

chapter one

*I*mmemorial silence: Maurice Blanchot

beginning to speak

Blanchot shows that all commentary is necessarily unfaithful. It's one of the things that distinguishes him from Heidegger.

—Leslie Hill

Writing of a writer like Maurice Blanchot, notable for his gracefully elliptical economy of expression, is virtually guaranteed to make one's own prose clumsy and inept. I must confess that I feel in trying to write of Blanchot what he may have felt in writing, in 1990, "I shall begin to write again, not on Derrida, (how pretentious!) but with his help, and convinced that I shall betray him immediately."¹ This inept betrayal may be particularly apparent here, since the issues I would engage are, Blanchot says, found in "neither reading nor writing, nor speaking. . . ."² Here I shall address the questions of time and silence by writing both with and about his work, about a particularly seductive and disturbing cluster of issues in his work, aware that addressing directly the elliptical openness of these texts risks chattering over their silences.

To write with the help of—or, more honestly, under the influence of—other thinkers is to write with those whose work opens spaces of possibility for one's own thought, and few can do this so astonishingly well as Blanchot. In fact, it is precisely this ability of Blanchot's to open spaces that is so surprising in his work, and so disturbing, which is why before writing further of Blanchot it may be advisable to say something of reading him. I began my own reading of Blanchot under the influence of others (chiefly Bataille and

Foucault) with the collections of literary essays, eventually making my way to one of his “fragmentary” (or, more properly, unclassifiable) works, *The Step Not Beyond*.³ In this text passages ranging in length from sentence fragments to a few pages are set apart from one another, each given space to resonate, each opening up space around itself. This formula is followed as well in *The Writing of the Disaster* and *The Infinite Conversation*, and it is on this trio that I shall focus here. The thought to which these texts expose us is as unfamiliar as Blanchot says, in the second sentence of *The Step Not Beyond*, death is—the sentence reads in English, “To death we are not accustomed.”⁴ And I found, after reading that sentence, that I had to put the book down for several hours, simply to make room for what was indeed unaccustomed thought.

More exactly, Blanchot opens spaces in language, in reading, and in thinking that are terrifying for being at once of the nature of things we should have known, or are sure that we once knew, and utterly unfamiliar. These are the spaces that were always just outside what we know, spaces before which we find ourselves utterly insecure. And because it is where we are most insecure and the matters before us are most unfamiliar that thinking is at its most exciting, I have decided, whether perversely or just foolishly, to try to explore, just a little bit, those very spaces, those openings in the intertwining of language and time. In the space of the unfamiliar and already known, we find the memory of a shattered present, an immemorial silence. I have tried to write here of what was and is every time again so astonishing to read: of silence and its remarkable temporality.

One senses in Blanchot a longing for silence (“Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it.”⁵) which cannot be kept and will not allow itself to be said, which eludes us and yet places on us the demands of language itself. It is silence that gives to Blanchot’s work its paradoxical rigor, a silence that is at once the space into which he writes (that which calls for his writing; that which calls to his thinking) and that which he cannot preserve in his writing. Cannot, because silence, as he tells us, cannot be kept; because writing shares with speaking the attribute of breaking the very silence that calls to it. Silence calls to language, and to keep silent would no more preserve silence than would speaking or writing of it. The call of silence reverberates, in a muffled way, within language itself.⁶

One ground of the unkeepability of silence is in fact its curious relation to the temporal. In Blanchot’s work the slipping and shifting of time will link silence to both madness and death, to time gone mad in the thought of eternal recurrence and to time gone missing in an unthinkable absence. I would suggest, too, that we find here the slightest edge of joy: “Perhaps,” as Blanchot suggests, “we know the disaster by other, perhaps joyful names. . . .”⁷

Yet this madness is disaster still. Silence in Blanchot is a gentle violence, a quiet devastation. It works its violence by fragmentation, a fragmentation not only of language but also of time, caught up for us in language—not only in its tenses, but in the passage of our speaking and writing and reading, in the effort to gather up meaning across the passage of a sentence, in our wait for the time at the end of the sentence in which we shall expect to remember its meaning. The fear which silence evokes, the ancient fear, is the fear of time and the absence of time, time which is never more than the coming of an absence, time which is not gathered into memory but fragmented in the return. But this silence, this absence, is also an opening. The infinite spaces which terrify are still the joyous openings which invite.

