

“An outstretched hand...”

From Fragment to Fragmentary

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◆ A hand outstretched, refused, which in whatever manner we would not be able to grasp. [*Une main qui se tend, qui se refuse, que de toute manière nous ne pourrions saisir.*] Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*¹

I

A hand, perhaps yours or mine, hers or his, extends itself or is extended, and reaches out. In that selfsame gesture, or shortly after, it withdraws, retreats, and resists. Not given, not taken: the hand, it seems, has always already eluded our grip.

But what is at stake in this meeting or missed encounter, this contact or loss of contact between one hand and another?

In other words, what is the reach – the extent, import, and address – of the gesture described and enacted by Blanchot’s fragmentary words? And what is it that Blanchot hands on to us, his readers, or down to us, who are last to speak? But who are we?

Like other readers during the last thirty or so years, I have on numer-

ous occasions stretched out my hand or hands towards *Le Pas au-delà*, this *Step Beyond* that is plausibly also a *Step Not Beyond* (as the English translation has it), only to find Blanchot's 416 uneven and unequal fragments escape me. Like others, too, I know, I have groped without success towards an understanding of the strange and singular invocation that greets us on the threshold of the book, and which consists, as many of you will remember, in the following injunction: “Let us enter into this relation [*ce rapport*: relation, relationship, report, ratio, return],” without it being at all certain to whom this invitation is being extended and to what kind of space, whether inside or outside, it promises or threatens us with access.

Admittedly, on that threshold also stands a title: *Le Pas au-delà*, and here too, like others, I find myself stumbling, not knowing whether to go forwards or back, tripping over the oxymoronic doubleness of the book's singular name, which on seven different occasions in the course of the text is no sooner advanced than withdrawn, as though it were always already a kind of unreliable quotation, an apocryphal, apocalyptic message written in some distant and untranslatable tongue. My aim here is not to examine in any detail those seven separate instances of the phrase “le pas au-delà” in *Le Pas au-delà* itself. What I do want to underline, however, is the extent to which each occurrence is itself marked or re-marked, differentiated and deferred, by the recourse to typographical devices such as a question mark or pairs of quotation marks, and by the appearance of the phrase in parentheses or within the confines of various sceptical asides.² What this leads us to think is clear enough. It is that if *Le Pas au-delà* is indeed the name of the book, it is a name that itself is always already a homage to the namelessness or anonymity that makes all names both necessary and unnecessary, possible and impossible as such.

“*Taking three paces, halting, falling, and immediately after, steadying itself in this fragile fall [Faisant trois pas, s'arrêtant, tombant et, tout de suite, s'assurant en cette chute fragile]*” (184; 135); so writes Blanchot's text towards the end, perhaps describing itself, at any rate offering an initial gloss on the three-stepped fragment with which I began and to which I shall return in an instant. But who is the reader who can find steadiness in such precarious progress?

How, then, to read? The question is a simple one, which endlessly remains, but, as always, takes on a particular inflexion here, now, at this time, in this place. We are enjoined, it seems, to trust in chance. In any case it is impossible to do otherwise. Chance has always already gone before; it cannot be abolished, even by a dice-throw. It can as a result never be denied, only ever affirmed. Chance always decides: on the side of the undecidable. And let me say this is indeed what happened. For it was, I assure

you, entirely by chance, while preparing for another paper, another occasion, another invitation, thumbing my way through *Le Pas au-delà*, that I once more came across Blanchot's outstretched hand.

The fact is, this fragment appealed to me: in all senses of the word. Like a favour, granted as well as asked. "Le fragment favorable," says *Le Pas au-delà* at one stage: "Favourable fragment" (90; 63). So, why this fragment? It was simple yet enigmatic; incisive yet elusive; transparent yet opaque. It simultaneously offered itself to reading and withdrew from reading. Without resolution. For no text is entirely readable or entirely unreadable, and if it is impossible at times to tell the difference between an appeal and a rebuff, as the Thomas of *Aminadab* discovers to his cost, this is only because, once the act of reading begins (and it began a long while ago for each of us), no possible end is ever in view. Readers know this, of course, just as they know, according to lines Blanchot once wrote, then effaced, at the end (without end) of *L'Arrêt de mort*, "that there is no ending on the basis of whoever wishes to end alone." We are enjoined, immediately after, not to assume these thoughts to be an expression of misfortune, but instead to imagine the hand that writes them. Only then, perhaps, Blanchot concludes, in words made famous by Pierre Madaule, will reading become "a serious task."³

