly pernicious – it constrains and obstructs the boundless movement of *Eros*, rendering even the smallest gap between them, ultimately, insurmountable.⁷⁶ The resulting pathos is famously evoked in a passage from Act II, Scene 2:

Isolde: How long apart! How far apart so long!

Tristan: How far [*weit*] when near [*nah*]! How near when afar!

[...]

Isolde: Dragging length of sluggish hours[*Träger Zeiten zögernde Länge*]!

Tristan: O distance (*Weit*) and nearness (*Nähe*), harshly divided!

[...] Blessed nearness, tedious (*öde*) distance!

It is important to note that the recrimination of distance (*Weit*) in this excerpt involves, as we have suggested, both a spatial and a temporal component. On one hand, Tristan and Isolde are mourning the impossibility of ever attaining the absolute spatial proximity which is continuously denied them on account of their bodily individuation. On the other hand, the invective against distance also assumes a temporal accent insofar as the instant of ecstatic union, which they so ardently

75 Act I, Scene 2.

76 We are anticipating here the words of Zarathustra’s “The Night Song”: the smallest chasm is the last to be bridged. As long as distance (in any shape or form) is allowed to persist, the lovers’ yearning for total consummatory immersion will be stifled.

seek, is indefinitely postponed by the “dragging length of sluggish hours.” Not only are the lovers deprived of propinquity and coital release, but even more cruelly, this tedious (*öde*) deprivation comes to be drawn-out, inexorably, along a temporal axis lacking any *telos*. Insofar as the pathos of irremediable spatial distance is made to persist without any end in sight (a situation which compels the courtly narrative to replenish itself through ever more insurmountable postponements), the scenography of yearning comes to resemble, more and more, “a series of no exits”⁷⁷ – a labyrinthine circuit bereft of both meaning and completion.

The torment of such a configuration is readily apparent, for if consummatory unification comes to be unremittingly forestalled in this manner, then the lovers’ only hope seems to reside in the promise of somehow transcending the scenography of spatio-temporal distancing altogether. In other words, as Tristan and Isolde gradually come to acknowledge the impossibility of erotic fulfilment, an overbearing *Weltschmerz* begins to take hold. And it is at this very point that Tristan’s yearning becomes subject to a subtle, almost imperceptible, transposition. His desire for Isolde is unwavering – but insofar as he must increasingly accept the realisation of her unattainability in *this world*, the boundlessness of his yearning leaves him with no choice other than to posit *another world* in which his yearning for her may finally come to be sated. Along these lines, the moment of death increasingly presents itself as a fortuitous conduit between the world of incessant deferral and the world of consummatory bliss. Incapable of attenuating the courtly scenography in any satisfactory manner, the amorous couple begin to idealise the ever-elusive prospect of gaining, by whatever means possible, eternal respite from “the anguish of waking.”⁷⁸

Indeed, Nietzsche will come to describe this situation with great acuity in the pages of *Zarathustra*, when he writes that “suffering [*Leiden*]...incapacity [*Unvermögen*] ...and weariness [*Müdigkeit*] that wants to attain the ultimate [*Letzten*] in a single leap, in a leap of death...is what created all worlds behind [*Hinterwelten*].”⁷⁹ The words which Nietzsche deploys here – *Leiden*, *Unvermögen*, and *Müdigkeit* – are

77 *A Lover’s Discourse*. 142.

78 Thomas Mann. “Tristan.” *Death in Venice & Other Stories*. London: Vintage Classics, 1998. 119.

79 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 28.

each ubiquitous tropes within Wagner's courtly economy; they evoke the despondency of a lover hopelessly bound to the eroticism of constant deferral. If we recall, moreover, that the word *Letzten* is etymologically related to *letztlich*, meaning "in the end" – then Nietzsche's meaning becomes even clearer. The courtly lover's fabulation of *Hinterwelten* is a direct consequence of his desperate need to impose a *telos* upon the trajectory of forbearance which indefinitely extenuates his torment.⁸⁰ Deprived of consummation and fulfilment, he transfers his yearning away from the *domina* and unto death itself in hopes of transcending the world of spatio-temporal distances and attaining "highest bliss [*höchste Lust*]." ⁸¹

Thus, the story's central conflict, in summarised form, can be seen to revolve around the lovers' continual, tragically unsuccessful attempts at transcending the unamenable spatio-temporal injunction which renders erotic release impossible. And on this point, rather importantly, Wagner's own metaphysical commitments are brought to the forefront. For, though it would be presumptuous to suppose any work of art capable of embodying, transparently and unproblematically, the tenants of a philosophical doctrine – it is interesting to note that the very beginning of Wagner's work upon *Tristan and Isolde* coincided, by the composer's own admittance, with a sustained immersion into the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

80 "When the poor, defenceless man is tortured by need," writes Lacan, "the first thing he does is to begin to hallucinate his satisfaction..."
The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. 138.

81 Act III, Scene 3.

Threshold of Renunciation

On December 16, 1854, in a letter to Franz Liszt, Wagner writes: “I have now become exclusively preoccupied with a man who – albeit only in literary form – has entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven. It is *Arthur Schopenhauer*, the greatest philosopher since *Kant*.”⁸² Only a few sentences later, Wagner references his newest musical composition, still in its germinal form. “I have planned in my head a *Tristan and Isolde*,” Wagner writes, “the simplest, but most full-blooded musical conception; with the ‘black flag’ which flutters at the end, I shall then cover myself over, in order – to die.”⁸³ That Wagner should have, from the very beginning, so strongly identified himself with Tristan’s fate,⁸⁴ and that the moment of this identification should have coincided with his immersion into Schopenhauerian metaphysics – seems a revelatory concurrence which goes a long way toward explaining how the desire for death and transfiguration came to permeate the later stages of the opera. For insofar as the scenography of *Tristan and Isolde* upholds and sustains, at all times, the incontrovertible law of courtly deferral and distancing, it necessarily engenders, within the amorous couple, an obsessive yearning for salvation and release. And it is this spirit of renunciation which we find so laboriously promulgated within *The World as Will and Representation*.

82 *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. Translated and Edited by Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington. London: Dent, 1987. 323.

83 Ibid. 323. Editor’s Note: “In certain versions of the Tristan legend, Isolde’s vessel bears a white flag as a token of her imminent arrival at her lover’s sick-bed; Tristan’s wife falsely gives out the colour as black, with the result that Tristan dies of grief. The motif was not used in the opera.”

84 Indeed, Wagner’s own courtship of a married woman during the time of his initial compositional work upon Tristan suggests that the opera, at least initially, may have been conceived as a kind of psychodramatic staging of his romantic despondency at the time. As Stewart Spender and Barry Millington write: “At the beginning of 1857, Wagner’s wealthy friend Otto Wesendonck offered him, apparently at the urging of his wife Mathilde, tenancy of a small house and garden adjoining the villa that was being built for him in the Zurich suburb of Enge...When the Wesendoncks moved into their villa in August 1857 the closeness of Wagner to Mathilde caused the tender feelings they had long held for each other to develop into a more serious relationship. Immediately before this, Wagner had diverted his creative energies from Siegfried to Tristan and Isolde, and the two lovers idealised their passion by identifying it with that portrayed in the latter music drama.” *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. 166-7.

As Wagner intimates in his letter to Liszt, Schopenhauer's philosophical project comprised both a critical revitalisation of Kantian metaphysics as well as a bold attempt at exceeding its carefully measured limits. Whilst he notably rejects the obsessive symmetries and structural contrivances of Kant's Table of Categories,⁸⁵ Schopenhauer accepts without hesitation the fundamental, Kantian delineation between the products of consciousness and the realm of things-in-themselves. It is in the process of explicating the precise nature of this metaphysical dualism, however, that Schopenhauer's decisive break from the narrowly-delimited contours of *The Critique of Pure Reason* truly becomes apparent. For, in stark contrast to Kant's rather famous insistence that the thing-in-itself must be considered empirically unknowable, Schopenhauer elects to specify the primordial effusion of the will [*Wille*] as the very nature of noumenal reality. Placing it beyond the constraints of space and time, Schopenhauer unequivocally stipulates its eternal and immutable presence.⁸⁶

And it is on the basis of this distinction between the spatio-temporal and the eternal, that Schopenhauer's metaphysical dualism can be most indelibly grasped. For, having appropriated, in its entirety, Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic,⁸⁷ Schopenhauer proceeds to argue that the scintillating transience of mere representation [*Vorstellung*], in contrast to the unitary world of will, is "necessarily conditioned by space and time, and conceivable only in them."⁸⁸ In other words, despite remaining pure idealities, space and time operate as the *principium individuationis* for all representations whatsoever, performing the crucial task of maintaining universal distances and relations amongst a vast plurality of individuated entities.⁸⁹ To do away with space and time, therefore, would be tantamount to annulling the "the plurality of the homogenous."⁹⁰ It would be to dissolve, all at once, the entire

85 In his "Criticism of Kantian Philosophy," Schopenhauer is unrelenting in his excoriation of Kant's transcendental categories, calling them "the fearful Procrustean bed on to which he violently forces all things in the world and everything that occurs in man." Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Toronto: Dover Publications, 1958. 430.

86 Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation* (Everyman). London: Everyman Paperback, 1995. 59.

87 The Transcendental Aesthetic, according to Schopenhauer, "has such a complete power of conviction that its propositions must be numbered among the incontestable truths. They are to be regarded as that rarest thing in the world, a real and great discovery in metaphysics." *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*. 437.

88 *The World as Will and Representation* (Everyman). 59.

89 Ibid..

90 *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*. 331.

scenography of distance and mediation.

Because an object's desirability, at least within the Schopenhauerian schema, is predicated upon its spatio-temporal distance from the one who yearns for it, any suspension of the *principium individuationis* would also have the additional consequence of attenuating the movement of inexorable longing which universally pervades the great drama of human existence. It is no surprise, then, that the prospect of transcending the implacable fetters of space and time should come to constitute, for Tristan and Isolde, a vision of the highest bliss. And yet, its price is steep. For in order to attain this desired state of consummatory immediacy, according to Schopenhauer, one must turn away from life itself and seek the utter abnegation of the will. The path to ultimate fulfilment, as Tristan and Isolde soon realise, leads ineluctably through the gates of death and renunciation.⁹¹

And it is at this very moment that we find, in addition to the courtly ideal, with its emphasis on indefinite postponement, the emergence of a competing ideal within the Tristan narrative – one which privileges, above all, the moment of erotic consummation and the attainment of blissful release. The distinction between these two ideals is unmistakable. To the former, there belongs a performative affirmation of non-recuperable expenditure and *coitus reservatus*; whilst to the latter there belongs a deep yearning for the thing-in-itself and the eternal *gloire* of abiding presence. Whilst, the former ideal upholds and sustains the irrevocability of mediation, the latter seeks to dispense with distance altogether, continuously extolling the sanctifying promise of “eternal union.”⁹²

91 Despite the unquestionable debt of influence, Wagner ultimately diverges from the Schopenhauer when he argues that love (along with pity) is “among the means human beings have at their disposal from overcoming their wills.” This idea, as Georges Liébert reminds us, “was completely foreign to Schopenhauer, who easily lost his temper on hearing the word ‘love,’ and who saw in it merely a ruse that the will uses to ensure the perpetuation of the species...” Indeed, according to Ronald Gray, “the paradox of love beyond self-annihilation is something Schopenhauer never contemplated...” See *Nietzsche and Music* (pg. 149) and *The Wagner Companion* (pg. 51).

92 In a programme note, Wagner himself offers us the following elucidation: “What fate divided in two now springs into transfigured life in death...eternal union in measureless space, without barriers, without fetters, inseparable.” *Wagner Nights*. 218.

Within the scenography of *Tristan and Isolde*, the juxtaposition between these two opposing ideals comes to be dramatically rendered through the contrapuntal alternation, so masterfully deployed by Wagner, between the competing imagery of light and darkness. The luminosity of day, as we will show, evokes the courtship of *domnei* and the proliferating series of detours and postponements which prohibit the amorous pair from ever consummating their love; the oblivion of night, meanwhile, serves as an emblem for the attenuation of erotic deferral and the suppression of all spatio-temporal distancing. As Thomas Mann tells us, “the sacred night...is eternal and true, and unifies all that has been separated.”⁹³

So compelling is the seduction of consummatory release, that we find Tristan and Isolde, in the middle of Act II, apostrophising the night with an almost unrestrained ardour: “O sink down upon us / night of love / make me forget / I live: / take me into your bosom, / free me from the world!”⁹⁴ Insofar as they remain immersed within the unrelenting radiance of daylight – exposed to “the star of day (*Taggestirnes*)...shining in barren splendour (*in öder Pracht schimmernd*)”⁹⁵ – the amorous couple are condemned to rehearse, endlessly, the torturous postponements of courtly deferral. The incomparable attraction of the night, then, lies in its ability to secure for them eternal respite from “the anguish of waking”⁹⁶ and liberation from the illusory world of individuated existence which perpetuates their insatiable longing. It symbolises fusion “with all barriers gone”⁹⁷ – in other words, absolute continuity and the end of all mediation and distancing.

In addition to the aforementioned influence of Schopenhauer, there can be no doubt that Wagner’s usage of this particular image repertoire incontrovertibly demonstrates an aesthetic indebtedness to Novalis, whose work from the very turn of the nineteenth century is similarly imbued with vivid textures of light and darkness.⁹⁸ Indeed, there is perhaps no work of literary Romanticism which provides a more

93 Thomas Mann. “Tristan.” 118.

94 Act II, Scene 2.

95 Ibid.

96 Thomas Mann. “Tristan.” 119.

97 Georges Bataille. *Eroticism*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. London: Boyars, 1987. 129.

98 This symbolic representation of the night as “the womb of revelation” is also echoed in the works of both Schleiermacher and Holderlin. See Bruce Haywood. *Novalis: The Veil of Imagery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959. 67.

evocative portrayal of the nocturnal element as a symbolic avatar for the blissful amelioration of earthly suffering than Novalis' famous "Hymns to the Night."⁹⁹ A closer look at the ascendancy of the consummatory ideal within this text will enable us to appreciate more fully the decisive importance which luminous and nocturnal imagery come to assume within the Wagnerian tableau.

Love's Hidden Sacrifice

The personal travails undergone by Novalis in the years immediately preceding the publication of "Hymns to the Night" are well-known and need little elaboration. In March, 1797, less than two months before the poet's twenty-sixth birthday, his young fiancée, Sophie von Kühn, tragically succumbed to tuberculosis. Sadly, the experience of losing her would not cease, for the remaining four years of his life, to haunt both him and his work. Several weeks after her death, whilst visiting Sophie's grave, we are told that Novalis underwent an epiphanic mystical experience in which "the immortal entelechy of his betrothed...became his guide in the supersensible worlds that were revealed to him."¹⁰⁰ From this point on, the physical world apparently evinced little allure for him and the painful contingencies of everyday life found themselves overshadowed, literally, by the promise of an eternal reconciliation with his beloved. As Novalis writes, in the following excerpt, the vision of mystical transcendence coalesced around none other than the salvific and sanctifying image of the night:

⁹⁹ The completed text of "Hymns to the Night" was published in the literary journal *Athenaeum* in August, 1800.

¹⁰⁰ Sergei O. Prokofieff. Foreword. *Hymns to the Night & Spiritual Songs*. Translated by George MacDonald. London: Temple Lodge, 1992. 2.

“Once when I was shedding bitter tears, when, dissolved in pain, my hope was melting away, and I stood alone by the barren hillock which in its narrow dark bosom hid the vanished form of my Life, lonely as never yet was lonely man, driven by anguish unspeakable [*unsäglicher Angst*], powerless [*kraftlos*], and immersed in conscious misery; there I looked about me for help, unable to go on or to turn back, and clung to the fleeting, extinguished life [*verlöschten Leben*] with an endless longing [*unendlicher Sehnsucht*]; then, out of the blue distances [*Fernen*], from the hills of my ancient bliss, came a shiver of twilight and at once snapped the bond of birth, the fetter of the Light. Away fled the glory of the world, and with it my mourning; the sadness flowed together into a new, unfathomable world. Thou, soul of the Night, heavenly Slumber, didst come upon me...and ever since I hold fast an eternal, unchangeable faith in the heaven of the Night, and its sun, the Beloved [*die Geliebte*].”¹⁰¹

Immediately discernable, within this passage, is the dramatic ascendancy of a certain teleological principle which seeks to express itself through Novalis’ explicit glorification of consummatory release.¹⁰² Powerless [*kraftlos*] in the face of a spatio-temporal distance which extenuates itself indefinitely, and filled with endless longing [*unendlicher Sehnsucht*] for an amorous object beyond his reach, the poetic speaker suddenly finds himself fortuitously enveloped by twilight. In the midst of this “everlasting [*zeitlos*] and boundless [*raumlos*]... dominion of the Night,”¹⁰³ the scenography of distancing is mercifully suspended. Here, in this saturating and immersive darkness, the lover and his *domina* are unified at last, brought together in the abiding restfulness of eternal, unmediated presence. Space and time, amidst this billowy darkness, lose all traction: the *principium individuationis* is overthrown.¹⁰⁴

101 Novalis. *Hymns to the Night & Spiritual Songs*. Translated by George MacDonald. London: Temple Lodge, 1992. 12.

102 According to Bruce Haywood, the “Hymns to the Night” evoke a “fervent longing for mystic union...expressed in boldly erotic imagery that suggests the vaporous commingling of the lovers in an eternity of passionate embrace...” *Novalis: The Veil of Imagery*. Gravenhage: Mouton, 1959. 57.

103 “Hymns to the Night.” II.

104 To yearn for the ultimate is to yearn for noumenal. For a compelling account of Novalis’ reevaluation of Isis symbolism in “The Hymns to the Night,” see Chapter 7 of Kristin Pfefferkorn’s *Novalis: A Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

All that remains is the unending, consummatory bliss of two lovers finally intermingling as one within a domain where “light no more scares away Night and Love...”¹⁰⁵

Having prioritised, in this manner, the notion of a redemptive and reconciliatory darkness, it is crucial to emphasise that Novalis, like Wagner’s Tristan, increasingly finds himself adopting the rhetoric of an unmistakable asceticism and world-weariness. In the midst of the night, “the word is void [*leer*].”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, nowhere is this theme more prominent than in the section entitled “Sehnsucht nach dem Tode,” where Novalis writes: “I feel in me a celestial exhaustion [*Müdigkeit*]...Long [*Weit*] and weariful [*ermügend*] was my pilgrimage to the holy grave, and crushing was the cross.”¹⁰⁷ What, we might ask, is this arduous path which, having been traversed, has exhausted the speaker of all his strength? It is, of course, none other than the *Via Dolorosa* of life itself, lived in forbearance and deprivation, punctuated by unbridgeable distances and inexorable deferrals. As long as the promise of consummatory release is continually forestalled, the grieving lover can do nothing to restrain his desperate cry: “Must the morning always return [*wiederkommen*]? Will the despotism of the earthly never cease...Will the time never come when Love’s hidden sacrifice shall burn eternally?”¹⁰⁸

The solution to this affliction, both for Novalis and Wagner’s Tristan, lies within the incomparable succour of twilight, which banishes the world to oblivion, restoring the primordial unity of all things. It attenuates the everlasting return of insatiable longing, assuaging the agony of interminable postponement which characterises life within the world of daylight. Understood in these terms, the spirit of profound adulation with which Novalis addresses the night becomes understandable. “In this sorrow-laden life [*Schattenleben*], I desire only thee,” the poet writes, “in thee I hope for healing [*genesen*], in thee I expect true rest.”¹⁰⁹ This account of reconciliation in transcendence, with its emphasis upon the exonerating of life by the redeeming

105 “Hymns to the Night.” 13.

106 *Ibid.* 23.

107 “Hymns to the Night.” 13.

108 *Ibid.* 11.

109 *Ibid.* 20.

powers of death, dates back, with minor variations, to Anaximander,¹¹⁰ whilst receiving undoubtedly its most comprehensive presentation (as we have already mentioned) in the works of Schopenhauer.¹¹¹ It is symptomatic, according to Nietzsche, of a *passive nihilism* which afflicts debilitated and despondent life-forms, seducing them with the promise of a consummate and enduring release from the torments of existence.

One can only imagine the immensity of sorrow which would have compelled Novalis, in the aftermath of Sophie's death, to seek, with such blind passion, this immersion within the nocturnal element. What is clear, however, is that the night constitutes, for Novalis, a symbol *par excellence* for all that is holy [*heiligen*], unspeakable [*unaussprechlichen*], and mysterious [*geheimnisvollen*]¹¹² – it suggests the overcoming of all metaphysical oppositions and the attenuation of yearning [*Sehnsucht*]. It evokes, in other words, the consummatory (or teleological) ideal's triumph over the cruel regimen of incessant deferral and distancing which had characterised the relentless luminosity of the day. If human existence is commensurate with endless suffering and the impossibility of attaining ultimate release, then it is only through the salvific intervention of the night that an antidote to this torment may be found.

Returning to the Tristanian scenography, we now find ourselves in a position to appreciate more fully the preponderance of luminous and nocturnal imagery which Wagner elects to deploy. Insofar as the amorous couple are made to endure “the sun's scorching beams”¹¹³ and “the devouring heat of the glow,”¹¹⁴ they suffer the torment of unbridgeable distances and inevitable postponements. They remain relegated, moreover, to the cruel irreducibility of their own spatio-temporal individuation within a world of mere semblances and signifiers. *So many words, because I can't touch you* – goes the lovers' lament. And yet, in every case, the

110 For Anaximander, “existence becomes...a moral phenomenon...It is not justified, but expiates itself forever through its passing.” Friedrich Nietzsche. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. Translated by Marianne Cowan. Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1962. 49.

111 Cf. “On the Doctrine of the Denial of the Will-to-Live” in *The World as Will and Representation*. In this chapter, Schopenhauer writes that man's “original sin...is in fact the affirmation of the will-to-live; on the other hand, the denial of this will...is salvation.” Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation, Volume II*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1958. 608.

112 “Hymns to the Night.” 9.

113 Act III, Scene 1.

114 Act III, Scene 1.

inexorable persistence of the signifying chain (and the distance it presupposes) induces a malaise which can be attenuated only through the intervention of the signified and the re-emergence of the primordial whole.¹¹⁵ Not unlike the ancient Romans who adorned their tombstones with the words “*Securitati perpetuae*” and “*Bonae quieti*,”¹¹⁶ Tristan and Isolde invariably end up seduced by the promise of eternal repose and fulfilment, preferring to will even nothingness rather than endure the indefinite prolongation of what Proust will call the “incurable malady”¹¹⁷ of erotic love.

As a result, we find Tristan, in each of the opera’s three acts, “deliberately seeking death”¹¹⁸ as a means of gaining release from the *atopia of despondency*. “*Sehnen! Sehnen!*” he exclaims in Act III, “To yearn! To yearn! What never dies [*nie erstirbt*] now calls, yearning, to the distant physician for the peace of death [*sterbens Ruh*].”¹¹⁹ This yearning for the peace of death profoundly echoes the spirit of adulation with which Novalis, in the following lines, had earlier apostrophised the night: “In this sorrow-laden life [*Schattenleben*], I desire only thee...in thee I hope for healing [*genesen*], in thee I expect true rest.”¹²⁰ Indeed, within this semiotic of latent world-weariness, the “long-awaited restoration [*selige Rückkehr*]”¹²¹ which is sought can only be granted through the succour of twilight which banishes the world to oblivion, negating earthly existence once and for all. In this state of absolute *Verklärung*, the inexorable postponements and delays which characterise the courtly scenography are terminated at last.¹²² The consummatory fantasy *par excellence* may finally be realised: two lovers, “heart to heart [*Herz an Herz*], lip to lip...bound together in a single breath.”¹²³ A fantasy whose evocative force remains supreme.

115 Consider Lacan’s claim that “the subject...suffers from the signifier.” *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. 143.

116 *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*. 492.

117 Marcel Proust. *The Captive*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin. New York: Random House, 1997. 105.

118 “First when he accepts what he believes to be death in the cup Isolde proffers him, then when he lowers his own sword before the thrust of Melot’s, and finally at the end of the drama when he tears the bandages from his wounds and dies in her arms.” *Wagner Nights*. 248.

119 Act III, Scene I.

120 “Hymns to the Night.” 20.

121 *Ibid.* 14.

122 It is important to remember that in the early sketches of Tristan and Isolde the lovers’ death-scene, the so-called Liebestod, was actually entitled *Verklärung*, or “Transfiguration.” *Wagner Nights*. 218.

123 Act II, Scene 2.

“Four Hours of Unresolved Chromaticism”

Could it be, then, that we had been horribly mistaken in considering *Tristan and Isolde* an archetypal exemplar of courtly romance? Might Wagner’s opera be understood, more accurately, as one in which the courtly ideal progressively finds itself overshadowed by a desire for consummatory, or teleological, fulfilment? On the surface, we would certainly be forgiven for assuming as much. Indeed, nothing seems to corroborate this possibility more strongly than the opera’s famous, final words: *Unbewusst, höchste Lust* – which evoke a spirit of the deepest abnegation. Understandably, numerous writers have taken this opportunity to privilege the theme of “resolution in death”¹²⁴ within Wagner’s opera. As Joseph Kerman insists, “the continual surging, shifting, renewing, interrupting, and aspiring ceases”¹²⁵ upon the intonation of Isolde’s final phrase. In the opera’s concluding bars, the darkness of consummatory twilight seems, moreover, to inundate the entire scenography – commending the amorous couple into the arms of a blissful nothingness. It is on this basis that Michael Tanner, in his essay, “The Total Work of Art,” perhaps justifiably elects to classify Wagner’s *Tristan* as “the most ascetic of tales.”¹²⁶

And yet, despite these intimations of consummatory fulfilment, we cannot ignore the fact that Wagner himself, on numerous occasions, expressly insisted that the movement of erotic deferral within his opera was to be considered radically insurmountable – even by the forces of death itself. As he writes, in a programme note from October, 1857, the story of Tristan and Isolde expresses “a single emotion:

124 Michael Tanner. “The Total Work of Art.” *The Wagner Companion*. Edited by Peter Burbidge. London: Faber, 1979. 188.

125 Joseph Kerman. “Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*: Opera as Symphonic Poem.” *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. Edited by Joan Tasker Grimbert. London: Routledge, 2002. 374.

126 *Wagner Nights*. 198.

that of longing *without* satisfaction or end.”¹²⁷ This longing “begins in the Prelude with the ‘Tristan Akkord’ and is sustained throughout the opera by a technique that can only be described as a dissonance *delaying* the final consequence that is awaited...”¹²⁸ The result of this delay is “four hours of unresolved chromaticism”¹²⁹ which evokes, in musical form, the unremitting turbulence of a perennially unsatisfied longing.

The emotional tumult engendered by this continual deferral of satisfaction gradually accumulates until Tristan, by the beginning of Act III, is compelled at last to acknowledge his unenviable and eternal burden. It is not the dread of dying which besets him; but rather, something infinitely more strange and agonising: the prescience of death’s impossibility. “That I should never die /but be left in eternal torment [*Qual!*]”¹³⁰ laments Tristan. Thus, in a final, magisterial *coup*, Wagner dramatically rescinds the offer of a salvific and libratory death, pulling the proverbial rug out from under the lovers’ feet. Despite all their passionate exhortations, the instant of death, in its abiding finality, must always elude them. Rather than erecting a monument to the eternal perseverance of the metaphysical *whole*, Wagner offers us an artistic rendering of erotic despondency carried to its furthest extreme: a depiction of yearning, ceaseless and without origin, perpetuating itself without any possibility of being fulfilled.

And it is precisely this sentiment which elicits from Tristan, in Act III, the opera’s most concerted outpouring of pathos: “No healing / sweet death [*süsser Tod*] / can ever free me / from the pain of yearning [*Sehnsucht Not*]. / Nowhere, ah nowhere / can I find rest [*Ruh*]. / Night casts me / back to day / so that the sun can for ever feast / its sight upon my suffering [*Leiden*].”¹³¹ What we encounter in this remarkable passage is once again Wagner’s appropriation of Novalisian imagery – only here, rather than praising the night’s salvific efficacy, he leaves Tristan to lament its profound impotence. Death would indeed be the sweetest thing, the most desirable thing – if only it were still possible! Midnight, as it turns out, is but “a

127 Ibid. 219.

128 Joan Tasker Grimbert. “Introduction.” *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. lvii.

129 “Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*: Opera as Symphonic Poem.” 376.

130 Act III, Scene 1.

131 Act III, Scene 1.

dissimulated midday,¹³² and the promised moment of eternal consummation is inevitably given over to the futility of incessant deferral. The blinding luminosity of the day pierces through to the very heart of darkness, exposing as fraudulent the pretence of teleological fulfilment in all its myriad forms: “nothing ends, everything begins again.”¹³³ Consequently, the maddening perspicacity of the lovers’ attempts to conjure eternal darkness must all invariably come to naught. For at the very stroke of midnight, as Tristan and Isolde leap, with feverish expectancy, into the arms of their *höchste Lust*, their hopes of absolute release are once more dashed by an exigency more powerful than death itself – an exigency so extreme and terrifying that Nietzsche would later have cause to name it *Das grösste Schwergewicht*. It is none other than the injunction to relive the entire scene and spectacle of one’s existence an infinite number of times, to discover at every supposed end nothing but a recommencement of sorrow.¹³⁴

Indeed, this exigency of perpetual recommencement pervades the entirety of *Tristan and Isolde*, shaping and configuring its scenographic space from the first to the last note. As a pre-eminent Wagner scholar writes:

“The music in and by itself shapes their total stage life into a kind of ring, a circle in which there is no apposition of starting-point and finish; the strain of longing is the first sound that greets our ears in the prelude, and it is the last to resound in them in the opera; and, as with a ring, it is equally appropriate to say that the work begins where it ends as that it ends where it began.”¹³⁵

Taken in this light, the death of the amorous couple must be considered, from the perspective of such an eternal recurrence, a false denouement. For if the narrative arc of Wagner’s opera is, in fact, no arc at all – but rather a circle – then the moment of *consummation in death* which Tristan so ardently seeks is no more than a fleeting mirage, a simulacra. Everything begins again insofar as the teleological finality of

132 *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

133 *Ibid.*

134 Thus, as the novelist Ann Quin once wrote, “death-devoted Tristan is continually haunted by a world he can neither take nor leave.” Ann Quin. *Tripticks*. London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1972. 189.

135 *Wagner Nights*. 215.

death is eternally postponed. For in the absence of any terminating point, the trajectory of courtly deferral ceaselessly returns upon itself – as if someone were to call out, incessantly, at the very moment of fulfilment: *De Capo!*¹³⁶ Indeed, this is a point which Wagner seemed to have grasped with particular clarity, as evidenced by his programme notes to the Paris concerts of 1860, where he describes the romance of Tristan and Isolde as a tale “of unquenchable longing and languishing forever renewing itself.”¹³⁷ Despite the lovers’ every attempt at securing the blissful tranquillity of consummatory repose, they remain confronted, at every moment, by the universe’s inexorable reverberation: “In vain!”¹³⁸ Consigned to the fathomless futility of eternal recurrence, Tristan and Isolde are compelled, without remittance, “to pine away in a longing that can never attain its end...”¹³⁹ Neither the joy of coitus, nor the consolation of death finds admittance within this scenography of “hopeless love.”¹⁴⁰



As we move forward, then, it is important for us not to forget this strange indeterminacy that we have come to discover within Isolde’s famous final words: *Unbewusst, höchste Lust* – words which seem to suggest, at one and the same time, both the arrival of a long-awaited consummation *and* the prescience of eternal recommencement; both the impending promise of release *and* the passion of the infinite. If the tradition of German romanticism, as Blanchot will later suggest, seeks in death, above all, “a return to the transfigured whole [*l’état total transfiguré*],”¹⁴¹ then there can be no doubt that Wagner’s opera carries this tendency to the point of its most paradigmatic exemplification. It is undoubtedly a work of the most

136 The reference here is to *Beyond Good and Evil* § 56.

137 *Wagner Nights*. 219.

138 *Ibid.*

139 *Ibid.*

140 *Ibid.* 218.

141 *The Space of Literature*. 111.

thorough-going romanticism. And yet, the sullen terror of endlessness which is simultaneously announced, here, already seems to draw us toward the point of romanticism's limit, to the point where, beyond the yearning for reconciliation and accomplishment, a new and unprecedented yearning might perhaps assert itself.

What makes *Tristan and Isolde* such an exemplary work of art is thus the manner in which it seems to offer its audience, side by side, two separate narratives, two separate tales – one culminating in presence, satiety, and release; and another, in which the tireless movement of courtly deferral remains utterly unvanquished. It is a work which pushes the longing for amorous proximity and consummation to its furthest point possible, whilst also offering us, at the same time, an account of absolute and unrelenting erotic forbearance.

And it was precisely this latter tendency which, as we will show, came to captivate Nietzsche so profoundly in the years immediately following his initial exposure to the piece. For what he increasingly came to see, within this regimen of endless deferral and distancing, was nothing less than a most valuable implement to be used in the struggle against romanticism itself – and not only romanticism, but the entire tradition of nihilistic, consummatory thinking stretching back to Plato. Where thinkers, poets, and philosophers had for so long raised the affirmation of fusional reconciliation to the highest summit of erotic life, Nietzsche would ultimately seek to affirm something even more extreme, “something higher than any reconciliation.”¹⁴²

But what, we might ask, could be more extreme than a desire for death and reconciliation? Nietzsche's answer: the Dionysian longing for a “deep, deep Eternity [*tiefe Ewigkeit*]”¹⁴³ bereft of either release or consummation. To desire eternity, in the absence of every end and every object – would this not be to subject eroticism to a fundamental reorientation, away from the pursuit of consummatory fulfilment, and towards an unprecedented valorisation of distance itself? Indeed, this is precisely what Nietzsche, by the early 1880s, would come to attempt: a rehabilitation of erotic distance which would manifest itself most unmistakably in the thought of eternal recurrence, the thought of absolute separation.

¹⁴² Laurence Lampert. *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. 149.

¹⁴³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 284.

What we will now attempt to show, in the pages that follow, is the precise role which Wagner's *Tristan* played in this crucial development – a development which has remained, until now, almost entirely unrecognised. For, if there indeed exists something resembling a secret history of eroticism linking the writings of Nietzsche to the writings of Blanchot, it is precisely through the legend of Tristan that this trajectory passes. It is through Nietzsche's formative, early exposure to the overwhelming pathos of the Tristan romance that he first came to encounter those subtlest, most tantalising, intimations of an eroticism no longer bound to the closed economy of teleological recuperation.

Chapter II

The Ecstasy of Transmogrification

Nietzsche, the Night, the Riddle

“...Tristan, it will be recalled, cannot state his secret...”

de Rougemont

“We love the places in which something has happened.”

Blanchot

“A meeting – not a meeting.”

Akhmatova

Initiation

Nietzsche's arrival at Tribschen on Monday, May 17, 1869 – the first of twenty-three visits which he would make over the next three years – marked the dawning an incomparably influential period in his life. “I would not give up my Tribschen days for anything,” Nietzsche would later write in *Ecce Homo*, “days of trust, of cheerfulness, of sublime chance – of *profound* moments [*der tiefen Augenblicke*].”¹ It would be here, in the environs of Wagner's villa along the shores of Lake Lucerne, that Nietzsche's initiation into the cabal of German high-artistry would be played out. Having been appointed to a professorship in Basel the previous winter, Nietzsche arrived on the Wagnerian scene, in the spring of 1869, with all the expectancy and ambition befitting a promising young scholar. By the close of his Tribschen idyll, some three years later, he had rather dramatically come of age as one of the most prominent intellectual voices of his generation: an incendiary rhetorician and self-proclaimed prophet of the German cultural renaissance.² It is no exaggeration, then, to say that the story of Nietzsche's development as a thinker begins in earnest here. Tribschen is the cradle of his mature philosophy.

Of course, the precise nature of Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner and Frau Cosima is a complex and multi-faceted topic which cannot be

1 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 92. Let us simply note, at this point, that Nietzsche's use of the phrase: “*der tiefen Augenblicke*” unmistakably echoes the diction which he had previously adopted in “The Vision and the Riddle.” This parable, which we shall eventually come to examine in some depth, is well known for its notoriously aporetic configuration of eternal recurrence.

2 It should come as no surprise, then, that much of Nietzsche's later excoriation of the German cultural malaise doubles as a form of self-criticism. Indeed, it could be argued that Nietzsche's own intimate affiliation with the project of cultural re-birth, and that project's subsequent failure, enabled him to discern, more incisively than anyone else, the physiological decadence

exhaustively dealt with here. Our modest intent, in the pages that follow, is simply to chronicle with requisite attentiveness the influence of Tristanian motifs upon Nietzsche's rehabilitation of erotic distance. What this will require of us, however, is the excavation of a radically discontinuous chronology. It is discontinuous in the sense that it rehearses, over the span of nearly four decades, a series of glances and moments, fortuitous and tragic, ultimately bound together by their relation to a single piece of music. It is a chronology punctuated by detours, deferrals, and secrets – all of which, as we have shown, evoke the eroticism of *domnei* with its valorisation of the *coitus reservatus*.

This excavation will endow us with the resources to elucidate, in an unprecedented manner, the way in Nietzsche, repeatedly seduced by the prospect of ultimate release, came to discover, in the thought of eternal recurrence, a means of definitively overcoming the allure of consummatory fulfilment. Along these lines, let us now turn our attention to those initial formative moments when the young Nietzsche first began to encounter, amidst scenographies of courtly desire, the stirrings of a great and irrepressible yearning.



In the springtime of 1861, some sixteen months after the Paris concerts, the young Friedrich Nietzsche, still a student at Schulpforta, was introduced, by his friend Gustav Krug, to the score of *Tristan and Isolde*.³ If retrospective accounts are to be believed, Nietzsche felt a profound and immediate affinity for the piece. “From the moment there was a piano score for *Tristan*,” he writes in *Ecce Homo*, “I was a Wagnerian.”⁴ According to his sister, Elisabeth,

which pervaded even its most cherished artistic exemplars, such as Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

3 Georges Liébert. *Nietzsche and Music*. Translated by David Pellaeur & Graham Parkes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 34.

4 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 93.

the two friends, along with their classmate William Pindar, met regularly at the Nietzsche house throughout the winter of 1861-2 in order to study and rehearse the piece.⁵ Nietzsche's initial, fervent enthusiasm for it is evidenced by his purported exclamation upon familiarising himself with the composition: "everyone *must* be enraptured by *Tristan!*"⁶ Indeed, as Elisabeth recalls, "Of all Wagner's works, *Tristan* always exercised the greatest fascination for [Nietzsche] and from the moment he became acquainted with the music, it remained his favourite music-drama."⁷ Moreover, the discovery of Wagner's opera seems to mark a crucial moment in the formation and development of Nietzsche's own burgeoning aesthetic sensibility: as musical experts can attest, the two compositions for piano which Nietzsche himself composed around the same time both bear certain striking resemblances to *Tristan*.⁸

Yet despite his great enthusiasm for the piece, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche himself did not actually see a full performance of *Tristan* until the end of June, 1872 – six months *after* he had already praised it in the pages of his first published work.⁹ Indeed, it was not until the two performances which he attended in Munich on June 20 and 22, at conductor Hans von Bülow's personal invitation, that Nietzsche experienced the monumental work in its entirety – a spectacle which elicited from him a truly enraptured response. In a letter to Rohde, Nietzsche wrote: "...I only wish you could hear *Tristan* – it is the most stupendous, most chaste, and the most astounding work that I

5 Förster-Nietzsche writes: "It was at our house that the three friends met to study the music of *Tristan* and *Isolde*, as Wagner's art met with lively opposition at the homes of Pindar and Krug." *The Wagner-Nietzsche Correspondence*. Edited by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Translated by Caroline V. Kerr. New York: Liveright, 1970. 3.

6 *The Wagner-Nietzsche Correspondence*. 3.

7 Ibid. 138. Our reliance here upon Elisabeth's accounts of her brother's childhood compels us to at least broach the subject of her later role in the perverse fabulation of Nietzsche's crypto-fascist legacy. Though a survey of her noted anti-Semitism falls outside the purview of our present discussion, it is an issue which Blanchot (following Bataille) takes very seriously. In a footnote to the essay, "Nietzsche, Today," from *The Infinite Conversation*, he includes a quotation of a newspaper article from November 4, 1933 (previously cited by Bataille in *Acéphale* 2), which references Hitler's visit to the Nietzsche-Archiv in Weimar, where he met with "Frau Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, the sister of the famous philosopher." Needless to say, then, her motives, if not her very words, should be considered tainted by her political affiliations. As a result, we have taken the utmost care in deploying, as evidence, retrospective statements made by her on the subject of her brother's life and works – and have only done so in cases where the accounts rendered have been corroborated independently. *The Infinite Conversation*. 449.

8 *Nietzsche and Music*. 34.

9 Ibid. 80

know.”¹⁰ Then, several days later, on July 20, in a letter addressed to von Bülow: “You have given me access to the most sublime artistic impression of my life, and if I was unable to thank you immediately following the two performances, then please ascribe this to that total upheaval in which a man neither speaks nor thanks but hides himself away.”¹¹

There can be little denying the exorbitant hyperbole which characterises these letters: Nietzsche’s purported inability to communicate the sublime nature of his experience, coupled with the subsequent retreat into solitude alluded to within his message to von Bülow are indicative of the deeply transformative effect which the June performances must have had upon him. The specific language which Nietzsche adopts here is also particularly telling. For him, *Tristan* is a stupendous – and yet supremely *chaste* – work of art, which elicits not a sense of calm, disinterested pleasure, but rather, a total upheaval of the soul. The chastity alluded to within his letter to Rohde evokes the lack of fulfilment endured by the opera’s two protagonists – a chastity, as we have specified in detail, which is generated and sustained through the extenuation of a pernicious and unbridgeable spatio-temporal distance. And if Nietzsche himself came to perceive this pathos of *die kleinste Kluft* more intensely than anyone else, it is perhaps because he had already begun to undertake, by the time of the Munich concerts of 1872, a process of irreversible, mytho-poetical appropriation whereby the intense yearning undergone by Tristan in Act III would gradually come to be experienced as his own.¹²

10 *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 137.

11 *Nietzsche and Music*. 35.

12 Nietzsche’s earliest published reference to *Tristan* appears in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he comes to deploy Wagner’s opera as a paradigmatic exemplar of the tragic form. Addressing his comments, initially, to those “genuine musicians” [126] who are “related to things almost exclusively through unconscious musical relations,” [126] Nietzsche proceeds to ask the following question: Would it be possible to imagine “a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan and Isolde* without any aid of word and image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing [*krampfartigen Ausspannen*] of all the wings of the soul?” [126] An experience of this variety, he goes on to say, would expose the listener to an “uninhibited effusion [*ungedämmten Ergüsse*] of the unconscious will” [128] so intense that the *principium individuationis* would, in the process, be radically suspended. Having seen this deeply into “the innermost abyss of things [*der innerste Abgrund der Dinge*],” [126] the listener would succumb, invariably, to a kind of “orgiastic self-annihilation.” [128] It is Nietzsche’s claim that this powerfully destabilising effect of “pure music” [126] is a direct consequence of its unparalleled proximity to the ultimate ground of reality which resonates, so to speak, within every note. Metaphysically, Nietzsche is borrowing generously here from Schopenhauer, who had previously stipulated that the priority of music over all other forms of representation resides in its unmediated relation to the will. Accordingly, to immerse oneself within “the highest ecstasies of

Over time, Cosima would become his Isolde, whilst Wagner himself would assume the role of King Mark, the jealous husband – with all of this reaching its natural culmination years later in that incredible admission from 1888: “...I have always considered her marriage to Wagner a simple act of adultery...The case of Tristan.”¹³ Indeed, even as early as 1870, to speak of Nietzsche’s growing fascination with this piece of music was by no means to speak simply of an intellectual or artistic attraction. It was also to speak of a visceral, erotic one, birthed of real passion and intensified by Nietzsche’s own friendship with both Wagner, and especially, Cosima. To speak of Nietzsche’s immersion into the Tristanian *milieu* was to speak invariably of those days and nights spent by their side. It was to speak of that rich enchantment offered to Nietzsche by the splendour of the Tribschen villa itself – a splendour which, in the decades that followed, would come to assume for him the appearance of a paradise lost. This is where, from 1869 to 1872, the pathos of Wagner’s opera began to take hold of him, captivate him, and even overwhelm him at times to the point of silence and withdrawal.

music” [125] is to gain access, albeit temporarily, to “the *heart* chamber of the world” [127] – where the abyssal, undifferentiated suffering of all existence reverberates *sine die*. It is Nietzsche’s claim that the music of the tragic opera (in this case *Tristan*), taken in and of itself, evokes a primordial seduction so irresistibly powerful that without some form of mediation, the listener would find herself overcome to the point of sheer dissolution and madness. What is needed, in other words, is distance and dissimulation: an elaborately contrived play of veils. The Dionysian ecstasy of the pure musical form and its consequent dissolution of all spatio-temporal barriers must be coupled, necessarily, with the prophylactic assurance of a mediating impulse. This impulse, which Nietzsche traces back to the god Apollo, “tears us out of Dionysian universality and lets us find delight in individuals.” [128] In other words, it offers us a repertoire of texts, images, and beautiful appearances to couple, aesthetically, with the dangerous turbulence of bacchanalian delirium. Tragedy, then, is simply the name given to this confluence of Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies which involves the measured and formulaic absorption of the “highest ecstasies of music [den höchsten Musikorgasmus]” [125] into an aesthetic context which – through the use of myth, word, and image – preserves the compulsory distance between a listener and his dissolution. In a broader sense, the exigency of mediation which we find enacted within the pages of *The Birth of Tragedy* suggests that even as early as his first published work, Nietzsche already possessed a profound understanding of the importance of distance. Whether it be the distance which so cruelly separates the amorous couple within scenographies of erotic deferral, or the compulsory distance which precludes these very scenographies from being inundated by the delirium of pure music, – Nietzsche seems to grasp, in both cases, its profound sensuousness and pathos. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 2000.

13 This statement appears in the Ecce Homo notebooks.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to argue that the general spirit pervading the Wagnerian scene, during the years of Nietzsche's visitation, was not infrequently characterised by a certain mania, or even obsession with this particular piece of music. Upon consulting Cosima's diaries from around this period we find numerous references to the opera along with any number of fascinating (and revealing) anecdotes which seem to place Nietzsche himself near the very centre of a burgeoning Tristanian cabal. Let us make note of the following entries:

Saturday, March 12, 1870 – “Very melancholy feelings. Thoughts of death. Can it erase the consciousness of guilt?...If anyone bore constant sorrow in enduring felicity, then Tristan bore this constant sorrow...In the evening R. reads Gottfried's *Tristan und Isolde* to me.”

Saturday, April 9, 1870 – “In the evening R. played a small passage from *Tristan* (A-flat major, second act) which so pierced my heart that I was quite unable to write a short note...”

Thursday, July 28 1870 – “Visit from Prof. Nietzsche, in the evening the French visitors, music, the Norns scene, and *Tristan*.”

Wednesday, December 28, 1870 – “In the afternoon music from *Tristan*, played by Richter for me and Prof. Nietzsche.”

Thursday, December 29, 1870 – “Family lunch; after that, whilst R. takes his walk, the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*, played by Richter for me and Prof. Nietzsche. In the evening R. reads us the words of it; but we wake up Fidi, and wander through the whole house, looking for a place to read the third act. It is cold downstairs, so we settle in the study, now given over to Prof. Nietzsche. But R. finds it too absurd, and he decides to read the third act in a lowered voice. The whole scene makes a tremendous impact on me.”

Friday, April 7, 1871 – “In the evening music from *Tristan*.”

Tuesday, September 19, 1871 – “...a harmonious evening to which R. adds a touch of the sublime by playing us the Prelude to Act III of *Tristan*, after telling us what kind of death had previously attracted him – among other things, falling asleep in the snow. ‘But now,’ he concludes, ‘I must go on living a very long time.’ ”



These are but fragments from a woman’s journal; and yet, what they already suggest to us is the irrepressible presence of *Tristan* – its music, its themes, its aura – in the very setting where Nietzsche, so many years later, would claim to have experienced many of his most profound moments. The entry from December 29, 1870 is especially fascinating in this regard, for it seems to us that the symbolic weight of Wagner’s recital from Act III of *Tristan* within Nietzsche’s *own study* should not be taken lightly.

Ever the admirer of a grand, rhetorical coup, Nietzsche would undoubtedly have come to appreciate Wagner’s dramatic recourse, here, to the hyperbole of near-silence. Indeed, the entire scene cannot help but anticipate *both* Lou Salomé’s own recollections of that unforgettable day, some twelve years later, when Nietzsche, “with quiet voice,”¹⁴ whispered into her ear his thought of the eternal recurrence – as well as Zarathustra’s own, closely related pronouncement that “it is the stillest words [*die stillsten Worte*] that bring on the storm.”¹⁵

And as we discover, Nietzsche’s subsequent re-enactments take on an even added significance if we consider that Act III of *Tristan*, the section purportedly read by Wagner “in lowered voice,” contains precisely those passages of the libretto most thoroughly and famously imbued with a yearning for consummation and death. It is as though, by means of these very parodies,

¹⁴ Lou Salomé. *Nietzsche*. Translated by Siegfried Mandel. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. 130.

these re-enactments, Nietzsche were somehow later to juxtapose, in a most provocative manner, Tristan's ardent yearning for consummatory release with a longing still more extreme: the affirmation of eternal recommencement itself.



Of course, all of this is still far from the thoughts of the young professor, the honoured guest, who comes to be regaled, here, by private concerts and recitations. For the Nietzsche of 1870-72, it is still a matter of initiation; it is a matter of formative moments, and formative passions. To this end, the time spent alone with Cosima, it seems, was particularly influential upon him.

We are told that Nietzsche, during his stays at Tribschen, would often be permitted to play Wagner's personal piano on those occasions when "the Master took a break from composing and went for a walk with his dogs."¹⁶ His audience, during such moments, would almost always consist solely of Cosima herself, who would be treated to "full-blooded performances of the preludes to *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*."¹⁷ It would be typical for Nietzsche to work himself into a frenzy in the midst of feverish improvising, "arousing in Cosima, herself not unacquainted with states of trance, a familiar sense of hallucination and intoxication."¹⁸

As Joachim Köhler claims, it was on the basis of these extemporaneous musical sessions that a "spiritual affinity"¹⁹ came to be cultivated between the lady of the house and her husband's young friend. "The superstitious

15 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 127.

16 Joachim Köhler. *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*. Translated by Ronald Taylor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 55.

17 *Ibid.* 55.

18 *Ibid.* 55-6.

Cosima,” as Köhler writes, “records a number of episodes in which the two of them tried together to move tables or invoke musical oracles, Nietzsche conjuring up the underworld at the piano and increasing her susceptibility to the forces of the occult.”²⁰

It is no coincidence that the music of Wagner’s *Tristan* was indeed featured at the very centre of these rituals – for its effect upon both listeners and performers was soon to prove as utterly maddening as it was enticing. A “voluptuousness of hell”²¹ was how Nietzsche himself, in the pages of *Ecce Homo*, would later refer to the opera’s strange and seductive allure. Indeed, some six months prior to the opera’s completion in 1859, Wagner had already written to Mathilde Wesendonck: “This *Tristan* will be something terrible! This last Act! I fear that the opera will be forbidden, unless bad performances can save me! Absolutely perfect ones will make people insane.”²²

That Wagner’s premonition came to be realised so dramatically must have surprised even the composer himself. The first victim of the “Tristan curse” was none other than the tenor Ludwig Schnorr, cast in the lead role, who died a short time after the Munich debut in the midst of “a kind of Wagnerian delirium.”²³ His wife, Malvina, as his Isolde, was then “struck by hallucinations and never really recovered from the ordeal.”²⁴ As Georges Liébert tells us, Hans Bülow, the opera’s conductor at its Munich debut, very nearly succumbed to a similar fate. Having begun rehearsals of the work “on the very same day that his wife Cosima was giving birth to Wagner’s first child...the first performances were a descent into hell, and he barely avoided committing suicide.”²⁵

19 Ibid. 55.

20 Ibid. 56.

21 *Ecce Homo*. 94.

22 Cited in Raymond Furness. “Wagner and Decadence.” *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. Edited by Joan Tasker Grimbert. London: Routledge, 2002. 394.

23 *Nietzsche and Music*. 151.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

Then, some twenty-three years later, the “curse” would claim Cosima’s own father, Franz Liszt. Having come to Bayreuth to watch a performance of the opera on July 25, 1886, he died only a few days later – a victim of pneumonia. Whispering to his Cosima, in the midst of great pain, his last words were: “Oh, Tristan!”²⁶

And we need only mention how, in those final hours of wavering lucidity in Turin, it was, once again, “primarily Wagner’s music,”²⁷ the music of *Tristan*, which Nietzsche was so frequently heard playing on his landlord’s piano – as though rehearsing, for all the spectres of the past, some maddening scene in the swiftly decaying light.²⁸ – A voluptuousness of hell, indeed.

The Ecstasy of Transmogrification

That Wagner’s music continued to haunt Nietzsche, even to the very end, is of course remarkable, insofar as it testifies to a certain enduring beauty at the very heart of sheer loss. And yet, even as early as 1871, we find that the artistry of Wagner’s *Tristan* had already become linked, for Nietzsche, with the fullest extremes of both ecstasy and sorrow. Consider the following lines from a letter to Gustav Krug, written in late December 1871: “Even pain must be surrounded by such a halo of dithyrambic ecstasy that it drowns in it, to some extent; this I feel about the greatest example of all, the third act of

26 Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. *Wagner and Nietzsche*. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978. 201.

27 *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*. Translated by David J. Parent. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 218.

28 It is interesting to note that, in Gottfried von Strassburg’s rendering of the Tristan tale, it is precisely through an impromptu concert (“Lovely Isolde...attended closely to Tristan as he sat and played his harp”) that the young knight, who had just arrived at the royal court, first attempted to woo the young princess. Gottfried von Strassburg. *Tristan*. Translated by A.T. Hatto. London: Penguin Books, 2004. 145.

*Tristan.*²⁹

Here, it is once again the exemplarity of Wagner's opera which asserts itself – an exemplarity which Nietzsche will, of course, continue to reiterate until his final published works. But wherein precisely does this exemplarity reside? It is in the opera's ability to offer us ecstasy even in pain, he writes. And whilst these words certainly anticipate, rather unmistakably, the rhetoric encountered within *The Birth of Tragedy*, they also hint at an additional significance. For one can't help but wonder if the allusion to ecstasy, here, might perhaps also hint at those secret, shared moments of feverish improvisation which he shared with Cosima – moments in which the two of them, through the very spirit of *Tristan*, came to approach some semblance of mystical complicity, or even erotic transmogrification.

We know, for instance, that by the autumn of 1888, Nietzsche had come to identify Cosima, rather explicitly, with the figure of Isolde. The occasion for this is an early notebook sketch from *Ecce Homo*, in which he writes that Wagner's marriage to her had amounted to “a simple case of adultery...the case of Tristan.”³⁰ And yet, could it be that, as early as December 1871, an infatuation on Nietzsche's part had already begun to assert itself? Could it be that Tristan's pain, that pathos of distance, which Wagner's third act (in Nietzsche's words) exemplifies so incomparably, had already somehow metamorphosed into his own pain – the pain of yearning for a woman that he simply couldn't have?

We know that less than a week before Nietzsche's letter to Krug, on December 25, he had sent Cosima, for her birthday, an original musical composition accompanied with a flattering dedication (unbeknownst to the recipient, the composition in question actually dated back to 1863). And a week prior to *that*, Nietzsche had been granted the noted privilege of accompanying Cosima alone, by train, to a performance of Wagner's work in Mannheim. The press accounts from that day seem to depict him almost in the manner of a suitor:

²⁹ Letter to Gustav Krug. December 31, 1871.

³⁰ *Nietzsche and Music*. 49.

“...the train from Lucerne arrived bringing Frau Wagner from Tribschen. She left the train *on the arm* of a young man of middle height, with dark brown hair, large mustachios, and the high broad, forehead of a scholar and a thinker...He was presented to the executive committee of the society: ‘Gentlemen, Prof. Friedrich Nietzsche!’ ”³¹

Here, Nietzsche seemed to be granted, for the first time in his adult life, access to the upper-echelons of German society. He enters the artistic world, so to speak, on the arm of a famous composer’s wife – this very same woman with whom he has been feverishly conjuring musical spirits for the past several months.

And what, we might ask, was performed that night in Mannheim, at the concert to which Nietzsche was to escort her? It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, none other than a programme of music concluding with the “Vorspiel” and “Liebestod” to *Tristan* – the very sections of the opera which appear to flow directly into one another, forming that great circle, bereft of completion. The very sections, moreover, which give voice to the ceaselessness of desire and the implacable persistence of spatio-temporal distance. *The very sections in which the hollowness of consummation and the inexorable pulsing of erotic deferral most audibly resound.*

Indeed, it was this very performance which came to elicit, only days later, the letter to Gustav Krug in which Nietzsche most enthusiastically evoked the work’s incomparable exemplarity. Still months before the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and nearly a decade before the famous revelation at Sils-Maria – the ecstasy and pathos of an eroticism freed from all ends had already mesmerised the young professor. And a single individual, it seems, had increasingly found her way to the centre of his fantasies. It was this woman with whom he had conjured, in rare moments, as if stolen from time, the ecstasy of transmogrification and the re-enactment of love’s absolute

³¹ *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 90.

unfulfilment.

But what had quickly evolved into a most fortuitous relationship, for Nietzsche, would soon find itself complicated and ultimately threatened by what was to come next. Less than four months after the Mannheim concert, Nietzsche would arrive at Tribschen, on a spring day in 1872, only to find Frau Cosima deep in the task of packing. “Whilst she moved from one room to another,” we are told, “he sat at the piano, weaving into his improvisations all his grief, his inexpressible hopes and fears, his precious memories and the acute realisation that something irretrievable was being taken from him. The strains, now jubilant, now mournful, echoed through the dismantled rooms, conjuring up ghosts of past joys and sorrows.”³²

The end of the Nietzsche’s Tribschen-idyll was now at hand. For the Wagners, as we know, were soon on their way to Bayreuth. The catastrophe of Nietzsche’s eventual rift from the great composer – the very rift about which he would later write: “something like a deadly offence came between us”³³ – was already not long in coming. It would be a rift, as we know, which would profoundly influence the entire development of Nietzsche’s thinking from the mid-1870s onward, and transform the memory of his association with Wagner into a source of both immeasurable anguish and endless provocation.

It is not our intent, as we have previously stated, to explore the nature of this rift in any significant detail.³⁴ It is well known that Wagner’s name is largely absent from Nietzsche’s works of the middle period – and yet, we also know that these works, as well as the ones that follow, are written by Nietzsche at least partially in response to his profound disenchantment, or disillusionment, with the hypocritical posturing and perceived passive nihilism of the

³² *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 112.

³³ Letter to Overbeck. February 22, 1883.

³⁴ Interestingly, it has been alleged by at least a handful of scholars that Cosima’s role in precipitating the Nietzsche-Wagner rift was perhaps much more central than it has been customarily alleged. Sarah Kofman, in a fascinating article, has gone so far as to suggest that Cosima herself “was quite possibly the *real cause* of Nietzsche’s rupture or divorce with the man he claims as his closest relation.” And while we refrain from unequivocally endorsing this statement, there can be little doubt that Kofman’s remarks, here, are more than reconcilable with our own findings. “A Fantastical Genealogy: Nietzsche’s Family Romance.” *Nietzsche and the Feminine*. 47.

Wagnerian *milieu*. We also know, rather importantly, that after the passing reference to *Tristan and Isolde* in the pages of *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche makes little or no mention of the opera itself until 1888, when he refers to it, once more, as a work of incomparable genius “which has no parallel, not only in music but in all the arts.”³⁵

The question we must ask is what, exactly, takes place in the course of those intervening years. Why is there no mention of *Tristan* for almost a decade? And most importantly, what becomes of that enchanted eroticism which had been generated through Nietzsche’s formative exposure to it? Does this eroticism simply disappear? Or could it be that it remains lingering just below the surface – within Nietzsche’s thinking and writing of the 1880s – waiting to emerge at certain select moments, and in certain sublimated forms?

Indeed, one such moment seems to occur in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where we find the title of the discourse, “On the Great Yearning [*Von der grossen Sehnsucht*],” lifted directly from the libretto of Wagner’s opera. – An important moment in Nietzsche’s work, when the latent eroticism, so to speak, threatens to break through the surface. But as a consultation of Nietzsche’s notebooks reveals, the aforementioned title was indeed notably absent from an early draft of the discourse in question. It was only later on, closer to the time of publication, that the section’s original title was ultimately replaced by Nietzsche with this reference to Wagner’s opera.

And what, we might ask, was this original title? Strangely, perhaps, it was none other than “Ariadne.” A name whose significance within Nietzsche’s writings has long defied even the most inspired attempts at exhaustive elucidation.

Is its appearance, here, merely a coincidence? Or could it be that, in the very relation between these two titles – and in the intersection of the Ariadnean and Tristanian lineages more broadly – a quintessentially Nietzschean eroticism might perhaps announce itself? A fascinating suggestion. And one

³⁵ *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 93.

whose plausibility seems difficult to deny. For we are already aware of the incontrovertible ties linking *both* the names Isolde and Ariadne to the figure of Cosima – just as we understand Nietzsche’s mania and capacity for transmutation to be nothing less than formidable.

And yet, the question nevertheless remains, what kind of eroticism are we talking about here? And how, exactly, are we to characterise the nature of this *grossen Sehnsucht* which comes to link Tristan’s beloved, rather unexpectedly, with the bride of Dionysus?

With these questions we come to approach, for the very first time, the domain of Nietzsche’s great, hitherto unrecognised contribution to thought: his attempted rehabilitation of erotic distance. A project which leads Nietzsche from his formative and unforgettable immersion within the tableau of Tristanian romanticism, to the threshold of a wholly unprecedented affirmation of erotic forbearance.

The Secret

If the riddle of Ariadne, which so conspicuously haunts Nietzsche's later writing, continues to evoke, to this day, an alluring, enigmatic lustre – then this can largely be attributed to two factors: first, its notorious inclusion within the scenography of madness in Turin; and second, its obscure association with the doctrine of eternal recurrence. It is well-known that Cosima Wagner, in the early days of January, 1889, received no fewer than three notes from Nietzsche, all bearing the signature of "Dionysus." The last of these notes, which contained the words, "Ariadne, I love thee,"³⁶ has been the subject of much commentary and speculation ever since. Could it be, as many critics have supposed, that Nietzsche, in his final moments of lucidity, had finally determined to reveal the identity of his elusive muse? Or might his communication, from the threshold of a swiftly encroaching darkness, have had some other – more oblique – significance?

Over the past century, there have been no shortage of attempts to explain the significance of Ariadnean imagery in Nietzsche's texts – and yet, despite this effusive outpouring of scholarly material, we have seemingly come no closer to the definitive answer which we seek.³⁷ Indeed, this difficulty of coming to

36 Letter to Cosima Wagner, January 4, 1889. *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Christopher Middleton. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969. 346.

37 "In keeping with Ariadne's labyrinthine character," writes Karsten Harries, "different interpretations can be supported: Ariadne as Arachne, the spider woman, the monster in the web of language; Ariadne as Jung's anima..." "The Philosopher at Sea." *Nietzsche's New Seas: Explorations in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*. Edited by Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988. 40. Of course, for every one of these readings, there are dozens more. For Alan D. Schrift, Ariadne is the emblem for the "philological rigour" that ensures the multiplicity of Dionysian perspectives "follow the walls of the labyrinthine text." *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*. London: Routledge, 1990. 197. Whilst for Robert Gooding-Williams, Ariadne is Nietzsche's name "for the human body's power of receptivity to the advent of the coming Dionysus." *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 181. For Karl Jaspers, Ariadne is a symbol which represents death itself. *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. Translated by Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 226. For Gilles Deleuze, on the other hand, Ariadne's marriage to Dionysus constitutes to the secret to the double affirmation of the eternal return, whereby becoming assumes the character of being – "the highest pinnacle of meditation." *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athelone Press, 1992. 186-9. For an astute survey of the main trends in Ariadne scholarship dating back to

terms with one of Nietzsche's most notorious and impenetrable riddles has led more than one critic to suggest that "the figure of Ariadne is altogether resistant to philosophical interpretation."³⁸ But is this really the case? Or have these scholars and critics simply been too naïve in their manner of courting Ariadne? Could it be that they have pursued her too directly, too violently – and that they have not sufficiently acknowledged the indispensable priority of distance in all erotic endeavours? In the pages that follow, we propose to rectify these shortcomings by situating the riddle of Ariadne, for the first time, within the larger context of Nietzsche's rehabilitation of erotic distance – a project which he inherits from the courtly troubadours of the 12th century and which culminates, as we will show, in the thought of the eternal return.



The ancient myth of Ariadne is well-known. It begins on the isle of Crete, where Ariadne's father, King Minos, had famously decreed that every year seven boys and seven girls were to be sent into the labyrinth as a sacrifice to the Minotaur. In a gesture of great bravery, a young man named Theseus volunteered himself for this blood-sport in hopes of slaying the Minotaur and putting an end to the king's cruelty. As the story goes, Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and subsequently gave him "secret instructions in how to kill the beast,"³⁹ in addition to providing him with "a clew of yarn to help him out of the maze."⁴⁰ As a result, Theseus was not only able to accomplish his original mission, but also navigate his way out of the labyrinth. The two lovers then set-off for Athens together, but upon disembarking, momentarily, on the Isle of Naxos – Theseus inexplicably deserted Ariadne, leaving her "spurned and

the turn of the century, see Adrian de Caro "Symbolizing Philosophy: Ariadne and the Labyrinth." *Nietzsche-Studien* 17. 1988.

38 David Farrell Krell. *Postponements: Women, Sensuality, and Death in Nietzsche*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 109.

39 Oscar Mandel. *Ariadne: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Gainesville: University of Florida, 1982. 47.

40 Ibid.

wounded...seeking an end to her life.”⁴¹ Whilst the details of what happened next are subject to varying accounts, it is commonly held that the god Dionysus, “in the course of his triumphant progress through the world,”⁴² heard Ariadne’s lament and came to her rescue – wedding her and assuaging the sorrow of her abandonment.

It was this very lament, summoned from the basin of the deepest despondency, which came to be immortalised by Nietzsche under the title, “Ariadne’s Complaint,” one of nine, ostensibly Bacchic, hymns compiled by him in the summer of 1888 under the title *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. As scholars have long been aware, the entire hymn, with the exception of its concluding lines, had already been featured several years earlier as the speech of the sorcerer in Part IV of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁴³ In this original context, there was “no hint of either Dionysus or Ariadne,”⁴⁴ and the words’ feminine endings were replaced by masculine ones. As a result, the text conjures much less an image of mythical Naxos than it does the tableau of Wagnerian Romanticism, with the afore mentioned sorcerer presumably a stand-in for the late composer himself.⁴⁵

Upon its revision for publication in 1888, however, Nietzsche elected to make a crucial addition to the text which would profoundly transform it both in tone and emphasis. This addition took the form of the dithyramb’s famous, concluding exhortation, proffered in the voice of Dionysus: “Be wise, Ariadne! You have little ears, you have ears like mine: let some wisdom into them! Must we not first hate each other if we are to love one another? *I am thy*

41 Joachim Köhler. *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*. Translated by Ronald Taylor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 2.

42 *Ariadne: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. 47.

43 Part IV of *Zarathustra* was printed in 1885, but only circulated privately amongst a handful of Nietzsche’s closest friends.

44 Karl Reinhardt. “Nietzsche’s Lament of Ariadne.” *Interpretation* 6. October 1977. 4.

45 Or, more precisely, the sorcerer may be considered a composite of both Wagner and Schopenhauer – the two towering intellectual influences of Nietzsche’s youth. In his essay “Nietzsche’s Dionysus-Ariadne Fixation,” Hermann J. Weigand makes the highly provocative, though completely unsubstantiated, claim that the lament was in fact intended for Ariadne all along – only being given to the sorcerer as an afterthought, and then switched back to its “original” form in 1888. To my knowledge, his is one of the only critical accounts to have espoused this highly unorthodox reading. “Nietzsche’s Dionysus-Ariadne Fixation.” *The Germanic Review* 48. March 1973. 112.

labyrinth...”⁴⁶ It is with these words that the “eternal torment [*ewigen Martern*]”⁴⁷ evoked so vividly within the dithyramb’s preceding stanzas shows itself, for the first time, to be of a specifically erotic nature, with the words, “sting and sting, shatter this heart...Will you not kill, only torment?”⁴⁸ conjuring the unmistakable pathos of an obsessive, unfulfilled love.⁴⁹

And whilst the precise nature of this eroticism remains, at least for the moment, uncertain – the Dionysian exhortation contained within the hymn’s *dénouement* already leads us to anticipate, with great foreboding, that this Ariadnean path from hate to love (and from repulsion to attraction) will most undoubtedly be a circuitous and labyrinthine one pervaded less by immediacy than by continual detour and indirection.⁵⁰

Of course, the dithyramb in question by no means marks the first time, in Nietzsche’s *oeuvre*, that we encounter the name Ariadne linked to the figure of the labyrinth. Indeed, as early as the winter of 1882-3, we find the following notebook sketch: “A labyrinthine human being never seeks the truth, but – whatever he may tell us – always and only his Ariadne.”⁵¹ Over the next two and a half years, as Nietzsche proceeded to complete Parts II-IV of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he would include at least two other, highly significant allusions to Ariadne in his work. As we have already mentioned, the section from Part III of the text, which now bears the title “On the Great Yearning,” was indeed originally named “Ariadne.” And it is also this very same name which

46 Friedrich Nietzsche. “Ariadne’s Complaint.” *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1984. 59.

47 “Ariadne’s Complaint.” 53.

48 Ibid.

49 Students of 17th century metaphysical poetry may find striking similarities between Nietzsche’s diction in the “Lament,” and John Donne’s use of hyperbole – particularly in “Holy Sonnet XIV” which features the following lines: “Batter my heart...Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again, / Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.” What is seemingly articulated, in both cases, is a willing acceptance and affirmation of suffering. However, whilst Donne’s affirmation is ascetically motivated, Ariadne’s (as we will come to show) is of a radically different variety. John Donne. “Holy Sonnet XIV.” *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse & Prose*. Edited by Alan Redrum, et al. Orchard Park: Broadview Press, 2001. 59.

50 And on this point, it is crucial that we take to heart del Caro’s warning that any attempt “to illuminate the meaning of Ariadne in Nietzsche’s philosophising runs the risk of entering, and losing itself, in the labyrinth.” “Symbolizing Philosophy: Ariadne and the Labyrinth.” 125.

51 *Nachlass*. 10, 125.

Zarathustra ascribes to his soul in the early drafts of “The Convalescent.” These references are then followed, in 1887, by his uncompleted sketches for a satyr-play which included the lines: “Oh, Ariadne, you yourself are the labyrinth: one doesn’t ever get out of you again...”⁵²

The transformation of perspectives contained within these various passages is truly astounding. We receive, in the excerpts cited above, no fewer than three separate erotic configurations, all of which portray the figure of Ariadne in an entirely different manner. Beginning with the chronologically earliest account, Ariadne is explicitly contrasted with “the truth” and presented as the *desideratum* sought after by the so-called “labyrinthine man.” Next, she herself becomes the labyrinth out of which the seeker is condemned never to emerge. And finally, in the startling reversal of 1888, we find Dionysus proclaiming himself a labyrinth *for her*. But even then Nietzsche is not finished. For in addition to all this, there still remains that final, tantalising invocation of Ariadne’s name which we discover in the infamous love-note of January, 1889.

Indeed, taking into account all of these multifarious references to Ariadne, it is perhaps the love-note which seems most difficult to fathom – especially coming from a man who, by all accounts, “had never touched a woman.”⁵³ And though the desire to posit a facile and unproblematic equivalence between Cosima and Ariadne must be, of course, assiduously avoided, we cannot help but wonder if here – perhaps more than anywhere else – the rich and variegated domain of Nietzsche’s obscure symbolic repertoire came to intersect, if only for a brief, scintillating instant, with the concrete immediacy of an irrepressible, all-too-human yearning.⁵⁴ On this basis alone, the love-

52 *Nachlass*. 12, 510. Left unmentioned here are three other significant allusions to Ariadne found in the following locations: *Nachlass* 37 [4], *Beyond Good and Evil* §295, *Twilight of the Idols* §19 (“Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”). Some of these passages will be cited in passing within the following text.

53 *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*. Edited by Sander L. Gilman. Translated by David J. Parent. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 258.

54 One of the earliest English-speaking scholars to champion the note was Crane Brinton, who accorded it truly unparalleled significance amongst all of Nietzsche’s writings on Ariadne. For Brinton, the love-note stood as incontrovertible evidence for the total equivalence between Cosima and Ariadne within Nietzsche’s work. However, Brinton’s disregard for large swathes of textual evidence (particularly from the *Nachlass*) raises serious doubts about the legitimacy of his woefully over-simplified

note has retained, quite deservedly, a certain distinction amidst the larger milieu of his correspondence from the threshold of madness. But how, precisely, are we to characterise its relation to those myriad evocations of Ariadne which we find in both the *Nachlaß* and published works, dating back to the winter of 1882-3? And what, if anything, might its significance be to Nietzsche's thought as whole – and the thought of the eternal return in particular?



In an influential study from 1935, Karl Reinhardt sought to mitigate the love-note's importance altogether by suggesting that Nietzsche's identification of Cosima with the mythical Ariadne was already a "sign of disease."⁵⁵ Far from offering us a definitive, "last word" on the riddle of Ariadne in Nietzsche's works, the note constituted little more than evidence of an ailing man's profound loss of his "symbolic functions."⁵⁶ According to Reinhardt, the true meaning behind Nietzsche's Ariadne symbolism necessarily remained, until the philosopher's death, "a secret...intelligible only to him."⁵⁷

theory. See Crane Brinton. *Nietzsche*. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1941. 70. Nonetheless, a more recent essay by Eugen Biser only confirms the residual popularity and influence of this highly reductionist account. Eugen Biser "Nietzsche als Mythenzerstörer und Mythenschöpfer." *Nietzsche-Studien 14* (1985). The fine balance which must be struck, it seems, is to accord the note all the importance which it genuinely warrants without, at the same time, taking the equation Ariadne = Cosima too simplistically.

55 "Nietzsche's Lament of Ariadne." 224. There can be no denying the magnitude of Reinhardt's influence upon Ariadne scholarship. Adrian del Caro claims, quite justifiably, that Reinhardt provides us with "the most detailed account of Ariadne to be found in the secondary literature." (126) Indeed, Heidegger himself encouraged his seminar students to read Reinhardt. For Erich F. Podach, however, Reinhardt's proximity to National Socialism renders his theory worthy of suspicion. On this implicit politicisation of Ariadne scholarship, see "Symbolizing Philosophy: Ariadne and the Labyrinth." 126-135.

56 Ibid. 224.

Less than a year after the publication of Reinhardt's essay, Karl Jaspers – in his monumental survey of Nietzsche's philosophical activity – similarly downplayed the note's importance, writing, in a crucial footnote:

“I do not wish to enter into the biographical discussions that try to prove that Ariadne is Cosima Wagner. There can be no doubt that at times remembrances of Cosima play a role when Nietzsche speaks of Ariadne, especially in the insane note to her...But these clues contribute *absolutely nothing* to an understanding of the philosophical meaning of this symbolism.”⁵⁸

But if both Reinhardt and Jaspers, in the course of their various readings, appear utterly convinced of the note's insignificance, then we encounter, in Pierre Klossowski's 1969 text, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, a much more nuanced and considered account. In the course of chronicling, with scholarly acuity, the relationship between Nietzsche's oscillating valitudinary states and the fortuitous emergence of the thought of eternal return, Klossowski came to assign a more provocative significance to the *Wahnsinnszettel* than we encountered in either of the previous studies. For Klossowski, Nietzsche's love-note evokes “the reactualisation of a distant past...[which is] specifically *libidinal*.”⁵⁹ This reactualisation, moreover, seems to have the effect of resurrecting, “in a magical fashion, the prestigious image of Tribschen”⁶⁰ – that proverbial Isle of Naxos where Ariadne and “her philosophical lover”⁶¹ had once engaged in their “famous dialogues.”⁶² The note represents, in other words, a genuine attempt at conjuring the erotic scenography of a “bygone past”⁶³ – a past which had “become Nietzsche's labyrinth.”⁶⁴

57 Ibid.

58 *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. 226.

59 Pierre Klossowski. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. London: Continuum, 2005. 184.

60 Ibid. 188.

61 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 201.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid. 188.

64 Ibid.

But what are we to make of Cosima's role in all of this? Could it be that she alone, through her participation in the scenography of Tribschen-Naxos, somehow held the secret to Ariadne's significance; and therefore, to Nietzsche's reactualisation of this distant past? In light of these questions, a closer examination of the woman at the centre of these fantasies may well be in order here.

“...Most Revered Lady...”

Born in Como, Italy in 1837, Cosima Francesca Gaetana de Flavigny was the daughter of composer Franz Liszt and Countess Marie D'Agoult. Whilst the rarefied *noblesse* of her parental lineage should have afforded a secure and comfortable upbringing, her early years were in fact rather tumultuous. Abandoned by her mother as young girl, and neglected by her famous father, Cosima was raised by an Austrian grandmother and a succession of governesses. Though not conventionally beautiful, Cosima assumed a graceful and refined bearing which exuded a quiet confidence. Despite being tall and thin, “too much so for a woman,”⁶⁵ she possessed, by all accounts, “enough natural charm to make everyone oblivious to her external traits.”⁶⁶ Her great talents as a conversationalist were matched only by her prodigious aesthetic sensibility. As Nietzsche himself would write in 1888, “The few cases of higher culture that I have found in German culture were all of French extraction, above all, Cosima Wagner, by far the leading voice that I have heard in questions of taste...”⁶⁷

Married at the age of nineteen to one of Germany's pre-eminent conductors,

65 *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. Edited by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Translated by Caroline V. Kerr. New York: Liveright, 1970. 248.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings...* 90. Joachim Köhler suggests that Nietzsche may have been lured “by her French accent and her dark, low voice, or by the vivacious way she tripped from one subject to another with a brash confidence that made him forget his intellectual superiority...” *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*. Translated by Ronald Taylor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 49.

Hans von Bülow, Cosima found herself, rather scandalously, pregnant with Wagner's child less than six years later. Though her marriage to von Bülow would endure, at least officially, until the summer of 1870, she had already become, by the mid-1860s, Wagner's acknowledged mistress and artistic accomplice. Moreover, from the day she moved into his Tribschen villa in 1868, Cosima would not part from Wagner's side for the remaining fifteen years of his life. Their relationship (unlike the one she would share with Nietzsche) was characterised by an eroticism of proximity – *par excellence*.

Indeed, the intensely spiritual ardour of Cosima's rapport with Wagner and the unapologetic nature of their (initially) adulterous relationship were, by all accounts, both fascinating and beguiling for the young Nietzsche, at least during the early days of his acquaintance with the couple. Even as late as 1872, Nietzsche admitted to his sister a feeling of slight embarrassment when Hans von Bülow, who had been enchanted by *The Birth of Tragedy*, elected to pay its author a surprise visit in order to express his admiration for the text in person. Immediately aware of Nietzsche's discomfort, von Bülow "sought to dispel [Nietzsche's] embarrassment by voluntarily alluding to the subject of his relations with Wagner and Frau Cosima."⁶⁸

As the story goes, he then constructed the following scenography: Cosima was *Ariadne*, he himself was *Theseus*, and Wagner was *Dionysus*;⁶⁹ except in this case, it was not *Theseus* who had deserted *Ariadne*, but just the reverse. Upon hearing von Bülow invest "his own experiences with such an impersonal and mythical character,"⁷⁰ Nietzsche's discomfort was allayed and he unreservedly accepted the conductor's subsequent invitation to attend the Munich premiere of *Tristan and Isolde* as his personal guest.⁷¹

68 *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 120.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.* 121.

71 Thus, the initial moment of Cosima's transfiguration into Isolde was virtually simultaneous with the moment of her initial transfiguration into Ariadne. A fascinating and revealing coincidence.



The fact that Nietzsche would later come to appropriate von Bülow's scenography, bestowing upon it, by the 1880s, a complex mythico-philosophical significance, demonstrates both the degree of his youthful impressionability *as well as* the great symbolic potency of the triadic configuration in question. We can only assume that by the time of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche saw himself taking up a position similar to that which Wagner, "a higher being...a god,"⁷² had once occupied. The crucial question, of course, is whether Nietzsche's adoration of Cosima was purely a function of her participation within this obscure, symbolic economy of meaning – or whether had he indeed formed, by the winter of 1889, some genuine, unrequited attachment to her?

As it turns out, any attempts at definitively clarifying the precise nature of this relationship have been invariably obstructed by the fact that Cosima, in the years following Nietzsche's descent into madness, elected to destroy – in keeping with her habits – each of the fifteen letters which he had sent her between the years 1870-1889.⁷³ Without these letters, we are left us with the unenviable task of attempting to reconstruct the entire scenography of their relationship on the basis of circumstantial evidence alone.

What we *do* know is that the final days of Nietzsche's lucidity are marked by a seemingly compulsive preoccupation with this woman with whom he had once enjoyed "a relationship of deep confidence and innermost accord"⁷⁴ – but who, since November of 1876, had remained separated from him by a cruel and unamenable distance.⁷⁵ In honour of her birthday, on December 25, 1888, only days before his collapse, Nietzsche sent Cosima the very first copy of his

72 *Ibid.* 120.

73 Lesley Chamberlain. *Nietzsche in Turin: The End of the Future*. London: Quartet Books, 1996. 46.

74 Letter to Karl Knortz, June 21, 1888. *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 299.

75 Nietzsche's last meeting with the Wagners came in Sorrento on November 2, 1876. For a detailed account see *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 292-295.

Ecce Homo, dedicating it to her personally as “Most Revered Lady.”⁷⁶ Only days later, on January 3, she received from him an additional note addressed to, “My Beloved Princess Ariadne.”⁷⁷ This was followed, on the very next day, by the declaration of love.