We can see in Blanchot's use of silence a temporality of past, present, and future. In his thought, under the Nietzschean influence, silence is implicated in the eternal recurrence. I have found that it is easiest to speak of silence first in its future aspect, as the call; then in its present aspect, as that which empties presence; then in its past aspect, as that which we find ourselves unable to remember or forget—from which we shall see that it has returned, before and after, already. Or, more precisely, we find that the temporality of silence is that of forgetting and returning, a temporal evocation of absence within every mode of time.

the opening onto the future:
silence as invitation and waiting

You were my death:
you I could hold
when all fell away from me.
—Paul Celan

At one level anticipatory or future-oriented silence is fairly straightforward, though it opens immediately onto complexity. Silence makes conversation possible. Simply, there must be silence to call forth speaking, or even writing. Silence is in this sense an invitation into a future, a space that draws us forth. Often we fail to find or make such silence: we speak over and across one another, interrupt, drown out, ignore one another. But aside from the fact that few of us consider such discursive situations ideal, we realize that such speaking-over fails to be a response; it is ir-responsible; it is, we might even say, uncalled-for. To speak over, to write without regard for the space into

which one writes, to think while keeping one's mind closed to the outside, is to evade the infinite conversation invited by the pause, the opening, the silence that waits before us. It is to speak as if one owned language, rather than being dispossessed by it, by its refusal of any possession.⁸

Simply, ideally, we are called by such silence, which is neither awkward nor angry. The easy, gracious silence is what Blanchot calls "the legitimate pause, the one permitting the give and take of conversation, the benevolent, intelligent pause" or "that beautifully poised waiting with which two interlocutors, from one shore to another, measure their right to communicate."⁹ Such silence draws forth response; it is conversational. In fact, we begin to speak only by anticipating this silence—we speak, that is, toward the possibility of response. "Every beginning speech begins by responding; a response to what is not yet heard, an attentive response in which impatient waiting for the unknown and the desiring hope for presence are affirmed."¹⁰ We speak, then, not only in order to be heard but to open up the space in which we might hear something new. From outside ourselves, new words enter and open new questions in turn.

Neither the wait nor the pause, though, is ever simple or wholly legitimate. In speaking toward the possibility of response, even in writing to be read, we await an interruption or disruption. More precisely, we open a space of interrogation. All speech is questioning in its anticipation of response; every response is another question. The conversation is infinite; there is always another opening. "As soon as there is a question, there is no reply that could exhaust that question,"¹¹ Blanchot writes, a sentiment that Jabès (whose work Blanchot admires) will extend to the infinite question that humanity, for him, poses to God. And interrogation is the mode of speech proper not only to the future which we await but to that which we try, in awaiting, to avoid; or that for which we await an end, thinking that then it can never come again: that is, to madness.¹² "Strictly," Blanchot writes of madness, "we maintain this word in the interrogative position: Hölderlin was mad, but was he?" and then: "Madness would thus be a word in perpetual incongruance with itself and interrogative throughout, such that it would put into question its possibility and, through it, the possibility of language that would admit it, thus would put interrogation itself into question. . . ."¹³

Silence is as proper to madness, which interrogates language, for Blanchot as for Foucault, who saw in madness the silence imposed by the discourse of rationality.¹⁴ Blanchot writes, ". . . what is being constituted in silence—in the seclusion of the Great Confinement, and through a movement that answers to the banishment pronounced by Descartes—is the very world of Unreason," inclusive not only of madness but as well of "sexual prohibitions,

religious interdicts, and all the excesses of thought and heart."¹⁵ The pause constituted by silence is a break, and in it language is indeed broken; in the silence of madness it is cut open, put into question: "madness reveals a staggering depth, a subterranean violence, a knowledge that is boundless, devastating, and secret."¹⁶

Blanchot himself distinguishes this devastation that drives language mad from the more gentle conversational pause, although we know that gentleness will open onto the extreme. "I will say rather: nothing extreme except through gentleness,"¹⁷ he writes, reminding us of the impossible quiet passivity of the wait which, as we shall see, interrogates speaking. Even this gentle responsivity participates in madness. "We have," he tells us, "two important distinctions . . . the pause that permits exchange, the wait that measures infinite distance. But in waiting it is not simply the delicate rupture preparing the poetic act that declares itself, but also, and at the same time, other forms of arrest that are very profound, very perverse, more and more perverse, and always such that if one distinguishes them, the distinction does not avert but rather postulates ambiguity."¹⁸ In gentleness we find one of the central ambiguities of silence; this gentleness (this passive wait before the future) is itself an extreme, a devastation or disaster murmuring to us of the inherent violence of the most quiet, which is silence, and the most passive, which is waiting.¹⁹