But if the hand that is outstretched cannot be grasped, this is not to say the hand that writes does not require from us a response. What follows, then, since I am the one who am writing here, now, in this place and at this time, last to speak, and yet because of that, first to speak, is an attempt to answer affirmatively, if my powers allow, the demand made upon me by Blanchot's text. Since that is the price and cost of what, according to the possibility and impossibility of names in general, Blanchot names without naming as the "step beyond."

II

In the original French, printed in italics, stamped at the outset with the familiar-unfamiliar device of a lozenge, diamond, or rhombus, standing like a tombstone at the head of all but one of the fragments that make up *Le Pas au-delà*, the fragment by Blanchot I want to read here is a mere sixteen words long. It barely constitutes a sentence, even less a proposition. It is perhaps more in the way of an invocation, evocation, or address, perhaps even an answer to an absent question. Whatever its status or genre, it reaches out. It points, indicates, or gives a sign, recalling a famous fragment from Heraclitus, cited on occasion by Blanchot, and taken by him as an indication that writing is thinkable neither as concealment nor as uncon-

cealment, but altogether otherwise: “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign [*n’exprime ni ne dissimule rien, mais indique*].”⁴ Neither *legei* nor *kruptei*, insists Blanchot, but *sêmeinei*.

So, if Blanchot’s own enigmatic fragment is a sign, albeit a sign that turns aside from manifestation and concealment alike, where does it point, in what direction does it reach?

Something of the appeal of Blanchot’s fragment, I want to suggest, derives from its grammatical structure. The fragment has no main verb. It consists of an invocation, a naming or nominating, qualified by three subordinate clauses. Of those three, the first two feature reflexive verbs, that is to say, verbs which are active and transitive, but which take as their direct object the subject that is governing them. As Blanchot’s hand stretches out, then, it both stretches out itself, as subject of the verb, and stretches itself out, as direct object. In other words, as the possibilities of English translation make plain, the hand both stretches out (active) and is stretched out (passive). And the same applies to the act of refusal: as the hand refuses itself, it itself refuses or is refused. (There is a further grammatical complexity which is that both the verb *tendre* and the verb *refuser* may also be used intransitively, and it would not be far-fetched to consider that in both self-reflexive clauses there still lingers something of the ghostly presence of the intransitive.) In self-reflexive expressions, of course, which are anything but uncommon in present-day French, the distinction between the active and passive voice, though still in evidence, becomes largely of secondary importance, and what speakers are dealing with probably has more to do with what in ancient Greek and other languages is called a middle voice, neither active nor passive, but between the two: neuter, if you will. (Latin, of course, like French, has no direct equivalent for the middle voice, which it tends to convey by the use of the passive, as in such so-called deponent verbs as *loquor*, I speak, or *moritur*, he, she, or it dies. Blanchot, a childhood speaker of Greek and Latin, Christophe Bident tells us in his biography,⁵ would no doubt in later life ponder such canonic examples at length.)

The unusual syntactic structure employed in Blanchot’s fragment has a number of striking consequences. For if the two verbs (*se tendre*, *se refuser*) function in effect as both active and passive, transitive and intransitive, this suggests that the hand “itself” or “as such” in these two clauses can be thought to be occupying simultaneously the position of both subject and object. But while being in a sense both subject and object, Blanchot’s hand is in fact neither. Its neutral status – less than a subject, less than an object, and holding in its span the possibility of always being the other – falls short of all proper binary opposition, which it oversteps and exceeds.

In the relationship it has with itself, as signified by Blanchot's two reflexive verbs, something about the hand necessarily escapes, which is the possibility of it always being other than what it is, and accordingly the impossibility of grasping it, or of it being grasped, unequivocally as subject or object. In its turn (or turning), this syntactic indecision about the hand is responsible for a number of other ambiguities. For not only is it impossible to tell whether the hand is stretching out actively or passively, or whether it is itself refusing another hand or being refused by it, there is also considerable doubt as to whose hand it may be anyway: is it yours, extending (itself) towards me and then pulled away, or is it mine, reaching (itself) out towards you and being refused? Does the hand belong to some nameless third person, and therefore become an object for the first-person plural (*nous*, we) invoked in the third subordinate clause, or does it itself belong, so to speak, to whoever that first-person voice anonymously names?