Around the same time, Nietzsche sent two separate letters to Jacob Burckhardt, both of which evoked the figure of Ariadne. “I, together with Ariadne, have only to be the golden balance of all things,”⁷⁸ wrote Nietzsche on January 4. Then, in a letter postmarked the following day, he appended the following postscript: “The rest is for...Ariadne...From time to time we practise magic...”⁷⁹ In the weeks that followed, even as Nietzsche’s sanity slowly dissipated, his thoughts seemingly remained fixated upon the image of Wagner’s widow, as evidenced by his purported remarks upon being interned in the Jena Sanatorium: “My wife Cosima brought me here.”⁸⁰



Still, as tantalising as these statements may be, they express very little about the reality of Nietzsche’s relationship with Cosima. As scholars have long known, and as Klossowski reminds us in his commentary on the love-note, “there had never been even the slightest intimacy between Nietzsche and Cosima.”⁸¹ With few exceptions, the entirety of their relationship was played out amidst the prohibitive domesticity of the Wagnerian abode. Nietzsche was welcomed here as a guest of honour and accorded his own living quarters. Yet

76 Sarah Kofman. *Nietzsche and Metaphor*. Translated by Duncan Large. London: Athlone, 1993. 52.

77 *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. 190.

78 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 345.

79 *Ibid.* 348.

80 *The Madness of Nietzsche*. 193.

even at the peak of their friendship, writes Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, “all Cosima could see in him was a young man of twenty-five.”⁸² One reason for this may have been Nietzsche’s strange, ostensibly immature, predilection for distanciation which, even from the earliest days of his friendship with Wagner and Frau Cosima, evinced feelings of confusion and frustration from his hosts. “The Professor makes himself scarce!”⁸³ Wagner supposedly exclaimed, in June of 1869 – only weeks after Nietzsche’s first visit – upon learning that he had declined a subsequent invitation to spend his summer holidays at Tribschen. When Nietzsche did return for a brief visit several weeks later, he promptly drew Cosima’s ire by inexplicably leaving the villa, despite her warnings, to climb nearby Mount Pilatus in the midst of a thunderstorm. “The whole thing was, and remains, abominable of you,”⁸⁴ she later wrote to him.

Then, some months later, after his professorial obligations⁸⁵ had precluded him from a timely reply to one of Wagner’s letters, Cosima intervened once more, this time showing signs of actual annoyance. “I have never been angry with you, but I am now going to make a beginning in that direction,” she wrote. “I have been genuinely concerned about you and feared that you might be ill, but I am not going to scold you and thus spoil my satisfaction at hearing the contrary...”⁸⁶ The seeds of their eventual parting, then, were already sewn well in advance of Bayreuth, Sorrento, or *Parsifal* – for theirs was a relationship predicated, from the very start, upon a play of distances. Even as early as May of 1871, Cosima had already noted, rather ominously, in her diary: “...I sense within [Nietzsche] an addiction to treachery, as it were...”⁸⁷ Then, in an entry from August 3, she adds the words: “[Nietzsche] is certainly the most gifted of our young friends, but a *not quite natural reserve* makes his

81 *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. 188.

82 *Wagner and Nietzsche*. 33.

83 *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 17.

84 *Ibid.* 18.

85 Nietzsche was particularly busy during the early months of 1870 as he had promised to deliver two special lectures on the “Greek Music Drama” and “Socrates and Tragedy.”

86 *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. 31.

87 *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries, Volume I*. 365.

behaviour in many respects most displeasing.”⁸⁸

In the years following Nietzsche’s voluntary excision from the sphere of her immediate relations, Cosima’s impression of both him and his work tended, if anything, toward a noted disinterest. In a letter to Houston Stewart Chamberlain, written in 1901, she would recall the “agony” of reading *Zarathustra* for the first time. “I was not only amazed at its stupidity but found that it aroused certain suspicions on linguistic grounds,”⁸⁹ she wrote. Clearly, these are not remarks of spite, but of incomprehension. The simple fact is that Cosima had neither an intellectual nor personal interest in Nietzsche extending beyond his early (and mutually profitable) inclusion within the Wagnerian cabal. And when the “mutual disloyalty”⁹⁰ of which he writes so eloquently in “The Grave-Song” finally came to pass, the personage of Friedrich Nietzsche became, for Cosima, little more than a prime exemplar of richly squandered potential.

Blicke und Augenblicke

In light of all this, the love-note of January 1889 assumes an ever more conspicuous redolence of fabulation – for the erotic scenography which it conjures remains hopelessly divorced from reality. Nietzsche was not Cosima’s lover. Nor was Tribschen a truly idyllic place.⁹¹ And yet, the language with which he addresses her in the final letters would seem to suggest otherwise. What is all too easily overlooked, however, is that Nietzsche’s intimation of an erotic bond between himself and Cosima is by no

⁸⁸ Ibid. 399.

⁸⁹ *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*. 164-5.

⁹⁰ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 96.

means lacking in precedent within his texts. As Hermann J. Weigand has previously argued, “the elements of a web of fantasy had been germinating long before 1889.”⁹² Indeed, even as early as 1883, Nietzsche can already be seen mythologising his relationship with Cosima in the most nostalgic of terms. “O you visions [*Gesichte*] and apparitions [*Erscheinungen*] of my youth,” he writes. “O all you glances of love [*Blicke der Liebe*], you divine moments [*göttlichen Augenblicke*]! How quickly you died away! I remember you today as my deceased.”⁹³ These words, written only weeks after Nietzsche first heard news of Wagner’s death, clearly anticipate, both in tone and diction, the famous statement from *Ecce Homo*: “I would not give up my Tribschen days for anything...days of trust, of cheerfulness, of sublime chance – of *profound* moments [*der tiefen Augenblicke*].”⁹⁴ That the scenography of Tribschen was, for Nietzsche, pervaded by certain libidinal investitures seems obvious enough, but what makes these passages so fascinating, especially when read together, is the *precise nature* of the eroticism which they describe.

The words that Nietzsche deploys here: visions and apparitions, glances and moments – could not be further removed from the language of amorous fulfilment. What they call to mind, instead, is a carefully orchestrated game of pursuit and elision in which Cosima, the desired lady, remains inaccessibly distant with respect to her admirer. Glances, mere glances – and momentary ones at that! Each vision, only an apparition.⁹⁵ And yet, for Nietzsche, it is precisely *these* glances and moments [*Blicke und Augenblicke*] – the unconsummated ones suggestive of erotic distance and indirection – which are explicitly privileged as most decisive and profound.

An obvious point of reference here is *Gay Science* §339, where Nietzsche reminds us of those ancient Greeks who likewise worshipped and sought “beautiful moments [*schönen Augenblicken*].”⁹⁶ For the Greeks, however, the

91 *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation* 37.

92 “Nietzsche’s Dionysus-Ariadne Fixation.” 99.

93 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 95.

94 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 92.

95 The German word *Gesichte*, translated here as “visions,” can also mean “faces” or “appearances.”

96 Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. London: Vintage, 1974. 272.

experience of a beautiful moment was fundamentally inseparable from an instance of unveiling in which the desired object found itself suddenly and inexplicably revealed in the sumptuous light of truth. Such moments would, of course, be extremely rare. And yet, when they did occur, the object's *exposure* would be absolute.

What is so remarkable about the “glances and moments” of Nietzsche's mythologised Tribschen, is that they indefinitely forestall and elide all such attempts at facile unconcealment. Unlike those revelatory moments which the Greeks so ardently desired, the *Augenblicke* of Tribschen preserve, at all times, the inaccessibility of the denuded form, both literally and figuratively. Within Nietzsche's scenography, Cosima retains her modesty behind countless veils, each one, “sparkling with promise, resistance, bashfulness, mockery, pity, and seduction.”⁹⁷

This is but one reason why we must insist upon the fact that, that despite certain appearances to the contrary, Nietzsche's fabulation of a mythical Tribschen is *anything but* a simple case of wish-fulfilment. For at no point, within this scenography, is his love for Cosima either consummated or even revealed. One could almost say, in fact, that nothing happens here, beyond the turning of a head, the momentary insouciance of a seductive glance – or rather, the dawning of its apparition [*Erscheinung*]. The Greeks would have never been satisfied with these ghostly moments of stunted arousal – but for Nietzsche, they belong to his mythical Tribschen as something approaching its very essence. Glances and moments, filling-out a spectral past, marking the site of an irrepressible yearning. A yearning, moreover, whose prototype is much less Hellenistic than Provençal.



⁹⁷ Ibid. 272.

Indeed, what has thus far escaped any notice from Nietzsche's vast coterie of interpreters is the incredible similarity to be found between the mythologised scenography of Nietzsche's Tribschen and the depictions of the *locus amoenus* found throughout the verses of the troubadours. As Bartlett Giamatti reminds us, the *locus amoenus*, or love garden, "was used throughout Provençal love poetry as the secluded, ordered, beautiful setting for the seizure by, or loss of, love."⁹⁸ What serves to distinguish it from other settings similarly pervaded by amorous investiture is its extreme "remoteness in space and time."⁹⁹ These gardens of the troubadours were always "far away or fortified or false as a means to convey the lover's daily awareness of the impossibility of attaining his ideal."¹⁰⁰ Though the erotic specificities of *what* transpired within its walls would necessarily remain a secret known only to the lover and his lady – "the complementary traits of yearning and nonpossession, desire and inaccessibility, were common to most garden descriptions."¹⁰¹ All of these features, incidentally, are prominent within Nietzsche's Tribschen reconstructions: mythical beauty, spatio-temporal remoteness, and most importantly, the persistence of erotic yearning coupled with the inaccessibility of the desired object. But if Cosima's propensity for elision here unquestionably recalls the eroticism of the courtly scene, then might something very similar be said about Ariadne's resistance to symbolic stabilisation more generally? Could it be, moreover, that the figure of Ariadne – not unlike Cosima herself, or even Isolde – approaches most nearly the heights of her mythical splendour *not* in being unveiled, crudely, for all to see; but rather, at the very moment in which she sustains, with a simple glance, the unassailable distance between herself and her admirer?

There can little doubt, on the basis of the evidence we have introduced thus far, that Cosima occupies a role of great importance whenever Nietzsche thinks of Tribschen – and indeed, of *Tristan*. But what remains much less

98 Bartlett Giamatti. *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1966. 60.

99 Ibid. 84.

100 Ibid.

clear is the precise role which Ariadne is meant to play within these scenographies of amorous longing. Without question, the circumstantial evidence linking the two names is considerable; and yet, if the relationship between them is taken to be anything other than one of strict identity, a careful and precise disambiguation must be undertaken. What makes such a disambiguation so difficult, however, is that despite his numerous references to Ariadne dating back to 1882-3, Nietzsche's most important, most concerted attempt at lucidly addressing the question of her overall significance comes so very late in his own thinking, as though in the very face of a swiftly encroaching darkness.

Solar Suffering & the Smallest Chasm

In fact, it was not until the autumn of 1888, only weeks before sending Cosima the famous love-note, that Nietzsche first posed, in the pages of *Ecce Homo*, the riddle of Ariadne in its explicit form. In the midst of a section dedicated to the retrospective appraisal of *Zarathustra*, we discover the following, inscrutable remarks: "Nothing like this has ever been composed, ever been felt, ever been *suffered* before, this is how a god suffers, a Dionysus. The answer [*Antwort*] to this sort of dithyramb of solar solitude in the light would be Ariadne...Who besides me knows what Ariadne is!...Nobody until now has been able to solve riddles [*Räthseln*] like this."¹⁰² Like most passages in Nietzsche's *oeuvre*, the significance of what is written here is entirely lost if we fail to consider the context in which it appears. These are *not* isolated, fragmentary remarks. On the contrary, they constitute a brief, though

101 Ibid.

102 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 133.

nonetheless scintillating, commentary on a specific passage from Nietzsche's own "Night Song" – that unforgettable interlude from Part II of *Zarathustra*. It is this song, redolent of a great nostalgic lament, which elicits from Nietzsche the boast that nothing similar had ever been composed, ever been felt, ever been suffered before.

What is initially so striking about the passages cited above, is the manner in which Ariadne – this unparalleled avatar of esotericism – is presented, rather ambiguously, as the *answer* to Nietzsche's dithyramb of solar solitude even whilst her own meaning remains hopelessly enshrouded in obscurity. Indeed, it is on the basis of this very tension between Ariadne's status as both an answer *and* a riddle, that Nietzsche's remarks derive both their hermeneutical depth and their enigmatic allure.

Despite assuring us of her crucial importance, Nietzsche nevertheless refuses to tell us precisely who or what Ariadne is. Instead, he offers us a clue: Ariadne is the answer to a particular type of "solar solitude in the light" which has never been felt or suffered until now. Her significance, therefore, is utterly dependent upon the scenography of suffering that we encounter within "The Night Song." But how, precisely, are we to characterise the nature of this suffering? And what might its broader philosophical significance be?

The thread of Ariadne, it seems, lies entangled around these very questions, and so it is here that we must attempt, with care and sobriety, to begin loosening Nietzsche's knot. In attempting to do so, we are greatly aided by Nietzsche's own, invaluable comments on the "Night Song" in those passages which both immediately precede and follow its citation within *Ecce Homo*. According to these comments, the "Night Song," which Nietzsche composed in May of 1883, was originally intended as "an immortal lament at being condemned never to love by an excess of light and power, by a *sun-like* nature."¹⁰³ One might assume, on the basis of this statement, that the dolorous rhetoric which so extensively permeates the scenography of the "Night Song" is a direct consequence of this mysterious injunction which condemns

Zarathustra never to love. But if this were indeed the case, then should we not expect to find, quite naturally, any number of textual references within the song itself suggesting a correlation between the suffering undergone by Zarathustra and the persistence of an inexorably stifled eroticism?

Indeed, upon reading the “Night Song” and studying its imagery, this is precisely what we *do* find. Moreover, there is arguably no section in the entire text of *Zarathustra* which is more explicitly and unmistakably pervaded by erotic longing. Already in the song’s first several lines we encounter the following confession: “Something unstilled, unstillable [*Unstillbares*] is within me, that wants [*will*] to become loud [*laut*]. A desire [*Begierde*] for love is within me, that itself talks in the language of love.”¹⁰⁴ Having previously compared his soul to “the song of a lover [*das Lied eines Liebenden*],”¹⁰⁵ Zarathustra here begins to express, for the first time, a desire not only to make this love manifest, but also to communicate it openly and publicly. In order to do so, however, he must wait for the appropriate moment – a moment which is marked, just as in Wagner’s *Tristan*, by the coming of nightfall. For it is only then, amidst the billowy darkness, that the “lover’s song may at last awaken.”¹⁰⁶

And yet, as we soon discover, the arrival of twilight ultimately brings Zarathustra, like Tristan, neither the satisfaction, nor the release, which he desires – but only the sorrow of an ever-renewed longing. His hopes of erotic fulfilment are continually frustrated, as Nietzsche explains, on account of the luminosity which envelopes him. “I am girded round with light,” Zarathustra laments, “ah, if only I were dark and night-like!”¹⁰⁷ This desire for the night expresses, in symbolical terms, a hunger for love’s enduring embrace. And yet, to the extent that Zarathustra’s luminous, sun-like nature prevails, the sensual darkness of erotic bliss is perpetually denied him.

103 Ibid. 131.

104 Ibid. 131.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

Zarathustra's problem is not that he is somehow incapable of loving – quite to the contrary, his heart, like the sun, “never rests from bestowing.”¹⁰⁸ At every moment, his love seeks to flow forth from an over-full heart. The problem is that he knows no *other heart* capable of loving him in the same manner. The roots of Zarathustra's suffering reside in the fact that he experiences “none of the happiness”¹⁰⁹ felt by the lover whose ardour is reciprocated. He incessantly seeks to illumine, and then to grow dark in love – but all of this is denied him. In spite of all Zarathustra's amorous longing, his inescapable solar-solitude ultimately condemns him to a love which is hopelessly unrequited and bereft of fulfilment.

As a result, the scenography of Nietzsche's “Night Song” comes to be pervaded not by depictions of intimacy or erotic consummation, but by the resounding pathos of a cruel and irreducible regimen of distanciation which returns, incessantly, to separate the willing lover from the object of his yearning. Nietzsche himself provides us with a helpful illustration of this eroticism, predicated upon dissymmetry, when he writes: “There is a chasm [*Kluft*] between giving [*Nehmen*] and taking [*Geben*]...and the smallest chasm [*die kleinste Kluft*] is the last to be bridged.”¹¹⁰ In Zarathustra's case, love is continually offered, but never requited – and thus, over time, “it grows weary of itself in its overflow.”¹¹¹ It is this very weariness, endured by a lover incessantly thwarted on account of *die kleinste Kluft*, that so thoroughly pervades the scenography of the “Night Song.”



108 Ibid.

109 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 132.

110 Ibid.

To understand how this eroticism of futility and distancing came to populate the Zarathustrian image repertoire, one need look no further than to Nietzsche's own letters during the period immediately preceding the song's composition. These letters depict, almost without exception, a man struggling against all odds to overcome an oppressive and irremissible loneliness. "I have suddenly become poor in love and consequently very much in need of love,"¹¹² Nietzsche writes, only months before composing "The Night Song." The subtext for these comments is ostensibly Nietzsche's abandonment, in November of 1882, by his closest friends, Lou Salomé and Paul Rée.

Having shared with them, throughout the summer of that year, a relationship of the deepest trust and intellectual complicity, Nietzsche found himself, only months later, utterly forsaken and alone. Though it is unquestionable that Nietzsche himself was at least partially responsible for precipitating this crisis, he nevertheless appeared to emerge from it all "insulted and degraded to the limit of his endurance."¹¹³

By the winter of 1882-3, his despondency had taken an increasingly morose turn, as evidenced by the following lines which he addressed to Rée in mid-December: "If I should happen one day to take my life because of some passion or other, there would not be much to grieve about. What do my fantasies matter to you?"¹¹⁴ The possibility of suicide is mentioned again, only weeks later, in a letter to Overbeck: "The barrel of a revolver is for me now a source of relatively pleasant thoughts."¹¹⁵

111 Ibid.

112 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 196.

113 *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. 72.

114 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 198.

115 Ibid. 206.

Though Nietzsche remained, for the most part, characteristically taciturn about the precise reasons for his sorrow, he complains, in at least two separate instances of “tormenting and horrible memories.”¹¹⁶ The past, it seems, had become inextricably bound up for him with the imagery of disappointment and loss. As a result, Nietzsche came to experience “a sort of instability such as he had never known before.”¹¹⁷ And all of this was only further exacerbated in February of 1883, when Nietzsche heard the sudden and unexpected news of Wagner’s death in Venice – an event which elicited from him, once again, an evocation of tortuously stifled eroticism.

“You served that which does not die with a man even though it is born in him,” Nietzsche wrote to Cosima, “Thus today I look upon you, and thus I looked upon you in the past, although from a *great distance*, only upon you, as the most honoured woman who could ever be in my heart.”¹¹⁸ On the day Nietzsche penned these words, it had been less than two months since his relationship with Lou had passed through “its last agonising throes.”¹¹⁹

What is both fascinating and eminently instructive about his note of condolence to Cosima, is the manner in which Nietzsche claims to accord her a place of utmost honour within his heart, telling her of his profound love for her, whilst at the very same time stipulating and even reinscribing the irreducible distance, the interval of separation, which necessarily keeps them apart. Indeed, it is almost as if this “great distance” of which Nietzsche writes, this interval of separation, had come to comprise the very condition of his love for her. As if it were within the very nature of his longing and his love to remain – not unlike Tristan’s passion – hopelessly unconsummated.¹²⁰

116 Ibid. 206 & 198.

117 Nietzsche: *An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. 72.

118 *Wagner and Nietzsche*. 227.

119 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 199.

120 Remember, it had been during a visit to Tribschen, of all places, that Nietzsche had elected to propose (unsuccessfully) to Lou in May 1882. Why had he chosen this site? Was it to purge the memory of an unfulfilled romance with Cosima? Or (as we suspect) to relive, on the contrary, a failure and dissatisfaction which had become perhaps more valuable to him than any triumph?

With all possibilities of intimacy seemingly foreclosed, Nietzsche's sense of loneliness and bereavement, in the weeks immediately preceding his composition of "The Night Song," became ever more intense.¹²¹ "With all the people I love, everything is *over*, it is the past...forbearance,"¹²² Nietzsche would write. Indeed, on the basis of the preceding remarks, it would not be implausible to suggest that, by the time of its composition, Nietzsche may very likely have seen this "immortal lament," this dithyramb of solar solitude, as a perfect opportunity to excise the very feelings of erotic frustration which he himself had so recently undergone.¹²³

What is so remarkable, however, is the fact that Zarathustra, at *no point* within the "Night Song" seeks to restrain or curtail his yearning simply on account of the impossibility which fetters him. On the contrary, it is this very impossibility, this distance itself, which seemingly draws him onward, ever deeper into the labyrinth of longing. Consequently, what we encounter, within the scenography of his lament, is an account not of desire's alleviation or diminution, but rather, of its gradual and irreversible intensification. Indeed, what begins as mere *Begierde* in the opening lines of the song has become *Sehnsucht* by its mid-point.¹²⁴ And when the former term returns once more, several lines later, it is doubled into the phrase *Begierde nach Begehren* ["desire for desiring"]. This movement of intensification culminates in the song's closing lines where Nietzsche elects to eschew both *Begierde* and *Sehnsucht* – in favour of *Verlangen*, a word which suggests, rather forcefully, a longing which has become transmuted into an exigency or demand. "Like a spring, my longing [*Verlangen*] flows forth from me," Zarathustra remarks, "And I long [*verlangt*] for speech."¹²⁵ Whilst these words evoke, in a manner which is undeniably heart-wrenching, the tragedy of Zarathustra's failure to

121 Nietzsche: *An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. 73.

122 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 220.

123 In a letter to Peter Gast from August of 1883, Nietzsche admits that the thematic content of Part II of Zarathustra is largely drawn from his own past. "The detail contains an incredible amount of personal experience and suffering which is intelligible only to me," he writes. *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 218.

124 As Heidegger helpfully instructs us, the etymological root *Sucht* carries the meaning illness, suffering, and pain (as in *Gelbsucht*, "jaundice," and *Schwindsucht*, "consumption"). It is in this sense that the word *Sehnsucht* can be considered a yearning which is a kind of affliction more extreme than ordinary desire. Nietzsche: *Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. 217.

125 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 133.

secure the intimacy he so passionately seeks, they also suggest, at the same time, an overpowering exigency to bear witness, if not to love's attainment, then at least to love's deferral.

But could it be that Nietzsche, through the mediatory voice of Zarathustra, speaks of love's deferral most eloquently at precisely that moment when he avows, with utmost restraint, the absolute deferral of speech? And might this be the reason why Ariadne's identity must remain perpetually enshrouded in secrecy?

A rather intriguing suggestion. And indeed, it is along these very lines that we shall now offer a reading of Nietzsche's most famous riddle which will come to illumine, in an unprecedented manner, the erotic scenography in question – and lead us, moreover, to the threshold of a newfound appreciation for Nietzsche's most challenging and illustrious of thoughts.

Towards a Rehabilitation of Erotic Distance

Let us recall how we began the present section by reading those words of great importance, found within the pages of *Ecce Homo*: “Nothing like this has ever been composed, ever been felt, ever been *suffered* before, this is how a god suffers, a Dionysus. The answer [*Antwort*] to this sort of dithyramb of solar solitude in the light would be Ariadne.” As we know, these words were originally intended, by Nietzsche, as an explication of Zarathustra's own

“Night Song.” And what they came to suggest, rather strikingly, was that Ariadne herself be understood as the *answer* to this very song.

A fascinating statement. But if Ariadne is indeed the answer, then what, we might ask, is the question? Here, on this point, we come to the heart of the discussion. For as we shall soon discover, to speak of a question, here, is to speak of nothing less than a provocation, an impasse, a crisis of utterly metaphysical proportions. Indeed, as the passage above suggests, it is a crisis which is linked inextricably to the fact of a most extreme suffering. A suffering the likes of which no one has ever suffered before: *a solar suffering*.

This, precisely, serves as both the theme of Nietzsche’s “Night Song” and the immediate context for Ariadne’s fortuitous intervention. The key, in other words, to this entire discussion resides in our ability to appreciate, as fully as possible, the nature of this solar suffering, this most unbearable agony, which only Ariadne, it seems, can assuage.

And on this point the text does not equivocate. Indeed, the nature of Zarathustra’s suffering is rendered abundantly clear to us. It is a suffering, as Nietzsche writes, which is fundamentally *erotic* in nature. And it is erotic, moreover, in the precise sense that it arises from an inability, on the speaker’s part, to attain amorous satisfaction or fulfilment. Zarathustra, as we have already mentioned, has the soul of a lover and a heart that does not cease bestowing. And yet, as Nietzsche informs us, Zarathustra nonetheless remains “condemned never to love.”¹²⁶ His yearnings remain hopelessly unsatisfied; his longings are never requited. And the joys of consummation, like the profound mysteries of intimacy, are thus rendered utterly alien to him.

The cause of this futility, this disappointment, is particularly telling. For, as Nietzsche proceeds to inform us, it is none other than “an excess of light”¹²⁷ which keeps Zarathustra from ever attaining fulfilment in love. “I am girded round with light,” Zarathustra laments, “ah, if only I were dark and night-like!”¹²⁸ Indeed, it is this very luminosity which constitutes the cause of his great suffering, his inability to attain erotic satisfaction. It is this luminosity which seems to hold him back, as if perpetually, at the very threshold of release.

And where, we might ask, have we previously encountered this very same rhetoric, this very same futility, this very same crisis of erotic relations? Nowhere else than in the unforgettable dramatic scenographies of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. Here, as we recall, the amorous couple were made to endure, like Zarathustra himself, the cruel and unremitting torment of “the sun’s scorching beams”¹²⁹ and “the devouring heat of the glow.”¹³⁰ Indeed, this preponderance of luminous imagery, as well as its association with the futility of erotic longing, were features not uncommon within the tradition of German romanticism more broadly.

Recall how Wagner’s deployment of such imagery had been anticipated and profoundly influenced by the writings of Novalis – writings in which the linkage between erotic unfulfilment and the tropes of luminosity received arguably its quintessential elaboration. For Novalis, as for Tristan, it was only in the dark of night that amorous satisfaction might be gained. Daylight, precisely, was a symbol of perpetual dissatisfaction, incompleteness, and futility.

This is because what the light of day comes to represent, in German romantic thought, is none other than the inexorable and abiding majesty of the *principium individuationis*: the principle of individuation itself. To remain

126 Ibid. 131.

127 Ibid. 131.

128 Ibid..

129 Act III, Scene 1.

130 Act III, Scene 1.

immersed in light, as Tristan and Isolde so painfully come to realise, is to remain bound to the irreducibility of one's isolated and individuated state, a state which is regulated at the most fundamental level, by the laws of temporal and spatial distance – such is the legacy of Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic (the one aspect of Kantian philosophy which Schopenhauer accepted unequivocally).¹³¹

It is distance, in other words, which is ultimately the culprit here. It is distance which is the cause of our yearning. It is distance which inspires our sense of incompleteness. It is distance which makes us suffer. And it is distance, in the end, which makes us despise life. This is what the venerable tradition of German romanticism, from Novalis, through Schopenhauer, and into Wagner makes abundantly clear to us: that there can be no satisfaction in erotic relations, or in life itself, as long as distance remains.

And in many ways, as we have suggested, it is Wagner's *Tristan* which marks perhaps the paradigmatic exemplification of this tendency in German romantic thought. For it is in Wagner's *Tristan* that the persistence of spatio-temporal distance, as we have already shown, renders perhaps its most striking consequence. Consigned to the futility of amorous relations, Tristan and Isolde ultimately come to transfer their longing *away* from erotic satisfaction and *onto* death itself in hopes of attaining, at long last, a release from the torments of their impossible love.

In doing so, their sentiments increasingly come to echo, perhaps unsurprisingly, the death-devoted rhetoric of Novalis: "In this sorrow-laden life [*Schattenleben*], I desire only thee...in thee I hope for healing [*genesen*], in thee I expect true rest [*Ruhe*]." ¹³² Compare these words to the ones found in Act III of Wagner's opera: "What never dies now calls, yearning, to the distant physician for the peace of death [*sterbens Ruh*]." ¹³³

¹³¹ This was previously discussed at length in Chapter I.

¹³² "Hymns to the Night." 20.

¹³³ Act III, Scene 1.

What both of these passages share in common is an implicit denigration, a recrimination, of erotic distance. It is a recrimination, moreover, which manifests itself most unmistakably in the yearning for death and repose. A yearning, in other words, for release from the torments of erotic deferral. Indeed, it is on this very point that we come to encounter, once more, that unmistakable ascendancy of the rhetoric of the night – an ascendancy which we have already documented at length. For, whereas the rhetoric of daylight, as we know, comes to be allied with the tropes of distance and transience, “the sacred night...is eternal and true, and unifies all that has been separated.”¹³⁴

This, in short, may be understood to constitute the immediate literary-philosophical context for Zarathustra’s “Night Song,” that paean to a hopelessly unrequited longing. And here, it seems, the similarities between the “Night Song” and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* become fully apparent. We note, for instance, the implacable irreducibility of spatio-temporal distance which cruelly rivets *both* Zarathustra and Tristan to a luminous solitude. In each case, it is the persistence of separation, of the inaccessibility of the beloved, which robs them of fulfilment and repose, consigning their yearnings to failure – and making them suffer, as though endlessly, on account of this futility.

But is the “Night Song,” on the basis of these similarities, to be understood as fundamentally *Wagnerian* – in its disposition toward the erotic? Is the “Night Song,” ultimately little more than a work of German romanticism masquerading as a dithyramb; a rather transparent attempt, on Nietzsche’s part, at coming to appropriate the Wagnerian image-repertoire for his own purposes? Or might there be more to this story than we had previously imagined?

¹³⁴ Thomas Mann. “Tristan.” 118.



It is perhaps not until the pages of *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, written in 1888, that we encounter Nietzsche's most candid and insightful attempt at disambiguating, in the clearest of terms, his own writings and philosophy from the broader milieu of German romanticism – and Wagner, in particular. Here, Nietzsche admits, with a trace of admiration, that it was indeed Wagner who “created the loneliest music in existence.”¹³⁵ A claim which *Tristan and Isolde* undoubtedly corroborates. But a question nevertheless remains: “Is it *hatred* of life or *superabundance* of life that has become creative here?”¹³⁶

Indeed, as we soon discover, it is only on the basis of this most serious and probing of questions that the fundamental differences between the Tristanian and Ariadnean scenographies become, for the first time, fully apparent to us.

For, as we know, fulfilment – within the Tristanian tableau – is quite simply never to be found in *this* life. As Herbert Marcuse writes, Wagnerian fulfilment “is only ever attained beyond the earthly realm,”¹³⁷ at that very point where the pervasive dominance of the *principium individuationis* comes to be annulled. This is because true fulfilment, true satisfaction, in Wagner's eyes, would require nothing less than a complete exoneration from the governance of time and space – an exoneration which would have the effect of suppressing, once and for all, any possibility of erotic distance. This, and nothing else, constitutes the highest aspiration of Wagner's Tristan: to accede unto a realm beyond the limits of individuation. This, and nothing else, would be, for Wagner, the meaning of redemption.

¹³⁵ *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. 267.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 272.

And there is absolutely nothing, as Nietzsche reminds us, “that Wagner thought about more deeply than [this] redemption...his operas are the operas of redemption.”¹³⁸ From one scene to the next, Wagner’s amorous couple do not cease to desire the ever-elusive end, the moment of transfiguration [*Verklärung*], which will come to reconcile them with one another. For it is only then, in light of their redemption from the cruel regimen of erotic distanciation, that oneness and unity may be realised.

Indeed, if waking existence, pervaded by the endless drama of erotic unfulfilment, might be thought to comprise the realm of mere appearances – as Wagner believed – then it was only by passing *beyond* this world, and its regimen of inexorable distanciation and deferral, that we finally come to approach the domain of the real. Hence, the unmistakable emphasis upon death which we find within the Tristanian tableau. And not just any death, we might add, but more specifically the *consummating* one [*vollbringenden Tod*] – the death that restores us to the whole, beyond all distance, beyond separation. To die the consummatory death is to find yearning quelled, it is to find desire silenced, it is to find oneself given access, at long last, to the eternal truth.

It is in this sense that Laurence Lampert rightly suggests that late German romanticism, the milieu of Schopenhauer and Wagner, be understood “as the final outcome of Platonism, its last possible form.”¹³⁹ For not unlike Socrates himself, who ultimately curses life in the name of a higher wisdom, Tristan too, beseeches with utmost reverence “the distant physician / for the peace of death.”¹⁴⁰ Here, the longing for a consummatory death comes to trump all else. To escape the torment of life: this becomes the worthiest and most blessed aim of life itself.

137 Herbert Marcuse. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. London: Penguin, 1969. 119.

138 *The Case of Wagner*. 237.

139 Nietzsche’s *Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 162.

And what becomes, therefore, of earthly existence? Naturally, it comes to be both devalued and despised. The world, pervaded as it is by spatio-temporal distances, is something to be left behind. – Such is the wisdom imparted upon us by Wagner’s *Tristan*. And such, moreover, is the enduring mark of Wagner’s own profound decadence, a decadence inherited, of course, from none other than Schopenhauer himself. “He flatters every nihilistic instinct and disguises it in music,”¹⁴¹ writes Nietzsche, in 1888. “Is Wagner even a person? Isn’t he really just a sickness? He makes everything he touches sick – *he has made music sick.*”¹⁴²

Decisive words. And clearly (as we can now discern) it is indeed a form of hatred for life, a form of abnegation in the face of suffering, a form of renunciation which has become creative here. For there can never be a single *answer* to Tristan’s solar suffering, in Wagner’s opera, other than death itself – the absolute cessation of desire.



All of this is so particularly instructive, because it was likewise (as we recall) in the form of an *answer*, namely, as an answer to Zarathustra’s own solar suffering, that Nietzsche first introduced us to the figure of Ariadne. It was precisely as a response to Zarathustra’s futility, his overbearing erotic dissatisfaction, that the figure of Ariadne had come to assert herself as the key to his redemption. To express it in the form of an analogy, we might say that what consummatory death becomes for Tristan, Ariadne becomes for Zarathustra. This much, it seems, is beyond dispute. And yet, the question nevertheless remains: what, exactly, *is* Ariadne?

¹⁴⁰ Act III, Scene 1.

¹⁴¹ *The Case of Wagner*. 256.

Could it be that she, likewise, is a symbol for death? A symbol for the absolute cessation of longing? A symbol for absolute truth? Indeed, this is what Karl Jaspers, among others, comes to conclude. But to say as much would be, once again, to reduce the “Night Song” to something which it is not – a pale imitation of Wagner’s Tristanian scenography. It would be to reinscribe, moreover, Nietzsche’s name back into that long and wearisome tradition of decadent, consummatory idealism from which he so tirelessly sought to extricate himself.

But if Ariadne is neither a symbol for death, nor a symbol for blessed release, nor the figurative embodiment of some absolute truth – then in what sense, precisely, does she come to comprise the *answer* to Zarathustra’s (and Nietzsche’s own) suffering? Indeed, everything that we have been discussing over the course of the preceding pages now seems to hinge upon this question. The entire nature of Nietzsche’s relationship to the tradition of German romanticism hangs in the balance.



As it turns out, the answer is already in our grasp. Indeed, it was Nietzsche himself, in that guiding passage from *Ecce Homo*, who already might be seen to offer us the crucial missing link. Let us read, once more, those lines: “Nothing like this has ever been composed, ever been felt, ever been *suffered* before, this is how a god suffers, a Dionysus. The answer [*Antwort*] to this sort of dithyramb of solar solitude in the light would be Ariadne.”

All this time, we have been concerning ourselves with the task of identifying, as thoroughly as possible, the nature of the solar suffering described here –

142 Ibid. 240.

and we have shown it be fundamentally linked to the injunction against absolute proximity stipulated by the *principium individuationis*. But in doing so, we have perhaps neglected to take into account one of the most important features of Nietzsche's riddle, namely, his allusion to the god Dionysus.

Indeed, the passage in question makes it quite clear to us that if Ariadne is indeed the *answer*, here, then she is nevertheless only the answer in relation to a suffering which might be characterised as Dionysian. "*This is how a god suffers...*" But what, exactly, might such a suffering entail? In principle, it would be no different than the crushing despondency, the sorrow undergone by Tristan – except with a single, important exception. Like Tristan's solar suffering, it would be a sorrow which consigns one to an eroticism of inexorable futility and perennial dissatisfaction. And yet, unlike Tristan's suffering, it would *not* seek any consummatory or teleological recompense for all this, it would not seek any end beyond itself, it would not seek release. In other words, as Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, it would not allow the pain of unfulfilment "to be considered an objection to life."¹⁴³

To speak of a Dionysian suffering would be to speak of a suffering which refuses to be given over to a yearning for death or consummation; but instead, which impels us to affirm, against all odds, the eternal ebb and flow of desire *even in the absence of every end and every object*. This, and nothing else, comprises the central conflict inherent to Zarathustra's "Night Song" – how someone with "the hardest, most terrible insight into reality...can nonetheless see it *not* as an objection...but instead find one more reason in it for himself to be the eternal yes to all things."¹⁴⁴

The question, indeed, is whether we, as lovers, are willing to suffer for the sake of love. Are we willing to cease allowing the pain of erotic forbearance to turn us against life? Or are we willing to stop allowing the sorrow of erotic dissatisfaction to manifest itself in a curse against earthly existence? To answer yes – it seems – would require of us nothing short of a fundamental

¹⁴³ *Ecce Homo*. 124.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 130.

reorientation in our thinking about eroticism. It would require, as Nietzsche himself increasingly came to realise, nothing less than a rehabilitation of the very notion of erotic distance.

For, as we have already shown, it is above all an ill-will against erotic distance which ultimately characterises the nihilistic, consummatory eroticism of the German romantic tradition. In the Wagnerian scenography, for example, it is distance which consigns the lover to irreducible solitude and renders his love vain. It is distance which makes him turn against life. But what, we might ask, would Dionysus say to all this? Would he likewise seek death, consummation, and release? Or would he not, in the spirit of overabundance, come to affirm even *distance itself*, in the name of life? Would he not long for the very prolongation of longing – and desire the very distance which sustains it? Would he not, in the name of life, even go so far as to desire absolute and total separation, the radical impossibility of all consummation, simply in order to make the great wheel of desire return – for all eternity?

Indeed, this is the great Dionysian longing – the *Verlangen* – of which the “Night Song” so eloquently speaks. And if Ariadne is in fact the answer to Zarathustra’s solar suffering, it because Ariadne herself is nothing but Nietzsche’s most privileged name for absolute distance itself, the vast distance of the circuit of circuits, emptied of all ends. Here, at last, we come to appreciate the secret which critics and commentators have toiled over, unsuccessfully, for the past hundred years. We come to an unprecedented understanding of Nietzsche’s most misunderstood symbol. To desire Ariadne, is to desire nothing less than the incessant prolongation of longing in the absence of all fulfilment. She is a name for distance itself – infinite distance (spatially) and eternal distance (temporally). To love her, therefore, is to love distance. It is to affirm distance, and seek, wherever possible to extend it *in the name of life*.



“Who besides me knows what Ariadne is?” These words, once again, return to us – borne up from the past by an irrepressible swell which threatens, at every moment, to inundate the Nietzschean scenography. Is there any other riddle within the history of philosophy which resonates with such portent – and yet, with such languor? Its resolution inexorably deferred, the riddle remains suspended, timelessly, within a seemingly inaccessible space where every means of approach is stifled. To the extent that we remain enamoured by it, seduced by Ariadne’s infinite allure, we are made to feel all the more palpably its irremediable remoteness. And yet, the seduction draws us ever onward, into the very heart of the labyrinthine circuit where the cry of parched lips reverberates endlessly: Why should Nietzsche have elected so cruelly to demur?

If the riddle of Ariadne, as we can now discern, appears to place us at the furthest remove from every answer, separating us from every resolution – then this is simply its way of revealing itself to us all the more plainly. For what Ariadne signifies, within Nietzsche’s writings, is none other than absolute distance itself, a distance which is not merely an interval *between* objects, but pure distance extenuated indefinitely, beyond all possibility of recuperation. One might even say, therefore, that what Ariadne embodies, for Nietzsche, is the notion of distance carried all the way to the point of impossibility – to the point where fulfilment, death, and completion are no longer realisable. Here, desire is left without any possible object to attain, without any possible Other to love. It becomes an empty desire, a pure desire. And Ariadne, precisely, is Nietzsche’s name for this absence of every Other.¹⁴⁵ She is the very plenitude of absence which remains in the wake of absolute distanciation.

¹⁴⁵ To speak of the absence of the Other, here, is to speak of the absence of every higher truth, every fixed meaning, every consummatory point, and every world beyond. It also refers to the absence of the beloved, as well as the absence of God himself.



Now, for the first time, we can begin to see how Cosima's role in all of this came to assume such a vital importance. For it was only through her relationship with Nietzsche, that he came to experience the very quintessence of a yearning without any hope of fulfilment. It was through her relationship with Nietzsche that he came to understand the absolute futility of longing – a futility which he nevertheless elected to affirm. Indeed, one need only think of that note of condolence, sent to her only weeks before his composition of the “Night Song” – a note of condolence in which he tells her of his incomparable admiration and love, but a love only from “a great distance.” Here, it seems, we find at least partial confirmation of Walter Kaufmann's hypothesis that “Nietzsche's love for Cosima was indeed but a secret reverie, impossible of fulfilment – a forbidden wish...”¹⁴⁶

Indeed, the key phrase, here, is “impossibility of fulfilment.” For what these words suggest to us is a love that affirms itself and even affirms its own intensification in the full awareness of its own futility. And is this not, once again, to evoke the eroticism of the courtly troubadours, the practitioners of *domnei*? Is this not to evoke an eroticism in which the intensification of desire comes to be valued more highly than consummation itself? For Nietzsche, it was only through his relationship with Cosima that he came to experience this eroticisation of distance first-hand. And it was perhaps only through their mutual participation in the cabal of Tristanian transfiguration, that Nietzsche came to perceive the necessity of fashioning, in direct response to the consummatory idealism of his predecessors, a counter-ideal.

¹⁴⁶ Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1968. 33.

And on this point, Nietzsche would not need to look very far for his guiding inspiration. For if Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* had offered him nothing less than a paradigmatic exemplification of "solar suffering," and of the decadent pursuit of consummatory release – it *also* offered him, at the very same time, an intimation of that greatest secret, the secret of endlessness, of the impossibility of dying. Indeed, it was in the opera's absence of a definitive *dénouement*, in its "unresolved chromaticism," and in the lack of apposition between start and finish, that Nietzsche came to encounter that pathos of radical distancing and deferral which renders all consummatory longing vain and ineffectual: a pathos without beginning or end, without origin or goal. And it was precisely in the context of his relationship with Cosima, that this ecstasy of distance gradually came to be experienced by Nietzsche as something resembling his own. Nietzsche had become Tristan and Cosima the unattainable lady. And yet, unlike Tristan, who had sought to impose an end upon separation and secure a release from longing, it was distance itself which Nietzsche would come to affirm – and not just once or twice, but for all eternity.

What we are now prepared to show, is the precise manner in which this affirmation of distance, an affirmation summoned in direct response to the perceived consummatory idealism of the German romantic tradition, ultimately came to assume, by the early 1880s, its most radical and provocative elaboration in the very thought of eternal recurrence. What we will now show, in other words, is how Nietzsche's formative immersion within the pathos of the Wagnerian *milieu*, an immersion which we have chronicled in detail throughout the course of the preceding pages, ultimately led him, by the time of *Zarathustra*, to the threshold of an entirely unprecedented affirmation of erotic forbearance, an affirmation inseparable from the performative valorisation of absolute distancing and deferral.

Indeed, it will be on the very basis of this discussion, that the full significance of Blanchot's radical reformulation and reinscription of Nietzsche's most abyssal thought will become gradually apparent to us.

Let us now turn to this very task.

Chapter III

“A Voluptuousness of Hell”

On Romanticism, Deferral, and the Scorching of the Heart

“...the thing I have been most deeply occupied with is the problem of decadence...Perhaps nobody has been more dangerously bound up with Wagnernianism [than me].”

“I have always considered her marriage to Wagner to be a case of adultery – the Tristan case.”

Nietzsche

Beyond Romanticism

The question of Nietzsche's relationship to the venerable tradition of German romanticism has long been a contentious one – pervaded by polemics and politicisation, characterised all too frequently, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, by a redolence of nationalistic prejudice and its equally noxious counterpart: Germanophobia. Seemingly, at every turn, we find Nietzsche's name drawn into the sphere of debate, subjected to unending controversy, and ultimately abandoned to the violence of well-meaning, but patently heavy-handed, interpretations.

We think, for example, of Ernst Bertram's classic study from 1918 which presents Nietzsche "as a patriot romanticist well within the noble German tradition."¹ Here, we find Nietzsche listed beside Schlegel and Novalis in a most incongruous pantheon, portrayed as nothing less than an "enthusiastic supporter of German nationalism."² Similarly, Thomas Mann, in text written during World War I, offers his readers an unabashedly Germanic portrayal of Nietzsche, which stresses his indissoluble closeness to the *milieu* of romanticism and the cult of the past.³

And then, of course, there are the far more odious, transparently false portrayals of Nietzsche which so tarnished his reputation both during and even after the ascendancy of National Socialism. Above all, one cannot help but be reminded of the nefarious party philosopher, Alfred Bäumler, who sought to transform Nietzsche, beyond all credulity, into a kind of Teutonic sage, a romantic prophet of the new, German rebirth. Indeed, on this point, as Blanchot himself reminds us, we remain

1 Adrian Del Caro. *Nietzsche Contra Nietzsche: Creativity and the Anti-Romantic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1989. 2.

2 Ibid. 11. For the context of these remarks, see Ernst Bertram. *Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology*. Translated By Robert E. Norton. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

3 See Thomas Mann. *Reflections of Non-Political Man*. Translated by Walter D. Morris. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985.

profoundly indebted to the admirable efforts of Karl Jaspers, among others, who strenuously sought to de-politicise Nietzsche's writings during the 1920s and 1930s – helping to free his texts from an ever-growing falsification.⁴



Of course, the desire to assimilate Nietzsche's work, in one form or another, under the rubric of a certain romanticism, has by no means remained a tendency reserved for commentators on the political Right. Consider the case of Georg Lukács, ideologically antithetical to Bertram and Bäumler, who nevertheless came to understand Nietzsche, rather similarly, as “above all...carrying on the romantic tradition.”⁵ – A thesis complicated, but by no means discredited, according to Lukács, by Nietzsche's assumed vocation as “a herald of imperialist development.”⁶

What is so fascinating about all this, as Blanchot notes, in his 1958 essay, “Nietzsche, aujourd'hui,” is that Lukács ultimately comes to denounce the author of *Zarathustra* as a “precursor of Fascist aesthetics,” whilst according him, at the very same time, a reading in many ways indistinguishable from Bäumler's own. A strange irony, which perhaps tells us less about the actual status of Nietzsche's writings in their relation to the 19th century, than it does about the intoxicating power of myth itself and its connection to the rhetoric of extremism.⁷

⁴ *The Infinite Conversation*. 143.

⁵ *Ibid.* 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Having said all this, let us make it abundantly clear that is by no means our intent, in the pages that follow, to address – in any detail whatsoever – the question of the appropriation (or *misappropriation*) of Nietzsche's works, or to speculate upon the remarkably complex topic of Nietzsche's own views on “the political.” For a compelling discussion of the Hitlerian falsification of Nietzsche's work, see Bataille's essay “Nietzsche and the Fascists,” originally published in the second issue of *Acéphale* (January 1937) and republished in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Translated by Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. 182-196. Also see Blanchot's essay “Nietzsche, aujourd'hui,” more broadly, for an overview of the perils and ignominies of the political or ideological appropriation of Nietzsche's writings.

Thankfully, contemporary Nietzsche scholarship has gone a long way toward re-establishing the integrity of discourse by purging it of both needless polemic and ideological posturing – allowing us to return toward a more meaningful engagement with the texts in question. The roots of this more even-handed approach might be seen to date back to Paul Gerhardt Dippel’s key, 1934 text, *Nietzsche und Wagner: Eine Untersuchung über die Grundlagen und Motive ihrer Trennung*, where we encounter an important early attempt at differentiating, or classifying, Nietzsche’s various writings on the basis of historical or developmental criteria. According to Dippel, there are undoubtedly certain tendencies toward romanticism to be found within Nietzsche’s texts, but these tendencies nevertheless only seem to apply to the first period of Nietzsche’s writings, that period during which he was still notably under the sway of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and captivated by the experience of his own personal association with Wagner.⁸ *The Birth of Tragedy* is indeed a text profoundly imbued with the motifs of romanticism, as the critic Frederick R. Love, among others, has shown us.⁹ But as one begins to consider Nietzsche’s work beyond the mid-1870s, these elements appear with far less frequency. Even the *Untimely Meditations*, those fascinating transitional texts which Wagner received and read with a telling disinterest, already bear witness to a thinker attempting to move rather decisively beyond the confines of the romantic tradition.

And perhaps no one has done a finer job, in recent years, of chronicling Nietzsche’s eventual movement *away* from the romanticism of his youth than Adrian Del Caro. In his text, *Nietzsche contra Nietzsche: Creativity and the Anti-Romantic*, Del Caro comes to clarify not only the precise nature of Nietzsche’s debt to romanticism, but also the reasons for his later reaction against it. According to Del Caro, Nietzsche may indeed be understood by us as both “the culminator and surpasser”¹⁰ of the German romantic age – an epithet which demands to be understood in a very specific sense. For if Nietzsche ultimately comes to move beyond the romanticism of Schopenhauer and Wagner, Del Caro tells us, it is nevertheless only by having affirmed this romanticism at its most extreme point. It is only by having, in some sense, carried the decadence and nihilism of his predecessors to its furthest limit,

8 Paul Gerhardt Dippel. *Nietzsche und Wagner: Eine Untersuchung über die Grundlagen und Motive ihrer Trennung*. Bern: Haupt, 1934. 93.

9 See Frederick R. Love. *Young Nietzsche and the Wagnerian Experience*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963.

10 *Nietzsche Contra Nietzsche: Creativity and the Anti-Romantic*. 5.

that Nietzsche perhaps begins to liberate himself from it.

Indeed, as we have already suggested in the preceding chapter, Nietzsche's break from Wagner ultimately became unavoidable, to the extent that the former thinker increasingly came to view, with a growing agitation, the entire tradition of German romanticism as "degenerate, nihilistic, pathological, and weak."¹¹ And why, we might ask, was such an insight so particularly troubling for Nietzsche? Simply put: because he came to recognise this nihilism, this decadence, to be none other than his *own*. He had become Tristan. He had lived the ecstasy of transmogrification. And thus, he had found himself implicated in the drama of Wagnerian decadence at its very deepest level.

In other words, if Nietzsche ultimately found himself so compelled to launch, in years following Bayreuth, a tireless campaign, as Del Caro writes, "to disassociate himself from romanticism,"¹² then this must be understood, perhaps first and foremost, as a campaign to purge the Wagner *within* himself. It must be understood as an attempt to purge, from his very own psyche, the Tristanian nihilism which had so captivated him, seduced him, during those legendary visits upon the Isle of the Blessed. The task of opposing romanticism had become – to use a phrase – nothing less than a question of redeeming his own past, of justifying it unto eternity.¹³



¹¹ Ibid. 11.

¹² Ibid. 10.

¹³ This is a theme whose significance in Nietzsche's work becomes ever more pronounced, especially throughout his later texts. We note in passing, for instance, that remarkable admission, from the pages of *Ecce Homo*, "you can put my name or the word 'Zarathustra' without hesitation wherever the text has the word *Wagner*..." *Ecce Homo*. 111.

But to do so, Nietzsche first had to establish a basis for critique, he had to come up with his own way, “his own non-romantic alternative.”¹⁴ As Del Caro writes, “the fact that Nietzsche did *not* have this ‘new way’ during the middle years of his writing is clear.”¹⁵ Indeed, what a careful examination of Nietzsche’s texts from the late 1870s and early 1880s immediately reveals to us, is a thinker in the very midst of intense crisis – a crisis related, as we know, to the perceived *impossibility* of rendering judgment.

On what basis, Nietzsche wonders, might a critique of romanticism become possible? On what basis, might an interrogation of decadence, more broadly, be undertaken? Having denied himself recourse to the metaphysics of Schopenhauer and the aestheticism of Wagner, a certain instability, a profound disquietude, comes to haunt Nietzsche’s texts. He is left without the resources, conceptual or otherwise, to begin his project in earnest. He is undoubtedly a free-spirit, one might say, but he is not yet a legislator.

Indeed, it would not be until just before the writing of *Zarathustra* that both the precise nature of Nietzsche’s mission, his *Aufgabe* – as well as his basis for critique – would finally become clear to him. This moment of clarity, it seems, coincided with the fortuitous re-emergence, in his writings, of a rather important notion from his own past, a notion which would come to assume a position of profound significance in the philosophy that was so soon to follow. “After an absence of nearly ten years,”¹⁶ Nietzsche elected to restore the concept of the Dionysian to his writings, mobilising it as an invaluable resource in his new struggle against romanticism.

And *alongside* Dionysus, that famous lover of Ariadne, Nietzsche would elect to deploy nothing less than his most affirmative, most formidable thought – a thought which would come to offer him, at long last, a basis for fundamental critique, a means of moving beyond the decadence and nihilism of the romantic tradition.

¹⁴ Ibid. 158.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. 7.

It is only in the pages of *Zarathustra*, Del Caro tells us, that we encounter, for the first time, “the integrated Nietzsche.”¹⁷ A problematic phrase, to be sure.¹⁸ But the meaning behind it is nevertheless clear. It is only in *Zarathustra* that Nietzsche attains, for the first time, both a conceptual and rhetorical repertoire adequate to the task of contesting the decadence of the romantic tradition.

And yet, could it be that the central thought of this work, that most formidable and provocative of thoughts, the thought of eternal recurrence, is in fact borrowed by Nietzsche, in a most knowing manner, from the very scenography which it had been summoned to contest – from the scenography of Wagner’s *Tristan* itself? And could it be that, for this very reason, the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* remain imbued with the unmistakable traces of a slow-burning eroticism, an eroticism of endless longing and endless deferral, which remains hopelessly unconsummated, unrealised – not unlike the doctrine of eternal recurrence itself?

“...this moonlight between the trees...”

Only weeks before his collapse in Turin, Nietzsche came to inscribe a series of remarks which seek to bear witness, in a most remarkable manner, to the unmistakable exemplarity of a certain text – a text set apart from all others. “My *Zarathustra* has a special place for me in my writings,” Nietzsche tells us, “with it I have given humanity the greatest gift it has ever received.”¹⁹ What these words suggest to us is not only the exemplarity of this particular text; but also, even more importantly, the precise reason for its privileged status. If Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* is indeed a text set apart from all others – it is surely on account of what is bestowed

¹⁷ Ibid. 6.

¹⁸ Problematic, as we will show, in the precise sense that the very thought which brings about this supposed integration, the thought of eternal return, is also the thought which seems to contravene it by withdrawing the very presence needed to ground an installation, a project, an identity. The moment of “integration” is thus already the moment of “disintegration.” This will increasingly become evident to us in the sections that follow.

¹⁹ *Ecce Homo*. 72.

both through and within it. In giving us his *Zarathustra*, as Nietzsche claims, he has given us “the greatest gift” we could ever receive. But what, exactly, is the nature of this gift?

As Nietzsche proceeds to tell us, this gift is none other than Zarathustra’s message itself – his doctrine of eternal recurrence. And by offering us this gift, Nietzsche claims, Zarathustra is offering us nothing less than “the formula for the highest possible affirmation.”²⁰ He is offering us, in other words, the formula for an affirmation which gladly accepts and even wills “the unconditional and infinitely repeated cycle of all things.”²¹ But before going any further, let us pause, here, and attempt to recall the story of the thought’s initial emergence, the story of its earliest introduction within the Nietzschean scenography.



It was in August of 1881, as we know, that this thought first announced itself to him during the course of an alpine perambulation just outside the town of Sils-Maria. Here, Nietzsche came to inscribe, in the pages of a small notebook, his initial sketches of that most affirmative and challenging of thoughts under a title which read: “6,000 feet beyond humanity and time.”²² – A terse and foreboding acknowledgement of a experience whose impact upon his life, both philosophically and personally, was soon to prove nothing less than utterly irrevocable.

Indeed, over the course of the following weeks and months, we come to discover any number of rather fascinating references to the thought in both Nietzsche’s letters and notebooks. “On my horizon, thoughts have arisen such as I have never seen before,” he would write to Peter Gast, “I will not speak of them, but keep my unshakeable peace.”²³ What these words, and others like them, written in the days immediately

²⁰ Ibid. 123.

²¹ Ibid. 110.

²² Ibid. 123.

²³ Letter to Peter Gast. August 14, 1881.

following the fortuitous emergence of the thought, already suggest to us – is not only Nietzsche’s awareness of the enormity of the task which now awaited him *but also* his understanding of the exigency of profound reticence which was necessarily to accompany it. Nietzsche would have to prepare himself, as he soon realised, with an unprecedented modesty and discretion, for the moment of eventual disclosure. He would have to await, with both patience and fastidious circumspection, the hour of its declaration.

As it turned out, it would not be until some six months later, in the spring of 1882, that this period of the thought’s initial germination would finally come to a head, with the composition of Book IV of *The Gay Science*. Indeed, it is here that we encounter, rather famously, the very first published account of the eternal recurrence in Nietzsche’s writings. “What if some day or night,” he inquires of the reader, “a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness [*einsamste Einsamkeit*], and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times...”²⁴ Would we be capable, Nietzsche asks us, of saying *yes* to the eternal recurrence of this life, in its every joy and every sorrow – to every instant, both great and small – “even to this spider and this moonlight between the trees?”²⁵ Would we be capable of affirming that all this return endlessly, as though an “eternal hourglass”²⁶ were turned upside down, again and again? Or would we, on the contrary, gnash our teeth in agony and cry out for an end to the torments of existence?

It is with these words that Nietzsche first introduces us to the thought of eternal recurrence – a thought which comprises, as he goes on to tell us, nothing less than the heaviest of burdens [*Das grösste Schwergewicht*].²⁷ But a burden for whom, we might ask?

In reading these words, let us be especially attentive to the fact that Nietzsche, in this very earliest published account, elects to pose the challenge of eternal recurrence in relation to a very specific individual – namely, the one who has sunk into the

²⁴ *The Gay Science*. 273.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

“loneliest loneliness.” A fact which is no mere accident. For if the thought of eternal return is indeed to be understood by us as the heaviest burden, then this is above all true for the *loneliest* of individuals, the one who suffers most palpably on account of distance; the one for whom the experience of endlessness would be most painfully experienced as the inexorable perpetuation of longing in the very absence of release. It is to *this* individual, and no other, that Nietzsche first poses the challenge of his thought of thoughts, because it is this individual for whom the prospect of eternal recommencement would be most terrifying.

Could it be any coincidence, therefore, that we should find, at the very conclusion of Part IV of *The Gay Science*, nothing other than Nietzsche’s introductory evocation of Zarathustra himself, the one individual who suffers, as we have already shown, a most extreme and unremitting loneliness, the “solar suffering” of a lover condemned never to love by an excess of light?

Indeed, for Zarathustra, this notion of a “heaviest burden” must be understood to apply in at least *two senses*. First, as we have just mentioned, there is the potential burden of an eternity spent in loneliness, without amorous fulfilment.²⁸ The burdensome weightiness of a heart which overflows with love, only to find itself, at every turn, rebuffed in its various attempts at achieving reciprocity or recognition. But then, there is also a second burden to be assumed here – a burden whose full significance will become increasingly evident to us in the pages that follow. For it is Zarathustra alone who must become, in the very midst of his loneliness, the *teacher and communicator* of this weightiest of thoughts. It is Zarathustra alone who must come to bear, with requisite lightness, the burden of discursive articulation, a burden which begins to announce itself, throughout Nietzsche’s writings of the mid-1880s, with an utterly irrepressible insistence.

²⁸ See, for example, the discourse entitled “The Wanderer,” from Part III of *Zarathustra*. Here, Zarathustra finds himself in the very midst of his “loneliest wandering [*einsamste Wanderung*]” and admits to us that love is indeed “the danger of the loneliest.” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 131-133.

“A difficulty...that exalts him”

Indeed, if it is Part IV of *The Gay Science* that offers us perhaps our earliest intimation of the rarefied importance which this thought of thoughts will ultimately assume in Nietzsche's writings, then it is only within the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that the *communication* of the doctrine of eternal recurrence becomes, for the first time, Nietzsche's central and most pressing preoccupation. This preoccupation, of course, is already indicated by the title of the book itself. As both Harold Alderman and Kathleen Marie Higgins have previously observed, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a book whose central concern is with the topic of communication.²⁹ Zarathustra, above all, is someone who *speaks* – “whether or not he has a human audience.”³⁰ Indeed, it is this exigency of speech which, more than anything else, seems to characterise both him and his calling. From the opening scene of the text, to the book's closing page, Nietzsche elects to depict his Zarathustra, rather unambiguously, “in the role of a speaker.”³¹

But how, we might ask, are we to characterise the precise nature of this discourse? As Nietzsche assures us, it is a discourse not to be confused, in any manner whatsoever, with the speech of a prophet, or a founder of religions. Indeed, despite the profundity of what is being expressed, Nietzsche reminds us that “nothing is being ‘preached’ here, just as nobody is demanding that you *believe*.”³² What Zarathustra is offering us, instead, is a series of speeches characterised by modesty and restraint: “drop after drop, word after word falls...[and] the tempo of this speech is tender and slow [*eine zärtliche Langsamkeit ist das tempo dieser Reden*].”³³

²⁹ Kathleen Marie Higgins. *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987. 71. Also Cf. Harold Alderman. *Nietzsche's Gift*. Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1977.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Ecce Homo*. 73.

³³ Ibid.

From one speech to the next, page after page, our anticipation does not cease to intensify, gradually but unmistakably, as we move ever closer to the presumed moment of illustrious revelation – a moment which perhaps never seems closer at hand than in the concluding pages of Part II, where Zarathustra is chided, in the very heart of his stillest hour, to make known his teaching. “You know it, Zarathustra, but you do not say it...Speak your word and break!”³⁴

It is with these words of great foreboding still resonating in our ears that the decisive, third part of the text commences. Indeed, as Laurence Lampert writes, it is Part III of *Zarathustra* which was originally intended, by Nietzsche, to serve as nothing less than “the climax and culmination of the text, the part for the sake of which the previous parts exist.”³⁵ Here, as Lampert writes, the event toward which the entire book has been moving seems finally at hand. At last, it seems to us that Zarathustra will come to articulate the doctrine of eternal recurrence in its entirety, offering us, in the process, a new ideal, a means of surpassing the decadence and nihilism of everything that has come before.³⁶

And yet, as we soon discover, the long-awaited moment, the moment of Zarathustra’s articulation of the thought, never seems to arrive. What we receive, instead, are nothing but continued and unrelenting deferrals, postponements, and detours. Throughout the pages of Part III, Zarathustra is repeatedly led to the very threshold of enunciating this thought of thoughts, only to find the words, quite literally, stuck inside his throat. He finds himself consigned, as if invariably, to the sheer futility of communicating his most important doctrine. In the very space where the thought of eternal return was to have achieved the incomparable resplendence of consummatory articulation, what we find instead are nothing but the traces of its perpetual elision, the *mysterium tremendum* of its strange resistance to discursive elaboration.

Indeed, as Gilles Deleuze writes, in his concluding remarks to the 1964 Royaumont Conference, “Zarathustra simply cannot be said to have articulated or formulated the

³⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 126-127.

³⁵ Nietzsche’s *Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 148.

eternal return [in the pages of Nietzsche's text]...For what little is articulated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not formulated by Zarathustra himself, but either by the 'dwarf' or by the eagle and the serpent."³⁷ Of course, despite the great insightfulness of his observation, here, Deleuze is by no means the only critic to have made note of all this. For many years now, the nature of the eternal return's radical incommunicability has not ceased to fascinate and beguile any number of Nietzsche's most astute interlocutors.

Pierre Klossowski, for instance, had already noted, by the mid-1950s, the seeming irreconcilability which exists between the thought of eternal recurrence and the possibility of its discursive articulation. "The experience of the eternal return of all things could not be...the object of a rationally constructed elucidation," he argues, "any more than the lived, inexpressible, and therefore incommunicable experience could ground an ethical imperative."³⁸ The reason for this, according to Klossowski, resides within the fortuitous singularity of the thought itself, which is compromised, irreparably, by any attempts at translating it into discursive language. There is, in other words, a fundamental disconnection between the ecstatic rapture of Nietzsche's lived experience and his "desire to legitimate [it] by means of a demonstration."³⁹

A number of these points are further echoed (though toward differing ends) in Eugen Fink's 1960 text, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where the eternal return is at one point likened to "an oracular revelation rather than a rational conception."⁴⁰ Indeed, as Fink notes, Nietzsche himself seems, at every moment, "almost afraid to articulate it."⁴¹ Rather than attempting a systematic elucidation of this most provocative vision, he continually hesitates and postpones its articulation, "as if concealing his secret behind increasing walls."⁴² Thus, as Heidegger himself had already noted, in his 1937 seminar, Zarathustra's various allusions to the eternal return invariably take

37 Gilles Deleuze. "Conclusion on the Will to Power and the Eternal Return." *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974*. Translated by Michael Taormina. Paris: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2004. 117.

38 Pierre Klossowski. "Nietzsche, Polytheism, and Parody." *Such a Deathly Desire*. Translated by Russell Ford. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 114.

39 Ibid.

40 Eugen Fink. *Nietzsche's Philosophy*. Translated Goetz Richter. London: Continuum, 2003. 80.

41 Ibid. 74.

42 Ibid.

the form of rather “cryptic”⁴³ statements, riddles, and allegories which constitute (in contrast to the much clearer *Nachlaß* fragments on the same subject) above all a kind of “veiling.”⁴⁴



Having said all this, the question nevertheless still remains *why* exactly Nietzsche should have elected, in the pages of this crucial text, to espouse a regimen of such thoroughgoing hesitation and deferral? Why should he have elected to restrain Zarathustra, at the very threshold of enunciation, from declaring the final truth of the eternal recurrence?

Confronted with the thought’s troubling impertinence, its resistance to discursive articulation, it is none other than Maurice Blanchot who proceeds to offer us, in the pages of *L’entretien infini*, a most prescient suggestion: what if, rather than continuing to search for some message, some answer, *beyond* Zarathustra’s regimen of endless deferral, we were to begin interrogating the nature of this deferral itself? Might such a strategy offer us, at last, some means of approaching that which otherwise admits of no proximity? Indeed, it is this very suggestion – as audacious as it is revelatory – that we find tacitly inscribed throughout the pages of Blanchot’s text. Let us consider, for example, the following passages from *L’entretien infini*:⁴⁵

43 Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche: Volumes I & II*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. London: Harper Collins, 1991. 17.

44 Ibid. 14.

45 The vast majority of essays compiled in *The Infinite Conversation* had been previously published as stand-alone pieces in *La Nouvelle Revue française*. Prior to their inclusion within *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot made revisions of varying importance and magnitude to nearly all the essays. Of the two passages which follow, the first is taken from an essay entitled, “Crossing the Line,” which was originally published in the September, 1958 issue of *La Nouvelle Revue française*. Blanchot’s revisions of this essay were some of his most extensive. In the passage which we will cite, however, Blanchot makes only a single modification upon the original NRF format: a deletion of the adjective “fort” in the opening sentence. The second passage, which is much longer, appears toward the end of an essay entitled, “On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return.” Though the first half of this essay was published in April, 1960 – the latter half, from which our passage is drawn, is generally thought to have been written only months before *The Infinite Conversation*’s publication in 1969, making it one of Blanchot’s final additions to the text.

“Enthusiastically and with categorical clarity, Zarathustra announces the overman; then anxiously, hesitatingly, fearfully, he announces the thought of eternal return. Why this difference in tone? Why is the thought of the eternal return, a thought of the abyss, a thought that in the very one who pronounces it is unceasingly deferred (*sans cesse ajournée*) and turned away (*détournée*) as though it were the detour of all thought (*le détour de toute pensée*)? This is its enigma and, no doubt, its truth.”⁴⁶

*

“Throughout *Zarathustra* Nietzsche maintains a zone of silence: everything is said of all there is to say, but all the precautions and resources of hesitation (*hésitation*) and deferral (*atermoiement*) that one writing knows (with a disquieting lucidity) are necessary, if he wants to communicate that which cannot be communicated directly... If, however, between the thought of the Eternal Return and its affirmation, Nietzsche interposes intermediaries always ready to allow themselves to be challenged (the animals, Zarathustra himself, and the indirect character of a discourse that says what it says only by taking it back); if there is this silent density (*épaisseur de silence*), it is not due simply to ruse, prudence, or fear, but is also because the only meaning of *news* such as this is the exigency to differ and defer that bears it and that it bears (*cette exigence de différer qui la porte et qu'elle porte*): as though it could be said only by deferring its saying. The deferral (*L'atermoiement*) therefore does not mark the waiting for an opportune moment (*un moment opportune*) that would be historically right (*historiquement juste*); it marks the untimeliness of every moment (*l'intempestivité de tout moment*) since return is already detour – or better: since we can only affirm the return as detour...”⁴⁷

In both of these passages Blanchot is seeking to draw our attention to the so-called “density of silence [*épaisseur de silence*]” which permeates Nietzsche’s writings on the eternal return.⁴⁸ Instead of revealing, once and for all, the meaning behind his most abyssal thought – Nietzsche instead elects to invoke “all the precautions and

⁴⁶ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 275-6.

⁴⁸ For an interesting, more recent, account which touches upon some of these themes, see Chapter III of Harold Alderman’s text, *Nietzsche’s Gift*. Alderman chronicles, in detail, how Nietzsche comes to use both silence and laughter as “restraining devices” (38) within the pages of *Zarathustra*. He claims that Nietzsche’s laughter “is itself a form of silence (it says nothing) which silences solemnity, dogmatism, and ponderousness...” (54) What laughter entails, then, is a general suspension of symbolic teleology. It contests the self-righteous pretension of any systematic claim to truth. Harold Alderman. *Nietzsche’s Gift*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977.

resources of hesitation [*hésitation*] and deferral [*atermoiement*] that one writing can contain.”

This much is abundantly clear. But what does Blanchot proceed to tell us next? He tells us that this regimen of postponement – rather than simply restraining us, momentarily, from grasping this weightiest of thoughts – might actually be understood to comprise, strange as it may sound, the very truth of the thought itself, as if bearing witness to its perennial untimeliness, its profound aversion to teleological recuperation.

If Nietzsche, in other words, makes use of nearly every means of postponement and hesitation available to him, then this is not on account of either “ruse, prudence, or fear,” Blanchot writes; but rather, because the very meaning of the doctrine resides in “the exigency to differ and defer.”⁴⁹ It is only through Zarathustra’s fastidious regimen of hesitation and postponement that Nietzsche finds himself able to express both the enigma and the truth of this most challenging thought. “The difficulty that Zarathustra cannot master,” as it turns out, “is thus the very thing that exalts him.”⁵⁰



Blanchot’s intervention, on this point, is so important because it suggests to us, perhaps for the first time, that the message of the eternal recurrence should ultimately be understood to reside *within* Zarathustra’s failure of communication, not beyond it. A most intriguing proposition. But how, precisely, might this prioritisation of hesitation and deferral be understood to relate, for instance, to

⁴⁹ Whilst this prioritisation of detour and deferral unquestionably calls to mind the play of Derridean *différance* – it is important to note that the first passage cited above was written nearly a decade before the publication of Derrida’s first major works. These would include *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena* – all published in 1967.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 274.

Nietzsche's on-going critique of German romanticism, and his project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance? And what, moreover, might any of this have to do with Wagner's *Tristan* – or, indeed, Nietzsche's formative immersion within the scenography of erotic longing which he encountered there?

As it turns out, it is with these questions that we come to approach, at last, the very heart of our discussion.

A Voluptuousness of Hell

Let us recall that it was some three years after the completion of *Zarathustra*, in May of 1888, that Nietzsche came to issue arguably his most lucid and relentless excoriation of the Wagnerian aesthetic and the *milieu* of German romanticism, more broadly. Here, in *The Case of Wagner*, the problem of decadence is outlined in perhaps its finest, most concise form. Wagner's art is linked, indissolubly, to the nihilism of Schopenhauer and the gospel of the lowly – and all of this comes to be related, by Nietzsche, to the unrelenting desire for redemption [*Erlösung*] which incessantly preoccupies Wagner's protagonists.⁵¹

It is here, in the context of this analysis, that we encounter a single, yet nonetheless fascinating, reference to something which Nietzsche calls: “this breath-holding of the Wagnerian pathos [*dies Athem-Anhalten des Wagnerischen Pathos*].”⁵² As Nietzsche proceeds to tell us, this breath-holding is none other than a theatrical device, or effect, prominent within the Wagnerian tableau, which announces itself in the pathos of “not wanting to break loose from the extremes of feeling.”⁵³ It is linked, by Nietzsche, to the so-called “horrifying *duration* of states where even the moment threatens to strangle us...”⁵⁴

And where, we might inquire, have we already encountered precisely such a pathos? Naturally, nowhere else than in the agonising final act of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. It is here, in that long wait for a death which never comes, that we already sense the unmistakable pathos of the so-called “breath-holding effect.” Here, everything becomes a matter of extenuation, of prolonging that “horrifying duration” which refuses to be terminated, carrying on intolerably in the absence of any resolution. Wagner himself had grasped all this at its deepest level when he described *Tristan and Isolde*, in the programme notes for the Paris concerts of 1860,

⁵¹ “The need for *redemption*, the embodiment of all Christian needs...is the most honest expression of decadence, it affirms decadence in the most convinced, most painful way.” *The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*. 262.

⁵² Ibid. 247.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

as a tale of “unquenchable longing and languishing forever renewing itself.”⁵⁵ Despite the lovers’ every attempt at securing the blissful tranquillity of consummatory repose, they remain confronted, at every moment, by the universe’s inexorable reverberation: “In vain!”⁵⁶ Consigned to this fathomless futility, Tristan and Isolde are compelled, without remittance, “to pine away in a longing that can never attain its end...”⁵⁷ Neither the joy of coitus, nor the consolation of death finds admittance within this scenography of “hopeless love.”⁵⁸

What is so particularly fascinating about Nietzsche’s reference to this prolongation of misery, “this breath-holding of the Wagnerian pathos,” is that it comes to be followed, only a matter of weeks later, by arguably his most effusive statements of admiration for Wagner’s opera – in the entirety of his published writings. The occasion for this, of course, is none other than the brief retrospective of his relationship with Wagner and Cosima encountered within the pages of *Ecce Homo*. Here, Nietzsche finds himself, once more, in the role of critic. He finds himself, once again, as an arbiter of Dionysian style and taste. And if there are two works of incomparable and abiding genius which Nietzsche elects, in the autumn of 1888, to praise more effusively than any others, then those two works are undoubtedly his own *Zarathustra* – and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*.

“I have looked through all the arts in vain,” he tells us, “everything strange and alien about Leonardo da Vinci is demystified with the first tones of *Tristan*. This work is without a doubt Wagner’s *non plus ultra*...”⁵⁹ In this passage, we find Wagner’s opera elevated to the highest echelons possible, to the point where it overtakes even the greatest works of the Renaissance.⁶⁰ And what, precisely, does Nietzsche tell us about the nature of his attraction to this piece – a piece with which he had been deeply enamoured since the early 1860s? He tells us, perhaps strangely, of its

⁵⁵ *Wagner Nights*. 219.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 218.

⁵⁹ *Ecce Homo*. 93.

⁶⁰ We need only mention, here, that remarkable letter, addressed to Carl Fuchs, from December 27, 1888 – less than a week before the collapse – in which Nietzsche beseeches his correspondent: “Do not shirk *Tristan*: it is the central work and of a fascination which has no parallel, not only in music but in all arts.” *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 341.

“hellish voluptuousness [*Wollust der Hölle*].”⁶¹ And then he goes on to claim that he has “never found a work as dangerously fascinating, with as weird and sweet an infinity, as *Tristan*.”⁶²



There can be no denying that these statements are of great significance to us. One might even say that our entire ability to appreciate, in its entirety, the extent of *Tristan's* profound and abiding influence upon the composition of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* may in fact hinge upon our understanding of the very remarks in question. Let us consider, therefore, the precise language which Nietzsche elects to make use of here. He writes, as we can see, of a “voluptuousness of hell [*Wollust der Hölle*]” and a “weird and sweet infinity [*schauerlichen und süssen Unendlichkeit*].” – Phrases which appear, in equal measure, both evocative and quizzical. And yet, when we consider them alongside Nietzsche's slightly earlier reference to “the breath-holding of the Wagnerian pathos,” a rather intriguing scenography begins to take shape. It is an erotic scenography, to be sure. But the precise nature of the eroticism which announces itself, here, is perhaps anything but immediately straightforward.

To speak of voluptuousness [*Wollust*], in such a context, is most assuredly to evoke a kind of enchantment or attraction. And yet, it is nevertheless an attraction which seems to incite desire, whilst leaving it perpetually unsatisfied. The reason for this, as Leopold Sacher-Masoch comes to suggest, in the pages of *Venus in Furs*, is that “all voluptuousness is inspired by things that are half-concealed.”⁶³ To speak of voluptuousness is necessarily to speak of that which entices one with a promise, but leaves its fulfilment unceasingly deferred.

61 *Ecce Homo*. 93.

62 *Ibid*.

63 *Venus in Furs*. 90.

Indeed, it is Levinas, of all people, who comes to formulate all this rather exceptionally, in a text from the 1940s, where he offers us a rather striking analysis of voluptuousness – an analysis whose resonance with Nietzsche’s own text is truly uncanny. “Voluptuousness,” writes Levinas, “is the pursuit of an ever richer promise; it is made up of an ever growing hunger which pulls away from every being. There is no goal, no end in view. Voluptuousness launches forth into an unlimited, empty, vertiginous future. It consumes pure time which no *object* fills or even stakes out.”⁶⁴

A number of points are worthy of mention here. First of all, what these lines suggest to us is that the notion of voluptuousness is indeed consistent, as we had supposed, with the pursuit of a promise. And yet, it is in the very nature of voluptuousness to deny our longing any recourse to fulfilment. For rather than leading us toward a point of consummatory resolution, it draws us forth into “an unlimited, empty, vertiginous future.” A future comprised of pure, empty time – a time without objects and without possibility of completion. One might say, that if voluptuousness is thus fundamentally futureal in its orientation, its futurity remains nevertheless radically undetermined. It leads us not toward a desired object, but only toward the space of desire’s eternal and undying intensification.

On the basis of all this, it becomes perhaps increasingly clear why Nietzsche should have elected, in the autumn of 1888, to ascribe unto the scenography of Wagner’s *Tristan* this epithet of voluptuousness. For, it is in Wagner’s opera that we encounter perhaps *the* paradigmatic exemplification of desire’s endless and unceasing perpetuation. We encounter, as Nietzsche tells us, “a weird and sweet infinity [*Unendlichkeit*].” A scenography *without end*. – But what, we might ask, had Wagner then chosen to make of this infinity, this endlessness? He had made of it, as Nietzsche tells us, nothing less than “a voluptuousness of *hell*.” He had made of it something to renounce, to denigrate, to curse. The space of desire’s ceaseless intensification had become, for Wagner’s *Tristan*, the very space of its renunciation.

And this is the key point. For as we can now begin to discern, the famous challenge of *Gay Science* §341, the challenge of the thought of eternal recurrence itself, was by no means unfamiliar to Wagner. He had already lived it, thought it, and expressed it

⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas. *Existence and Existents*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001. 35.

well before Nietzsche's experience at Sils-Maria, and thus well before the composition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Indeed, if the Nietzsche of 1888 came to see in Wagner's *Tristan* a work of incomparable genius, without precedent, not only in the history of music, but in all the arts, it is because this work, more than any other, already gave voice to the eternal recommencement of desire in the absence of every end. It gave voice to the thought of eternal recurrence itself. *Except Wagner had failed the crucial test*. He had looked eternity in the eye, and had cursed this "voluptuousness of hell." He had sensed the endlessness of yearning as humanity's most profound damnation, and had turned against life, on account of it.



Only pages ago, we had posed the question of *why* Nietzsche had elected to restrain Zarathustra, at the very threshold of enunciation, from declaring the final truth of the eternal return. We had wondered why Nietzsche had espoused, in Blanchot's words, this regimen of tireless hesitation and postponement, leaving the eternal recurrence – as a coherent and systematic doctrine – wholly unconsummated within the pages of his text. Now, it seems, the precise reason for all this is becoming increasingly apparent to us.

It is well-known that Nietzsche himself had once written that "perhaps the whole of *Zarathustra* might be considered music."⁶⁵ Could it be, therefore, that here, in this very text, we encounter Nietzsche's most bold and provocative attempt at conjuring, once again, the voluptuousness of the infinite which he had encountered in Wagner's opera? Could it be, in other words, that by restraining Zarathustra at the threshold of enunciation, Nietzsche were simply reinscribing and rehearsing that quintessentially Wagnerian trope, the "breath-holding effect," which serves to extenuate and prolong all yearning? Could it be, in other words, that it is precisely through Zarathustra's inability to declare the doctrine of eternal recurrence that

⁶⁵ *Ecce Homo*. 123.

Nietzsche is seeking to approximate, as closely as possible, the Wagnerian pathos of endlessness, the inability to achieve death or consummation, which so thoroughly pervades Act III of *Tristan and Isolde*?

A fascinating possibility. But if this is indeed the case, then what exactly had led Nietzsche here, to this point of seeking to reinscribe these quintessentially Wagnerian tropes within the pages of his text? Why had Nietzsche chosen, in this manner, to pattern the breath-holding of Zarathustra upon the breath-holding of the Wagnerian tableau?