What is it we await? What throws all of our meaning into question, interrogates us endlessly, draws us to an impossibility? In the context of infinite interrogation, this question is itself illegitimate. What is it we await, which cannot arrive, at which we cannot arrive even at the end of our waiting?²⁰ A simple answer is a lie which still comes close to a truth: in the future, throwing everything into question; in silence, working within language, is death. "Death, this badly unified word, interrogation always displaced."²¹ Death, like madness, can be posed only in the interrogative.

The answer claiming that what we await is death is a lie because it names, with the definition and identifiability that naming implies, as if we had answered the question. Death is not what we await, any more than madness is the question we ask. Yet it is linked to a pure waiting as madness is linked to pure interrogation. "Death' is not capable of putting an end to waiting,"²² Blanchot says; the wait is infinite, the awaited the impossible. We wait and we invite; we play our sense of the future between action and passivity. We invite a doubly impossible silence: the infinite awaiting, always an opening and invitation, the call which reverberates in language without language being able to speak it; and the unawaitable, the impossible necessity of death,²³ the silent violence of destruction, the madness at the heart of meaning.

Every invitation, that is, is at once creative and destructive: “Enter into the destructive element,’ we do not write a word that does not contain this invitation and sometimes, another that is superfluous: let you destroy yourself.”²⁴ The destructive invitation (the silent opening allied with madness and death) is forgetfulness: “To speak is to lose rather than to retain; to entrust to forgetfulness rather than to memory. . . .”²⁵

Against the forgetfulness of speaking, we think, we have writing. But here, too, we are invited to silence, not just by mad writing (such as Hölderlin’s, which, as we shall see in chapter three, warns us of our own inability to speak what is most profound) but by all writing, as the invitation to destruction. (This issue will recur in the discussion of Bataille’s work as well.) Death and forgetting are entangled in writing as in speaking, though the relation is no longer so natural: “. . . writing is always second in the sense that, even if nothing precedes it, it does not pose as first, instead ruining all primacy through an indefinite reference that leaves no place even for the void. Such is, then, barely indicated, the dispersed violence of writing, a violence by which speech is always already set apart, effaced in advance and no longer restored, violence, it is true, that is not natural and that also prevents us, dying, from dying a natural death.”²⁶ Writing is violence enacted on language. To write is already to open, to cut apart language for the spaces of silence: “. . . there is no silence if not written: broken reserve, a deep cut in the possibility of any cut at all.”²⁷ “The game of common etymology makes of writing a cutting movement, a tear, a crisis . . . the proper tool for writing was also proper to incising: the stylet . . . this incisive reminder still invokes a cutting operation, if not a butchery: a kind of violence. . . .”²⁸ In writing we find dying, the impossibility of death, as the infinite wait for that which will put no end to waiting; in speaking we find madness in an endless interrogation. Yet writing also enters into the interrogation of the infinite conversation as it directs itself toward the reader; speaking, naturally (too naturally, Blanchot says) evokes death in the silence of the voice.

Silence is waiting in language. It waits for and as the answer to an impossible question, as time gone missing and mad; yet it remains itself an interval of interrogation, awaiting what will come from outside. It opens in language the spaces in which we will forget, a forgetfulness we anticipate with hope (that we can forget madness and render it truly impossible; that we will receive to our question an answer at last) and with fear (that we shall forget meaning, and madness will fill its space; that death awaits as the final lack of an answer).

And so we are invited to the destruction of meaning. We are invited, at the beginning of speaking, to forget: “to speak is to draw from the depths of

speech an inexhaustible forgetfulness.”²⁹ We wait, “waiting for nothing,” only, always again, “opening the interval of another waiting.”³⁰ “To death we are not accustomed,” nor can we become so. But our desire here is not simply to retreat: “the preoccupation with dying, throughout Blanchot’s work, is less in the service of negativity or nihilism than of radical passion, irreducible extremity, and boundless affirmation.”³¹ Here the passivity of the wait is affirmed as surely and as paradoxically as the ineluctable and infinite return is for Nietzsche.