There are other kinds of indecision, too, dividing the text from itself. Can we be certain, for instance, that this is a human hand? Equally, is it male or female? If it is impossible to tell, how should we handle the fact that the only two nouns that appear in the fragment (*main*, meaning hand, and *manière*, which is what is done with a hand) are both in the feminine? What is the gender of *nous*? Moreover, what is the extent of the present tense used in both initial clauses? Is this a continuous present, a sign that a hand is reaching out as we read, or a repetitive present, an indication that the gesture recurs time and again, or is this a hypothetical present, that has never taken place as such, and is unlikely ever to do so? Much of the argument put forward by Blanchot in *Le Pas au-delà* hinges, as readers will recall, on the writer's refusal to grant the present or presence the prestige and authority that it has so long enjoyed in metaphysical tradition. Such a stance (if it is a stance) is sometimes dismissed as a sign of postmodern scepticism or relativism. Blanchot's point, however, is much simpler. It is to observe, on the basis of such examples as displayed in this fragment, that the present tense rarely, if ever, belongs to the present. It is always separated from itself as non-identical repetition. As readers always know, I who am writing this now in the present will no longer be present when you the reader begin reading it in the present, even though each of us is doing what we are doing, irrepressibly and irretrievably, in the present tense. But when is that present ever present to itself or present to reading?

Blanchot's sentence – hardly a sentence, more a phrase or cursory notation – has a third subordinate clause. Here, remarkably enough, the relationship between subject and object, between *nous* and the relative pronoun *que*, seems initially to have been restored, as no doubt befits the seizing or grasping of the one by the other. But not only is the first person

plural, *nous*, left anonymous and unexplained (does it refer to the writer, the reader, or the whole of humankind?), the present tense of the two previous verbs is also erased, supplanted by an enigmatic conditional tense: *pourrions*. As readers will know, the conditional (which is more properly a mood than a tense, but no matter) generally serves three sorts of usage in modern French. It is either attached to a conditional subordinate clause (even if a hand were to be outstretched – the implication being that the hand is *not* currently outstretched – it would not be possible for us to grasp it); or it can indicate a future in indirect speech (I wrote: if a hand was outstretched, it would not be possible for us to grasp it in the past or the future); or it can convey the sense of an unconfirmed allegation or hypothesis, which the speaker or writer does not endorse (it is claimed – unverifiably – that in no circumstances might it be possible for us to grasp an outstretched hand). Common to each of these examples is the motif of virtuality, the possibility that, if conditions were different, things might be otherwise, and this is why, of course, the conditional gets its name. But here too Blanchot’s syntax undergoes or performs a curious suspension. For what the reader is given in the latter half of the fragment is a hypothetical conditional clause that, we are duly informed, can never apply. There is no way or manner, asserts the text, no turn or sleight of the hand, by which a hand may be grasped by us, and what the clause therefore describes as a spectral encounter ever come to pass. So if the form *pourrions* (could, would, or might be able) is correctly termed a conditional, it is, obscurely enough, in Blanchot’s fragment, an unconditional conditional, a hypothetical absolute, the effect of which is to open up within language, within the text, within the reader, an abyss that it is possible to describe only as an impossible possibility – at the very moment we are being alerted to the possible existence of a possible impossibility.