What we are now seeking to propose is that he had done so, in a very specific sense, to juxtapose the Wagnerian *denigration* of endlessness, with the Dionysian affirmation of voluptuousness itself – an affirmation of desire’s intensification in the absence of either object or end.

Where Tristan and Isolde find themselves consigned, in Wagner’s opera, to the impossibility of death and the infinite remoteness of the desired object, Zarathustra finds himself likewise consigned to a certain futility – the futility of ever drawing to an end the regimen of inexorable detour and deferral which separates him from the consummatory utterance, the declaration of the thought of eternal recurrence. But *unlike* Tristan and Isolde, Zarathustra comes to summon a truly unprecedented affirmation in the very face of this futility, allowing Nietzsche to juxtapose, in a most stunning manner, the Tristanian longing for death and consummation, with a longing still more provocative and extreme, a Dionysian longing for “deep, deep eternity [*tief Ewigkeit*]”⁶⁶ bereft of either consummation or release.

And this, precisely, is why the doctrine of eternal recurrence is never fully elaborated in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is because the very meaning of this thought, its truth, resides in its profound resistance to teleological finality. Indeed, its meaning is found, above all, in the movement of deferral which carries it *away* from every end. Thus, by postponing his decisive communication of the thought, by holding his breath, and even by choking on the words themselves, Zarathustra is actually bearing witness, with an incomparable eloquence, to the enigmatic truth of

⁶⁶ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 284.

the thought. He is bearing witness to the exigency of deferral which, as Blanchot had earlier come to suggest, is the very meaning and message of the eternal return.

Does this mean, as we had previously suggested, that Nietzsche's most abyssal thought, the thought of return, is in fact fundamentally imbued with a latent eroticism? Indeed, what we would now suggest, perhaps even more radically, is that the affirmation of the eternal recurrence amounts to nothing less than an affirmation of voluptuousness itself. It amounts to an affirmation of desire's endless and undying intensification. For voluptuousness, as we have shown, is radically incommensurable with the thought of consummatory fulfilment.⁶⁷ What it evokes, instead, is the sheer openness of the future unfettered by any form of teleological recuperation. To affirm the eternal return, as Blanchot writes, is thus "to desire that which turns us away from every desired."⁶⁸ It is to make our greatest longing, as Nietzsche tells us, our longing for the sheer and untarnished "voluptuousness of the future [*die Wollust des Zukünftigen*]."⁶⁹ This is the most profound longing, the truly Dionysian one: the desire for the endless intensification of desire itself.



It is not, in other words, simply the postponement of Zarathustra's *doctrine* which is at stake here; but rather, the inexorable and unceasing postponement of consummatory fulfilment in *all* its forms. What Nietzsche offers us, through the story of Zarathustra's failure in communicating the thought of thoughts – is an allegory about the impossibility of fulfilment, about the impossibility of teleological recuperation, more generally. Indeed, this is something which Blanchot himself, even as early as his very first, mature essay on Nietzsche, had already seemed to

67 This is a point alluded to within Jean-François Lyotard's text, *Libidinal Economy*: "The emission of semen gives a moment of pleasure, but not a sensation of voluptuousness. If, instead, the man practises the sexual act without ejaculating his vital essence will be strengthened, his body will be at ease, his hearing will be refined and his eyes will be perceptive...his love for the woman will be increased." *Libidinal Economy*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Athlone Press, 1993. 204.

68 *The Infinite Conversation*. 279.

69 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 194.

grasp with an enviable clarity.

He tells us, in the pages of “Du côté de Nietzsche,” an essay from the winter of 1945, that it is none other than the “absolute impossibility of repose [*l'impossibilité de tout repos*],”⁷⁰ which announces itself in Nietzsche’s text; it is none other than “the refusal of an answer [*le refus d'une réponse*],”⁷¹ which demands to be reckoned with. Indeed, it belongs to Nietzsche’s profoundest exigency as a writer and a philosopher, as Blanchot tells us, to deny himself “the permission to unload himself [*se décharger*] onto an eternal truth.”⁷² Whether this truth is to be equated with the attainment of erotic satisfaction, a fusional reconciliation with the beloved, or with a reunification with God himself: to think the thought of eternal recurrence is to face the sheer impossibility of ever coming to rest in a moment of pure presence, in a moment of consummatory fulfilment. It is, in other words, to consign oneself to the impossibility of achieving, in any form whatsoever, “discharge,” or release.

And if this is something which Blanchot, even as early as the mid-1940s, had already come to appreciate in Nietzsche’s writings, then it is a lesson which Nietzsche *himself* perhaps expresses most formidably in the tale of Zarathustra’s encounter with the Soothsayer. For if Nietzsche’s text, taken as a whole, may be understood as a kind of allegory about the terror of endless unfulfilment and the unprecedented affirmation of forbearance which it comes to require of us, then perhaps nowhere is all of this expressed more succinctly, more provocatively, than in the discourse of the Soothsayer. – It is here, in this very discourse, that everything we have been discussing over the course of the preceding pages is brought to the fore in a most stunning manner: the eroticism of eternal recommencement, the crisis of Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner, and the very possibility of ever surmounting the decadence and nihilism of the German romantic tradition. It is here, moreover, that we begin to appreciate, perhaps for the very first time, the complex significance behind Nietzsche’s own usage of the rhetoric of redemption, and its relation to his broader project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance.

70 *The Work of Fire*. 290.

71 *Ibid.* 292.

72 *Ibid.*

The Scorching of the Heart

What we encounter, in the opening lines of the discourse in question, is a truly harrowing prophecy, intoned by the Soothsayer himself, which evokes a scene of utter devastation, of a world sunk deeply into despair. “I saw a great mournfulness come over humankind,”⁷³ laments the Soothsayer, as he proceeds to tell Zarathustra, in poetic voice, of a parched earth which suffers on account of endless drought. “Arid [*Trocken*] we have all become, and with fire falling upon us, we turn like dust into ashes.”⁷⁴ Line after line, it is the sheer relentlessness of heat, the relentlessness of sunlight, which is accentuated. It is this luminosity, this unremitting blaze of the solar fire, as the Soothsayer tells us, “which has made us weary...scorching our fields and hearts.”⁷⁵

But how, exactly, are we to understand the nature of this vision? And what are we to make of the mournfulness which is being described here? It is a mournfulness, as we can see, which is intimately related to the figure of “a scorched heart” – a figure, as it turns out, which is not uncommon within Nietzsche’s later writings. Consider, for example, the *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, written between 1883-1888, where we encounter on at least two separate occasions, references to a “hot heart [*heisses Herz*]”⁷⁶ and a “scorched heart [*verbranntes Herz*]”⁷⁷ – references which come to be linked, by Nietzsche, to the so-called “weariness of the day...[and] the sickness of light.”⁷⁸

Indeed, what these images, alongside the Soothsayer’s own reference, cannot help but evoke, is a sense of unwavering erotic forbearance, of tormented and perennially

⁷³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 116.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *The Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. 27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 27.

dissatisfied longing – the very dissatisfaction, it seems, which we had earlier encountered in Zarathustra’s “Night Song,” that legendary dithyramb of “solar suffering.” Only here, in the context of the Soothsayer’s prophecy, this suffering comes to be exacerbated even further on account of the sheer endlessness which is being evoked.

If the Soothsayer’s vision of mournfulness is indeed so profoundly disquieting, so upsetting that Zarathustra himself is ultimately shaken by it – even to the point of utter terror – then this is for no other reason than because it offers him a prophecy of unfulfilment carried to its furthest extreme, to the point where the very heart which has endured, with such courage and resilience, the unrelenting radiance of daylight, the scorching heat of the glow, must now prepare to face something truly unthinkable, unbearable: not only the agony of continued unfulfilment in *this* life, but the agony of an unfulfilment which endlessly recurs – without end. It must now come to face the agony of unfulfilment made subject to the law of eternal return.

This, precisely, is the terrifying prophecy expressed by the Soothsayer’s infamous pronouncement: “All is empty, all is the same, all has been!”⁷⁹ – the very words which send Zarathustra reeling into the throes of sickness and despair. For it is with these words that the most horrifying consequence of his thought of thoughts becomes suddenly apparent to him: “Existence as it is, without sense or aim, but inevitably returning, without a finale in nothingness.”⁸⁰ This, as Nietzsche writes in his 1887 “Notebook on European Nihilism,” is indeed the very meaning of the eternal return. And this, moreover, seems to be the very notion which we find so eerily corroborated in both the Soothsayer’s prophecy of the scorched, unsated heart *and* Zarathustra’s own, subsequent vision of terrifying interminability – the recounting of which comes to comprise the crucial, second half of the scenography in question.

⁷⁹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 116.

⁸⁰ *The Nietzsche Companion*. 385.



Having returned to his disciples, in the days following his distressing encounter with the Soothsayer, Zarathustra seeks to make known to them the contents of a profoundly unsettling vision which he himself has just undergone, a vision whose profound connection to the Soothsayer's prophecy is immediately made apparent. He tells them how, in the midst of a dream, he had become a night-watchman in the "lonely mountain castle of death,"⁸¹ where all around him were glass-coffins filled with the bodies of the vanquished. It was then, in the very midst of this, that he came to witness, as he tells us, a truly unforgettable vision: the vision of "a coffin bursting open,"⁸² accompanied by the sounds of mocking laughter.

An utterly disconcerting scene. And one which appears to reveal, in the most unmistakable of terms, the futility and powerlessness of death. "Verily, we have become even too weary to die...we live on – even in burial chambers!"⁸³ It is a vision which suggests, in the most frightening terms available, the sheer impossibility of ever putting to an end to existence; the impossibility of parting decisively with the past. It tells us of the fundamental "imprisonment"⁸⁴ of mankind, consigned to the endless lapping of recommencement which turns every future into a frightful prophecy of that which has already come before it: the tyranny of the "*it was*."⁸⁵

Of course, we cannot help but notice, on this point, the unmistakable resonances, both thematic and rhetorical, linking this utterly frightful vision to another, rather similar, evocation of death's gruelling impossibility – namely, the one encountered within Baudelaire's poem, "The Skeleton Worker." Here, in the midst of a meditation upon the striking falsity of nothingness, Baudelaire comes to suggest to

81 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 117.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.* 116.

84 *Ibid.* 117.

85 As Zarathustra tells us in the discourse "On Redemption," to justify that which has passed away "and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'Thus I willed it,' that alone would be the meaning of redemption." *Ibid.* 121. And then, "*It was*: that is the will's gnashing of teeth and the loneliest of sorrows. Powerless with respect to what has been done, it is an angry spectator of all that is past." *Ibid.*

us that “even in the grave / the promised sleep remains far from certain.”⁸⁶ At the very moment when our long-awaited death appears to claim us, to deliver us from earthly existence, we nevertheless seem fated to arise, once more, in order to “to scrape the sour earth / and push again that heavy spade.”⁸⁷ And if death, in this manner, appears to us utterly powerless to attenuate the sorrows of life and longing, then this is for no other reason than because to enter into existence *at all*, is necessarily to enter “a situation that has as its essential nature the fact that one is never finished with it [*on n’en finit pas*].”⁸⁸ It means, as Kafka’s “Hunter Gracchus” comes to learn, that there can be no end, “no possibility of ever being done with the day.”⁸⁹

Indeed, it is precisely in the context of such an eternity of recommencement, such an impossibility of ever attaining repose, that the Soothsayer’s earlier references to the “scorched heart,” and the desolation of the parched earth, must be now understood. For what the scorched heart yearns for, as we know, is nothing but the cool somnolence of the shade. It yearns for a respite from the unrelenting heat of the glow. But this, of course, is precisely what the thought of eternal return, the thought of the Great Noon, so persistently denies us. It denies the scorched heart any release from the fever of earthly existence – forcing us to endure, as Paul Eluard writes, the endless return of “a night which is never complete.”⁹⁰

At the very moment of death, at the moment of presumptive release, it is the exigency of recommencement which asserts itself once more, opening the tombs of the past and making us relive every sorrow, every agony. At the very instant when the long-awaited darkness, the sacred and abiding night, appears to descend upon us – to deliver us from the unremitting sorrow of existence – it is none other than the

⁸⁶ *The Work of Fire*. 147.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 148-9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 8. We recall the basic plot of Kafka’s short story: A hunter falls into a deep ravine, and is hurt but not mortally so. He remains there for some time, stretched out, laying in wait, unable to help himself. “Then,” as Kafka tells us, “the disaster happened.” As Blanchot goes on to discuss, in the pages of “La lecture de Kafka,” an essay from November 1945, this disaster which comes to afflict the hunter is none other than “the impossibility of death,” a theme whose prominence in Blanchot’s critical essays of the 1940s and early 1950s is particularly unmistakable. *The Work of Fire*. 7.

⁹⁰ Or perhaps, as Michel Leiris famously wrote: To endure “a night without night.” Paul Eluard. *Last Love Poems*. Translated by Marilyn Kallet. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. 89.

“brightness of midnight [*Helle der Mitternacht*]”⁹¹ which so cruelly reasserts itself, throwing us back into the harsh light of day. Nothing ends, everything must begin again. As Blanchot writes, in an essay from September 1958, “Midnight is nothing but a dissimulated noon, and the Great Noon is the abyss of light from which we can never depart.”⁹²



We return, in other words, to that striking polarity between the rhetoric of luminosity and the rhetoric of darkness which has so frequently imposed itself upon the preceding discussion. We return, again, to that tension, so memorably inscribed throughout the tradition of German romanticism, between the sacred night “which unifies all that has been separated”⁹³ – and “the star of the day...shining in barren splendour.”⁹⁴ Only now, it seems, the stakes of all this have been raised to a truly unprecedented level.

For if the imagery of light and luminosity, as we have learned over the course of the preceding chapters, ultimately comes to represent, from Novalis to Wagner, nothing less than the abiding and incontrovertible majesty of the *principium individuationis*, the laws of temporal and spatial distance – then the impossibility of eluding or escaping the scorching heat of the glow must now be understood in a very specific sense. It must be understood, in other words, as the impossibility of ever putting an end to the eternal and unremitting persistence of separation. It must be understood as the impossibility of ever coming to surmount *die kleinste Kluft*.

91 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 117.

92 *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

93 Thomas Mann. “Tristan.” *Death in Venice & Other Stories*. London: Vintage Classics, 1998. 118.

94 Act II, Scene 2.

This, and nothing other, is what the image of the Great Noon suggests to us. This is what the “brightness of midnight” and the Soothsayer’s evocation of the scorched heart must be understood to convey: the incontrovertible relentlessness of spatio-temporal distance. But who, Nietzsche asks us, would be capable of holding firm in the face of all this? Who would be capable of saying yes to the *eternal* beating of a scorched and unsated heart? Who would be capable of accepting an existence without end – a yearning without any hope of fulfilment?



Indeed, it was in the face of this very provocation, in the face of this most vaunted of challenges, that Nietzsche had witnessed, as we know, the greatest figures of the German romantic age prove themselves – by comparison – so small, so unwilling, so incapable. Schopenhauer and Wagner – the two men who had seen more deeply into human suffering than anyone else, had become utterly decadent, “consumptives of the soul,”⁹⁵ who had sought to glorify nothing but weariness and renunciation. Having found themselves confronted with the very prospect of ceaseless longing and dissatisfaction, the endless beating of a scorched heart, they had succumbed to the seductive allure of the consummatory ideal. They had become, in other words, “preachers of death,”⁹⁶ evangelists of blessed release.

That these greatest of men, these truly Olympian figures, had proven themselves so utterly unworthy, so weak, could not help but impel Nietzsche to the very threshold of crisis – a crisis of immense personal and philosophical consequence. Why? For no other reason than because Nietzsche, as we have previously suggested, had increasingly come to recognise, by the mid-1880s, this very nihilism, this decadence which he had so decried in both Schopenhauer and Wagner to be none other than his

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 39.

own. He had become Tristan. He had lived the ecstasy of transmogrification. And thus, he had found himself implicated in the drama of Wagnerian decadence at its very deepest level.⁹⁷

As a result, the unprecedented task which now consumed and preoccupied him – the task of surmounting the consummatory ideal – could not help but be understood, by Nietzsche, as utterly inseparable from the task of redeeming his own past, of purging the decadence *within*.⁹⁸ This, and nothing else, was to become the central focus of his later philosophy, “the hardest and most melancholy task,” of his adult life.⁹⁹



But how, exactly, was all of this to be achieved? How was this redemption to be gained? In a word, only by coming to affirm, against all odds, the *very thing* which had made both Schopenhauer and Wagner turn against life in the first place, the very thing which had rendered existence, for them, worthy of contempt: the implacable, unyielding persistence of erotic distance itself.

⁹⁷ Consider the following words from the Spring of 1888: “What does a philosopher demand of himself, first and last? To overcome his age, to become timeless. So what gives him his greatest challenge? Whatever marks him as a child of his age. Well then! I am just as much a child of my age as Wagner, which is to say a *decadent*: it is just that I have understood this, I have resisted it. In fact, the thing I have been most deeply occupied with is the problem of decadence...Perhaps nobody has been more dangerously bound up with Wagnernianism [than me].” Ibid. 233.

⁹⁸ Recall, once more, that remarkable admission, from the pages of *Ecce Homo*, “you can put my name or the word ‘Zarathustra’ without hesitation wherever the text has the word *Wagner*...” *Ecce Homo*. 111.

⁹⁹ *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 188.

To move beyond the consummatory idealism of the German romantic tradition would demand of him, in other words, that he affirm everything which they had both feared and despised: the unrelenting luminosity of the day; the impossibility of dying which transforms every grave into a cenotaph; the interminable beating of a scorched and perennially unsatisfied heart. It would demand of Nietzsche that he no longer seek an end to desire, a release from longing; but rather, that he learn to affirm the eternal intensification of desire itself, in the very absence of all fulfilment. It would demand, in other words, nothing less than a fundamental *rehabilitation of erotic distance itself*.



For, as we have shown, there is absolutely *nothing* which characterises the decadence of Wagner more unmistakably than his relentless denigration of erotic distance, his recrimination of erotic separation in all its forms. “How long apart! How far apart so long!” exclaims a listless Isolde in Act II, Scene 2. “O distance [*Weit*] and nearness [*Nähe*], harshly divided,” replies Tristan, “Blessed nearness, tedious [*öde*] distance...”¹⁰⁰

Here, the text of Wagner’s libretto must be allowed to speak for itself. It is none other than the very distance which separates Tristan and Isolde that is portrayed as the most odious thing, the most accursed thing – just as it had been for Novalis, in the pages of the *Hymns*, and for Schopenhauer throughout his philosophy.¹⁰¹ It is none other than the distance which precludes Tristan from ever having Isolde, from possessing her entirely, that ultimately leads him to curse life, to make recourse to the physician of death. This much is indisputable.

¹⁰⁰ Act II, Scene 2.

¹⁰¹ We recall, once more, that image of consummatory eroticism *par excellence* from Act II, Scene 2: “Heart to heart, lip to lip...bound together in one breath.” This image, wherever possible, should be directly contrasted with its Nietzschean counterpart, the image of the scorched and unsated heart.

And it is on this very point that Nietzsche, in the pages of *Zarathustra*, would then attempt to stage his fundamental break from romanticism. It is on this very point, that Nietzsche, having arrived at the thought of eternal recurrence, would attempt to move beyond the consummatory yearning for fulfilment and release by choosing to affirm, on the contrary, an *extenuation* of the very distance which separates him from every end, every truth, and every possible form of consummatory satisfaction.

Chapter IV

The Absolute of Separation

On Love & Affirmation at the Heart of Nihilism

“A mandarin fell in love with a courtesan.
‘I shall be yours,’ she told him, ‘when you have spent
a hundred nights waiting for me,
sitting on a stool in my garden,
beneath my window.’
But on the ninety-ninth night,
the mandarin stood up, put the stool under
his arm, and walked away.”

Barthes

“To the impossible book, the word vows impossible love.”

Jabès

Fernsten-Liebe: A Study in Courtship

From the very opening pages of our study, we have made no secret of our interest in coming to elucidate the precise nature of this so-called *rehabilitation of erotic distance*. We have spoken, at numerous points, of its importance within the tangled narrative of Nietzsche's contestation of German romanticism. We have stressed, moreover, its indissoluble connection to the figure of Ariadne, to the thought of eternal return – as well as its partial derivation from Nietzsche's own formative immersion within the pathos the Tristanian scene. We have even stated, on at least one occasion, that this rehabilitation of erotic distance might be thought to comprise arguably the most significant, hitherto unrecognised, link between Nietzsche's writings and those of Blanchot – a claim which still remains to be substantiated.

Nevertheless, at no moment of the preceding account, have we truly come to define or delineate the precise nature of this project. At no moment have we come to offer a sustained analysis or appraisal of the very rehabilitation in question. – One reason for our hesitancy, it must be said, resides in the simple fact that Nietzsche, at no point in his work, actually makes reference to a “rehabilitation” of erotic distance. The phrase itself is little more than a convenient, if well-meaning, interpolation.

And yet, what it *speaks to* – what it seeks to evoke – is something wholly undeniable. To speak of the rehabilitation of erotic distance in Nietzsche's writings is to evoke nothing less than an utterly unmistakable tendency, spanning from Book IV of *The Gay Science* to his final texts of 1888, which manifests itself in the radical reprioritisation and revalorisation of the role of *distance* within

erotic life. It marks, in other words, a clearly identifiable tendency in Nietzsche's writings toward the performative affirmation of distance in all its forms as a means of contesting the decadent, consummatory eroticism which had so thoroughly pervaded the scenographies of his predecessors, most notably, Schopenhauer and Wagner.

To speak of a rehabilitation of erotic distance, is to speak of nothing less than a concerted attempt, on Nietzsche's part, at coming to affirm the very things which had convinced Wagner's Tristan to turn against life, compelling him to renounce his earthly existence and to seek death instead. The very things, moreover, which had so perniciously tempted Nietzsche *himself*, in the winter of 1882-83, to contemplate suicide, even leading him to confess, in a pair of letters, that "the barrel of a revolver" had become "a source of relatively pleasant thoughts."¹

What exactly are we referring to here? Nothing but the blazing luminosity of the day, the torment of irremissible loneliness and unfulfilment. In a word: we are referring to the implacable persistence of spatio-temporal separation itself, which had transformed the present into a basin of unimaginable futility, and which had filled the entirety of the past, for Nietzsche, with nothing but "tormenting and horrible memories."² How can we forget that remark from early 1884: "With all the people I love, everything is *over*, it is the past...forbearance?"³ A remark which had come to follow, by only a matter of months, the related confession: "I have suddenly become poor in love and consequently very much in need of it."⁴

The despondency echoed in these statements is difficult to mistake. Indeed, what Nietzsche's words reflect, here, is not only a sense of deprivation, of loss – but also, of an overwhelming awareness that this unfulfilment, this futility, was now to remain bound up with him interminably. If everything, by the time of

1 *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 206.

2 *Ibid.* 206 & 198.

3 *Ibid.* 220.

4 *Ibid.* 196.

Zarathustra, was indeed *over* for Nietzsche – if he had found himself refused by Mathilde Trampendach, abandoned by Lou, and separated irrevocably from Cosima⁵ – then to recall the past, to think of what *had been*, was necessarily to recall a veritable procession of disappointments which could no longer be allayed or amended; and yet, which did not cease to haunt him.⁶ At every turn, Nietzsche had found himself powerless in the face of these tormenting memories, “powerless [*Ohnmächtig*] with respect to what had been done.”⁷ He had found himself, in the words of *Zarathustra*, confronted by the “loneliest sorrow [*einsamste Trübsal*],”⁸ the sorrow of one’s inability to go backwards, the sorrow of one’s incapacity to undo the most painful of pasts. – A fate, as we know, which bore a profound and striking resemblance to Tristan’s own.

Recall, for instance, how everything in Wagner’s opera had begun *in medias res*. Recall how, even prior to the very beginning of the story, the amorous couple had already found themselves bound to an unending dissatisfaction by the edict of an immoveable fate, by the requisition of an unalterable past. Indeed, if Nietzsche, like Tristan himself, is unceasingly tormented by the persistent futility of achieving fulfilment, of attaining consummatory repose, then he is tormented just as much, it seems, by this immoveable stone of the past, the stone he cannot roll away: the sheer facticity of the “it was,” which renders his passion both supremely vain and utterly ineluctable.

This, and nothing else, is what ultimately consigns Tristan to a most devastating, suicidal nihilism: the impossibility of attaining fulfilment in the present, *alongside* the prospect of eternally coming to relive this futility in every memory, in every recollection, of the past. It is, in other words, not only the impossibility of ever overcoming the laws of spatio-temporal distance, but also the exigency of

⁵ This passage alludes to the fact that on April 11, 1876 Nietzsche had unsuccessfully proposed marriage to Mathilde Trampendach.

⁶ As we have already mentioned, these recollections of primarily *erotic* dissatisfaction were indeed only further compounded and exacerbated by those “thousand shaming memories” of his friendship with Wagner which had so violently resurfaced upon the occasion of the composer’s death in February of that year. *Ibid.* 241.

⁷ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*

ceaselessly reliving and rehearsing this impossibility. This, as Nietzsche so astutely realised, was the very point at which earthly existence had lost its sense for Wagner; and this, as we shall now see, was to be none other than the very point at which its sense would come to be redeemed.⁹



Though Nietzsche's project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance might already be discerned, in latent forms, even as early as the 1870s – it will only be our intention, in the pages that follow, to explore and elucidate the nature of this rehabilitation in its paradigmatic, mature form. Namely, the form which it comes to assume within the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the very text in which we read the following words: “Higher than love of the nearest is love of the farthest [*Fernsten-Liebe*].”¹⁰ Indeed, it is here, in this very statement, that the project of rehabilitation might be understood to receive arguably its quintessential elaboration. But what, exactly, are we to make of this pronouncement? And how are we to characterise, moreover, the nature of the *Fernsten-Liebe* which is being evoked?

As we soon discover, the provocation inherent within Zarathustra's statement, here, is inseparable from the call of a very specific demand – the demand of coming to conceive, first and foremost, of that which is genuinely *farthest away*, separated from us by the greatest of distances. A challenge which seems to appear, at least at first glance, relatively straightforward.

⁹ Wagner's own personal identification with Tristan's plight was likewise nothing less than profound. Only unlike Nietzsche, it was in Tristan's renunciation of life that Wagner had seen the greatest, the most impressive, of gestures. Recall those lines from Wagner's letter to Liszt on December 16, 1854: “I have planned in my head a *Tristan and Isolde*...with the black flag that flutters at the end, I shall then cover myself over, in order to die.” *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. 323.

¹⁰ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 54.

For there is no doubt that one might easily come to imagine any number of erotic objects which are spatially remote from us; objects whose distance makes them appear, in one form or another, seemingly inaccessible. One might think, for instance, of a rather classic example: the unattainable lady of the courtly tableau, who remains invariably separated from the one who desires her, asserting herself as utterly ungraspable, and consigning the lover's every desire to futility.

And yet, as much as the scenography of courtly love cannot help but offer us a truly fascinating and undeniable precedent for the Nietzschean rehabilitation of erotic distance, a precedent which Nietzsche himself acknowledges – it must be stressed that the notion of *Fernsten-Liebe* which is being described in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is entirely irreducible to any form of eroticism predicated upon a merely contingent or circumstantial separation. Just as it is irreconcilable with any erotic economy still regulated and governed by a pursuit of consummatory fulfilment or release.

To think of that which is truly most distant, in other words, demands of us that we conceive of something *even farther away* than every object of possible acquisition. Indeed, it demands of us that we attempt to think of that which remains excluded, by necessity, from ever being grasped – not simply by a contingent incapacity on the lover's part, or by some provision of amorous conduct – but rather, on account of the object's sheer incommensurability with any form of presence.

And this, precisely, is the key point. For if nearness and proximity, the very things so lauded and venerated by Wagner's Tristan, are to be understood, above all, in terms of their relation to the *hinc et nunc*, then whatever is truly most distant must necessarily assert itself, first and foremost, in its radical *aversion* to both presence in space and nowness in time. It must assert itself, rather paradoxically, in its sheer impossibility of ever coming to offer itself, once and for all, in a moment of pure bestowal or revelation.

Indeed, this is something which Zarathustra himself indicates rather clearly, by suggesting to us that the greatest lover, the lover of that which is most distant, “loves beyond reward [*Lohn*] and retribution [*Vergeltung*].”¹¹ He loves, in other words, beyond all ends and all results – beyond all possibility of satisfaction. He loves in such a way that erotic distance is permitted to extenuate itself indefinitely in the absence of either end or recuperation.

But what, we might ask, could possibly satisfy such a rigorous criteria? What could possibly remain for us to love and to desire when *every* object, *every* other, and *every* end – has been disqualified or rendered vain? As it turns out, there is, for Nietzsche, but a single response to this dilemma. And it is a response which promises to strike terror into the very heart of every Schopenhauerian. For, to love that which is truly farthest, as we soon discover, is to love nothing other than the vast and illimitable circuit of circuits itself – the ring of eternity which transforms the infinity of time into a spiralling pathway bereft of either beginning or completion.

“Oh how should I not lust after Eternity and the nuptial ring of all rings,” Zarathustra gushes, “Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, except for this woman whom I love...I love you, O Eternity!”¹² Here, and nowhere else, do we encounter the greatest and most absolute form of separation, “the unmarked and immeasurable distance”¹³ which separates each and every moment from the instance of its self-same recurrence. It is this very distance which comes to refine and rarefy every act of love by allowing it to return ceaselessly, but only on the condition that it first pass through a point of absolute separation from itself.

To love that which is most distant, in other words, is to love distance itself – it is to love, moreover, that which makes this very distance recur and perpetuate

¹¹ Ibid. 228.

¹² Ibid. 200.

¹³ *The Step Not Beyond*. 30.

itself: “the ring of recurrence [*dem Ring der Wiederkunft*].”¹⁴ Indeed, it is along these lines that the presumptive transitivity of amorous relations, a mainstay of eroticism in the West, finds itself gradually weakened, in Nietzsche’s text, until the highest love, the love of that which is truly farthest, becomes utterly synonymous with the love of recommencement itself.

What we are suggesting, in other words, is that Zarathustra’s notion of *Fernsten-Liebe*, that guiding conception of his project of rehabilitation, must necessarily be understood in direct relation to the thought of eternal return, which alone offers us a manifestation of distance truly unfettered by every limit. To love that which is most distant, is to love neither objects, nor ends – but rather, endlessness itself, the very endlessness which makes all distance ceaselessly return.

And this, it seems, is a point which Blanchot himself, perhaps more than anyone else, appears to have grasped with a truly unmistakable perceptiveness. For it was Blanchot, as we recall, who had earlier noted that the greatest desire, in the pages of Nietzsche’s writings, was none other than the “desire that turns us away from every desired.”¹⁵ The greatest desire, in other words, is nothing less than the very *purest* one, the one that affirms its own perpetuation in the radical absence of all fulfilment.¹⁶ This, precisely, is the remarkable state of eroticism in Nietzsche’s text; a state which owes everything, as we can see, to the fortuitous emergence of the thought of eternal recurrence. For if distance itself becomes the measure of absolute devotion, here, then it is nothing other than the affirmation of the eternal return, as Blanchot tells us, “which alone makes this desire return [*revenir le désir*], without beginning or end.”¹⁷

14 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 200.

15 *The Infinite Conversation*. 279.

16 On the allusion to purity, here, let us simply make note of Nietzsche’s words from 1888: “The whole of my *Zarathustra* is a dithyramb to solitude, or, if you have understood me, to *purity*...” *Ecce Homo*. 83.

17 *The Infinite Conversation*. 280.



Indeed, it is precisely *this* story, the story of Zarathustra's courtship of eternity, which might be understood to comprise, in other words, arguably the most prominent, most compelling, leitmotif in the entirety of Nietzsche's text. It is a story of the greatest consequence, which comes to feature Zarathustra himself in the guise of a presumptive lover, courting an eternity which is personified "as the woman loved."¹⁸ Between them a relationship unfolds which is nothing short of tempestuous – pervaded, at every turn, by dramatic interventions and crises of faith ("O Zarathustra, you are not true enough to me...you have not loved me as much as you say you do.")¹⁹ And yet, it is nevertheless over the very course of these trying interactions, and in particular, over the course of Zarathustra's various attempts at demonstrating his undying fidelity to her, that the rehabilitation of erotic distance, in Nietzsche's writings, comes to achieve arguably its most eloquent elaboration.

The key, it seems, to understanding the precise nature of this courtship is to appreciate, first and foremost, the implacable persistence of indirection and detour which necessarily complicate Zarathustra's every attempt at wooing this most tantalising and elusive of figures. For even to speak of her – *who is she?* – is invariably to negotiate that most perilous boundary between the desire to nominate and the desire to fetishise. Consider how, in making reference to her, Nietzsche will frequently refer to "eternity," whilst at other times simply to "life," and still elsewhere, particularly in the notebooks and letters, to "Ariadne," that most privileged name for an eternity conceived in the absence of every end.

Of course, this perpetual displacement of identity is by no means merely a coincidence. Rather, it suggests that eternity's most fundamental essence be

¹⁸ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. 187.

¹⁹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 198.

understood to reside within her radical aversion to any fixed identity, just as it resides within her erotic comportment, in relation to Zarathustra, to refuse him any possibility of facile satisfaction. Such is the nature, one might say, of her voluptuousness.

“You love me?” she asks him in the pages of Part III, “Then wait a little longer: I do not have time for you just yet.”²⁰ Here, in this statement, we find nothing less than an unmistakable allusion to that perpetual remoteness which keeps her inexorably out of reach. Indeed, one might say that it is, above all, her unrelenting *refusal* to grant Zarathustra fulfilment, her refusal to bring the courtship to completion – which seems to characterise, more than anything else, the precise nature of her role within the pages of Nietzsche’s text.²¹ “One thirsts after her and is never sated,” Zarathustra tells us, “one looks through veils, one grabs through nets...”²² A tireless and ever shifting game without possibility of resolution.

And all of this is so particularly interesting, because it was none other than this very game, as we recall, this very regimen of tireless deferral and distancing, which had ultimately succeeded in turning Wagner’s Tristan against life. It was this very promise of unceasing dissatisfaction which led him to prefer even death to the indefinite prolongation of longing. – A decision which had come to comprise, as we have discussed at length, a moment of crowning and unparalleled decadence.

Considered in this light, the story of Zarathustra’s courtship cannot help but be understood to offer us a rather compelling point of contrast with the Tristanian narrative. For like Tristan, Zarathustra is similarly tempted, at nearly every turn, by the promise of consummatory release (“O Zarathustra...I know you are

²⁰ Ibid. 191.

²¹ It is this eroticism of refusal which will find itself transferred and reinscribed to great effect within Blanchot’s writings of the 1940s and early 1950s. We will examine this in considerable detail in the chapters that follow, making special note of the role of refusal in Blanchot’s *Au moment voulu* and his relationship with Denise Rollin.

²² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 94.

thinking that you want to leave me soon.”)²³ And yet, for Zarathustra, it is a temptation which comes to be continually resisted, continually offset. Indeed, it is on this point, perhaps more than any other, that Nietzsche’s contestation of the German romantic tradition becomes most vividly apparent to us.



Of course, for all its radicality and provocative force, it must be soberly reiterated that Nietzsche’s project of the rehabilitation is by no means an undertaking entirely without precedent. For, in addition to the venerable troubadours of the *gai sabre*, and the heroes of Stendhalian tragedy, there is perhaps yet another, even more immediate, influence upon the eroticism of the Nietzschean tableau. We are referring, of course, to that most formidable of precursors drawn – rather importantly – from the very tradition being brought under contestation. A predecessor, moreover, whose own affirmation of absolute and unwavering erotic distance might be seen to foreshadow, in a most striking manner, Nietzsche’s own.

Hölderlin and the Rehabilitation of Erotic Distance

Though Nietzsche’s most provocative and sophisticated attempts at carrying out the project of rehabilitation appear within the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the thought of eternal return is invoked as a stunning rejoinder to the

²³ Ibid. 198.

impasse of Tristanian nihilism, the roots of all this go back much further – to a time when the allure of the Wagnerian mythos had only just begun to exert its influence upon Nietzsche.

In the autumn of 1861, only months after the piano redaction of Wagner's *Tristan* had first entranced him, Nietzsche's literary sensibility began to gravitate unmistakably toward a writer whose work would form both a striking complement and a telling contrast to the scenography of Tristanian romanticism. This writer, whom the young Nietzsche would soon anoint his "favourite poet,"²⁴ was Friedrich Hölderlin.



As early as 1873, Cosima Wagner had already noted "the great influence"²⁵ which Hölderlin's *Hyperion* seemed to have had upon Nietzsche's personal and intellectual development. In commenting upon that work, in a fragment from October 18, 1861, Nietzsche had written that, "In *Hyperion*...all is dissatisfaction and unfulfilment...arousing unsatisfied longing."²⁶ This pronouncement, it seems, which could just as easily be applied to *Tristan*, resonates all the more provocatively when we consider that Nietzsche was indeed, at that very same moment, busily immersing himself in the scintillating pathos of Wagner's opera. But what exactly is the nature of this unfulfilment which supposedly permeates Hölderlin's text, and how might it be seen to prefigure Nietzsche's own

²⁴ *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 4. As David Farrell Krell tells us, it is likely that Nietzsche's earliest exposure to Holderlin's work would have come via the two-volume edition of the Collected Works published by Cotta in 1846 and edited by Christoph Theodor Schwab. Nietzsche would also have been in possession of a biography of Holderlin in his home library by 1861. For more on the young Nietzsche's interest in Holderlin, see David Farrell Krell. *Lunar Voices: Of Tragedy, Poetry, Fiction and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. For a broader survey of the relation between the two writers, see Graham Parkes. *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

²⁵ *The Diaries of Cosima Wagner, Volume I*. 713.

²⁶ *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 6.

rehabilitation of distance and deferral?

Balanced precariously along the threshold of despondency, the Hölderlinian erotic scenography develops, in an epistolary style which recalls both Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* and Goethe's *Werther*,²⁷ a portrayal of the courtly lover consigned, without recourse, to the impossibility of ever attaining consummatory release. The story of the romance between Hyperion and Diotima is a story abounding in postponement and deferral in which the displacement of proximity comes to permeate the entirety of Hölderlin's text, from beginning to end.²⁸ All of this comes to conjure, in accordance with the courtly schema, nothing less than an irresistible, though tragic, sensuousness of distance. "She seeks him, nears [*nähere*] him, recedes [*entferne*] from him," Hölderlin writes, "and between pleasure and grief, ripens the highest beauty."²⁹

The key to this erotic configuration, as we have previously shown, lies in the narrational extenuation of those intractable detours and postponements which keep the amorous couple hopelessly separated. These obstacles, moreover, may take the form of any number of circumstantial exigencies which render erotic fulfilment, for one reason or another, unfeasible. For Hölderlin's protagonist, as it turns out, the problem of fulfilment's delay, much as in *Tristan*, is fundamentally attributable to the sheer impossibility of physical proximity and the cruel persistence of mediation in all its forms. "I never managed to see Diotima alone. A third person always had to disturb us, separate us, and the

27 As Howard Gaskill writes, "Hyperion does indeed have much in common with *Werther*," (17) despite the fact that the former tale is comprised of letters separated from their experiential contents by a veritable ocean of time, whereas the latter are seemingly written in the present. In both cases, the letter writing is "neither therapeutic nor cathartic" – rather, it leads one "further into the labyrinth...very near to madness." (16-17) Howard Gaskill. *Hölderlin's Hyperion*. Durham: University of Durham Press, 1984.

28 The romance is, of course, a thinly-veiled, mythologised rendering of Hölderlin's own ill-fated relationship with Susette Gontard, the mother of his young tutee. In this real-life courtly drama, which resembled, in equal parts, the story and Abelard and Heloise and Stendhal's later fictional text, *The Red and the Black*, Hölderlin was eventually compelled to quit his post as tutor in the Gontard home only to maintain, for the next two years, a secret correspondence with his lover. His real-life name for her during this period was Diotima.

29 *Hyperion*. 72.

world lay between her and me like an infinite emptiness.”³⁰

At every turn, the exigency of separation seems to reassert itself, precluding him from grasping the object of his desire. And even if, by some twist of fate, Hölderlin should be granted an audience with his beloved – there simply can be no overcoming, as he soon realises, that absolute and most irreducible of all obstacles: the implacable persistence of the *principium individuationis* itself. For if lovers, as Novalis has already shown us in his *Hymns to the Night*, “are ultimately consigned to futility by time and space”³¹ – then perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the pages of *Hyperion* where, to use David Constantine’s phrase, a “palpable absence”³² reigns supreme. Even prior to Diotima’s final, heartbreaking departure – there can be no doubt that she is essentially lost to him on account of her spatio-temporal individuation. No matter how closely he approaches her, he can never be close enough. The smallest of gaps will always stifle his advance.

And all of this is only further compounded, as we might expect, by Hyperion’s tragic inability to communicate his amorous declarations to her in an efficacious and unproblematic manner. As Hyperion laments: “If I sought her with my eye, night fell before me; If I turned to her with a word, it choked in my throat [*so erstickt’ es in der Kehle*]. O! the holy nameless longing [*Verlangen*] often nearly tore my breast asunder...”³³

The profound and deep-seated parallelism between this excerpt and Nietzsche’s “Night Song” should immediately be apparent to us. For, in both cases, as we can see, there arises within the poetic subject (Hyperion-Zarathustra) an overwhelming compulsion to speak. Indeed, the word which both Hölderlin and Nietzsche make use of in this context is *Verlangen* – a term which suggests a

30 Ibid. 93.

31 Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*. 39.

32 David Constantine. *Hölderlin*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. 99.

33 *Hyperion*. 93.

longing carried to the extreme point of requisition. “Like a spring, my longing [*Verlangen*] flows forth from me, and I long [*verlangt*] for speech,”³⁴ Zarathustra tells us in the “Night Song.”

And yet, for Hyperion, as for Zarathustra, the moment of decisive articulation is nevertheless continually postponed. The words choke, quite literally, within the lover’s throat – consigning him, by necessity, to the perilous ambiguity of the written word, which can do no better than indicate, as we have shown, a deprivation it can never assuage.³⁵ Indeed, it is in precisely this sense, as Edgar Pankow writes, that “all of Hyperion’s letters are marked by a blind spot caused by the unavailability of the linguistic referent. Over and again, Hyperion necessarily fails to articulate an essentially nameless experience and produces a series of interminable meditations instead.”³⁶

What follows is not only a feeling of dejection, but also of overbearing and exhausting strandedness: a feeling of being lost and without compass. Indeed, as long as this interminable extenuation of the courtly drama leaves Hyperion subject to the pathos of continual displacement, it is precisely the satiety of repose which is most cruelly denied him – and hence, most ardently sought. Deprived of fulfilment, the lover wanders “restlessly [*ruhelos*] and aimlessly”³⁷ within an *atopia* of despondency, bereft of home and solace. Embedded within a scenography suffused by deferral and distanciation, his existence is ruinous, dissolute, and constantly pervaded by the exhausting perpetuity of disorientation which elicits from him the cry: “I was born to be homeless [*heimatlos*] and without a place of repose [*Ruhestätte*]. O earth! O you stars! Will I dwell

34 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 133.

35 The recursivity of this configuration should be apparent. For in attempting to articulate the unbridgeable distance between himself and the object of his desire, Hyperion actually introduces a further distance, namely, the temporal one which separates the events themselves from the instance of their epistolary inscription. Distance is extenuated in the very act of attempting to surmount it.

36 Edgar Pankow. “Epistolary Writing, Fate, Language: Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*.” *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*. Edited by Aris Fioretos. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 170.

37 *Hyperion*. 181.

nowhere in the end?”³⁸

Made to endure, in this manner, a cruel exile from his beloved, the situation of the unfulfilled Hyperion soon becomes utterly unsustainable – the world which once so plentifully enticed him, now becomes a source of unending regret. He wanders through it, clutching at signifiers, unable to express his longing, and finding himself increasingly alienated from the possibility of satisfaction.

Abandoned, in this manner, he quite naturally comes to seek, above all, a *Ruhestätte* – a place of abiding security and comfort where the regimen of erotic futility might finally be suspended. Indeed, as Howard Gaskill maintains, “it is with the achievement of ‘*Ruhe*’ that Hyperion’s development as narrator is chiefly concerned...”³⁹ But how, exactly, are we to characterise this state of repose which Hyperion so passionately comes to extol? Does it assume, in the Novalisian, or Tristanian sense, an otherworldly sheen? Or might Hölderlin have something altogether different in mind?



As it turns out, the image of quiescent satiety with which he provides us seems to evoke much less an escape from the world, than it does a profound and saturating immersion within it. Consider the following passage: “To be one with all that lives, to return in blessed self-oblivion in the All of nature, that is the summit of thoughts and joys, that is the holy mountain height, the place of eternal repose [*ewigen Ruhe*], where the midday loses its swelter and the thunder its voice and the boiling sea resembles the billowing field of grain.”⁴⁰ Lest we mistake this

³⁸ Ibid., 162.

³⁹ Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*, 25.

⁴⁰ *Hyperion*, 12.

account for a crude monism, it is important to emphasise that the ideal of unity which Hölderlin proposes here “is not that of amorphous oneness...but rather of a differentiated unity in which there is an embracing vision both of the whole and the part...”⁴¹

As Howard Gaskill writes, “Hyperion ultimately finds his ‘*Ruhe*’ in the revelation that it is the very essence of the gods’ divinity to be, not only above everything, but also in everything, and as such, in their temporal aspect, subject to the same limitations as all living beings, the same laws of change and decay.”⁴² Gaskill’s distinction is crucial, because it means that, unlike the Novalisian and Wagnerian consummatory scenes which we encountered earlier, the Hölderlinian tableau preserves, at all times, the sacred inviolability of spatio-temporal distance. Hölderlinian repose *does not invoke* a suspension of the *principium individuationis*. It implies, on the contrary, the seamless and ordered integration of all individuated entities within the heart of a living, breathing nature.



The question, of course, is whether the attainment of repose, here, necessarily translates into full, erotic satisfaction. Indeed, it is in addressing this very question that we finally come to appreciate the magnitude of Hölderlin’s influence upon Nietzsche. For unlike Novalis, Schopenhauer, and Wagner – all of whom see the persistence of longing as something which must finally be surmounted by the salvific and transfiguring intervention of the night – Hölderlin posits a notion of *Ruhe* in which mediation, and therefore desire, is inexorably sustained and prolonged. Rather than appealing to the darkness of a world-negating twilight, Hyperion glorifies the moment of midday, in all its

⁴¹ Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*. 39.

⁴² *Ibid.* 42.

luminosity, as an emblem for the “the summit of thoughts and joys.”

If we recall the denigration of day-light which we encountered in Novalis’ hymns and elsewhere, then Hölderlin’s gesture assumes an especially weighty significance. For the brightness of noon, symbolising as it does, fulfilment’s postponement and delay, is precisely what Hyperion elects (against all odds) to affirm. His lesson is clear: the world and its distances and deferrals are to be affirmed *without exception*; only then will the lover attain his longed-for repose.

What further grants Hölderlin’s text its position of special importance within our broader discussion, is the manner in which this affirmation of erotic forbearance then comes to be instantiated, rather boldly, at the cosmological level. Indeed, by relating the endless cycling and recycling of nature to the inexorable longing of the unsatisfied lover, we find Hölderlin coming to posit a prescient – albeit largely undeveloped – formulation of eternal recurrence, which anticipates Nietzsche’s own theory in a most startling way. “If the life of the world consists in the alteration of opening [*Entfaltens*] and closing [*Verschließens*], in departure [*Ausflug*] and in return [*Rückkehr*] to itself,” writes Hölderlin, “then why should the heart of man not also?”⁴³

This analogy, which seeks to equate the eternal persistence of a lover’s yearning to the periodic circulation of all natural processes, is continually reiterated and refined throughout the pages of *Hyperion*, culminating in the book’s famous concluding passage: “The dissonances of the world are like lovers’ strife [*Zwist*]. In the midst of the quarrel is reconciliation [*Versöhnung*], and all that is separated comes together again...The arteries part and return in the heart, and all is one eternal, glowing life.”⁴⁴

The German word *Versöhnung*, which is translated above as “reconciliation,” can also mean “atonement.” And it carries with it, as Hölderlin realised, an

⁴³ *Hyperion*. 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*. 215.

unmistakable intimation of that ancient debate waged between the pre-Socratic philosophers Anaximander and Heraclitus on the question of eternal justice. To appreciate, fully, the essence of what Hölderlin is saying here, it is imperative upon us to recall the basis for this classic dispute. For it was Anaximander, as we recall, who came to view the world “as a sum of unexpiated injustices”⁴⁵ which could be reconciled or atoned for only through death.⁴⁶ Whilst Heraclitus, by contrast, had come to understand this strife [*polemos*] “as the continuous working out of a unified, lawful, reasonable justice”⁴⁷ – thereby exonerating existence from any need for atonement. He affirmed, in other words, the profound innocence of all becoming and the essential reconcilability of all dissonance within the unity of nature.

What Hyperion is saying, here, about the lover’s strife and unfulfilment necessarily turns upon the particular meaning which we ascribe to *Versöhnung*. This is because, unlike those thinkers and writers who, descending from the lineage of Anaximander, decry and condemn earthly existence on account of its intrinsic imperfection, Hölderlin elects to see the detours and deferrals of erotic life, not unlike the dissonances of nature, as fundamentally unimpeachable. They constitute, to use his phrase, complementary aspects of an “eternal, glowing life” which is regulated and sustained through the primordial complicity between proximity and distance.

The Hölderlinian notion of *Versöhnung*, then, not unlike his conception of *Ruhe*, entails a tension between opposites in which the alternating movements of departure and return are both preserved. Repose is not to be found in an overcoming of earthly existence, but in an affirmation of the rhythmic cycles of return and departure which characterise the “never-ending”⁴⁸ flow of all natural

45 *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*. 34.

46 See the following line from Euripides: “Death is a debt that all must pay” in “Andromache.” *Ten Plays*. Translated by Moses Hadas and John McLean. New York: Bantam Books, 198. 129.

47 *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*. 64.

48 Eric L. Santner. *Friedrich Hölderlin: Narrative Vigilance and the Poetic Imagination*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986.

processes. A movement which achieves, in the image of the heart, its quintessential exemplification.⁴⁹



In light of all this, we can perhaps begin to understand, with greater clarity, the meaning of Nietzsche's statement from 1861, that "In *Hyperion*...all is dissatisfaction and unfulfilment...arousing unsatisfied longing."⁵⁰ For as we have shown, there can be no doubt that the Hölderlinian scenography appears to exclude, from the very outset, the possibility of complete and unmediated erotic proximity; Diotima nears Hyperion, and then once again recedes from him – all the while extenuating the interminable trajectory of his yearning for her. The path which he traverses, thus finds itself marked, as Eric L. Santner writes, by nothing less than "his repeated abandonments at the hands of both nature and the woman he loves."⁵¹

And yet, despite the immensity of unfulfilled longing which so persistently afflicts him – at no point does Hyperion fall victim to the insidious reactivity of Novalisian (or Wagnerian) world-renunciation.⁵² This is because the Hölderlinian pursuit of *Ruhe* comes to entail nothing less than a transformation of consciousness whereby dissatisfaction and unfulfilment are found to be

52.

49 Let us simply note, here, that the figure of the heart, which we have already encountered in the "Soothsayer" discourse, will constitute a trope of increasing importance in the pages that follow. In Blanchot's writings, in particular, its connection to the thought of eternal return and the eroticisation of distance will become unmistakable.

50 *The Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 6.

51 *Friedrich Hölderlin: Narrative Vigilance and the Poetic Imagination*. 52.

52 A point well-noted by Blanchot in an early essay on Hölderlin from December 1946. "Nothing could be further from a Novalis," Blanchot writes, "even though the movement of certain themes comes close, there is nothing nocturnal in Hölderlin's [texts], nothing funereal." *The Work of Fire*. 120.

inseparable from the very essence of what it means to live – and to love. And it is in this sense, precisely, that we discover within *Hyperion* the beginnings of a radical rehabilitation of erotic distance which Nietzsche will carry to its furthest limit in the affirmation of the eternal recurrence.

“...A Love of Causes and Spectres”

But if the story of Hyperion’s courtship, in this manner, ultimately comes to comprise nothing less than a stirring and provocative *anticipatory* rejoinder to the impasse of Tristanian nihilism, then it must nevertheless be said to leave seemingly unresolved that most crucial and pressing of questions: under what conditions is this love of life, this love of eternity, ultimately possible for us? Under what conditions, in other words, might one arrive at the veritable crossroads, the infamous *Augenblick*, and choose *not* to follow the Tristanian example of lunging lustfully into the arms of blessed release? Under what conditions, might one elect, instead, to affirm life and even to *love* it – in spite of everything?

These, it seems, are the decisive questions bequeathed unto Nietzsche by the tradition of German romanticism; the very questions, moreover, which render utterly unmistakable both the necessity of the project of rehabilitation, as well as the specific nature of its aims and goals. Indeed, it is seemingly in the form of a response to this very impasse, that Nietzsche – in a late work from 1888 – comes to assure his readers that even in spite of everything, the love of life remains “still possible.”⁵³ Even in the midst of excessive suffering, it is not beyond our capacity to love. What it demands of us, however, is nothing less than a fundamental

53 Nietzsche contra Wagner: *From the Files of a Psychologist*. 281.

reorientation of erotic life; it demands of us that we learn “to love *differently*.”⁵⁴ It requires of us, as Nietzsche writes, that we learn to love life in the same manner that one loves “a woman who gives us doubts.”⁵⁵

A fascinating statement. But what, exactly, does all this mean? –It means, as Nietzsche goes on to tell us, that we must attempt to surmount, first and foremost, our prodigious and nearly irrepressible longing to remove the veil, to pierce every surface. We must cease wishing “to see everything naked,”⁵⁶ Nietzsche writes. We must cease, moreover, wishing “to be present everywhere, to understand and ‘know’ everything.”⁵⁷ Indeed, rather than desiring and expecting, at every moment, the imminent arrival of consummatory satisfaction, discharge, or release – we must learn, instead, “to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin.”⁵⁸

We must come to carry out, in other words, a fundamental rehabilitation of erotic distance whereby it is separation itself, mediation itself, and even the unending perseverance of detour and deferral, which are eternally affirmed and even *sought*. Then, and only then, will the unceasing futility of erotic relations no longer be considered an objection against life; then, and only then, will the interminable beating of a scorched heart no longer manifest itself in a curse against existence.

Could it be, therefore, that what Nietzsche is ultimately proposing, here, amounts to nothing less than a new law of amorous relations, a new erotic ideal? Indeed, such a thought would hardly be inconsistent with the letter of Nietzsche’s text.⁵⁹ But if the project of rehabilitation is indeed to be translated, here, into nothing

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid. 282.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 We have already mentioned, for instance, how Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil* §120, had come to appropriate as his own the Stendhalian transcription of a famed medieval love code. Cf. Stendhal. *Love*. Translated by Gilbert and Suzanna Sale. London: Penguin Books, 1975. 278.

less than a new erotic ideal, linked to an exigency perhaps more rigorous and unwavering than anything since the late 12th century, then how, precisely, are we to characterise the nature of its prescriptive force? How are we to characterise, moreover, the very eroticism which it comes to recommend to us?

On this point, Nietzsche does not equivocate. He tells us, as we have just seen, that it would require of us a truly unprecedented affirmation, namely, an affirmation of endlessness itself, of sheer interminability. But this is not all. For even beyond the willing acceptance of continual recommencement, it would also require something further, an additional, incomparably provocative step – arguably unmatched in the history of Western eroticism. It would require of us nothing less than a fundamental overturning and displacement of the age-old privilege accorded to fulfilment, fusion, and consummation within erotic life. It would demand of us that we dethrone the very principle which has implicitly dominated and circumscribed eroticism in the West ever since the speech of Aristophanes, and probably long before: the principle of redemption through reconciliation [*Versöhnung*].

For what, we might ask, has our overbearing, lingering awareness of our own incompleteness and our nostalgia for lost unity made us, for all these many years, desire so ardently and with such maddening perspicacity? Nothing other than “to melt together with the one [we] love, so that one person might re-emerge from the two.”⁶⁰ But what if all this should prove impossible? – Well, then, we must come to desire a reconciliation, a redemption by whatever means available to us. We must endeavour to suppress and overcome, however we can, the temporal and spatial distance which so perniciously keeps us apart. So says the traditional wisdom; so says “the Logos of gratification.”⁶¹ Indeed, it is precisely in this manner that death, through the ages, becomes the central and abiding focus of erotic life – and the legend of Tristan (as Rougemont tells us) its paradigmatic

⁶⁰ *Symposium*. 29.

⁶¹ *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. 112.

exemplification.⁶²

It is nothing less, in other words, than our spirit of *revenge* against the abiding incontrovertibility of spatio-temporal distance which has ultimately led us to prefer even death to the incurable malady of hopeless love.⁶³ It is nothing less than our ill-will against erotic separation which leads us to seek, in the end, a blissful redemption from earthly existence. The lesson, therefore, is clear. As long as consummation and fulfilment remain the standard, the measure, of all erotic life, we will not cease to be confronted, invariably, by a sensation of perpetually falling-short, of ongoing deprivation. As long as the desire for absolute presence is allowed to dominate and circumscribe our erotic scenographies, we will not cease to curse our desire on account of its perennial futility and eventually seek to silence it.



It is in light of all this, that the necessity of a new ideal becomes plainly apparent to us. And it is likewise in this very same context that Nietzsche's *own* discourse "On Redemption" – likely one of the most important sections in the entirety of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – should then ultimately be understood. For it is here, in this very discourse, that Zarathustra not only comes to acknowledge that "loneliest of sorrows,"⁶⁴ the anguish of our inability to amend the unfulfilments of the past, but also, the irrepressible need for redemption which necessarily accompanies it.

62 As noted earlier, see Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* for claims pertaining to the exemplarity of the Tristan myth. 18-19.

63 This is a point which Nietzsche himself alludes to in the following well-known passage: "This...is what revenge [*Rache*] itself is: the will's ill-will toward time and its *it was*." *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 121.

64 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 121.

Indeed, what Nietzsche ultimately comes to suggest to us, here, is that the notion of redemption [*Erlösung*] come to be extricated, at long last, from the scenographies of death and fusal fantasy – extricated from its association with the consummatory ideal – and reconceived by us as “something higher than any reconciliation [*Versöhnung*].”⁶⁵ But how, exactly, is all of this to be achieved?

Indeed, few questions, it seems, were ultimately of a greater, or more pressing, importance to Nietzsche, either philosophically or personally, than the question of redemption. For it was this question, more than any other, that spoke to the very heart of Nietzsche’s own deepest and most prodigious suffering – his suffering on account of the past. We know that Nietzsche, by the time he composed his discourse “On Redemption,” had found himself haunted, almost incessantly, by the stark and unyielding facticity of the “it was,” its cruel and unrelenting dominion over the present (and the future). At nearly every turn, Nietzsche had found himself “powerless [*Ohnmächtig*] with respect to what had been done.”⁶⁶ He had found himself confronted by the “loneliest sorrow,”⁶⁷ the sorrow of his inability to will backwards, the sorrow of his incapacity to undo the most painful of memories. Bound irrevocably to a chronology pervaded by unmitigated failures and erotic frustrations (Mathilde, Lou, Cosima) – he had come to assume and ultimately embody, as we have already mentioned, the essential unfulfilment, the despondency, of Tristan himself; he had come to *live* the drama of Wagnerian decadence at its deepest level, even to the point of contemplating suicide.

For Nietzsche, simply put, the problem of redemption was seemingly indissoluble from the problem of coming to justify his own past, of coming to purge the nihilism and decadence *within*. The stakes of redemption, in other words, could not possibly have been any higher.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 121.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

And it was here, in this very context – a context which could so easily have tilted, slowly but surely, in the direction of consummatory fantasy or even sheer renunciation – that we find Nietzsche coming to tell us, instead, of a redemption even “higher than any reconciliation,” of a redemption even higher than any “*Versöhnung*.” A truly defining moment, it seems, in the history of Western eroticism. For if anyone, in light of a relentless suffering, had seemingly entitled themselves, in all good faith, to a yearning for satiety and fulfilment, then surely this individual was Nietzsche. And yet, it was precisely the desire for fusional reconciliation which, in the pages of *Zarathustra*, he elects to eschew, rather remarkably, in favour of a new and unprecedented concept of what it means to be redeemed.

If up until now, in other words, the greatest answer, the only *true* answer, to human suffering had resided in the notion of eternal reconciliation, in the definitive suppression of all spatio-temporal distance – then what Nietzsche comes to offer us, in the pages of his text, is a notion of *Erlösung* which could not possibly be further removed from the *milieu* of consummatory idealism and the lust for blessed release. For rather than coming to link, as Schopenhauer and Wagner had, the notion of redemption to a suppression of spatio-temporal distance, Nietzsche elects to make *distance itself* the guiding principle of all redemption.

A truly stunning reversal – which turns the tables, not only on his decadent, German romantic predecessors, but on the entire tradition of consummatory idealism, more broadly. Redemption, in the pages of *Zarathustra*, is no longer to be attained through the pursuit of reconciliation, Nietzsche tells us, or through a pursuit of restoration in death, but only through an affirmation of distance itself – an affirmation of the very separation (the *Fernsten-Liebe*) which indefinitely extenuates our longing in the absence of all satisfaction.



Why, we might ask, is this ultimately such a provocative development? First and foremost, because to make distance the measure of all redemption, is to find the earth itself, and all earthly existence, instantaneously redeemed. – And not only redeemed, but exonerated *intrinsically*, rendered innocent and utterly beyond reproach. For nothing, as we know, is perhaps more essential, more fundamental, to earthly existence than the regimen of spatio-temporal distancing which regulates each and every one of our encounters and each and every one of our relationships – erotic or otherwise. To make distance, rather than reconciliation, our measure for redemption, is therefore to find the world itself suddenly revealed for what it already is: utterly perfect. It is to find earthly existence rendered unimpeachable *on account* of its distances, not in spite of them.⁶⁸

And this, undoubtedly, is a point of considerable importance. For, if the parallel notions of distance and deferral are indeed allowed to replace, in this manner, consummation and fusion as the guiding principles of redemption, then the partings, the abandonments, the refusals which had so thoroughly haunted Nietzsche's *own* past and personal history, might suddenly become – not unlike the distances and dissonances of nature – fully exonerated. The moments of unfulfilment, of unresolved tension, of amorous irreciprocity, so assiduously chronicled in the letters of the mid-1880s, become transformed, in other words, into the most blessed moments, the most sacred moments of his entire life; the moments which bear witness most eloquently to the highest of all affirmations: the affirmation of desire's ceaseless intensification in the absence of all

⁶⁸ To seek redemption through reconciliation is to seek to enter, in one form or another, "the Kingdom of Heaven." To make distance the principle of redemption, by contrast, is want nothing other than the sheer heartland of separation itself, "the Kingdom of the Earth." Cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 277.

resolution.⁶⁹

The “tormenting and horrible memories”⁷⁰ of the past, in other words, come to be redeemed; and redeemed, moreover, through an affirmation of the *very things* that the tradition of consummatory eroticism had so denigrated and disparaged: the abandonments, the refusals, and the unwavering separations of erotic life. Indeed, what Nietzsche is ultimately suggesting to us is not only that we come to affirm and accept all this, but that we learn to *love it* as well, without succumbing, at any moment, to the desire of putting an end to longing, or seeking a release from the discomforts of amorous dissatisfaction.

For redemption, as Lawrence Lampert tells us, is only achievable, in Nietzsche’s text, “by a will that would not have the earth be other than it is.”⁷¹ To surmount the spirit of vengeance against the past and to redeem all that has been done, is to accept, first and foremost, that “nothing in existence should be excluded, nothing is dispensable.”⁷² To redeem the past, in other words, requires of us that we take account of every slight, every failure – every moment of heartbreak, every weakness – and to affirm the very necessity of these moments. It means to love eternity *on the very basis* of the interminable distances and deferrals which she offers us, not in spite of them. It means to treasure, moreover, every breath, every glance, every moment – knowing that they will never lead us to absolute consummation or release, but rather, engender something far more precious: the return of endless separation, the absolute and unwavering distances of the *circulus vitiosus*.

For *if* to love eternity ultimately means, as Zarathustra has shown us, to love that which is most distant – then it is *also*, by this very same necessity, to love

69 This newly redeemed perspective on the past is clearly evidenced in those words, already cited, from *Ecce Homo*: “I would not give up my Tribschen days for anything...days of trust, cheerfulness, and sublime chance...of profound moments [*der tiefen Augenblicke*].” The very cradle of erotic disappointment had become the most blessed place for him. *Ecce Homo*. 92.

70 *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 206.

71 *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 149.

72 *Ecce Homo*. 109.

everything which makes this distance return.⁷³ It is to love everything that allows us, through the incalculable play of causality and influence, to see this distance incessantly regenerated and sustained. Indeed, it is along these very lines that Zarathustra, with the same breath that praises the *Fernsten-Liebe*, also recommends to us, rather importantly, “a love for causes and spectres.”⁷⁴

This is because, if all things, as Nietzsche tells us, are ultimately “chained together, entwined, in love,”⁷⁵ then to will the return of even a single moment, is necessarily is “to want it *all* back.”⁷⁶ This, and nothing other, is the essential meaning behind Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, his formula “for human greatness.”⁷⁷ To love fate, according to Nietzsche, is to love without exclusion, without complaint. It is to “not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity.”⁷⁸ – A most provocative of notions, which appears to lead us, solemnly and unmistakably, toward thought’s most auspicious, most extreme limit. As though everything that Nietzsche’s discourse had been building towards, throughout the early 1880s, were suddenly to reveal, beyond the precipice of a most prohibitive exigency, the demand of a new and unprecedented relation with the impossible, the incomplete.

73 On this point, see Alexander Nehamas’ *Nietzsche*, where the author comes to develop, in considerable detail, this particular aspect of the eternal recurrence. For Nehamas, the immediate consequence of the eternal return would be that “If anything in the world recurred, including an individual life or even a single moment within it, then everything in the world would recur in identical fashion.” Cf. *Nietzsche*. 156.

74 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 53

75 *Ibid.* 283.

76 *Ibid.* 283.

77 *Ecce Homo*. 99.

78 *Ibid.*

“We are at the heart of nihilism...”

But where, we might ask, does all of this ultimately leave Nietzsche with respect to Wagner? And where, moreover, does it leave us with respect to the question of decadence? Important questions. And though any attempts at forging, or even attempting to suggest, a naive and uncritical identification between the two works must, it seems, be strenuously avoided – there can simply be no doubting, on the basis of the preceding account, that Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* may rightfully be understood to comprise, in so many respects, a rather knowing re-enactment, or even restaging, of Wagner’s *Tristan*.

For what both of these works come to offer us is nothing less than erotic scenographies thoroughly pervaded by inexorable breath-holding, hesitation, and deferral. Both works, moreover, seem to lead us, through the unrelenting pathos of postponement and separation, to the threshold of an ostensibly supreme *moment*. – A moment of supreme crisis, perhaps, but also of supreme invitation. The moment of an intimacy that never gives itself once and for all.

And yet, if there remains, when all is said and done, a single most unmistakable and riveting point of contact *and* divergence between these two works, a point which seems to encapsulate, more evocatively than any other, the meaning of Nietzsche’s rehabilitation of erotic distance *in its relation* to Wagner’s opera – then this point must be understood to arise nowhere other than in these works’ respective, final scenes, those moments of presumptive culmination and finality, in which everything seems to end, only to begin again.



Of the two scenes in question, Wagner's is, of course, by far the more famous one. Indeed, much more has been written of it than we could ever hope to encapsulate or summarise here.⁷⁹ We know, for instance, about its "unresolved chromaticism," just as we know of its unparalleled emotional tumult, and its deeply affecting symphonic swoon. But what concerns us in the *present* case is something much more basic, something much more simple. What concerns us are the words themselves. –Words which, despite their uncontested notoriety, nevertheless seem to bear examining more closely.

For it is within Isolde's rapturous exclamation, as one senses, that the entire tradition of German romanticism, from Novalis to Schopenhauer and beyond, seems to receive arguably its most fitting, *apothetic* enunciation. When Wagner's Isolde – cresting volubly in the midst of an ecstatic rapture – stands over Tristan's fallen body, and intones that phrase: "*Unbewußt, höchste Lust*," it is not simply the opera's heroine who has spoken her defining word, but the entire tradition of consummatory eroticism, from Anaximander to Schopenhauer, as well.

But what, exactly, does this phrase – ostensibly so singular, and yet remarkably paradigmatic – ultimately signify? For Wagner, it seems, the phrase's precise meaning must be understood as not only utterly apodictic in nature, but also, as metaphysically *absolute*. This is because what it expresses is nothing less than the final, eternal truth itself. Operating, as we know, within the confines of a post-Kantian, dualist metaphysic, Wagner had come to understand, precisely like Schopenhauer, all conscious existence to be fundamentally circumscribed by the *principium individuationis*, the laws of temporal and spatial distance – and therefore, essentially divorced from the eternal and abiding truth of the *noumenal* realm, that undifferentiated Oneness in which all distance is

⁷⁹ For a full appraisal of the Wagner-scholarship associated with this scene, see Chapter 1.

annulled.⁸⁰

Considered in this light, Isolde's parting words may rightly be interpreted as a statement of profound and unwavering optimism – a naive optimism, perhaps, that the possibility of a most supreme and incomparable of joys now awaited her: the joy of absolute and unending night. For this, as we know, is precisely what the notion of “unconsciousness,” here, is so carefully coded to entail. It is coded to entail nothing less than a deepest immersion within reconciliatory fusion, “a long-awaited restoration [*selige Rückkehr*]⁸¹ with one's beloved. Here, in the darkness of this absolute *Verklärung*, there will no longer be anything to separate Tristan and Isolde. The consummatory fantasy *par excellence* will finally be realised: two lovers, “heart to heart [*Herz an Herz*], lip to lip...bound together in a single breath.”⁸²

This, in short, is the precise manner in which Wagner's scenography seeks to conclude itself, namely, by invoking nothing less than a world-suppressing twilight and the joy of eternal reconciliation. It concludes itself by conjuring, in other words, an ecstatic vision of the consummatory fantasy becoming reality: an unmistakable exaltation of the single, unified heart, beating silently and contentedly, amidst the satiety of supreme repose.



And is it not fascinating, in light of all this, that no one, until now, has seemingly noticed the rather striking manner in which Nietzsche's concluding stanzas to “The Drunken Song,” that final, major discourse of *Zarathustra* IV, appear to be

80 The question of the relationship between Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as the question of Wagner's metaphysical investments is likewise dealt with in considerable length, in Chapter 1, and referred to broadly within the Chapter 2 as well.

81 “Hymns to the Night.” 14.

82 Act II, Scene 2.

composed almost in direct *response* to this very vision – the ecstatic vision of a death-devoted Isolde? Just as in Wagner’s paradigmatic and unforgettable *Liebestod*, we find Nietzsche, particularly in the tenth and eleventh stanzas, coming to emphasise, above all, the notion of joy, or *Lust* – at the very same time that he exhorts his audience: “The hour is here, let us wander into the night!”⁸³ A remarkable point of rhetorical and thematic confluence.

Of course, as we might have expected, these points of unmistakable similarity, for all their suggestive force, only serve to render, all the more noticeable and significant, the deep-seated antagonisms which exist between the two scenes in question. For in direct contrast to the Wagnerian *Liebestod*, there is absolutely no image, here, of a unified and sated heart to serve as a rhetorical and thematic exemplification for Nietzsche’s erotic fantasies. Nor is there any intimation of an eternal and abiding amorous reconciliation – a moment of ultimate fusion. Rather, what we encounter is something very different, something which proceeds to mark, in a most deeply provocative manner, the exigency of an eroticism given over to the affirmation of distance itself, the affirmation of endless forbearance. “Did you ever say Yes to a single joy [*Lust*]? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well.”⁸⁴

It with these lines, and the ones which immediately follow them, that Nietzsche comes to offer us nothing less than a rather telling rejoinder to Wagner’s own, closing invocation of a “*höchste Lust*.” For in direct contrast to the Wagnerian joy, which decisively consummates itself in an instant of death and transfiguration – Nietzsche’s *Lust* remains, at all times, irreconcilable with consummatory fulfilment. It is a joy which comes to be linked, instead, to an unconditional affirmation of the circuit of circuits, the ring of eternity, in its unmasterable distances. –And thus, by the very same logic, necessarily linked to the prospect of an endless dissatisfaction. This is because, as Nietzsche reminds us, to desire the return of every highest joy, every *höchste Lust*, is also necessarily

⁸³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 279.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 283.

to affirm the very grief which inextricably accompanies it (“*For joys all want themselves, therefore, do they also want grief!*”)⁸⁵

And what word, we might ask, does Nietzsche elect to make use of, here, in speaking of this inescapable and utterly compulsory grief – this sorrow linked to the notion of an eternal and undying *Lust*? His word choice, as it turns out, could not possibly be more significant. For it is none other than the notion of *Herzeleid* which Nietzsche comes to evoke here. – A word which means, quite literally, “heart suffering,” or perhaps more colloquially, “heartbreak.” It is a term which rather plainly seems to evoke a torment, or a grief, of a quintessentially amorous, or erotic, nature.

This, and nothing other, is what Nietzsche, in those crucial, final stanzas of Zarathustra’s penultimate discourse elects to emphasise and affirm. “Oh happiness, Oh pain! Oh break, thou heart [*O brich, Herz!*]”⁸⁶ he goes on to write, as if to render all the more unmistakable the stark juxtaposition with Wagner’s own, earlier evocation of a consummated, unbroken heart. Indeed, of all the figurative, or symbolic, tropes which Nietzsche could have chosen to call upon, it cannot help but strike us as profoundly fascinating that it is the figure of the heart which happens to assert itself, here, at this culminating moment of his discourse.

Could it be, we might ask, that after the shattered intimacy of Tribschen, the disappointments of Bayreuth, and the coldness and abandonment which followed that final, shared sunset in Sorrento – it were somehow *in this very figure*, the figure of the heart, broken and yet unceasingly resilient, that Nietzsche had perhaps come to discover his most poignant image for expressing the painful ambivalence of his relation to Wagner, and the tradition of German romanticism, more broadly?

–A possibility which would allow us to ascribe, it seems, a more prescient and

⁸⁵ Ibid. 282-3.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 283.

decisive importance to those already unquestionably moving words from 1883: “Many a leave have I taken already...I know the heart-rending final hours [*Ich kenne die herzbrechenden Stunden*].”⁸⁷ For what this statement, as we can see, simply cannot help but reinscribe, once more, is a rather stark and telling contrast with the paradigmatically Tristanian image of two lovers “heart to heart [*Herz an Herz*], lip to lip...bound together in a single breath.”⁸⁸

But to juxtapose the Wagnerian heart to the Nietzschean heart, in this manner, is never as simple, or straightforward, a task as it might initially appear. For what it requires of us is nothing less than a truly incomparable appreciation for the very *nuanced* tension which holds these two images in equipoise. A tension, a cleavage, which marks nothing less than the point of silent rupture between two discontinuous planes, two traditions, two visions of what it means to desire and to love, in the wake of eternal unfulfilment.

To undertake such a comparison is never simply to oppose a consolidated unity, to a fractured whole. Nor is it to oppose presence to absence, proximity to separation, or even identity to difference. For the imposition of such dualities and divisions can only work to obscure, ever more perniciously, that deepest, most mysterious, *secret* of the real wounding at stake.

This is because to evoke the Nietzschean *Herzeleid*, is to speak, above all, of a most profound and *imperceptible* fracture – one which precedes the very heart it shatters, much as the movement of eternal recurrence precedes every possible beginning, every possible origin. To speak of such a breaking, is to speak of a wounding which remains both always already accomplished – and yet, at the very same time, always *still to be inflicted*, always for the very first time. It is a breaking, in other words, which can never be decisively completed, just as it can never be decisively mended.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 74.

⁸⁸ Act II, Scene 2.

Indeed, *this* is what the story of Zarathustra's courtship, more than anything else, seems to teach us. And it is precisely this notion whose transference and reinscription within the pages of Blanchot's *own texts* will later comprise arguably one of the most significant, hitherto unrecognised, points of contact between the two writers in question. A point of contact in which the entire project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance will find itself confirmed and carried to its furthest limit.



But before any of this can be further addressed, or elaborated – a number of earlier questions still remain to be resolved. First and foremost, there is the lingering consideration of Nietzsche's precise relation to German romanticism, as well as the question of his on-going polemic against nihilism.

Where is one to stand on these issues? Does Nietzsche remain a nihilist, a decadent? Or does he surmount, at long last, these traditions which had both provoked and distressed him, in equal measure?

These are clearly important questions. – Questions which seem to preclude us, almost from the very beginning, of responding, with any confidence whatsoever, in either the affirmative or negative voice. For *if*, as we have already shown, over the course of the preceding chapters, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is indeed a text which simply cannot be understood, in any depth whatsoever, without taking into careful consideration the profound and inimitable influence of Wagner's *Tristan* – then the inextricable ties linking not only this most crucial of texts, but also this *most provocative of thoughts*, the thought of eternal return, to the heritage of German romanticism, must be recognised as utterly irremissible.

And yet, one might also say, by the very same token, that in coming to reinscribe the thought of eternal return, as he does, within an unprecedented, and wholly affirmative context, Nietzsche is simultaneously opening a *future* for thought which romanticism had prematurely closed. If Wagner, in other words, had already faced the exigency of eternal return, decades prior to Nietzsche, and had seen in it a terrifying manifestation of humanity's most accursed damnation – then for Nietzsche, it is never really a question of “introducing” this thought of thoughts, or even of explicating it – but rather, of coming to *affirm* it in the precise manner that Tristan was unable to. It is never, in other words, a matter of naively seeking to contradict Wagner's scenography with an opposing construction of his own. It is never a matter of mere dialectics.

Rather, what is at stake, here, is something altogether different, something altogether more subtle. For Nietzsche, as it turns out, it is above all a question of attempting to bring to light, to excavate and expose, the very notion which Wagner had struggled so persistently to suppress and silence beneath Isolde's final, ravishing exclamation – beneath her *höchste Lust*.

We are referring, of course, to the notion of an endless, objectless, desire – the trauma of eternal recommencement which consigns every yearning to dissatisfaction and every love to failure. This, precisely, is what the *dénouement* to Wagner's opera attempts, so visibly, to conceal and to subdue. And it is this, precisely, which Nietzsche is then attempting to reassert, so affirmatively, at the very heart of his own text – by coming to inscribe an ending to Zarathustra's tale of courtship which so expressly seeks to contest its Tristanian counterpart.

For whereas Wagner's opera appears to culminate, as we know, in a moment of unparalleled, teleological grandiosity, a moment of blissful reconciliation – Nietzsche elects to fashion, on the contrary, a conclusion to his *Zarathustra* which patently seeks to subvert any possibility of facile recuperation. What exactly are we referring to here? Nothing but that strange and utterly unmistakable tension between Nietzsche infamous “two endings” to *Zarathustra*

– that seemingly irresolvable tension between Parts III and IV of his text, which allows the supreme impossibility of determinate culmination to announce itself most remarkably.



For it is well-known that when the “complete text” of *Zarathustra* first appeared in published form, in 1886, two years *after* Nietzsche had completed Part IV – it was nevertheless this latter section which came to be rather conspicuously excluded from the printed manuscript. Rather than electing to publish and release this final chapter alongside his other, earlier sections of the text, Nietzsche had made the unusual decision of having it “privately printed and circulated secretly”⁸⁹ amongst only a handful of his closest friends. A decision as fascinating as it is quizzical. But how, exactly, are we to understand its significance? Could it be, we might wonder, that Nietzsche had simply come to recognise, from a stylistic point of view, that the conclusion of Book III, with its evocation of the Seven Seals, served as a more suitable, a more poignant, ending for his text?

Perhaps. But there is also, it seems, another explanation. Namely, that by writing Part IV, distributing it, and then coming to exclude it from the published version of the text, he were somehow attempting to bear witness to the sheer falsity, the duplicity, of *every* ending, of *every* resolution. A testimony, moreover, to the impossibility of ever marking a point of definitive closure with relation to the text, the courtship, or even life itself.

Indeed, the more closely we examine the relationship between Parts III and IV of Nietzsche’s text – the more revelatory, and justified, such a reading begins to

⁸⁹ Nietzsche’s *Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 287.

appear to us. For there can simply be no doubting that the very existence of the fourth part, as Laurence Lampert writes, clearly violates the more natural ending of Part III.⁹⁰ And yet, it is precisely this violation which Nietzsche not only seems to authorise, but also to carry out – albeit “in secret.”

In further support of this thesis, it is perhaps indispensable to note that Nietzsche himself, in coming to speak of his Part IV, in later years, almost never speaks of it as a definitive ending or resolution. Rather, as Laurence Lampert reminds us, it is above all under the form of a “transitory” moment that Nietzsche, throughout the late 1880s, comes to conceive of this ostensibly concluding section. In a pair of letters from 1888, for instance, Nietzsche even proposes an explicit renaming of Part IV. His suggested title? “The Temptation of Zarathustra: An Interlude.”⁹¹

The remarkable fact that Nietzsche, by the summer of 1888, had plainly come to consider the concluding section of *Zarathustra* as merely an “interlude” cannot help but suggest to us, in the clearest of terms, the fundamental aversion to teleological recuperation which must be understood to haunt the text’s final pages – those very pages in which his allusions to Wagner’s *Tristan* become perhaps most discernibly pronounced.

At the very point where Wagner, in his related scenography, had sought to make recourse to the notion of death and reconciliation as a paradigmatic exemplification of *höchste Lust*, Nietzsche comes to displace the primacy of the teleological, or consummatory, ideal by exposing his own text to the exigency of interminable recommencement – an exigency which manifests itself in this conclusion which “is not itself an ending.”⁹² A crucial and most striking riposte to the demand for narrational consolidation.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See Lampert’s text for a more detailed discussion. Ibid. 288.

⁹² Ibid. 288.

Indeed, it is perhaps on this very point that the contrast between the Nietzschean and Wagnerian scenographies becomes perhaps most indelibly apparent to us. For it is precisely by subjecting the presumed moment of completion, in this manner, to a most radical indeterminacy, that Nietzsche not only comes to accentuate a tendency perhaps long hidden within Wagner's *own* scene – but also, offers us arguably our most lasting impression of what it means to affirm, at all costs, the unceasing play of detour and deferral.