Silence, then, is a mode of waiting, of hope and fear, the opening of the future which may be the madness of the return and the unthinkable of death. In opening language to the not-yet of the future, silence must also alter the relation of language and thought to presence, with which it is in constant battle.³² And so we slide, already through the detour of forgetting, to another temporality in our search for a present reality.

present language: silence as disruption and secret

If, from the start, a mind regarded the boundary between reason and unreason . . . as a flagrant error, it would consent to reason only if it could also reserve for itself the use of unreason.

—Pierre Klossowski

Present in language, we say, or more precisely that which language presents, is meaning. Silence, too, is present, or not-present, concealed and revealed, lacking a name. Which is to say that silence is the absence of and in language, the break in meaning. As absence, too, silence is linked to madness: “That madness is present in every language is not enough to establish that it is not omitted in them.”³³ Absent from every language is what would turn madness to reason.³⁴ Silence is antithetical to the presence of meaning, but never purely so, because meaning is still in need of silence: “A word that is almost deprived of meaning is noisy. Meaning is limited silence (language is relatively silent, depending on the degree to which it contains the element into which it departs, the already departed, the absent meaning, which verges upon the a-semantic).”³⁵ Pure noise means nothing.

Both speaking and writing, as we have already begun to see in the effort to understand waiting within them, lose presence. Speech, awaiting the silence that is its future yet interrogates it throughout, slides immediately into the past: “. . . speech is perishable. Scarcely said, it is effaced, lost without

recourse. It forgets itself."³⁶ Writing, directed in hope to a future reader, can never be read (properly speaking) by its writer, and loses its hope of a future even as it fails to preserve a past, once more without presence, or in "obscure combat" with presence: "It is . . . in struggling for presence (in accepting to make itself naively the memorial of something that presents itself in it) that language treacherously destroys it. This happens by way of writing."³⁷

It is Blanchot's work, the work of his unworking,³⁸ to foreground the silent presence of absence. What he would speak, and write, what he would think and say and present to us, is always a secret, necessarily so, a secret which cannot be kept, just as we cannot keep silence. Michael Newman remarks, "The secret can neither be told nor not told, and this is the paradox of testimony: as Blanchot writes. . . , '*The secret alluded to is that there is none, except for those who refuse to tell.—But it is unutterable inasmuch as narrated, proffered.*' The very telling, in other words, obscures what is to be told."³⁹ One cannot, could not even if one could write as gracefully as Blanchot, tell and keep the secret. And yet the secret, that which is absent or unspeakable at the heart of meaning, reverberates throughout the work. Writing is not an act of presenting but a call, an invitation to share the secret which cannot be shared. It calls to the absence of meaning: "May what is written resound in the stillness, making silence resound at length, before returning to the motionless peace where the enigma still wakes."⁴⁰

With this, absence takes on a familiar resonance. The secret we cannot share (the meaning that hollows out the center of every meaning, the madness at the heart of reason) is shared by all, is death: "It is the dying which, though unsharable, I have in common with all."⁴¹ With Freud, Blanchot links death to silence as the inability to present meaning: "If it is true that for a certain Freud, 'our unconscious cannot conceive of our own mortality' (is unable to represent mortality to itself), then it would seem to follow that dying is unrepresentable, not only because it has no present, but also because it has no place, not even in time, the temporality of time."⁴² For Freud, too, the violence of the death drive is silent; the destructive force is manifest—visible or audible—only when it is intermingled with the forces favoring life. And for Freud, too, the experience which breaks through experience, which so exceeds the possibility of experience as to enter straightaway into the atemporality of the unconscious, will call to us through and without language, in which it has, nonetheless, no place.

The call, once more, is to entry into destruction. Death, as the drive to destroy, is violence, and it calls silently from within language. "Violence is at work in language and, more decidedly, in the speech of writing, in as much as language conceals itself from work: this action of concealing itself again

belongs to violence."⁴³ To make secret and to reveal belong alike to the violence of destruction. From Freud to Bataille to Deleuze to Blanchot we are reminded of something astonishing: violence is silent.⁴⁴ And silence, in all of its gentleness, is violent still.

Because violence is silent, because death is a shared and yet unspeakable secret, we know that we lie in naming it. We try to name it, to not-keep its secret, in order to lose it or rid ourselves of it; we try to forget it. ". . . we have lost death," Blanchot says. ". . . We name it, but in order to master it through a name and, through this name, finally rid ourselves of it."⁴⁵ But we cannot forget it. First, death itself forgets us; it is the arrival of our absence. Second, we have never known it; it was never there for us to forget, any more than it ever came at the end of our awaiting. We have never known what it was; it warns us of the impossibility of knowing. Finally, like madness, it keeps its own secret within the language that tries to name it.