It is not that Blanchot is somehow attempting to leap over the rules and received conventions of French syntax in a concerted attempt at poetic transgression. The verbal structures explored in this fragment are banal, unexceptional, and unspectacular. They are not part of so-called poetic discourse, but ordinary language. At any event, Blanchot argues, transgression as such is impossible; to break the law is ultimately to fulfil the law and strengthen its authority and power. But if as a result the step beyond (or *not* beyond) cannot promise or deliver transcendence, this is not to say it can guarantee immanence either. For both the one and the other fall subject to erasure. What the “step beyond” affirms, and does so time and again in *Le Pas au-delà*, is that everything (including the word or concept of everything itself) is always already in default of itself as a site of disruption or interruption, difference or deferral, dislocation or dispersion, without it ever

being possible to recoup within any kind of dialectical or other unity, or to gather together within any kind of worldly horizon this essential non-coincidence with itself that affects each of the concepts, themes, or experiences that Blanchot details in his text, ranging from the most philosophical to the most everyday, including (or rather: precisely *not* including) temporality, writing, literature, naming, repetition, the fragment, fear, death, dying, desire, anguish, knowledge, or experience itself. In turn, this is what is at stake in the fragment that concerns us here: at work (*not* at work) in Blanchot's sixteen words is a process (*not* a process), the effect (*not* an effect) of which is to neutralise subject, object, temporality, and the limit of possibility dividing the possible from the impossible, and *vice versa*, not in order to declare such notions inadequate or redundant, but to affirm the otherness that, without ever being namable as such, divides from itself each and every experience, word, or thing, and exposes it to radical exteriority, but without which language, thought, literature would barely occur at all.

In writing *Le Pas au-delà* (and the same could be said, I think, of *L'Écriture du désastre*), Blanchot's overriding concern, so to speak, is to problematise and resist thematisation, the identification of any thing, word, or concept as itself "as such." This is no easy endeavour; it is one that cannot be approached directly, only by an infinite detour, and as a result of perpetual vigilance, even perhaps an expectation of failure. Words themselves arguably do not help. We know, for instance, from Nietzsche that God lives on in grammar itself, alongside the rest of Western metaphysics, and Blanchot seems to suggest as much himself when he comments as follows, in *Le Pas au-delà*, on the word God:

God: language speaks only as the sickness of language [*comme maladie du langage*], in so far as it is split down the middle [*fissuré*], broken apart [*éclaté*], and put at a distance [*écarté*], a failing [*défaillance*] that language immediately recuperates [*recupère*: recoups] as its own strength [*validité*], its power and its health, in a recuperation [*recupération*] that is its most intimate sickness, of which God, this always irrecoverable [*irrecupérable*] name, always yet to be named and naming nothing, seeks to cure [*guérir*] us, a cure [*guérison*] for which itself has no cure [*incurable*]. (70; 48)

But there is here an important nuance, inseparable from the nearly untranslatable idiomatic complexity that Blanchot increasingly brings to bear on and in his thinking, which is that, if language is the sickness from which Western onto-theology is suffering, then the only possible – impossible – cure for that disease is language itself. (Readers of *L'Arrêt de mort* will recall that, by way of a quotation from Kafka taken from Max Brod's biogra-

phy, a similar point is made about death and dying.⁶) Language, in other words, is where the divide between immanence and transcendence is decided; but by that very token it is also where the divide is always already suspended, together with all the concepts to which it gives rise. Language, then, for Blanchot is never simple, or unified, never gathered in one place around any opening, emergence, or giving. It is always at odds with itself, simultaneously healthy and sick, sick and healthy, without it ever being possible to identify which of these it is, for it is both and neither: neutral. Radical homeopathy, suggests Blanchot: language is what we must trust, since we have no alternative; but it is also what we must distrust, because we have no alternative.⁷

Syntax, of course, is not all. There is also rhythm, but understood less as regular flow (according to what Blanchot in *L'Écriture du désastre*, following Emile Benveniste, refers to as a dubious etymology) than as "shifting configuration," i.e. a form in which repetition and difference, like the ebb and flow of the waves, have not yet been anchored to the self-presence of the one place and assimilated to the re-presentation of identity.⁸ "All is rhythm," Hölderlin is reported as saying to Bettine von Arnim, according to Isaak von Sinclair, and went on: "Man's entire destiny is a single heavenly rhythm, just as the work of art is a unique rhythm." Blanchot cites the remark, approvingly, on at least two occasions, notably in *L'Entretien infini* shortly before the quotation from Heraclitus mentioned earlier (*EI* 42; *IC* 30), and towards the end of *L'Écriture du désastre* (*ED* 173; *WD* 112). But he adds a note of warning. "All, here," he explains, "does not mean the cosmic in an already ordered totality which it would be the task of rhythm to maintain." Rhythm, Blanchot insists, "is not in accordance with nature, language, or even 'art' though that is where it seems to predominate" (*ED* 173; *WD* 112; trans. modified).⁹ Hölderlin's perhaps apocryphal remark is made to resonate, then, with the earlier borrowing from Heraclitus: as a sign or indication that what is at stake in fragmentary writing, as practised by Blanchot's two favoured predecessors (to whom might be added Nietzsche and René Char), is not the nature and extent of the aesthetic (which, it will be remembered, for both Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis was the principal horizon and final justification of the fragment as such), but, in far more radical and contestatory manner, the disseminatory articulation of language and writing in so far as both are always already fragmented, which is also to say: no longer bound within the (negative) horizon of the Romantically ironic fragment, but always already re-marked, that is, dispersed and multiplied according to the shifting configurations of rhythm.