The last moment, as Nietzsche means to suggest, is never really the last. But rather, always an invitation to that which remains still to come. This, precisely, is what the thought of eternal recurrence, conceived as the thought which rehabilitates the very notion of erotic distance, ultimately impels us to venerate and to *desire*: “the voluptuousness of the future [*die Wollust des Zukünftigen*].”⁹³ This, as Nietzsche assures us, is not only the highest of all affirmations, but also, the highest form of love, the truest and most ardent *Fernsten-Liebe*, the unconditional love of eternity itself.



And yet, the question nevertheless still remains: having arrived, in this manner, at an affirmation of an unparalleled erotic forbearance, a “love for the eternal” – can it now be assumed that we are “definitively sheltered from the threat of nihilism?”⁹⁴ Can it now be assumed that nihilism, at long last, has been definitively surmounted?

Indeed, it is this very question which we find Maurice Blanchot, in an essay from

⁹³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 194.

⁹⁴ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

September 1958, explicitly coming to pose. –A question which endeavours to clarify not only the precise nature of Nietzsche’s relation to philosophy, but also, the full extent of his historical, and perhaps even transhistorical, significance as a thinker and writer. To pose the question of Nietzsche’s relationship to nihilism, in other words, is not only to speak of his relation to the past – to the decadence and consummatory idealism which precedes him – but also, rather importantly, to pose the question of his relationship to the future. It is to pose the question of that which remains yet to come, yet to be affirmed.

There are, in other words, few questions of greater consequence, or greater urgency. And indeed, it is perhaps for this very reason that Blanchot’s *answer* to the question, ultimately comes to strike us in such a fascinating, though disconcerting, manner. For, rather than assuring us, as we might have expected, that the affirmation of eternal recurrence ultimately leads us decisively *beyond* the nihilistic lineage of Western metaphysics, it is an entirely different sort of pronouncement which he comes to deliver.

To arrive upon the affirmation of eternal recurrence, as Blanchot writes, is to find oneself *nowhere other* than “at the very heart of nihilism [*au coeur du nihilisme*].”⁹⁵ It is to find oneself utterly immersed within nihilism – perhaps even immersed at its very deepest point. This is because the affirmation of the eternal recurrence, as it turns out, cannot be understood to rescue us from undergoing the crisis at hand; but rather, actually seems to bring it ever the more vividly and urgently to the fore. An unexpected turn of events?

Indeed, it is in corroboration of this rather provocative statement, that Blanchot then proceeds to reference a rather key passage from Nietzsche’s own 1887 “Notebook on European Nihilism” – a passage whose overall significance within our study is perhaps difficult to overstate.⁹⁶ “Let us attempt to think this thought

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ It is important to note, from a scholarly perspective, that Nietzsche does not actually mention nihilism *by name* in any work before 1886, at which point it appears in the tenth aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Almost the entirety of his various statements on the

in its most terrible form,” Nietzsche exhorts his reader, “existence as it is, without sense or aim, but inevitably returning, without a finale in nothingness: the eternal return...this is the most *extreme* form of nihilism...”⁹⁷



Why, we might ask, is this such a particularly important statement? First, as Blanchot suggests, because it comes to shatter arguably our most fundamental misconception about the very nature of nihilism – not only in Nietzsche’s work, but also more broadly. Namely, the misconception that nihilism is primarily, or above all, a question of *nothingness*. Such a notion, as Blanchot assures us, could not possibly be further from the truth. For, as we have just discovered, to think the thought of eternal return, is ultimately to think nothing less than the sheer *irremissibility* of existence, the impossibility of escaping the regimen of tireless detour and deferral, the impossibility of achieving release.⁹⁸

Indeed, to think such a thought, far from leading us toward a consideration of salvific annihilation, actually makes us confront, on the contrary, the sheer “impotence [*impuissance*] of nothingness, the false brilliance of its victories.”⁹⁹ It leads us to confront the fact that *even when* we try to conceive of the deepest and

question of nihilism appear in the unpublished notes from 1886-1889.

⁹⁷ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

⁹⁸ By all accounts, the very earliest usage of the term nihilism in a philosophical context occurs in an essay from the 1770s entitled “Idealism and Nihilism,” by F.H. Jacobi. Here, in this essay, he argues that Kantian philosophy “leads to a view of the human subject as ‘everything’ and the rest of the world as ‘nothing.’ ” [xvi] The first, full-length monograph of the subject to be published in West, did not arrive until 1933, when Karl Lowith published a book explicitly exploring the question of nihilism from a philosophical perspective. For a well-documented, general discussion of the question of nihilism in European literature and thought, see Keiji Nishitani. *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Translated by Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

⁹⁹ *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

most unrelenting nothingness, we are still thinking of being.¹⁰⁰ “All this time,” as Blanchot writes, “we had thought nihilism was tied to nothingness. How ill-considered this was...”¹⁰¹ This is because nihilism, as we can now discern, is ultimately indissoluble from the sheer and unwavering *impossibility* of nothingness, the impossibility of ever drawing existence to a close, or evading its perpetual recommencement.



This, precisely, is the key, initial move which Nietzsche’s statement from the 1887 notebook suggests to Blanchot. But, in addition, there is also a *further* consequence at play. For, by the very same logic that consigns us to the sheer hopelessness of achieving an end to existence, we are also forced to acknowledge an additional impossibility – namely, that most frightful impossibility of ever drawing nihilism *itself* to a close.

Why is this the case? Because, as one recent commentator notes, “there is perhaps nothing more nihilistic,” than the notion of an “end” to nihilism.¹⁰² To seek, or to anticipate, such an end – is therefore immediately to fall prey, once more, to nihilism’s most pernicious and unavoidable temptation. It is to reinscribe the teleological fantasy, the consummatory ideal, all over again. It is to ensure, in other words, the certainty of nihilism’s perpetuation.

Indeed, it is this very paradox, as Blanchot reminds us, which is brought to light perhaps most unmistakably in the context of Heidegger’s celebrated dialogue

100 “Being, the true, and the real are the avatars of nihilism,” Gilles Deleuze will write, in 1962, some four years *after* Blanchot’s essay was originally published in the NRF. Cf. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. 184.

101 *The Infinite Conversation*. 149.

102 Leslie Hill. *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 242.

with Ernst Jünger – the very dialogue which inspires not only the measured tonality, but also the title, of Blanchot’s 1958 essay.¹⁰³ For it is in the very context of this dialogue, oriented, as we recall, around the question of the presumptive end of nihilism, that we come to discover Heidegger, in a sustained and rigorous manner, seeking to contest and problematise the very teleology implied by such an event.

This is because, unlike Jünger, who found himself, toward the end of the 1950s, vociferously promulgating his rather staunch belief that nihilism was imminently surmountable, that “the crossing of the critical zone was being accomplished, or could be accomplished”¹⁰⁴ – Heidegger had found himself, in a much more nuanced manner, seeking to propose that the movement of nihilism, as it comes to its end, ultimately leaves “what it means to reach the end undecided.”¹⁰⁵

Would such an ending, he wonders, consign us to “the nullity of nothingness,” or rather, offer us transit into “the region of a new turning of being?”¹⁰⁶ –It is a question which can only defy our every attempt at decisive resolution, he writes. And thus, it is a question which requires of us nothing less than a new approach to the very crisis at hand. Rather than seeking, at every moment, to complete and verify this purported overcoming [*Überwindung*] of nihilism, this crossing of the line – Heidegger proposes, more delicately, that we undertake a “twisting-out [*Verwindung*],” of the very *aporia* itself. He proposes a sustained discourse on the nature of “the line,” rather than any definitive attempt at crossing it.

103 The title of Blanchot’s essay is “Passage de la ligne,” which is a translated rendering of the phrase “Crossing the Line,” the very title accorded by Jünger to his contribution to the *Festschrift* honouring Heidegger’s sixtieth birthday. For Heidegger’s response to Jünger, see *Zur Seinsfrage*. Frankfurt am Main: V Klostermann, 1956. Also, for Heidegger’s other significant commentaries on the question of nihilism, see his lectures published in both *Holzwege* (1950) and the *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (1954), plus the massive two-volume study, *Nietzsche*, published in 1961, but containing lectures from throughout the late 1930s. For a good general discussion of Heidegger’s views on nihilism and their relation to Blanchot’s writings, see *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit*. 237-255.

104 *The Infinite Conversation*. 150.

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*



What Blanchot seems to inherit from Heidegger, on this rather specific point, is thus a supreme attentiveness, or vigilance, to the demand of resisting any attempts at *overdetermining* the moment of crossing, the moment of ostensive completion. Indeed, it is precisely this vigilance which Blanchot then comes to reinscribe, rather prominently, within the context of his own, slightly later, engagement with Jünger in the pages of his 1960 essay, “Entretien sur un changement d’époque.”¹⁰⁷

Here, in a series of particularly incisive remarks, we find Blanchot coming to inquire, audibly, whether the desire to circumscribe the end of *history*, not unlike the desire to declare a final end to nihilism, might similarly betray nothing less than a latent impatience, a consummatory impatience – one might say – which revels in its distinct horror of the future.

Do we not sense, in all forms of eschatological fantasy, Blanchot wonders, a certain tacit acknowledgement, a frightful awareness, that it is actually *duration* itself, as Nietzsche had written, “which is the most paralysing thought?”¹⁰⁸ And might not our every attempt, therefore, at marking a point of epochal closure, or definitive transition, then simply betray this very dread of the incompleteness of the future and of the indeterminacy of what is yet to come?¹⁰⁹

It was this very dread, this world-weary pessimism, as we know, which had ultimately led Nietzsche to seek an escape from romanticism, an end to nihilism

¹⁰⁷ This essay was reprinted, with substantial additions, in 1969, now under the crucially augmented title of “Sur un changement d’époque: L’exigence du retour.” Cf. *The Infinite Conversation*. 264-281.

¹⁰⁸ *The Nietzsche Reader*. 385.

¹⁰⁹ *The Infinite Conversation*. 268.

– even whilst knowing, fully well, that the very *escape* he so desired could never be decisively achieved or completed as long as it was the contestation of teleology itself which was at stake. Indeed, this is a pathos, a sense of the interminable, which Blanchot, perhaps more than anyone, seemed to have grasped with an admirable clarity – and *not only* in the abstract. For as we will now proceed to show, it is this very movement of thought, this dual positionality, which might be seen to carry over, rather noticeably, into the domain of Blanchot’s own engagement, particularly from 1960s onward, with the perceived inescapability of the philosophical tradition.

But whereas, for Nietzsche, it had been Schopenhauer, Wagner, and perhaps even Plato, who had come to embody, above all, the repugnancy of teleological fetishism; for Blanchot, this role was to be reserved for someone else entirely. It was a role to be reserved, as it turned out, for none other than Hegel himself. It was Hegel who would come to represent, for Blanchot, the paradigmatic embodiment of exhaustive recuperation, of systematic totality. It was Hegel who would assume the mantle of the consummatory thinker *par excellence*. And thus, if the legacy of Nietzsche’s rehabilitation of erotic distance is ultimately of any interest to us, especially in its relation to Blanchot’s own writings, then it is necessarily toward a closer examination of the Hegelian project – and in particular its designs upon the future, and the course of desire – that we must turn our attention.

Chapter V

The Irrevocable, the Prophetic

“The girl whom he had liked for a long time and whom he saw in a painful exhaustion come out for a breath of air every noon on the window ledge, offering to the foolish young men on watch her superb impudence; the whoorish blue of her eyelids, the heart-shaped red of her mouth, a bored look piercing sideways through the torrent of her hair, her whole bust daringly undone and transparent like a palm against the black-painted décor of the alcove where, late in the night, a laugh pierced with marvelous moans drew him out of bed to roll on the floor, torn apart by desire, overcome with his misery, with the furious movements of a famished beast gnawing at its bars.”

des Forêts

The Spirit and its Wound

To read the *Phenomenology* as a text bearing witness to an unprecedented obsession with consummatory repose and the satiety of fulfillment – is by no means to downplay or seek to minimise the strife and violence which constantly tear at its seams. Rather, it is to recognise *in this very tension*, the already glimmering promise of a reconciliation as elusive as it is tantalising. Never does one desire satisfaction more than when it is persistently denied – and in no philosophical text do we find this denial, and the logical necessity proper to it, accounted for more exhaustively, more irrefutably, than here in the *Phenomenology*.

Everything turns, for Hegel, on the question of relationality. Indeed, it is within the privileged relationship between consciousness and its object that the entire drama of the *Phenomenology* can already be foretold – from alienation and distance to the eventual recuperation of a common identity. In short, the entire narrative arc, from start to finish, of traditional consummatory eroticism. But what distinguishes the Hegelian story from all others, is precisely the unprecedented emphasis which it places upon the *immanence* of this unfolding with respect to itself. The encounter with alterity, the carefully circumscribed violence of suppression, the majesty of eventual reconciliation – in short, the entire Hegelian drama is staged by the spirit [*Geist*] “as a spectacle for itself.”¹ And all of this is played out, moreover, within the realm of consciousness, which is spirit in its immediacy.²

1 Jean Hyppolite. *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Samuel Cherniak & John Heckman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974. 579.

2 Ibid. 575.

Thus, whereas in so many tales of great passion – Daphnis and Chloe, Aucassin and Nicolette, Romeo and Juliet – it often seems as if the Fates themselves do violence to the lovers’ wishes, holding them back from the satisfaction which they seek; here, in the pages of the *Phenomenology*, “consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands.”³ The moment of estrangement and alienation so crucial to the dialectic is like a wound which the spirit continually inflicts upon itself.

Let us be clear. We are not suggesting that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* be read in the manner of an erotic fiction (though neither would we oppose such a reading) – rather, what interests us here is the fundamental relational dynamic at play. A relational dynamic which Hegel’s text seems to share, at least *prima facie*, with any number of erotic myths centred around the pursuit of pseudo-eschatological deliverance or consummation.

Indeed, the necessity of estrangement and the pursuit of absolute reconciliation are tropes already well-entrenched within Hegel’s discourse as early as the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*. Here, we are told that consciousness simultaneously distinguishes itself from an object at the same time that it relates itself to it.⁴ An innocent enough statement. And yet, in the very positing of this relation, a seemingly irreparable rift is opened.

Why is this the case? Because consciousness, as Hegel seeks to maintain, “posits the truth of the object to which it is related as an in-itself *beyond* its knowledge, beyond what the object is for-consciousness.”⁵ Thus, the truth of the object, or what he refers to as the concept [*Begriff*], persistently exceeds our knowledge of it, introducing the trace of a subtle, yet unmistakable, difference into the very heart of thought.

3 G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. 51.

4 Ibid. 52.

5 Victoria I. Burke. “From Desire to Fascination: Hegel and Blanchot on Negativity.” *MLN*. III.4 (1999). 849-50.

What results from all this, is that every single epistemic achievement – no matter how satisfying – cannot help but appear *at the same time* dissatisfying, since it only reinforces “the disparity [*Ungleichheit*] which exists in consciousness”⁶ between knowledge and truth, object and concept.

Of course, the nature of this disparity, as we soon discover, must be understood as utterly irreducibly distinct, for instance, from the dualism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, it will be recalled, the *Ding an sich* came to be posited beyond the limits of possible experience as something empirically inaccessible to us. To speak of the *noumena* – was to speak of something fundamentally outside the realm of consciousness. For Hegel, by contrast, *being-in-itself*, or the truth of the concept, is at all times immanent to consciousness as its very essence. The disparity between object and concept, therefore, is fundamentally an internal conflict. As Hegel writes, both object and concept are already “present in consciousness,”⁷ and in examining them, consciousness simply “examines its own self.”⁸

But why, if this is the case, can consciousness not simply affirm this overarching immanence and claim its rightful due? The reason, as Hegel tells us, is that though the truth of the concept is indeed immanent to consciousness, it is not yet fully present as an object *for* consciousness. And this makes all the difference. For as long as consciousness abides in ignorance of its essence, it necessarily remains burdened by the appearance of a lingering rift within the heart of its own domain.

Nevertheless, what appears here as an intractable burden – is actually, for Hegel, a most fortuitous shortcoming. For it is on the very basis of this perceived rift that *Geist* receives the impetus it needs in order to develop itself and ultimately progress toward greater self-awareness – an awareness fostered through its exposure to the alterity which *it feels itself to be* in relation to itself. “Spirit becomes...other to itself...becomes alienated from

6 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 21.

7 *Ibid.* 54.

8 *Ibid.*

itself and then returns to itself from this alienation [*Anderssein*],” writes Hegel, “and it is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth [*Wahrheit*].”⁹

Indeed, it is this very movement of dialectical mediation – wherein spirit comes to pass through otherness in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of itself – which becomes, for Hegel, synonymous with the very notion of experience [*Erfahrung*].¹⁰ A notion whose implicit teleology, as Jean Hyppolite comes to observe, is nearly impossible to mistake. “The history of consciousness,” he writes, “is the history of experience, the progressive revelation of spiritual substance to the self.”¹¹ And this experience, moreover, “necessarily takes place in time.”¹²

But what exactly *is* time? And how are we to characterise its relation to history? These are important questions, because they lead us to consider not only how, but also *where* in Hegel’s discourse, the consummatory ideal ultimately begins to assert itself.

Indeed, as Hyppolite proceeds to tell us, time is nothing other than “the disquiet of consciousness which has not attained itself, which sees itself as outside itself.”¹³ It is “the teleology immanent in this consciousness...which manifests itself as the destiny and the necessity of spirit which has not yet reached culmination.”¹⁴ The passing of time, in other words, is necessarily bound up with a certain experience of dissatisfaction, of incompleteness. As Hegel himself writes in the pages of the *Phenomenology*: “Spirit appears in time just so long as it has not yet *grasped* its pure Concept.”¹⁵

What these statements, and others like them, appear to make abundantly clear, is time’s fundamental orientation towards the future – a future which

9 Ibid. 21.

10 Ibid. 21.

11 *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. 579.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 487.

seems to hold the promise of nothing less than the spirit's consummatory actualisation. But how, precisely, does this process of actualisation unfold? And under what conditions is this fulfilment ultimately realisable?



In the years immediately preceding the Second World War, it is likely that no single individual did more to explore these questions in their full breadth and complexity than Alexandre Kojève. The importance of Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology* – not only to Hegel scholarship, but to the development of intellectual life in France more broadly – has for a long time now been indisputable. What interests us, here, in the context of our present study, is the manner in which Kojève, particularly in his 1938-9 lectures, comes to elucidate the relationship which exists, in Hegel's philosophy, between time, eternity, and the concept.

According to Kojève, time *is indeed* characterised (as we had already suspected) by “the primacy of the future”¹⁶ – only the nature of this primacy in perhaps of a slightly different nature than we might have initially assumed. This is because time does not simply flow from the past into the future by means of the present; rather, as Kojève explains, the movement of time *originates* in the future and then arrives in the present only by way of the past. A strange circumlocution. Yet one whose necessity is already inscribed within the very impulse which animates time and makes history possible. This impulse, as Kojève tells us, bears the name of desire [*Begierde*].

In Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes desire as the drive which seeks to make explicit the fundamental identity between object and

¹⁶ Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Translated by James Nichols. New York: Basic Books, 1969. 134.

concept, being-for-itself and being-in-itself.¹⁷ It undertakes, in other words, the task of bringing consciousness to the point of complete self-awareness – or, in world-historical terms, of leading spirit to universal actualisation. As such, desire is necessarily directed toward the eradication of difference [*Unterschied*] and the consolidation of the unified whole.

What it wants is nothing less than the truth of the concept in its immediacy, and yet this is precisely what it cannot have, at least not at first. For as we have already shown, it is in the very nature of consciousness to posit the truth of the concept always in excess of any object which it grasps, thus reinforcing its own internal disparity in the very act of suppressing it. What follows from all this, is a movement of perpetually reinscribed dissatisfaction, or futility, which cannot help but assume the appearance of a vicious circularity.

Consciousness, aware of the lingering rift which separates it from itself, incessantly desires to attain its object and close the gap. Yet with each successive attempt at doing so, it only reinforces its own internal disparity, since the very act of grasping an object impels the concept to slip, once more, painfully out of reach. As Victoria I. Burke writes, “desire is thus regenerated by the same movement of consciousness that seeks to satiate it.”¹⁸



And on this particular point we cannot help but notice a rather interesting congruence, a momentary resonance, between Hegel’s discourse and the scenographies of courtly eroticism which we had examined earlier. For let us recall how the courtly lover, finding himself deprived of amorous proximity in relation to his beloved, had invariably turned to the precarious comfort of the *billet-doux* in hopes of achieving some semblance of the very intimacy which

¹⁷ *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 105.

¹⁸ “From Desire to Fascination: Hegel and Blanchot on Negativity.” 851.

was so cruelly denied him. Here, the importance of each letter – each word – actually seemed to increase, in direct proportion to the distance which separated the courtly lover from his beloved. As this distance grew and frustration mounted, so too did his desire – and above all, his desire to perpetuate the correspondence.¹⁹

But, as we soon discovered, this profusion of amorous correspondence, far from bringing the lover any closer to his beloved, actually carried the strange effect of seeming to re-entrench and exacerbate their estrangement from one another. Indeed, each love-letter, as we found, only seemed to reinforce the very persistence of mediation which it attempted to suppress – and writing soon became a matter of *creating* distance as much as a means of overcoming it. Considered in these terms, the futility of courtly love cannot help but appear strikingly similar to the futility undergone by consciousness in Hegel's text. For in both cases, desire seems to regenerate itself, almost magically, by perpetually snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

And yet, when examined more closely, the scenographies in question also acquire a noted dissimilarity. Why? Because it is not simply desire's apparent futility which is at stake here, but also, the precise meaning which comes to be ascribed unto this futility, within the broader economy of desire. The question, in other words, is not so much *whether* we fail, but rather how we comport ourselves in response to this failure. Are we, as thinkers, lovers, philosophers, capable of summoning, from the very throes of our despondency, an affirmation of deferral and incompleteness? Are we willing to go on desiring – even in the absence of all fulfilment? Or must we invariably find ourselves seeking, at all costs, to put an end to this cruel regimen of purported deprivation?

Confronted with these questions, we already know which path Nietzsche took. We know the circuit of longing, void of all consummation, which he named

¹⁹ "Writing," as Edmund Jabès tells us, "keeps up the illusion that rescue is near." *The Book of Margins*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 78.

Ariadne and devoted himself to affirming and even loving. Needless to say, this was not the same path that Hegel chose. For the author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, it seems, the allure of teleological completion had proved far too powerful to resist. And as a result, what initially appears to us as the ceaseless, unending futility of desire in Hegel's text – is ultimately shown to be nothing but its slow, steady progress toward eventual fulfilment.

“The goal [*Ziel*] is necessarily fixed,” as Hegel himself admits, “it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where concept corresponds to object and object to concept.”²⁰ Though consciousness may be perpetually beset with the appearance of internal strife, “progress [*Fortgang*] towards this goal is unhalting.”²¹



By its very definition, in other words, we find Hegelian desire to be fundamentally productive and recuperable – it has its end in sight. And this end, as we discover in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, is nothing other than the attainment of absolute Knowledge [*das absolute Wissen*]. Here, as Hegel writes, consciousness finally achieves total self-identity. It achieves “communion with itself in its otherness as such.”²² All difference comes to be fundamentally and exhaustively recuperated in the “pure universality of knowing,”²³ which vindicates every moment of perceived incongruity and dissonance.

What we are referring to is nothing less than the absolute overcoming of

²⁰ *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* 479.

²³ *Ibid.* 485.

alienation in all its forms, the absolute suppression of all distance. We are referring to the total “consummation [*Vollendung*] of a *self-conscious Spirit*”²⁴ which brings the work of the Concept, the work of time itself, necessarily to its end. Here, all negation falls silent, and history is brought to its point of completion.²⁵

Indeed, it is precisely in light of all this, as Kojève goes on to assure us, that man himself finally becomes “fully satisfied [*pleinement satisfait*].”²⁶ He has nothing more to do, he has nothing left to desire. He is without need – for everything, at long last, has been carried to a point of its decisive achievement. All possible questions have been posed, and a “total answer [*une réponse totale*] has been obtained.”²⁷ Here, we arrive at the very threshold a supreme wisdom, a wisdom which is radically indissoluble from the illustrious attainment of unitary reconciliation. It is a wisdom which basks in consummatory fulfilment, in the repose of eternal truth and validation.



What had begun, in other words, so disconcertingly as a fundamental lapse in consciousness, an agonising distance at the very heart of interiority, thus shows itself to be nothing but a temporary and transient affliction – a wounding in the spirit which heals without leaving a scar. What begins with

²⁴ *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 488.

²⁵ As Stefanos Geroulanos writes, the end of history would manifest itself in a political sense through the dawning of an era in which “there would be no more substantive events, no more real wars, no real borders, only an everyday life whose truth is expressed by the state that manages its every moment.” Cf. Stefanos Geroulanos. “Transparency Thinking Freedom: Maurice Blanchot’s *The Most High*.” *MLN* 122 (2007). 1055.

²⁶ *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. 80.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 94.

the imperious and insatiable pulsing of desire, concludes with its cloying satiety.

Indeed, there can be little doubting that what we encounter, throughout the pages of the *Phenomenology*, is a veritable fault-line, running through the very heart of the text, posing and counter-posing terms in near-direct juxtaposition to one another. On one hand, there is a rhetoric of estrangement and distance: *Trennung* [separation], *Ungleichheit* [disparity], *Unterschied* [difference], *Anderssein* [otherness], *Fremdsein* [alienation]. On the other hand, a rhetoric of atonement and release: *Gleichheit* [identity], *Vereinigung* [unification], *Versöhnung* [reconciliation], *Befriedigung* [gratification], *Vollendung* [consummation].

By the end of the text, by the conclusion of Hegel's argument, what we find is the entirety of this first set of terms decisively and incontrovertibly eradicated, assimilated, or absorbed under the provenance of the second. This, precisely, is the movement of Hegel's *Phenomenology*; a movement which imposes itself with a majestic and dazzling violence.²⁸ To speak in the language of amorous discourse, one might say that what we encounter, here, is nothing less than an unmistakable confirmation of that age-old fusional fantasy, the very fantasy which captivates Novalis and indirectly inspires Wagner's image of the two lovers: "heart to heart [*Herz an Herz*], lip to lip...bound together in a single breath." –We are referring, in other words, to the fantasy of a desire which succeeds in decisively overcoming the hindrance of erotic distance and consummating itself in a lasting moment of pure, undisturbed presence. This is the end of history, the end of time. This is the meaning of the infinite accomplishment to which Hegel's text bears witness.

²⁸ As Derrida writes, "the infinite passage through violence is what is called history [in Hegel]." Cf. Jacques Derrida. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 2005. 162.



It should now be apparent on precisely what basis we had earlier suggested that Hegel's text reveals an utterly unmistakable obsession with consummatory repose and the satiety of fulfillment. And it should also be apparent, moreover, why it was precisely Hegel, more than anyone else, who had come to embody, for Blanchot, the ominous grandeur of teleological recuperation. For what we find, in the Hegelian scenography, is a glorification of *Versöhnung* which cannot help but circumscribe and overdetermine, in advance, the entirety of the future, the entirety of the possible – subordinating the whole of philosophical discourse, not to mention the entire course of history, unto a project already specified, and therefore consummated, in advance.

Nothing, it seems, can exclude or exceed the system. Nothing can impede its relentless progress toward realisation. And does this not evoke, therefore, once again, that very same “horror of the future” which we had alluded to in the preceding chapter? Does this not suggest, once more, a distinct and almost pathological aversion to the indeterminate? A categorical denial of the endless, the incomplete?

Indeed, it is precisely in light of this over-determination, this ruthless violence of the concept, that Blanchot then comes to see Nietzsche's intervention, within the history of philosophy, as such a significant and supremely provocative moment. For what Nietzsche comes to engender, particularly through his thought of eternal recurrence, is nothing less than a supersession of “linear time, the time of salvation and progress, with the time of spherical space.”²⁹ A move whose impact could not possibly be more consequential, since what it implies, above all, is a deferral of gratification [*Befriedigung*] which is no longer temporary or contingent, but utterly absolute. A deferral of

²⁹ *Friendship*. 180.

satisfaction which never leads one to the threshold of release, but only toward the inevitable prolongation of a longing without end.

One might even say that it is precisely in defiance of the overdetermined grandiosity of a future already written, already bound to the developmental certainty of the concept – that Nietzsche comes to utter, in *Gay Science* §287 that most striking and incomparably affirmative of phrases: “I love ignorance touching upon the future [*Ich liebe die Unwissenheit um die Zukunft*].”³⁰ A phrase whose precise wording cannot help but immediately call to mind a most profound contrast with Hegel’s own vision of the future, a vision dominated by *das absolute Wissen*.

Indeed, it is likely on the basis of this rather telling, rhetorical contrast (between *Wissen* and *Unwissenheit*), that Blanchot himself then elects to deploy a very similar phraseology within his all-important, “Sur un changement” essay from April 1960. Responding, as though to the tradition of consummatory idealism at large, Blanchot comes to write: “I love the future you do not love...I love being ignorant of it [*J’aime l’ignorance de l’avenir*].”³¹ Here, in this statement, an undeniable clarity of thought asserts itself. It is a clarity which seems to render unmistakable the nature of Nietzsche’s profound influence upon Blanchot’s writing – and in particular, upon the contestation of teleological fantasy which we find so rigorously, so unceasingly, enacted within its pages.



³⁰ *The Gay Science*. 162.

³¹ *The Infinite Conversation*. 271. By the time of the essay’s republication, in dramatically lengthened form, in 1969, Blanchot has turned the notion of the “ignorance of the future” into one of the essay’s most prominent motifs. Here, he tells us, rather explicitly, that this very phrase should be called upon whenever “something like the end of history is pronounced.” Cf. 280-281.

And yet, for all its ingenuity and rhetorical force there can be no mistaking the fact that Blanchot's mobilisation of Nietzsche, here, is by no means entirely without precedent. Indeed, as we will soon discover, it is nearly *impossible* to speak of Blanchot's intellectual engagement either with the philosophy of Hegel, or with Nietzsche himself, without taking into careful consideration the profound and abiding influence of one individual in particular – an individual whose close personal association with Blanchot, particularly during the 1940s, would not cease to leave a most indelible imprint upon the latter's writing and thought. That person is Georges Bataille.



“I am on fire...with unsatisfied desire”

We know that Blanchot was first introduced to Bataille in late 1940 by the writer Pierre Prévost, and that the two quickly became close friends.³² In a late essay, from March 1984, Blanchot would come to recall their relationship as one of a deepest complicity and unbroken trust. “I had the privilege, from 1940 onwards, of seeing Georges Bataille almost on a daily basis and discussing a whole range of subjects with him,”³³ Blanchot tells us. And among these subjects, as we know, it was the philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche which seemed to have been accorded, by the two friends, a particularly elevated importance.³⁴ – An unsurprising fact, perhaps, given that Bataille had been closely following, throughout the preceding decade, Kojève’s lectures at the Sorbonne, whilst immersing himself, at the very same time, within Nietzsche’s writings, both published and unpublished.

Indeed, by the time he was introduced to Blanchot, in the closing weeks of 1940, Bataille had already come to envision, in expressly provocative terms, the relationship between Hegel and Nietzsche as one of startling, or even ravishing, antagonism. Far from signifying a merely philosophical, or theoretical, dispute – this antagonism had become emblematic of a more fundamental conflict between the logic of totality *in all its forms* and the irreducible singularity of everything which seeks to resist definitive recuperation.

³² It is interesting to note that Prévost, in addition to his friendship with both Blanchot and Bataille, was also close with Denis de Rougemont, whose paradigmatic reading of the Tristan romance so deeply influenced our own argumentation in the early sections of this thesis.

³³ Maurice Blanchot. “Intellectuals Under Scrutiny.” *The Blanchot Reader*. Edited by Michael Holland. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1995. 226.

³⁴ Blanchot obliquely makes reference to “conversations bearing on the Sils-Maria experience” which he had shared with Bataille, in the 1969 additions to the “Sur un changement” essay. Cf. *The Infinite Conversation*. 273.

For Bataille, in other words, to speak of the Hegelian system was not merely to speak of one particular, historically instantiated discourse, but rather, to speak of the comprehensive embodiment of *every* system, *every* totality, *every* discourse whatsoever. To speak of Hegelian thought, was to speak of philosophy in its entirety, conceived as a consummated whole.

And this, precisely, is the point where Nietzsche became so absolutely important for Bataille. For it was none other than Nietzsche himself who came to embody, as for Blanchot, a most irrepressible resistance to systematic totality. In direct contrast to the Hegelian emphasis upon exhaustive inclusivity – it was Nietzsche who would find himself mobilised, quite radically, as a thinker of nonassimilable excess, of shattering and uncompromising exteriority.



Indeed, it is this very contrast – reductive though nevertheless scintillating – which comes to emerge, most unmistakably, within the pages of Bataille’s 1943 text, *L’Expérience intérieure*, where the juxtaposition of Nietzschean and Hegelian thought is brought rather strikingly to the fore. Here we find Hegel’s philosophy coming to be decried, almost breathlessly, on account of its unbending teleology and its propensity for absolute closure – its obsession with satisfaction at all costs.³⁵

For Hegel, as we recall, it is fundamentally under the form of a grand, universal “project” of experience, that the entire sphere of human endeavours and relations is circumscribed. A project which leaves no stone unturned, no desire unsated, no negation unrecuperated. This, of course, is the project of Absolute Knowledge itself, which overdetermines the future, in advance, by making it the inevitable terminus toward which all paths must lead. As a

³⁵ Georges Bataille. *Inner Experience*. Translated by Leslie Anne Boldt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. 108.

result, Bataille writes, nothing is allowed to escape the irresistible pull of this ceaseless movement toward a grand and concluding achievement. Nothing is allowed to remain unaccounted for. Nothing is allowed to remain unfinished.

And it is precisely in response to this all-encompassing, domineering subjugation of the future, of life itself – that we find Bataille, throughout the early 1940s, repeatedly coming to deploy Nietzsche’s writings and thought as a radical alternative to this Hegelian prioritisation of comprehensive, or consummatory, satisfaction. In the pages of Bataille’s 1945 text, *Sur Nietzsche*, for instance, this tendency might be seen to assume an especially pronounced form, as do the author’s passionate enunciations in defiance of the Hegelian whole, in defiance of the recuperative fantasy. “I am on fire with...unsatisfied desire,” he begins the book by writing. “I’m deprived of all rest.”³⁶



What these statements suggest, of course, is nothing less than an explicit contravention of the Hegelian emphasis upon *Befriedigung*, an explicit contravention of Kojève’s assertion that the end of history, having arrived, has brought the work of negativity and the ceaseless pulsing of desire to absolute completion. Indeed, it is here, in this very context, that the figure of Nietzsche comes to embody, for Bataille, arguably the most eminent personification of this virulently anti-teleological comportment. This is because, as Bataille tells us, from the perspective of dialectical efficacy, Nietzsche’s lifework can only be understood to “amount to nothing less than failure.”³⁷ It produces, as Bataille tells us, no piece of decisive, definitive wisdom. Just as it yields no final verdict on the future, or the past. It never consolidates itself, at any moment, successfully into a closed, systematic whole.

³⁶ Georges Bataille. *On Nietzsche*. Translated by Bruce Boone. St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992. xix.

³⁷ *Ibid.* xxxi.

And yet, rather than constituting an unfortunate, or embarrassing, deficiency on his part – it is precisely on the *very basis* of these ostensive shortcomings that Nietzsche’s great importance, as an unmistakable antidote to Hegel, is rendered so manifestly evident. This is because, unlike the author of the *Phenomenology*, who had sought so vigorously to bring death, time, and even the future itself, under his masterful control, it was Nietzsche, as Bataille reminds us, “who never abandoned the watchword of refusing every end.”³⁸ It was Nietzsche, moreover, who seemingly made his highest affirmation, the affirmation of “the absence of the goal”³⁹ – thus notably eschewing the so-called “world of motives,”⁴⁰ the realm of preordained projects and works.

Indeed, for Bataille, as for Blanchot himself, this resistance to teleology is perhaps most radically and incontrovertibly expressed by the thought of eternal recurrence itself, which renders vain all hopes of a definitive resolution. In a key passage from Bataille’s *Sur Nietzsche*, we find the author telling us, in a statement of the highest coherence, that the eternal return “*unmotivates* the moment and frees life of ends.”⁴¹ To speak of such an “unmotivation,” here, is to evoke, in the highest of terms, an exoneration from every project which would seek to regulate or circumscribe the moment from afar. It is to evoke an exoneration, moreover, from any teleology whatsoever which would seek to subordinate thought unto an outcome always already determined. This, precisely, is what the eternal return so tirelessly destabilises and discredits – the very pretence of an exhaustive gratification, the oppressive narrowness of a future already written.

38 Ibid. xxxii.

39 Ibid. xxxiii.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid. xxxiii.



And it is here, perhaps, more than anywhere else, that we encounter the illustrious and defining hallmark of Bataille's reading of Nietzsche. A reading whose rhetorical and thematic specificities we find Blanchot, in numerous places within his work, explicitly coming to rehearse and reinscribe. We think, for example, of those concluding remarks to the 1969 version of Blanchot's "Sur un changement" essay, where it is clearly Bataille's polemic against Hegel which is being echoed in the words: "Let us affirm the indeterminate relation with the future as though this indeterminacy, by the affirmation that confirms it, were to render the thought of Return active."⁴²

Likewise, the traces of Bataille's influence are rendered similarly unmistakable, only pages earlier, in the very same essay, when Blanchot assures us that "the eternity of the return...does not permit assigning to the figure a centre, even less an infinity of centres, just as the infinite of the repetition cannot be totalised."⁴³

But at the very same time that Blanchot reinscribes these tropes, he is also coming to stake-out, as though simultaneously, an even more radical, more provocative position – one which still owes much to Bataille, but precisely in the sense that it exceeds even the latter's most precise and painstaking of formulations.

This is because what Blanchot increasingly comes to realise, by the late 1960s, is that the eternal return – more than simply depriving history of its culminating point, its consummatory *telos* – actually engenders nothing less than a wholesale interruption and ungrounding of time in its entirety, an ungrounding and destabilisation of chronology at its most basic level. It is not simply a displacement of beginnings and endings which is at stake, here, but a

⁴² *The Infinite Conversation*, 280.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 275.

contestation of developmental, or dialectical, temporality in its every form. A contestation, in other words, of any notion of time still fixated upon the present.

Indeed, it is this very contestation which might be said to orient – or rather, *disorient* – so profoundly, nearly the entire scenography of Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche, from the late sixties onward. We think, in particular, of *Le pas au-delà*, that fascinating fragmentary text from the autumn of 1973, where we find Blanchot coming to warn his readers, as if from the outset, that the eternal return “will never allow *you*, except through a misunderstanding, to leave yourself a place in a possible present, nor to let any present come as far as you.”⁴⁴ –A notion which is then immediately reiterated in the very next fragment, with Blanchot telling us that the eternal return “excludes any present mode from time.”⁴⁵

Certainly, this is a rather bold pronouncement – and one whose consequences, it seems, cannot help but extend far beyond the rather limited domain of philosophical discourse. This is because to speak of a suspension of all presence, as Blanchot himself so astutely recognises, is to speak of nothing less than an annulment, or ungrounding, of every basis for an installation whatsoever. It is to annul, from the very start, the unquestioned privilege accorded to the subject, by depriving him of any recourse to an enduring sameness or propriety. It is to exclude, as Blanchot writes, “any possibility of identity,”⁴⁶ thereby turning us away from ourselves, away from any hope of egoistic consolidation.⁴⁷

But it is also, by the very same token, to exclude something further – something equally consequential, namely, the sheer possibility of ever coming to posit, in any form whatsoever, a lasting *value*, a truth, a law. This is

⁴⁴ *The Step Not Beyond*. 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ A notion which clearly bears the imprints of Pierre Klossowski’s famous thesis, elaborated most notably in his 1969 text, that “at the moment the Eternal Return is revealed to me, I cease to be myself *hic et nunc* and am susceptible to becoming innumerable others.” Pierre Klossowski. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Translated by Daniel Smith. London: Continuum, 2005. 45.

because, with all presence now fundamentally displaced, there can remain no stable basis for any act of positing, just as there can remain no ground for any possible affirmation. To seek to declare a truth, a value of any kind, is thus to find oneself invariably “struck with nullity.”⁴⁸ It is to find oneself given over to what Gilles Deleuze, in a text from 1968, comes to refer to as “a violent centrifugal movement,”⁴⁹ which reveals the inexorable groundlessness of a temporality emptied of all presence.

Indeed, considered in these terms, we could hardly envision a more radical, more *nihilistic* consequence to the eternal return. For what we are describing, here, entails not only the categorical suspension of every notion of self-identity, but also, the categorical annulment of all legislative efficacy. To affirm the eternal recurrence, in light of all this, is to affirm not only the dispersal of every beginning and every end – but also the profound impossibility of ever gathering oneself together within the abiding *gloire* of the present; it entails nothing less than the impossibility of ever establishing a higher value, a higher truth.

⁴⁸ *The Infinite Conversation*. 274.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. London: Continuum, 2004. 66.

Prolepsis

But what about the eternal return *itself*? Is it not also a law, a truth? Is it not also a thought which implies a certain legislative efficacy? Certainly, it appears this way. But if this is indeed the case, then how might its status as a law, as a supreme and absolute injunction, come to be reconciled with this nihilistic suspension of presence which it engenders?

As it turns out, this perceived *double register* of the eternal return – this tension, latent with undecidability, between the eternal return conceived as law *and* the eternal return conceived as a radically suspensive impetus of universal displacement, could not possibly be more crucial to our understanding of Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche. Indeed, one might even say, with little exaggeration, that this tension might ultimately be seen to comprise nothing less than very focal point of Blanchot’s entire discourse on the eternal return, particularly from the late-1960s onward. Let us consider, along these lines, the following passage from *Le pas au-delà*, in which this tension of the double register comes to be perhaps most clearly evoked:

“*In a certain way, the law of return [la loi du retour] – the Eternal Return of the Same – as soon as one has approached it by the movement that comes from it [le mouvement qui vient d’elle] and that would be the time of writing if one did not have to say, also and at first, that writing holds the demand of return, this law – outside the law – would lead us to take on (to undergo by way of the most passive passivity, the step/not beyond) the temporality of time, in such a way that this temporality, suspending, or making disappear, every present and all presence, would make disappear, or would suspend, the authority or the foundation from which it announces itself.*”⁵⁰

Here, in this statement, we find Blanchot coming to direct our attention, to the two, ostensibly contradictory, vocalities of Nietzsche’s most abyssal thought. On one hand, we are entreated to take into consideration *la loi du*

⁵⁰ *The Step Not Beyond*. 15.

retour – which, like all laws, wishes to speak from a position of authority and announce itself on the basis of a stable foundation. On the other hand, however, we are told that the very efficacy of this law, namely, the transgressive *mouvement qui vient d'elle*, cannot help but radically suspend all presence, annulling every origin and every foundation.

An utterly strange and benumbing paradox. For what appears to follow from all of this, is that the law of return, by a remarkable sleight of hand, actually seems to be legislating its *own* impossibility, as if annulling itself, in advance – by withdrawing from time every moment in which it might come to be posited. Indeed, it is precisely this paradox of self-ungrounding which then inspires Blanchot's key, subsequent observation that the "revelation of Surlej, revealing that everything comes again, makes the present the abyss where no presence has ever taken place and where 'everything comes again' has always already ruined itself."⁵¹

What Blanchot is suggesting, in other words, is that the law of return, having emptied time of all presence and ungrounded every ground, thus cannot help but destabilise, in the process, its *own* foundation, as well. And it is precisely this self-ruination, moreover, which therefore comes to comprise, strange as it might sound, the law's surest and most incontrovertible "verification," its most indubitable truth.⁵² It is only through this very displacement, a displacement of its *own* authority, that the law finally reveals itself, in a most unlikely manner, as utterly supreme.

Indeed, this is a notion which Zarathustra himself already appears to gesture us toward, when he rather famously remarks: "I am a law only for my own; I am not a law at all."⁵³ Here, it seems, one might already discern the double register of the law, a double register which leaves him hesitating, oscillating uncontrollably, between positing and annulling, between speech and silence. And is this not precisely the *hesitation* which we found to permeate, so

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *The Infinite Conversation*. 281.

⁵³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 249.

pervasively, the entire scenography of Zarathustra's courtship, from beginning to end? The very hesitation, moreover, which seemed to hold him back, incessantly, at the very threshold of declaring, once and for all, his thought of thoughts, his most illustrious doctrine?



Indeed, let us be clear: if the eternal return seems to remain, throughout the pages of *Zarathustra*, not only uncommunicated, but also radically *incommunicable*, then this is for no other reason than because the movement of ungrounding, that “violent centrifugal movement” which expunges time of all presence, has in fact always already – of necessity – suspended every moment within which such a message, such a doctrine, could ever possibly be declared. But this also means, by the very same token, that it has suspended, among others, the very law which engenders the precise movement in question – thus coming to “orphan” itself, as it were, by retroactively annulling the condition of its own possibility. –We might think, in a strange turn, of the ghost of Hamlet killing his own father.

This, precisely, is the most difficult thing to conceive: a mode of spectral legislation wherein the law of eternal return itself *has always already been suspended by the anarchic movement it initiates and provokes*. A remarkable and deeply aporetic state of affairs. And yet, it is precisely this aporia which, despite the profound difficulties involved, we find Blanchot, throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, unceasingly attempting to think, to affirm. This, and nothing other, becomes the sternest and most uninviting challenge of Nietzsche's intervention within the history of philosophy – the demand of coming to think both sides of this aporia, both sides of this breach: the incomparable sovereignty of the highest law *and* the radical anteriority of the transgression which has always already brought it to its knees.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ One might say that these two, so-called registers of the eternal return may perhaps be understood as closely correlated to the

To think the eternal return, for Blanchot, thus becomes utterly synonymous with the tireless ordeal of coming to grapple with the aporia of *prolepsis*, the aporia of that strange twist of logic whereby something is lost before ever being gained, suspended before being posited. Indeed, if the eternal return, for Blanchot, is fundamentally a *proleptic* thought, then it is because to think it is both (1) to have always already thought it, and (2) to have always already lost it – and lost it, moreover, in advance of ever thinking, or communicating, it.⁵⁵ This is the tension buried at the very heart of Nietzsche’s eternal return, a tension which renders even the moment of affirmation itself patently unverifiable, incommensurable with all presence. Consider the following, late addition to *L’entretien infini*:

“We can only affirm the return as detour, making affirmation what turns away from affirming and making of the detour what hollows out (*creuse*) the affirmation and, in this hollowing out (*creusement*), makes it return from the extreme of itself back to the extreme of itself, not in order to coincide with it, but rather to render it again more affirmative at a mobile point of extreme non-coincidence (*un point mobile d’extrême non-coïncidence*).”⁵⁶

What we encounter, in this excerpt, is a statement which seems to draw together, rather succinctly, any number of the more prominent strands from our preceding discussion. Here we find, once again, the noted emphasis upon inexorable detour and deferral which had earlier been shown to comprise, as it were, the formal essence of the eternal return itself. Only now, as we soon discover, this regimen of deferral comes to be linked, indissolubly, to the “hollowing out [*creusement*]” of time, the anarchic ungrounding of all presence. A fascinating convergence, to say the least, which leads Blanchot to the following, rather provocative claim: to affirm the thought of thoughts is

“two languages and two requirements” which Blanchot will eventually come to stress within the pages of *L’écriture du désastre*: the dialectical language and the radically nondialectical one. Understood in this sense, the infinitely suspensive movement which ungrounds every present would be linked to the nondialectical language, whilst the language of the law, always already displaced, would be the dialectical one. Cf. *The Writing of the Disaster*. 20.

55 In the pages of *L’écriture du désastre*, Blanchot expressly references the notion of prolepsis [*prolepsis*] in relation to a kind of speech which conveys “in advance” the fact that it is taken back, retracted. The infinitely suspensive nature of Zarathustra’s discourse cannot help but come to mind here. *The Writing of the Disaster*. 21.

56 Ibid. 275-6.

necessarily to find this affirmation itself ceaselessly hollowed out, displaced – and finally rendered non-identical with itself. In this manner, as Blanchot goes on to write, the affirmation is indeed permitted to *recur*, even infinitely, but only on the condition that it never coincide with itself in a moment of common presence. To affirm the eternal return, in other words, is to find this very affirmation, as if always in advance, separated both from itself and from every moment of potential presence by a most absolute and unwavering distance. – A distance, as Blanchot writes, which is synonymous with “extreme non-coincidence.”

This, as we can now discern, becomes the prodigious, aleatory point toward which Nietzsche’s rehabilitation of erotic distance ultimately endeavours to lead us. Having come from the tradition of the *amour courtois* and its eroticisation of the unattainable object, we now find ourselves, light years ahead, at the very threshold of an ever-more-extreme separation, an absolute separation, which seeks to maintain every affirmation in a position of hyperbolic non-identity with itself. Having entered, by way of the eternal return, into this most radical, most extreme form of distance – this distance which had been so violently suppressed by Hegel – we now appear closer than ever, it seems, to appreciating, at least in part, the meaning behind that ever-elusive phrase, from September 1958: “We are at the heart of nihilism.”

For, what this phrase now appears to suggest to us, is that there can remain absolutely no possibility of ever positing, either unproblematically or without contestation, a law, a truth, a doctrine of any kind, insofar as the movement of return has always already denied us every foundation, every possible presence from which to speak. To enter the heart of nihilism, is to enter that space where the eternal return manifests itself most brilliantly and provocatively through the very annulment which it engenders, an annulment which renders even the law of return itself – impossible.



But if the scenography of eternal recurrence, having exonerated itself from all presence, from every origin and every terminus, no longer remains bound to any form of teleological constraint – then how precisely are we to understand, in light of all this, the very notion of the *future*, a future whose voluptuous indeterminacy had so enticed Nietzsche? With this question, it seems, we come to arrive at the very threshold of what is incontestably the most esoteric, most mysterious, aspect of Blanchot's entire discourse, his speculative philosophy of time, articulated in fragmentary form, primarily in the opening pages of *Le pas au-delà*. To trace the oblique contours of this radical, non-dialectical temporality, and to extrapolate, moreover, the manner in which it appears to carry, hesitantly and with great nuance, the Ariadnean valorisation of distance to its proverbial limit – this, precisely, will be our central focus in the pages that follow.

The Ice & the Mirror: A Study in Perpetual Allusion

It might be stated, in the very broadest of terms, that what Blanchot appears to be formulating, in the opening pages of *Le pas au-delà*, is nothing less than a fascinating, if incomplete, discourse on the very nature of temporality – in which the void of the past and the void of the future, having become radically disjoined by the absence of any discernible present, come to modulate between themselves, in a reflective manner, a play of surface-effects, or simulacra, regulated by none other than the repetition of difference.

If all of this sounds strange to us, or even confusing, it is likely on account of the fact that the entire *topos* of Blanchot's speculative discourse on

temporality has remained, until now, almost entirely neglected as a subject of critical inquiry. The Blanchotian philosophy of time has never, strictly speaking, been accorded the detailed explication which it surely warrants, leaving its tropes and themes largely misunderstood, even to many of Blanchot's most dedicated readers. Given this dearth of scholarly, exegetical material, it will comprise one of our primary goals, in the pages that follow, to lay the groundwork for subsequent encounters by attempting to work through any number of key passages in a sustained and rigorous manner, whilst noting both Blanchot's debt to his contemporaries and highlighting, wherever possible, the influence of Nietzsche.

Let us begin, therefore, by coming to take into consideration what is arguably the most distinctive and unmistakable feature of Blanchot's nascent philosophy of time – the *disjunctive* relation of non-relation which, according to Blanchot, comes to sever the past from the future. For it is here, in this very severing, this rupture, that we discover nothing less than the most vertiginous consequence of the law of return's radical ungrounding of itself.



It is well-known, by students of philosophy, that Nietzsche, in the pages of his posthumous notes, comes to posit, in rather specific terms, finite matter and infinite time as the two cosmological pre-requisites for eternal recurrence. But *what if* this Great Year of Becoming, conceived by Nietzsche (perhaps crudely) as a vicious circle, were suddenly to come unhinged, shattered inexorably by a latent, moving fissure? How would we then understand the nature of such a “broken” eternity? And how would we understand the nature of the time which remained?

Indeed, it is precisely in relation to such a question, unspoken but tacitly implied, that we find Blanchot, in the very opening pages of *Le pas au-delà*, coming to introduce his readers to the incomparably crucial notion of the “infinite rupture.”⁵⁷ To speak of such a rupture, as Blanchot quickly assures us, is indeed to speak of a displacement of presence, a hollowing out [*creusement*] of time, such as we have previously been discussing – only now, it seems, the precise consequences of such an ungrounding have suddenly shown themselves to be nothing less than portentous. This is because, far from merely suspending the reign of presence, or “excluding any present mode from time,”⁵⁸ it is nothing less than the stark, ineradicable juxtaposition of past [*passé*] and future [*avenir*] which suddenly comes to assert itself.

“Let there be a past, let there be a future,” Blanchot writes, “with nothing that would allow the passage from one to the other, such that the line of demarcation [*la ligne de démarcation*] would unmark them the more, the more it remained invisible...All that would remain of time, then, would be this line to cross, always already crossed, although not crossable, and, in relation to ‘me,’ unsituable.”⁵⁹

In the very plainest of terms, what Blanchot is seeking to propose, here, is that the very relation between the past and the future, the very rapport between the *it was* and the *it shall be*, finds itself radically suspended, disjoined, by the sheer ruin of the present. For what could possibly hold the past and the future in relation with one another, we might ask, if not their common reference to the prestigious and abiding *gloire* of the present? To speak of the dislocation of presence, is thus to speak of nothing less than a truly incomparable rupture, an “infinite rupture,” through which the entire relationship between the past and the future comes to be irreversibly unhinged, shattered. In the very space where the tradition of metaphysics had so naively inserted a self-sufficient a moment of absolute positionality, a moment of pure presence, we now discover only a deep fracture marking the (non)place where, through the

⁵⁷ *The Step Not Beyond*. 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 12.

dispersive efficacy of the movement of return, all trans-temporal relationality has collapsed.

Let us consider the following excerpt in which this radical disjunction between past and future comes to be further elaborated:

“As if the repetition of the Return had no other function than to put in parentheses, in putting the present in parentheses [*entre parenthèses*], the number 1 or the word Being, compelling thereby an alteration that neither our language nor our logic can admit. For even if we dared to designate the past conventionally in numbering it 0 and the future in numbering it 2, whilst postulating the suppression, with the present, of any unity, we would still have to mark the equal power of the 0 and the 2 in the unmarked and unmeasurable distance of their difference [*la distance non marquée et non mesurable de leur différence*]...and to mark that this equal power would not allow us to identify them, nor even to think them together, but not to exclude them from one another either, since the Eternal Return says also that one would be the other, if the unity of Being had not, by an inadmissible interruption, in fact ceased to order the relations.”⁶⁰

At the very heart of this passage we once again encounter a rather prominent *double register* to Blanchot’s account of the eternal return. Only now, the doubling in question comes to assume, rather specifically, the form of a fundamental, metaphysical juxtaposition, or disparity, between two notions of time, or temporal ordering. We are referring, here, to the notions of temporal exclusion and temporal sublation. But how, precisely, are we to characterise the discrepancy between these two readings of time?

To speak of exclusion, in this case, is to evoke the radical non-relationality of a past disjoined from the future, separated from it by an absolute or unmeasurable interval. This, we might say, is the configuration of temporality which embodies, most fully, the rehabilitation of erotic distance carried to its absolute limit. To speak of sublation, on the other hand, is to indicate a temporal configuration in which the past and future, through the vicious circularity of the recommencement, actually come to resemble one another

⁶⁰ Ibid. 30.

even unto the point of interchangeability: the past as future, the future as past.

In evoking this later motif, the motif of temporal sublation, it is clearly the rather distinctive work of Eugen Fink which Blanchot is rather self-consciously drawing upon. In a greatly influential reading of Nietzsche, which Blanchot himself explicitly cites in a footnote to *L'entretien infini*, Fink comes to argue that “the thought of eternal return sublates the difference between past and future, imbuing the past with the open possibilities of the future and the future with the determinations of the past.”⁶¹ Such a reading, in other words, would lead us to believe “that the one [the past] would be the other [the future].”⁶² And that to have lived the *it was*, is to have lived the *it shall be*: past and future being equals.

The basic suggestion, here, would be that the two paths of time, if pursued unto infinity, actually sublata their differences by endlessly transforming themselves into one another, only to begin again in the absence of any origin or end. The theory of sublation thus argues that no assignable difference can therefore be posited between past and future insofar as they co-constitute a single ring of time, like a serpent biting its own tail.⁶³



Could it be, Blanchot proceeds to ask, that the past is indeed indistinguishable from the future? Could it be that to think of the *it shall be*, is in fact to think of the *it was*? There can be no question that Blanchot, in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, begins by working rather explicitly on the very basis of this model. And yet, at the very same time, he is also attempting, it seems, to contest and challenge it in a most striking manner.⁶⁴ For what he ultimately comes to

⁶¹ Eugen Fink. *Nietzsche's Philosophy*. 78.

⁶² *The Step Not Beyond*. 30.

⁶³ For other, unrelated “cosmological renderings” of the eternal return, see Arthur Danto's *Nietzsche as Philosopher* [p. 200-210], Alexander Nehamas' *Nietzsche* [p.142-150], Bernard Magnus' *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* [p. 75-85], and Tracy Strong's *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* [p. 265-266].

⁶⁴ Fink's text was published in 1965, which means that its influence upon Blanchot's writings would only have come into play,

propose, in contrast to Fink, is that the suppression of presence, engendered by the movement of recurrence itself, ultimately entails nothing less than the sheer incommensurability of the past and the future, the irremediable exclusion, and absolute distancing, of the one from the other. The suspension of Being *qua* presence, in other words, must be understood to introduce rupture into infinity by annulling any point of possible contact, or relation, between the *it was* and the *it shall be*. This “inadmissible interruption”⁶⁵ shatters the unity of the sublated ring, by asserting the fundamental non-identity of the past and the future.

But how, in the wake of all this, are we to conceive of the relationship, if any, which remains between these two, temporal ecstasies, disjoined by the shattering blow? How are we to understand the apparent relation of non-relation which it entails?

Few questions, it seems, in the early pages of *Le pas au-delà*, ultimately come to be accorded a greater visibility or prominence than this one. Indeed, one might even say that the entire discourse on the eternal recurrence, within the pages of Blanchot’s text, is in large part devoted to the task of elucidating this very disjunction. And if there is perhaps but a single passage, in Blanchot’s text, where all of this comes to receive arguably its most succinct and radical elaboration, then it is surely the passage which follows:

“How, according to the law of return, where between past and future nothing is conjoined, can one leap from one to the other, when no passage is allowed, even that of a leap? The past, one says, would be the same as the future. There would be, then, only one modality, or a double modality functioning in such a way that identity, differed/deferred, would regulate the difference. But such would be the demand of the return: it is ‘*under the false appearance of a present [sous une apparence fausse de présent]*’ that the ambiguity past-future would invisibly separate the future from the past.”⁶⁶

This fascinating excerpt begins, as we can see, with Blanchot coming to tell us,

for the first time, around time of his revisions and additions to *L’entretien infini*.

⁶⁵ *The Step Not Beyond*. 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 11.

in the most lucid and unmistakable of terms, that the eternal return expressly prohibits any passage from past to future, “even that of a leap.” This is because, as we know, the anarchic movement of ungrounding, the infinite rupture itself, transforms time into “an infinite game with two openings...given as one, and yet never unified.”⁶⁷ Time is shattered in advance, ruined by the transgressive movement of return, through which the past and the future are irremediably sundered, divorced from one another by means of an incomparable fissure.

This much we already know. But what does Blanchot tell us next? He tell us, quite remarkably, that dividing these two irremediably sundered paths, we encounter no point of stable or abiding fixity, but merely “the false appearance of a present,” a spectral line of demarcation, a caesura, indicating either an erasure of that which has never been marked, or the repetition of that which has never been present. Why is this so important? Because in coming to evoke this so-called “the false appearance of a present,” Blanchot is explicitly borrowing a phrase from none other than Mallarmé’s “Mimique” – a brief, enigmatic text whose author had come to be rediscovered, by the early 1970s, by an entire generation of French post-war theorists and writers.

Indeed, it had been this very same phrase (“under the false appearance of the present”), which *both* Derrida and Deleuze, in the years immediately preceding the publication of *Le pas au-delà*, had each come to deploy, rather notably, within their respective writings. Thus by citing and even italicising this very phrase within his own text, Blanchot appears to be suggesting, quite unmistakably, that these broader, supplementary resonances not only be acknowledged, but also taken into direct consideration, in our reading of the disjunctive relationship between past and future. –A point of considerable importance, as we shall see.

⁶⁷ Ibid.



Of the two, supplementary references in question – it is Derrida’s reference to Mallarmé which is by far the more well-known and immediately applicable, especially insofar as it seems to reinscribe any number of motifs which we have already encountered in Blanchot’s reading of Nietzsche: the inexorable displacement of the origin, the suspension of presence, and the intrinsically parodic, or derivative, nature of all positing. And though a detailed discussion of Mallarmé’s “Mimique” falls outside the purview of our study, a brief recapitulation of its main themes may be helpful to our understanding of the precise significance which it ultimately comes to assume within Derrida’s (and later Blanchot’s) text.

In summary, one might say that “Mimique” tells a rather simple and unassuming story of the “poignant and elegant mime Paul Margueritte,”⁶⁸ and his dubious, oblique involvement in what appears to be a spousal homicide. Only, in this particular case, the very murder in question comes to bear the unlikeliest distinction of having, quite strangely, never occurred in any moment of presence. Rather, as we soon learn, it seems to have taken place, from the very start, as a kind of re-enactment, as a rehearsal of a rehearsal. It thus remains suspended, inexorably, within an eternal state of limbo, or indeterminacy, as if occupying the refractory interval between two mirrors, facing one another, but eternally askew.

“Here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present*,” writes Mallarmé. “That is how the mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction.”⁶⁹ It is with these words that Mallarmé comes to describe the very event in question, an

68 Stéphane Mallarmé. “Mimique.” *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Mary Ann Caws. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1982. 69.

69 Ibid.

event which is confined, as he tells us, to “a perpetual allusion.” It is an event, moreover, in which the decisive act, the act of murder, never comes to occupy any moment of fixed presence; but rather, repeats what has never occurred.

And why, we might wonder, is the modality of *mimesis* which we encounter, here, so particularly radical, so subversive? For no other reason, as Derrida tells us, than because it propagates itself, on account of all this, without reference to any stable (transcendental) signified of Ideal form. Rather than opposing the mimetic image to some originary prototype, “Mimique” suggests a notion of fiction which, always already in play, has never referred to any reality outside itself. It offers us, in other words, a quintessential exemplification of fiction imitating fiction, of images alluding only to themselves.

Indeed, it is in precisely this manner, according to Derrida, that Mallarmé manages to preserve “the differential structure of mimicry, but without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation, which implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated.”⁷⁰ What is extraordinary about the story, in other words, is that rather than opposing the tradition of consummatory metaphysics directly, by simply *denying* the transcendental structure of mimesis, Mallarmé’s text operates more discreetly and provocatively by silently subverting its very condition of possibility – namely, the enduring presence of the original image, the original law.⁷¹

And here, it seems, we cannot help but note a rather striking and indisputable parallel with the very reading of the eternal recurrence which Blanchot has been attempting to propose in the early pages of *Le pas au-delà*. We recognise, in particular, a shared reliance upon that enigmatic notion of

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida. “The Double Session.” *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. 206.

⁷¹ Though importance of Derrida, here, should not be underestimated, it is important to note that the anteriority of the simulacral, as a theme in Blanchot’s writing, can already be found rather prominently, at least two years prior to the publication of Derrida’s first major work, in a reading of Klossowski’s seminal essay, “Nietzsche, polythéisme et la parodie.” Here, as early as 1965, Blanchot had come to write that the eternal return “places us in a universe in which the image ceases to be second in relation to the model...where there is no longer an original, but eternal scintillation in which the absence of origin, in the blaze of detour and return, disperses itself.” Cf. Maurice Blanchot. *Friendship*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. 180.

prolepsis, the spectral efficacy of that which has never been present. For just as Blanchot had told us that the movement of return unmarks, always in advance, the very instance of the law's inscription – so, too, do we find Derrida, in his earlier reading of “Mimique,” coming to evoke a notion of spectral writing which entails the radical anteriority of dis-location.⁷²

Consider the following passage from Derrida's essay on Mallarmé: “Whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke...this double stroke escapes the pertinence or authority of truth...This displacement does not take place, has not taken place once, as an *event*. It does not occupy a simple place.”⁷³ Bereft of any centring presence, or point of origin, we are left merely with “the false appearance the present” – a spectral interval dividing the past from the future, introducing rupture into infinity.

And it is this very rupture, this annulment of presence, which then cannot help but entail, for Blanchot as for Derrida, nothing less than the radical disorientation of the *entirety* of time, an ungrounding of that fundamental rapport between past and future: “Such difference without presence appears, or rather baffles the process of appearing, by dislocating any orderly time at the centre of the present. The present is no longer the mother-form around which are gathered and differentiated the future (present) and the past (present). What is marked...is only a series of temporal differences without any central present...”⁷⁴

A statement of immense importance. For, whereas in the temporality of sublation, such as the one Fink proposes, the present can still be likened, in a Platonic manner, to the moving image of eternity, endlessly traversing the closed, integrated circuit of the past-future – the temporality of return which Derrida and Blanchot are proposing requires, on the contrary, that the sheer deficit of the present deprive the past and future of any mediating link. Between them: only the hollowed out space where the law of return

⁷² “The Double Session.” 193.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 210.

incessantly oscillates between positing and annulling. Properly speaking, this is the space of *prolepsis*, where the trace of that which has never been inscribed silently erases itself under the sign of impossibility.⁷⁵ The space where the very heart which has never been whole, finds itself shattered, now and forever, always in advance.

Indeed, it is in precisely this sense that the site of this irremediable dislocation necessarily tells a double story and comes to require a double reading. On one hand, it marks the site where the law of return – a law which capable of retroactively suspending the whole of Western metaphysics, from Plato to the present day – is posited. But on the other hand, it suggests to us, perhaps ominously, that this law, inextricable from the most extreme form of nihilism, has always already ungrounded *itself*, rendering this very movement of return impossible. For where there has never, strictly speaking, been a positing, there has also never been an annulment. This, it seems, is a paradox well-worth considering.



And it is in light of all this, that we can now begin to appreciate, at least in part, the profound connection forged between the texts of Derrida and Blanchot on account of their shared evocation of Mallarmé. –A connection which cannot help but entail dramatic consequences for the configurations of temporality, the veritable philosophy of time, which we come to encounter within the pages of *Le pas au-delà*. For what it proposes to us is nothing less than the ascendancy of a most allusive and telling figure, a figure which now appears to form, as it were, the very backbone of Blanchot's account: the figure of the past and the future, transformed into empty, elongated surfaces – the mirrors of a mime – poised in radical disjunction by the caesura of a shattered presence. In arriving upon this image, we have taken an

⁷⁵ Thus Spoke Zarathustra. 131.

undoubtedly important step toward understanding the meaning of the infinite rupture which Blanchot's text evokes, as well as the enormity of its prodigious consequence.

But if it is Derrida's mobilisation of Mallarmé which has attracted, over the years, a far greater outpouring of critical attention, then it is nevertheless Deleuze's own engagement with "Mimique" which might be understood to exert a more paradigmatically *philosophical* influence upon Blanchot's reading of the eternal return – even constituting, one might say, arguably its most significant and unmistakable precedent. To understand and appreciate the broader, philosophical significance of Blanchot's remarks is necessarily to understand and appreciate their profound relation to Deleuzian thought. Let us examine, therefore, the nature of this relation.



Inspired by what he describes as "the greatness of Stoic thought,"⁷⁶ Deleuze endeavours, in *Logique du Sens* (1969), to propose two radically divergent readings of time, highlighting, in the process, their mutual incommensurability and reciprocal exclusion. The first, which he calls *Chronos* (after the Greek god who devours his own children), is a fundamentally cyclical modality of time comprised of interlocking presents. In this modality of time, as Deleuze tells us, the past and the future only partake in reality by means of their relation to the present, for only the present, strictly speaking, exists. In this sense, one might rather conveniently liken the temporality of *Chronos* to the time of sublation (Fink's model)

⁷⁶ Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester. London: Continuum, 2004. 72.

discussed earlier. For in each case, the future is rendered ultimately reducible and relatable to the past, to the extent that the past and future at every moment depend upon the present for their reality and content. Seen in this light, *Chronos* is “a coiling up of relative presents, with God as the extreme circle or the eternal envelope.”⁷⁷ To conceive of the eternal return in terms of this temporal modality would be, as Deleuze says, to think the recurrence of the Same, the identical. For in the time of *Chronos*, it is only the present which returns.

Indeed, it is then in direct contradistinction to this configuration of time that Deleuze then comes to propose to us the temporality of *Aion* – a temporality which is “a pure straight line at the surface, incorporeal, unlimited...an empty form of time, independent of all matter.”⁷⁸ Much like the time of radical disjunction, or infinite rupture, which we find in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, the temporality of *Aion* consists of a disjoined past and future, fractured by the absence of any present. “Instead of a present which absorbs the past and future,” writes Deleuze, “a future and past divide the present at every instant and subdivide it *ad infinitum* into past and future, in both directions at once.”⁷⁹

The present, in other words, is violently and constantly dislocated, here, by the centrifugal movement which empties it of all content and all substance. Thus, in direct contrast to the time of *Chronos* which is entirely filled with bodies and causes, matter and substances (the trappings of presence) – the scintillating surface of the *Aion* comes to be populated only “by effects which haunt it without ever filling it up.”⁸⁰ This, precisely, is the temporality of the *mime* whose mirror perpetually alludes to a past, to a future, without reference to anything that has ever been present. It is this temporality, moreover, which engenders what Deleuze refers to as “event-effects”⁸¹ – simulacral, or spectral, images reflecting back and forth across the clear,

⁷⁷ Ibid. 186.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 73.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 188.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 66.

⁸¹ Ibid. 73.

untarnished surfaces of the past and future.



And it is precisely here, in the very context of describing all this, that Deleuze then proceeds to quote, perhaps rather strikingly, that very *same* passage from “Mimique” which Derrida, only months earlier, had come to deploy – and which Blanchot himself, in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, would later elevate to such great importance.⁸² Indeed, for Deleuze, as for Derrida, the play of surface effects which populates the temporality of *Aion* must be understood, above all, to refer back to no pre-existent reality, no pre-existent ideal. “The masks,” as Deleuze writes, in the pages of *Différence et Répétition*, “do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated...”⁸³

Considered in these terms, moreover, the difference between *Chronos* and *Aion*, in Deleuze’s account, could not possibly be more pronounced, more unwavering. For, in contrast to any temporal configuration whose starting point would be a stable origin capable of orienting the entire temporal horizon by means of fixed chronological relations, Deleuze’s *Aion* finds only difference and detour at its origin. In *lieu* of presence, it finds only a deep and abiding fracture at its very heart – a fracture bordered, on either side, by “the two series of amplitude,” past and future, “which constitute the metaphysical surface.”⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid. 74.

⁸³ *Difference and Repetition*. 19.

⁸⁴ *The Logic of Sense*. 279. It is perhaps especially interesting, given all this, to find Deleuze, at numerous times within his discourse, coming to refer to this very fracture as none other than a *brisure* – the precise term to which Derrida, in the pages of *De*

Indeed, on this point, the unique significance of Deleuze's philosophy of time, within the context of our reading of Blanchot, becomes particularly unmistakable. For what Deleuze ultimately comes to offer us, through his timely reference to Mallarmé, and his two models of time, appears to be nothing less than a philosophically rigorous foreshadowing of that *very* configuration of temporal disjunction which so importantly announces itself in *Le pas au-delà*. According to this configuration, the two series of amplitude (the past and future) become pure, empty forms, like panes of glass, or mirrors without depth, upon which simulacra are unceasingly reflected. A most tremulous and unverifiable scintillation; a glimmering without origin and without end.



And it is at this very point, and with this very image – an image of scintillating hollowness (“*le coeur du nihilisme*”?) – that we come, it seems, to the point of returning, once more, to Blanchot's own text, *only now*, for the first time, with a more adequate appreciation for that most crucial of phrases: *sous une apparence fausse de présent*.

Indeed, it is in light of this very phrase, and everything which it has shown itself to entail, from Derrida to Deleuze, that we now find ourselves in a position to appreciate, perhaps for the very first time, what is arguably the text's most fascinating and demanding passage. We are referring, of course, to that very moment when Blanchot elects to introduce us to the supremely perplexing notion of irrevocability itself. Let us consider the following

la Grammatologie, had rather prominently ascribed the double meanings of both joint and breach. The word seems particularly appropriate, here, especially given the noted double-register of the eternal return which we have been emphasising throughout the preceding pages. Indeed, according to the hymeneal logic of the *brisure*, one might rather felicitously read the law of return as occupying the position of the logically excluded middle – always already suspended, yet suspended by its own decree – oscillating uncontrollably between positing and annulling. Cf. *Of Grammatology*. 65.

passage, whose importance within Blanchot's text simply cannot be overstated:

“He knew it (in accordance, perhaps, with the law): the past is empty, and only the multiple play of mirroring [le jeu multiple de miroitement], the illusion that there would be a present destined to pass and to hold itself back in the past, would lead one to believe that the past was filled with events, a belief that would make it appear less unfriendly, less frightening: a past thus inhabited, even by phantoms, would grant us the right to live innocently...Irrevocability would be the trait by which the void of the past marks, by giving them as impossible to relive and as thus already having been lived in an unsituable present, the appearances of events that are only there to cover over the void [les semblants d'événements qui ne sont là que pour recouvrir le vide], to enchant it in hiding it, whilst all the same announcing it through the mark of irreversibility. The irrevocable is thus by no means, or not only, the fact that what has taken place has taken place forever: it is perhaps the means – strange, I admit – for the past to warn us (preparing us) that it is empty and that the falling due – the infinite fall, fragile – that it designates, this infinitely deep pit into which, if there were any, events would fall one by one, signifies only the void of the pit, the depth of what is without bottom. It is irrevocable, indelible, yes: ineffaceable, but because nothing is inscribed in it...What has just taken place would slip and would fall right away...through irrevocability, into ‘the terrifyingly ancient,’ there where nothing was ever present. Irrevocability would be, in this view, the slip or fragile fall that abolishes time in time...and shrouds everything in non-time, from which nothing could come back, less because there is no return than because nothing falls there, except the illusion of falling there.”⁸⁵

The excerpt begins, as we can see, with Blanchot seeking to evoke a most common, ostensibly straightforward, phenomenon. It is none other than the lingering awareness, perhaps borne of regret, that the past has indeed *come to pass*; the awareness, one might say, that yesterday is gone and unreachable. To speak of such an awareness, is to speak of something which everyone experiences and which is perhaps most banal: the sheer facticity of the *it was*.⁸⁶ Indeed, it is precisely this awareness, as Blanchot goes on to tell us,

⁸⁵ *The Step Not Beyond*. 13-14.

⁸⁶ We merely remind the reader, at this point, of Zarathustra's discourse “On Redemption,” in which the crisis of the facticity of

which we come to evoke perhaps most soberly with the term irrevocability [*irrevocabilité*]. It is a term which makes us think that the past is filled, whether sombrely or joyously, with real events, with the traces of lived experience, remaining forever just out of reach.

And yet, as we soon discover, it is precisely this very notion which the eternal recurrence immediately strikes as vain and ineffectual. This is because the very *meaning* of Nietzsche's highest thought, if we can use such a phrase, resides nowhere other than in the infinite rupture which it imposes upon time, a rupture which shatters all possibility of relation between past and future, by suspending, in advance, every moment of presence. Indeed, it is on this very basis, as Blanchot writes, that the very past which we had once envisioned as holding our deepest memories, our most intimate recollections – the very traces of our being – is suddenly revealed to us for what is truly is: nothing but an empty pit within which *nothing* falls, or has ever fallen.

A most terrible revelation – and one which cannot help but strike us with sheer incredulity. For even in spite of all this, in spite of the very emptiness which it harbours, the past still does not cease to attract and allure us. At almost every moment, we find ourselves continually seduced by its unrivalled splendour, by its nostalgic gleam. We find ourselves captivated into believing that what occupies it is real – and that this very content is nothing less than a precious, if incomplete, vestige of our deepest experiences.

But how, we might wonder, if the past is indeed empty, might such a seduction persist in beguiling us? How might we persist in duping ourselves? Only by means of a most intricate and effervescent play of mirroring. Only through an eternal scintillation, as Blanchot writes, a modulation of surface effects without reference to any present. This, precisely, is what seduces us – this is what allures us: the resplendent vacuity of the empty past infinitely reflecting an empty future. And it is in precisely these terms, moreover, that Blanchot then exhorts us to rethink the very notion of *irrevocability* – no

the past came to be most notably addressed within Nietzsche's writings. Here, as we recall, the imposition of the irrevocable led Zarathustra to his pursuit of a redemption "higher than any reconciliation." See Chapter IV for a detailed discussion of this.

longer as a crutch of fatalism, but as a supremely affirmative manifestation of radical indeterminacy.

To speak of irrevocability in the wake of eternal recurrence, is to speak of nothing less than an infinite game of dissimulation and mimicry, a *jeu multiple de mitroitement*, which endows an empty past with the illusion of depth and substantiality. A game which generates nothing less than a host of simulacral renderings to “cover over the void,” whilst at the very same time announcing it, indirectly, in much the same way that Mallarmé’s mime had tacitly indicated an event which had never taken place.

Indeed, it is this very notion, the supreme notion of irrevocability, which might be thought, in such terms, to comprise arguably one of Blanchot’s single most important, *unique* contributions to our understanding of Nietzsche’s eternal return. It is a notion which seems to evoke, in equal measure, the Deleuzian metaphysics of time, Derrida’s reading of Mallarmé, and the work of Pierre Klossowski – whilst remaining seemingly irreducible to each.

Against all odds, is actually Blanchot’s *own* voice, trembling, doubling back upon itself, which seems to emerge here, for a rare and scintillating instant – as if coming to mark, through this most precarious transience, the hollowness, the vacancy, which it bears and which it dissimulates.

Elsewhere, Always Elsewhere

Thus, it seems, we arrive at long last upon an understanding of what the infinite rupture means for *the past*: it means irrevocability, scintillation. But what, exactly, does it mean for the future?

With this question, the entirety of the preceding discussion is brought, rather suddenly, to a head. For, if the past and the future, as Blanchot writes, are indeed likened to pure, empty mirrors, reflecting between themselves a play of surface effects without reference to any present – then is this to suggest that the future is ultimately bound to repeat (or reflect) the very past which has already been given? Is this to maintain, in other words, that the scintillating image which imposes itself upon the future is the *very same* image which has already imposed itself upon the past? Or could it be that, against all odds, the irrevocability of the past does not translate, purely and simply, to the irrevocability of the future; but rather, allows for a measure of indeterminacy, a radical openness in excess of all closure, to assert itself?

Indeed, it is precisely this latter formulation which Blanchot comes to endorse in one of the most important, most thought-provoking, fragments in the entirety of *Le pas au-delà*. Let us read the following words, in which the contestation of teleological, or consummatory, reconciliation is carried arguably to its furthest point:

“...The past could not repeat the future as the future would repeat the past. [This is because] the repetition of the past as future frees for a completely different modality – which one could call prophetic [*prophétique*]. In the past, what is given as repetition of the future does not give the future as repetition of the past. Dissymmetry is at work in repetition itself. How then think dissymmetry in terms of the Eternal Return? That is what is perhaps most enigmatic.”⁸⁷

Here, in these words, we finally receive the statement we have been looking for – a statement which attempts to clarify the precise nature of what it means to speak of the future in the wake of infinite rupture. It is a statement which seeks to make clear to us the precise relationship between the two amplitudes of time, broken and dislodged from one another, yet rendered infinitely reflective amidst the scintillating glow of false presence.

And how, exactly, does Blanchot propose to elucidate this relation? He tells us, rather straightforwardly, that the “past would not repeat the future as the future would repeat the past.” He tells us, in other words, that the play of mirroring, or miming, would not reproduce itself equally on both sides of the breach; but rather, would engender a kind of *dissymmetrical* effect – an effect rendering the future somehow radically irreducible to the past.⁸⁸

This, one might say, is arguably one of the truly pivotal moments in Blanchot’s reading of the eternal return. For it is in this very passage that the essential contrast between Nietzsche and the entire tradition of consummatory metaphysics finds itself expressed perhaps most succinctly, most provocatively. If for Hegel, as we have learned, the future is always given from

⁸⁷ *The Step Not Beyond*. 41-42.

⁸⁸ The topic of dissymmetry in Blanchot’s work has been a matter of considerable interest to commentators, usually in terms of the purported influence of Levinas. It is well known, for instance, that Levinas, in his mature work, suggests that an asymmetrical rapport with transcendent alterity effectuates a radical subversion of totality. A point which is certainly not lost upon Blanchot. Having said this, however, it is important that we now, at any point, conflate the terms *asymmetrical* (Levinas) and *dissymmetrical* (Blanchot). For, as Leslie Hill notes, the prefix ‘a-’ connotes absence, whilst Blanchot’s preferred ‘dis-’ entails doubleness. In other words, what Blanchot is ultimately proposing is that the relation of non-relation between past and future is “redoubled by a second relation of non-relation” [p. 176] passing from the future to the past. Moreover, these relations are radically non-exchangeable. The past, according to Blanchot, could not repeat the future as the future would repeat the past, because there is already dissymmetry at play in repetition itself. But why, we must ask, is repetition inherently dissymmetrical? A question which poses itself, here, with an irrepressible force. Cf. Leslie Hill. *Extreme Contemporary*. London: Routledge, 1997.

the start, inscribed within the very truth of the concept – then for Nietzsche (or at least for *Blanchot's* Nietzsche), the movement of repetition, of eternal recurrence, must be understood to free a modality of the future which is utterly irreducible to the past, irreducible to any concept or any given. It is this modality, which comes to ensure that what returns is never to be mistaken for what has already come to pass. It ensures, moreover, that the voluptuousness of the future, the *Wollust des Zukünftigen*, which Zarathustra so ardently comes to praise, might remain forever untarnished by any consummatory resolution, untarnished by every prospect of *Versöhnung*.