We are faced with what we cannot face and cannot even present to ourselves, the muffled reverberations of madness and death within language, in silence. We must ask, too, what it is that renders the present impossible, keeps it from being a present now, even if it waits. The return, we might say, a return which is no comfort. Schopenhauer saw the eternal return as the *guarantor* of presence.⁴⁶ But for Blanchot, the return is a reminder of what we have always already forgotten, of the impossible un-knowledge that comes to us only by way of forgetting. "We must pass by way of this knowledge and forget it."⁴⁷ We must forget that we have passed already. "Know only," we are instructed, knowing that we cannot know, "—injunction that does not present itself—that the law of the return, counting for all of the past and all of the future, will never allow you, except through a misunderstanding, to leave yourself a place in a possible present, nor to let any presence come as far as you."⁴⁸ Further, we are warned, "The Eternal Return of the Same: the having been, repetition of a will take place as having been, does not signal any presence, even that of old. The Eternal Return would say this, it would say that in what has been, no present is retained, except in this speaking of it, if it were spoken."⁴⁹ And in this speaking, too, it is exactly the present which eludes us.

And so silence opens onto the future as the invitation to language, but also to (self-) destruction, to knowing the secret that cannot be known. It opens within the present to tell us—that is, to keep secret from us, though it can neither tell nor keep the secret—of the absence that opens up within the very meaning language endeavors to present. It tells us that it is death we await, though this name, "death," lies by naming. It tells us that madness is at the heart of all our meanings, though we lie by pretending to be able to say

without question “madness.” But where, if it is never present, do we find meaning, the meaning for which we wait? What limits the silence, if not only noise? Only one answer remains: we seek meaning in memory; it is only when speaking has passed or writing has been read that, we think, we know what we have waited to know: what it means. (As we shall later, somewhat surprisingly, see, this connection of meaning to memory-in-silence may be found in the reflections of Augustine as well.)

past silence: memory is the dispersal of fragmentation

Sentences will be confined to museums if the emptiness of writing persists.

—Georges Bataille

It seems that here, at least and at last, we might find some security: in that which we hold in memory. Memory, as Heidegger tells us, is the gathering of recollection,⁵⁰ where we might collect the bits of our knowledge and bring them back to coherence. But silence, once more, opens this secure space from within, fragments what memory has patiently collected, “linking us to a past without memory.”⁵¹ We feel that we shall come to meaning only in memory; “I do not know,” Blanchot writes, “but I have the feeling that I’m going to have known.”⁵² In this feeling, though, memory is already caught up into the expectation of the future and implicated in the impossible necessity of the return.

Again, this is no simple return which would allow us to remember because what happens now mirrors what happened once; rather, it is a decentered return which means that whatever happens we have always, already, forgotten.

[T]he infinite of the return . . . does not permit assigning to the figure a center, even less an infinity of centers, just as the infinite of the repetition cannot be totalized in order to produce the unity of a figure strictly delimited and whose construction would escape the law it figures forth. If the Eternal Return can affirm itself, it affirms neither the return as circle, nor the primacy of the One, nor the Whole, and not even by way of the necessity that through the Eternal Return ‘everything returns,’ . . . it is not the whole that returns, but rather: it returns, the return returns.⁵³

Such a return does not join our moments into a single smooth circle but breaks them irrevocably apart, in the space where silence fragments and disjoins endlessly our efforts at meaning. In this fragmentation we find no gathering again, but “forgetfulness, remembrance of the immemorial, without recollection.”⁵⁴

Silence calls us to an unknown, to the outside/within of language. Yet our sense of this unknown is not pure future—that which we *shall* find—nor is it presence, as if we could see it before us. Silence calls to memory, to our sense of having forgotten. It calls, more precisely, to what we could never remember, never re-collect, because it began without origin, in fragmentation, as the very site of disruption. (This nonorigin, this break will recur in some form in the thought of everyone we read in this work.)