Reading for or according to the fragment means attending to the singularity of a rhythm. It comes as no surprise, then, that not just semantically

or syntactically, but rhythmically too, there is something remarkable about Blanchot's own fragment, those mere sixteen words I am still endeavouring to read. Rhetorically, the fragment seems to divide up, neatly enough, into two evenly paired, symmetrical units, each eight words long, the first comprising the initial nominative clause and opening two subordinate clauses (*Une main qui se tend, qui se refuse*), the second the third, counterbalancing subordinate clause (*que de toute manière nous ne pourrions saisir*), with a caesura falling between these two paired units, occurring after the word *refuse*. This carefully calculated rhetorical patterning, however, is not all. For the fragment is also inhabited by a spectral, verse-like poetic structure that is both more complex and less evenly balanced than its prosaic counterpart. "In the genre called prose," wrote Mallarmé, whom Blanchot later quotes on this very point, "there are sometimes wonderful lines of verse, made up of all kinds of rhythms."¹⁰ If one follows Mallarmé here, and reads Blanchot's sentence, as its length seems to demand, as a possible fragment of poetry, in accordance with standard prosodic conventions (which mainly require the reader to count mute *e* sounds not occurring at the end of lines of verse), it yields the following phantom pattern: *Une main qui se tend, / qui se refuse, // que de toute manière / nous ne pourrions saisir*. In other words, the rhythmic structure of the fragment is such that it is possible to read it as though it was made up of two lines of verse, the first with 6 + 4 syllables, thereby producing on the reader the effect of a regular decasyllabic line or *dizain*, ending on the word *refuse*, but followed, on the other hand, by an awkward, poorly articulated six- or seven-syllable hemistich (depending on whether *manière* is treated as a two- or three-syllable word), and concluding with seven badly limping syllables tagging along at the end.

Two kinds of rhythm coexist, then, dividing the fragment from itself. Either way, to read the fragment as prose or as poetry is to encounter dissymmetry. In the first case, it is because the fragment's address and two opening subordinate clauses are placed in equilibrium, or kept in check, by a single subordinate clause contributing far less to the argument of the sentence than its counterpart; as a result of the equal-unequal balancing act between the two halves of the sentence, the fragment quite markedly falls away at the end. But if the fragment is read as cryptic poetry, or at least with attention to its prosodic structure, the effect is perhaps even more radical. For the comparative euphony of the first part of the fragment, brought about by its verse-like regularity, is sabotaged by the clumsy patterning of the second. In its handling of rhetorical, phonetic, and prosodic structures, then, what Blanchot's outstretched hand manages to do, then, is to contest its own status or standing as a rhetorical or aesthetic object.

But there is more. The calculated-uncalculated clumsiness of the second part of the fragment has a powerful effect on the three-step structure of the argument the fragment seems to be presenting. The fragment begins with a hand, which is first extended, refused, but then it proves not to have been possible to grasp it anyway. The sequence of these three motifs is again remarkable. For if it was not possible in any event to grasp the hand, there was little reason for the hand to refuse, unless of course, rather than an act of stubbornness or wilful non-cooperation, this refusal was already something more akin to an always prior injunction. And if the hand were always already synonymous with refusal, what is the reason for it being extended in the first place? As the reader asks these questions, it is apparent that no answer is forthcoming. Words are proffered, but logical unity, coherence, ultimate meaning are all refused. Rather than proceeding through a three-phase process towards some appropriate conclusion, reading is forced to move backwards, impelled, as it were, to scrutinise and challenge anew the meaning of each and every previous assertion made as though in a spirit of generosity by Blanchot's outstretched hand. In other words, instead of a progressive, teleological dialectic, taking us through affirmation (a hand outstretched), and its negation (a hand refused), towards some synthesis (embodied perhaps in some so-called democratic, but always less than democratic community, in which hands are exchanged, as objects by subjects, in the name of an allegedly mutual respect of all citizens for one another, a respect that remains carefully silent about the fact that some hands are stronger than others), what Blanchot's fragment promises (without promising) is the possibility (or impossibility) of an unavowable community that can never be made present or realised as such.