And what, we might ask, is the very title which Blanchot then accords unto this modality of the future? He describes it, rather specifically, as a futurity which is “prophetic [*prophétique*]” in nature. A fascinating turn of phrase. But how exactly is this notion of the prophetic to be understood?



For a point of entry into this most decisive of questions, it seems that we would do well to consult Blanchot's 1957 essay, “La parole prophétique,” in which we encounter a series of truly remarkable insights into the speech of prophecy and its connection to a time bereft of presence. Here, we find Blanchot coming to suggest that prophetic speech, far from simply foretelling that which is yet to occur, actually announces, by its very nature, “a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence.”⁸⁹ The reason for this, as Blanchot claims, is that when speech becomes prophetic, “it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is

⁸⁹ Maurice Blanchot. *The Book to Come*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 20002. 79.

taken away, and with it, any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence.”⁹⁰

To conceive of prophecy, in such a context, is thus to conceive of something wholly irreducible to any notion of either predicting or speculating upon the contingencies of what may come. Just as it remains entirely irreducible to the dubious practise of divination. Rather, to evoke the notion of prophecy, or prophetic speech, in such a context, is to call upon a future beyond all possibility of confirmation, beyond all possibility of advent. It is to welcome a futurity which cannot help but escape all forms of definitive recuperation. –A futurity which only truly *comes* to the extent that it turns us away from welcoming it once and for all.

In the very place where consummatory idealism had so vigorously sought to interpose its teleological vindication, its absolute knowledge, its coital resolution – a futurity of the prophetic modality announces only the dispersion of all presence and the deferral of every end. Here, it is never the abiding *gloire* of teleological grandiosity which asserts itself, but only the *atopia* of the vast desert, – “the emptiness of the sky and the sterility of a bare land where man is never there but always outside.”⁹¹

To go in the direction of such a future, is never to approach any space, any site, capable of accommodating a fixed subject, a masterful ego. Rather, it is to move incessantly toward the *locus* of perpetual dislocation where to be *there*, is never to be anywhere – but always outside, always *elsewhere*. Indeed, it is precisely this emphasis upon displacement, upon exile, which Blanchot elects to carry forward, rather explicitly, from his 1957 essay on prophecy, to the very pages of *Le pas au-delà* – as though rendering unmistakable the already prominent resonances linking the two texts in question.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid. 80.

It is here, in this later text, that Blanchot goes on to tell us, in a truly remarkable series of statements, that “the ‘re’ of the return inscribes like the ‘ex,’ the opening of every exteriority: as if the return, far from putting an end to it, actually marked the exile itself, the beginning in its rebeginning of the exodus.”⁹² With these words, the precise meaning of prophetic repetition – the meaning of prophetic *recurrence* itself – becomes increasingly apparent.

For, if the repetition of the past as future is indeed, to use Blanchot’s language, prophetic, then this is not (as we can now discern) because it prescribes, in a metaphysical sense, the repetition of some pre-ordained temporal content, or the return of any specific event – *but rather*, because what it engenders is nothing less than a re-turning toward the outside itself, a recommencement of the exodus, or of the interminable courtship. Only such an “event,” as we know, would be capable of validating the prophecy in question, by suspending and hollowing out the very present which would seek to herald its realisation, handing us over to a time without time, a future without concept.

Strange as it might seem, this and nothing other is in fact the scenography of voluptuousness *par excellence* – the scenography in which to come again, to return, becomes synonymous with coming “to ex-centre oneself, to wander anew.”⁹³ Indeed, to pursue the sheer voluptuousness of the future, in light of all this, would be to pursue nothing other than the very return of that which turns us away from all consummation, from all *Vollendung*. It would be to pursue the return of the very rupture, the broken heart, which spares me from ever having to undergo it in the present.

And it is perhaps for this very reason that here, amidst the openness of a future never pre-scripted, never pre-determined, “it is only the *nomadic* affirmation which remains.”⁹⁴ This is because, as Blanchot tells us, it is only

⁹² *The Step Not Beyond*. 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the nomadic affirmation, the affirmation without presence and without fixed identity, which is capable of sufficiently bearing witness to movement of rupture, of displacement, which turns time away from every possible terminus, just as it turns it away from every moment of temporal (or historical) consolidation. It is only the nomadic affirmation which is capable of affirming this “extreme non-coincidence (*extrême non-coïncidence*),”⁹⁵ because it is only the nomadic affirmation which understands this very non-coincidence to be its own essence, as well as the essence of the highest thought, the thought of return itself.⁹⁶



Indeed, it is on this very point that we seemingly arrive at the most radical, most indelible elaboration of that very project which Nietzsche, nearly a century prior to the publication of *Le pas au-delà*, had so presciently come to initiate: the project of coming to rehabilitate the very notion of distance itself – of coming to conceive of separation as no longer derivative, or deficient, in relation to proximity and presence, but rather, as wholly affirmative and worthy of eternal extenuation.

For what Blanchot appears to be offering us, throughout the various passages which we have been examining, is rather undeniably a configuration of time circumscribed, as it were, by the infinite rupture of the present, and thus dominated by the “unmarked and unmeasurable distance” between the past

⁹⁵ *The Infinite Conversation*. 275-6.

⁹⁶ In this sense, the nomadic affirmation bears a most profound and unmistakable similarity to the affirmation of the courtly lover, which likewise remains outside the realm of recuperability.

and the future: the *irrevocable* and the *prophetic*. A distance not only hyperbolically extreme, but also utterly dissymmetrical, to the extent that the void of the past, as Blanchot writes, can never be faithfully (identically) reproduced as the void of the future – any more than the empty future can faithfully reflect its openness onto the past.

It is this very distance, in other words, which might be understood to comprise nothing less than the defining feature of Blanchot's mature reading of the eternal return. Indeed, one might even say that what "returns," strictly speaking, throughout the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, is ultimately little more than the absolute of separation itself. A separation no longer derivative of any proximity of any presence whatsoever, but emblematised most provocatively by the scintillating vacuity of those pure, empty mirrors, held eternally askew, reflecting between themselves an intimation of beautiful events, beautiful moments, that never come to presence and thus never come to pass [*They will be too beautiful for anyone to notice it.*]⁹⁷ This is the scenography of the spectral, the indeterminate, the unresolved. An exuberance of luminosity.



⁹⁷ *The Step Not Beyond*. 17.

An Invitation

So where, we might ask, does this leave us in terms of our stated project?

If our guiding intention, from the opening pages of this study, has been to dedicate ourselves to the task of uncovering and analysing the eroticisation of distance *latent* within Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence, then surely this phase of our research now appears to have reached its conclusion.

Indeed, what we have now come to show, over the course of the preceding chapters, is that for Nietzsche, the thought of eternal return was indeed construed as nothing less than a stimulating and provocative rejoinder to the impasse of Tristanian nihilism. – A direct response to that valorisation of death-devoted, consummatory idealism and decadence which Nietzsche had understood to pervade such large swathes of the German romantic tradition.

It was on the very basis of this discovery, that we then proceeded to show how Nietzsche's radical contestation of the consummatory ideal ultimately came to assume, in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, arguably its quintessential elaboration in the very notion of *Fernsten-Liebe* – a notion which seemed to entail nothing less than an unprecedented, incomparable love for the future itself.

Indeed it was this very love of the future, or more precisely, this love of its *uncertainty* (“*Ich liebe die Unwissenheit um die Zukunft*”), which Blanchot then came to reinscribe, rather prominently, in any number of his writings throughout the late fifties, sixties, and early seventies – where the Nietzschean

valorisation of distance and incompleteness finds itself expressly mobilised as an antidote to the metaphysics of totality and the nostalgia for lost presence.



All of this, we have already shown to be the case. –But what still remains entirely unclear, is the precise status of eroticism, of desire itself, in Blanchot's *own* scenographies. For had we not suggested, from the very outset of this study, that it was none other than Blanchot's appropriation and reinscription of Nietzsche's eroticisation of distance within his own writings, both literary and critical, which above all interested us? And had we not also suggested, that it was perhaps only in the context of these very transfers and reinscriptions, that the project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance truly came to approach its most extreme limit, its most radical consequence?

Indeed, as we shall soon discover, to speak of Blanchot's engagement with Nietzsche, or with Nietzsche's thought of thoughts, is by no means to speak *merely* of those half-dozen or so essays and texts, so widely read and widely cited, which nominally appear to concern themselves with the topics of nihilism, the end of history, or the eternal return.

Rather, to speak of Blanchot's relationship to Nietzsche, as both a thinker and a writer, is *also* to speak of something far more subtle, far less accessible. It is to speak of a tendency defying any facile analysis – which seems to manifest itself most radically, not in the space of philosophical discourse or philosophical critique, where the majesty of the *logos* has already circumscribed, in advance, the domain of the possible – but in those rare,

scintillating moments when, perhaps through a collapse in the very logic of the world, perhaps through a catastrophic and singular encounter, the possible itself *gives way*.

We are referring, here, to a marked tendency in Blanchot's writings, particularly from the forties and fifties, toward the inscription of scenes of an explicitly erotic nature – scenes in which the eroticisation of distance is allowed to express itself perhaps more openly, but also more aporetically, than anywhere within Nietzsche's work, or elsewhere, for that matter. We are referring to scenes bordering upon the very threshold of the impossible, in which the vertiginous, or proleptic, movement of *retour* is nearly incessantly evoked and affirmed with the greatest of significance.

Indeed, it will be our suggestion, in the pages that follow, that it is here, in these very scenes – and in the repertoire of tropes which anchor them – that the rehabilitation of erotic distance, that the quintessentially Nietzschean obsession, ultimately comes to the point of revealing its most radical and unexpected consequence, a consequence which Nietzsche himself could have scarcely envisioned.

What are we alluding to? Nothing but “the secret of absolute distance [*le secret de l'écart absolu*].”⁹⁸ A secret which has remained, until now, ostensibly hidden from scholars and critics alike. It is a secret, moreover, which will threaten, as we will so soon discover, to turn the very project of rehabilitation against itself; threatening the very notion of erotic distance itself with sheer collapse.



⁹⁸ *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

This, one might say, is the direction in which we are heading. But let us restrain, for the moment, from commenting any further on the nature of this secret, whose profound complexities will all-too-quickly be rendered apparent to us. Instead, let us now seek to prepare for the broader task which awaits us in the second half of this study: the task of coming to elucidate the precise manner in which the latent eroticism of the eternal return, of absolute distance itself, comes to be transferred and reinscribed within Blanchot's own discourse. – A task for which the preceding chapter has offered us little more than a brief and tantalising introduction.

Indeed, it is toward this end, that we shall come to begin the second half of this study by taking into account one of Blanchot's most important, most widely overlooked, essays on the question of eroticism. An essay from one of his most prolific periods – in which the question of erotic relationality comes to receive perhaps its finest, most provocative elaboration.

We are referring, here, to none other than Blanchot's 1954 essay on the eroticism of Tristan and Isolde, where the connection between the eternal return and the affirmation of absolute separation, the very connection which we have been stressing since the opening pages of this study, finds itself corroborated (and problematised) in a most startling manner.

Chapter VI

When Distance Collapsed

Blanchot on Tristan & the Emergence of the Emptiest Heat

“...For surely no one in this world was ever / More separated than we are.”

Akhmatova

“Terrifying that such distances exist.”

Michaux

“Oh, labyrinth of extreme love!”

Char

“That Inexhaustible Myth”

It seems remarkable that Blanchot’s 1954 essay, “Orpheus, Don Juan, Tristan,” should have attracted, up to this point, so very little attention from scholars and critics. Gazing through book after book, article after article, one is hard-pressed to find even a passing reference to it, let alone the detailed elucidation which it most assuredly deserves. This apparent paucity of scholarly interest in an essay written during one of Blanchot’s most prolific periods is even more beguiling when we consider the fact that it offers us arguably some of his finest (and most sustained) observations on the nature of erotic relationality; observations which come to be inscribed, rather explicitly, under the very sign of eternal recurrence – “the infinite movement that always begins again.”¹

Indeed, it would be by no means sensationalistic to argue that the entire project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance, a project which Nietzsche (for reasons which should now be obvious) was unable to accord a decisive resolution, comes to receive one of its most lucid and enthralling critical adaptations in the pages of this very text.

Originally published in March 1954, Blanchot’s essay might be understood to concern itself, in the broadest of terms, with the question of precisely what happens to erotic desire in the very wake of eternal recommencement, in the wake of an exposure to absolute and unwavering separation. If, for Blanchot, it is none other than the romance of Tristan and Isolde which ultimately comes to emblematises, as he tells us, “the erotic relation *par excellence*,”² then this is because what we encounter

¹ *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

² *Ibid.* 191.

here, within this scenography of hopeless love, is an unparalleled confrontation with the extreme limit of distance, a confrontation (one might say) with the impossibility of consummation made subject to the law of eternal return.



But if, as we have just suggested, it is indeed the romance of Tristan and Isolde which comes to exemplify this confrontation perhaps most paradigmatically, then it is nevertheless with an entirely different, though not unrelated, tale of amorous entanglement, that Blanchot elects to open the essay in question. We are referring, here, to that seemingly “inexhaustible myth”³ of desire and loss – already so familiar to readers of Blanchot – the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Indeed, to speak of Blanchot’s engagement with the Tristan romance, in the pages of his 1954 essay, is nearly impossible without also coming to evoke, of necessity, this other great myth of amorous passion and amorous futility with which it comes to be so closely associated. This is because, as Blanchot proceeds to tell us, the desire “that carries Orpheus forward,” is the very same desire “that compels Tristan.”⁴ But how, precisely, are we to characterise the nature of this most ardent and irrepressible longing – this passion of (and beyond) the limit – which Orpheus so famously comes to embody?

First and foremost, we are told that it must be understood as radically irreducible to any desire which would seek “to clear the interval.”⁵ Just as it remains distinct from any yearning which would attempt to surmount the absence of the amorous object. This is because the desire that pervades both the Orphic and Tristanian scenographies, according to Blanchot, is founded upon nothing other than “a separation which attracts.”⁶ It is generated, in other words, not by the promise of absolute presence and satiety, but by the seductive allure of distance itself.

³ Ibid. 187.

⁴ Ibid. 188.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

And on this point, in particular, the ingenuity of Blanchot's reading begins to announce itself rather unmistakably. For it is not, as we soon come to realise, Eurydice herself – in her fleshy, corporeal embodiment – which ultimately follows Orpheus out of the underworld, dangerously inciting his desire; but rather, something far more mysterious, something far more alluring. As Blanchot goes on to tell us, it is nothing other than separation itself which seems to accompany him out of Hades. It is the plenitude of distance, here, which “becomes palpable”⁷ – impelling him onward, toward the point of his eventual ruin. To speak of a quintessentially Orphic desire, in other words, is to speak of nothing less than a yearning for the sheer sensuousness, or voluptuousness, of separation itself.

It is this very sensuousness, we might note, that the writer Gabriel Josipovici comes to describe ever so vividly in the pages of his book, *Touch*. Here, in the midst of a meditation on the ritualism of the medieval pilgrimage, we find an account of separation which cannot help but remind us of Blanchot's Orpheus (and perhaps Tristan as well). “The pilgrim's journey,” as Josipovici tells us, “was not so much a passage from point A to B as a journey into the experience of distance itself. When the pilgrim touched the shrine at the end of his long journey it was in an attempt not so much to bridge the distance that separated him from the holy, as it was an instinctive way of making that distance become palpable.”⁸ Of course, such an experience, as Josipovici tells us, cannot be straightforwardly thematised. For when separation becomes palpable, as it does in the Blanchot's retelling of the Orpheus myth, it is never experienced, strictly speaking, as a *thing*; but rather, as the plenitude of deprivation itself becoming manifest. “An absence that turns back into presence,”⁹ as Blanchot describes it.



7 Ibid.

8 Gabriel Josipovici. *Touch*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. 68.

9 *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

Indeed, there are perhaps few themes that ultimately come to be featured with greater prominence or emphasis, in Blanchot's early critical essays, than this one. Consider, for example, his 1946 essay on Benjamin Constant, the famed author of *Adolphe*, where it is, once again, the eroticism of "irreducible distance [*l'irréductible distance*]"¹⁰ which Blanchot elects to highlight. For Constant, as we are told, it is never the female beloved who finds herself projected as the object of his most ardent erotic longings, but rather, "the very distance [*la distance*] that invariably pushes them apart from one another."¹¹ The story of Constant's numerous, well-documented love affairs, thus becomes utterly synonymous, as Blanchot tells us, with the story of his various, overwhelmingly dissatisfying attempts "to trap this emptiness" that is the very "condition of attachment" and the truest, most rarefied, object of his desire.¹²

This fixation upon distance, in the pages of Blanchot's early writings, is further evidenced in "La Parole 'sacrée' de Hölderlin," an important essay originally published only two months after his article on Constant – where we encounter, once again, a rather fascinating reference to "an infinitely remote distance [*le lointain infiniment éloigné*]."¹³ – A reference which must be understood, as Blanchot tells us, in close relation to the so-called "double absence of the gods, those who have vanished and those who have not yet appeared."¹⁴

And then, of course, even beyond Constant and Hölderlin, there are those additional, multifarious references to a quintessentially "Mallarméan" distancing which come to populate so many of Blanchot's essays from the very same period. From "Mallarmé et le langage," in the spring of 1946, to the seminal essay, "La Littérature et la droit à la mort," first published in January 1948, Blanchot does not cease to remind us that it is in the very nature of poetic speech "to distance the thing [*d'éloigner la chose*] in order to signify it."¹⁵ As he writes, in his explication of a famed Mallarméan dictum: "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

10 *The Work of Fire*. 233.

11 *Ibid.* 232.

12 *Ibid.* 235.

13 *Ibid.* 121.

14 *Ibid.* 117.

15 *Ibid.* 322 & 66.

her.”¹⁶ Distance, here, finds itself at the very heart of every poetic utterance. And poetry itself becomes indistinguishable from the materiality of absence, the palpable nothingness, which it comes to embody at its very limit.¹⁷



But if the eroticisation of distance might indeed be understood to pervade, in this manner, so many of Blanchot’s most important essays in the years immediately prior to his engagement with the scenographies of Orpheus and Tristan, then it is nevertheless in the essay “Du côté de Nietzsche,” published in two instalments between December 1945 and January 1946, that we encounter arguably the most significant, anticipatory passage of all – a passage in which the eroticism of separation comes to be explicitly portrayed, perhaps for the first time in all of Blanchot’s work, as an eroticism *beyond* all recuperability. And what is perhaps most significant about the passage in question, is that the very figure which Blanchot elects to deploy, here, in attempting to bear witness to this most radical separation is none other than a figure borrowed directly from Nietzsche himself. It is, of course, the figure of Ariadne. Let us read the following words:

“Freedom is to God what Ariadne is to Theseus and Dionysus...first, it annihilates him, as Ariadne annihilates Theseus: ‘That is my sign of supreme love [*amour supreme*], to reduce him to nothing.’ But then, Ariadne needs Dionysus, the god torn apart, who tells her, ‘I am your labyrinth.’ She needs to tear God apart; for against God who is the end, the outcome above all others, she asserts herself as refusal, refusal ever to accept an alien end [*refus de jamais accepter une fin étrangère*]. And she needs the torn-apart God who is the labyrinth, and against the labyrinth she affirms her free movement, her ability to separate herself [*se dégager*].”¹⁸

16 Ibid. 322.

17 So we are told in an early essay on the poet René Char, published in Bataille’s journal, *Critique*, in October 1946. Cf. *The Work of Fire*. 104.

18 Ibid. 296-297. These lines seem to be rather loosely based on the one encountered at the conclusion of Nietzsche’s brief, dramatic sketch from Autumn of 1887, a sketch intended as a satyr-play: “...‘You are flattering me,’ Ariadne replied, ‘I am weary of my pity, all heroes should perish by me: this is the sign of my supreme love for Theseus: I reduce him to nothing.’” Cf. *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. 84.

What we come to discover in this fascinating passage from the winter of 1945-6, is a rather explicit acknowledgement of Ariadne's radical incommensurability with any form of teleological constraint. She asserts herself, as Blanchot writes, "as the refusal...to ever accept an alien end" – affirming herself, moreover, in the ability to separate herself indefinitely. In light of all this, it becomes unthinkable, for us, to conceive, or even to attempt to conceive, of Ariadne as an object, or a goal – even an unattainable or infinitely distant one. For distance, in such a context, is no longer to be thought as derivative in relation to the terms between which it mediates; but rather, pursued and affirmed in itself. This, as we have shown, is the most extreme consequence of Nietzsche's rehabilitation of erotic distance. And this, precisely, is what Blanchot comes to evoke so unmistakably in the pages of "Du côté de Nietzsche" – a supreme love, as he writes, which is bound only to the desire for distance itself.

Density of Shadow

Of course, the question which we must now pose is whether anything substantially different from all this is ultimately taking place in Blanchot's rendering of the Orpheus myth, or in his engagement with the Tristan romance itself. We recall, for instance, how Nietzsche's courtship of Ariadne had been circumscribed, quite necessarily, by the exigency of a tireless detour and deferral. Regulated, one might say, by the demand of continual indirection. – And is it not fascinating, therefore, to find Blanchot himself, in his famed retelling of the Orpheus myth, making reference to the very same tropes, the very same indirection? Indeed, as Blanchot reminds us, Orpheus can only complete the work assigned to him, the work of bringing Eurydice "back to the light of day,"¹⁹ by maintaining, at all times, an interval of separation with

¹⁹ *The Space of Literature*. 171.

respect to her. It is only through his continuous “turning away [*détour*],”²⁰ that she can be approached, and ultimately retrieved from the underworld.

Much as in the Ariadnean, or courtly scenography, therefore, everything seems to hinge upon a profound and abiding patience. It is patience, above all else, that comes to constitute, for Orpheus, the absolute measure of amorous devotion. A crucial point. For, as we know, it is nothing less than a most monumental *lapse* in patience, an irreversible breach in the courtly protocol, which ultimately consigns Orpheus to failure. At the very edge of the underworld, only steps away from completing his work, he suddenly elects to suspend the regimen of indirection. He succumbs, as Blanchot tells us, to nothing less than a most irrepressible desire to turn and look, to gaze in the direction of his beloved.

Perhaps no single moment, in the pages of Blanchot’s early critical writings, is more intriguing, or of greater consequence. But the act itself remains nevertheless enshrouded in ambiguity. Why, we might ask, does Orpheus ultimately elect to break-off the courtship and ruin the work? An important question, which seems to demand of us, first and foremost, that we take into careful consideration the precise language which Blanchot makes use in describing this most auspicious of scenes.

For what he evokes, here, is nothing less than a “turning back [*retour*]”²¹ which reveals the sheer disappearance of Eurydice manifesting itself as a “density of shadow [*épaisseur de l’ombre*].”²² Indeed, what is so remarkable about these words is the manner in which they seem to foretell the *precise* rhetoric which Blanchot, some fifteen years later, will make use of in another essay – an essay on Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and the thought of eternal recurrence. A fascinating coincidence?

20 Ibid.

21 *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

22 Ibid.

Let us recall that passage from *L'entretien infini*, already cited at length, in which Blanchot comes to tell us that the only “meaning” of Nietzsche’s most abyssal thought, its so-called truth, would reside in that hyperbolically rigorous “exigency to differ and defer.”²³ Here, just as in his 1954 essay on Orpheus and Tristan, we find Blanchot coming to link the notion of *retour*, rather explicitly, to a strange and seductive thickness, or “density.” Only instead of the *épaisseur de l’ombre* which greets Orpheus’ transgressive gaze, it is an *épaisseur de silence* which comes to pervade Zarathustra’s every attempt at communicating the elusive doctrine.

The resonance, here, is unmistakable. For what we find, in both of these passages, separated by some fifteen years, is an evocation of *retour* explicitly linked to the manifestation of a palpable absence. Density of shadow, density of silence – in each case, it is neither an object which is grasped nor a decisive word which is spoken, but rather, a departure from all possible satisfaction, from all possible presence, which is being evoked.

And why, exactly, is this so important in the context of the Orpheus myth? For no other reason than because, as Blanchot tells us, it is *this* very density, this *épaisseur de l’ombre*, which comes to motivate, more than anything else, the ruinous turn. It is not, as many traditional readings of the myth might suggest, Eurydice in her “daytime truth and her everyday appeal”²⁴ that Orpheus ultimately desires – nor is it the desire “to produce a work”²⁵ which ultimately inspires his descent into the underworld.

Rather, if Orpheus ultimately comes to assume this most arduous of tasks, the task of the descent – and then elects, at the very threshold of completion, to shatter the prohibition which confines him – then it can only be for one reason: “he wants to see the presence of Eurydice’s infinite absence.”²⁶ It is not the luminous visage of a woman he has known and loved which inspires his *retour*, but rather, the pressing

23 Ibid. 275.

24 *The Space of Literature*. 172.

25 Leslie Hill. “Affirmation Without Precedent: Maurice Blanchot and Criticism Today.” *After Blanchot: Literature, Philosophy, Criticism*. Edited by Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. 64.

26 Michael Newman. “The trace of trauma: Blindness, testimony and the gaze in Blanchot and Derrida.” *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*. Edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill. Oxford: Routledge, 1996. 159.

demand to see her as he has never seen her before, in her “non-relational, non-horizonal character.”²⁷ He wants to see, moreover, “the very distance which separates them from one another.”²⁸ This, and nothing else, is what enflames his prodigious desire: neither the promise for an amorous object, nor the promise of a glorious end, but the intimation of a lingering sensuousness, an *épaisseur de l'ombre*, in the very space where everything has long-since disappeared.



Is this to suggest, therefore, that Orpheus' impatience, his ruinous turn, and his supposed abandonment of the exigency of detour and deferral might be understood to mark a point of noticeable departure from the tableau of Ariadnean, or courtly, longing? Certainly, we could be forgiven for assuming as much. And yet, it is precisely the opposite statement which ultimately shows itself to be the case. For let us imagine, for a mere moment, that Orpheus had in fact *not* turned back. Let us imagine that he had *not* elected to look over his shoulder. It is rather clear what would have happened: the work of retrieval would ultimately have reached, only seconds later, its natural completion, the work of courtship would have come to its proverbial end. Consummatory fulfilment would have been achieved in a moment of pure presence.

To do nothing, in other words, would have been to allow for a moment of resolution, or recuperation, to assert itself. And this, *precisely*, is what neither the courtly lover, nor Zarathustra himself, would have ever, in good conscience, been able to accept. Why? Because for each of them, as for Orpheus, it is desire's endless and undying intensification which demands to be preserved at all costs. It is the sensuous palpability of absence which demands to be pursued *without end*. – Thus, in a strange and unlikely reversal, it is only by *suspending* the tireless regimen of *détour*

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Chantal Michel. *Maurice Blanchot et le Déplacement d'Orphée*. Saint-Genouph: Librairie-Nizet, 1997. 25.

and attenuating the trajectory of indirection, that teleological finality ultimately comes to be displaced here. It is only through the utter insouciance of the reckless gaze that recuperation can be eternally forestalled.

This, it seems, is the great secret of the Orpheus myth. A secret which Blanchot himself perhaps came to recognise more profoundly than anyone else. It is the secret of impatience itself – an impatience which must actually be understood, here, “as the core of an even more profound patience.”²⁹ For it is none other than this recklessness of the gaze which alone ensures a future bereft of all completion. It is nothing other than the impatient turn itself which ensures that the end will not come, the work will not be finished. The courtship will never be consummated.



If Orpheus, in other words, ultimately comes to suspend the exigency of indirection and deferral, then it is only because he increasingly recognises it as nothing more than a means toward an end – not unlike the precise manner in which negativity is portrayed in the pages of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. To speak of deferral, in such a context, is to speak of a regimen of mere *Bedürfnisbefriedigung*, or delayed gratification.³⁰ It is to speak, in other words, of a detour which remains fundamentally recuperable within the economy of some possible, future presence – the presence of the work itself.

By turning back, and subverting this regimen of *false* (teleologically oriented) detour, Orpheus is therefore freeing himself to affirm something far more radical, a desire no

²⁹ *The Space of Literature*. 176.

³⁰ Not unlike the one described in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where we are told that “under the ego’s instincts of self-preservation” the so-called reality principle intervenes in psychic life to regulate and redirect libidinal discharge. Here, as Freud writes, the reality principle reigns-back the ego’s seemingly boundless impetus for pure pleasure through a series of diversion and sublimations. The reality principle “does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure,” according to Freud, “but merely demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction...as a step on the long road to pleasure.” For the courtly lover, as for Orpheus, desire is exonerated absolutely from the economy of eventual satisfaction. It is distance itself which is sought instead. Cf. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. 7.

longer beholden to any notion of *Befriedigung* whatsoever. He is freeing himself to pursue the *eternal*, unending distances and detours of the vicious circle itself.

Indeed, this (and nothing other) is what Orpheus ultimately comes *to seek and find* in the very heart of that most reckless moment. Turning to face Eurydice, he encounters nothing but the sheer “depth and detour of the interval”³¹ asserting itself with a disconcerting density – a density of pure shadow. He sees, in other words, the “absolute of separation [*l’absolu de la séparation*]”³² suddenly becoming manifest. A separation no longer derivative of any end or any object. A separation which announces the sheer impossibility of finishing the courtship, of finishing the work itself. What Orpheus encounters, in other words, is nothing less than that quintessentially *Ariadnean* impossibility of ever bringing distance to an end; the impossibility of ever distancing oneself from distance.

A Passion of the Infinite

And it is this very impossibility which Blanchot, in the pages of his March 1954 essay, comes to link most explicitly with the romance of Tristan and Isolde. This, in other words, is the very point where Orpheus and Tristan, in the pages of Blanchot’s text, meet. It is on this very point, moreover, that the Orphic desire for absolute separation, is shown to be none other than the precise longing “that compels Tristan.”³³ For like Orpheus, there can be no disputing that Tristan, too, is confronted with the “ordeal of the end’s absence [*épreuve de l’absence de fin*].”³⁴ And for this very reason, as Blanchot tells us, Tristan and Isolde’s passion necessarily

31 *The Infinite Conversation*. 187.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

34 *The Space of Literature*. 172.

“escapes all possibility.”³⁵ It escapes, moreover, “their power, their decisions, and even their desire”³⁶ – consigning them to the unmasterable pull of the *circulus vitiosus* which draws them ever onward in a seduction without truth, without resolution.

Indeed, when we come to examine, with requisite attentiveness, the text of Blanchot’s 1954 Tristan essay, it is precisely *this* eroticisation of distance, alongside the impossibility of consummatory fulfilment which, more than any other tropes, announce themselves with an unmistakable prominence. An important point. For what all of this once again suggests to us, is nothing less than the profound and enduring influence of Nietzsche’s project of rehabilitation upon Blanchot’s writing and thought.

One might say, in other words, that what Blanchot ultimately inherits from Nietzsche, on this point, is nothing less than the exigency of surmounting or (at the very least) tactfully eliding the compulsion to affix a certain positionality to desire. He inherits the challenge of rendering erotic scenographies which are no longer governed by the polarity of subjects and objects, beginnings and endings – but rather, circumscribed by a desire which “aims at nothing and leads to nothing”³⁷ except the endless, impassable distances of a scintillating and barren circuit: void of the past, void of the future.

Could it be, we might ask, that Blanchot had somehow sensed, even without knowing, the incomparable effect which the romance of Tristan and Isolde had once exerted upon Nietzsche? Could he have somehow known about the glances and moments – *Blicke und Augenblicke* – shared between Nietzsche and the composer’s wife? The impassioned improvisations on Wagner’s own piano? The melodramatic re-enactments? And that entire voluptuousness of hell which descended upon Nietzsche in Turin as if he alone, somehow, were chosen to bear the full pathos of Tristan’s unenviable fate?

³⁵ *The Infinite Conversation*. 190.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ This phrase is taken from Blanchot’s essay “Le chant des Sirènes,” first published in July 1954, only four months after his essay on Tristan first appeared. Cf. *The Book to Come*. 5-6.



It is difficult to say. But what we *do* know is that both Nietzsche and Blanchot, in each their own ways, seemed to have discovered, in this very same narrative, in this very same myth, the paradigmatic exemplification of an eroticism given over to the vertigo of eternal recurrence. –An eroticism, moreover, exonerated from the economy of teleological recuperation. “*La relation érotique par excellence*”³⁸ – is how Blanchot, in his 1954 essay, refers to the unconsummated passion of Tristan and Isolde. The very same passion which Nietzsche himself, in the last decades of the previous century, had elevated to the highest echelons possible.

And just like Nietzsche, who finds himself captivated beyond measure by the inexorable breath-holding of the Tristanian tableau, its “weird and sweet infinity [*Unendlichkeit*],”³⁹ so too does Blanchot elect to emphasise, in his 1954 essay, above all, the ceaseless pulsing of an interminable erotic longing. He comes to link, in a manner nearly indistinguishable from Nietzsche, Tristan’s prodigious desire to that “infinite movement that always begins again...the errant depth of that which does not cease.”⁴⁰ With all chances of definitive resolution foreclosed, with every presumptive end given over to the exigency of recommencement, we find the romance of Tristan and Isolde, in much the same manner as the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, coming to assume the form of an affair predicated upon impossibility. Or, as Blanchot himself writes, an “impossibility made relation [*impossibilité qui se fait rapport*].”⁴¹

Indeed, what Blanchot seems to be telling us, throughout his essay, is that the scenography of the Tristan romance, circumscribed – as it is – by the “distance of absolute separation [*l'écart de la séparation absolue*],”⁴² the passion of the infinite, and the exigency of return, must be understood to remain nothing less than radically

38 *The Infinite Conversation*. 191.

39 *Ecce Homo*. 93.

40 *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.* 190.

irreconcilable with any form of teleological finality, satisfaction, or intimacy. It must be understood as exonerated from every libidinal economy which would seek to impose an end upon erotic longing.

An Empty Heart

And yet, as we soon discover, this is only half of the story. –

For, in addition to everything we have been suggesting over the course of the preceding pages, it seems that there is also *another* side to Blanchot's 1954 Tristan essay. It is a side which asserts itself subtly, though unmistakably. – A side which appears deeply at odds with the entire project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance which we have been attempting, since the opening pages of this study, to chronicle and elucidate. What, exactly, do we have in mind here?

We are referring to a tendency within Blanchot's Tristan essay – and within his work from the 1940s and early 1950s more broadly – that few, if any, commentators have come to explore in any significant detail. A tendency which seems to challenge, in a most remarkable manner, the very interdiction against consummatory fulfilment which we have seemingly spared no effort in coming to document. A tendency which threatens the entire project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance with collapse.

Indeed, what makes the essay in question such an incomparably fascinating piece of writing, at least within the context of our present study, is the manner in which it seems to bear witness, rather undeniably, to the traces a profound fissure, a tension between two competing exigencies, two competing demands, two forms of eroticism.

On one hand, as we have already stated, we encounter, here, nothing less than the *Ariadnean* exigency of absolute separation and eternal recommencement which comes to consign the amorous couple, as if ineluctably, to “the absence of unity”⁴³ – dispossessing them of themselves and displacing them from all presence.

And yet, with the very same breath that comes to depict Tristan and Isolde, in this manner, as “neither merged nor unified...[but] giving body to the distance of absolute separation,”⁴⁴ Blanchot *also* proceeds to tell us of something very different. He tells us that these lovers “without hesitation, without reservation, and without doubt, also give the impression of an intimacy that is absolute [*une intimité absolue*].”⁴⁵ A statement which is perhaps as fascinating as it is utterly unexpected.

For there has been nothing – literally *nothing* – over the course of the preceding pages, that either Nietzsche, or Blanchot himself, have seemingly attempted to eschew more tirelessly, than the temptation of making recourse to the seductive allure of consummatory fantasy. And yet, it is here (of all places) in an essay on the Tristan romance, the *precise* romance which had inspired Nietzsche’s most profoundly anti-teleological thought, that we find Blanchot seemingly attempting to reintroduce that very notion which the project of rehabilitation had so valiantly attempted to displace and discredit – the notion of intimacy, of erotic reconciliation, of *Versöhnung*.

And indeed, what makes Blanchot’s reference to “absolute intimacy” so doubly fascinating, as well as so undeniably problematic, is that it comes to be deployed neither in direct opposition to the thought of eternal return, nor in exclusion from it – but rather, precisely *alongside* it. Indeed, it is almost as if, rather than seeking to oppose the thought of intimacy to the thought of eternal recurrence, as Nietzsche had, Blanchot were somehow intent upon linking the two notions together, even at the greatest of costs.

43 *The Infinite Conversation*. 190.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.* 190-191.

A truly astonishing move, and one which comes to receive arguably its clearest elaboration in the following passage: “When the absolute of separation [*l’absolu de la séparation*] has become relation, it is no longer possible to be separated. When desire has been awakened by impossibility and by night, desire can indeed come to an end and an empty heart [*le coeur vide*] turn away from it.”⁴⁶

Few passages in the entirety of Blanchot’s 1954 Tristan essay are perhaps more intriguing, more problematic, than this one. For what Blanchot seems to be suggesting, here, is that there may indeed come a moment when the pernicious, spatio-temporal interval separating the amorous couple will find itself extended to its furthest point, to the point where it can no longer *possibly* be extended any further. And when this moment comes, as Blanchot tells us, all possibility becomes radically suspended – including, of course, the possibility of separation itself. At this very moment, as Blanchot writes, desire itself comes to an *end*, and the empty heart turns away from it.

And what, we might ask, would be capable of bringing about such a cataclysm? What would be capable of extenuating the interval of separation to that most hyperbolically extreme point wherein it finally collapses upon itself? The answer, here, is already known to us. It is, of course, nothing other than the eternal return itself. – For to speak of absolute separation, as we have learned over the course of the preceding chapters, is to speak of nothing less than the *pure and unwavering* distances of the circuit of circuits, the ring of eternity, which endlessly returns upon itself in the absence of any *dénouement*.

This, and this alone, is the meaning of absolute separation for Nietzsche and Blanchot. And it is this very separation which must therefore be understood to hold in reserve, rather remarkably, the secret of an unexpected and mysterious intimacy, the “exigency of a more essential relation [*l’exigence d’un rapport essentiel*]”⁴⁷ – which emerges, according to Blanchot, at the very limit of separation, at the furthest extreme of erotic distance.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 192.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Clearly, these are fascinating developments. Indeed, it simply cannot be overstated how utterly important this reintroduction of intimacy-rhetoric actually is, not only within the context of Blanchot's engagement with the Tristanian scenography, but also in terms of his relation to Nietzsche more broadly. For all this time, we had been supposing that Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence, summoned as a provocative rejoinder to the impasse of Tristanian decadence and nihilism, had ultimately come to *displace* the traditional primacy of intimate relations, of fusional and reconciliatory fantasies. We had been supposing, moreover, that to affirm the thought of eternal return was to affirm nothing less than the impossibility of any resolution, of any consummatory scene. It was to affirm the endless intensification of desire in the sheer absence of every object, every end.

Now, all of a sudden, it seems that we are being told by Blanchot, in this most fascinating and unexpected series of passages, that this very impossibility, the impossibility inherent within absolute separation itself, might in fact lead us, somehow, to the threshold of desire's end – to the threshold of a new and unprecedented intimacy.

But the question still remains: how precisely is such an intimacy to be construed? What, in other words, might Blanchot actually have in mind when he makes use of this utterly beguiling phrase: *l'intimité*? And why, moreover, might this very notion emerge in Blanchot's writing at the exact moment when it does? And why does it emerge at all?

These latter questions, in particular, seem to carry with them a certain intrigue – for despite the fact that the rhetoric intimacy, as we will soon discover, might indeed be encountered, rather prominently, throughout Blanchot's fictional writings of the 1940s, it is *only* in the early 1950s that it first begins to emerge within the context of his critical essays. In particular, it is within the context of a certain half-dozen essays

published between the start of 1953 and the summer of 1955 that *nearly every single one* of Blanchot's most significant references to the notion of intimacy is to be found.⁴⁸

This, as we know, is the immediate context for Blanchot's Tristan essay, as well as his writings on both Orpheus and Mallarmé's *Igitur*, among several notable texts. But if there is perhaps one, single essay from this period which, more than any other, finds itself most incomparably suffused with the rhetoric of intimacy, then this text surely is none other than "Rilke et l'exigence de la mort," first published in two instalments between April and May of 1953. It is here, in this very essay, published less than a year before Blanchot's study of Tristan, that we discover for the first time a fascinating, yet deeply problematic, rhetoric of intimacy coming to assert itself, with a truly voluminous intensity, at the very heart of his critical discourse.

This, it seems, is the moment when the rhetoric of intimacy truly emerges with a full-force in Blanchot's critical discourse. And if it is indeed our intention, in the pages that follow, to come to an understanding of this rhetoric, and to clarify its precise relation to the thought of eternal return and the broader project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance, then it is necessarily here, with Blanchot's Rilke essay, that we must begin.

⁴⁸ We are referring, therefore, primarily to the essays comprising *L'Espace littéraire*, though several of the early essays from *L'entretien infini* (such as the Tristan essay itself), and others from *Le livre à venir* might also be counted amongst this grouping.

Essential Reconversion

Reading through the pages of Blanchot's 1953 Rilke essay, the references to *l'intimité* could not be more conspicuous. A casual scan of the text reveals more than a dozen instances of the phrase in one section ("L'espace de la mort") alone. We encounter references to "the intimacy of conversion [*l'intimité de la conversion*]"⁴⁹ and to "the intimacy of invisible death [*l'intimité de la mort invisible*]"⁵⁰ – as well as references to "spiritual intimacy [*intimité spirituelle*]"⁵¹ and the "intimate vastness of the outside [*l'ampleur intime de ce dehors*]." ⁵² There is even an enticing reference to "the intimacy of the heart [*l'intimité du coeur*]." ⁵³ Indeed, few themes within Blanchot's reading of Rilke are mentioned with greater frequency or assigned a more noticeable rhetorical prominence. The question of precisely what this "profundity of intimacy [*la profondeur de l'intimité*]"⁵⁴ might entail, however, remains problematic to say the least.

What we *do* know, thanks in large part to Blanchot's partial disambiguation of the matter, is that – for Rilke – intimacy is wholly irreducible to the fantasies of fusional consummation which we found to pervade large swathes of the German romantic tradition. Rilkean intimacy has nothing in common, for instance, with the "imperious and magic violence"⁵⁵ by which distances are transcendently annulled in the writings of Novalis. Likewise, it is foreign to any thought or act which would seek "a surpassing of the earthly."⁵⁶ As Blanchot tells us, Rilke "rejects the Christian solution"⁵⁷ of harmonious reconciliation and places his entire faith in the "profoundly, blessedly terrestrial."⁵⁸ It is here on earth, and nowhere else, that

49 *The Space of Literature*. 135.

50 *Ibid.* 147.

51 *Ibid.* 136.

52 *Ibid.* 136.

53 *Ibid.* 138.

54 *Ibid.* 135.

55 *Ibid.* 138.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.* 133.

58 *Ibid.*

intimacy must be either gained or lost.

Nevertheless, if Rilke's poetic practise marks an important break, in so many respects, from the broader milieu of the 19th Century, then this is perhaps only possible because he, like Nietzsche himself, had already absorbed this tradition thoroughly enough to displace it from within. For Rilke, not unlike Schopenhauer and Wagner, it is the implacable persistence of the *principium individuationis* which appears to consign all lovers to perennial dissatisfaction. It is "the locality of beings...their spatio-temporal limit"⁵⁹ which is at least partially to blame for our inability to attain intimacy.

But this is not all. For in addition to this so-called "bad extension"⁶⁰ – this interval of unbridgeable separation – there is also an additional, even more nefarious, culprit at play: the *bad interiority* of our own consciousness. Indeed, as conscious beings, we are not only excluded from things on account of the irreducible distance which separates us from them, but separated even more profoundly "by the imperious, violent way we seek to master them."⁶¹ It is precisely this mania for possession, security, and stability that Blanchot, in the pages of his Rilke essay, refers to as bad interiority. And its tangible manifestation, as he goes on to tell us, is always and without exception "purposeful activity which seeks to make us possessors and producers, concerned with results and avid for objects."⁶² Knowledge is the great pay-off here, but it comes at a steep price. For, to the extent that we remain enthralled by the world of products, outcomes, and ends – real intimacy is rendered inaccessible to us.

The question, then, becomes how to surmount (at one and the same time) the limitations imposed upon experience by both spatio-temporal distance *and* bad interiority? How, in other words, to transcend the world of distances whilst refusing any teleological consolation? Might there be a point where "interior and exterior gather themselves together into a single continuous space"⁶³ – where intimacy and

59 Ibid. 135.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid. 138.

exteriority coincide? Indeed, it is precisely such a point which Rilke comes to conceive of as the *Weltinnenraum* – the world’s inner space.

In a famous poem from August 1914, he writes: “Through all beings spreads the one space: / the world’s inner space. Silently fly the birds / all through us. Oh, I who want to grow, / look outside, and it is in me that the tree grows.”⁶⁴ What these words announce to us is nothing less than the dawning of a truly unprecedented poetic exigency. To become poets, as Rilke tells us, requires of us that we *create* this very space within ourselves. We must become “the intimate and pure ark of things [*l’arche intime et pure de toutes choses*].”⁶⁵

And yet, this task, which Rilke elevates to the highest level possible, is by no means a simple one. Indeed, it demands of us that we undertake nothing less than a process of “essential reconversion.”⁶⁶ – A task which calls upon us “to impregnate the provisional and perishable earth so profoundly in our mind, with so much patience and passion, that its essence can be reborn in us invisible.”⁶⁷ It is in this manner, as we soon learn, that all things are ultimately restored to us at the very point where “they escape divisible space and enter our own essential extension.”⁶⁸

An utterly fascinating development. And one which marks, perhaps more unmistakably than any other, the sheer ingenuity of the Rilkean project. For in contrast to those great post-Kantian thinkers and writers who had understood consciousness to be irrevocably circumscribed by *a priori* spatio-temporal limits, Rilke seeks to lead us, by means of this reconversion, toward an even more primordial interiority, where the Transcendental Aesthetic no longer holds sway. Indeed, it is this very process of reconversion which Blanchot himself goes on to elucidate rather helpfully in the following passage:

64 Ibid. 136.

65 Ibid. 140.

66 Ibid. 137.

67 Ibid. 140.

68 Ibid. 137.

“Instead of leading consciousness back toward that which we call the real but which is only the objective reality where we dwell in the security of stable forms and separate existences...the essential conversion would turn it toward a profounder intimacy [*une intimité plus profonde*], toward the most interior and the most invisible, where we are no longer anxious to do and act, but free of ourselves and of real things and of phantoms of things, ‘abandoned, exposed upon the mountains of the heart [*les montagnes du coeur*],’ as close as possible to the point where ‘the interior and the exterior gather themselves together into a single continuous space.’”⁶⁹

The conversion described here by no means constitutes an evasion, or suppression, of consciousness. Rather, as Rilke tells us, it is a matter of becoming “as fully conscious as possible of our existence.”⁷⁰ Except consciousness, here, is no longer to be understood in the sense of a “bad intimacy which closes us in [*la mauvaise intimité qui nous enferme*]”⁷¹ – for then it would be simply be a matter of producing and representing, possessing and mastering objects. Rather, the poetic consciousness which Rilke is describing would entail a very different kind of intimacy – an intimacy which would be synonymous with “the bursting and springing of the outside.”⁷² The fetters of space and time *as well as* our proclivity for mastery and possession would be surmounted; an unprecedented manner of relating to existence would be inaugurated within us.

Indeed, it might be said that very little was in fact dearer to Rilke – than the promise of acceding unto this intimacy of the *Weltinnenraum*. And yet, what particularly impresses Blanchot, throughout the pages of his 1953 essay, is that despite Rilke’s irrepressible enthusiasm and increasingly elaborate formulations (“the infinite outside penetrates the poet so intimately that it is as though the shining stars rested lightly in his breast”⁷³) – all of this never ceased to remain *but a promise*. “The uncertainty,” as Blanchot tells us, “is essential.”⁷⁴ For to approach the world’s inner space as something certain, “would surely be to miss it.”⁷⁵ It would be to allow our

69 Ibid. 138.

70 Ibid. 139.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid. 136.

74 Ibid. 137.

75 Ibid.

bad interiority to assert itself once more, turning the prospect of intimacy into an outcome among others: something to be achieved. Indeed, if Rilke, throughout his writings, continually reaffirms and reiterates his faith in the *possibility* of “essential reconversion,” it is a faith which comes to be derived neither from a belief in his own poetic prowess nor an awareness of his own masterful potency; but rather, almost exclusively on the basis of those rare moments of piercing vulnerability when the predominantly teleological orientation of consciousness is momentarily suspended.

The Stillness of the Arbour

And, as we know, it was within the world of eroticism, perhaps more than anywhere else, that Rilke encountered a presentiment of this very suspension. Especially, “in great movements of love...when one goes beyond the beloved, when one is loyal to the audacity of this movement which knows neither stop nor limit.”⁷⁶ Such passion, as Blanchot writes in his 1953 Rilke essay, cannot be tempted by either satiety or repose – “it neither wants nor is able to rest in the person sought, but *destroys* this person or surpasses him in order that he not be the screen that would hide the outside.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid. 136.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

It must be remarked that the similarity between these words and the language which Blanchot had made use of, only several years earlier, in the pages of “Du côté de Nietzsche,” is certainly striking. Recall, for instance, the specific phrase which Blanchot, in that essay, had obliged his Ariadne to speak: “This is the sign of my supreme love, to reduce him to nothing.”⁷⁸ A passionate utterance, predicated upon a profound refusal. The refusal of God and Truth – certainly. But also, just as much, a refusal of fulfilment, of consummation, of release. And do we not hear an echo of this very sentiment when Blanchot, in his Rilke essay, describes a passion which neither wants, nor is able, to rest in the person sought, but destroys this very person? Do we not discern, in this Rilkean “passion that knows nothing of ends [*passion sans but*],”⁷⁹ a rather unmistakable reinscription of the Ariadnean love which covets nothing but deep, deep eternity?⁸⁰

Indeed, the more closely we attend to Rilke’s own preoccupation with the irreciprocity and intransitivity of the erotic relation, the more widely his debt to Nietzsche is felt, and the more unmistakable his influence upon Blanchot becomes. Take (for example) the First Elegy – in which we find Rilke repeatedly coming to extol the virtues of unfulfilled love. “It is time that we loosed ourselves / from the loved one,” he writes, “and unsteadily, survived.”⁸¹ Then, in another passage, he goes so far as to confess an envy for “the bereft ones [*Verlassenen*]” – claiming that they “are so much bolder in love than those fulfilled.”⁸² Of course, this valorisation of amorous irreciprocity is a theme which has by no means escaped the notice of critics. On the contrary, it is almost impossible to find a scholarly reading of the *Duino Elegies* which *does not* make some mention of Rilke’s “glorification of unrequited love.”⁸³ As Kathleen L. Komar writes, “The unrequited lover becomes Rilke’s supreme example for describing the movement toward reunification with

78 It will be recalled that these lines are originally found at the very conclusion of Nietzsche’s brief, dramatic sketch from Autumn of 1887, intended as a satyr-play: “...‘You are flattering me,’ Ariadne replied, ‘I am weary of my pity, all heroes should perish by me: this is the sign of my supreme love for Theseus: I reduce him to nothing.’” *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. 84.

79 *The Space of Literature*. 136.

80 Rilke himself, as we know, was a perceptive reader of Nietzsche’s work. Consider, for example, Rilke’s brief, but nonetheless fascinating commentary found in *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1902-1926*. 66-7.

81 Rainer Maria Rilke. “First Elegy.” *Duino Elegies*. Translated by J.B. Leishman. New York: Norton & Company, 1939. 23..

82 *Ibid.*

83 Peter Hutchinson. *Rilke’s Duino Elegies: Cambridge Readings*. Edited by Roger Paulin. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1997. 7.

existence.”⁸⁴ The reason for this is that “the bereft ones” – or, *Verlassenen* – are more capable than anyone of surmounting the bad interiority of their “isolated self-conscious states.”⁸⁵ For their love, unlike the ardour of the satisfied lover, is both unrestrained *and* wholly intransitive. It is “not trapped in a love object, and thus can be more easily drawn back into the cosmic space of nature.”⁸⁶

To find an example of such intransitivity taken to its proverbial limit, we need look no further than lines 52-55 of the Third Elegy. Here, in rapid succession, we twice encounter the word “*Liebte*” – deployed alone and without reference to either subject or object. According to Edward Timms, what is being described here is nothing less than “a libidinous drive predating all individuation.”⁸⁷ Not only is there “no beloved in sight,”⁸⁸ but neither is there a lover. “The pronoun with the greatest significance for the process of individuation,” writes Timms, “is the one that does not occur in the Third Elegy, the first person singular ‘I’ (*ich*).”⁸⁹ This absence is all the more conspicuous given the fact that the pronoun *ich* is prominent “in all the other Elegies, with the solitary exception of the Eighth.”⁹⁰ Indeed, by inscribing the word “*Liebte*” within such a context, Rilke seems to be testifying to the sheer impersonality of even the deepest amorous devotion. Love, when taken to its furthest extreme, is commensurable no less with a subject than it is with an object.

At this point, readers of Rilke will likely recall that it was this very same impersonality, in fact, which he had already described, several years earlier, in one of the most enduring passages from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. We recall the famous scene in which Malte himself, having just encountered Abelone in the stillness of the harbour, begins to read aloud from a book of letters – Bettina’s correspondence with Goethe. At first, Abelone listens respectfully, and despite Malte’s general clumsiness, is indeed moved by the manner in which he gives voice to the young lady’s words of avid longing. But then – just as he is about to begin reading one of Goethe’s responses, Abelone suddenly interrupts Malte, demanding of

84 Kathleen Komar. *Transcending Angels: Rainer Maria Rilke’s Duino Elegies*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. 33.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Rilke’s *Duino Elegies: Cambridge Readings*. 45.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid. 50.

90 Ibid.

him that he not continue.

Why has she done this? Why has she silenced him? – When Malte asks her, she offers no response – except to make it known that only Bettina’s letters (and not Goethe’s replies) are to be read. The meaning of this injunction remains for a long time unclear to him. But little by little, as he gradually comes to an understanding of it, his love for Abelone cannot help but be profoundly transformed. For what he ultimately discovers in Bettina’s letters is a form of eroticism which so far exceeds – in its audacity and its breadth – the ardour summoned by her correspondent, that Goethe’s every attempt of reciprocating it amounts to little more than a profanation. Indeed, as Malte tells us, “such love as hers needs no response.”⁹¹ For unlike Goethe’s passion, which remained at the level of transitivity, Bettina’s love “belonged to the elements”⁹² – which is a way of saying that it belonged to nothing and originated from no one. That Goethe failed to understand this, Malte argues, “will perhaps one day be seen as the limit of his greatness.”⁹³

But if Goethe himself, this veritable demigod and worshipper of the eternal feminine, was ultimately incapable of acceding to a love which “passes into openness,”⁹⁴ then what hope can possibly remain for us – mere mortals? If even Goethe’s most concerted efforts at reciprocating the effervescence of Bettina’s passion were bound, almost pathetically, to failure – then what might this teach us about the difficulty of the lover’s task?⁹⁵

First and foremost, it suggests to us that love is hard – much harder, perhaps, than we ever care to admit. For love is nothing if not a privileged form of relationality. And yet, our ability to relate, according to Rilke, is at all times threatened and impeded not only by the spatio-temporal limits which keep us apart, but even more

91 Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Translated by Burton Pike. Champaign: Dalkey Press, 2008. 151.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Romano Guardini. *Rilke's Duino Elegies: An Interpretation*. Translated by K.G. Knight. London, 1961. 237.

95 In a fine short story from 1942, the American author, Carson McCullers, comes very close to adopting a Rilkean perspective on the matter, when she writes: “I meditated on love and reasoned it out...I realised what is wrong with us. Men fall in love for the first time. And what do they fall in love with?...A woman...Without science, with nothing to go by, they undertake the most dangerous and sacred experience in God’s earth...They start at the wrong end of love. They begin at the climax...Do you know how love should be begun? A tree. A rock. A cloud.” Carson McCullers. “A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud.” *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, 1977. 150.

profoundly by the proclivities of our own “bad interiority” – our need to know, possess, and master the objects we supposedly love. As a result, we are always either too close or too far; too present or too painfully absent.

Indeed, this precisely is the lesson which Malte comes to learn: that the true lover, as one commentator writes, is the one who “remains unfulfilled but none the less continues to love.”⁹⁶ Such steadfastness comes without reward, without satisfaction. And it is undoubtedly for this reason that Rilke never ceased to consider love “the most difficult task that is set for us...the work for which all other work is only preparation.”⁹⁷ – But if love is indeed our most difficult task, as Rilke suggests, then the question still remains: what about intimacy? Is it possible? And if so, then in what form? As it turns out, it was with these very questions that Rilke would find himself led to the threshold of a most profound *turning*, or crisis – a crisis whose ultimate impact upon his writing, not to mention Blanchot’s own, would prove to be nothing less than decisive.

⁹⁶ Rilke’s *Duino Elegies: An Interpretation*. 31. As Guardini goes on to write, “perfect love,” in the pages of Rilke’s *Malte*, “is one in which the lover is not attached to the other person.” [237] The extent to which this emphasis upon intransitivity anticipates many of Blanchot’s own statements about the nature of the erotic relation will become increasingly apparent in the pages that follow.

⁹⁷ *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1902-1926*. 425.

“...those images imprisoned within you”

By all accounts – on the morning of Saturday, June 20, 1914 – Rilke rose early and immediately set to work. His writing was both resolute and inspired; by the stroke of noon, he had already completed a poem of some fifty-six lines. After making a few corrections, and appending an epigraph, he wasted no time in sending it, along with a brief prefatory note, to the woman who had been (since the summer of 1897) his advocate and close friend. A keeper of unfathomable secrets: this recipient was none other than Lou Andreas-Salomé.

“Lou, dear, here is a strange poem composed this morning,” Rilke wrote to her from Paris. “I am sending it at once because I involuntarily called it *Wendung*, and it represents the turning that *must* come if I am to live, and you will understand how it is meant...”⁹⁸ As posterity confirms, there are few other poems in Rilke’s *oeuvre* to rival “Wendung” for its sheer concentration of notable motifs. The “open vision [*offenen Blick*]” of the Eighth Elegy is explicitly mentioned here, as is the classic Rilkean valorisation of sacrifice and forbearance; we find allusions to mortality (line 33) and intimations of the sacred.

But if the poem remains, to this day, one of Rilke’s most famous, it is almost certainly on account of a single, oft-quoted (but rarely explicated) exhortation which we find nestled in the middle of its final stanza: “The work of vision is done, / now do heart-work / at those images imprisoned within you [*Werk des Gesichts ist getan, / tue nun Herzwerk / an den Bildern in dir, jenen gefangenen*].”⁹⁹

There can be no doubt that there is something immeasurably evocative about these lines – and about the phrase “*Herzwerk*,” in particular. We might think, initially, of the heart’s physical labour – of its beating, of its pulsing, of the arteries meeting and

⁹⁸ Ibid. 243.

⁹⁹ *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1902-1926*. 243-4.

parting. But then we also think of the work of conversion, or transmutation, which Rilke assigns to us as our most serious poetic calling. The demand of *taking to heart* all that we have seen, all that we have known, all that we have loved – and allowing it to be reborn, invisibly, within us. For this, too, is most certainly a kind of *Herzwerk*. But in what sense, precisely, does Rilke himself seem to be using this phrase? And what might all of this reveal, more broadly, about the precise significance which the rhetoric of intimacy and the imagery of the heart ultimately come to assume in Blanchot's own scenographies?¹⁰⁰

As W. L. Graff suggests, in his classic study from 1956, the meaning of *Herzwerk* is best gleaned in relation to a very specific “turning” – or crisis – which Rilke himself underwent in the weeks and months immediately preceding his composition of the poem in question. The nature of this crisis concerned his growing disillusionment with what he sensed as the unwarranted prioritisation of vision and visibility in all of his poetry up to that point. This emphasis upon the visible had been, of course, been thoroughly inculcated within him by his muse and mentor Rodin. During the years of his apprenticeship, Rilke had learned to perform this “work of the eye” to near perfection. But all of this had come at a steep cost, writes Graff. For during this period, Rilke's work “increasingly came to lack in warmth and love, ultimately leaving him without further inspiration.”¹⁰¹ By June 1914, Rilke sensed the very real threat of an impending artistic sterility.

Taken in this light, his exhortation to move beyond the *Werk des Gesichts* in favour of a new poetic exigency might be read not only as an indictment of what he had come to perceive as the increasingly barren aesthetic potentialities of his earlier method – but also, as a rejection of the power of representation to deliver him from the impasse at hand.

100 As readers of Rilke's poetry can attest, references to the heart are more than numerous within the pages of his work. The most authoritative Rilke concordance reveals a staggering 261 references to *Herz*, as well as 133 additional references to *Herzen*. See *Rainer Maria Rilke: A Verse Concordance of His Complete Lyrical Poetry*. Edited Ulrich K. Goldsmith. Leeds: W.S. Maney and Son, Ltd., 1980.

101 W.L. Graff. *Rainer Maria Rilke: Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956. 212.

It was around this same time, in the early months of 1914, that a most fortuitous encounter not only roused him from his creative somnolence, but offered him hope of a genuinely revitalised poetic calling. Students of Rilke's life and work are already well-acquainted with the story of the Benvenuta affair:

In the last weeks of December, 1913 – a talented concert pianist named Magda von Hattingberg bought herself a book of poetry by an unknown author, “and in the afterglow of the first reading wrote a letter of thanks to him.”¹⁰² A week later, Rilke's response arrived in the post – and a torrid correspondence ensued. In the decades since these letters were first made public, more critical material has been devoted to them than we could ever hope to summarise here. The essentials, in any case, are beyond dispute. At the very nadir of despondency, a woman whom Rilke has “never seen in body...beckons invitingly from afar.”¹⁰³ He is immediately smitten, and falls under the sway of a great passion. It was as if he had “lived encased in ice for a long season,” writes one Rilke scholar, “and she had melted it away.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, from the very beginning of this romance, the factual contingencies of this woman's existence are of little concern to him. He rechristens her with a name of his own choosing: Benvenuta – and wastes little time in projecting upon her all the idealities which his “childlike sensuality”¹⁰⁵ could muster.

Their correspondence lasts but a single month, yet throughout its course, Rilke's letters “literally rush upon her, trembling both from the certainty that she is destined for him and from the wonder of how this could ever be.”¹⁰⁶ And she, of course, hardly complains. By the end of February 1914, they have made plans to meet in Paris – where she regales him with daily performances of Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann. By all accounts, all of this was pleasant for Rilke. But should we be surprised that once he had actually met his Benvenuta in person, the passion between them quickly dissipated, “leaving nothing but the dregs of reality sublimated

102 Norbert Furst. *Phases of Rilke*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958. 117.

103 Rainer Maria Rilke: *Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet*. 44.

104 *Phases of Rilke*. 117.

105 Rainer Maria Rilke: *Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet*. 44.

106 *Phases of Rilke*. 116.

by the radiation of a beautiful dream?”¹⁰⁷ And, given what we know about Rilke’s own erotic proclivities, could any other outcome even have been possible?



Indeed, even a casual survey of Rilke’s letters to Benvenuta reveals that “the beloved occupies surprisingly little space in them.”¹⁰⁸ Even when Rilke addresses to her the most ardent declarations of love, it is never she herself who receives them – but rather, a kind of anonymous, unknowing double. As one critic notes, it is almost as if what Rilke most desires is not her at all, but rather, “a solitude that wants to be wrapped in love.”¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the inevitable failure of this relationship was to be not entirely without its consolations. For it was only weeks after parting from Benvenuta that Rilke announced, in his epiphanic letter to Lou, that he had put the work of vision behind him and had undertaken henceforth to carry out the work of the heart. The ill-fated love affair, it seems, had been just the impetus Rilke needed in order to make his decisive turn towards a new poetic calling. But how, exactly, had this quizzical and disappointing romance led him to this most auspicious of turning points?

Here the biographers must at last fall silent – or risk venturing into the vicinity of a crude and unrewarding reductivism. For we simply cannot know what was transpiring within Rilke’s soul, that Saturday morning, when he sat down to write “Wendung.” Nevertheless, we have at our disposal at least two pieces of textual evidence which offer us grounds for speculating that the failure of the Benvenuta

107 *Rainer Maria Rilke: Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet*. 29.

108 *Phases of Rilke*. 117.

109 *Ibid.*

affair may not have been far from his thoughts.

First, we take note of the poem's epigraph, a quotation from Rudolph Kassner,¹¹⁰ which reads: "The road from passion to greatness lies through sacrifice." Second, we note the poem's equally important, concluding lines: "Behold, inner man [*innerer Mann*], your inner maiden [*dein inneres Mädchen*], / this maiden attained [*errungene*] / from a thousand natures, this / till now but attained, never / yet beloved creature [*geliebte Geschöpf*]."¹¹¹ That Rilke elects to begin his poem by evoking the necessity of sacrifice, and ends it with an exhortation to love – is undoubtedly significant. But who, exactly, is the amorous object here?

As the passage above makes clear, the woman in Rilke's poem is neither the corporeally inaccessible beloved of traditional romance, nor the idealised beloved of sheer fantasy. Rather, it is none other than the "inner maiden" herself – an erotic composite, formed from a thousand natures. And though Rilke declines to offer us anything resembling a detailed description of this "never yet beloved creature," the very name which he ascribes to her, *inneres Mädchen*, tells us nearly everything we need to know.

For what this name immediately evokes, surely in accordance with Rilke's wishes, is (once more) the notion of the *Weltinnenraum*, or the world's inner space – that profoundest reservoir of intimacy "where we are no longer anxious to do and act, but free of ourselves and of real things and of phantoms of things, 'abandoned, exposed upon the mountains of the heart [*les montagnes du coeur*],' as close as possible to the point where 'the interior and the exterior gather themselves together into a single continuous space.'"¹¹² If this is indeed the inner maiden's rightful element, as Rilke suggests, then impersonality is surely her rightful essence. And to speak of her at all, is thus to conjure, once more, the entire scenography of essential conversion.

110 Rudolf Kassner (1873-1959) was an Austrian writer, essayist, and translator. According to Siegfried Mandel, he was Rilke's "only close male friend" during the period in question. *Rainer Maria Rilke: The Poetic Instinct*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965. 118.

111 *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1902-1926*. 244.

112 *The Space of Literature*. 138.

Understood in these terms, the inner maiden of Rilke's poem must be understood, rather remarkably, as no longer bound, in any form whatsoever, to the contingencies and limitations of spatio-temporal individuation. Having undergone transmutation from visibility (the visibility of a thousand natures) into invisibility itself, Rilke's inner maiden can no longer be either portrayed or represented as such. She thwarts our every desire for possession and renders our aspirations of mastery vain. To love the inner maiden is thus necessarily to love her at the very point where she escapes our hold. It is to love her all the way unto the point where she disappears from sight and comes to reside, as Blanchot writes, within the very "intimacy of the heart."¹¹³

Indeed, on this point, it seems, the ineluctable necessity of sacrifice, mentioned in the poem's epigraph, at last becomes apparent to us. For the transmutation in question simply cannot be reconciled, or rendered commensurable, with any form of eroticism which would seek to grasp its object of adoration *as* object. What we lose in coming to the intimacy of conversion, is the very possibility of a transitive, or personal, intimacy between two individuals who would hope to retain their distinct and autonomous individuality. Such an intimacy – an intimacy of propriety – is necessarily jettisoned, by Rilke, in accordance with the demands of a poetic calling which, by the Spring of 1914, had come to supersede all others. This calling, which he reveals to us only several lines prior to his evocation of the inner maiden, is none other than the exigency of *Herzwerk* itself.



¹¹³ Ibid.

In Praise of the Unaccomplished

“The work of vision is done,” Rilke writes, “now do heart-work / at those images imprisoned within you.” These lines which, only moments ago, had seemed to us so deeply ambiguous, can now be understood with a newfound clarity – and appreciated more fully. Situated, as they are, in a context still largely dominated by the aftermath of the Benvenuto affair, what they propose is much more than a simple shift in poetic emphasis, away from vision and towards the heart. Rather, what these words prescribe for us is nothing less than a fundamental reorientation – a redirection of erotic longing *away from* everything which the work of vision, since the beginning of Western culture, has come to symbolise: possession, mastery, knowledge.¹¹⁴

To make the transition from *Werk des Gesichts* to *Herzwerk* is thus not only to give up on our mania for representation, but also to sacrifice all hope of attainment, consummation, and release. And to do so, moreover, in favour of a task which can neither be verified, nor exhausted, nor even truly experienced. This task, of course, is the arduous work of transmutation itself – the task of reconstituting all persons and things, beyond visibility, within the incomparable intimacy of the world’s inner space.

Indeed, what Rilke ultimately comes to discover, by the Spring of 1914, is that the work of transmutation is in fact synonymous with *Herzwerk*, just as the intimacy of the *Weltinnenraum* is indissociable from the intimacy of the heart. To perform the task of essential conversion is thus to affirm, and to love, all things beyond the contingency of their spatio-temporal individuation. It is to allow them to be reborn within us, within the heart itself – not as distinct entities, but as a kind of impersonal

¹¹⁴ Cf. *The Infinite Conversation*. pp. 29 & 252.

multiplicity composed of “a thousand natures.” And it is along these lines, moreover, that we find Rilke, in the wake of the Benvenuta affair, determining “to stop loving actual women otherwise than for the purpose of confirming his inner maiden.”¹¹⁵ A gesture of sacrifice, undoubtedly, but one which demands to be understood in a very specific sense.

For what is being sacrificed, here, is by no means simply the eroticism of the visible or the eroticism of the flesh. Indeed, it is nothing less than the sheer possibility of *any* erotic relation whatsoever still founded upon mutual recognition or reciprocity, mastery or possession. To perform the transmutation, to populate the vast reaches of the heart, is to lose possession of the very thing one transmutes. It is to relinquish all hold over it – and to let it slip, imperceptibly, into the realm of the invisible.¹¹⁶ But necessarily so. For it is only in this manner that intimacy, as Rilke tells us, may be founded. To undertake the task of *Herzwerk*, as we discover here, is to lead the most beloved of objects, the most beloved of images, to the very threshold of disappearance. An endeavour which remains strangely unverifiable. A passion for the unaccomplished itself.



¹¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke: *Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet*. 212.

¹¹⁶ It may be worth noting, here, that evidence of this correlation between the exigency of sacrifice and the symbolism of the heart can already be discerned within Rilke's work dating back to the earliest days of his career. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a poem entitled, “Die Liebende,” composed in early August of 1907: “my heart / seems so immense, so willing / to let him again depart / whom I perhaps have started / to love – to hold, maybe.” Rainer Maria Rilke. *New Poems*. Translated by J.B. Leishman. London: Hogarth Press, 1964. 265.

And here, at last, we cannot help but discern a unmistakable intimation of that crucial, final demand imposed upon us by the profound exigency in question. For to perform the transmutation upon *every* creature and *every* image, as Rilke exhorts us to do, is thus necessarily to perform it upon oneself as well. This, and nothing other, is what comprises the final, most auspicious, task of the poetic transmutation. When everything else has been led, through the work of essential conversion, to the point of invisibility, it is the poet himself who must take that final plunge into anonymity and affirm his own disappearance.

Understood in this light, the exigency of *Herzwerk*, becomes nothing other than a preparation for this final passage to the limit – when I affirm (perhaps with the madness of a leap) the very intimacy which I, the one who toils and labours for it, will never experience as my own.¹¹⁷ This, precisely, is the strange and paradoxical shape of intimacy in Rilke's later writings. And though Blanchot, at no point in his 1953 essay, comes to offer us an exhaustive explication of this strangest and most intimate of relations – what he *does* proceed to offer us is a truly invaluable analysis of a closely related phenomenon. A phenomenon which might be seen to mirror, in a profound and unmistakable manner, the very account which we have just attempted to elucidate. We are referring, of course, to nothing other than the phenomenon of death itself.



¹¹⁷ And to the extent that we, the final ones to take that leap, will never undergo it in a position of mastery, it might be said that the movement of *Herzwerk* is thus never definitively ended.

Indeed, there are perhaps few aspects of Blanchot's literary criticism that have attracted more attention, or more notoriety, over the years, than his reading of the so-called "two kinds of death." It is a reading, as we know, which attempts to elucidate, through the story of Rilke's own, various confrontations with the exigency of dying, the essential "doubleness [*dédoublement*]"¹¹⁸ of that final, most inscrutable of events.

For the young Rilke, as Blanchot tells us, there had been only one truly passionate desire – the longing for a *personal* death: "Oh Lord, grant to each his own death..."¹¹⁹ Indeed, it is within this very promise, this very prayer, as Blanchot suggests, that Rilke had come to seek nothing less than the defining culmination of his earthly existence, a moment which was to be earned and consummated on the basis of a most arduous commitment to one's own tireless labour. – A death perhaps not unlike the one Heidegger would later make reference to in the pages of *Being and Time*. Indeed, such a death, a truly proper one, would necessarily constitute, as Blanchot tells us, nothing less than one's *own most* possibility; it would constitute, moreover, "the most personal event that could possibly befall the 'I'...the event which 'I' would be called upon to affirm most authentically."¹²⁰

And yet, as Blanchot goes on to write, there is – in Rilke's work – yet another, more obscure side to death. It is a side which remains utterly apart from all propriety, all mastery, all authenticity. This, precisely, is the side of death which Rilke, in the years following his composition of the *Malte*, increasingly came to discover and bear witness to with a courageous, rarely broken, reticence. "Nothing is possible for me anymore, not even dying,"¹²¹ he writes in a letter from 1910. Indeed, the difference between these two, alternating faces of death, as Blanchot tells us, could not possibly be more starkly defined.

For, on one side, we find a relation with death which is predicated upon possibility and consummated in a moment unparalleled authenticity. Whilst on the other side, the hither side of all this, we find a death "with which no authentic relation is

118 *The Space of Literature*. 155.

119 *Ibid.* 149.

120 *Ibid.* 150.

121 *Ibid.* 132.

possible...a death to which I can never yes...a death which never comes for me.”¹²² Here, it is no longer *I* who die, but rather *they* who die. It is always someone other, someone who is never me. Here, in other words, death becomes a radically impersonal event – it becomes an entirely anonymous experience without any subject who would be capable of undergoing it.¹²³

And perhaps nowhere is the exigency of this latter death expressed more poignantly than in Rilke’s famous, self-penned epitaph: “Rose, oh pure contradiction / desire to be no one’s sleep/ under so many eyelids.” Through these lines, and through the image of the sleeping rose in particular, what Rilke succeeds in highlighting is the sheer impersonality of dying. Death becomes “no one’s sleep,” and whatever comfort might be gained there, necessarily excludes me from enjoying it. At the very heart of this invisibility, as Blanchot writes, “death becomes that which is not even an event, that which is not accomplished.”¹²⁴ To go towards it, as Rilke ultimately learns, is to move invariably in the direction of *régions anonymes* where both consummation and culmination are excluded.¹²⁵

Why do we mention all this? For the simple reason that this characterisation of death, of a death which remains radically impersonal and unclaimed, cannot help but call to mind, it seems, to the very depiction of intimacy which we have just encountered in the pages Blanchot’s 1954 Tristan essay – an essay published (as we know) less than a year after his study of Rilke. How can we not sense, in Blanchot’s allusion to an “intimacy absolutely without intimacy,”¹²⁶ an unmistakable echo of Rilke’s own notion of a death which is never fully accomplished, a death which is no

122 Ibid. 155.

123 We have already alluded to the notoriety of this aspect of Blanchot’s account. Deleuze, as we know, makes reference to the “two kinds of death” in both *Différence et Répétition* and *Logique du Sens*, where he reminds us that the second, or other, kind of death denies the event any definitive accomplishment. There are also strong Blanchotian resonances to be found in Lacan’s reading of the Antigone myth, in his 1959-60 seminars, particularly in Chapter XXI, “Antigone Between Two Deaths.” Cf. Gilles Deleuze. *Différence and Répétition*. Translated by Paul Patton. London: Continuum, 2004. 138. Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester. London: Continuum, 2004. 172. Jacques Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*. Translated by Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992. 247-286.

124 *The Space of Literature*. 155.

125 We are told by witnesses that Rilke’s death was painful. And this pain, it seems, was only exacerbated by the fact that death came very slowly. Day after day, week after week, fever consumed him, and his body broke down. But whereas others might have sensed the impending prospect release and even sought to hasten it, Rilke remained lucid for as long as possible, seeking to remain faithful to life (and therefore to death as well), even as the forces of dissolution wracked his body. Cf. *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1902-1926*. 437.

126 *The Infinite Conversation*. 191.

one's? How can one not sense, moreover, in the image of the empty heart – that most crucial of images from the Tristan essay, a kind of self-conscious reinscription of the Rilkean heart, that locus of incalculable intimacy, which is never mine?

Indeed, the resonances, here, are clearly undeniable. We can see, perhaps for the first time, the broad thematic affinities linking together these two essays, each written in the early 1950s. We can sense, moreover, the subtle emergence of a certain accent earlier unnoticed, perhaps even suppressed – an accent linked to the suspension of propriety, the suspension of *Eigentlichkeit*.

And yet, the question of influence, here, turns out to be a decidedly more complex issue than we could have ever first have imagined. For despite the fact that his 1953 Rilke essay does indeed contain Blanchot's first sustained attempts at inscribing the rhetoric of intimacy in the context of his *critical* writings, it is by no means his first attempt overall.

This is because, even as early as the beginning of the 1940s, Blanchot had already sought to introduce, rather prominently, any number of references to intimacy within his *fictional* writings – references which remain, to this day, largely undiscussed and widely misunderstood. It is these very references which come to offer us a truly invaluable sense of how Blanchot himself, even beyond the sphere of his literary criticism, was already coming to think, or more likely *rethink*, the very notion of intimacy within a decidedly post-Nietzschean paradigm.

To truly understand, in other words, the broader context for Blanchot's 1954 Tristan essay, and the presumptive collapse of distance which we encounter there, we must necessarily return to these early works of literary fiction, where the intimations of an empty heartbeat might already be discerned, unmistakably, in the silent tremors of an eroticism unchastened, even by the forces of impossibility itself.

Chapter VII

The Nothingness of Love

Intimacy Rhetoric in the Early Blanchot

“Embracing, we sever...”

Celan

The Tearing-Away

“In the night we are inseparable [*inséparables*]. Our intimacy [*intimité*] is this very night,” writes Blanchot in *Thomas l’obscur*. “Any distance [*distance*] between us is suppressed, but suppressed in order that we may not come closer [*rapprocher*] to one another.”¹

It is with these words that we begin our survey, because it is with these words, found within the pages of Blanchot’s very first published text, that the strange and disconcerting tension between the rhetoric of intimacy and the rhetoric of distance might already be seen to announce itself in a rather unmistakable manner. Are we being introduced, here, to a scene of amorous proximity – or to a portrayal of cruel and unrelenting estrangement? No matter how closely we examine these words, the indeterminacy which we encounter here seemingly cannot help but resist our every attempt at pacification, our every attempt at decisive resolution.

And on this point, of course, the passage above cannot help but bear a most striking resemblance to those other, similarly enigmatic and unexpected lines, inscribed by Blanchot in the early spring of 1954: “When the absolute of separation has become relation it is no longer possible to be separated” – the very lines which had initially signalled to us a collapse of distance, impelling us toward the important and wholly unprecedented task at hand.

¹ Maurice Blanchot. *Thomas the Obscure* in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. Edited by George Quasha. Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999. 121.

Indeed, what we encounter, in each of these two passages, is a nearly identical allusion to the annulment of erotic separation – a telling allusion to the ascendancy of intimate relations. And yet, just as in the Tristan essay, where the amorous couple found themselves consigned, in the midst of all this, to a certain unrelenting inaccessibility – so, too, are Blanchot’s protagonists, in the passage just cited, rendered somehow incapable of achieving a definitive *rapprochement*. A margin of separation, it seems, cannot help but persist. But what, exactly, are we to make of all this? What are we to make of this unsettling indeterminacy?



As it turns out, this precarious liaison between the rhetoric of intimacy and the rhetoric of radical separation is anything but anomalous within the pages of *Thomas l’obscur*. Consider, for example, the following excerpts:

“The darkness immersed everything; there was no hope of passing through its shadows, but one penetrated its reality in a relationship of overwhelming intimacy [*l’intimité*]...it was not that he saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he was bathed.”²

*

² Ibid. 60.

“I looked before me: a girl was sitting on a bench, I approached, I sat down beside her. There was only a slight distance [*un faible intervalle*] between us...She saw me with my eyes which she exchanged for her own, with my face which was practically her face, with my head which sat easily on her shoulders. She was already joining herself to me. In a single glance, she melted in me and in this intimacy [*intimité*] discovered my absence.”³

*

“From one moment to the next one might anticipate, between these bodies bound so intimately together [*noués si intimement*] by such fragile bonds [*par des liens aussi fragile*], a contact which would reveal in a terrible way their lack of bonds [*peu de liens*]. The more he withdrew [*reculait*] within himself, the more she came frivolously forward [*avançait légèrement*]. He attracted her [*Il l’attirait*], and she buried herself in the face whose contours she thought she was caressing. Did she act so imprudently because she thought she was dealing with someone inaccessible [*d’inaccessible*], or, on the other hand, with someone too easy to approach?”⁴

Three passages: each of which is irreducibly singular. And yet, considered side by side, a striking commonality emerges. Tropes of intimacy and estrangement, in every case, deployed alongside one another, as if some profound oblivion had annulled, momentarily, the incommensurability that should have existed between them. In the first excerpt, the “overwhelming intimacy” pervading the scene renders Thomas unrecognisable to himself; whilst in the second excerpt, the girl who comes near him, approaching a space of intimacy to be shared in common, can merge herself with little more than the overbearing awareness of his absence. The third excerpt takes all of this still further by accentuating even more explicitly the tireless movement of attraction and elision through which intimacy and inaccessibility, when taken to their respective limits, become seemingly interchangeable.