Forgetting, Blanchot says, (surprisingly at first) is thus older and deeper than memory. “Forgetting is the primordial divinity, the venerable ancestor and first presence of what, in a later generation, will give rise to Mnemosyne. . . . The essence of memory is therefore forgetting; the forgetfulness of which one must drink in order to die.”⁵⁵ This is not a secondary forgetting, failing what we once knew or even remembered;⁵⁶ it is a primordial forgetting of what we never knew, but always knew, somehow, that we would have known. All is past, all has already passed not into the safe recollection of memory but into the silence of pure loss—“*had he then forgotten it, the meeting always to come that had, however, always already taken place, in an eternal past, eternally without present?*”⁵⁷

Forgetting, already caught up in the return, can only come first because that which is to come has passed already. But it has passed away, as Blanchot argues writing does, without a trace, without leaving marks.⁵⁸ In silence we forget what we never remembered, what was always silent, just beyond our hearing. Forgetfulness partakes of the impossible passivity we have already seen in waiting: “. . . forgetting gets away. It escapes. This does not simply mean that through forgetting a certain possibility is taken from us and a certain impotence revealed, but rather that the possibility that is forgetting is a slipping outside of possibility.”⁵⁹

Memory is the gathering of recollection; forgetting is the silent dispersal of fragmentation.⁶⁰ What we forget; our “remembrance” of the immemorial, is that in which we have (impossibly) lost ourselves. “[I]mpossible loss,” as Blanchot remarks in writing of Bataille, “. . . does not allow the tensions which rip thought apart, and which the harshness of a restless language maintains, to congeal into a system.”⁶¹ We will try to speak of the impossible, or to silence it; we will try to speak it in order to silence it. But silence will break forth impossibly from the places in which we try to keep

it, returning to the outside we have forgotten. “Still, nothing is said,” as we are warned, “if we do not force ourselves to think . . . the invisible rupture of prohibition, the transgression to which we feel we are accessories, because it is also our own strangeness.”⁶²

What we must force ourselves to think—the silence without which nothing is said—is our own transgression, the breaking of our own limits. We are, in this silent space, this space without origin into which we come only by returning, returning to the forgotten. This inexplicable-seeming movement, return by forgetting, will recur in a number of the readings that follow, building new senses in each elaboration. “[F]ragmentation is bound up with the revelation of the Eternal Return. The eternal return says time as an eternal repetition, and fragmentary speech repeats this repetition by stripping it of any eternity.”⁶³ Eternity as the standing now would be an infinite presence; speech fragmented by silence bespeaks an infinite absence. We must return to the immemorial.

immemorial silence: thought from the outside

We are standing on the edge of an abyss that had long been invisible: the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject.

—Michel Foucault

Primordial forgetting, which is also the forgetting without origin, implies the immemorial: it forgets what we did not originally remember. The immemorial implies the inexperiencable: we cannot remember what we could never know. Time is caught again in a return that makes it both necessary and meaningless. We cannot remember that which has never entered the possibility of memory. It is the moment of such impossibility, intensity, or intolerance—of pain or joy or both at once—the never-present instant of mortal intensity at the quick of life, which refuses the possibility of memory by refusing presence: “The quick of life would be the burn of a wound—a hurt so lively, a flame so avid that it is not content to live and be present, but consumes all that is present till presence is precisely what is exempt from the present. The quick of life is the exemplarity . . . of un-presence . . . absence in its vivacity always coming back without ever coming.”⁶⁴

Such moments are without original, because (as the reading of Bataille will make more apparent) *we* were never there: “There is no origin, if origin

presupposes an original presence. Always past, long since past already, something that has passed without being present—such is the immemorial which gives us forgetfulness saying: every beginning is a beginning over.”⁶⁵ It is only in having-forgotten these unrepresented moments that we come to them; we come to them always as to something we have forgotten.

This is so first via Blanchot’s embrace of the idea of eternal recurrence. On his reading, as on Klossowski’s, return demands that I forget. But we also come to the already forgotten. As I shall argue in more detail in the next chapter, moments of the greatest intensity may never make it to consciously accessible memory. And that which we have primordially forgotten is, once more, death: “Through the movement that steals away (forgetting), we allow ourselves to turn toward what escapes (death), as though the only authentic approach to this inauthentic event belonged to forgetting. Forgetting, death: the unconditional detour.”⁶⁶ We cannot move through time without detour, even towards death. But, if we can succeed in the passivity which can be no success of ours, we are able to forget, to open to the outside beyond experience. If we are able to allow it, we can read Blanchot, and have the feeling, at the limit of madness, that we are going to have known silence. “It is . . . in the space established between madness and unreason . . . that we have to ask ourselves if it is true that literature and art might be able to entertain these limit-experiences and thus, beyond culture, pave the way for a relation with what culture rejects: a speech of borders, the outside of writing.”⁶⁷