This probably explains Blanchot's use of the word *saisir*, falling at the end of the fragment like a premature, forced conclusion. Like its German counterpart, *(be)greifen*, the word indicates both a concrete and an abstract operation, physical as well as ideational, meaning simultaneously to seize by the hand and by the concept. In this regard, what Blanchot's fragment offers is nothing short of a condensed, yet nevertheless incisive reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which it does not contradict as such, since to do so would be to confirm the thought of contradiction that animates the *Phenomenology*, but which Blanchot's fragment nevertheless mimes by way of its own three-step progress, if only to have the dialectic itself stumble and trip over its own always prior assumptions, notably its reliance on the necessary primacy of conceptuality and the concept. It is surely no accident either that the caesura audible in Blanchot's fragment falls on the word refusal. For refusal in Blanchot is itself a caesura, having many different philosophical, poetical, and political connotations. As such (and it is important

here to begin to refuse what is implied by any such formulation as such), refusal is precisely *not* an act of opposition or gesture of negativity, nor is it an appeal to any prior system of values, political, moral, or otherwise; refusal for Blanchot does not therefore belong to any dialectic, the power and authority of which it indeed refuses, resists, and contests. As Blanchot's outstretched hand indicates, refusal is therefore not an act of will, founded on the self-assurance of a philosophical, literary, or political subject. It is itself a step beyond that is not a step beyond, that is, it inscribes itself within Blanchot's text as a re-mark, a withdrawal, an interruption, an interval, a position without positionality or place without place, and as an affirmation reducible neither to an assertion nor to a negation.¹¹ In that sense, refusal is perhaps simply another name for the neuter, as Blanchot presents it or refuses to present it.

Another fragment, the longest in *Le Pas au-delà*, describes more explicitly what is at issue here. Blanchot writes:

Something is at work [à l'œuvre] by virtue of the neuter [de par le neutre], which is also the work of worklessness: there is a neuter effect [effet de neutre] – which speaks the passivity of the neuter – which is not an effect of the neuter [effet du neutre], since it is not the effect of a Neuter supposedly at work as cause or thing [cause ou chose]. There cannot be said to be a working of the neuter [travail du neutre], as there is a working of the negative [travail du négatif]. The Neuter: a paradoxical name: it barely speaks at all, a simple, mute word, and yet always veiling itself, always displacing itself outside of its meaning, working [opérant] invisibly upon itself while never ceasing to unravel [se déenrouler], in the immobility of its position that repudiates all depth. The neuter neutralises, neutralises (itself), and therefore evokes (but only evokes) the movement of *Aufhebung*, but while it suspends and retains, it retains merely the movement of suspending, that is to say, the distance it produces by the very fact that, by occupying the ground, it makes it disappear. (105-6; 75)

It will be remembered that the hand, for Hegel, alongside language, was the philosophical organ *par excellence*. This allows us to understand, I think, at least part of the extent of the intervention into thinking made by Blanchot's fragment. For as Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*, following in the footsteps of a long-standing anthropocentric tradition which privileges language as communicative interaction and body parts as tools, "next to the organ of speech [dem Organ der Sprache], it is the hand most of all by which a man [der Mensch] manifests and actualizes himself [sich zur Er-

scheining und Verwirklichung bring[en]. It is the living artificer [*der beseelte Werkmeister*] of his fortune.” “We may say of the hand,” Hegel adds, with crucial import for the rest of his own philosophy and much that came after, “that it is what a man does [*sie ist das, was der Mensch tut*], for in it, as the active organ of his self-fulfilment [*dem tätigen Organe seines Sichselbstvollbringens*], he is present as the animating soul [*als Beseelender gegenwärtig*]; and since he is primarily his own fate, his hand will thus express this in-itself [*dies Ansich*].”¹²