³ Ibid. 117.

⁴ Ibid. 80.

Indeed, it is almost as if the very possibility of intimacy, in these passages, were somehow made inseparable from its impossibility – as if to approach the threshold of amorous proximity were somehow to enter the space of its annulment and disqualification. In light of all this, one might inquire: what happens to the individual who would seek to make intimacy the object of a lived experience, or the outcome of a sovereign act? “One would only lose oneself [*se perdrait*] and continue to lose oneself,”⁵ Blanchot tells us. And in this losing of oneself, one would also lose all possibility of relating to the other, thus losing her as well.

There can be no doubt that the pages of Blanchot’s early fiction abound in instances of such loss. Not once, or twice, but in multiple instances, Blanchot presents us with erotic scenographies in which the profundity of intimacy and the shattering force of a terrifying estrangement find themselves inextricably linked. “At the pinnacle of passion [*au comble de la passion*] I attained the pinnacle of estrangement [*le comble de l'étrangeté*],”⁶ confides Thomas. And what about Anne, his interlocutor? Might she somehow find herself exempt from undergoing a similar fate? “All that she saw,” writes Blanchot, “all that she felt was the tearing away [*le déchirement*] which separated her from what she saw and what she felt.”⁷

For readers all too familiar with the canonical variants of fusional, or consummatory, eroticism stretching from the *Symposium* to the present day, this tension between seemingly incommensurable tropes must undoubtedly be jarring, not to mention confusing. And yet, it is precisely this tension which Blanchot comes to reinscribe, time and again, throughout the pages of his early work. From one book to the next, throughout the 1940s, his characters are persistently drawn back into the orbit of an intimacy consummated and subsequently shattered by the force of an estrangement growing ever more intense.

5 Ibid. 65.

6 Ibid. 112.

7 Ibid. 96.

Consider the erotic scenes from *Le Très-haut*, published in 1948, which bear witness to this very intensification: “I held her, roughly. She was rigid with a rigidity that called for a hammer,” recalls Henri Sorge, the novel’s protagonist. “Suddenly the cloth of her dress came to life under my fingers. It was strange – an irritating smooth surface, a kind of black skin that slid, adhered and didn’t adhere, billowed up. It was then that she was transformed – I swear, she became different. And I myself became someone else [*un autre*].”⁸ Then, only a few sentences later, Sorge goes on to recount the precise terms of this estrangement. “Yes, I swear it: I had become a stranger [*un étranger*], and the more I held her the more I felt her become a stranger...At that moment, we became separated [*séparés*], we felt and breathed the separation, we gave it a body...finally we were no longer touching.”⁹

It is remarkable how closely the language encountered in this passage already anticipates the rhetoric which Blanchot will later adopt in his 1954 Tristan essay. Recall, for instance, how Tristan and Isolde, “dispossessed of themselves, took body from, as they gave body to, the distance of absolute separation.”¹⁰ Clearly, something very similar is being described here, when Blanchot’s narrator declares: “We became separated, we felt and breathed the separation, we gave it a body...finally we were no longer touching.” In both cases, the amorous couple seems to slide, almost imperceptibly, from the very threshold of intimacy to the throes of separation – and then back again – as the tireless movement of attraction and repulsion ceaselessly recommences itself.

Scene after scene, page after page, we encounter these moments of dark incandescence – depictions of intimacy in which someone, rather inexplicably, seems to slip away. After a while, the various descriptions become almost interchangeable. “All of this was taking place at an infinite distance [*infiniment loin*],” remarks the narrator in *L’Arrêt de mort*, “my own hand on this cold body seemed so far away

8 Maurice Blanchot. *The Most-High*. Translated by Allan Stoekl. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 39.

9 Ibid. 39. And this is not all. Later, in another erotic scene from the same text, we read the following words: “I grabbed her, shook her, carried along by the wish to see her be separated from herself [*se détacher d’elle-même*], be separated from me [*se séparer de moi*], and become something else [*devenir quelque chose d’autre*].” [98]

10 *The Infinite Conversation*. 190.

from me [*éloignée de moi*]...”¹¹ Then, in *Le Très-haut*, we read: “she remained calm and let me touch the dry, hard body whose coldness didn’t even have the passivity of sleep...I stood there before nothing, myself empty [*vide*] and stripped of everything.”¹² That these texts were actually published side by side, in the very same year, only renders the repetition all the more unmistakable.

Indeed, with each recommencement, with every repetition, the sheer monotony of all this only becomes more apparent. The more closely we examine these various erotic scenes, the more convinced we become of a certain obsessiveness on Blanchot’s part, a fixation which leads him, over and over, to make use of the same tropes, the same descriptions. It was Françoise Collin, in her 1971 text, *Maurice Blanchot et la question de l’écriture*, who first made note of this obsessiveness, this inexorable recurrence of a single scene which, strictly speaking, never begins and never ends. It is interesting, in this respect, that Collin also found herself, at the same time, so particularly keen to disambiguate the Blanchotian erotic scenes from those of his friend and contemporary, Georges Bataille.

For the latter, she claims, eroticism was always a question of ecstasy; it was invariably a matter of acceding to “the sphere of the sacred.”¹³ For Blanchot, by contrast, the emphasis is placed primarily upon the “monotonous detachment,”¹⁴ the coldness and emptiness, which seem to pervade every touch, every caress. As a result, she argues, it is not Bataille who is Blanchot’s true peer in the realm of eroticism, but Sade himself.¹⁵ Indeed, it was Sade, as she reminds us, who first came to formulate, with such crystalline lucidity, “the eroticism of recommencement and repetition.”¹⁶ It was Sade, moreover, who theorised that profound and essential *dispassion* which belonged at the heart of every great passion.¹⁷

11 Maurice Blanchot. *Death Sentence* in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. Edited by George Quasha. Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999. 178.

12 *The Most-High*. 203 & 225.

13 Françoise Collin. *Maurice Blanchot et la question de l’écriture*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971. 138.

14 *Ibid.* 141.

15 Interestingly, it was none other than Bataille who, upon announcing the publication of *Lautréamont et Sade* in the Spring 1949 edition of *Critique*, wrote that the thought of Sade had pushed Blanchot to his limit, and vice versa. Cf. Christophe Bident. *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*. Seyssel: Champ Villon, 1998. 256.

16 *Maurice Blanchot et la question de l’écriture*. 140.

17 If ecstasy, for Bataille, is synonymous with death, Collin concludes, “one could easily apply a Blanchotian trope and say that in Sade’s eroticism we encounter, to the contrary, the very impossibility of death and the inexorable futility of dying.” *Ibid.* 141.

Indeed, this is something which Blanchot himself, in the pages of his 1949 text, explicitly comes to recognise in Sade's work. For Blanchot, there is perhaps no trope of greater importance within the writings of Sade than "the highly coherent concept...of apathy [*apathie*]."18 But how, precisely, are we to understand this term borrowed, as we know, from the very annals of Stoicism? A Sadean apathy, writes Blanchot, "does not merely consist in ruining parasitic affections, but also in opposing the spontaneity of any passion whatsoever."19 For passion to become energy, he continues, "it is necessary that it be constricted [*comprimée*], that it be mediated by passing through a necessary moment of insensibility; then it will be the greatest passion possible."20 Central, therefore, to the notion of Sadean apathy is this *moment nécessaire d'insensibilité*, a moment of indirection or deferral, wherein passion finds itself both constricted and refined by passing through insensibility.21 It is here, in the midst of this interval, that I am momentarily turned away from my own desire and separated from the very pleasure I undergo.22

"Consider how, in the early stages of her career, Juliette was continually scolded by Clairwell," writes Blanchot. "He reproaches her for only committing crimes with enthusiasm."23 Why is such an act, in Clairwell's eyes, worthy of reproach? It is because, as Blanchot tells us, to commit a crime with enthusiasm is to place lust, "the effervescence of pleasure,"24 above all else. "These are dangerous potentialities...[for] crime itself matters more than lust" – in Sade's work – "and what matters more than anything is the dark and secret crime committed by

18 Maurice Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. Translated by Stuart & Michelle Kendall. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. 37.

19 *Ibid.* 37.

20 *Ibid.*

21 We know that Blanchot's book on Sade was written more or less concurrently with both *L'Arrêt de mort* and *Le Très-haut* – and it makes sense, therefore, that of all Blanchot's fictional works, these are the two most visibly imbued with a rhetoric of frigidity and insensibility. "Passion – what does it mean?" asks the narrator of former text. "And what about ecstasy [*délire*]? Who has experienced the most intense feeling? Only I have, and I know that it is the most glacial [*glacé*] of all..." [p. 181] One cannot help but note the obvious rhetorical and thematic resonances linking these words to the somewhat frightening description, encountered in *Le Très-haut*, of Jeanne's "naked legs coming out of her heavy leather boots with glacial brutality [*une brutalité glaciale*]." [p. 185]

22 And is this not precisely what happens to us upon reading Sade's novels? Are we not invariably estranged from Sade the same way that his libertines become estranged from both themselves and their victims? Indeed, this is precisely what Blanchot himself appears to suggest in one of his later texts. "To say, I like Sade, is to have no relation at all to Sade. Sade cannot be liked, no one can stand him, for what he writes turns us away absolutely by attracting us absolutely: the attraction of the detour." Maurice Blanchot. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 45.

23 *Lautréamont and Sade*. 37.

24 *Ibid.*

hardening one's sensitive parts."²⁵ All great libertines, who live only for pleasure, Blanchot reminds us, "are great because they have obliterated within themselves every capacity for pleasure."²⁶

It is significant, therefore, that nowhere within Blanchot's erotic scenographies do we discover even the slightest reference to the pleasure of consummation or the joy of sexual fulfilment. Neither, in fact, do we encounter either "scandal, debauchery, or any sliding toward the obscene"²⁷ – all of which did not cease to attach themselves to the author of *Madame Edwarda* and his work. What we find, instead, is the "persistent impropriety of relation,"²⁸ a hyperbolic insensitivity which estranges us from our own passion, holding us back at the very threshold of gratification. What recurs, in other words, throughout Blanchot's fiction of the 1940s, is precisely this tendency toward the depiction of scenes which emphasise, in the very context of presumptive intimacy, the imposition of a radical strangeness, apathy, and detachment – a detachment which, as Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt reminds us, must never be confused for "a merely disinterested love [*un amour désintéressé*]."²⁹

For when we think of disinterested love, we almost always think of a willed decision, voluntary and masterful, to experience – as if objectively – the swelling intensity of amorous sentiment *whilst standing outside it all*.³⁰ But there is absolutely nothing (and here the comparison with Sade runs up against its limit) masterful about the coldness and insensibility which we encounter in Blanchot's texts. The experience of the erotic, in these early works, is not a cool and collected experience outside [*hors*] of passion; but rather, a passionate experience of the outside [*le dehors*] itself.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Marie-Laure Hurault. *Maurice Blanchot: Le principe de fiction*. Sanit-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1999. 60.

28 Ibid.

29 Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt. *Maurice Blanchot: L'écriture comme expérience du dehors*. Geneva: Droz, 1995. 239.

30 The most well-known, theological formulation of *Agape*, or "disinterested love," is likely the one proposed by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-5. He describes it as a love unbound from self-interest and committed to the well-being of others. For an interesting contemporary application, see Slavoj Žižek. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso, 2010. 98.

To enter the space of intimacy, in these texts, is to enter a space of dispersion where one's entire relationship to the world is jeopardised. It is to enter a space where work is rendered vain and the incessant murmur of perpetuity becomes audible. In nearly every case, the setting for this is but a single room, distanced (as if infinitely) from everything that lies beyond it. "These are decentred spaces, which double-back upon themselves infinitely,"³¹ writes Schulte Nordholt. Indeed, the rooms in question are almost always sparsely furnished and dimly lit, closed-off from the *milieu* of production and recuperable expenditure. "This closure of the room," she goes on to write, "signifies that the lovers have quite literally been cut-off from the world...like Tristan and Isolde...who famously remark: 'we have lost the world, and the world has lost us.'" ³²

The comparison with Tristan and Isolde, here, is an interesting one. For when we think back to our earlier analysis of the Tristanian scene, we are inevitably reminded of the implacable persistence of *die kleinste Kluft*, that smallest, most pernicious interval of separation which refused – even at the moment of unparalleled bliss – to be decisively surmounted. Here, in the pages of Blanchot's early fiction, "the accent is [likewise] placed on separation."³³ Only now, the separation itself has become multiplied. For it is not only the distance *between* the amorous couple which we must take account of, but also the internal distance which keeps them from ever coinciding with themselves. On one hand, there is the *entre-deux* which keeps the lovers forever apart; on the other hand, there is the strange force of impersonality which turns each of them, in the very midst of passion, into someone other, someone else.

Consider how, throughout Blanchot's fiction, this impersonality manifests itself rather prominently at the level of characterisation. Taking *L'Arrêt de mort* as our example, we might inquire: what, exactly, do we know about the narrator of the text? "Unknown are his physical traits, his characteristics, his age," writes Schulte Nordholt, "without name, he is equally without personal history, without a past...without extended family and without a fixed domicile, he has presumably no

31 Maurice Blanchot: *L'écriture comme expérience du dehors*. 243.

32 Ibid.

33 Maurice Blanchot: *Le principe de fiction*. 62.

social identity other than his profession as a journalist, which is mentioned in passing.”³⁴ One might say, quite justifiably, that he is little more than “a semblance,”³⁵ a glorified apparition. His only identity, it seems, resides in the very difference which separates him from himself. And what does this most anonymous of men, this man without qualities, proceed to tell us about the woman with whom he has entered into relation?

“I can say that by getting involved with Nathalie I was hardly getting involved with anyone [*je ne me liais presque avec personne*]: that is not meant to belittle her; on the contrary, it is the most serious thing I can say about a person.”³⁶ This impersonality, this trait of being almost no one, is her mark of freedom – a freedom from subordination which renders her not only strangely ungraspable (“I saw her from infinitely far away...”³⁷), but practically invisible as well. “Do I notice her at all?”³⁸ the narrator asks himself at one point. And yet, it is precisely toward this uncertainty, this impersonality, that he is drawn. It is her nothingness which attracts him, leading him forward into that most vertiginous of spaces where, in order to have her, he must lose himself as well. An ominous prospect which is expressed perhaps most succinctly in the following, brief exchange which we encounter in the text’s concluding pages: “Where do you want me to meet you?” he asks her. “Nowhere,” she replies.³⁹

Might we propose that Nathalie’s response, here, be understood in a very specific sense – as an allusion to that most mysterious and auspicious space where positionality and presence are suspended; a space where intimacy is perhaps finally granted, but only to the extent that it be understood as an intimacy of *no one*? Like the Rilkean heart, that *locus* of profound interpenetration where the inner maiden comes to reside, this space is accessible only to the individual willing to give up the desire for mastery and possession, as well as the assurance of personal autonomy. To accede unto the intimacy of the heart, is to enter a space where I am dispossessed of

³⁴ Maurice Blanchot: *L'écriture comme expérience du dehors*. 242.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Death Sentence*. 169.

³⁷ Ibid. 165.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 173.

myself – a dispossession which becomes both love’s surest verification and the sign of its inevitable collapse.

Along these lines, let us simply make note of the following words, written by Blanchot perhaps as early as the late 1930s: “Having now only a silent and dreary soul, a heart empty and dead [*un coeur vide et mort*], she made the sacrifice, full of strangeness, of her certainty that she existed, in order to give a sense to this nothingness of love [*ce néant d’amour*] which she had become.”⁴⁰

Beyond the fact that these words, taken from *Thomas l’obscur*, comprise one of Blanchot’s very earliest references to the heart – they also interest us for another (closely related) reason. It is here, in this passage, that the entire trajectory of Blanchot’s early thinking on the erotic might already be foretold. The exigency of sacrifice, the strangeness of relation, the nothingness of love – three tropes whose importance, in the years that follow, will only grow in stature, are already evident here in Blanchot’s very first published work of fiction. Some twelve years before the publication of his Rilke essays in the Spring of 1953 and thirteen years before his first engagement with the scenography of the Tristan romance, the question of intimacy is already prominently in play throughout the pages of Blanchot’s writing.



And yet, if there is a single fictional work from this early period which, more than any other, gives voice to the question of intimacy – in all its richness and complexity – this text is, in fact, neither *Thomas l’obscur*, nor *Le Très-haut*, nor even *L’Arrêt de mort*, but *Aminadab*, Blanchot’s under-read and largely under-appreciated second

⁴⁰ *Thomas the Obscure*. 104.

novel. For what is merely adumbrated in Blanchot's other texts from this period, comes to be ever more rigorously, more obsessively articulated here, in this novel which Jean Paulhan, upon its publication in September 1942, diminutively referred to as "a second *Thomas*."⁴¹

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the text's final third comprises one of Blanchot's lengthiest, most sustained discussions on the question of intimacy in the entirety of his published writings. This is perhaps all the more fascinating when we consider that *Aminadab*, as we have already mentioned, is also a text utterly permeated with references to distance, deferral, and the necessity of indirection – tropes which lend it, as many critics have suggested, a rather striking similarity to Kafka's own work.



⁴¹ Maurice Blanchot: *Partenaire invisible*. 204.

A Matter of Gifts in the Fire

We recall the rather inconspicuous manner in which Blanchot's novel begins. Through an open window, the narrator spies a young woman, briefly illuminated, who proffers him the simplest of gestures, a wave of the hand, before disappearing into the darkness. For all its simplicity, even banality, the narrator cannot help but wonder about the meaning of her sign, as well as what lies *behind* it – and in the swelling voluptuousness of the instant, it is his need to subdue this uncertainty, this ambiguity of the sign's meaning, which ultimately draws him forward, into the very heart of the labyrinth.

He is greeted there, as we know, by inevitable disappointments. To enter the apartment building, to undertake a search for the mysterious girl in the window, is to consign oneself, as he soon discovers, “to unlimited postponement [*l'ajournement illimité*] and the certainty of countless frustrations [*d'ennuis sans nombre*].”⁴² It is to find oneself all too quickly ensnared within “a hopeless situation [*une situation désolante*]”⁴³ in which all possibility of resolution comes to be cruelly foreclosed.

From one floor to the next, Thomas is led onward by the flickering translucence of desire – a desire which ceaselessly replenishes itself, forever extenuating his torment. With every encounter and every new scene, he seems to find himself ever further removed from his intended destination. “I'm probably chasing after phantoms [*les chimères*],”⁴⁴ he finally admits, in a concession of futility which nevertheless offers him neither the resolution, nor the solace which he seeks.

But then, in the very midst of all this – something truly remarkable happens. Having been pushed to the extreme limit of despondency and exhaustion, the inconsolable

⁴² Maurice Blanchot. *Aminadab*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 144.

Thomas suddenly finds himself face-to-face with the very woman he had been seeking all along. Here, in the heart of the labyrinthine circuit, the desired object suddenly stands before him, tangible and embodied.

A miraculous occurrence. And one which seems to announce, at long last, the promise of resolution: an end to the cruel regimen of deferral and postponement, an end to dissatisfaction, an end to longing. “Your fidelity [*fidélité*] will be rewarded,” Lucie tells him, “soon, nothing will stand in the way of our intimacy [*intimité*].”⁴⁵



There can little doubt of this scene’s importance, and not only within the context of the novel itself. For there is perhaps no other scene, within the entirety of Blanchot’s work, where the prospect of intimacy – of complete and total satisfaction – appears as imminently realisable. “I will take you in my arms and murmur words of great importance in your ear,” she continues. “In a moment we will be permanently united [*définitivement unis*]. I will stretch out my open arms; I will embrace you; I will roll with you through great secrets [*grands secrets*].”⁴⁶

So evocative are these words that we are nearly overwhelmed by the scope of their resonance: “I will take you in my arms and murmur words of great importance in your ear...I will roll with you through great secrets.” Of course, one cannot help but think, here, of Nietzsche whispering the secret of his most abyssal thought in Lou’s ear. But let us also think about everything we have learned, in the preceding pages, about the significance of the whisper more generally.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 178 & 181.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 197.

For is it not, without any doubt, our most intimate form of enunciation? The one which delivers us most nearly to the threshold of sheer immediacy? The one in which signifier and signified come closest to sharing a common identity and a common presence?

Indeed, it is not just a whisper which is at stake, here, but the entire scenography of immediacy and presence which it comes to entail. In the very midst of a seemingly intractable situation, Lucie appears before Thomas and proceeds to offer him, as if miraculously, a release from torment, an immersion within amorous proximity, and the assurance of a safe transit to the very end of deferral. An unexpected turn of events, to say the least. And one which cannot help but invite comparisons to Ariadne's fortuitous intervention on Theseus's behalf.

And yet, none of this, as we soon discover, comes without its costs. For in order to claim this intimacy as his own, and bring the story to its rightful resolution, Thomas is made subject to one final requirement, one final test; he is required to guarantee his adherence to a set of three, ostensibly unambiguous rules of amorous conduct. "First, I will ask that you speak as little as possible," Lucie demands of him. "Second, I will ask you please not to look at me...Third...Beginning from the moment when our union shall begin, you will be obliged not to think of me..."⁴⁷

By rendering intimacy subject to these three requirements, Blanchot is offering us something rather spectacular and unexpected, a melodramatic *tableau* borrowed from the very annals of the 17th century. It is none other than his attempt at rendering (and not without irony) a formal "proviso scene" in the style of the old masters. Though students of English literature will most likely have encountered variants of it within the works of Dryden and Congreve (with the latter's *The Way of the World* a canonical example), the formal "proviso scene" was originally conceived by the French writer Honoré D'Urfé in his "celebrated codebook of *précieuse* gallantry"⁴⁸ – *L'Astrée*. In this venerable text, some 5,000 pages long, we find the amorous couple (Hylas and Stelle) agreeing to draw up, in the presence of witnesses, the precise terms which are to govern their relationship. They agree, for instance, "to

⁴⁷ Ibid. 174-5.

⁴⁸ William Congreve. *The Way of the World*. Edited by Kathleen Martha Lynch. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. xiv.

banish jealousy, respect each other's speech and action, and abolish in their discourse all terms of endearment."⁴⁹

Had Blanchot read this text – arguably one of the most famous works of literature produced in 17th century France? Or had he simply assimilated elements of it from other sources? It is difficult to know for certain. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the proviso scene which we encounter in *Aminadab* seems to comprise a knowing re-enactment of what had surely become, by the early 20th century, a kind of anachronistic cliché.

Like the female beloved in *L'Astrée*, Blanchot's Lucie insists upon the presence of a third-party, a witness, to "oversee the execution"⁵⁰ of the agreements made. Right on cue, a young man – one of Thomas's "former companions"⁵¹ – arrives upon the scene in order "to verify that everything is happening according to the rules."⁵² But should it surprise us that his presence as a supposed mediator actually serves to obstruct and deter the very intimacy which he has been called upon to ensure? Such is the nature of Blanchot's discourse and the exigency of separation which inhabits it...

And what about the proviso itself, this all-important contract which will establish, for better or for worse, the terms of their union? Here, once again, Blanchot borrows knowingly from the very conventions which he seeks to contest. For it is typical, in most proviso scenes, to find the female lover taking great pains to ensure her freedom from domination, her "dear liberty" – as Millamant, for example, does in *The Way of the World*. Indeed, as students of literature can attest, the most common romantic proviso is the one which seeks to safeguard, at the very heart of amorous entanglement, a measure of irreducible distance between the lovers.

If the *Aminadab* proviso, between Thomas and Lucie, is of special importance to our study, it is because of the manner in which Blanchot carries this convention to its

49 Ibid.

50 *Aminadab*. 181.

51 Ibid. 179.

52 Ibid.

furthest, most unsustainable limit – to the point where it is not so much intimacy which is being safeguarded and ensured, but rather, the profound inevitability of estrangement itself.

Is it stating the obvious, then, to note that all three of the conditions for intimacy which Lucie enumerates are, in fact, conditions of its impossibility? Of these, perhaps the most intriguing is the third condition. “Beginning from the moment when our union shall begin, you will be obliged not to think of me.” Consider the following remarks which Lucie offers by way of a justification: “By refusing me the gift of a few particular thoughts, you will be offering me not only all your other thoughts, not only your thought and attention as a whole, but also your distraction, your absence, and your distance [*éloignement*].”⁵³

With these words, we come to approach the very heart of what Blanchot, in his early fiction, comes to formulate under the rubric of intimacy. If such a relation is possible, he tells us, it can be achieved neither on the basis of shared interest, nor commonality, nor even attraction; but rather, only through the force of an initial *refusal*. It is only by refusing her “the gift” of any particular thoughts, that Thomas is able to bestow upon Lucie something far more precious: the entirety of his thoughts and the entirety of his distraction.

Offer me neither your presence nor your proximity, she instructs him, but your absence and distance instead. Thus “you will absolve me of all that is yourself, and you will open up to all that is not you [*tout ce qui n’est pas vous*].”⁵⁴ These are strange words, which seem to run contrary to everything we have been taught to think about eroticism and love. Here, intimacy has nothing to do with mutual recognition, just as it has nothing to do with fusional reconciliation. If you love me, then forget me – such is Lucie’s paradoxical exhortation in the *Aminadab* proviso scene.

⁵³ Ibid. 176.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 176.

It is an exhortation, moreover, which we find echoed, in various forms, throughout the pages of Blanchot's novel.⁵⁵ Let us read, for example, the following words, encountered only pages earlier: "If he casts out my thought [*s'il rejette ma pensée*], then he remains faithful [*fidèle*] to it, has understood it perfectly, and has taken it into his heart [*emportée dans son coeur*]."⁵⁶ Here, it is fidelity which is at stake, not intimacy, but the radical precedence of refusal is very much the same. Refusal, or rejection – in this passage – becomes the very *measure* of fidelity. To remain faithful to the thought, Blanchot writes, is necessarily to forget it. Indeed, it is only then, in the wake of this loss, that we may claim to have truly taken it to heart.⁵⁷



Reading these words, we are struck by an undeniable prescience of the very rhetoric which Blanchot will later adopt throughout his various readings of the eternal return, that most auspicious of thoughts situated (and thus perpetually displaced) at the very heart of nihilism. To think the thought of eternal return, as we have discovered, is to find oneself incapacitated by the thought's impossibility – an impossibility which nevertheless serves as its surest testimony and verification.

And what does Blanchot seem to be saying, here, about the requisite conditions for fidelity, for intimacy? Precisely that they, likewise, entail a certain redirection, or even suspension, of thought. Just as the eternal return announces itself most

⁵⁵ And not only within the pages of *Aminadab*, but in other places throughout Blanchot's early fiction as well. Consider the following passage from *Thomas the Obscure*, which places a similar emphasis upon estrangement as the ultimate and incontrovertible condition of possibility for the experience of intimacy: "If ever I could be before you and completely absent from you [*m'écartant tout à fait de vous*], I would have a chance to meet you [*j'aurais une chance de vous rejoindre*]. Or rather I know that I would not meet you. The only possibility I would have to diminish the distance [*distance*] between us would be to remove myself to an infinite distance [*m'éloigner infiniment*]. But I am infinitely far away [*infiniment loin*] now, and can go no further. As soon as I touch you, Thomas..." [p. 85]

⁵⁶ *Aminadab*. 147.

⁵⁷ We have made no secret, in the preceding chapters, of our interest in Blanchot's usage of heart rhetoric – and here, once again, we find *le coeur* bound up, indissolubly, with the rhetoric of a certain vacancy and deprivation.

unmistakably in our incapacity to think it, so too does intimacy find itself confirmed in distraction, forgetfulness, and oblivion. Or at least this is what Lucie, throughout the course of her proviso speech, seeks to maintain. “Beginning from the moment when our union shall begin, you will be obliged not to think of me,” she tells Thomas. “This is what I ask of you, because I want to remain as close [*près*] to you as possible.”⁵⁸

When we take into account, alongside this injunction, the other two elements of the *Aminadab* proviso, namely, the prohibitions against looking and speaking – it soon becomes clear to us that path leading us toward intimacy is, in a certain sense, nearly indistinguishable from the path leading us away from it. Was it not Beckett who once speculated that the ascent to heaven and the descent to hell might be one and the same? Indeed, by the concluding pages of *Aminadab*, intimacy and estrangement find themselves so delicately intertwined that it becomes almost impossible to speak about one without necessarily evoking the other.

And could this be, perhaps, the very reason why Lucie prohibits Thomas not only from thinking about her, but from speaking to her, as well? Could it be that to speak of intimacy is already to conjure, in some way, its very displacement? Indeed, on this point, we cannot help but wonder whether *all* of the preceding account might constitute little more than an elaborate rephrasing of Nietzsche’s own words, in *Beyond Good and Evil* §120, that “One no longer loves one’s knowledge sufficiently after one has communicated it?”⁵⁹

It was with these words that we began our present study – and it is to these words that we seem fated, once more, to return. For what this aphorism (borrowed, as we know, from the courtly troubadours *via* Stendhal) expresses more succinctly than any other, is the incontrovertible necessity of distance, discretion, and deferral within erotic life. To withhold speech, as Lucie demands of Thomas, is not merely a condition for love – but love itself. The moment I begin to speak, I already love you less.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 176.

⁵⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil* §120.

This is a thought which Levinas himself, possibly under the influence of Blanchot, articulates rather cogently, when he writes that “what is presented as the failure of communication in love, in fact constitutes the positive character of that relationship.”⁶⁰ Here, once again, the message is clear: “everything that distances [the lover] brings him closer [*Tout ce qui l'éloigne le rapproche*].”⁶¹ Indeed, not unlike Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the underworld, the protagonists in Blanchot’s early novels seem utterly compelled to maintain, at all times, a relation of strict indirection between themselves and their female interlocutors. For it is only then, rather paradoxically, that they might somehow manage to preserve that last, flickering hope of an intimacy to come.



So what, we might ask, ultimately becomes of Thomas at the end of Blanchot’s second novel? Does the intimacy which has been promised him in fact arrive? Does he come to receive, in accordance with Lucie’s vow, that unparalleled proximity, the mingling of *pneuma*, the moment of satisfaction and release? Let us direct our attention to the novel’s final pages.

What we find, in the novel’s concluding scene, is an account of Thomas and Lucie awaiting, with great expectancy, the imminent arrival of night. It is a dramatic wait, perhaps even a tortuous one, which cannot help but call to mind those myriad scenographies of nocturnal longing which pervade the annals of German romanticism. Recall how Novalis, at the end of the 18th century, had written of the night, “In this sorrow-laden life [*Schattenleben*], I desire only thee...in thee I hope for healing [*genesen*], in thee I expect true rest [*Ruhe*].”⁶² And then how Tristan and

60 *Existence and Existents*. 98-9. These words, incidentally, are taken from his 1947 text, *Existence and Existents* – a text which explicitly references Blanchot’s *Aminadab* as a work in which eroticism is “pushed to the point of the loss of personal identity.” [p. 99]

61 *Aminadab*. 147.

62 “Hymns to the Night.” 20.

Isolde, in Act II of Wagner's opera, had similarly apostrophised it with such unrestrained ardour: "O sink down upon us / night of love / make me forget / that I live: / take me into your bosom, / free me from the world!"⁶³ In both these cases, the coming of night was to entail not only the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* but also an immersion within unprecedented proximity. To enter the sacred purity of the nocturnal element was to be delivered, at last, from longing and deferral. It was to find separation annulled and consummatory fulfilment attained.

Clearly, one of Blanchot's objectives, in final pages of *Aminadab*, is to reinscribe, somewhat parodically, many of these same themes – even making recourse to much of the same rhetoric as his illustrious predecessors. Like the German romantics before him, Blanchot elects to offer us a description of intimacy linked, as if quintessentially, to the all-encompassing saturation of a nocturnal darkness. Consider how, on the text's penultimate page, Lucie seems to reassure Thomas, "When the night has revealed its truth to you and you are fully at rest...we will be permanently united [*définitivement unis*]...there will never be anything to separate us."⁶⁴ Nothing could be closer, or more faithful, to the precise sentiment which Novalis had sought to express in his *Hymns to the Night* and which Tristan and Isolde aspire to within Wagner's opera.

But then, having led us to this very limit, to the threshold of amorous fulfilment – something extraordinary happens in Blanchot's text, something which seems to transport us back into the realm of an unimaginable strangeness. "...There will never be anything to separate us," remarks Lucie, "What a shame you will not be able to witness this good fortune [*quel dommage que tu ne puisses assister à ce bonheur*]."⁶⁵ With these words, uttered as the last traces of light come to vacate the desolate scene, the earth seems to drop from under Thomas's feet. At the very point of consummation, an unimaginable catastrophe announces itself in these most unassuming of words. Intimacy (at last) is here – but it is an intimacy which will never be experienced by him. It is an intimacy which excludes him from ever making it his own. "What a shame you will not be able to witness it," she tells him, what a

63 Act II, Scene 2.

64 *Aminadab*. 196-7.

65 *Ibid.* 197.

shame that the revelation of intimacy and the highest bliss of consummation “does not touch you yourself [*ne t’atteigne pas toi-même*].”⁶⁶

Sobering words, which seem to echo, unmistakably, those lines from *Thomas l’obscur* with which we began this chapter: “In the night we are inseparable [*inséparables*]. Our intimacy [*intimité*] is this very night. Any distance [*distance*] between us is suppressed, but suppressed in order that we may not come closer [*rapprocher*] to one another.”⁶⁷ As in the passage from *Aminadab* quoted above, it is the final clause, here, that changes everything.

What falls is not, in fact, the night of rest and repose – but that *other*, more menacing night – the night which sends our protagonist reeling from the very threshold of intimacy toward a terrifying awareness that the event which is coming, an event of unparalleled importance, will forever exclude him.⁶⁸ As darkness descends, on the text’s final page, it is not the awaited advent of consummatory fulfilment which greets Thomas, but rather, a renewed disorientation and estrangement, both from himself and from the object of his desire. Here, and nowhere else, do we find the novel’s most Kafkaesque moment – here, at the precise instant when Thomas, groping in the depths of an impenetrable darkness, utters that final, all-important question: “Who are you [*Qui êtes-vous*]?”⁶⁹ In the very midst of presumptive intimacy, it is ignorance and uncertainty which once more assert themselves – thus casting him back, as if symbolically, to the story’s opening page, where the ambiguity of a single sign had been enough to enflame the entirety of his prodigious desire.⁷⁰

66 Ibid. 196.

67 *Thomas the Obscure*. 121.

68 It is this *other* night which we think of when we read those words, found in one of Paul Eluard’s last love poems, “Night is never complete.” Indeed, if night is never complete, in the pages of *Aminadab*, it is because there remains, strictly speaking, no possibility of bearing witness to an event (the event of completion or consummation) which perpetually expels *me* from its domain. To proclaim, “Now the night is complete, now intimacy is achieved,” is to mark a limit which has already, by necessity, been crossed. To speak of an end, is to speak from beyond it, and thus to refute oneself. Paul Eluard. *Last Love Poems of Paul Eluard*. Translated by Marilyn Kallet. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. 89.

69 *Aminadab*. 199.

70 On this point, in particular, Christophe Bident draws an important parallel between *Aminadab* and *Le Très-haut*, where Blanchot similarly offers us erotic scenes which tend to emphasise, “at one and the same time, the fusion and separation of bodies.” [p. 264] In both texts, we encounter, on the final page, a glaring moment of indeterminacy, a lack of resolution, which seems to direct us back to the beginning of the tale. Not unlike the final scene of *Tristan and Isolde* which culminates neither in harmonic resolution nor erotic satiety, the concluding pages

How can one not think, here, of the tap-room scene in *The Castle*? How can one not recall the feeling of intense depersonalisation and dislocation which afflicts K. at the very height of amorous proximity, in those “hours spent breathing together with a single heartbeat [*gemeinsamen Herzschlags*]?”⁷¹ Indeed, what we encounter in the final paragraph of Blanchot’s *Aminadab* is a scene in which resolution perhaps *does* come, but not for anyone who would seek to undergo it in the present. And certainly not for anyone who would seek to undergo it in a relation of mastery or propriety. The only intimacy to be found here, is an intimacy whose heart, to borrow a line from *Thomas l’obscur*, is always empty [*vide*] – an emptiness fed by that “nothingness of love” which Blanchot’s characters quite literally become.

“Yes, love is a matter of gifts / thrown in the fire, for nothing.” This is how Marina Tsvetayeva, who hanged herself in late 1941, only months before the publication of *Aminadab*, once memorialised the essential profligacy of erotic relations.⁷² What these words convey so vividly is the necessity – in love – of a sacrifice, a loss, which remains utterly non-recuperable. Gifts, thrown in the fire, for *nothing*.

And yet, reading these words, it also strikes us that refusal, too, can be a gift – and a most significant one, at that. When Thomas is instructed to refuse Lucie the gift of any particular thoughts, what he gives her, in a sense, is the gift of his refusal itself. And this refusal, then, becomes a most sublime expression of his love and devotion.

Might we conclude, therefore, on the basis on the preceding remarks, that the eroticism which we encounter in Blanchot’s fictional texts, throughout the 1940s, remains rather obsessively fixated upon one, very specific, conglomeration of tropes: sacrifice, separation, and loss – as the conditions of (im)possibility for the amorous relation? At every turn, we find gifts thrown in the fire for nothing. At every turn, we find the stubborn insistence of a heart whose very emptiness testifies, more eloquently than any plenitude, to the pure essence of love. Indeed, at every turn, it is the radical precedence of refusal which comes to assert itself at the very centre of

of both these texts seem to suggest that tacit command: *De Capo!* – a command which brings to bear the full force and terror of eternal recurrence, consigning us to a longing that forever recommences.

71 *The Castle*. 41.

72 Marina Tsvetayeva. *Selected Poems of Maria Tsvetayeva*. Translated by Elaine Feinstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. 54.

erotic life – a refusal which Blanchot himself, by the end of the 1940s, had not only come to write, but also to live.

Indeed, the more closely we examine the relationship between Blanchot's personal life and his writings of the 1940s and early 1950s, the more we become aware of a rather compelling story behind the story, a refusal behind those myriad refusals and separations which pervade his fictional texts. We become aware, in other words, of a hesitant, uncertain dance between intimacy and estrangement, between nearness and separation, a dance which was soon to transport him, this most private of men, beyond the bounds of literature, beyond the bounds of philosophy, into a space where passion takes hold – a passion which was to bear the name of Denise Rollin.

Chapter VIII

An Uncertain Covenant

“What do you consider the essential encounter of your life?
To what extent did it seem to you to be fortuitous or foreordained?”

Eluard

“...this young woman who had just entered was about to reappear in the street, where I was waiting for her without being seen. In the street...The marvellous rush of evening made this liveliest and, at times, most disquieting part of Montmartre glitter like no other. And this figure was fleeing before me, ceaselessly intercepted by the darkness of moving hedges. Hope – what sort of hope? – was now just a tiny flickering beside me. I never remember having felt in my life such a great weakness. I almost lose sight of myself, I seem to have been carried away like the actors in the first scene.”

Breton

“The Moment never arrives until the person is there...the right person.”

Kierkegaard

“...this being destined for me...”

Much of what we know about Blanchot's relationship with Denise Rollin comes from the Bident and Surya biographies. These studies are admirable for their scope and precision, but both are disappointing to the extent that they fail to offer us any serious discussion of Rollin's influence upon Blanchot's work and thought. A likely reason for this is that, until now, the matter itself has remained largely speculative.

We know that Blanchot was first introduced to Denise Rollin in the autumn of 1941, not long after the initial publication of *Thomas l'obscur*. Over the next year and half, the two of them would meet nearly twice a month for conversations, at 3 rue de Lille, along with Bataille (who was her lover at the time) and others. By all accounts, the Blanchot who participated in these discussions presented himself as the very embodiment of modesty and discretion. And Rollin, who was fond of professing that there could be “no grandeur unless it [was] accompanied by a great humility,”¹ was naturally drawn to him. “M.B. is the being with the utmost humility that I know,” she would later confide, “he resembles most incredibly Dostoevsky's ‘Idiot’...yet he is altogether unconscious of all this.”² This unconsciousness, this absence from himself, as Bident claims, “is precisely what attracted her...This movement of self-effacement, of being nobody, is what seemed to fulfil her.”³

The various descriptions of Denise which have been passed down to us seem to portray her, almost uniformly, as a woman of great deliberation and restraint. Bataille's daughter, Laurence, remembers her “as someone both extremely open and completely

1 Maurice Blanchot: *Partenaire invisible*. 277.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

withdrawn.”⁴ Whilst Michel Fardoulis-Lagrange, a close friend, recalls Denise as a woman who “quite literally embodied silence.”⁵ Blanchot himself, we are told, “was deeply shaken by the reserve of this woman of such melancholic and taciturn beauty.”⁶

By the time they met, Rollin was thirty-four (the same age as he) – recently divorced, with a young son. She was already well-known in avant-garde circles, and had cultivated, throughout the 1930s, close friendships with any number of surrealist artists and writers, including Breton himself.⁷ It was in October 1939, that she first met Bataille – and the connection between them was both visceral and immediate. “Except with Laure, I have never felt such comfortable purity, such a silent simplicity,”⁸ Bataille would later write. Toward the end of March 1943, the couple left Paris for Vézelay, along with Rollin’s young son, Jean. Less than six months later, however, Bataille would break-off the affair, rather impulsively, and return to Paris alone. Their romance, he would later claim, “had been nothing but glitter in a void.”⁹

It was in the Autumn of 1943, upon her own return from Vézelay, that Denise grew particularly close to Blanchot. By the middle of 1945, as Bident tells us, the two had become lovers. What followed, over the next few years, was arguably the most significant romance of Blanchot’s adult life, a *relation amoureuse* which nevertheless came to be disrupted, repeatedly, by the imposition of distances, disappointments and deferrals. It was a relationship, moreover, predicated from the very start upon a profound sacrifice – a sacrifice whose precise nature will become increasingly evident to us in the pages that follow.

4 Michel Surya. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Krzysztof Kijalkowski. London: Verso, 2002. 281.

5 Maurice Blanchot: *Partenaire invisible*. 273.

6 Ibid.

7 *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. 282.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.



Toward the end of the 1950s, Denise Rollin would write to a friend, “This now makes fourteen years that I refuse Maurice Blanchot – who nevertheless is the being destined for me.”¹⁰ Incredible words. But what, if anything, might they contribute to our appreciation of Blanchot’s work?

Counting backwards (some fourteen years) from the date of her letter, we arrive at November 1945 – “La Lecture de Kafka” had just been published and Blanchot was leaving Paris for Beausoleil. He would return to the capital the following Spring – only to leave again less than four months later. Such peregrination was, for Blanchot, less the exception than the rule. By the winter of 1946, he had moved again. This time, to the little house in Èze where, in the months that followed, he would begin work on *Au moment voulu* – the text “written for Denise.”¹¹

It was over the course of this year and a half that the refusal which she refers to in her letter began to take shape. Though the exact circumstances which surround it remain largely unknown to us, what we do know is that, when he was in Paris, Blanchot would “regularly visit” Denise at her home on rue de Vaugirard.¹² This is verified by her son, Jean, who remembers the visits and later described Blanchot as “a very gentle man, full of humour, though also very ill, extremely feeble.”¹³ Of course, for much of the time between the winter of 1945 and the autumn of 1946 Blanchot was not in Paris at all, but on the move between Chalon and Beausoleil.

In his biography, Bident leads us to believe that the epistolary correspondence conducted between them during this period was considerable, with her letters, in

¹⁰ *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*. 275.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.* 272.

¹³ *Ibid.*

particular, characterised by a high style and intensity.¹⁴ As for Blanchot's letters – we can only speculate. Yet what we *do* know, is that his critical writings from around this time are some of his most important early pieces, many of which bear witness to a burgeoning obsession with themes whose prominence would only increase in the years that followed: the affirmation of extreme distance, the contestation of teleologically-oriented eroticism, the exigency of return.

Particularly striking, in this respect, is the rhetoric adopted in his essay, “Du côté de Nietzsche,” published in two instalments between December 1945 and January 1946. In the midst of a brief, but fascinating, digression upon Nietzsche's well-known mythopoetic symbology – we find the following remarks, which we have previously cited:

“Freedom is to God what Ariadne is to Theseus and Dionysus...first, it annihilates him, as Ariadne annihilates Theseus: ‘That is my sign of supreme love [*amour supreme*], to reduce him to nothing.’ But then, Ariadne needs Dionysus, the god torn apart, who tells her, ‘I am your labyrinth.’ She needs to tear God apart; for against God who is the end, the outcome above all others, she asserts herself as refusal, refusal ever to accept an alien end [*refus de jamais accepter une fin étrangère*]. And she needs the torn-apart God who is the labyrinth, and against the labyrinth she affirms her free movement, her ability to separate herself [*se dégager*].”¹⁵

Having read these words, by now, hundreds of times I can attest that they appear to me as resistant to exhaustive interpretation as anything Blanchot ever wrote. Nonetheless, they are words which demand not to be passed over. For when we approach them with the requisite attentiveness and patience, a scenography of incomparable importance slowly takes shape before our eyes. An erotic scenography, to be sure. And yet, one which knows absolutely nothing of either possession or fulfilment, satisfaction or release.

14 Ibid. 273.

15 *The Work of Fire*. 296-297.

From out of this paragraph, let us cull three separate statements – statements which, when considered together, come to offer us some sense of how Blanchot may indeed have understood the enigmatic figure of Ariadne and the eroticism which she came to embody. First of all, we encounter the words: “That is the sign of my supreme love, to reduce him to nothing.”¹⁶ Next, we are told that, against God – who is the end above all others – Ariadne asserts herself as refusal, the refusal ever to accept an alien end. Finally, Blanchot tells us, it is against the labyrinth, which she nonetheless needs, that Ariadne affirms her freedom, her ability to separate herself.

Three statements, three distinct points of emphasis: the sign of supreme love, the refusal of all ends, and the exigency of separation. Indeed, it is at the very point where these statements converge that the mystery of Ariadne’s significance appears to be found. Of course, we cannot help but notice how closely each of these statements seem to align themselves with the very depiction of Ariadne which, only slightly earlier, we ourselves had come to propose in relation to Nietzsche’s work.

Recall, for instance, how it had belonged to the very nature of Ariadne’s essence to elide even our most sophisticated attempts at conceptualisation or identification. This was because what she embodied, for Nietzsche, was nothing less than the sensuousness of every object’s absence; the strange voluptuousness encountered in that quixotic space freed of all ends, all beginnings, and all values. Ariadne became Nietzsche’s name for the extremity of distance *made palpable* – the very distance to which the eternal return forever consigns us.

To love Ariadne was not to love the Other; but rather, to love the absolute and irremediable absence of every Other. It was to feel the sensuousness of this absence and to desire it, affirm it, and praise it for all eternity – knowing, all the while, that no amount of desire or yearning will ever grant us dominion over this absence. One can

¹⁶ This phrase is in fact a direct quotation from a dramatic sketch set down in Nietzsche’s notebook during his stay in Venice in the autumn of 1887 (Wagner had died in the city less than five years earlier). The drama in question was to conclude with a last act entitled: “The Wedding of Dionysus and Ariadne.” Here, Ariadne was to remark: “...this is my supreme love for Theseus: to reduce him to nothing.” Blanchot’s citation of this phrase further corroborates his broad familiarity with Nietzsche’s published and unpublished work. *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*. 84-5.

only court her, and pursue her, endlessly. And the law of this courtship is simple and unbending: raise your desire to the highest level possible, desire her for all eternity, but without orgasm, without consummation.



Considered in this light, the passage from “Du côté de Nietzsche,” becomes surprisingly comprehensible. What is being described is precisely an eroticism unfettered by teleology and devoted to the affirmation of extreme distance. It is an eroticism which makes the act of refusal – the refusal of all ends – an act of supreme love.

And is it not immensely fascinating, therefore, that Blanchot should elect to make refusal a sign of Ariadne’s supreme love *at nearly the same exact moment* when Denise Rollin, according to the letter previously cited, began enacting a refusal of her own – quite literally refusing *him*, this being for whom she was, nevertheless, destined? Is this merely a coincidence? Or could it be that the Ariadne who refuses all ends, is in fact a placeholder, here, for Denise – who had just refused Blanchot, reduced him to nothing, and then by separating herself from him, performed the act of supreme love?

Keep in mind that Blanchot’s allusion to Ariadne, here, is by no means an isolated occurrence. Indeed, we know that only months after the publication of “Du côté de Nietzsche,” Blanchot would once again inscribe, albeit more discretely, the traces of Ariadne within his writing. The occasion for this would be his essay on Benjamin Constant – an essay from the autumn of 1946 which we have already noted for its prominent references to the eroticisation of distance. Here, in the final lines of this essay, Blanchot elects to offer us a quote from the pages of *Zarathustra* – an excerpt which subtly evokes that famous paean to unrequited love which Nietzsche himself would later gloss, in the Autumn of 1888, with the rather provocative remarks: “Nothing like this has ever been composed, ever been felt, ever been *suffered* before, this

is how a god suffers, a Dionysus. The answer [*Antwort*] to this sort of dithyramb of solar solitude in the light would be Ariadne...Who besides me knows what Ariadne is!...Nobody until now has been able to solve riddles [*Räthseln*] like this.”¹⁷

The comparison which Blanchot is seeking to elicit, here, in the closing lines of this 1946 essay, is between the solar solitude which Zarathustra evokes in proclaiming: “Unsated as the flame / I burn in order to be consumed”¹⁸ – and the amorous sentiment of Constant, “this indifferent man, model of the ennui’d heart,”¹⁹ who writes to Juliette Récamier: “I am destined to illuminate you by burning myself up.”²⁰ In both cases, as Blanchot points out, the speakers of these respective statements inform us quite plainly that they burn, that they are enflamed. It is a burning, moreover, which consumes them entirely, signifying a love carried to the point of absolute irreciprocity. Indeed, one might even say that this incineration is precisely what lights, sacrificially, the very pyre of love – a love from which someone is perpetually rendered absent, as if annihilated.

And where have we already encountered this rhetoric? Naturally, in the lines from “Du côté de Nietzsche” quoted above – those *very lines* in which Denise Rollin herself had seemed so visibly impregnated. Lines in which annihilation, refusal, and separation were valorised at the heart of erotic life. Could it be, therefore, that Blanchot (by the winter of 1946) had come to see his situation as analogous, in some respect, to the one evoked by Zarathustra, by Constant? Is it possible that just as these earlier figures, one fictional and one real, had come to experience the profound sense of loss and emptiness at the heart of the amorous relation, so too had Blanchot himself come to understand the experience of love as inextricably linked to the necessity of sacrifice and refusal?



17 *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. 133.

18 *The Work of Fire*. 243.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

Such a possibility, it seems, makes for rather enticing reading. But there is *even more* to this theory. For as we know, in the months that immediately followed all this, Blanchot would relocate to that little house in Èze, the house not far from those steep cliffs where Nietzsche's own path runs tenuously over rock and boulder. Here, in the midst of an incomparable solitude, Blanchot would set to work on a *récit* which, more than any of his previous texts, would be visibly and unmistakably imbued with the rhetoric of sacrifice and refusal. This text, as we know, was none other than *Au moment voulu* – a text whose main female character, Judith, was to be loosely-based (according to Bident) upon the personage of Denise Rollin herself.

Here, the Ariadnean resonances which had been accumulating throughout the mid-to-late 1940s reach a point of unmistakable saturation. For Blanchot's treatment of Judith, in this text, cannot help but evince a most startling resemblance to the precise manner in which Nietzsche, throughout his writings, alludes to his own, mysterious muse. Indeed, it is with both hesitation and discretion that the figure of Judith is introduced to us. "I would like to let nothing be understood about her, ever..." admits Blanchot's narrator. "My need to name her, to make her appear in circumstances which, however mysterious they may be, are still those of living people, has a violence about it that horrifies me."²¹ And yet, despite this horror, the demand to speak nevertheless imposes itself upon him. Not unlike Zarathustra, for whom the requisition [*Verlangen*] of speech could only express itself in the form of a hyperbolic modesty, Blanchot's narrator offers us a testimony characterised, above all, by extreme restraint. "To pass over the essential – this what the essential asks of me,"²² he tells us.

The significance of Blanchot's hesitation (he waits until the final ten pages of the *récit* to formally introduce her) can perhaps be seen as a manifestation of this need "to pass over the essential." But this is *only if* we understand that what is most properly "essential"

21 Maurice Blanchot. *When the Time Comes* in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. Edited by George Quasha. Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999. 206.

22 *Ibid.*

about Judith is precisely her lack of self-identity, her lack of essence. Thus, the very act of “passing over” allows Blanchot’s narrator to bear witness more nearly to who she is. Given all this, what is perhaps most surprising is the candour and naturalness which seem to characterise the following lines: “I met this woman I called Judith: she was not bound to me by a relationship of friendship or enmity [*un rapport d’amie ou d’ennemie*], happiness or distress; she was not a disembodied instant, she was alive.”²³ Not unlike the opening lines of *La folie du jour* (“I am neither learned nor uneducated...”) Blanchot’s tone here is calm and measured – pervaded, one might say, by an almost unreasonable equanimity.

And yet, it is an equanimity which can only be imperilled by what comes next. For what Blanchot proceeds to recount for us, in the paragraph that immediately follows, is without any doubt, a most “devastating story [*histoire accablante*].”²⁴ Consider the following words:

“As far as I can understand, something happened to her that resembled the story of Abraham. When Abraham came back from the country of Moria, he was not accompanied by his child but by the image of a ram [*de l’image d’un bélier*], and it was with a ram that he had to live from then on. Others saw the son in Isaac, because they didn’t know what had happened on the mountain, but he saw the ram in his son, because he had made a ram for himself out of his child. A devastating story. I think Judith had gone to the mountain, but freely. No one was freer than she was, no one troubled herself less about powers and was less involved with the justified world. She could have said, ‘It was God who wanted it,’ but for her that amounted to saying, ‘It was I alone who did it.’ An order? Desire transfixes all orders [*Le désir transperce tous les orders*].”²⁵

Here, in this passage, we are told of a most harrowing event, an event in which Judith herself, under the compulsion of a most irrepressible desire, is led to the very brink of committing the ultimate sacrifice. And yet, what is perhaps most remarkable, here, is that even though the decisive act, the sacrifice itself, is never actually consummated – it

²³ Ibid. 253.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

nevertheless continues to occupy her attention, to haunt her, precisely *as if* it had. It is this very event, the one that never occurs, never truly arrives, which becomes, for Judith, the most significant event of all – an event which refuses to relinquish its hold upon her for the remainder of her life.

Of course, it is nearly impossible for us to read these words, and consider this passage in any depth, without thinking immediately of Kierkegaard, for whom the mysteries of the Abrahamic covenant, were a source of almost unlimited agony and stupefaction. “When I have to think about Abraham,” Kierkegaard writes, “I am virtually annihilated.”²⁶ Indeed, it was in Kierkegaard’s writings, more than anywhere else, that the sacrifice on Mount Moria, the very sacrifice described in this passage, first came to assume a truly unprecedented importance within philosophical discourse. But what, if anything might Kierkegaard’s insights on the subject offer us by way of assistance here? To what extent might they aid us in reading Blanchot’s text – or in understanding the nature of his relationship with Denise?



As it turns out, the influence of Kierkegaard upon Blanchot’s writing, both stylistically and thematically, is a subject which has been almost entirely overlooked by scholars. It could be argued, perhaps, that much of this neglect was owed to the widespread appropriation of Kierkegaard’s work within existentialist circles both during and immediately following the war. That Blanchot always maintained a respectful distance from this particular intellectual milieu might explain (at least in part) why these two writers – both of whom were fascinated and distressed by Hegel in equal measure – never inspired the kind of full-scale comparative study which they deserved.²⁷

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Howard & Edna Hong. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1983. 62.

²⁷ We note in passing the well-known fact that Bataille, at one point, had apparently planned to write a monograph entitled, *Maurice Blanchot and Existentialism*. Whether or not this text would have cast a valuable light on the relationship between Blanchot and Kierkegaard can only be a matter of speculation.

For instance, we know that Blanchot's broad familiarity with Kierkegaard's work dates back at least to 1941, if not earlier. A familiarity, moreover, which at least on the basis of what we can glean from the Benny Lévy interviews, far exceeded Sartre's own appreciation for the Kierkegaardian *oeuvre* at the time.²⁸ Two essays, one from December 1941 and the other from July 1943, bear witness to Blanchot's early interest in Kierkegaard – and provide us, alongside Kierkegaard's own *Fear and Trembling*, with an invaluable companion piece to some of the most important passages in *Au moment voulu*, that very text in which in the eroticism of sacrifice appears to loom so large.

“I am your murderer, and this is my desire”

It goes without saying that most contemporary readers of *Fear and Trembling* are well aware of the text's biographical context. We know that Kierkegaard wrote this book in the wake of his broken engagement to Regine Olsen.²⁹ We also know that the story of Abraham might, therefore, conveniently be overlaid with the story of Kierkegaard's own sacrifice at the time. In fact, this transposition of a biblical story into an explicitly erotic one is something which Kierkegaard not only endorses, but himself specifically undertakes within the very pages of his text.

“A swain falls in love with a princess,” he writes in *Fear and Trembling*. “The content of his whole life lies in this love, and yet the relationship is one that cannot possibly be

²⁸ In recalling his philosophical interests and endeavours of the early 1940s, Sartre equivocates greatly about the actual influence of Kierkegaard's philosophy upon his own thought. See Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy. *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*. Translated by Adrian van den Hoven. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 54-55.

²⁹ Kierkegaard proposed to Regine, the State Counsellor's eighteen year old daughter, in September 1840. Their engagement lasted barely a year.

brought to fruition, it cannot be translated from ideality into reality.”³⁰ Not to be deterred, the swain summons all his energy and all his resources, concentrating all of his yearning upon this single, incomparable object. “Having thus imbibed all the love and absorbed himself in it, he does not lack the courage to attempt and risk everything.”³¹ And yet, when it gradually becomes clear to him that the matter is, in fact, one of impossibility, he is left with seemingly no choice but to relent. “He becomes quiet – remains alone and performs the movement.”³²

The *movement* which Kierkegaard refers to here is none other than the movement of “infinite resignation”³³ – and its consequences are nothing less than profound. To the extent that the swain’s yearning for the princess comprises “the unifying focus of his identity,” his failure to attain her “reverberates throughout the entirety of his experience.”³⁴ His relation both to himself and to the world is immediately “torn asunder, stripped of meaning and reality.”³⁵ He retreats into the waking catastrophe of a life bereft of satisfaction. Having expended all of his energy and resources, he is left with no choice but to renounce, at last, all claims to the amorous object. She recedes from him infinitely, inexorably. And he, as if watching a distant ship passing over the horizon, suddenly understands, for the first time, that she will never be his.

At this very moment, a relation of infinite distance is achieved. The interval of separation between the young man and the princess is recognised for what it truly is: utterly prohibitive and untraversable. What separates them is a distance so extreme, so unforgiving, that any chance of surmounting it is definitively excluded from the realm of the possible. Nevertheless, the peace that descends upon the young man, at precisely this moment, is incomparably immersive – and in its midst, an unmistakable transformation begins to take place.

30 *Fear and Trembling*. 70.

31 *Ibid.* 71.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.* 73.

34 Edward F. Mooney. “Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith, and the Absurd.” *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*. Edited by Robert L. Perkins. Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1981. 104.

35 *Ibid.*

For as he begins to recognise the futility of all his previous endeavours, and surrenders all claims upon the object of his desire, the young man finds himself no longer merely a swain, no longer merely an enchanted lover fated to disappointment, but rather, a *knight of infinite resignation*. Now, as Kierkegaard writes, “what the princess does can no longer disturb him.”³⁶ He has carried his avowal of resignation to its furthest extreme, and can now enjoy the sense of release which it grants him – release from waiting, release from longing, release from the torment of uncertainty.



Of course, as readers of Kierkegaard know, the story does not end here. For, beyond the movement of infinite resignation (and its emphasis upon absolute distance), a second movement asserts itself – not so much in opposition to the first, as in excess of it. Enter the knight of faith. “He begins by doing exactly the same as the other knight,” writes Kierkegaard. “He infinitely renounces any claim to the love which is the content of his life.”³⁷ But then, beyond all this, the knight of faith makes an additional movement – “more wonderful than anything else.”³⁸ For rather than abiding in the calm somnolence of renunciation, he elects to utter the mad and wholly unjustified pronouncement: “I nevertheless believe that I shall get her.”³⁹ On what basis can he say this? Only on the strength of the absurd, Kierkegaard writes. And it is precisely this vow of faith in the impossible which constitutes the crucial second movement – the one which miraculously grants us intimacy through extreme separation, possession through loss.

36 *Fear and Trembling*. 73.

37 *Ibid.* 75.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

If Abraham is, in this sense, a “knight of faith,” it is because “he both resigns *and* believes in the self-same instant.”⁴⁰ He saddles the asses and arrives upon Mount Moria neither too early nor too late – but rather, precisely on time. It is then, at the appointed moment (and not sooner), that he prepares to enact, with terrifying vehemence, an act of sacrifice which will not only estrange him from the law, but also render him alien to the one individual whom he loves most. The heart-rending nature of this estrangement is captured in the following notebook sketch from early April 1843:

“...And when [Abraham] again turned to him, he was unrecognisable to Isaac. His eyes were wild. His countenance was chilling. The venerable locks of his hair bristled like furies above his head. He seized Isaac by the breast. He drew the knife. He said: ‘You thought it was for the sake of God that I was going to do this? You were wrong. I am an idolater. This desire has again awakened in my soul...Despair, you foolish boy, who imagined that I was your father. I am your murderer, and this is my desire.’”⁴¹

What is being described here, in words which Blanchot carefully reinscribes within the pages of *Au moment voulu*, is a passage to the extreme limit of resignation – a resignation inextricably bound up with the affirmation of absolute distance. Here, Abraham becomes unrecognisable even to his own son. He stands before Isaac with the countenance of a madman, a psychotic – and raises the knife. But all of this, it seems, is *still* not enough. A final step demands to be taken, a step which constitutes the point of absolute and irrevocable severance between them. This step is expressed in the following words: “You thought it was for the sake of God that I was going to do this, but you were wrong. I am your murderer, and this is my desire.”

Why (we might ask) are these final words necessary? For one thing, it is because they carry the distance between Abraham and Isaac to its absolute limit – to the most extreme point imaginable. For as long as the sacrifice remains but a matter of divine compulsion (“for the sake of God”), Abraham will still be able to reassure himself of both ethical propriety *and* an underlying fidelity to Isaac. But, in doing so, Abraham will

40 Josiah Thompson. *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967. 132.

41 Joakim Garff. *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2000. 255.

then invariably find his own heart divided against itself with ambivalence, or even remorse, and the point of absolute resignation will not be reached.

All of this is of such great significance, because it is only when the affirmation of infinite resignation has been carried to its furthest extreme, that the second movement – the movement of restoration and intimacy can take place. Indeed, it is only by moving beyond the *order* to slay, and affirming the *desire* to do so, that Abraham can reach that point of most extreme and hyperbolic separation where, perhaps, separation itself might finally come to an end.

As we can now see – infidelity, in this parable, becomes the very measure of fidelity – just as distance becomes the measure of intimacy. Consider the following words which Kierkegaard writes in his journal upon seeing Regine for the first time after her marriage: “Today I saw a beautiful girl who does not interest me. No married man can be more faithful to his wife than I am to Regine.”⁴² If Kierkegaard’s faithfulness to her exceeds that of her own husband, it is only because, like Abraham, he has already carried the movement of infinite resignation (“she no longer interests me”) to its furthest limit – the limit where estrangement is rendered absolute in a moment of pure loss. In fact, one might even say that Kierkegaard actually *needs* Regine’s marriage to another man in order to make the separation between them complete. For it is only when the possibility of a rapprochement between them is utterly obliterated, that the mysterious *second* movement – the movement of faith – can bring her back to him.⁴³



42 Georg Lukács. “The Foundering of Form Against Life: Soren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen.” *Soren Kierkegaard: Modern Critical Views*. Edited by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989. 7.

43 Along these same lines, consider the following excerpt from the draft of a late, unsent letter to Regine: “I must thank you for never having understood me, for it taught me everything. I thank you for being so passionately unjust toward me, for that determined my life.” *Ibid.* 13.

But what, exactly, does any of this have to do with Blanchot's text? Nearly half a century ago, one of Kierkegaard's most astute critics wrote that "the secret meaning in *Fear and Trembling*, which was supposed to be deciphered primarily by Regine, could not consist in her learning *that* she was sacrificed as Isaac was sacrificed by Abraham, for she knew that, as did others, but rather in enlightening her as to *why* she had to be sacrificed..."⁴⁴ The secret, in other words, could not be whether sacrifice, for Kierkegaard, had in fact become a necessity of erotic life, but rather, why it had become so.

What we are now seeking to propose, on the basis of the preceding remarks, is that this very secret – the secret behind Abraham's unspeakable act – is in fact none other than the secret of intimacy itself; a strange and mysterious intimacy which becomes accessible, rather paradoxically, only through infinite separation.

Indeed, this is the very suggestion which Blanchot himself makes in "*Le Journal de Kierkegaard*," an essay from December 1941, where he tells us that it was only "through rupture, by placing an impassable distance between his fiancée and himself,"⁴⁵ that Kierkegaard found himself capable of forging this most essential of bonds. It was only by refusing the demands the ethical world and resigning himself to the inevitability of a most profound loss, that Kierkegaard perhaps arrived at the threshold of a mysterious and secret intimacy – an intimacy which few will ever experience.

But why do we qualify this statement with the word "perhaps"? It is because to accede unto the realm of such an intimacy, as we have already discovered, is to undergo a truly unverifiable experience. It is to enter a space of uncertainty, or even secrecy. And is it not fascinating, in light of all this, that nothing, as Blanchot tells us, was more "essential" to the life and work of Kierkegaard than the theme of the secret?⁴⁶ Indeed, there can be no disputing that the pages of *Fear and Trembling* are thoroughly imbued

⁴⁴ Gregor Malantschuk. *Kierkegaard's Thought*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. 236.

⁴⁵ *Faux-Pas*. 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 18.

with secrecy, hesitation, and discretion. At every moment we are confronted with the overbearing presence of something left unsaid.⁴⁷ Abraham, for example, not only refuses to speak, but *cannot* speak. “The one word that would explain everything...is precisely the word he cannot say.”⁴⁸ The reason for this, as Kierkegaard would have us believe, resides in the nature of language’s complicity with the universal. “The moment I speak,” writes Kierkegaard, “I express the universal, and when I do not, no one can understand me...”⁴⁹

But might there be another reason as well – a reason which perhaps recalls the prohibition against speech which we encountered in the *Aminadab* proviso and elsewhere? Could it be that where speech ends and silence begins, in Kierkegaard’s text, is precisely the point at which distance and resignation – when taken to their respective limits – give way to that which is most intimate? Not a fusional or consummatory love in which I am present as the joyful recipient, but the strange nothingness of a love which announces itself tacitly in the very midst of refusal, ignorance, and disengagement.

It is this refusal and disengagement which Abraham quite literally comes to embody on Mount Moria – and which Blanchot’s Judith, in the pages of *Au moment voulu*, will come to exemplify, as we shall see, with a comparable eminence. Only here, it seems, a rather pressing question seems to assert itself: if for Abraham, it was Isaac who had to be sacrificed, and if for Kierkegaard it was Regine – then who, precisely, was sent to the mountain with Judith? Who assumes the role of her Isaac? And what exactly is the meaning of her sacrifice?

Very few critics have ventured an answer to these questions. And those who have, such as Larysa Mykyta, have come to offer us somewhat unsatisfactory responses. “Judith sacrifices not her life but life-as-presence,” writes Mykyta, “She wills her passing away not in the sense of dying or being ‘open to death’ but in the sense of changing and losing

⁴⁷ Let us simply recall the relevant detail that Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, here, was Johannes de Silentio.

⁴⁸ *Fear and Trembling*. 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 89.

one's self...[thus] she becomes for herself what Isaac became for Abraham.”⁵⁰ This is certainly a reasonable explanation – but it is one which completely neglects to address the relational, or erotic, component of Blanchot's story. If the tale of Abraham is ultimately reconfigured, both by Kierkegaard and Blanchot himself, as an allegory about the loss of intimacy and its subsequent restoration, then wouldn't it serve us well to look for evidence of these tropes within the very *récit* in question? Would it not benefit us, in other words, to examine the eroticism of the text more broadly?

Indeed, this is precisely what we, in the pages to come, will make one of our primary objectives. We will endeavour to show how the movement of absolute separation invariably comes to assert itself within Blanchot's *récit*, manifesting itself in any number of scenes pervaded by distance, estrangement, refusal, and sacrifice – scenes in which all thought of amorous reciprocity or satisfaction is rendered vain.

But then, in the midst of all this, we will also show how – on the very basis of this distance – a second tendency, second movement, gradually emerges within Blanchot's text. It is a movement which, in line with Kierkegaard's own thinking, comes to grant us, quite strangely, a semblance of intimacy at the very point of extreme separation. Only here, in keeping with the fictional scenographies of the 1940s – and in anticipation of the 1953 Rilke essay – this intimacy will be construed by Blanchot as an intimacy of *no one*. It will be an intimacy which falls, rather profoundly, outside the world and its horizon of possibilities; an intimacy, moreover, which will explicitly come to be aligned with the realm of the imaginary, and linked indissolubly with one image in particular: *the image of the heart*.



⁵⁰ Larysa Mykyta. “Blanchot's *Au moment voulu*: Woman as the eternally reurring figure of writing.” *Boundary 2*. Volume X, No. 2. Winter 1982. 89.

Fascinating developments, to be sure. But, as we shall soon discover, the text's importance extends even further than all this. For what makes *Au moment voulu* such an incomparably pivotal work within our study – as well as a text utterly resistant to exhaustive interpretation – is indeed the sheer multitude of consequential tropes and trajectories which meet and part within its pages, intersecting and then diverging throughout its fictional spaces. We know, for instance, that in addition to the Kierkegaardian references which notably pervade its scenes, *Au moment voulu* is also a text famously suffused with instances of Nietzschean thought and rhetoric. We have already alluded, for instance, to the various Ariadnean resonances which are to be encountered here, but let us also keep in mind that the very title of the *récit* is in fact directly lifted from the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Indeed, there is arguably no work of fiction signed under Blanchot's name which more unmistakably bears the traces of Nietzsche's thought, and in particular, the traces of that most extreme thought, the thought of eternal recurrence.

Until now, however, no one has attempted to show how these Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean tropes within Blanchot's *récit* so importantly overlap, intersect, and mutually inform one another. No one has attempted to show how the trope of eternal recurrence, a trope which asserts itself here with both visibility and prominence, both complements and contests, albeit subtly, the notion of possession through loss which characterises the Abrahamic narrative. And certainly no one has sought to situate this disparate and slightly maddening confluence of tropes within its rightful context – a context which lends the trope of *refusal* a special, hitherto unrecognised, significance.⁵¹

What we will attempt to document, in the pages that follow, is the precise nature of this confluence, this veritable convergence of themes. We will show how both Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean elements, the tropes of sacrifice and refusal, the imagery of the heart, and the exigency of return all seem to intersect, here, at a single

⁵¹ With these words we are alluding, once more, to the figure Denise Rollin.

point. It is a single point which, far from unifying these disparate themes, seems instead to expiate or empty itself of all content. It is a point which, strange as it may seem, bears witness to this convergence and subsequent refraction of tropes most impressively through the very lightness, the glimmering ephemerality, which it comes to exude. Blanchot's name for this point, wherein the rhetoric of intimacy and the movement of eternal return intersect, is none other than the *moment*.

A Dream Body, A Perfect Rose

But what, precisely, does Blanchot have in mind when he refers to *the moment*? As one might expect, nowhere, within the pages of his text, do we receive anything resembling a formal, philosophical definition. Instead, what we encounter are any number of hints, insinuations, and allusions laden with metaphorical resonance which offer us an increasingly vivid, if necessarily incomplete, sense of the term's meaning and importance.

In a text containing nearly two-dozen, separate references to either *l'instant* or *le moment* (these terms being used interchangeably), it is almost inevitable that we find certain ambiguities within Blanchot's account – ambiguities which only add to the text's richness, even whilst making our task, as readers and critics, ever more challenging.

In one passage, for instance, we find the moment configured as that “before which time rebels,”⁵² whilst elsewhere it comes to be formulated as that which “sweeps time away.”⁵³ And in still another passage, we are told that the instant is bound to “a time that at a

52 *When the Time Comes*. 254.

53 *Ibid.* 232.

certain point always disengages itself [*se dégage*] from time.”⁵⁴ Notable similarities between all three formulations are, of course, immediately evident – but so, too, are any number of discrepancies. What, exactly, is the nature of the instant’s relation to time? What causes it to sweep time away? And how, moreover, does this disengagement *of* time *from* time take place?

One way of addressing these questions and coming toward a greater appreciation of what is at stake in Blanchot’s text, is to analyse, as carefully as possible, the fictional scenes in which Blanchot’s various references to the moment are embedded. Chief among these is the *scène terrible* in Judith’s bedroom, where Blanchot’s narrator finds himself exposed, beyond all recourse and volition, to the strange and disconcerting “world of a single instant.”⁵⁵



Let us recall the following scene: Accompanied by Claudia,⁵⁶ Judith’s friend and housemate, the narrator enters a bedroom only to find himself suddenly immobilised by the occupant’s petrifying gaze. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a look as avid as that one,”⁵⁷ he later confesses. As Claudia proceeds to pull the bed-sheets off Judith, the latter remains nonplussed, contemplating her own nocturnal body and staring ahead with the lingering expression of “sarcastic avidness.”⁵⁸ Suddenly, Claudia touches Judith’s arm,

54 Ibid. 260.

55 Ibid. 254.

56 As Christophe Bident suggests, the character Claudia was in fact based upon Denise Rollin’s real-life close friend, the German *chanteuse*, Marianne Oswald. Bident goes on to note that Rollin’s first husband was himself named Claude (thus lending credence to the suggestion that Blanchot’s text might be read, at least in part, as a sort of “*récit-a-clef*”).

57 *When the Time Comes*. 247.

58 Ibid. 248.

trying to raise it, trying to open her hand. “What followed,” Blanchot writes, “was the work of an instant...”⁵⁹

With amazing spirit, we are told, Judith proceeds to sit up, and shout, “from the depths of her memory,”⁶⁰ the words *Nescio vos* – literally, “I don’t know who you are.” This profession of estrangement, of profound ignorance, however, is nonetheless tempered, within the narrator’s recollection, by the “intimacy of a mysterious familiarity.”⁶¹ For at the very moment that Judith howls these words, she sinks back, gently, into his waiting arms. “It was on me,” he writes, “that this dream body decomposed.”⁶²

This scene is of great importance for at least two reasons. First, because it immediately anticipates, and to a certain extent contextualises, Blanchot’s subsequent deployment of a key, titular reference: “maybe she was unknown to me, but it didn’t matter, because for one and for the other...the moment had come [*le moment voulu*].”⁶³ Second, because it leads us, by allusion, to recall two other scenes, similarly poised, in which the tenuous liaison between distance and intimacy, ignorance and complicity, is evoked.

Consider, for example, the scene which we encounter – only pages earlier – in which Blanchot’s narrator writes of occupying himself with “looking at a face, touching a body – and not at all with holding onto it, even less with asking questions to find out what that face saw of [him].”⁶⁴ Here, it is an encounter with Claudia which is being described, and yet it is once again the same tropes, the same rhetoric, which come to the fore. It is a matter of “a single moment, a unique moment,” in which the narrator senses “the intimacy of a limitless consent [*l’intimité d’un consentement sans limites*].”⁶⁵ A look, a touch – so very little. And yet, as long as “the energy of the instant lasted,”⁶⁶ nothing

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid. 249.

61 Ibid. 248.

62 Ibid. 249.

63 Ibid. 250.

64 Ibid. 223.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

else was needed, “nothing else continued to exist.”⁶⁷ This self-sufficiency of the instant, as well as its relative poverty – a poverty which is also its richness – are tropes which we will have reason to examine more closely in the pages to come.



But alongside these two scenes, which do resemble each other in very noticeable ways, an additional, even *earlier* scene should also be taken into account: a scene which, despite the abundance of critical material which has sought to illumine it, remains every bit as inexplicable and miraculous to us as it must have seemed upon its initial publication in June 1948. This scene is none other than the rather famous depiction of J.’s waking in Blanchot’s *L’Arrêt de mort*:

“I sat down on the edge of the bed...for an instant I was overwhelmed by sadness. I leaned over her, I called to her by her first name...her arms moved, tried to rise. At that moment, her eyelids were still completely shut. But a second afterwards, perhaps two, they opened abruptly and they opened to reveal something terrible which I will not talk about, the most terrible look which a living being can receive...I took her in my arms, whilst her arms clasped me...”⁶⁸

Down to the slightest detail (the raising of the arms, the incapacitating gaze) these words seem to anticipate, even foretell, the scene in Judith’s bedroom. And when we find, in the pages of *L’Arrêt de mort*, this scene repeating itself, with J. rising from a stupor, pointing to the oxygen balloon, and murmuring, “A perfect rose”⁶⁹ – the parallelism seems complete.

67 Ibid.

68 *Death Sentence*. 144.

69 Ibid. 148.

In both cases we encounter a woman, ensconced in bed sheets, gazing forward with piercing intensity, uttering a single, enigmatic phrase. Indeed, there can be little doubt that these parallel utterances (“A perfect rose” and “*Nescio vos*”) both seem to anchor and orient the very scenes in question. One might even say that the scenes themselves, with all the trappings of plot and description which they contain, serve as little more than framing devices for the intonation of these very words. But whilst the importance of these parallel utterances may appear indisputable, the precise meanings which they seek to convey are far less self-evident.

Of the two utterances in question, it is J.’s evocation of the rose which has so far elicited the more impressive outpouring of speculation. We know, for instance, that its inclusion within the pages of *L’Arrêt de mort* may indeed have been inspired, in large part, by the dying words of Colette Peignot, a co-founder of *Acéphale* – and one of Bataille’s former lovers. It was Peignot who, in the midst of her death-throes, had supposedly murmured the words, “*la rose*” – the final stirrings of a life as scintillating as it was brief. This utterance, which has subsequently passed into legend, would likely have been related to Blanchot either by Bataille himself, or perhaps by Michel Leiris – who more than anyone were responsible for Peignot’s posthumous canonisation by the French avant-garde.

And yet, in addition to all this, there is a further resonance which demands to be investigated here; a resonance which leads us, of all places, back to Rilke. Let us recall, once more, the poet’s famous, self-penned epitaph: “Rose / oh, pure contradiction / desire / to be no one’s / sleep under so many eyelids.” And then, let us also recall everything that we have already suggested about the significance of these words, namely, the essential tension between intimacy and impersonality, propriety and impropriety, which they evoke. By offering us this image of “no one’s sleep,” Rilke is offering us a poetic testimony to eternal rest and consummation bereft of the very person who would experience it. It is an image of death from which the self is forever absent. And is this not, precisely, what the reader encounters within the pages of *L’Arrêt de mort* – an account of consummation which refuses to come for anyone who would seek to undergo it in the present? A death which never touches *me*?

Indeed, this is an interpretation which Blanchot himself explicitly seems to corroborate in the pages which immediately follow J.'s evocation of the rose. Let us remember how, whilst sitting at her bedside with an attendant nurse, the narrator hears J. speak the following words: "Now then, take a good look at death."⁷⁰ With this remark, she proceeds to point her finger squarely, if dispassionately, at the narrator. An enigmatic gesture, to be sure. But consider how its meaning suddenly becomes clear when we read it alongside the following lines, encountered only a few paragraphs earlier: "I took her hand gently, by the wrist...and scarcely had I touched it when she sat up with her eyes open, looked at me furiously and pushed me away, saying, 'Never touch me again [*Ne me touchez plus jamais*].'"⁷¹

The insinuation, here, is obvious. If he (the narrator) *is* death, then her words to him constitute much less a request, or even an injunction – than a simple statement of fact. "You will never touch *me* again." When death comes, it will never come for her. The passion of endless dying cannot be put to rest. We are transported, in other words, back to the impropriety and impersonality of dying which Rilke had sought to evoke in his epitaph – and which Jacques Dupin, decades later, would inscribe with similar beauty, when he came to write of "the endless oblivion of a rose."⁷²

Now, perhaps, J.'s utterance may be allowed to resonate in its full importance. For, as we can now discern, the words, "a perfect rose," must indeed be coupled with this second, more ominous, utterance – an utterance which suggests to us not the arrival of blessed release, but the prescience of death lived always in abeyance. In the very midst of unprecedented intimacy, the intimacy of sovereign death, or of consummatory fulfilment, it is always *I* who go missing.

Should we be surprised, then, by the nature of Judith's rather similar utterance in *Au moment voulu* – that incredulous howl, which precedes, by only the briefest of

70 Ibid. 149.

71 Ibid. 148.

72 Jacques Dupin. *Selected Poems*. Translated by Paul Auster, et al. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1992. 47.

moments, her fall into the narrator's arms? In the very midst of his intimate embrace: *Nescio vos* – "I don't know who you are." Is this not, once again, the oblivion of the rose? Is it not, once more, the passion of J. in *L'Arrêt de mort*? Indeed, considered in these terms, what Blanchot seems to be describing, in both texts, is the recurrence of one and the same event, an event which never comes; or rather, comes to differ from itself through the very fact of its repetition – as if "repeating itself, it weren't really repeating itself."⁷³

And here, it seems, we return to our earlier point of departure; we return to the question of the moment and its relation (or non-relation) to time. Only now, having suggested that this very question is bound up with the larger problem of intimacy and distance in Blanchot's work, let us attempt to approach, once again, the *scène terrible* in Judith's bedroom, the scene in which our narrator finds himself exposed to an "instant [which] infinitely surpassed all the others."⁷⁴

Falling (Again)

Much can be gleaned, as it turns out, from the narrator's own description of this event, a description which still bears the traces of a certain shock, or even terror. "It had the strangest relations to time," he tells us. "Had it happened once? A first time and yet not the first."⁷⁵ From these words alone, one might speculate that what is being described for us is a mere ambiguity of time, a kind of temporal aberration, or hiccup. Yet, from the sentences that immediately follow, it soon becomes clear that what is at stake, here,

⁷³ *When the Time Comes*. 232.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 249.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

is something far more serious: “the moment of collapse, the dreadful alteration of life...this mad catastrophe”⁷⁶

Indeed, what collapses in this scene (a collapse mirrored by Judith’s own swoon upon the bed), is nothing less than the integrity of time itself. Consider the precise language which Blanchot makes use of here. He writes of a “fall into time [*chute dans le temps*]”⁷⁷ – which also “crossed time and hollowed out an immense emptiness [*traversé le temps en y creusant une immensité vide*].”⁷⁸ Strange words. But also, strangely familiar ones. For what we encounter, in this description, is an unmistakable prescience of the very rhetoric which Blanchot, in the decades following *Au moment voulu*, will frequently deploy in commenting upon the eternal return. Two tropes in particular exude a certain familiarity here: “the fall” and “the hollowing out.”