Between the madness of the return (by way of the unconditional detour outside of time) and the unreasoning absence of meaning, we come back—yet we come for the first time—to those spaces from which we were always absent, in which we had always lost ourselves. Back to the outside, which we have forgotten. “To remember forgetfully: again, the outside.”⁶⁸ Back to death and to madness—and to joy beyond ourselves. Back to the spaces in which the languages by which we constitute ourselves, our self-inscriptions and our voices, fall, always have fallen, silent.

Silent and yet wanting, though lacking nothing. This is the joy of desire. For there is desire in forgetfulness, as much as fear; there is desire for fear, even, for life at its most intense and for the mortal excesses of madness; “desire for that which provokes the fear that nothing provokes.”⁶⁹ It is the desire belonging to the outside, “the thought that thinks more than it thinks.”⁷⁰ Such a desire, we are told, “desires what the one who desires has no need of, what is not lacking and what the one who desires has no desire to attain, it being the very desire for what must remain inaccessible and foreign. . . .”⁷¹ Only in forgetting do we open space for such desire, a “mute and closed space where desire endlessly wanders.”⁷² This is a desire to exceed our

own limits, a desire that will take us beyond ourselves, such that the desire and its fulfillment, which in the end we shall be unable to distinguish from one another, are beyond our ability to say them. Indeed, we cannot know these joys which take us beyond the limits of knowing. This is, as Blanchot writes of Bataille's affirmation of the inexperiencable limit-experience, "an affirmation of which man has no memory . . . a measure of extreme pain and extreme joy."⁷³

The extreme, the limit, the outside: this is the silent space which calls to us, draws us back before ourselves, in a repetition which the Deleuzian reading of Freud would tie in turn to the drive for death,⁷⁴ to a space that can only be one to which we return, never for the first time. It is to this return that silence, murmuring incessantly beneath Blanchot's words, calls us.

Here the return pulls me back to those astonishing and terrifying opening lines of *The Step Not Beyond*. We have already read the second line, "To death we are not accustomed." The first is an invitation. *Let us enter into this relation*,⁷⁵ Blanchot invites; the secret is shared among us; let us enter into what relates us, reverberates across us, and yet marks (with the mark that writing never leaves) the infinite distances between us. The mortal distances: To death we are not accustomed. A fragment set next to our relation and yet broken apart from it; a fragment that relates and fragments us, measures between us the infinite distance that constitutes our relation. We will have known, surely, but we shall not remember.

This is what the thought of the eternal return tells us: it is not our presence, but our passing, which is guaranteed. It is mortality which reverberates within this mad thought; it is at mortal intensity that Blanchot writes, "In the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry."⁷⁶ Death whispers silently, madly, in the voice of no one (the murmur of the neuter, the impersonal) throughout Blanchot's texts, as the return unworks his remarkably meticulous (his beautifully worked-out) writings. But mortality, loss of self, is not only the ancient fear; it is the within-outside, which is at the same time the space into which we leave ourselves at the height of joy: extreme joy, extreme pain. To destroy oneself, to accept the invitation into the destructive element, is not an act of hatred. We do not hate where we forget: "*Lethe* is also the companion of Eros, the awakening proper to sleep, the distance from which one cannot take one's distance since it comes in all that moves away. . . ."⁷⁷ This seductive distancing is an infinite demand: ". . . as though impossibility, that by which we are no longer able to be able, were waiting for us behind all that we live, think, and say—if only we have been once at the end of this waiting, without ever falling short of what this surplus or addition, this surplus of emptiness, of 'negativity,' demanded of us

and that is in us the infinite heart of the passion of thought.”⁷⁸ From this sense, which evolves in Blanchot’s understanding of Bataille (for whom the return is caught up in the impossible nonknowledge of communication, which opens us to one another without making any union possible), we can turn to one of Bataille’s own thoughts (with which I return to the thought that first brought me to Blanchot): “What is strangest is that nonknowledge should have the ability to sanction. As if, from the outside, it had been said to us: ‘Here you are at last.’”⁷⁹

Here we are, at last. Let us enter into this relation.