In 1973, then, this period of acute political dissensus following the *événements* of May 1968, Blanchot stretches out his hand. Towards Hegel and the dialectic of possibility that Hegel’s name serves to identify. As he does so, Blanchot acknowledges the reach and extent of the world of possibility, where hands are both proffered and refused in struggle and interaction, but then interrupts both himself and the dialectic – in order to write, in other words: to resist. Indirectly, obliquely. And to refuse the dialectic by suspending it, withdrawing its imperious appeal to human or humanist possibility, grounded in the self-manifestation and self-actualisation of “man,” and reaching out, impossibly, for what refuses to position itself as object and is at any event unattainable as such.

At this stage in my reading, a hand – the hand that is the measure of all things – bids me pause, if only for a moment. The fragment itself, however, is not ended, nor is the infinite movement of its reading, which (I know) carries on elsewhere. Take this to be both a promise and a warning.

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NOTES

¹ Blanchot, *PD* 146. Lycette Nelson’s less idiomatic rendering runs as follows: “A hand that extends itself, that refuses itself, that we cannot take hold of in any way” (*SNB* 106). Subsequent references to the book will be given directly in the text; of the two sets of page numbers, the first refer to the Gallimard text, the second to the SUNY translation, which for reasons of accuracy or stylistic consistency I have modified in most cases.

² These seven occasions when Blanchot’s text re-presents its title (making eight occurrences in all) are as follows. First, almost at the beginning, comes something resembling a definition, albeit a paradoxical one: “Time, time: the step beyond [*le pas au-delà*],” we read, “that does not occur within time may be said to take us [*conduirait*] outside time [*hors du temps*], without this outside [*dehors*] being time-

less [*intemporel*]” (8; 1). Second, some twenty pages later, glossing the thought of eternal return, Blanchot adds a reference to the step beyond in a parenthesis, seemingly by way of an afterthought: “*In a certain sense*,” he writes, “the law of return ... might make us to accept (that is, suffer in the most passive passivity, in the step beyond [*de par la passivité la plus passive, le pas au-delà*]) the temporality of time in such a way that, suspending or dissipating all present and presence, it suspends or dissipates the authority or foundation on which the law of return depends in order to be announced at all” (26; 15). Readers then have to wait more than a hundred pages for the next occurrence. This comes as part of a discussion of suicide which is described, in an aside, and with the addition of quotation marks, as “that ‘step beyond’ [*le «pas au-delà»*] which is not a stepping beyond [*là où cependant l’on ne passe pas*]” (135; 97). A similar strategy is adopted for the fourth citation of the term, which is again given in quotation marks, and doubly withdrawn, so to speak, by the use of a conditional verb. “As custom dictates,” writes Blanchot, “we busy ourselves doing nothing, we help the living, and help them in death, but not with dying [*le mourir*]: something there occurs, in the absence of all else and by default, something that does not occur, which might be termed the ‘step beyond’ [*qui serait le «pas au-delà»*], which does not belong to duration, repeats itself without end” (145; 105). The fifth occurrence repeats this pattern: “Nothing answers [*répond*: responds, corresponds] the neuter, this name without name,” we read, “except a faltering answer [*la réponse qui défaille*], that has always been on the point of answering and always failed in answering, that was never patient enough to ‘step beyond’ [*passer au-delà*], albeit this ‘step beyond’ [*ce «pas au-delà»*] never occurs” (162; 118). Throughout, Blanchot plays insistently on the homophonic relationship between *pas* (meaning *step* or *pace*, but inevitably evoking the negative *ne... pas*) and the words *passé* (past time), *passif* or *passive* (passive), and *passion* (passion); the next instance is a case in point, with Blanchot also adding a question mark to the quotation marks: “the ‘pass’ of the entirely passive [*le «pas» du tout à fait passif*] – the ‘step beyond’? [*le «pas au-delà»?*] – is more the folding back [*repliement*: retreat, withdrawal], as it unfolds [*se déployant*], of a relation of strangeness neither suffered [*subie*] nor accepted [*assumée*]” (167; 122). The last occurrence in the book echoes what has gone on before, referring to “the ‘step beyond’ of the entirely passive [*le «pas au-delà» du tout à fait passif*] to which we may be said to answer in dying [*en mourant*]” (174; 127). Blanchot’s effort to re-present the title of the book in this oblique, sceptical, questioning manner fulfils, I think, an essential purpose, which is to withdraw conceptual identity from the phrase, and transform it, so to speak, into a written trace, exhibiting the complex logic of non-identical repetition. Rather than conceptualising the step beyond, then, Blanchot’s seven-fold recitation of the title of the text in book enacts the very movement of erasure and dissemination which the strange name of the ‘step beyond’ serves to address.