Let us remember, from an earlier chapter, how Blanchot, in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, had sought to elucidate one of the most curious and beguiling features of the eternal recurrence, namely, its irrevocability:

“The irrevocable [*l’irrévocable*] is thus by no means, or not only, the fact that that which has taken place has taken place forever: it is perhaps the means – strange, I admit – for the past to warn us (preparing us) that it is empty and that the falling due – the infinite fall, fragile [*la chute infinie, fragile*] – that it designates, this infinitely deep pit into which, if there were any, events would fall one by one, signifies only the void of the pit, the depth of what is without bottom [*la profounder de ce qui est sans fond*]...Irrevocability would be the slip that, by vertigo, in an instant, at the furthest remove from the present, in the absolute of the non-present, makes what “just happened” fall...Irrevocability would be, in this view, the slip of the fragile fall that abolishes time in time [*le glissement ou la chute fragile qui abolit le temps dans le temps*], effaces the difference between the near and the far...and shrouds everything in non-time [*le non-temps*], from which nothing could come back, less because there is no return than because nothing falls there [*rien n’y tombe*], except the illusion of falling there [*l’illusion d’y tomber*].”⁷⁹

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 *The Step Not Beyond*. 13-14.

Not once, or even twice, but multiple times in the span of less than a page Blanchot evokes this notion of *la chute*. Irrevocability, here, “would be the slip of the fragile fall that abolishes time in time.” But what, exactly, can we ascertain about the nature of this fall? And what, moreover, *does* the falling? These are important questions – which Blanchot not only anticipates, but (rather fortuitously) seems to aid us in answering.

He tells us, for instance, of “an infinitely deep pit” into which events “if there were any...would fall one by one.” Is this to suggest that it is the event itself which does the falling? Certainly, this is what an initial, perhaps slightly impatient, reading would suggest to us. But what are we to make of those final, supremely enigmatic, lines: “Irrevocability...shrouds everything in non-time, from which nothing could come back, less because there is no return than because nothing falls there, except the illusion of falling there?” Here, the much more radical suggestion seems to be that what *falls* is in fact not the event itself, but rather, merely the illusion of one – as if what Blanchot were seeking to describe would be the temporality of a moment to which no presence corresponds, and yet, which does not cease to return.

Indeed, what returns, in such a context, is never the event in its presence, but rather, the “hollowing out” of time which it engenders. We have already spoken of this earlier, and there is little need for us to repeat ourselves here. We are well aware of Blanchot’s affinity for the term *creusement*. We know how he uses it, in multiple contexts, especially within the pages of *L’entretien infini*, to describe the eternal return’s infinitely suspensive, anarchic capability. Not only does the eternal return contest and destabilise every end and every beginning, every truth and every law – including the very one which “founds it” – but it also ungrounds, through this very same movement, all positionality and all presence whatsoever. The movement of eternal recurrence leaves “the abyss of the present indefinitely hollowed out [*indéfiniment creusé*],” delivering us over “to another time...a time without event, without project, without possibility.”⁸⁰

80 *The Infinite Conversation*. 44.

Such emphasis upon the hollowing out of time – and the resultant, ensuing spectrality of the event – is, as we have shown, not infrequent within the essays and fragmentary texts of the 1960s and 1970s. And yet, as we can now discern, these themes might already be seen to assert themselves in Blanchot’s fictional work as early as 1951, if not earlier. Indeed, when Blanchot, in the pages of *Au moment voulu*, writes of a “fall into time [*chute dans le temps*]”⁸¹ – which also “crossed time and hollowed out an immense emptiness [*traversé le temps en y creusant une immensité vide*],”⁸² it is crucial that we recognise nothing less than an important, early attempt at bringing into play the very rhetoric which will increasingly come to pervade his writings on the eternal return throughout the years and decades to come. It is as though, in coming to speak of “the ghost of the event,”⁸³ Blanchot’s narrator were indeed coming as close as possible to evoking what *falls* and continues to fall, even without falling.



What makes the scene in Judith’s bedroom so significant, at least from this perspective, is that it seems to offer us an important point of intersection in which the tropes of intimacy and estrangement, so prevalent throughout Blanchot’s fiction throughout the 1940s, come to overlap with those tropes (such as *l’irrévocabilité*, *la chute*, *le creusement*) explicitly linked to the discourse of eternal recurrence. And though the precise details and consequences of this intersection still remain to be explicated, we can already sense, on the basis of these rather limited remarks, that to undergo exposure to this most auspicious of moments, the moment of unparalleled intimacy, is to fall into the hollowness, the void of the present, where time is fractured and its continuity dislodged. It is to find oneself exposed, as Blanchot writes, to the “sarcastic erosion of

81 *When the Time Comes*. 249.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*

time”⁸⁴ – wherein even the most “beautiful instant” invariably becomes “a beautiful apparition.”⁸⁵



And so, it is with this in mind that we return once more to that all-important question: “Had it happened once? A first time and yet not the first...” For it was this question, as we recall, that the narrator had come to pose with respect to that most critical of moments – the moment when Judith elects to utter her strange and fascinating pronouncement: *Nescio vos*.

As we can now begin to discern, to say of this moment that it occurs “a first time and yet not the first,” is to evoke the spectrality which we have just recounted, the spectrality assumed by each and every instant which is made subject to eternal repetition. And yet, what is perhaps most startling about this moment, is that even in spite of its spectral nature (or perhaps on account of it), it becomes utterly unforgettable [*inoublisable*] to the narrator.⁸⁶ He lives it, obsesses over it, and even grieves for it. Whilst at the very same time, he cannot help but admit that it is an instant which, quite simply, “[does] not belong to the past”⁸⁷ – just as it never truly belonged to the present.

A strange relationship to time, indeed. But what else does Blanchot tell us about this most unusual of moments, the moment when Judith – in a manner so eerily similar to the waking scene in *L'Arrêt de mort* – rises ever so briefly from her pillow in order to utter a most startling and incongruous phrase?

84 Ibid. 220.

85 Ibid. 238.

86 Ibid. 249.

87 Ibid.

We know, for instance, that the phrase itself (“*Nescio vos*”) cannot help but evoke anything less than a spirit of sheer ignorance and infidelity. It bespeaks both estrangement and total separation. And yet, the collapse, that swoon into the narrator’s arms, which immediately follows her enunciation, cannot help but suggest, quite to the contrary, an immersion within amorous proximity. What, therefore, are we to make of this strange and unsettling marriage of opposing tendencies, between the rhetoric of intimacy and the rhetoric of detachment – between nearness and farness?

As we know, it is a tension which inhabits so very many of the texts which we have been examining throughout this study. From the fiction of the 1940s, to the Rilke essay of 1953, to the Tristan essay published less than a year later – this tension has appeared to permeate vast swathes of Blanchot’s writing, irrespective of genre, dating back to the very beginning of his career as a mature writer. And whether consciously or unconsciously, in nearly every case, Blanchot seems to make recourse to one, very specific trope in bearing witness to this tension. This trope, as we know, is none other than the figure of the heart.

Should it come as any surprise, therefore, to learn that here, in the very midst of the crucial *Nescio vos* scene, it is once again the figure of the heart which rather prominently asserts itself? Consider the precise manner in which Blanchot’s narrator comes to describe those most mysterious words, spoken to him by Judith. They constitute, as he tells us, “the greatest and truest utterance...the radiant heart [*coeur rayonnant*], the expression of the familiarity and the jealousy of night.”⁸⁸

In speaking of the familiarity and jealousy of the night, Blanchot’s narrator is, of course, reinscribing the very tension which we have just highlighted. For, whilst the notion of familiarity evokes a sense of nearness, proximity, and perhaps even intimacy – the notion of jealousy is clearly bound up with deprivation and loss. According to the narrator’s remarks, it is “the greatest and truest utterance” which manages to bear

⁸⁸ Ibid. 250.

witness, at one and the same time, to both sides of this breach, to both intimacy and loss. Indeed, this is precisely what the words *Nescio vos* appear to achieve. Like J.'s evocation of the perfect rose, they convey the hollowness, the emptiness, at the very centre of what is most intimate.



But what, exactly, are we to make of the rather striking image which seems to accompany all this – the image of the radiant heart? We recall, for instance, how in *Thomas l'obscur*, in a similar context, Blanchot had similarly written of the heart's emptiness. The question, now, becomes what, if anything, this notion of radiance is supposed to entail. Why should it be that the words *Nescio vos* – words which convey a profound sense of estrangement – should nonetheless be linked, by Blanchot, to a heart which is radiant?

With this question we come to an absolutely crucial point in our discussion. For as we will proceed to show, it is this very image, the image of the radiant heart, which ultimately comes to serve as the very nexus of intersection between the tropes of intimacy and estrangement and the rhetoric of eternal recurrence in Blanchot's text. Indeed, it is here, in this very image, that the layered significance of *the moment* in Blanchot's *récit* will at last become clear to us.

A Ceremony with a Thousand Variations

Of course – little, if any, of this can be surmised from the brief excerpt which we have just cited. To uncover the full importance of this key trope, we must momentarily embark upon a brief, yet indispensable, digression. We must dig deeper into the pages of Blanchot's *récit*. For (as it turns out) there is another, slightly earlier reference to *le coeur* within the pages of *Au moment voulu* – a reference which, as we will see, might rather profitably be read alongside Blanchot's evocation of the "radiant heart," as though contextualising and illuminating it.

This other, earlier reference appears approximately half-way through the text. Here, we find Blanchot's narrator in the process of describing "a lovable caprice," a ceremony with "a thousand variations."⁸⁹ In actuality, it is little more than an innocent game of Claudia running a comb through Judith's hair. And yet, it is a game which seems to enthral him immeasurably. He wonders if he has fallen under some enchantment as Claudia arranges and re-arranges her friend's locks – with each tousele of the hair channelling visions and glances from the past, approximations and parodies of an event long forgotten.

It is in this context, amidst the childlike innocence of this scene, that little by little, the expression on Judith's face becomes visibly accentuated. It assumes, as we are told, an inexhaustible, elemental quality which gives the impression of something ancient. "A face like that," Blanchot's narrator recalls, "was hardly made to be seen, I was seeing it unlawfully, in a sense, 'by chance,' even though at such a moment the whole scene seemed to be taking place only for the sake of this apparition."⁹⁰ It is at this very moment that the narrator is seized by an unparalleled vertigo. He falls under the sway

89 Ibid. 231.

90 Ibid.

of a sudden motion, an “almost wild leap [*le bond presque sauvage*]...that took the form of a bolt of lightning.”⁹¹

Let us make note of the following words from his account: “Without being able to understand exactly when it happened, this movement shook me, I was overcome with horror; I think I saw light, a vision difficult to sustain, instantaneous, connected to that movement, as though the fact that the two of them were torn apart [*cette déchirure entre elles deux*], as though this cruel interval [*ce cruel intervalle*]...but I can’t do it, I can’t finish the sentence.”⁹²

Here, the narrator’s account breaks down, rendering his thought incomplete. What are we to make of this unfinished, unconsummated utterance? In examining these lines, we note that it is not only the two women, Claudia and Judith, who are torn apart, but the continuity of Blanchot’s syntax as well. A single term, *déchirure*, seems to bear the rhetorical burden for expressing all this. On one hand, it suggests the violence of a tear, the sundering of a relation.⁹³ At the same time, it also evokes the interruption of thought and the wounding of syntactic continuity, not to mention, temporal coherence.⁹⁴ A ravishing blow so intense – that even when the horror of infliction passes, and when the usual course of events is nominally restored, we are left with the unmistakable awareness of a lingering rift, a visible scar which does not cease to endure.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Recall how Blanchot, in *Thomas the Obscure*, had earlier made reference to “the tearing away [*le déchirement*] which separated [Anne] from what she saw and what she felt.” (p. 96)

94 But there is more. For in addition to all this, the word *déchirure* also elicits a further connotation – a connotation which calls to mind, once more, the influence of Georges Bataille. We know, for instance, that throughout the mid to late 1930s, references to *déchirement* were utterly ubiquitous within Bataille’s writings. The critic, Milo Sweedler, notes one particular page from “Le Collège de Sociologie” in which the word appears, in one form or another, no fewer than nine times. But perhaps even more interesting than the frequency with which Bataille uses the term, is the unique significance which he ascribes to it. Indeed, for Bataille, the notion of *déchirement* comes to be configured as an essential feature of all authentic communication – as well as a prerequisite of any communitarian endeavour whatsoever. To enter into communion, or to communicate, with another person is always to be torn apart. Communicants tear themselves apart “in order to create a new being different from either of them.” Lovers, moreover, “communicate through their wounds [*déchirures*].” What all of this suggests is that the very thing which tears the amorous couple apart, is also (strangely) what brings them together. Fusion and *déchirement* “are thus not opposed tendencies...they are, on the contrary, the twin forces of communication itself.” Milo Sweedler. “From the Sacred Conspiracy to the Unavoidable Community: Bataille, Blanchot, and Laure’s *Le Sacré*.” 341-344.

It is here, in the light of this very scar – and in the wake of this *déchirance* – that the first of the text’s two references to the heart appears. In recalling the precise nature of this shock, Blanchot’s narrator tells us of a “terrible...powerful trembling [*ébranlement*] which, before it touched [him], swept time away [*balayait le temps*].”⁹⁵ This allusion to the anarchic centrifugality of eternal recurrence is then immediately followed by the words: “and I fell [*tombais*] into this open well, down to the dizzying heart of time [*au coeur vertigineux du temps*].”⁹⁶



What we find, in this fascinating description, are in fact two rather differing statements coupled together – statements which mutually inform one another whilst also deriving, from the conjunctive power of the “and,” a kind of subtle antagonism. First, we are told that the sheer impact of this *ébranlement*, even before touching the narrator, manages to sweep time away. Then, in the sentence’s latter clauses, we are led to believe that he (the narrator) actually falls, as a result of this shock, into the very heart of time.

The contradiction, here, is immediately apparent. How can the narrator, in the span of a single instant, experience the sweeping-away of time *whilst* falling into its very heart? A crucial question. Interestingly, it is one which Blanchot himself comes to formulate, in almost identical terms, elsewhere in his work. The occasion for this, as we soon discover, is none other than his essay on Proust, first published in two instalments between August and September 1954.

Here, in one of his only extended piece of mature, critical writing dedicated to the Proustian *oeuvre*, Blanchot selects, as his point of emphasis, the strange, yet mutually interdependent, relation amongst the differing varieties of time in Proust’s novels.

⁹⁵ *When the Time Comes*. 232.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

What he comes to discover, over the course of his investigation, is in fact a variant of the precise contradiction which we have just cited – the seemingly illogical correlation between time’s abolition and our exposure to its most intimate reaches. Let us take a moment, then, to examine this supposed contradiction in more detail.

A Time Outside Time?

Everything can begin (so to speak) with the most insignificant of incidents, an incident which takes place at “a certain moment, now long ago, forgotten, and not only forgotten, but unperceived...”⁹⁷ And yet, as Proust shows us throughout his work, time is nevertheless capable, through its own incomparable enchantments, of bringing it back, “not as a memory, but as an actual event, which occurs anew, at a new moment in time.”⁹⁸ Numerous examples of this phenomenon might be selected for examination, but let us take, for convenience sake, the scene from *Au moment voulu* which we have just introduced.

Recall the events which immediately precipitate the narrator’s fall into the heart of time: Claudia is joyously tousling Judith’s hair, reminding her of how it used to be arranged, whilst the narrator watches, silently and studiously. Then, all of a sudden, the expression on Judith’s face achieves, without warning and without consolation, the appearance of something ancient, something unspeakably old. It is (as we soon discover) the deepest of pasts suddenly rising to the surface, only not as a memory; but rather, in Proustian fashion, as an “actual event which occurs anew.” This event entails nothing more elaborate than the presentation of a single face, “an apparition,” as

⁹⁷ *The Book to Come*. 12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Blanchot writes – and yet, the *ébranlement* which it elicits sweeps away the entirety of time.

We cannot help but be reminded, here, of how a similar effect came to be generated, in Proust's own novel, by another, "less than significant" occurrence. Recall how, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, the single footstep which "stumbles on the irregular cobblestones of the Guermantes courtyard" suddenly becomes, through a strange mystery of time, "the same footstep that stumbled over the uneven flagstones of the Baptistery of San Marco."⁹⁹ A scene well-known to students of literature. But consider how Blanchot, in his 1954 Proust essay, comes to describe this very occurrence. He tells us, rather importantly, of "a minute incident, but deeply moving."¹⁰⁰ So deeply moving in fact, that it "tears apart [*déchire*] the fabric of time and by this rending introduces us to another world: outside time..."¹⁰¹

Remarkably, the rhetoric adopted here is nearly identical to the language which we encounter in *Au moment voulu*. It is a matter, in both texts, of a *déchirement* which rends time and exposes us to something utterly foreign. A fascinating connection. But what, we might ask, entitles us to claim, in each of these cases, that time has actually been swept away? And how, precisely, is such a feat accomplished?



Writing, here, in the voice of Proust himself, Blanchot offers us the following explanation – one whose details might easily be transposed to fit the narrational parameters of his own *récit*:

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

“Time is abolished, since, at once, in a real act of capturing...I hold the Venice instant and the Guermantes instant, not a past and a present, but one single presence that causes incompatible moments, separated by the entire course of lived life, to coincide in a palpable simultaneity. Here, then, time is erased by time itself: here death, the death that is the work of time, is suspended, neutralised, made vain and inoffensive. What an instant! A moment that is ‘freed from the order of time’ and that recreates in me ‘a man freed from the order of time.’”¹⁰²

As these remarks make clear, to speak of time’s annulment in such a context is to speak, first and foremost, of a suspension of temporal continuity and recuperation. It is to find the progressive, developmental model of time (the model preferred by Hegel, among others) fundamentally overturned. And what, precisely, is capable of displacing this linearity? As Blanchot tells us, it is nothing but the palpable simultaneity of two, ostensibly incompatible, instants occupying a single presence. An utterly inexplicable occurrence, or rather *recurrence*, which frees us from the logical passing of time. Indeed, it is this very recurrence which renders the work of time and the labour of negation utterly inconsequential and vain by allowing the simultaneous cohabitation of two visions, two glances, at once.

One might wonder, however, whether all this might simply amount (once again) to the glorification of the present, or presence. For does it not appear to be through the power of the present alone that time – in this account – comes to be swept aside? Certainly it might seem this way at first glance. And yet, as we soon discover, it is on *this very point* that Blanchot introduces perhaps his most important corrective to Proust’s account. For, whilst Proust seems to fix on some instant of the actual past by uniting it with some present instant, Blanchot writes, “it is just as much to draw the present outside the present, and the past outside of its determined reality – leading us, by this open relationship, always farther, in every direction, handing us over to the distant and giving us this distance where everything is always given, everything is taken away, incessantly.”¹⁰³

102 Ibid. 12-13.

103 Ibid. 17-18.

When the Judith of the past – in other words – seems to superimpose herself upon the Judith of the present, it is the entire relationship between past and present which is thrown into jeopardy. It becomes impossible, from this point on, to distinguish the two visions from one another, just as it becomes impossible to establish any sense of chronological precedence between them.¹⁰⁴ This is because the so-called moment of simultaneity, far from entrenching the imperious grandeur of the present, actually destabilises it by drawing it outside of itself (in the sense of *ek-stasis*), as well as outside of any determined set of temporal relations. Positionality is not only undermined, but decisively suspended. This is the “moment of collapse...the mad catastrophe”¹⁰⁵ which Blanchot’s narrator refers to; this is the instant where time appears to disengage itself from time, suspending the seamless flow of duration, and withdrawing from us every beginning and every end.

What returns, in this moment of purported simultaneity, is a vision of Judith which has never been present and which remains forever divorced from all presence. This face which asserts itself under the appearance of the here and now, thus constitutes nothing less than the imposition “of an already other time.”¹⁰⁶ It suggests a temporality emptied of all events, a temporality suspended between living and dying, a temporality in which apparitions come and go. Blanchot’s name for it is rather significant; he refers to it, here, as “the time of the *récit*.”¹⁰⁷

Indeed, it is precisely this temporality which, only moments ago, we had implicitly evoked when coming to speak of the profound similarities between those two, unforgettable “waking scenes” – one in *L’Arrêt de mort* and the other in *Au moment voulu*, the very text in question. Remember how, in both scenes, beyond the remarkable similarity of certain details (women ensconced in bed-sheets, rising momentarily to utter a single, enigmatic phrase) the force of an even more profound repetition had

104 One might recall, on this point, a notable similarity with the legendary *Blicke* of Tribschen; those unforgettable, unliveable glances outside of time which so captivated Nietzsche and inspired his “Tomb Song” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

105 *When the Time Comes*. 249.

106 *The Book to Come*. 17.

107 *Ibid.* 13.

asserted itself. For in both scenes what we encountered was an unmistakable allusion to the very same event – or rather, non-event. It was an allusion, as we recall, to that moment of consummation, or death, which never arrives in the present, and never comes *for me*.

And why, exactly, does it never arrive? It is because, as we now discern, the movement of eternal recurrence, the movement which causes this non-event to return, also makes it fall silently, imperceptibly, into the very emptiness, the hollowness, of time which it carves out. And is this not, moreover, precisely what seems to happen during the course of that “loveable caprice,” that “ceremony with a thousand variations” which we have just introduced? Is this not precisely what happens at that very moment when Claudia appears to run her comb through Judith’s hair, summoning (through this very motion) the apparitions of an empty past, of a phantom event?

Indeed, there can be little doubt that when Blanchot’s narrator comes to refer, in this context, to the collapse of time – or tells us of a “powerful trembling [*ébranlement*] which, before it touched [him], swept time away [*balayait le temps*]”¹⁰⁸ – he is referring to nothing other than the inexorable movement of ungrounding perpetrated by the eternal return itself. He is referring, in other words, to the obsessive recurrence of something that has never, strictly speaking, come to presence. Here, it is little more than the expression on Judith’s face, an expression unspeakably ancient, which conjures the monumental effect “destroying the present into which it seems to introduce itself.”¹⁰⁹ A vision, a mere glance, which over-turns the continuity of time and alters his life, as though *irrevocably*.¹¹⁰



108 *When the Time Comes*. 232.

109 *The Book to Come*. 9.

110 Already here we should sense a rather striking commonality with the story of Abraham: it is the event which never happens, which never comes to pass, which nevertheless does not cease to haunt the narrator precisely as if it had.

But remember – this is only half of the story. For it is in the very midst of all this, that Blanchot’s narrator, with the same breath that professes the collapse of time, also suggests to us that he has fallen into time’s vertiginous *heart*. How, we must ask, can these two statements be reconciled? How can one fall into the most intimate reaches of something which has altogether ceased to exist?

If Blanchot’s Proust essay indeed comprises an invaluable resource for our understanding of *Au moment voulu*, this is because of the manner in which it assists us in coming to terms with these very questions. For the apparent contradiction which we have just highlighted is by no means unique to Blanchot’s text. Indeed, it is nearly identical (as we have suggested) to the crucial tension which Blanchot makes note of in Proust’s *own* account.

Let us read the following words: “By a contradiction he scarcely notices, so necessary and fertile is it, Proust, as if inadvertently, says of this minute outside of time that it allowed him ‘to obtain, to isolate, to immobilise – for the length of time of a flash of lightning – what he never apprehends: a little time in its pure state [*un peu de temps à l’état pur*].’ ”¹¹¹

The paradox, here, is immediately apparent. How can that which is outside of time, Blanchot asks, manage to lead us toward the incomparable experience of time in its pure state? And couldn’t a very similar question be posed in relation to *Au moment voulu*. Rephrased only slightly, we might ask: How does the suspension of temporal continuity, the sweeping away of time, manage to expose the narrator to time’s vertiginous heart? How – at one and the same moment – can time both disappear and

¹¹¹ *The Book to Come*. 9.

yet seem to reveal itself in its utmost purity?¹¹² Blanchot's response to these most crucial of questions takes the form of the following, immeasurably important, lines:

“To live the abolition of time, to live this movement, rapid as ‘lightning,’ by which two instants, infinitely separated, come (*little by little although immediately*) to encounter each other...is to travel the entire extent of the reality of time, and by travelling it, to experience time as space and empty place, that is to say, free of the events that ordinarily fill it.”¹¹³

In this passage, the disambiguation which we have been looking for begins to take shape. Until now, the dissolution of time, that “mad catastrophe,” had appeared to us logically irreconcilable with the fall into the heart of time which both Proust, and Blanchot's narrator, seem to be describing. Now, we begin to see, more precisely, the true nature of what it means for time to be “swept away” – as well as what it means for us to undergo an exposure to its most intimate reaches.

To live the abolition of time, as we know, is to live this movement, “rapid as lightning,” by which two instants, “infinitely separated,” come to encounter each other in a simultaneity, a fortuitous conjunction, which makes a mockery of temporal continuity and repudiates the seamless flow of duration. But what does Blanchot tell us next? He tells us that to undergo such a movement, the movement of eternal return, is to experience something truly remarkable – it is “to travel the entire extent of the reality of time,” and in doing so, to experience “time as space and empty place.” It is to experience, in other words, a stunning transformation, an incomparable metamorphosis, whereby pure empty time, “the time of the *récit*,” literally *gives way* to pure empty space – a space “freed of the events that always ordinarily fill it.”¹¹⁴

112 As we continue to investigate this matter, the thematic and rhetorical resonances between Blanchot's *récit* and his Proust essay, published only two and a half years later, become increasingly overt. We note, in addition to the earlier, twin references to *déchirance*, that both texts seem to reserve a crucial role for the trope of lightning. Recall how Blanchot's narrator had earlier spoken of the sudden motion, the *almost wild leap*, which took “the form of a bolt of lightning.” Here, in nearly identical circumstances, Proust tells us of “a minute outside time” that allowed him to isolate, “for the length of time of a flash of lightning,” a little time in its pure state. But this is not all. Indeed, the very notion of the leap itself is likewise to be found in the Proust essay (“an unforeseeable leap”). And let us not forget that the adjective, *vertigineux*, which modifies Blanchot's crucial evocation of *le coeur du temps* can also be found in the latter text (“this vertiginous movement”).

113 *The Book to Come*. 13.

114 *Ibid*.

Indeed, it is this very space which might then be thought to comprise, strange as it sounds, “the intimacy of time [*l’intimité du temps*]...”¹¹⁵ A hollow intimacy which is only accessible through the catastrophe, that *déchirement*, which rends the very fabric of time, exposing us to its vertiginous depths. To undergo the sweeping away of time is to fall, and fall again, into this very space. It is to enter a realm exonerated from all presence, exonerated from all positionality, in which neither mastery, nor work, nor rest may be permitted.

And what, if anything, remains capable of inhabiting such a space? What remains capable of occupying this strangest and most inhospitable *milieu*? Neither events, nor entities, Blanchot tells us, but only images. To descend here, to the vertiginous heart of time, is to descend into the realm of the imaginary where the power of resemblance takes hold. This space of images “offers all things that ‘transparent unity’ in which...they can come ‘to line up next to each other in a kind of order, penetrated by the same light...converted into one single substance, with the vast surfaces of a monotone shimmering.’”¹¹⁶ These words are taken from the 1954 Proust essay, but similar descriptions are to be found all throughout the pages of *Au moment voulu* – where we frequently encounter references to “the eternal glitter of an image [*le resplendissement eternal d’une image*]”¹¹⁷ or “the endless shimmer [*le miroitement sans fin*].”¹¹⁸

Indeed, it might be said that this realm of the imaginary, this space proper to the image, comprises nothing less than the hollow, scintillating centre toward which everything in Blanchot’s *récit* seems to gravitate. Its importance, as we will show, is undeniable – not only to the text in question, but within Blanchot’s writing more generally. For it is here, in this very space, that the rhetoric of intimacy comes to intersect most unmistakably with the rhetoric of time’s annulment, the rhetoric of eternal recurrence itself.

115 Ibid. 16.

116 Ibid. 17.

117 *When the Time Comes*. 258.

118 Ibid. 257.

Given all this, it is perhaps no coincidence that Blanchot's most important early essay on the topic of the image was actually published, in the Spring of 1951, only six months prior to the release of *Au moment voulu*. This essay, entitled, "Les deux versions de l'imaginaire," is also interesting for another reason, namely, the crucial, rather telling, reference to *le coeur* which we discover in its midst.



Indeed, what is at stake in this key essay is nothing less than a formal differentiation between two types of images – or, versions of the imaginary. In a nod to Hegel and Mallarmé, Blanchot defines the first type of image as “the life-giving negation of the thing.”¹¹⁹ It is life-giving in the sense that it puts the thing at a distance in order to help us grasp it in its ideality, thus facilitating not only knowledge but productive usage as well.

But not all images are useful, Blanchot argues. And not all negation is recuperable. Indeed, it is this realisation which compels us to take account of the *other* imaginary – the one which falls outside of the world and its horizon of possibilities. As Blanchot writes, there is a strange and seductive gleam in every image which “constantly threatens to relegate us, not to the absent thing, but to its absence as presence [*l'absence comme présence*], to the neutral double of the object [*au double neutre de l'objet*] in which all belonging to the world is dissipated.”¹²⁰ In this *other* realm of the imaginary – “distance [*éloignement*] is not the simple displacement of a moveable object which would nevertheless remain the same. Here, distance is in the heart of the thing [*L'éloignement est ici au coeur de la chose*].”¹²¹

119 *The Space of Literature*. 262.

120 *Ibid.*

121 *Ibid.* 255.

What this means, is that distance – in this other realm – no longer mediates between an object and its image, but rather, inhabits the object from within, perpetually separating it from itself. Distance is no longer subordinated to presence, just as difference is no longer subordinated to identity. What is being described here, in other words, is already the ascendancy of the simulacral which Derrida and Deleuze, toward the end of the next decade, would each evoke so memorably with their parallel references to Mallarmé.

And it is precisely this *other* realm of the imaginary which we come to encounter, rather prominently, in the pages of *Au moment voulu* – the realm of images to which no presence corresponds, a realm whose eternal scintillation bears witness to the distance which separates each image from itself. These are images, we might say, in a perpetual state of displacement from themselves. And yet, they are also images which come to comprise, rather unexpectedly, a most profound intimacy, a “transparent unity,” to use a phrase from the Proust essay.¹²² For it is here, in this *milieu* where duration has been annulled and time transmuted into pure, empty space, that we encounter the resplendence of total radiant interpenetration: images reflecting images reflecting images, without beginning or end.



Certainly, this is not an easy notion to grasp. And if a measure of ambiguity necessarily persists, here, it is undoubtedly because the terminology which Blanchot makes use of in describing this *milieu* of the image is both remarkably ambiguous and tends to fluctuate rather mistrustfully between temporal and spatial motifs. Consider how, in speaking of the realm of the image, Blanchot alternately makes reference to the “vertiginous heart of

122 *The Book to Come*. 17.

time,”¹²³ or the “intimacy of time,”¹²⁴ or perhaps even to “time as space and empty place”¹²⁵ – whilst at other moments, he will refer quite simply to pure, empty space or “the space unique to images.”¹²⁶ For a philosopher like Bergson, such obfuscation of the difference between time and space would, of course, be greatly problematic. Nevertheless, it is crucial that we not allow these terminological ambiguities to derail our potential understanding of the text. This is because (strange as it may sound), each of these descriptions actually refer to the same thing. When Blanchot evokes the vertiginous heart of time, in the pages of *Au moment voulu*, it is none other than the (spatial) realm of the imaginary that he has in mind. He is referring, in other words, to that point where “the pure inwardness of time...[becomes] imaginary space.”¹²⁷

As we know, it was the discovery of this imaginary space which became, for Proust, “synonymous with the ability to write.”¹²⁸ But even beyond Proust – and his widely overlooked influence upon Blanchot – there is another literary resonance, here, which demands to be taken into account. For it is difficult to read about “the pure inwardness of time” becoming “imaginary space,” without thinking, once more, of Rilke and his famous *Weltinnenraum* – that most auspicious of spaces “which is no less things’ intimacy than ours.”¹²⁹ It was this space, as we recall, which came to embrace (without ever enclosing) the entirety of creation *in its transmuted form*. Here all things circulated and interpenetrated with one another beyond the fetters of their spatio-temporal existence and outside the domain of mastery and possession. This was the space of the free image, the image which had been made subject to essential conversion, to the exigency of *Herzwerk*.

Let us recall how Blanchot, in coming to describe all this, within the pages of his 1953 Rilke essay, had made reference to the following poem, dated from August 1914:

123 *When the Time Come*. 232.

124 *The Book to Come*. 16.

125 *Ibid.* 13.

126 *Ibid.* 14.

127 *Ibid.* 17.

128 *Ibid.* 16.

129 *The Space of Literature*. 136.

“Through all beings spreads the one space: / the world’s inner space. Silently fly the birds / all through us. Oh, I who want to grow, / I look outside, and it is in me that the tree grows.”¹³⁰ What we encounter in these lines is a depiction of the unbounded freedom, the limitlessness, which seems to pervade the *Weltinnenraum*. It is a limitlessness most beautifully conveyed, here, by the image of the bird which flies silently through one’s very breast, through the intimacy of the heart – as if all boundaries having been dissolved, it were to find itself suddenly and inexplicably transported into the space of the infinite.

Indeed, it is truly remarkable how closely this depiction comes to resemble a pair of lines encountered, rather prominently, near the very end of *Au moment voulu*. Consider how Blanchot’s narrator, on the text’s penultimate page, tells us of coming to behold “through the radiant space [*l’espace rayonnant*], the flight of a free image [*l’essor d’une image libre*] soaring from a point that I can’t see towards another point that I can’t see.”¹³¹ The language, here, is undeniably Rilkean in its tenor just as the “flight of the free image,” which Blanchot makes reference to, cannot help but draw comparisons to those very birds, in Rilke’s poem, which “silently fly” through the most intimate reaches of the heart.

And what about the precise adjective which Blanchot elects to use in describing the space in question? He writes (as we can see) of a “radiant” space [*espace rayonnant*]. A crucial turn of phrase. For where, we might ask, have we already encountered this term *rayonnant*? –Precisely in our first of two references to the heart, that very reference immediately linked to the all-important *Nescio vos* scene. Indeed, it was this very reference to *le coeur rayonnant* which had elicited our initial digression into Blanchot’s reading of Proust, as well as our subsequent discovery of that most crucial (and necessary) tension at the very heart of his account.

130 Ibid.

131 *When the Time Comes*. 259.

Now, it seems, these two references to the heart, each encountered within the pages of *Au moment voulu*, have come to link up in rather stunning manner.

For as we can now discern, it is precisely through the narrator's exposure to the eternal return, to that strange and bewildering experience of an event which comes to recur outside of all presence, that he manages to fall into the very heart of time, where the radiance of the image takes hold. It is precisely through this most terrifying of instants, the instant of phantom simultaneity, that the resplendence of the radiant image – and the realm of the imaginary more broadly – come to the fore in Blanchot's text.



If the *Nescio vos* scene, in other words, more than any other, seems to grant the narrator access, as he claims, to the most remarkable moment, an instant which “infinitely surpassed all the others,”¹³² it is because what announces itself to him at this very instant is something utterly incomparable: the sheer radiance of the imaginary. It is this moment, as we can now discern, which compels him to fall, far beyond himself, into the abyss of empty time which surrenders him to “the joyful space of the festival [*l'espace joyeux d'une fête*], the eternal glitter of an image [*le resplendissement eternal d'une image*].”¹³³

Here, as Blanchot writes, this scintillation becomes “freedom in me, a freedom that tears apart all bonds [*une liberté qui déchire tous les liens*], that abolishes all tasks...”¹³⁴ To enter this space of the imaginary, is to enter a space where the work of negation is suspended and the pursuit of knowledge is relinquished. It is within this space, as

132 Ibid. 249.

133 Ibid. 258.

134 Ibid. 259.

Blanchot will later write in the pages of *Le dernier homme*, that “everyone is reflected in each of us by an infinite glimmering that projects us into a radiant intimacy...”¹³⁵ An intimacy which is only accessible, as we have discovered, through that *déchirement* which rends both syntactic and temporal continuity, exposing us to the mysterious point where pure, empty time is literally transformed into imaginary space.

Indeed, it is this very space, the space of glimmering intimacy, which Blanchot will ultimately come to describe, by early 1957, in his strangest and most revealing manner yet, as nothing other than “the terrible thing, the eternal heart [*le coeur éternel*].”¹³⁶ Words of great importance. For when we think of all the epithets which have thus far been linked to the heart: empty, vertiginous, radiant, eternal – and now, terrible – it is perhaps this last one which strikes us as most fascinating, most inexplicable. Why, we must ask, should such a heart be *terrible*? What, exactly, is so terrible about this infinite glimmering which Blanchot is attempting to describe?

With these questions, we come at last to approach the point of both thematic and rhetorical confluence which we have been pursuing. We come to the very core of our discussion. For if the radiant heart is ultimately indistinguishable, for Blanchot, from the most “terrible thing” this can only be on account of the loss, the ignorance, and the estrangement – in a word, the sacrifice – which is required of anyone who would seek to accede, here, unto the intimacy of the glimmering imaginary. But let us be clearer on this most crucial of points.



¹³⁵ Maurice Blanchot. *The Last Man*. Translated by Lydia Davis. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 75.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 86.

What we have learned, thus far, is that it is precisely through the moment, the *Augenblick*, that the return announces itself, and announces itself, moreover, by impelling us to fall through the broken shards of time into the realm of the imaginary. Here all things become infinitely reflective, interpenetrating with one another in a vast, glimmering intimacy.

And yet, as Blanchot maintains, this *locus* of intimacy is also the most terrible, the most frightening space. Why, we might ask, is it so utterly terrifying? Because, as we soon learn, it is here, in this realm pervaded by “shining resemblance” which throws each thing “back infinitely from likeness to likeness [*du semblable au semblable*]”¹³⁷ – that *I* am necessarily lost. The intimacy of death, like the intimacy of amorous consummation, is necessarily withheld, here, from anyone who would seek to experience it in a position of mastery or propriety.

Consider the following passage from *Au moment voulu*: “How terrible things are, when they come out of themselves, into a resemblance, eternally their own likenesses, they do not affirm themselves but rather, beyond the dark flux and reflux of repetition [*le sombre flux et reflux de la répétition*], affirm the absolute power of this resemblance, which is no one’s and has no name and no face.”¹³⁸ Indeed, as Blanchot tells us, it is for this very reason that it is so frightening to love. “To bind oneself to a reflection – who would consent to that? But to bind oneself to what has no name and no face...that is precisely what passion wants.”¹³⁹

It is passion, in other words, which necessarily leads us, through the movement of return, into that terrifying space where intimacy is perhaps at last achieved, only never by me. It is passion which compels me to await with such persistence, with such undying fidelity, that *moment* in which I will be absolved of myself, turned away from myself, in order to give light to that glowing, resplendent intimacy which will never be mine. To speak of the most passionate moment, the most passionate embrace, is thus to

137 *When the Time Comes*. 260.

138 *Ibid.* 258.

139 *Ibid.* 258.

speak of the embrace I will never undergo; it is to speak of the embrace which absolves me from experiencing it.



And this, as we can now discern, is nothing less than the precise significance of the *Nescio vos* scene – that scene which we have attempted, over the course of the preceding pages, to explicate with both attentiveness and subtlety. Recall, for instance, what the narrator tells us about it: “I was the torch lit in order to illuminate a single instant...I had become no one [*personne*]...”¹⁴⁰ And what does he tell us, furthermore, about the face which he encounters there, the face of Judith, this woman who rises momentarily from her bed in order to utter the briefest and most enigmatic of pronouncements? He tells us of encountering a face, “but one deprived of a name, without a biography, one that is rejected by memory...”¹⁴¹ And then, in another passage: “[Her] look was avid...but possessing nothing...She had looked at me for a long time, but I did not see her.”¹⁴²

How can we not think, here, of the proviso scene in *Aminadab*? How can we not be reminded of Lucie’s three conditions for intimacy – those injunctions against speech, against looking, against thinking? Indeed, it is precisely along these lines that we should then come to understand the following remarks, uttered by the narrator in relation to the scene in Judith’s bedroom: “I know that it isn’t a question...of an event belonging to me...I haven’t looked for her, I haven’t questioned her, and if I pass near there, I don’t stop. What sort of relations do we have? I don’t know.”¹⁴³

140 Ibid. 252.

141 Ibid. 255.

142 Ibid. 248 & 254.

143 Ibid. 255.

These are decisive words. For it is in these lines that the exigency of sacrifice and loss becomes utterly unmistakable to us. To undergo exposure to this event, the most meaningful event, is to lose all relation to it. To enter the space of incomparable of intimacy, the intimacy of resplendent and radiant interpenetration, is to find oneself no longer there, but rather, always elsewhere – as if carried away by the eternal scintillation itself.¹⁴⁴

And so, as the narrator tells us, in order to bring about this moment, the moment which “infinitely surpassed all other,” he himself has to disappear. In order to allow Judith that lunge, that wild movement which shatters time, he himself has to sacrifice everything. “To allow her that leap [*ce bond*],” he tells us, “I must draw back [*reculer*], and draw back again.”¹⁴⁵ On this point, as we can see, the Kierkegaardian rhetoric which we had emphasised at the outset, once again resurfaces. And the context for this resurfacing, as it turns out, could not possibly be more significant.

For let us recall how, in the pages of *Fear and Trembling*, it was only through an initial affirmation of absolute distance, an affirmation of irretrievable loss, that the mysterious second movement – the movement of faith – came to restore, to Abraham, his dearly beloved son. It was only by carrying the exigency of separation to its furthest limit, to a point beyond mere compulsion, beyond obedience, all the way to that furthest, most unthinkable point, where the order to kill Isaac became transmuted into the *desire* to do so – that the miracle of restoration was granted him.

Indeed, what we can now discern, rather remarkably, is that the *very same* double movement appears to be at play, right here, in Blanchot’s text – as evidenced by that relation of nonrelation which brings together, by tearing apart, the narrator and this woman whom he calls Judith. If the narrator finds himself, here, in the space of the image, drawn into a relation of unprecedented intimacy, it is only through the prior

¹⁴⁴ “Where I am entering, no one enters,” writes Blanchot in *L’Arrêt de mort*. And in *Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas*, he tells us rather similarly of the site of an encounter “in which there was no one [*il n’y avait personne*] and in which I was not myself.” Cf. *The One Who was Standing Apart From Me* [p. 284] & *Death Sentence* [p. 167].

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

imposition of an utterly impassable distance, a separation so radical that it comes to be linked with an absolute tearing [*déchirement*] of time.

And what, we might ask, is capable of bringing into play a distancing this catastrophic, a distancing through which Judith, like Abraham, comes to renounce the one she loves, declaring in all truthfulness, her absolute ignorance and refusal of him? *Nothing but the movement of eternal recurrence itself.*

If the story of Abraham, a story which Blanchot so poignantly reinscribes within the pages of *Au moment voulu*, suggests to us, in other words, that it is only through absolute separation that intimacy perhaps becomes possible, then it is none other than Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence which alone seems capable of bringing such a distance into play. It is only through the eternal return, in other words, that the separation between Judith and the narrator can reach a point as utterly extreme as the one between Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard and Regine. It is only through the eternal return which makes us absolute strangers to one another, displacing us from all fixed identity, that we can perhaps enter that space where absolute distance, taken to its limit, gives way to the miracle of intimacy.

On Readiness

At last, on this point, the Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean trajectories come to intersect as promised. At last, we come to see that those two, contrary movements encountered in *Fear and Trembling* – the movements of absolute distancing and subsequent intimacy – are analogous to the two faces, as it were, of eternal recurrence itself. Indeed, it is this fascinating convergence of tropes which enables us to appreciate not

only Blanchot's *récit*, but the entire development of his thinking on eroticism, from the early 1940s onward, in a whole new light.

Consider the good-natured, but notably inadequate, critical reception which has been accorded to the text in question. According to Steven Shaviro, *Au moment voulu* is a *récit* imbued with "a pathos of intimacy and excess."¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, for Marie-Laure Hurault, it is a text in which "the accent is placed on separation."¹⁴⁷ How can it be, we might ask, that these two commentators, each with a profound appreciation for Blanchot's work, come to describe the very same text in such radically divergent ways? Could it be (we might ask) that intimacy and separation – the two tropes emphasised by Shaviro and Hurault respectively – are in fact so indissolubly linked within Blanchot's text that we cannot speak of one without necessarily reinscribing the other? And could it be, moreover, that they are unified precisely by the movement of eternal recurrence itself, which makes intimacy emerge out of absolute distance – just as Kierkegaard's leap of faith had seemed to grant him possession out of loss?

Indeed, this is precisely what we have attempted to show. And it is along these lines, moreover, that the *récit's* fascinating title should then be interpreted. For we know that the phrase "*au moment voulu*" is directly lifted, by Blanchot, from the pages of *Zarathustra* where mastery over death "is presented in the guise of a voluntary stoic death, a dying at the chosen moment."¹⁴⁸ And we also know how Blanchot himself, in his 1946 essay, "Du côté de Nietzsche," goes on to gloss this very phrase, rather helpfully, for us. He tells us how the instruction: "Die at the right moment [*Meurs au moment voulu*]" cannot help but recommend to us a truly impossible act, since it seeks to link my decision "to a moment that no one can recognise, the best moment, the deliberate moment, one that I could only perceive after I am dead, by going back over the whole of my complete existence."¹⁴⁹

146 Steven Shaviro. *Passion & Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990. 143.

147 Maurice Blanchot: *Le principe de fiction*. 62.

148 "Blanchot's *Au moment voulu*: Woman as the eternally recurring figure of writing." 81.

149 *The Work of Fire*. 297-8.

We should pay special attention, here, to the phrase “a moment that no one can recognise,” because it is in these very words that the paradox of intimacy in Blanchot’s *récit* is already made apparent. If the right moment, the moment of death or consummation, is precisely the one which can never be recognised in advance, nor lived through in the present, then there is something strikingly impossible about the nature of Nietzsche’s famous exhortation. And yet, it is a *necessary* impossibility – and this, precisely, is the key point.



For let us recall how, in *Fear and Trembling*, everything hinged on the very affirmation of the impossible. Indeed, what differentiated the knight of faith from the knight of infinite resignation was that the former remained somehow undeterred by the infinite and impassable distance which separated him from the beloved object. And he recognised, moreover, in this very distance, the only means by which the beloved might be returned to him. This is the most difficult and most mysterious point in Kierkegaard’s discourse, the point where absolute deprivation and loss perhaps lead us to the threshold of restoration. And if we necessarily speak, here, of a *perhaps* – it is only because like Nietzsche’s moment of fortuitous death, Kierkegaard’s moment of fortuitous restoration can neither be recognised in advance, nor induced by external means. This is a point well-made by one of Kierkegaard’s more astute recent commentators: “The knight of faith has the faith, strength, or courage to say: ‘I shall get her by virtue of the absurd,’ but he cannot force or coerce her return. Rather, by an open readiness to receive her...he can welcome her, if she is given.”¹⁵⁰

150 “Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith, and the Absurd.” 108.

What is being evoked, therefore, in Blanchot's title, is precisely this "open readiness" for the moment, that most fortuitous moment, when the seamless continuity of time and the tireless work of negation come to be annulled, suddenly, by little more than a face in a window, or the shudder of a silhouette in the Montparnasse night. Perhaps not unlike the stroke of lightning which Proust himself describes – this moment comes always unexpectedly, compelling us to fall through the ruins of a broken time and into that radiant, scintillating heart of the imaginary where everything is granted us, on the condition that we ourselves are lost there. As Blanchot writes, in the autumn of 1954:

"All real time is necessary to arrive at this unreal movement...[and yet] this revelation is in no way the necessary effect of a progressive development: it has the irregularity of chance, the gracious strength of an unmerited gift, which does not in the least recompense a long and skilful labour of development...[Indeed] it owes everything to duration, but owes it everything only so that it could escape it suddenly, by an unforeseeable leap..."¹⁵¹

When we read, here, about "an unmerited gift" or "an unforeseeable leap" – it is precisely the improbable nature of the moment which is being stressed. It is the radical anarchy of this instant in relation to time which is being highlighted. For no amount of time, as Blanchot tells us, can ever grant us this gift; and yet, it is nevertheless *in time* that we must wait for it. Indeed, this is precisely the strange paradox which announces itself in the *récit's* title. We must wait *in time* for that very moment, as Blanchot writes, "which at a certain point always disengages itself [*se dégage*] from time."¹⁵² Thus, not unlike the law of return which spoke from within metaphysics about that abysmal movement that always already exceeds it – so, too, does the phrase "*au moment voulu*" seek to render in temporal terms what falls outside of time. For when "the moment comes," it is no longer time which concerns us, but rather the scintillating radiance of pure imaginary space. When the "unmerited gift" of intimacy is granted, if it is granted, there remains no moment of presence adequate to it. So we wait for that instant when time itself must give-way, against all odds, in order to welcome something which may perhaps forever elude us.

151 *The Book to Come* 16-17.

152 *When the Time Comes*. 260.

Yes, this is the great, unspoken secret of Blanchot's narrator: to comport oneself, to prepare oneself to welcome her *if she is given*. Indeed, this is the very ethos of Abraham himself, who rises neither too early, nor too late, Kierkegaard tells us, but right on time to lead Isaac to Mount Moria with no expectation of a miracle (for then his path of resignation would not yet be complete), but rather, only a comportment of openness to receive Isaac *if* he should be restored.

And how, exactly, are we to characterise the nature of this comportment? Here, at least, the answer seems rather unambiguous – from the pages of *Thomas l'obscur*, through *Aminadab*, and into the *récits* of the late 1940s and early 1950s – Blanchot makes it perfectly clear to us that it is withdrawal, refusal, and detachment which are required above all else. In a word, it is distance; it is the absolute of separation which is demanded if one is to allow for the “unforeseeable leap.” Recall the narrator's words, in *Au moment voulu*, “To allow her that leap [*ce bond*], I must draw back [*reculer*], and draw back again.”¹⁵³ It is this drawing-back which allows for the magic, the mystery of the moment to interpose itself by shattering the continuity of time and allowing us an exposure to the eternal lapping of the outside [*dehors*].



Few, if any, of Blanchot's recent commentators have come to discuss this in any significant detail. But of those critics who have sought to address the complex role of distance within Blanchot's erotic scenographies, it is perhaps Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt who comes closest to sharing our perspective. It is she, along with another recent commentator, Chantal Michel, who seeks to draw, in this respect, an interesting parallel between *Au moment voulu* and Breton's *Nadja* – arguably one of the greatest

¹⁵³ Ibid.

love stories of the 20th century.¹⁵⁴ In both texts, we find our respective narrators as if perpetually “on the look-out for the miracle of the encounter [*miracle de la rencontre*].”¹⁵⁵ And in both texts, moreover, it is neither through will, nor voluntary action of any kind, that this seduction of chance, that this courting of the miracle, takes place.

To attract the moment, to attract the instant of the beloved’s fortuitous and utterly improbable manifestation, is to “avoid her, and in any case, forget her in a passive state of distraction, indifference, and inattention which Blanchot refers to as negligence.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, as Schulte-Nordholt writes, “it is only by distancing himself from her, that the lover approaches his beloved.”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, it is only by making himself unknown, utterly foreign to his own son (“I am not your father, I am your murderer...”) and then raising the knife, in an unparalleled gesture of separation, that Abraham comports himself for the miracle – the miracle of restoration, the return of intimacy.

Indeed, understood in these terms, the significance of Blanchot’s reinscription of the biblical story should now appear increasingly clear to us. For if Judith, in the concluding pages of the text, is expressly linked to the personage of Abraham (“something happened to her that resembled the story of Abraham...”) – then she is also linked, as Christophe Bident assures us, to the most auspicious personage of Denise Rollin, the very woman who seemed to have actually enacted the very sacrifice in question. A fact which cannot help but endow Blanchot’s Abrahamic scene with a ravishing poignancy. For let us recall, on this point, those utterly fascinating words written by Denise toward the end of the 1950s: “This now makes fourteen years that I refuse Maurice Blanchot – who nevertheless is the being destined for me.”¹⁵⁸ *Nowhere*, it seems, do we discern more clearly than here the two movements of the Abrahamic discourse, the simultaneity of resignation and faith, distance and intimacy. Particularly

154 Cf. Chantal Michel. *Maurice Blanchot et le Déplacement d’Orphée*. Saint-Genouph: Libraire-Nizet, 1997. 98.

155 Maurice Blanchot: *L’écriture comme expérience du dehors*. 258.

156 Ibid. 258-9.

157 Ibid. 260.

158 Maurice Blanchot: *Partenaire invisible*. 275.

telling are those final words: “...*who nevertheless is the being destined for me.*” This is because what these words appear to rehearse is that very phrase, already cited, from the pages of *Fear and Trembling*, which the knight of faith is said to utter in the very midst of severance and deprivation: “*I nevertheless believe that I shall get her.*”

As we recall, it is this crucial phrase which comes to bespeak, from out of the very heart of sacrifice and loss, the sheer absurdity of the endeavour, the madness of an uncommon faith which affirms even the most extreme alienation and estrangement in the name of the faintest of promises, a belief that the impossible itself will grant us the miracle of restoration, of return. This is the phrase which encapsulates, for Abraham, for Judith, for Denise, “an open readiness” to receive the gift, a comportment which at no moment can be separated from the Nietzschean affirmation of extreme distance.

For how can we forget those words from the winter of 1946, words inscribed in the very weeks and months when Denise’s refusal first began to take shape, words which demonstrate Blanchot’s incomparable appreciation for the Nietzschean rehabilitation of erotic distance: “This is the sign of supreme love,” Ariadne tells us, “to reduce him to nothing.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, as Blanchot went on to write, it was precisely the sign of Ariadne’s supreme love to assert herself as the refusal of all ends, as the ability to separate herself indefinitely.

Just as the eternal return confirms itself most eloquently and unmistakably in the distance which turns us away from it, so too, does Denise seem to express her fidelity to this “being for whom [she] is destined” precisely by turning *him* away. Such is the secret of Ariadne, the secret of Anne, Lucie, J., and Judith. It is none other than the secret of the labyrinth itself: in order to achieve something, one must go away from it. Distance, estrangement, absolute detachment – all of this is necessary, to bring about the moment of moments. All of this is necessary to bring about that most fortuitous instant of restoration, of intimacy, of communion.

¹⁵⁹ *The Work of Fire*. 296-297.



But even at this point, this *remarkable* point where intimacy emerges out of distance, Blanchot still has one final lesson, it seems, to teach us – a lesson without which our understanding of his *récit* remains hopelessly incomplete. For what does he proceed to tell us, in the concluding pages of *Au moment voulu*, about the Abraham who returns home from the mountain? What does he tell us about this man who finds himself, through the miracle of the instant, restored to the one whom he loves most? “When Abraham came back from the country of Moria,” Blanchot writes, “he was not accompanied by his child but by the image of a ram [*l’image d’un bélier*], and it was with a ram that he had to live from then on. Others saw the son in Isaac, because they didn’t know what had happened on the mountain, but he saw the ram in his son, because he had made a ram for himself out of his child.”¹⁶⁰

It is here, on this final point, that the void, the emptiness, at the heart of intimacy becomes once more painfully apparent to us. For what follows Abraham down from the mountain, in the very wake of this miraculous restoration, is not Isaac – but rather, merely the *image of a ram*. The awaited restoration, it seems, has indeed been granted; and yet, it is a restoration which necessarily refers one to the glimmer of the imaginary. It is a restoration which dissimulates itself behind an unsteady glow. And does this not once more corroborate precisely what we had been suggesting throughout the preceding pages, that to enter the space of intimacy, to fall into the vertiginous heart of time, is to find oneself transformed into a mere reflection, “an image wandering among images and drawn along with them in the monotony of a movement that appears to have no

160 *When the Time Comes*. 253.

conclusion just as it had no beginning?”¹⁶¹ Indeed, this is precisely what the allegory of Isaac’s transformation teaches us. It teaches us that it is only in the realm of the imaginary, amidst the glittering resplendence of the image, that intimacy (in Blanchot’s text) might be achieved – an intimacy which renders one alien to oneself, and alien to all recognition from the other.

And what does this suggest, moreover, about the precise nature of the narrator’s relationship to Judith, or Blanchot’s own relationship with Denise, for that matter? It tells us that the fortuitous moment which grants one intimacy through distance also makes one fall, by the very same logic, into a space where identity comes to be displaced, or dissimulated infinitely behind a series of glimmering, scintillating images without reference to any present. It also tells us, rather importantly, that the space of intimacy is perhaps co-extensive with the space of literature itself, allowing us to speculate that the *relation amoureuse* between Blanchot and Denise perhaps only came to approach that threshold of unprecedented intimacy at the very moment when she herself, disappearing behind the name Judith, gave body and form to the effervescent glimmer of an image, a fiction.

It suggests to us, in other words, that the truth of intimacy could only become available to Blanchot and Denise, rather paradoxically, within the imaginary space of the *récit* itself – in that space where Denise effaced herself behind the pure scintillation of the image, becoming *no one* in order to accede unto that most auspicious space which Blanchot, by 1957, would come to refer to as the “eternal heart.” And just as Abraham alone was capable of seeing the image of a ram in Isaac, so too has the haunting trace of this woman, visibly impregnated within the pages of Blanchot’s *récit*, remained (until now) completely unrecognisable to us readers. It is this unrecognition, an unrecognition which Blanchot bears witness to so poignantly with the phrase *Nescio vos*, that comes to comprise arguably the most indelible testimony to a relation founded upon the very premise of the impossible.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 257-8.

Chapter IX

“This Beating of a Hesitant Heart”

The Eroticism of Prolepsis & the Double Affirmation of Eternal Recurrence

“Even so, you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it ever happened.”

Duras

“Don’t write... and avoid meeting me, just fulfil this request in silence, it’s the only way that I can somehow go on living...”

Kafka, to Milena

A Return to Tristan

As we move forward – into the concluding sections of this thesis – it will be of great importance for us to keep in mind everything that we have discovered, in the preceding pages, about the nature of eroticism in Blanchot's fictional writings of the forties and fifties. It will be crucial for us to retain, for example, a sense of the profound importance which Blanchot ascribes to the necessity of detachment, refusal, and sacrifice in erotic life. It will also be crucial for us to remember the unmistakable emphasis which he places, both in the proviso scene of *Aminadab*, as well as in the two parallel waking-scenes in *L'Arrêt de mort* and *Au moment voulu*, upon the essential ignorance, the strangeness, which necessarily inhabits even the most tender embrace. And last (but not least) it will be crucial for us not to forget that final, especially provocative move which we have just discussed – the invocation of the imaginary, that field of scintillating radiance which asserts itself, in the very absence of temporal continuity, as the *locus* of glimmering interpenetration.

Now – having made note of all this – the time has come for us to close the broken circle and approach, once more, our point of initial departure. The time has come for us to return to the spring of 1954, to that moment when Blanchot's Tristan essay was originally published in the *NRF*. For it was here, in this very essay, an essay which has been entirely overlooked, utterly marginalised, by three generations of readers and critics, that we first came to encounter that most incongruous of words, a word which surprised us, provoked us, and subsequently compelled us to wonder if everything we had previously alleged about the Nietzschean rehabilitation of erotic distance (and Blanchot's subsequent role in radicalising and reinscribing it within his own texts) had somehow been sorely mistaken. It was here in this essay that we encountered a phrase which so threatened the entirety of the preceding account, that without immediately addressing both its presence *and* prominence within the essay at hand, our entire undertaking in this study would likely have been consigned to

failure. This word, which had brought our discourse to the point of sheer crisis was none other than the phrase – *l'intimité*.



How (we had wondered) could any form of intimacy whatsoever remain commensurable with the Nietzschean rehabilitation of erotic distance, this project which had sought to reprioritise and reaffirm everything which the venerable tradition of German romanticism had systematically denigrated in the realm of erotic life: distance, deferral, unfulfilment? How could one *even speak* of intimacy in the wake of the eternal return, this thought of absolute separation, which challenged us to affirm endlessness without consummation, without release? And how, especially, could any notion of intimacy come to abide within the parameters of Blanchot's own discourse – a discourse seemingly preoccupied with the contestation of teleological recuperation in all its forms?

There can be no doubt that the discovery of intimacy rhetoric in Blanchot's Tristan essay had marked a point of real crisis in the pages of this study. It was a crisis, moreover, which also gave voice to the deepest of ironies. For as we know, it was precisely *in response* to his profound and unforgettable immersion within the pathos of the Tristanian milieu, that Nietzsche himself first came to construe his thought of extreme distance, his thought of eternal recurrence. It was precisely *in response* to the world-weariness, the longing for release, the consummatory idealism which he encountered in Wagner's erotic scenography – that Nietzsche came to perceive the necessity of fashioning a counter-ideal; an ideal in which the endlessness of longing, the insatiable persistence of desire, would be affirmed rather than denigrated – and not just in this lifetime, but for all eternity.

Now, to discover Blanchot, in the midst of an essay on Tristan, suddenly electing to inscribe the rhetoric of intimacy – and even telling us of the *collapse* of erotic

distance, the annulment of separation – how, we might ask, could this constitute anything less than a clear and unpardonable betrayal of the Nietzschean project?

Indeed, it was in response to this crisis that we embarked upon a rather sustained excavation of Blanchot's writings from the forties and early fifties in an attempt at clarifying the precise context for his troubling remarks. And what we found, almost immediately, was that Blanchot's emphasis upon intimacy in the 1954 Tristan essay was by no means an isolated occurrence. Only months earlier, in the spring of 1953, Blanchot had already come to inscribe, with both regularity and flourish, the trope of intimacy in an essay dedicated to Rilke's work. Here, in "Rilke et l'exigence de la mort," we encountered references to "the intimacy of conversion [*l'intimité de la conversion*]"¹ and to "the intimacy of invisible death [*l'intimité de la mort invisible*]"² – as well as references to "spiritual intimacy [*intimité spirituelle*]"³ and the "intimate vastness of the outside [*l'ampleur intime de ce dehors*]." ⁴ There was even an enticing reference to "the intimacy of the heart [*l'intimité du coeur*]." ⁵ Indeed, few themes within Blanchot's reading of Rilke were mentioned with greater frequency or assigned a more noticeable rhetorical prominence.

And yet, as we soon discovered, the origins of Blanchot's apparent fascination with this trope could be seen to date back even further, to the very earliest days of his career as a mature writer. Returning to the beginning of the 1940s, what we discovered within his fictional writings from that era was likewise a pattern of tireless reinscription which could only be described as obstinate, or even obsessive in nature. From *Thomas l'obscur*, to the pages of *Aminadab*, we encountered a veritable fixation upon the trope of intimacy culminating, in the final third of that latter text, with a proviso scene borrowed from the very annals of the classical tradition. Here, it seems, the question of intimacy came to receive its lengthiest and most sustained treatment in the entirety of Blanchot's early writings.

1 *The Space of Literature*. 135.

2 *Ibid.* 147.

3 *Ibid.* 136.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.* 138.

Nevertheless, it was not until the pages of *L'Arrêt de mort*, and in particular, *Au moment voulu* – his first *récit* of the Èze period – that the full significance of intimacy in Blanchot's writings gradually became apparent to us. At last, the broader, literary-philosophical context for Blanchot's usage became increasingly evident. And yet, from one scene to the next, the question nevertheless remained: *why intimacy?* Why had Blanchot chosen to reinscribe, throughout his fictional texts of the forties and early fifties, this particular trope – a trope whose redolence of the early 19th century had seemed to us so decidedly *pre-Nietzschean*?



As we will now suggest, it is not until his 1954 Tristan essay, published some two and a half years after *Au moment voulu*, that Blanchot finally offers us a response to this all-important question. Here, for the very first time, Blanchot comes to accord the mysterious complicity between intimacy and estrangement, proximity and separation, its long-overdue, critical elucidation. What we discover, in the very midst of this elucidation, is not only an invaluable perspective on one of the most widely misunderstood tendencies in Blanchot's early writings – but also, at the very same time, a significant contribution to our understanding of Nietzsche's *own* work, a contribution which has, until now, been almost completely overlooked.

If Nietzsche's name appears conspicuously absent from the essay in question, the same cannot be said about his most famous and formidable thought – the thought of eternal recurrence. As even the most casual reading of the 1954 Tristan essay will immediately reveal, it is none other than the thought of eternal return which comes to assert itself, here, with an incontrovertible prominence. For if the essay in question might be said to deal, loosely speaking, with the question of erotic desire in three great tales of heterosexual passion (the stories of Orpheus, Don Juan, and Tristan) – it is nonetheless Nietzsche's thought of thoughts which unmistakably

circumscribes the very context for this discussion. This much is made clear in the following passage, which already suggests to us an undeniable liaison between the rhetoric of intimacy and the abyssal movement of return:

“Whoever desires is not only bound to the repetition of what always begins again; the one who desires enters into the space where the remote [*le lointain*] is the essence of proximity [*la proximité*] – where what unites Tristan and Isolde is also what separates them: not only the limit of their bodies that are closed and off-limits, the inviolable reserve of their solitude that rivets them to themselves, but the secret of absolute distance [*le secret de l'écart absolu*].”⁶

In this passage, we are told that what unites Tristan and Isolde, is in fact the very thing which also separates them: not only the spatial and temporal limits of their own bodies, but the secret of absolute distance. An intriguing turn of phrase. But how, exactly, are we to understand the nature of this *écart absolu*? On the basis of the preceding remarks, we are led to envision an interval of separation even more irreducible, even more indestructible, than the spatial distance which maintains all bodies as distinct from one another – and *even more* insurmountable, we might add, than the interval of temporal separation which holds apart two distinct moments in time. To speak of an absolute distance, in other words, would be to speak of a distance which remains utterly untraversable; a distance not to be annulled or overcome by any means – not even by death or consummation. For it would be only such a distance, Blanchot claims, that would remain, in every sense of the term, truly *absolute*.

And where, we might ask, have we already encountered precisely such a distance – a distance not to be undone, not to be overcome, even by the forces of death itself? Nowhere else than in the opening chapters of this very thesis, in those scenographies of incomparable longing which Nietzsche himself came to construe in direct response to the provocation of German romanticism, and in particular, Wagner's *Tristan*. It was here, in Zarathustra's regimen of endless hesitation and in the prophecy of death's terrifying hollowness, that we already came to sense a most inimitable secret: the secret of absolute distance itself.

⁶ *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

Remarkably, then, it is this very same secret which Blanchot himself comes to accentuate in his own reading of the Tristan legend. Only now, as we will see, Blanchot proceeds to take an additional step, a step whose radicality is foreign even to Nietzsche's own discourse. It is a step which appears to carry the thought of eternal recurrence to its most extreme limit – to a point where the affirmation of the interminable comes to yield perhaps its most startling and unexpected consequence.

Indeed, what Blanchot is seeking to propose, in the pages of his 1954 Tristan essay, is that the “secret” of absolute distance, the secret of eternal recurrence itself, resides in the manner in which it leads us, somewhat extraordinarily, from the sheer indissolubility of separation to the threshold of an unprecedented intimacy. “When the absolute of separation [*l'absolu de la séparation*] has become relation [*rapport*],” Blanchot writes, “it is no longer possible to be separated. When desire has been awakened by impossibility and by night, desire can indeed come to an end and an empty heart [*le coeur vide*] turn away from it.”⁷

Certainly it is no exaggeration to say that this passage may be thought to constitute one of the most significant statements on the nature of eroticism in the entirety of Blanchot's critical writings. For what it suggests to us is that distance, when taken to its most extreme limit, ultimately collapses upon itself. When desire is confronted with the sheer impossibility of fulfillment – the very impossibility felt so palpably by Hyperion, by Zarathustra, and by Blanchot's narrator in *Au moment voulu* – a mysterious transformation begins to take place, a transformation in which the separation between us, the distance that keeps us apart, is suddenly annulled. Desire, as Blanchot writes, can then come to an end and an empty heart turn away from it.



⁷ Ibid. 192.

Yet the question still remains *why* this should happen to be the case. Why should distance – when taken to its absolute and furthest extreme – collapse upon itself? A crucial question. And though the answer is never fully elaborated in the pages of Blanchot’s Tristan essay, it is a topic which comes to be treated in considerable detail elsewhere within his work. In perhaps one of his clearest statements on the matter, Blanchot tells us, in *Le pas au-delà*, that “distancing oneself [*s’éloigner*] presupposes a fixed point [*le point fixe*] in relation to which there would be distancing [*éloignement*].”⁸ And this fixed point, moreover, necessarily takes the form of presence.

But what would happen if this presence could somehow be contested, or dislodged from its position of primacy? Would this not entail an annulment of the very separation which it both sustains and upholds? Indeed, it is along these very lines that Blanchot, in an essay from late 1962, comes to argue that “distance [*lointain*] ceases as soon as presence ceases...”⁹ This statement, written on the occasion of Bataille’s death – and then republished nearly a decade later in *L’amitié* – is of paramount importance to us. For what it suggests in the clearest possible language is an unexpected, yet profound, complicity between the regimen of presence and the persistence of separation in all its forms.

This complicity is so extraordinarily unexpected because up until now it seems that we have been thinking of distance almost exclusively as a distancing *from* presence. To speak of Nietzsche’s rehabilitation of erotic distance, for example, was to speak of a denial of presence in all its forms. It was to speak of a refusal of consummatory fulfilment. Now, it appears to us that this very distance which so perniciously keeps us apart might at last be overcome – if only the regime of presence could somehow be suspended.

8 *The Step Not Beyond*. 70

9 *Friendship*. 289.

And what, we might ask, would be capable of engendering such a suspension? The answer to this question is clear: nothing but “the infinite movement that always begins again”¹⁰ – the ceaseless lapping of eternal recurrence. As Blanchot writes, it is irrevocability “which effaces the difference between near [*proche*] and far [*lointain*].”¹¹ The very same irrevocability which makes the future nothing but a prophecy of an empty past, shrouding everything in non-time, and offering us (under the false appearance of the present) the illusion of a history that never was – and yet, never ceases to return.



A strange turn of events. For up until now we had been convinced that the thought of eternal return – conceived as a thought of absolute distancing – rendered separation absolute. Now, it seems to us that the dislocation of presence engendered by the eternal return actually comes to *annul* the very basis for distancing. In a most unexpected turn of events, it is the thought of absolute distance – the thought of eternal recurrence – which ultimately renders distance impossible by emptying time of the very presence needed to sustain this separation.

And now, at last, the rhetoric adopted within Blanchot’s 1954 Tristan essay begins to make sense to us. For what is being described here is nothing less than a passage to the far shore of distance – to the point where positionality is suspended and separation can no longer take hold. A point as mysterious as it is alluring. Nevertheless, it is one which necessarily remains hidden to anyone who continues to pursue the wilful denial of severance. This is because the suppression of distance, as Blanchot tells us, can only come about as a radical consequence of *distancing itself*. Indeed, it is only by entrusting ourselves completely to the movement of

¹⁰ *The Infinite Conversation*. 188.

¹¹ *The Step Not Beyond*. 14.

absolute separation, and affirming this separation in its most extreme form, that the interval between us might at last be levelled.

The Empty Heart, the End of Desire

But how, precisely, are we to characterise the nature of this relation which emerges at the absolute limit of separation? We know, for example, that it is a relation no longer characterised by the persistence of mediation. We also know, as Blanchot tells us, that it is a relation seemingly bereft of desire. Since the very desire which had been awakened and then gradually intensified by the movement of inexorable deferral necessarily falls silent when confronted with the total collapse of distance. Does this mean, however, that the amorous couple – after so many trials and tribulations – have at last arrived upon the threshold of satisfaction?

An important question. For it seems to us that to admit even the *possibility* of fulfilment, especially at this stage, would amount to nothing less than a betrayal of the project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance. It would be to reinforce the pervasive dominance of the consummatory ideal under the very pretext of attempting to subvert it. And yet, is this not precisely what Blanchot, with his emphasis upon the annulment of separation and the cessation of longing, seems to be doing?

On the basis of everything we have said thus far, one could certainly be forgiven for assuming as much. And yet, upon returning to that crucial, guiding passage from the 1954 Tristan essay, all of this is invariably complicated by the persistence of a single, seemingly irreconcilable, trope. This trope – which seems to restrain the very tides of consummatory fulfilment, entreating us to hesitate interminably upon the threshold of release – is none other than the image of *the empty heart*.



Let us read, once more, the passage in question: “When the absolute of separation has become relation, it is no longer possible to be separated. When desire has been awakened by impossibility and by night, desire can indeed come to an end and the empty heart [*le coeur vide*] turn away from it.” What these words suggest to us, is that even when distance and desire have been brought to an end, there is still something which remains, nevertheless, unsated. And this something is the heart itself – whose very *emptiness* seems to persevere even when separation and yearning have long been extinguished.

But what, exactly, is this emptiness intended to signify? As we have already suggested, to speak of emptiness, in such a context, is to render an allusion to the centrifugal movement of eternal recurrence itself – the very movement which, having vacated time of all presence, suspends even the possibility of its own instantiation *as law*. It is this movement which is responsible, as we have shown, for the inexorable hollowing out (*creusement*) of time – as well as the contestation and ungrounding of every site where a truth, an ideal, an end might come to be declared.

To speak of the heart’s emptiness, in such a context, is thus to evoke the void, the sheer hollowness, engendered by the movement of eternal return, a hollowness which is nevertheless eternally radiant – for what reverberates throughout its vertiginous depths is nothing other than “the endless shimmer [*le miroitement sans fin*]”¹² – an infinitely alluring play of surface-effects divorced from any relation to the present. Here, in the realm of the imaginary, what continues to persist is neither a masterful striving for fulfilment, nor a longing for amorous reciprocity; but rather, “a

¹² Ibid. 257.

blind, impersonal desire,” as Blanchot writes, “that takes into account neither you nor me.”¹³

Indeed, it is here, amidst the radiance of the empty heart, as Blanchot writes, that “the happiness of private relations founders.”¹⁴ And yet, as we soon discover, this impossibility must be understood (in a very specific sense) to mark “a failure [*échec*] nonetheless more necessary and more precious than any triumph, for it holds hidden and in reserve the exigency of a more essential relation [*l'exigence d'un rapport essentiel*].”¹⁵ Clearly, these are important words. But how, precisely, we are to understand the nature of this *other* relation – this relation exonerated from both mediation and propriety – which prevails amidst the spectral, glimmering radiance of the imaginary?



In a sense, everything which we have been discussing from the very opening pages of this study has been building up to this question. And perhaps at no point of the preceding account have we come closer to reaching an answer, than in our discussion of Blanchot’s carefully choreographed reinscription of the story of Abraham in the pages of *Au moment voulu*.

Let us recall how, in the context of that very discussion, we had suggested that it was only through Abraham’s performative affirmation of absolute estrangement (an affirmation symbolised by the raising of the knife) that Isaac was ultimately restored to him. It was only by availing himself, when the time came, to this most irrevocable

¹³ *The Infinite Conversation*. 192. In his 1969 revisions to the Tristan essay, Blanchot replaces the term “*impersonnel*” with the term “*neutre*.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

déchirement, to a moment of irreversible separation, that the miracle of restoration was granted.

Indeed, it was precisely this story, as we recall, which had then come to mirror, so profoundly, the story of Blanchot's own relationship with Denise Rollin – a relationship fictively rehearsed in the narrator's dealings with that mysterious woman he called Judith. Like Abraham, like Kierkegaard, like Judith herself – Denise had to carry the exigency of distancing to its furthest limit, to the limit of absolute refusal, in order to unite herself with Blanchot. And where, we might ask, and in what form, did this reconciliation ultimately take place? Only in the realm of the imaginary, in the fictional space of the *récit* itself, where she found herself transformed into a glimmering image – rendered unrecognisable to the one she loved, in the very midst of unprecedented proximity.

Here, it seems, we encounter a most profound and telling exemplification of the “failure [*échec*] more necessary and more precious than any triumph,” which Blanchot elects to emphasise in his 1954 Tristan essay – the failure of *every* relation predicated upon reciprocity and recognition, mastery and possession. And if, as Blanchot suggests, it is a failure nevertheless “more necessary than any triumph,” it is because this collapse of personal relations enables us, perhaps for the very first time, to approach the domain of an even more essential relation – a radically *impersonal* one.

But let us seek to clarify this matter even further, by introducing, here, yet another example of the phenomenon in question, an example whose resonance, within the pages of Blanchot's 1954 Tristan essay, is perhaps almost impossible to ignore.

“A failure perhaps more necessary...”

It might be said that, with the possible exception of Nietzsche himself, there was perhaps no individual who came to undergo, in Blanchot’s eyes, this so-called “failure of personal relations” more tragically and unceasingly than Kafka. And it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that only seven months after the publication of his 1954 Tristan essay, Blanchot would once again elect to inscribe this notion of a “necessary failure” – only this time, within the context of a discussion of Kafka’s affair with Milena Jesenská.

The essay in question, which Blanchot tellingly entitled, “L’échec de Milena,” was written seemingly in response to the publication, some two years earlier, of the first edition of Kafka’s letters to her, a volume of rather dubious provenance, published under the editorship of Willy Haas.¹⁶ Here, for the first time, we encounter the story of Kafka’s tortured romance with a married woman, some fourteen years his junior – in his own words. It is an affair, as we know, pervaded by the imposition of unbridgeable distances, deferrals, and obstacles which do not cease to torment Kafka, even as they render the necessity of each epistle ever more undeniable. “All the misfortune of my life...derives from letters and from the possibility of writing letters,”¹⁷ Kafka remarks, near the end of the correspondence.

16 For many years now, readers of Kafka have had to content themselves with this edition, the one originally published in 1952. This edition, widely considered to be inadequate by scholars, not only leaves the letters undated and chronologically jumbled, but also features extensive omissions. In the early 1980s, important steps were made towards re-establishing the integrity of the Kafka-Milena correspondence by a pair of German scholars named Jürgen Born and Michael Müller. For an overview of their work, see Mark Anderson’s article “Kafka’s Unsigned Letters: A Reinterpretation of the Correspondence with Milena.” *MLN*. Vol. 98. German Issue (Apr. 1983), pp. 384-398.

17 Franz Kafka. *Letters to Milena*. Edited by Willi Haas. Translated by Tania and James Stern, London: Secker & Warburg, 1953. 229.



What we discover, in the pages of his letters to Milena, is a persistent – nearly irrepressible – desire to replace the unending disappointment of personal relations, with something *else*, a different kind of relation, which he struggles, in a rather heart-rending manner, to articulate or define. In one, particularly moving passage, he implores of her: “if...only you were willing to...reach *beyond* yourself so powerfully that in doing so you might perhaps be torn to shreds, stumble, disappear (and I, no doubt, with you)...to come to a place which offers no attraction, where I am sitting, without happiness or unhappiness...”¹⁸

These lines, it seems, might already be seen to constitute a rather unmistakable call to this *other* relation – an invitation for her to join him, at that point where personal relations cease, where one stumbles, perhaps disappears completely, in order to accede unto that place where a new and unprecedented rapport might be established. And that place, for Kafka, was of course to be none other than the space of literature itself – the space of dispersion and requisite impersonality where one passes “from *Ich* to *Er*, from I to He.”¹⁹

To establish relations here, as Kafka understood it, would necessarily be to establish them on the basis of the loss of fixed identity. It would be to establish them, moreover, in that barren space eternally outside of Canaan, where one loses oneself and does nothing but wander, endlessly, in the absence of death or completion. Indeed, if the Milena correspondence ultimately comprises such a fascinating and informative document of amorous entanglement, it is primarily through the manner in which it offers us a rather striking portrayal of Kafka literally tossed back and forth by the competing, mutually opposing, demands of the personal and impersonal spheres. From one letter to the next, he appears to play each sphere against the other, and then wallow in the guilt of having done so. He wants Milena’s

¹⁸ Ibid. 111.

¹⁹ *The Work of Fire*. 21.

companionship, and yet knows that it is incommensurable with the essential solitude demanded by his work.

By the end of the correspondence, it is clear that the latter exigency has won out, and Kafka's letters come to reveal, in an increasingly vivid manner, the sheer absence of personality – as though no one remained seated at his table, as though *no one* continued to write. Indeed, as Mark Anderson suggests, the question here must not be “whether Kafka ‘really loved’ Milena, but whether an ‘*ich*’ exists at all, whether it is single, identical to itself, whether it is strong enough to assume its active role.”²⁰ If Kafka, at no point in his letters to Milena writes the words “I love you,” this can only suggest to us, once again, “a failure more necessary,” the very failure of personal relations which we have been highlighting throughout the preceding pages.²¹

It suggests, in other words, the enormity of that strangest pull, that preternatural seduction, which comes to draw Kafka away from the world and its commitments, its exigencies of work and production, and into the realm of fiction and fabrication, where he increasingly comes to understand his destiny as inseparably bound to the essential anonymity, the impersonality of his protagonists. Here, the space of the amorous correspondence becomes coextensive with the space of literature itself, and the amorous proximity which had been so deprived him in his relation with Milena, finally comes to be realised – if only in the form of an allegory, a mythologised rendering.

20 Mark Anderson. “Kafka’s Unsigned Letters: A Reinterpretation of the Correspondence with Milena.” *MLN*. 98.3 (1983). 391.