³ Blanchot, *AM* 148. These lines were printed in the original edition only and they were deleted in all subsequent (French) editions. They appear, however, in Lydia Davis’s translation *DS* 81. They provide Pierre Madaule with the title of his own *récit* about *L’Arrêt de mort*, entitled *Une tâche sérieuse?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

⁴ The reference is to Heraclitus, Fr. 93, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, second edition, eds. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P.,

1983), p. 209. Blanchot cites the fragment in a number of places. Probably the earliest reference is to be found in the essay, “La Bête de Lascaux” (1953), now reprinted in *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 56; “The Beast of Lascaux,” trans. Leslie Hill, *Oxford Literary Review*, 22 (2000), p. 11. Using a slightly different French translation, Blanchot refers to it twice again in *EI* 43-4; 131; *IC* 31-2; 92. Blanchot uses the fragment, originally found in Plutarch, in order to disengage language, writing, poetry, from phenomenology, understood as a discourse that confers an absolute privilege on what appears “as such.”

⁵ See Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), p. 16.

⁶ See Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 206-26.

⁷ See Blanchot, *ED* 170-1; *WD* 110-1. “To write,” Blanchot explains, “is to distrust writing absolutely by trusting in it absolutely. Whatever foundation is ascribed to this double movement, which is not as contradictory as this compressed formulation might suggest, it remains the rule of every writing practice: ‘giving withdrawing’ [*le «se donner se retirer»*] finds here, not its application or illustration, for these are inadequate terms, but that which, by means of dialectics and outside dialectics, justifies itself by letting itself be said, as soon as there is saying and by virtue of what there is saying [*se justifie en se laissant dire, dès qu’il y a dire et par quoi il y a dire*].”

⁸ Blanchot’s main stimulus for rethinking rhythm in this way, as he readily acknowledges, is a famous article by the eminent linguist, Emile Benveniste, “La notion de «rythme» dans son expression linguistique,” first published in 1951, and republished in the author’s *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 327-35.

⁹ Blanchot continues (*ED* 173-4): “Rhythm, even as it makes room [*tout en dégageant*] for the multiple, whose unity is thus no longer apparent [*se dérobe*], and though it may seem to follow a regular pattern and assert itself according to rule, nevertheless always threatens the rule, which it exceeds through an inversion [*un retournement*] by virtue of which, while being at play or at work within measure, rhythm itself is not however measured by it. The enigma of rhythm – dialectical or non-dialectical: neither the one nor the other escapes it – is extreme danger. That, in speaking, we should speak in order to make sense [*sens*] of rhythm, and to make rhythm outside meaning [*le rythme hors sens*] both perceptible and meaningful, this is the mystery that traverses us, from which we will not be released by revering it as sacred.” These comments are worth putting next to a slightly later passage from Blanchot’s essay “La Parole ascendante, ou: Sommes-nous encore dignes de la poésie? (notes éparses)”, in Vadim Kozovoï, *Hors la colline* (Paris: Hermann, 1984), p. 120.

¹⁰ Blanchot, “La Parole ascendante, ou: Sommes-nous encore dignes de la poésie? (notes éparses)”, p. 122.

¹¹ “Au neutre,” says Blanchot, “répondrait la fragilité de ce qui déjà se brise: passion

plus passive que tout ce qui aurait de passif, oui qui dit oui avant l'affirmation, comme si le passage de mourir y avait toujours déjà passé, précédant le consentement" (162; 118).

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 3: 237; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 189.