21 In an essay on the Milena correspondence, David Farrell Krell helpfully notes the grammatical ambiguity contained within the French title of Blanchot’s essay. Is the failure Milena’s? Or is she herself the failure? “Whose failure is it?” asks Krell. “And what *sort* of failure are we talking about?” Such questions necessarily remain unanswerable *unless* we take into consideration the crucial, inter-textual resonances linking this title back to the Tristan essay and its rhetorical emphasis on “a failure perhaps more necessary.” For it is only by linking this so-called failure back to the move from personal to impersonal relations that we fully grasp what is at stake here. And, of course, Krell is not alone in missing this point. As the 1954 Tristan has remained until now almost universally neglected by scholars and critics alike, it is our view that the “received version” of Blanchot’s thinking on the nature of eroticism perhaps stands in need of a broader reassessment or emendation in the wake of our “rediscovery” of this important text. David Farrell Krell. *Lunar Voices: Of Tragedy, Poetry, Fiction and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 125.



For it has long been supposed, first by Max Brod and later by others, that *The Castle* was in fact conceived, rather explicitly, by Kafka as an “attempt at transposing the vicissitudes of his relationship with Milena into a fictional context.”²² We know, for example, that the character of Frieda was likely based upon Milena herself – a suggestion which Blanchot not only acknowledges, in his 1954 essay, but proceeds to describe as “not altogether implausible.”²³ Thus, not unlike Blanchot himself, for whom the failure of personal relations with Denise ultimately gave way, within the pages of *Au moment voulu*, to the hollow scintillation of a more essential, impersonal, relation – we seem to find Kafka, throughout the pages of *The Castle*, attempting to approach, within the very space of the imaginary, a long desired, semblance of intimacy.²⁴

Indeed, there is perhaps no greater, more evocative exemplification of all this, than the legendary tap-room scene – that very scene which we began this study by quoting. Here we find K., wrapped in Frieda’s arms, rolling back and forth through puddles of beer and rubbish as her small body burns in his reluctant hands. Certainly, it is a love-scene. Perhaps even a rather poignant one. But like the *Nescio vos* scene which we encountered in the pages of *Au moment voulu*, what we discover here is a depiction of unparalleled intimacy which is nevertheless an intimacy belonging to no one, an intimacy which marks the sheer collapse of personal relations. For in the very midst of incomparable proximity to Frieda, K. cannot help but feel as though he has lost himself, “or wandered farther into foreign lands [*der Fremde*] than any human being before him...”²⁵ The moment of consummation is at the same time a moment of supreme estrangement, even of loss.

22 Maurice Blanchot. *De Kafka à Kafka*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1981. 168.

23 Ibid.

24 In the essay, “Kafka et Brod,” written around the same time as “L’échec de Milena,” and first published in October 1954, Blanchot refers to *The Castle* as “perhaps Kafka’s most important work.” *Friendship*. 244.

25 *The Castle*. 41.

And what image, in particular, do we find Kafka, in this very scene, electing to evoke in bearing witness to this loss? It is, of course, the *very same image* which Blanchot makes use of (in nearly identical circumstances) within the pages of both *Au moment voulu* and his 1954 Tristan essay. It is none other than the image of the heart.

In each case, it seems to be a heart, empty and yet luminous, which holds the secret of the *other* relation, a relation of intimacy bereft of the very person who would seek to experience it as his own. In each case, it is this very image which comes to bear witness, most eloquently, to that “beyond of failure [*un au-delà de l'échec*]”²⁶ through which the exigency of a more essential – impersonal – relation asserts itself.



One might readily conclude, on the basis of all this, that the spectre of Kafka indeed looms large over Blanchot’s 1954 Tristan essay. For not only does the notion of “a failure perhaps more necessary,” immediately evoke the precise rhetoric which Blanchot will adopt, only months later, in discussing the Milena affair; but the figure of the heart, emptied by the centrifugal movement of eternal recurrence, cannot help but remind us of Kafka’s tap-room scene from *The Castle*, the very scene in which Kafka’s failed affair with Milena found itself most vividly transposed into fictional form. –And as if this were not enough, Blanchot actually goes on to quote from Kafka’s Milena correspondence *in the very pages of his Tristan essay*, as though confirming rather explicitly the profound connections which we have been elaborating here.²⁷

²⁶ *The Work of Fire*. 23.

²⁷ “One day, when Milena and Kafka met in Gmünd, she asked him whether he had not been unfaithful to her in Prague. ‘Was this a possible question?’ Kafka writes to her. ‘But this was still not enough, and I made it even more impossible. I said that indeed I had been faithful.’” *The Infinite Conversation*. 191.

Given all this, we might assert with reasonable confidence that the two Kafka essays from the autumn of 1954 (“Kafka et Brod” and “L’échec de Milena”) were very likely being written, or at least researched, concurrently with Blanchot’s work on Tristan. And that these essays, then, alongside the Rilke studies from the previous spring – as well as the various, key articles on the imaginary from around the same period – might therefore be understood by us to constitute the immediate, critical context for Blanchot’s writing on the nature of the erotic relation in his 1954 Tristan essay.²⁸

It is a context, however, which remains necessarily incomplete as long as we fail to take into consideration the unmistakable development of Blanchot’s thinking on the nature of eroticism found within his *fictional* texts of the forties and early fifties. In particular, the increasingly sophisticated manner in which Blanchot comes to specify its relation to the movement of eternal recurrence in the pages of *Au moment voulu*.²⁹

28 Recall that the Proust essay dealing with the transmutation of pure empty time (the time of return) into pure, imaginary space, very much belongs to this same context. It was first published in two instalments, only four months after the Tristan essay and *immediately before* the two Kafka essays in question.

29 Undoubtedly, to speak of development, here, is to raise a rather contentious issue. For, as Paul Davies has previously suggested, in a statement widely corroborated throughout the Anglo-American literature, to speak of “development” at all in relation to Blanchot’s writing appears to be a self-refuting endeavour. Davies takes as his example the well-known notion of *désœuvrement*, or worklessness, so vital to Blanchot’s contestation of the Hegelian dialectic – and argues that “to set this worklessness to work in an account of Blanchot’s development...is to forget something of what was meant by [the very phrase in question].” A point well taken.

But let us also remember that Blanchot, at no point in his rather extensive writings on the subject, seeks to deny the efficacy and universality of the Hegelian dialectic. Just as at no point does he deny the ineluctable reality of teleological recuperation. Rather, it belongs to Blanchot’s exigency as a writer and critic (an exigency inherited from Mallarmé and perhaps shared with Beckett) to witness the work of negation carried to its absolute limit in order to respond all the more avidly to the worklessness which somehow both precedes and exceeds it. Indeed, it is in precisely this sense that Blanchot tells us, in October 1959, of that most crucial, double demand, the demand of both naming the possible *and* responding to the impossible.

Applied to the study of Blanchot’s own fictional writings, we might say that the documentation of his development as writer belongs squarely to the exigency of naming the possible. –A task which nevertheless comes to constitute an important, even essential, complement to any attempted study of the *nonrecuperable* features of his writing, those features which seem to defy a facile, developmental analysis. And it is precisely in the case of Blanchot’s various evocations and inscriptions of the eternal return, throughout his fictional writings of the forties and early fifties, that we encounter perhaps our most compelling illustration of this point. For, to speak of the eternal return, as we know, is to speak of the thought of impossibility itself – it is to evoke that which cannot be accomplished in time and which has always already shattered history in two. And yet, to speak of Blanchot’s deployment of this trope throughout his fictional writings, is also to speak, invariably, of a consummately historical development which comes to achieve, within the pages of *Au moment voulu*, perhaps its most provocative expression. Cf. Paul Davies. “The Work and the Absence of the Work.” *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*. 98.

For what we discover in that *récit* is indeed a truly profound and unparalleled (for its time) account of what it might mean to establish erotic relations *on the very basis of this most abyssal thought*. It is here, in this text, that we encounter a most remarkable attempt at carrying the thought of eternal recurrence beyond the confines of Nietzsche's own discourse and toward its most extreme limit – toward that limit where this thought of absolute separation becomes, remarkably, a thought of unprecedented intimacy.

Here, we came to discern that the two movements of the Abrahamic discourse, the movements of estrangement and restoration, were in some way eerily synonymous with the two movements, as it were, of eternal recurrence itself. A fascinating discovery.³⁰ For what all of this led us to recognise, within Nietzsche's project of the rehabilitation of erotic distance, was *but the first movement* of an even more complex thought which Blanchot, some half a century later, would come to pursue to its furthest limit. But let us attempt to be clearer on this most crucial of points.



For Nietzsche, as we have discovered, the eternal return was originally conceived as a most challenging rejoinder to the impasse of Tristanian nihilism, a response to that yearning for death and consummation which pervaded so much of the German romantic tradition. It was precisely in response to the passive nihilism of Schopenhauer and Wagner that Nietzsche first came to summon this affirmation of

³⁰ The connection which we have attempted to draw, here, between the two movements of Kierkegaard's discourse, and the two movements of the Tristan romance, might initially appear adventurous. But keep in mind that it is this very connection which Blanchot himself proposes, late in the pages of *La communauté inavouable*, where find the following words: "The leap that is affirmed by love – symbolised by Tristan's prodigious bound onto Isolde's bed such that no earthly trace of their coming together remains – evokes 'the lethal leap [*le saut mortel*]' which, according to Kierkegaard, is necessary to elevate oneself to the ethical and, above all, religious level." Cf. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988. 44.

unwavering erotic deferral and absolute separation, a separation not to be outdone, even by the forces of death itself. This, for Nietzsche, came to constitute the most extreme thought; a supremely nihilistic thought which compelled Tristan to recommence, endlessly, his courtship of Isolde, by rendering the distance between them *eternally* insurmountable.

But what does Blanchot proceed to tell us, in the pages of his 1954 Tristan essay? Precisely that there is an *additional*, or second, movement to this thought, a movement which Nietzsche perhaps never fully came to recognise. This is because when we affirm the thought of eternal return – when we affirm the suspension of all beginnings and all ends – we affirm an eternity bereft of all positionality and all presence. And what this entails is in fact a most startling, a most unexpected consequence. For when presence and positionality are suspended, Blanchot tells us, so too is the very possibility of separation. Indeed, it is on this point that we come to encounter the mysterious second movement of eternal recurrence – that movement, both terrifying and miraculous, through which the exigency of distancing, when carried to its absolute limit, ultimately collapses upon itself.

What Blanchot is suggesting, in other words, is that the pernicious, unrelenting regimen of separation which so frustrates the amorous couple might at last be levelled – but *only* in this most unexpected manner, by carrying their separation to its furthest extreme. Indeed, it is only through the affirmation of a distancing, or estrangement, so radical and unremitting that it consigns Tristan and Isolde to the absolute impossibility of all intimacy – that intimacy might somehow be granted them.

The secret of this second movement, then, is none other than the secret of intimacy itself – a secret which only becomes apparent to us at the precise moment when we carry the affirmation of distance to its furthest limit. We are speaking, here, of an intimacy which emerges *on the very basis* of the impossible; an intimacy which excludes me from ever experiencing it, referring me beyond all presence to the eternal glimmer of the imaginary.

This, precisely, is the intimacy of K. and Frieda, so memorably inscribed in the tap-room scene – and of Blanchot’s narrator and the woman he calls Judith, in the pages of *Au moment voulu*. And it is also, as we can now discern, the very intimacy of Tristan and Isolde who “give the impression of an intimacy that is absolute [*une intimité absolue*] yet absolutely without intimacy [*absolument sans intimité*], given over as they are to the passion of the outside [*la passion du dehors*] that is the erotic relation par excellence.”³¹ – A relation characterised by unparalleled proximity, but a proximity which neither Tristan nor Isolde can ever claim as their *own*.

Indeed, what makes this form of intimacy so particularly fascinating, especially in the light of its relation to the eternal return, is that one might ultimately come to think of it, both strangely and inexplicably, as an intimacy that has *always already* been undergone – only never in the present, and never by me. It is an intimacy which, by its very definition, ceaselessly returns, but only on the condition that it shatters the very present within which it would be introduced. To relive every amorous encounter, every *déchirement*, not just once, or twice, but endlessly, under the “false appearance of the present” – this, it seems, is arguably the most challenging aspect of affirming an eroticism on the basis of the eternal return.

And is this not already the very challenge so unmistakably conveyed by Nietzsche himself in those unforgettable, closing pages of *Zarathustra*, where it is nothing less than the prospect of an incessant and eternally recurrent ravishment which ultimately draws forth that crowning, decisive affirmation: “For joys all want themselves, therefore, do they also want heartbreak [*Herzeleid*]!” Here, it seems to us, we come to approach arguably one of the most intriguing points of Nietzsche’s entire discourse, the point where the latent eroticism of his most abyssal thought finally asserts itself with an incontrovertible prominence. In stark contrast to the Wagnerian, consummatory fantasy of two lovers, “heart to heart [*Herz an Herz*], lip to lip...bound together in a single breath,” Nietzsche leaves his readers with the most improbable, most affirmative, of parting exhortations: “Oh happiness, Oh pain! Oh break, thou heart [*O brich, Herz*]!”

³¹ Ibid. 191.

The lesson here is clear. To affirm the eternal recurrence is to affirm nothing less than the sundering, the ravishment, which has always already come to shatter me in advance and which must forever return to displace me from any moment of masterful primacy. And if there is one aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy which Blanchot, more than Klossowski, more than Deleuze, more than anyone else, seemed to have grasped with an indelible clarity – then it is perhaps this very point, this passion of the broken heart. It is Blanchot, more than anyone, who senses within the *anteriority* of the fissure the most radical consequence of the eternal return, the most radical consequence of the rehabilitation of distance itself. But let us attempt to substantiate this rather provocative claim by taking into consideration, once more, the very letter of Blanchot's text. –



Only pages ago, in Chapter V of this study, we had come to outline in considerable detail the precise nature of Blanchot's rather stunning mobilisation of the eternal return in the 1973 text, *Le pas au-delà*. Here, we had found Blanchot attempting to think the thought of absolute separation in its most extreme form as engendering nothing less than a fundamental rupture of temporal continuity – the infinite displacement of the present.

Indeed, what had made this rupture so profound, so irrevocable, was the manner in which it seemed to have preceded every whole, every moment of recuperable totality. Before the ring of rings, the circuit of circuits, could have ever asserted itself in its primordial unity, we were told, it had already been shattered. And it was precisely this anteriority of the fissure which we had then attempted to come to associate with the notion of *prolepsis*.

If, as Blanchot had seemed to suggest to us, the infinite rupture of time responds to a *proleptic* demand, then this is precisely in the sense that it seems to deliver its

shattering blow in *advance* of every beginning. The ring of recurrence is broken before being whole; the law of return is annulled before ever being posited. And what results from all this, as we soon discovered, is nothing less than the absolute disjunction of past and future, a disjunction which precludes any transit, any relation, between them other than an elaborate play of mirroring, a refractory scintillation without reference to any presence. This, in short, was the state of affairs which we found Blanchot, in the pages of his 1973 text, coming to describe under the auspices of the eternal recurrence.

But what had been lacking, it seemed, from this account – was any explicit acknowledgement, by Blanchot, of what all of this might entail with respect to the world of eroticism. Could it be, we had wondered, that by the time of *Le pas au-delà*, published some twenty years after Blanchot's most prominent commentaries on the nature of the intimate relation, the distinctive eroticism of the eternal return had finally come to be jettisoned, subtly suppressed, within his writings? Could it be that the eroticism of abandonment, in other words, had found itself quietly transmuted into the abandonment of eroticism?

Certainly these are justifiable concerns. And yet, as it turns out, nothing could be further from the truth. For, as we will now show, it is precisely in the very pages of *Le pas au-delà* that the eroticism of the eternal return, in Blanchot's writing, ultimately comes to be pursued to its most extreme limit. It is here, in this text which makes the infinite rupture of time its primary concern, that the eroticism of the Nietzschean *Herzeleid* becomes the very subject of the profoundest prophecy, and the vacuous content of the profoundest return.

If none of this, until now, has seemingly come to the attention of the scholarly community – then this can only be on account of the unspeakably nuanced and delicate manner in which Blanchot comes to code this very eroticism, this very prophecy. Indeed, there can be little doubting that an initial, perhaps slightly impatient, reading of the text cannot help but reveal a sheer *paucity* of explicit eroticism: this is not *Au moment voulu*, this not even *L'Attente l'oubli*, wherein the traces of narrational coherency still announce themselves at certain times. Rather, what we are dealing with here is a text utterly without characters, without story,

without episodes to be recounted. And yet, it is precisely on account of all this, that what little *does* remain, is therefore all the more precious, all the more telling. For, in this text situated uncomfortably between literature and philosophy, between the emptiness of the past and the emptiness of the future, a single (amorous) trope of the most undeniable importance nevertheless seems to announce itself with a pressing urgency. It is the very same trope which Nietzsche evokes in the closing pages of *Zarathustra* – the very same trope, moreover, which Blanchot himself, from the early 1940s onward has persistently come to associate with the aporetic impropriety of the intimate relation. We are referring, of course, to the figure of the heart itself.



It is here, in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*, that the richly layered significance of heart-rhetoric in Blanchot's writings, the very significance which we have been attempting, since the opening pages of this thesis, to understand and appreciate, finally comes to achieve arguably its most sophisticated (and consequential) elaboration. But it is a significance which simply cannot be broached, as we soon discover, without coming to take into careful consideration, once again, the vertiginous movement of *prolepsis* which seems to circumscribe its every deployment within Blanchot's text. For, what makes the Blanchotian heart utterly different, wholly irreducible to any other, is that the wound which pierces it, which strikes it, is far older – terrifyingly more ancient – than the very heart itself.

Take, for instance, Blanchot's rather beguiling reference to "the beating heart whose every beat would be illicit, unnumbered."³² Why, we might ask, should the heart's beating, in such a context, be construed in this manner? The reason, as Blanchot quickly allows us to discern, is that with every single beat, the heart actually comes to reinscribe, as though tacitly, that anarchic, sundering blow which has always already

³² *The Step Not Beyond*. 96.

preceded it.³³ If the beating of the heart is illicit – then this is because the ravishing blow of a deathly, incomparable intimacy has always already come to wound it in advance of its very earliest tremor, thus depriving it (from the start) any access to real life or real death. With every beat it persists in a state of interminable forbearance, outliving the moment of its ruination on the condition that it ceaselessly *re-live* it. With every beat, it abides as if posthumously, broken by a blow which it can never recall and which it can never let go of: the innumerable, the recurrent.

Indeed, it is precisely with all this in mind, that we should then read the following, rather important, lines – encountered approximately half-way through Blanchot's *Le pas au-delà*:

“It is like a figure that he doesn't see, that is missing because it is there, having all the traits of a figure that would not figure itself and with which the incessant lack of relation [l'incessant défaut de rapport], without presence, without absence, is a sign of a common solitude. He names it, although he knows that it is has no name, even in his language, this beating of a hesitant heart [ce battement d'un coeur hésitant].”³⁴

Here, in this passage, we are offered one of the lengthiest, most detailed, statements on the nature of the heart in the entirety of Blanchot's published writings. And though the sheer complexity of what is being described here certainly defies any attempts at an exhaustive interpretation – let us attempt to make note of what appear to be the three major themes which Blanchot is electing to emphasise.

The first thing which catches our attention is the paragraph's second clause, the allusion to a figure which is “missing because it is there.” Under ordinary circumstances it seems, such a paradoxical utterance would likely add nothing but needless obscurity to Blanchot's account; but as we can now discern, on the basis of

³³ All of this cannot help but call to mind the manner in which Cathy Caruth comes to define the notion of trauma, a notion which consists “not only in having confronted death, but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it.*” Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996. 64.

³⁴ *The Step Not Beyond*. 63.

our earlier investigations, what these words actually seek to evoke is nothing less than the logic of *prolepsis* itself. To speak of something which is missing because it is there, is to evoke the sheer spectrality of that which announces itself most eloquently, most unmistakably, through the palpable deficit (the irreducible remainder) which it has always already left behind.

Indeed, we cannot help but think, rather immediately, of the eternal return itself – which comes to be announced in Nietzsche’s text through the very detour and deferral which carries it away from discursive articulation. It is Zarathustra’s *épaisseur de silence*, more than anything, which renders the doctrine of eternal recurrence manifest. This, it seems, is the first theme which Blanchot’s paragraph announces to us.

The second theme of importance, here, which should likewise already be quite familiar to us, is the notion of an “incessant lack of relation...which is a sign of a common solitude.” Indeed, from the pages of *Thomas l’obscur* all the way to those increasingly spare, increasingly decentred, scenographies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, there is perhaps no single notion which characterises the Blanchotian eroticism more succinctly than this one. For what this statement conveys so effectively is of course nothing less than the lingering ambiguity, the indeterminate doubleness, wherein the commonality, or even intimacy, which brings the amorous couple together, appears to become inseparable from the force of estrangement that tears them apart. “An intimacy which is absolute, yet absolutely without intimacy,”³⁵ is how Blanchot so memorably describes it in the pages of his 1954 Tristan essay.

Understood in these terms, the opening sentence of the passage in question seems to be suggesting to us nothing less than a tenuous, yet unmistakable, connection between the *proleptic* withdrawal of every origin and the miraculous advent of an intimacy without intimacy. A connection which we have already encountered before.

But it is precisely in the very light of this intriguing liaison, that Blanchot then proceeds to deploy the third, and arguably most significant, theme of the passage in

³⁵ *The Infinite Conversation*. 191.

question. This theme, as we can see, is none other than the notion of hesitancy (“this beating of a *hesitant* heart”).



In many ways, it is precisely this last notion which is most difficult to reconcile, or accommodate. This is because the notion of hesitancy, by its very nature, appears to resist any efforts at being definitively encapsulated. To speak of that which is hesitant, is to speak of that which remains, by its very essence, suspended within a state of indeterminacy. It is to speak of that which remains undecided. Derived from the Latin term *haesitantia*, it literally refers to an “action of stammering” – a speech imbued with involuntary pauses and repetitions. But what, we might ask, could it possibly mean to think of a heartbeat that stammers? What could it mean to evoke a heartbeat that remains perpetually undecided?

These, it seems, are the crucial questions posed by the passage at hand. –Questions which appear, at least *prima facie*, to deny us any straightforward resolution. And yet, as it turns out, we are perhaps aided in our endeavours, here, by the discovery of another, strikingly similar passage, composed only a few years earlier, which seems to offer us a rather valuable point of comparison and contrast. We are thinking of that most intriguing excerpt from Blanchot’s parenthetical, 1969 additions, to the text of “Parole de fragment” – an excerpt in which it is once again the beating of the heart which is being emphasised.

Here, in a series of remarks added to the essay only weeks before its republication within the pages of *L’entretien infini*, we find Blanchot coming to make reference to a phenomenon which he terms “this beating of an empty heart [*ce battement d’un coeur vide*].”³⁶ A phrase which, in addition to its striking similarity to the line from

³⁶ *The Infinite Conversation*. 313.

Le pas au-delà which we have been attempting to explicate – also mirrors, to a certain extent, the phrase, “*de battements de coeur communs*,” used by Alexandre Vialette (Kafka’s earliest French translator) to render the phrase “*gemeinsamen Herzschlags*,” from *The Castle*.³⁷ This latter point of resonance is so particularly fascinating because of the precise moment in Kafka’s text where this phrase appears – namely, in the legendary tap-room scene, where K. and Frieda, as we know, come to achieve unparalleled intimacy in the very midst of unparalleled estrangement.³⁸

Given all this, the rhetoric which we then encounter within Blanchot’s “Parole de fragment” cannot help but assume, for us, a rather amplified significance. For what we find, here, is Blanchot’s evocation of the “beating of an empty heart” coming to be linked, in the clearest of terms, to a scene of violent rupture, of shattering displacement. “The word too many [*Le mot de trop*],” he writes, “would come from the Other [*l’Autre*] without ever having been heard by a self [*de Moi*]...less to disperse or break him than to respond to the breaking [*la brisure*] or dispersal [*la dispersion*] that the ‘I’ conceals, making of itself a self by this movement of hiding that seems the beating of an empty heart.”³⁹

Much as in the passage from *Le pas au-delà*, quoted above, it is this calamity of a dispersal preceding every origin which seems to herald Blanchot’s allusion to the heartbeat. Only in *this* passage, it seems that Blanchot is perhaps slightly less coy about stating the precipitating circumstances for this *brisure*. Indeed, we find him coming to associate it, rather explicitly, with none other than the imposition of “the word too many,” a word which responds to the radical anteriority of a shattering in excess of all presence. It is this *word too many* which comes to respond, as Blanchot tells us, to the breaking, the sundering, which the “I” conceals. But how, exactly, are we to understand the precise nature of this word which testifies unto the anteriority of the ravishing blow?⁴⁰

37 Cf. *Testaments Betrayed*. 119.

38 *The Castle*. 41.

39 *The Infinite Conversation*. 313.

40 It needs to be acknowledged that much of Blanchot’s rhetoric and argumentation, not only in this passage, but also elsewhere within this discussion, is being influenced (to one extent or another) by the ethical metaphysics of Levinas. Having said this, we also know that the question of the influence of Levinas’ mature philosophy (post-*Totality and Infinity*) upon Blanchot is topic of great complexity which cannot possibly be treated within our limited context. Let us simply acknowledge, without elaborating further, that the configuration of

In a most remarkable statement which immediately follows his evocation of the heart, we find Blanchot coming to offer us the following, elucidatory comments: “Where there is, or would be, a word too many, there is the offense and the revelation of death [*la révélation de la mort*].”⁴¹ Clearly, this is a sentence which cannot help but impact our discussion in a rather dramatic fashion. For it seems to render unmistakable what we had only dared to hint up until now – the moment of death, the moment of consummation itself, *already precedes us*. Only we, the ones who would seek to undergo it in a moment of presence, in a position of omnipotent mastery, have always been excluded from that scene.⁴²

This, precisely, is the revelation which Blanchot elects to link, in the most explicit manner, with the notion of “a word too many” – a word which seems, as we can infer from the title of Blanchot’s essay, to be bound up most intimately with the very exigency of fragmentation itself. Indeed, it is on this very point, that Zarathustra’s parting exhortation – *O brich, Herz!* – seemingly cannot help but return to us, once more, from the very depths of past, as if signalling an exigency of aporetic dispersal which turns every moment of love into a hollow basin of unimaginable futility.

eroticism through which I become infinitely passive, vulnerable, in relation to an Other who has always already divested me of my initiative, does in fact seem to bear a certain striking similarity to the Levinasian *ethical* scene. Indeed, this is a similarity which Blanchot himself responds to in the pages of *La communauté inavouable*. Referring, here, to the erotic relation, he asks: “Is it the same dissymmetry that, according to Levinas, marks the irreciprocity of the ethical relationship between the other and me, I who am never on equal terms with the Other, an inequality measured by this impressive thought: The other is always closer to God than I am (whatever meaning one gives that name that names the unnameable)? This is not certain, and neither is it clear. Love may be a stumbling block for ethics, unless love simply puts ethics into question by imitating it.” Interesting words indeed. *The Unavowable Community*. 40. For additional coverage of this issue, see Leslie Hill’s *Blanchot: extreme contemporary*, pp. 206-208.

41 *The Infinite Conversation*. 313.

42 A not dissimilar notion, as we know, would ultimately come to be elaborated, around the same time, in the posthumous writings of the D.W. Winnicott. We are thinking, in particular, of the essay, “Fear of Breakdown,” written in the early 1960s, but not published until 1974 (three years after his death), in which we are told that Death would be “something that happened to the patient, but which the patient was not mature enough to experience.” Here, the necessary therapy for a fear of death, according to Winnicott, would lead one to accept, first and foremost, that this very death has *always already* taken place, and then, secondly, to convince one of the need to undergo it, now for the first time, in a position of mastery and omnipotence – through the analytic transference relation. It is precisely this notion of posthumously reasserting the supremacy of the ego, of the present, which Blanchot explicitly comes to contest in the pages of *Writing the Disaster* (pp.66-69). For Winnicott’s argument in its entirety, see D.W. Winnicott. “Fear of Breakdown.” *Psychoanalytic Explorations*. Edited by Clare Winnicott, et al. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Everything, in other words, begins to hinge upon this notion of a recurrent breaking, or fragmentation. And is it not especially fitting, therefore, to find each of Blanchot's post-1961 references to the heartbeat (including the reference to the hesitant heart in *Le pas au-delà*) coming to be deployed in the very form of fragments? This, it seems, is a point of considerable importance which demands not to be overlooked. For, given what we now know, the possibility simply cannot be discounted that there indeed exists a rather close relation between the rupture of the text engendered by fragmentary writing, and the rupture of the heart which we have chronicling throughout the preceding pages. Could it be, we might ask, that the inscription of the fragmentary, in Blanchot's text, might be understood as rehearsing, as though performatively, the very eroticism of anarchic rupture which estranges me from the intimacy that I have always already (never) undergone?



One way of approaching this question is to examine Blanchot's various statements on the fragment in the pages of *L'entretien infini*. For it is here, in this very text, that Blanchot comes to define the term, rather importantly, in relation to its rigorous and categorical aversion to all unity and reconciliation. The fragment, as Blanchot writes, evokes "plurality, separation...disjunction [and] divergence."⁴³ But how, we might wonder, does any of this differ from, say, the aphorism? Or any other form of aleatory writing?

An important question. For it is precisely in direct juxtaposition to the so-called *aphoristic exigency* that we find Blanchot, in the pages of *L'entretien infini*, first electing to emphasise the incomparable and inimitable specificity of the fragment. Indeed, to speak of the fragment, according to Blanchot, is first and foremost, never to confuse it for the aphorism. This is because, unlike the latter form of writing, which "limits and encloses"⁴⁴ – the fragment is unbounded by every horizon and remains unlimited by every whole. Whilst the aphorism, as Blanchot continues, invariably refers us to some pre-existing totality in relation to which it might be termed derivative, the fragment entertains absolutely no such dependency upon a totalised unity. It is no proverbial puzzle piece; it is no shattered edifice.

Rather, as Blanchot writes, "the fragment appears with its sharp edged and broken character like a block to which *nothing* seems able to attach. A piece of meteor detached from an unknown sky and impossible to connect with anything that can be known."⁴⁵ To speak of the fragment, in other words, is always to speak of a "sharpness of edge that refers back to no shattered thing."⁴⁶ It is to speak of a splintering, or fracturing, which actually interposes itself in excess of every whole. Rendering vain the very possibility of exhaustive recuperation.⁴⁷

And it is precisely this notion, whose significance within Blanchot's later work simply cannot be overstated, which finds itself drawn, by the winter of 1966-67, into close

43 *The Infinite Conversation*.. 152 & 308.

44 *Ibid.* 152.

45 *Ibid.* 308.

46 *Ibid.* 152.

47 It is interesting to note that, by the early 1970s, Blanchot had increasingly come to propose an ever-so-subtle distinction between the fragment itself and the fragmentary [*le fragmentaire*]. For an explanation, see *The Step Not Beyond*. 42-3.

relation with the thought of eternal recurrence itself.⁴⁸ In a series of remarks on the notion of discontinuity and its relation to the exigency of interminable recommencement, we find Blanchot coming to invoke none other than the figure of Dionysus, the god of fragmentation himself.⁴⁹

For Dionysus, as we are told, the affirmation of necessary sundering, or *déchirement*, is never commensurate with a “rash renunciation of unity.”⁵⁰ Nor does it come to imply any fracturing, or divergence, which destabilises an originary totality. Rather, as Blanchot goes on to tell us, what is being described, here, is something far more radical, something far less easy to conceptualise. For if Dionysus is indeed to be understood as the god of fragmentation, then this is for two very specific reasons. First, it is because Dionysus (as the very embodiment of the fragmentary exigency) destabilises every relation to a centre-point. And second, because he displaces every origin and every end.⁵¹

The lesson here should be clear. One simply cannot hope to reconcile the fragmentary, in any form whatsoever, with a manner of thinking in which the priority of the origin, or a moment of founding presence, remains uncontested. If the notion of the fragmentary seems to refer us to a blinding interruption, a blow which speaks in the language of discontinuity – then it is this very interruption which must be understood, perhaps counter-intuitively, as radically anterior to the very thing it interrupts.

And if the figure of Dionysus, for Nietzsche as for Blanchot, thus comes to embody nothing less than the exemplification *par excellence* of the fragmentation of the self – then this fragmentation must always be understood as afflicting *no one*. For the very blow which shatters me, always comes prior to the installation of the ego. Indeed this is why, as Blanchot tells us in *Le pas au-delà*, there can simply be “no experience,”⁵² strictly speaking, of the fragmentary as such. To speak of the

48 Ibid. 159.

49 This is a notion which Blanchot had already noted and elected to emphasise in his reading of Nietzsche as early as the mid 1940s. Cf. *The Work of Fire*. 296-7.

50 *The Infinite Conversation*. 157.

51 Ibid.

52 *The Step Not Beyond*. 49.

shattering of the self, according to Blanchot, is necessarily to evoke an event forever “without subject,”⁵³ and without witness of any kind. It is to evoke an occurrence utterly alien to thought.



Interesting developments. And indeed, it is with all of this in mind that we should then come to consider, once more, that supremely enigmatic fragment, from *Le pas au-delà*, which had initially so captivated us – the fragment in which Blanchot chooses to invoke, amidst allusions to *prolepsis* and the emptiness of intimacy, the beating of a hesitant heart.

Why, we had wondered, should Blanchot have elected, here, to ascribe unto such a heart the epithet of hesitancy? And what, precisely, was this hesitancy supposed to entail?

As we can now discern, the exigency of fragmentation – when applied to the figure of the heart – leaves it shattered in advance of every beginning, in advance of every first encounter. To reinscribe the invaluable commentary of Jean-Luc Nancy, we might even say that, strictly speaking, the heart is never *actually* broken, in the sense that it would exist before the break. Rather, “it is the break itself that makes the heart.”⁵⁴ To conceive of the heart, in this sense, is to understand it neither as an organ, nor a faculty, nor a seat of human emotion – but as a figure which bears witness to the fact

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy. “Shattered Love.” *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Lisa Garbus & Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 99. The essay which we are referencing, “L’amour en éclats,” was originally published as a stand-alone piece in a 1986 edition of the journal *Aléa*.

that “I am broken and traversed by the other at the very site where presence is most intimate and life most open.”⁵⁵

The heart, in other words, emblematises nothing less than the sheer vulnerability which precedes any initial consolidation of unified subjectivity or egoic life. As such, the heart “exposes the subject to everything which both anticipates and destabilises it – everything that “is not dialectical,”⁵⁶ everything that is not recuperable under a form of mastery or possession. When we speak of the heart, in such a context, we are speaking of a crossing, quite literally, a step (not) beyond, which cuts across and displaces the origin before it has ever been gathered into stable presence. It is this crossing which initiates the break – a break which is “nothing more than a touch,” as Nancy suggests, “but a touch [*une touche*] which is never any less deep than a wound [*une blessure*].”⁵⁷

And so – given all this – the heartbeat seemingly cannot help but *hesitate*. But why exactly? Is it because of this wound which has always already crossed it? Is it because of this break which has always already broken it? Undoubtedly. But *not* in the sense of a pathos which binds one, as if melancholically, to some terrible memory that fetters it. No, we are not describing a psychological phenomenon here. Rather, if the heart (in Blanchot’s fragment) invariably hesitates – then it is more precisely on account of what it *awaits*. The heart’s hesitation, as we soon discover, must be understood as futureal. Its indeterminacy is to be thought in relation to what remains yet-to-come.

Indeed, this point is already foreshadowed, in Blanchot’s writings, as early as 1962, where (in another fragment) he had come to write of “the heartbeats [*les battements du coeur*], the restlessness of hope [*l’agitation de l’espérance*], the anxiety of illusion.”⁵⁸ Words without explanation, without consolation, which nevertheless seem to acquire a profound resonance when considered alongside everything which we have been discussing over the course the proceeding pages. For as we now perhaps discern – the great crisis inherent to Blanchot’s account, the truly decisive

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid. 90.

57 Ibid. 98.

58 *Awaiting Oblivion*. 27.

point of his discourse on eroticism, might be seen to reside within that simplest, but most ineluctable, of questions: How does a broken heart comport itself with respect to the future? How does a broken heart comport itself with relation to that which remains yet to come?



It seems to us that if the heart cannot help but hesitate, then it is for no other reason than because the gravity of this very question, this interrogation, has momentarily stunned it – consigning it, perhaps, to a state of *fear and trembling*. But what, exactly, is this future which it senses, which it anticipates, which it dreads? Could it be that what makes the heart hesitate, here, is perhaps nothing more than an awareness of its own transience, its own lingering uncertainty of existence?

Indeed, it is this very possibility which René Char, in a poem from the late 1940s, comes to encapsulate perhaps most poignantly with the following words: “When we say the heart (and say it longingly), we are speaking of the inflaming heart which, hidden under shared and miraculous flesh, can at any moment stop beating and giving.”⁵⁹ If there is a certain lacerating beauty inherent to these words, then it is because what is being conveyed here is, of course, nothing less than the sheer precariousness of every beat, of every tremor. At any moment, the heart can stop beating – and thus, at every moment the sheer tenuousness of its situation cannot help but impose itself with a frightening and unavoidable urgency. Each moment becomes infinitely precious, infinitely consequential, for each moment could be its last. –A situation which calls, at one and the same time, for deliberation and

⁵⁹ René Char. “Redness of the Dawnbreakers.” *The Dawn Breakers*. Translated by Michael Worton. Oxford: Bloodaxe Books, 1992. 147. The passage can be found in its original form in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 332.

decisiveness. This, it seems, is undoubtedly one of the meanings behind the heart's hesitation in the pages of *Le pas au-delà*.

And yet, it also seems to us that the secret behind the heart's hesitation is perhaps much deeper than all this. For if there is one thing which we have learned over the course of the preceding chapters, it is that the end (in Blanchot's writings) is never really the end – just as the beginning is never sovereign, clear-cut, uncontested. Rather, as we have discovered, it is the movement of eternal recurrence, in Blanchot's writings, which assumes the profound role of making us relive, interminably, the passion of death's impossibility, the trauma which precedes every origin and exceeds every end. It is the eternal return, in other words, which makes us relive that very encounter which has always already separated us from ourselves, and estranged us from the other – even the midst of presumptive intimacy.

Considered in this light, the hesitation of the heart must be understood, quite specifically, *not* as a simple, or straightforward, reaction to the prospect of definitive annihilation. For death, as we know, always entails a hollow glory; its grandeur is a false grandeur. Rather, it is something quite different which makes the heart hesitate – it is none other than the awareness (borne by the prophetic) that the shattering blow of an incomparable intimacy remains always yet to be re-enacted. The heart hesitates, or stammers, at the very threshold of a moment that it cannot endure, cannot even experience, and yet *must* relive: the moment when separation collapses and the ensuing proximity becomes unbearable.

Yes, one might say that such an encounter nevertheless *does* remain somehow akin to the moment of death. But *only* if we understand death as turning us away from any possibility of undergoing it in the present. For nothing has perhaps been rendered more evident to us, over the course of the preceding pages, than the fact that the moment of intimacy, in Blanchot's writings, is by its very nature unverifiable. It is, in many ways, *the supreme moment*, but only in the sense that it is also a moment of supreme dislocation – a moment which comes to be dislocated from time itself.

Indeed, this (precisely) is the tremulous set of circumstances which awaits the hesitant heart. This is what looms before it. The prospect of an encounter in which all distance between us will be annulled – but only so as to make this convergence unliveable under the rubric of mastery or possession. As one recent commentator has rightly suggested, the logic of such an encounter is always one of “disarticulation before articulation.”⁶⁰ It affirms, in other words, “disjunction, non-complementarity, and the impossibility of satisfaction as the groundless ground for the encounter.”⁶¹

Here, amidst this improbable conjunction of tropes is where the broken heart asserts itself, in Blanchot’s discourse, as in Nietzsche’s, as the symbol *par excellence* of the wounding at (of) the origin – the very wounding which forever awaits us and forever eludes us. But how, in light of all this, can an already broken heart ever come to desire or affirm the eternal recurrence of that very encounter – that moment of fortuitous passion, of ecstasy – which has previously shattered it? How can the heart comport itself *affirmatively* with relation to the future, when it is the future itself which allows that shattering blow to return?



60 Leslie Hill. *Blanchot: extreme contemporary*. London: Routledge, 1997. 206.

61 *Ibid.*

Undoubtedly, this is one of the most difficult questions posed in the wake of Blanchot's reading of Nietzsche. This is because it appears to give voice to a fear, a hesitancy, an apprehension which extends far beyond the domain of speculative philosophy or critical theory. To pose this question is to approach, it seems, the very crux of what it means to live and to love.

For who has not felt the heart-rending agony of love's devastating blow? Who has not emerged from the midst of an incomparable intimacy torn, beaten, bruised? And yet, it is this very encounter which, having always already displaced us, must forever displace us yet again. It is this encounter which draws, at every moment, nearer to us, nearer to the ones whom it will tear apart. How, in light of all this, can the heart persist in affirming a future whose voluptuousness only promises the ever-recurrent trauma of recommencement? How can the heart affirm to be shattered over and over again?

From Nietzsche to Blanchot, the answer remains the same: only through *forgetting*. It is forgetting alone which is capable of bearing witness to the displacement which "breaks history,"⁶² which shatters the heart. It is forgetting alone which allows us to "think this rupture"⁶³ that turns us away from ourselves. Indeed, this is a point which Blanchot, throughout his writings of the late 1960s, does not cease to reiterate in relation to the thought of eternal recurrence. He tells us, in no uncertain terms, that it is only in the mode of forgetfulness that Nietzsche was capable of thinking this most ravishing thought of thoughts.⁶⁴ For it is only forgetting that is capable of "freeing the future from time itself"⁶⁵ – freeing it, as it were, from any possibility of decisive recuperation.

And is it not fascinating, given all this, to find Blanchot, in the concluding lines of his 1954 Tristan essay coming to emphasise, above all, the notion of forgetting [*l'oubli*] in its relation to the erotic? Indeed, one might even say, with little exaggeration, that

62 *The Infinite Conversation*. 280.

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.* 278.

65 *Ibid.* 280.

it is precisely this notion of forgetting which comes to hold, for him, the very secret to erotic relationality in the light of eternal recurrence. –

“Perhaps the shadow behind the story of Tristan and Isolde must be grasped,” Blanchot writes, “Forgetting is the mute and closed space where desire endlessly wanders; where someone is forgotten [*oublié*] he or she is desired [*désiré*], but this forgetting must be a profound forgetting.”⁶⁶ Let us not rush over these remarkable words. For what Blanchot is telling us, here, is that to desire the Other, to desire the encounter that will draw her near, is necessarily to forget her. This, in other words, is precisely how a bruised, broken heart becomes capable of comporting itself toward the future. – It is by desiring that she come again, always again, but only under the cloak of forgetfulness, always without recognition, without identification.

A fascinating notion, which perhaps comes to be most concisely stated in Blanchot’s 1962 text, *L’attente l’oubli*, where we discover the following, brief exchange:

–“Will you forget me?”

– “Yes, I will.”

– “How will you be sure that you have forgotten me?”

– “I will be sure when I remember another woman [*une autre*].”⁶⁷

Here, it seems, Blanchot could not possibly be clearer about what is at stake. If the broken heart, in his account, finds itself incessantly consigned to await the reinscription of the cut, the wound, that has marked it in advance of every beginning, then this awaiting must be understood as inseparable from “a profound forgetting.” It is only forgetting which allows the unconditional affirmation of this encounter to come forth. It is only forgetting which renders the return *active*. And thus, one might say, that it is forgetting alone “that will reunite us,”⁶⁸ as the protagonist in *L’attente l’oubli* comes to realise, only never without turning us away from ourselves in the process.

66 Ibid. 192.

67 *Awaiting Oblivion*. 32.

68 Ibid. 43.

Understood in these terms, one might even go on to say, that to forget intimacy, in a most remarkable sense, is precisely to remember it. To forget the breaking of the heart is to come closest to reliving it. It is in this sense, as Blanchot writes, in a late addition to *L'entretien infini*, that *Lethe* shows itself to be “a companion of *Eros*.”⁶⁹ Love and forgetfulness become indissoluble, synonymous even, for the heart that comes to affirm, from out of the fractured basin of a perpetually wounding intimacy, the return of a deep, deep eternity.



And so we wait, all the while forgetting – thus allowing the encounter to return, once more and forever. Intimacy: it is coming. But to speak of its approach, as Blanchot insists, is always to speak of “the approach of the unaccomplishable.”⁷⁰ This is because the instant of wounding shatters, by its very definition, the very presence within which it would be announced.⁷¹ It shatters, moreover, the very individual who would seek to witness it in a position of masterful omnipotence. Thus, if forgetting frees the future for the beloved’s return, then it must also be understood to stipulate, by the very same logic, that this return, this joyous reconciliation, never be experienced by *me*.

But what, therefore, can we even say about such an encounter? What can we say about a moment utterly without witness? A ceremony wholly forgotten?

It is perhaps not until his final, major text, *L'Écriture du désastre*, that Blanchot explicitly comes to address this crisis from a terminological perspective. And it is then with considerable reluctance and equivocation that he finally begins to speak of

69 *The Infinite Conversation*. 193.

70 *Awaiting Oblivion*. 22.

71 “An intimacy that makes presence burst into pieces [*une intime qui fait voler en éclats la présence*],” is how Blanchot describes it in 1973. Cf. *The Step Not Beyond*. 72.

“the scene [*la scène*].” –A phrase, as he tells us, which is less than ideal, since it carries with it a hint of the representational; yet which permits us, rather importantly, not to have to speak of an event “taking place at a moment in time.”⁷² Indeed, this (for Blanchot) is really the key. For what such an occurrence ultimately entails, as we know, is nothing less than the breaking and hollowing of time itself – a transit into that scintillating vacuity of the realm of mere images where one encounters, in the very midst of losing it, “the intimacy of a limitless consent [*l’intimité d’un consentement sans limites*].”⁷³

To speak of such a “scene,” we might say, is to speak of that which takes place amidst the eternal radiance of the imaginary, “under the false appearance of the present.” It is to speak, as Blanchot tells us, “of a shadow [*une ombre*], a faint gleam [*une faible lueur*].”⁷⁴ – Words which cannot help but remind us of the precise language which we had earlier encountered, so prominently, within the pages of *Au moment voulu*.

Recall, for instance, that remarkable pronouncement: “Both of us were pursuing the possibility of giving an empty point [*un point vide*] the lustre and the living value of a real meaning [*une signification véritable*]. And certainly, the point remains empty...but – and this is the strange thing – I don’t worry about it and I go on seizing the instant with an incredible avidity, the same instant through which I seem to catch sight of this glimmer [*lueur*].”⁷⁵

Is this not the very glimmer, we might ask, which Blanchot seems to reinscribe, some thirty years later, in his definition of the scene? The very glimmer, moreover, which bears witness to an encounter always already consummated in the sheer absence of time? Here, amidst the radiant intimacy of imaginary space, the amorous couple seem to meet, for the first time, having always already parted. What they hold in common, therefore, is perhaps nothing but this very place, this very scene, “where together, they do not find themselves”⁷⁶ – the very space where they lose one another amidst the shattering of the heart itself. And yet, rather importantly, it is perhaps on

72 *The Writing of the Disaster*. 114.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Au moment voulu*. 259.

76 Ann Smock. “Conversation.” *Maurice Blanchot and the Demand of Writing*. 131.

the very basis of this scene that the heart continues to beat, obstinately and without relenting, as if awaiting the very future which it has already forgotten.⁷⁷



Might we then conclude, on the basis of all this, that there still remains, in spite of everything, a discernible measure of hopefulness within Blanchot's account? –An unlikely, yet utterly irrepressible, belief in the salvific potency of the erotic relation?

These, it seems, are some of the most difficult, most complex, questions bequeathed to us by his writings. And though there can be no question of attempting to accord them, here, the rigorous and detailed response which they surely deserve – let us simply suggest that *if* there yet remains a lingering, palpable residue of hope within Blanchot's erotic scene then it must be understood as radically irreducible to any projection, or fantasy, which could ever come to be fulfilled once and for all. Just as it remains irreducible to any longing which could be definitively satisfied.

In the pages of an 1959 essay on the poet Yves Bonnefoy, Blanchot comes to tell us, along these lines, that the notion of “hope is to be reinvented”⁷⁸ – that it demands to be extricated, in other words, from a yearning for absolute reconciliation, or absolute knowledge. “The hope that passes by way of the ideal,” Blanchot writes, “is a weak

⁷⁷ The most famous *scène*, in Blanchot's later writings, is of course the *scène primitive* which we find in the pages of *L'Écriture du désastre*. Here, we find Blanchot making reference to “a heart that no longer beats [*un coeur qui ne bat plus*].” It would be interesting, in a future study, to address the possible significance of this phrase by bringing into relation with the discourse on intimacy and distance which we have been elaborating here. The complexities of such a project would undoubtedly be considerable, especially given the noticeable psychoanalytic elements at play in Blanchot's *scène*. The term “primal scene [*Urszene*]” – as we know – is a term which Freud makes use of in his 1918 Wolf-Man case study to refer to the witnessed act of parental coitus. Cf. Sigmund Freud. “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (‘The Wolf Man’).” *Case Histories II*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Penguin Books, 1991. 279.

⁷⁸ *The Infinite Conversation*. 40.

hope.”⁷⁹ This is because, as we have already discovered, any hope which remains linked to the notion of the ideal cannot help but betray an unmistakable aversion to the uncertainty of the future, a repugnance of the unexpected.

But what, we might ask, is Blanchot then prepared to propose as an alternative?

In a series of rather fascinating remarks, from 1959, he goes on to tell us that hope becomes perhaps “most profound,” most worthy, at the very moment when it distinguishes itself from (and deprives itself of) “all manifest hope.”⁸⁰ It becomes most profound, in other words, at the very moment when it binds itself to what is most improbable, most unlikely, most prohibitive.

A statement of great consequence. For what, we might ask, could ever be *more* improbable, more unlikely, within the context of Blanchot’s writings, than the very moment of death, the ascendancy of the intimate? What could ever be more unlikely than the crossing blow, the shattering of the heart, that touches the lover always in advance of every encounter, making him love in a perpetual state of forgetfulness?

If hope, in other words, remains somehow remarkably undeterred within the Blanchotian erotic scene – then it is a hope which comes to promise me nothing less than a revisitation of the most beautiful, most fortuitous moment, but only on the condition that *I* am always excluded from it. It is a hope which promises me, moreover, nothing less than the beloved herself – but only in the form of a glimmering image, a fleeting silhouette in the Montparnasse night – always already dissolved amidst the impersonal spectrality of a vast, interpenetrating field of light.

To speak of a Blanchotian hope, in other words, is to speak of the very hopefulness of Abraham, the muted hopefulness of one who rises neither too early nor too late, but ascends the mountain at precisely the appointed time in order to enjoin a most uncertain and unverifiable encounter. This is the hopefulness of the Blanchotian erotic scene: the fragile hopefulness of the lover who affirms even the deepest estrangement, the most absolute distance, without any desire for recompense –

⁷⁹ Ibid. 41.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 41.

knowing that it is only through the moment of irrevocable tearing, of ravishing *déchirement*, that he might perhaps be restored to the one he loves.

This, we might suggest, is the most radical consequence of the movement of eternal recurrence; this is what awaits us in our passage to the furthest limit, the limit of absolute separation itself: the collapse of the interval and the emergence of an intimacy which is consummated amidst the shattering rupture of the present, the heart, the world itself.⁸¹

And it is here, moreover, in the very face of this scene, that we seem to arrive, at last, upon that most unexpectedly hopeful utterance, that most profoundly ardent declaration of love – a love with comparison, without consolation: “I affirm you without seeing you, knowing that you are not there, not knowing it, knowing it.”⁸² Here, in these words, taken from the pages of Blanchot’s last published *récit*, the eroticisation of distance inherited by Blanchot from Nietzsche comes to reach arguably its most poignant, most provocative, articulation. Whatever hope might remain within the Blanchotian discourse, finds itself channelled, here, into a single, incomparably affirmative utterance which announces to us an unprecedented openness to the future. Here, the lover waits, all the while forgetting – and amidst this infinite calmness, comports himself with serenity to the encounter which has always already absolved him of himself.

81 This collapse is perhaps alluded to most notably in Marguerite Duras’ story *La maladie de la mort*, when she maintains that love can only happen “through a sudden lapse [*une faille soudaine*] in the logic of the universe...never through an act of will.” The second half of Blanchot’s *La communauté inavouable* (which also features a renewed examination of the Tristan myth) comprises a rather lengthy engagement with this fictional text and its related themes. Cf. *The Malady of Death*. Translated by Barbara Bray. New York: Grove Press, 1986. 49.

82 *The Last Man*. 86.



This, in summary, is the state of affairs which comes to comprise, as it were, the *quintessence* of Blanchotian eroticism: that strangest and most beguiling aspect of his work. And it is with all of this in mind, therefore, that we come to approach, at last, those final sentences of *Le pas au-delà* – sentences in which it is, once again, the figure of the heart which comes to assert itself at the centre of Blanchot’s discourse.

“He was so calm in dying,” Blanchot writes, “that he seemed, before dying, already dead; after and forever, still alive, in this calm of life for which our hearts beat [*dans ce calme de vie pour lequel battent nos coeurs*] – thus having effaced the limit at the moment in which it is it that effaces.”⁸³ What these words manage to convey, so unmistakably, is the sheer precariousness of the heart, its trembling passion in the midst of an unparalleled stillness. Having always already been made subject to the anarchic sundering of a radical fragmentation, it abides amidst the incessant twilight, the aftermath of a most improbable encounter: an encounter with the other, with death itself. An encounter, moreover, which leaves it broken, perhaps irrevocably, but nevertheless comported affirmatively in relation to the future.

Indeed, it is this relation with the future, this relation with the moment yet-to-come, which then finds itself explicitly evoked in the text’s very next (concluding) sentence: “In the night that is coming, let those who have been united [*qui ont été unis*] and who efface one another [*qui s’effacent*] not feel this effacement as a wound [*une blessure*] that they would inflict on one another.”⁸⁴

If it is with these words that Blanchot elects to close his text, then it is neither to signal to his readers any final resolution, nor any intimation of the ultimate truth. Rather, what these words seem to constitute is nothing less than a tender exhortation, a statement of subtle reassurance, to the heart which waits, endlessly,

⁸³ *The Step Not Beyond*. 137.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

for the return of that very moment which has always already broken it. It is with an unexpected warmth, with compassion even, that Blanchot comes to offer us this parting gesture, this prophetic utterance, which seeks to draw our attention to “the night that is coming...”

And do we not sense, in these words, a nearly unmistakable intimation of that final scene of Blanchot’s own *Aminadab*, where Lucie, as we recall, makes it her point to prepare Thomas for the advent of an unprecedented intimacy. “You must wait for the night,” she tells him, “...in a moment we will permanently united [*définitivement unis*]. I will stretch out my open arms; I will embrace you...There will never be anything to separate us. What a shame you will not be able to witness this good fortune!”⁸⁵ If these words, written in the early 1940s, cannot help but resonate ever so suggestively in relation to the closing passage of *Le pas au-delà*, a text written some thirty years later, then it is because what we discover, in both passages, is a nearly identical allusion to the imminent arrival of the most auspicious moment, the moment of darkness, the advent of an incomparable intimacy. –A moment which is also the strangest and most utterly disconcerting. Why? Because, as Lucie tells Thomas, in the very midst of this impending unity, *he will not remain* to witness the good fortune of this convergence. The night of nights will never touch him. It will expel him from its very midst, exonerating him, depriving him, leaving him aside.

All of this is so important, because what Blanchot appears to be telling us, in the final sentences of *Le pas au-delà*, seems to imply something of a strikingly similar nature. Namely, that when the night of intimacy and shattering proximity returns – it will forever absolve us of ever making this wounding, this fragmentation, an injury which we would inflict upon one another. It will never allow, in other words, this wound to be inflicted by *me*, or upon me. This is because *I* will never be present there; nor will you. When the heart breaks, when it shatters to pieces with love, the violence of this moment will never indicate anything more than an impersonal, anonymous collapse.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *Aminadab*. 196-197.

⁸⁶ Indeed, when (in these closing passages) we encounter the word “calm,” or an allusion to calmness, it crucial that we understand this to refer to nothing other than the radical imposition of impersonality itself, the collapse of the masterful ego, the annulment of sovereignty, the suspension of the world itself. As Blanchot’s narrator tells us in *Le dernier homme*, the calm “wasn’t commensurate with me, it was even

Just as the thought of eternal recurrence turns away the very individual who would seek to think it, so too does the advent of a wounding intimacy expiate me, as if always already, from undergoing it. Thus, as Blanchot means to suggest, let us await it with a calm heart, and even affirm it without exception – knowing, not knowing, that when it arrives we have nothing to fear from a scene without witness, an event without participant, a moment without depth. This is the testimony, the prophecy, with which the book presumably ends.⁸⁷ A prophecy which, without seeking to recuperate (in any formal manner) Nietzsche’s most supreme vision, nevertheless succeeds in carrying the thought of thoughts to its proverbial limit, to its most startling and unexpected consequence. An elegy of broken intimacy? Let us spare ourselves any such feeble attempts at definitive categorisation and simply reinscribe, here, the supremely affirmative words of René Char:

extraordinarily outside of me.” [63]. Then, in *L’attente l’oubli*, we are told of “the calm movement that came from forgetting.” [38]. In *Le pas au-delà*: “the calm of a wait for something that will not take place.” [62] And finally, in *L’écriture du désastre*: “Calm, always calmer, the undesirable calm.” [87]. Of course, this is only a mere sampling. As it turns out, “calm-rhetoric” is almost as prevalent as “intimacy-rhetoric” in Blanchot’s writings, and indeed, often comes to be rather closely associated with it. Should any of my colleagues wish to investigate the matter further, I encourage them to peruse, at their convenience, the following references to the “calm” within Blanchot’s writings which I have happily compiled. The following list is by no means comprehensive, but I have yet to find a comparable item elsewhere. *Thomas the Obscure* [55, 77, 119]; *Aminadab* [1, 8, 131, 198, 199]; *The Most-High* [203, 243]; *Death Sentence* [178]; *When the Time Comes* [259]; *The One Who Does Not Accompany Me* [282]; *The Last Man* [60, 63, 65, 73, 74, 83, 85, 86, 89]; *Awaiting Oblivion* [16, 29, 38, 41, 83, 85]; *The Step Not Beyond* [9, 11, 55, 62] *The Madness of the Day* [191]; *The Writing of the Disaster* [6, 40, 87].

87 Did Blanchot, then, ultimately come to “experience” the very intimacy of which he so obsessively wrote? And if so, then in what form? -- A grossly improper question, to be sure. And yet, it is one which must, nevertheless, be answered in the affirmative, only not (perhaps) in the sense that we might have initially imagined.

For leaving aside, for the moment, his affair with Denise Rollin (they corresponded until shortly before her death in the late 1970s) it seems that the greatest intimacy, the greatest shattering, of Blanchot’s life was ultimately to be found nowhere other than *in the act of the writing itself*. If the heart is broken in Blanchot’s later writings, it is because writing itself breaks the heart. Writing is heartbreak. To write, as Blanchot tells us in *L’écriture du désastre*, “is to know that death [intimacy] has always already taken place [*toujours déjà passée*] even though it has not been experienced, and to recognise it in the forgetfulness [*l’oubli*] that it leaves...” [66] If there remains, in other words, a fracturing always still to come, an encounter always to be awaited, then this encounter, this fracturing, belongs to the movement of writing. It is writing which has always already shattered *me*. And thus, it seems to us, there can be no more fitting name for Blanchot’s practice, than that of rendering *scenographies*, scenes of rupture, rupture of scenes. This, for Blanchot, is intrinsically the realm of the erotic.

Pierre:

- *Prononce un vœu, nuit où je vois?*

La Nuit

- *Que le rossignol se taise,
Et l'impossible amour qu'il veut calme en son cœur.*

Afterword

I would be remiss not to mention, as though parenthetically, the conclusion of the story with which we had begun. The story of my first (and only) visit to the South of France. A story which had seemingly inspired (though perhaps indirectly) this very study. Here, therefore, are those promised remarks, hesitantly tendered:

Upon arriving back in Nice, later that night, Béa informed me that she would be travelling to Aubagne the very next day to visit her grandmother – but would return in a week’s time. Would I like to meet her then? Yes, I said. Let us meet near the golden-leaf archway on the Rue Messena, where it comes to intersect La Promenade des Anglais. We agreed to a certain hour in the afternoon and embraced briefly.

Then, as she was turning to leave, and almost without thinking, I took two or three books off the desk and placed them in her hands. Perhaps these books will keep you company on the train, I told her.

For the next several days, I made a home for myself in the cafés of Vieux Nice – writing with studiousness and dedication. In the evenings I would walk along the Prom, pausing at irregular intervals to inscribe words in a small notebook. Spring was quickly becoming summer and my senses were enchanted by the sights and smells of the seaside.

Late one evening, as I was returning to my hostel, the man at the front-desk handed me, over the wide counter, a paper bag containing the very books I had leant Béa. Inside the bag, I found a brief note. *Write a thesis on the heart in Blanchot* – it read.



I waited with great anticipation for the appointed day, and when the hour at last came, I made my way to the place we had selected, the archway on the Rue Messena. The afternoon was blustery and I was chilled in my short sleeves. Standing there, waiting for Béa to arrive, it occurred to me that Nietzsche himself had once written, in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of a similar archway, a gate not unlike the very one which stood before me.

His gateway had marked the point where two roads intersected, the road of the past and the road of the future. Above it was inscribed a single word: *Augenblick*. And for me, too, it seemed, the moment was about to come. The fortuitous instant was almost here. Any second, she will emerge from the mid-afternoon bustle of the old-city and pass under this very archway.



I cannot recall if I waited an hour, or two, or three – but I can only say that Béa never arrived. The afternoon eventually gave way to evening and I stumbled through the gateway myself with a sunken heart. The traffic on the Promenade was monotonous and dense. Before me, la Baie des Anges was shimmering silently, in the glow of a receding sun.

It might be said, without exaggeration, that this thesis, a work whose imperfections are vast, has been written almost entirely in the sombre light cast by this non-occurrence. Every word, here, is a testimony to this non-arrival which, for the longest time, had persisted in ravaging me.

It is a thesis written, therefore, at least partially in compliance with Béa's wishes. A thesis dedicated to the figure of the heart in Blanchot's work. And yet, at the very same time, it is a study which also owes its realisation to the vertiginous indirection

of Nietzsche's path, the calm scintillation of la Baie des Anges, and the inconsolable devastation which I came to experience, one afternoon, in the very shadow of a gilded archway.

It is a thesis about intimacy and distance, longing and deferral – a piece of writing profoundly indebted to the incomparable majesty of a single instant in which everything was granted me, even whilst everything was taken away.

Avoid it as I might, the forgetting only brings it closer.

And so I cannot help but believe that if the inexorable circularity of time prevails, then all of this is but the beginning of that long preface which will lead me back there, to the place where, in the unperturbed calm of a single instant, we both disappeared.

I must believe that this intimacy has come and will come for all eternity, even if – through the vertiginous majesty of this return – it should forever exclude me.

“I secretly peer into the future
If the evening is clear, light blue,
And I foresee a second meeting,
An inevitable meeting with you.”

Akhmatova

Appendix

Notes Toward a Psychoanalytic Reading

In sharing the findings of my research with colleagues over the past several years, I have frequently been asked to clarify the relationship of my project in its potential relationship with the psychoanalysis. Though the possibility of offering, in the pages of this thesis, a comprehensive engagement with the pertinent psychoanalytic literature has largely been denied me on account of spatial considerations, I am convinced (on the basis of my findings) that a second volume of the present study could very well be written in the future, focusing entirely upon Blanchot's deployment of the motif of *retour* in its relation to psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan, Leclaire, Winnicott, etc). Such a study would likely deal quite heavily with the text of *L'Écriture du désastre* and would almost certainly concern itself, first and foremost, with Blanchot's treatment of the question of narcissism as it relates to the eternal recurrence of the same. In preparation for such a study, I have composed the following, brief outline which seeks to propose *one* possible way of approaching such an investigation.



We know, on the basis of the preceding remarks, how Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence came to be fashioned in direct response to the perceived consummatory idealism and passive nihilism of the German romantic tradition. We know, moreover, how Nietzsche developed this weightiest of thoughts as critical rejoinder to the unrelenting denigration and recrimination of erotic distance which had pervaded the pages of Schopenhauer's work, not to mention Wagner's *Tristan*. To think the eternal return, in such a context, would be to affirm – against all odds – the endlessness of erotic forbearance and to love the very distance which separates us from every end. It would be to no longer seek rest, consummation, and release, but to affirm a sort of metaphysical *coitus reservatus*, the eternal prolongation of desire, boundless and unresolved.

To think the eternal return, in other words, would be to think the thought of eternity bereft of every beginning and every end, every value and every object. It would be to think, quite radically, the absence of *every Other*, the sheer deficit of all transcendence. What returns, here, is nothing but the return itself, emptying time of all presence, displacing all positionality, and consigning us to live in a world where consummatory fulfilment is rendered vain.

And yet, the question which must be asked, is whether Nietzsche, through this “passion for the unfinished [*passion de l'inachèvement*],”¹ ultimately commits himself to a position which might be termed narcissistic. Is it possible, in other words, to continue loving even in the absence of all objects, even in the absence of all ends? Or does such a love invariably become a self-projection, a manifestation of sheer megalomania?

These are immeasurably important questions, and ones which – at least to our knowledge – have not yet been treated with a satisfactory response in any of the literature dedicated to the subject of the eternal recurrence. Indeed, there can be little doubt, at least as far as the clinical definitions are concerned, that what we are describing here does indeed seem to come dangerously close to a classically narcissistic comportment. But let us examine the issue more closely.



Remember how Freud, in his 1914 essay, “On Narcissism,”² tells us of the “original libidinal cathexis of the ego [*einer ursprünglichen Libidobesetzung des Ichs*],”³ a kind of primordial quantity of libidinal energy which may be invested, at will, in any number of external objects. Such an investiture, according to Freud, is synonymous

1 *The Infinite Conversation*. 152.

2 The term “narcissism” first appears in Freud’s writings in a footnote added in 1910 to *Three Essays* (1905).

3 Sigmund Freud. “On Narcissism: An Introduction.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 14*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1957. 75.

with the formation of the so-called object cathexes [*die Objektbesetzungen*] – libidinal allocations which come to link the ego with its various objects of desire. These object cathexes, as we know, can be then “sent out and drawn back in again,”⁴ with a sort of inverse relationship governing the interplay between the ego-libido [*Ichlibido*] and the object-libido [*Objeklibido*]: “The more one is employed,” Freud writes, “the more the other becomes depleted.”⁵

The lesson here is simple. Libido may neither be created nor destroyed, according to Freud, but merely transferred and redistributed – either amongst the various objects of desire, or back to the ego from which it originates. Indeed, all psychic life might, therefore, readily be described in terms of a fluctuating series of libidinal investitures and disinvestitures, attachments and detachments, forever in search of an elusive equilibrium.

The highest phase of development for the object-libido, according to Freud, comes to be seen “in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favour of an object-cathexis [*Objektbesetzung*].”⁶ Whereas the opposite extreme, would show itself to be evident “in the paranoiac’s phantasy (or self-perception) of the end of the world.”⁷ It was precisely such a phantasy, as we recall, which came to be described rather famously by Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber, a patient of Freud’s in the early 1900s, who had become convinced by inner voices that a great catastrophe was soon at hand, that all the work of the past 14,000 years “had now come to nothing, and that the earth’s allotted span was only 212 more years.”⁸

According to Freud, the megalomania and paranoia which comprised Schreber’s most glaring symptoms could only have come about in one way, namely, “at the expense of the object-libido.”⁹ Indeed, as a consequence of his all-encompassing paranoia, Schreber had come to disinvest his libido from every single external object

4 Ibid. 76.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Sigmund Freud. “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia.” *Case Histories: II*. London: Penguin Books, 1988. 207.

9 “On Narcissism.” 74.

to which it had been previously bound. And what, we might ask, had then happened to this massive quantity of libido – this freed erotic energy which had found itself suddenly disinvested from the external world? It could only find itself directed in one place, namely, “back to the ego,” as Freud tell us, “giving rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism [*Narzissismus*].”¹⁰

What we encounter, in the Schreber Case, is therefore nothing less than a very specific regression – a regression back to that intermediate stage of infantile development which the libido must pass through “on the way from auto-eroticism [*Autoerotismus*] to object-love [*Objektliebe*].”¹¹ Here, in this state of so-called primary narcissism, we find the individual unifying his sexual instincts for the very first time in order to obtain an initial love-object. Only, rather than selecting something beyond himself, beyond the scope of the ego, the individual begins, instead, by taking his own body as his object of amorous investiture. It is only later, as Freud tells us, in the subsequent stages of development, that the individual then “proceeds from this to the choice of some person other than himself”¹² – sending his libido outward, for the very first time, toward the world of external objects and ends.

To speak, in our present context, of a narcissistic comportment, is therefore to evoke an individual who experiences a “detachment of libido [*Ablösung der Libido*]”¹³ in relation to all persons and things that had previously been loved, thereby regressing, in this manner, to a state comparable to the one experienced by the infantile, narcissistic ego. It is to refer, in other words, to a comportment in which the totality of *external* objects, ends, and goals is utterly and absolutely disinvested.

And what, we might ask, would be capable of provoking such a regression? What would be capable of effectuating this most radical detachment of libido? Especially among males, Freud writes, the prominent features in causation are “social humiliations [*soziale Kränkungen*] and slights [*Zurücksetzungen*].”¹⁴ Why is this so

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia.” 197.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 210.

¹⁴ Ibid. 197.

important? Because when we look at those crucial months in the winter of 1882-3, those very months in which Nietzsche comes to deploy in his notebooks, for the *very first time*, the figure of Ariadne, this paradigmatic symbol of an eroticism bereft of every object and every end – it is precisely slights and humiliations which abound most prominently.



It all begins, of course, several months earlier, in May 1882, when Nietzsche visits Tribschen with Lou, and makes the decision of proposing to her on the very grounds where he had first fallen under the sway of Cosima's incomparable charm. Naturally, Lou refuses his impetuous proposal – and within a matter of months, Nietzsche has disengaged himself completely from his relationship with both her and Paul Rée. We recall, here, the various letters from this period, already cited, which render unmistakable the extent of Nietzsche's despondency and disappointment: "I have suffered from the humiliating and tormenting memories of this summer...It is night all around me...The barrel of a revolver is for me now a source of relatively pleasant thoughts...With all the people I love: everything is *over*, it is the past, forbearance."

It cannot be denied that all of this seems to bear witness, rather strikingly, to the very *Libidolösung* which Freud comes to evoke in his account – that profound disinvestment of libidinal cathexes which impels the freed erotic energy to rush back upon an increasingly inflated, narcissistic ego. Could it be any coincidence, therefore, to find Nietzsche, during the course of these very weeks and months of extreme deprivation coming to elevate, within his philosophy, that thought of an eternity bereft of every end and every object? A thought which affirms and performatively valorises the withdrawal of libido from every *desideratum* to which it had previously clung?

Could it be, we might ask, that the dissemination of the thought of eternal recurrence, throughout Nietzsche's writings of the mid-1880s, might in fact be inextricably bound up, in this manner, with the social humiliations and slights, the *Libidolösung* he had just undergone? Could it be, in other words, that the thought itself might therefore be a product of paranoiac fantasy, not unlike Schreber's own: a construction of sheer megalomania? A manifestation of utter narcissism? Certainly, it is a rather tempting notion to consider. –



And then, of course, there is also that *other* event from the winter of 1883. An event perhaps even more significant, ultimately, than Nietzsche's inevitable parting from Lou. We are speaking, quite naturally, of Wagner's death. Setting aside, for the moment, the deep animosities which had been left to fester between the two men in the years following their final meeting in November 1876 – there can simply be no doubting the significance of this loss.

Recall how, only days after hearing news of the composer's passing, Nietzsche had written to Overbeck: "Wagner was by far the *fullest* human being I have known."¹⁵ Words of admiration, undoubtedly. But also words of mourning. For it was none other than Wagner himself whom Nietzsche had long considered "the man perhaps most closely related to [him]."¹⁶ Even at the very threshold of darkness, whilst preparing those final, scathing polemics, those texts of wholesale repudiation, in the summer of 1888 – Nietzsche did not hesitate, in a letter to an inquisitive American journalist, to describe a "relationship of deep confidence and innermost accord"¹⁷ with the late composer.

¹⁵ Letter to Overbeck. February 22, 1883.

¹⁶ *Ecce Homo*. 78.

¹⁷ Letter to Karl Knortz. June 21, 1888.

We know, moreover, the immense and indisputable influence which Wagner's *Tristan* had exerted upon Nietzsche. It was this drama, as we know, which Nietzsche would continue to describe, until the final week of 1888, as a "work without parallel, not only in music but in all the arts."¹⁸ A work, moreover, which had led him, rather dangerously, down the path of erotic transmogrification, compelling him to live the Tristanian pathos as his own, and to seek a redemption higher than any reconciliation. – All of this we have already discussed at length, and there is no need to rehearse it once more.

For what interests us, here, is the precise effect which Wagner's death, in February 1883, combined with the accompanying personal disappointments and dejections of the winter of that year, might ultimately have exerted upon his most auspicious of thoughts, the thought of eternal return, still in its early stages of germination at that point. We know, instance, that Nietzsche had written, in a letter only months earlier, that his experiences with Wagner had, in fact, amounted to nothing less than "a great passion," and that the renunciation which it had ultimately required, "was among the hardest and most *melancholy* things that had ever befallen [him]."¹⁹ To be forced to relive this melancholy, to be forced to endure its very recurrence, only months later, in the form of Wagner's death, could not possibly have left Nietzsche any less than shaken.

And is it not fascinating, given all this, to find Freud's *own* discourse on mourning and melancholia so closely linked to another, related set of clinical investigations – namely, the work on narcissism which we have just examined. For what we encounter, in this former discourse, is likewise a story about the disinvestment of object-libido and its subsequent return upon the ego. In the case of a loved one's death, as Freud tell us, reality-testing quickly determines that "the loved-object [*das geliebte Objekt*] no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object."²⁰ Just as in the paranoiac's regression to narcissism, a quantity of libido thus finds itself made suddenly free,

¹⁸ *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 341.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 188.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 14*. Edited by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1957. 244.

and returned to the ego where it is made available either for subsequent investitures, or megalomaniac inflation.

But what happens, we might ask, in a situation like Nietzsche's – a situation in which the deceased individual, whom one has deeply loved, was *also* one's tormentor, one's adversary? A crucial question. For in such a case, as Freud tells us, the free libido [*die freie Libido*] withdraws as usual back into the ego; but upon arriving there, it neither dissipates, nor attaches itself to a new object, but rather serves to establish “an identification [*Identifizierung*] of the ego with the abandoned object [*aufgegebenen Objekt*].”²¹ Thus, the object-loss [*Objektverlust*] in question is ultimately transformed into an ego-loss [*Ichverlust*] and “the conflict between the ego and the loved person is transformed into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.”²² In such a case, we are told, the past conflict with the lost object is transformed into an internal conflict between the ego and itself. The ego begins to persecute itself, deriving an almost sadistic satisfaction from its own suffering, whilst viewing itself, more and more, as a stand-in for the object lost.

And are we not describing, here, almost without trying, the very Nietzsche of 1888 – who relentlessly, breathlessly attacks the Wagner *within* himself? Are we not describing, here, the very Nietzsche who, throughout those final published texts, decries with such vehemence the decadence of Wagner, which is also his own?

“Perhaps nobody has had been more dangerously bound up with Wagnerianism [than me]...I needed a particular form of self-discipline for a task like this: to take sides *against* everything sick in myself, including Wagner...”²³ These are Nietzsche's words, as we know, written only weeks before the collapse in Turin. And what they suggest is both the identification of the ego with the lost object which Freud refers to, as well as the unrelenting self-punishment which comes to result from it. We find hate and love, as Freud writes, “contending with each other... the former seeking to detach the libido from the object, and the latter to maintain this position of the libido

²¹ Ibid. 248.

²² Ibid. 249.

²³ *The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*. 233.

against the assault.”²⁴ And what, we might inquire, are the ultimate consequences of all this?

As Freud goes on to tell us, the consequences, here, are rather profound – all the more so, perhaps, for remaining entirely unconscious. For this cleavage at the very heart of the ego ultimately takes the form, according to Freud, of “a painful wound [*eine schmerzhaft Wunde*],”²⁵ a tear in the very fabric of self. It is a wound, as Freud tells us, which requires, moreover, an extraordinarily high anti-cathexis [*Gegenbesetzung*],”²⁶ or counter-pressure, if it is to be kept from emerging, violently, at the very forefront of consciousness.

This, as we know, is the very mechanism of repression itself. And it is this very mechanism which then enters the picture, rather importantly, in the winter of 1883. For it is this very mechanism which must now attempt to staunch that most painful of wounds, a wound in the fabric of the ego itself – a wound inflicted by Nietzsche’s melancholic identification with the lost object. This is undoubtedly the most serious repressive episode in Nietzsche’s adult life. For what is held back from the surface, here, is nothing less than considerable: the Tribschen idyll, the “tiefen Augenblicke,” the ecstasy of transmogrification itself – not to mention Bayreuth and the recollections of disillusionment that followed.

Here, in the tension between these seemingly incommensurable pasts, we find the very ambiguity which characterises, above all, the very nature of melancholia in Freud’s account. It is here, moreover, this is this cleavage, this tension, that the deepest of tears, of wounds, is inflicted. A wound which then threatens, at every moment, to expose itself, unless the repression is tirelessly maintained and reinforced.



²⁴ “Mourning and Melancholia.” 256.

²⁵ Ibid. 258.

²⁶ Ibid. 258.

This, in short, is the state of affairs for Nietzsche in the winter of 1883 – that winter of immeasurable discontent during which he would find himself tempted, according to his own admission, by the idea of suicide: “Make it easier for yourself, die...”²⁷ And what, we might wonder, was the nature of intellectual itinerary during these very weeks and months? His plan, as Lou Andreas Salomé reminds us in her memoir, was nothing other than to “disengage himself” from all writing activity, immerse himself in silence for a decade, before “emerging as the proclaimer” of the eternal return in 1892. A fascinating plan – which would, of course, never come to fruition.

For coming to interrupt this gestational period would be nothing less than the sheer trauma of the double bereavement which we have just documented: Nietzsche’s abandonment at the hands of his closest friends *and* the death of Wagner, in the span of mere weeks. The most crucial period in the development and germination of the doctrine of eternal recurrence thus came to be marked by a veritable perfect storm, a confluence of two separate catastrophes.

On one hand, we find Nietzsche abandoned, refused, and thus coming to formulate and affirm, in the winter of 1883, a thought which entailed the most radical divestment of object-cathexes in the history of philosophy. A thought which seeks to affirm an eternity in the absence of every object and every end. In normal circumstances, as we know, all this would have entailed a requisite inflation of the ego, and a return to narcissism. In normal circumstances, moreover, the diagnosis here would be clear and unmistakable: the thought of eternal return would be conceived as a narcissistic thought *par excellence*.

But in Nietzsche’s case, something truly remarkable happens. For as we have just chronicled, in the very weeks and months when Nietzsche’s abandonment by Lou and Rée comes to elicit from him that absolute *Libidolösung*, that radical detachment of erotic investiture – Nietzsche receives news of Wagner’s death. A

²⁷ *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. 214.

coincidence of great consequence. Because it means that this disinvestiture takes place nearly simultaneously with the beginning of Nietzsche's melancholic identification with Wagner – an identification and subsequent conflict which, as we have just shown, engenders a “painful wound,” a tear in the very fabric of the ego itself. *Both narcissism and the sheer impossibility of narcissism thus come to inhabit the very same organism simultaneously. This, precisely, is the context for the eternal return's emergence as a serious, philosophical thought. It is a thought which emerges, as we can now see, amidst the absence of the object and the displacement of the ego.*

Indeed, it seems remarkable to us that an analysis such as this has never, to our knowledge, previously been suggested in the hundred years since Nietzsche and his writings have entered our intellectual vernacular. For everything beguiling about the eternal return might be clarified, it seems, by keeping in mind that this very thought comes to the fore at the precise moment when the narcissism of total disinvestiture has deprived him of *das geliebte Objekt* and identification with the late Wagner has deprived him, at the same time, of a consolidated ego.

The thought of thoughts emerges, in other words, from the very basin of a wounded ego, traumatised by the ordeal of substitutive identification [*Identifizierung*]. – The basin of an ego, moreover, engaged in the act of attempting to punish the loved object which *it has become* by “abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and even deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.”²⁸ That this thought was even able to emerge at all, and come to some semblance of discursive articulation in the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a testimony, above all, to the prodigious power of repression, which somehow managed to keep this “painful wound [*schmerzhafte Wunde*]” covered so successfully, until Turin.

Indeed, under this sketch of an interpretation, what actually comes to pass, in the final days of 1888, is that Nietzsche's unconscious identification with the object both loved and despised, suddenly breaks through the elaborate mechanisms of repression. And it does so, moreover, with devastating effects. In one of four mad

²⁸ “Mourning and Melancholia.” 251.

notes to Cosima, he writes, "...I was also Voltaire and Napoleon, perhaps Richard Wagner...I have also hung on the Cross." Here, the identification with Wagner is mentioned explicitly, in the clearest language – as is the painful wound which has been inflicted upon the ego by itself, the wound of the Crucified.

And this is immediately followed, by only a matter of hours, by the composition of the famous *Wahnsinnszettel*, the love-note itself. In a final, mad gesture, Nietzsche (now signing from the *other* side of the breach, as Dionysus himself) declares his love for Ariadne. He makes this love his final public gesture. From a heart, quite literally, divided against itself; from an ego wounded, comes a declaration of unlikely amorous investiture at the very threshold of darkness.



Of course, these are but provisional remarks, adumbrating a discourse yet to come. Along these lines, it would then be necessary to show how this notion of the impossibility of narcissism ultimately comes to be reinscribed within Blanchot's own discourse – throughout the pages of *L'Écriture du désastre*, for example. A task of great importance and urgency toward which our efforts should now turn.

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