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## RUMORS OF THE OUTSIDE

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Un regard est très différent de ce que l'on croit, il n'a ni lumière ni expression ni force ni mouvement, il est *silencieux*, mais, du sein de l'étrangeté, son silence traverse les mondes, et celui qui *l'entend* devient autre.

*Blanchot, L'Arrêt de mort*<sup>1</sup>

**L**anguage that is written and read is necessarily also always in some sense heard.

I begin with this problematic statement in order to follow it, if at times obliquely, into the strange logic of Blanchot's texts, insofar as these texts place us within an unsettling relationship between language, image, and sound. The wager of this statement is to posit that reading is a kind of listening, as is writing, though with one crucial difference: the reader's listening is mediated by a very specific and concretely embodied medium, a book (or text on a visible surface), whereas a writer's listening is less singularly and concretely localizable. Both of these converge, however, in a phantom-like source of language that must exist, that must already sound, before anything in particular can be written down – a pre-inscribed sonorous material that necessarily precedes and structures any given act of inscription. In Blanchot, this sonorous material receives various names, though he most often refers to it as a *murmur*, also at times as *rumor*. These and other figures of language's generalized sounding will be in question here, especially insofar as Blanchot evokes them as something like the pre-existing ground against which literature comes into its own peculiar (written) speech. This problem thus immediately opens onto another: what is specific to literary speech? How does the latter delineate itself against speech at large, in order

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## RUMORS OF THE OUTSIDE

### *blanchot's murmurs and the indistinction of literature*

to “be literature”? If a writer must begin by hearing, somehow, a language that precedes, from somewhere, the writing that is to be done now, what if anything marks the passage or transition from one to another, from the murmur to writing? For Blanchot this passage is above all a question of *silence*, an imposition of silence, as he often puts it. But as we read Blanchot with this problem in mind, this silence becomes as thin as the distinction it is meant to secure.

My objective here is not to directly illuminate this passage but to try to hear something from out of it, by way of Blanchot, and in the direction of a more and more impossible form of speech called literary writing. Despite himself,

and in a rigorous but vexed attempt to delineate such writing within a cultural moment given over to its dispersal in technicity, reproduction, circulation, and exchange, Blanchot tells us something irrevocable about the never-ending end of this by now highly tenuous category. Literature, for Blanchot, is not simply finished (though he wrote of it less and less, or did so more and more along its margins, as his later trajectory unfolded); but its endless agony takes a specific form, a spectral murmur deeply confounded with the undifferentiated rumor of a generalized public speech, both heard and unheard – an inside rendered outside and vice versa. Put crudely, the speech that precedes speech, or perhaps language sounding “internally,” is not literature (Beckett: “When one really listens to oneself, it is not literature that one hears”<sup>2</sup>), and yet literary writing still insists and calls on a source of language that must be “heard” and heard “there” where one is. In essays from the 1950s and early 1960s, Blanchot meditates on a non-differentiation of speech – in its sources and means of transmission – that threatens to efface the distinction required by the literary as such, and he does this in the name of what is “to come,” and in an effort to grapple with contemporary conditions of mass society and technical media that intensify the problem. In what follows I will show that he presses this anxiety into its properly radical element, where the sounding of language not only loses the marks of a legitimizing source in a privileged subject, and of a category of cultural production, but also comes to be threatened by a radical *indistinction*, one that resounds with the ambiguity of its own “essence” as understood by Blanchot.<sup>3</sup> Can a literature that strives toward the neutral and empty speech of no one fail to be stricken with the *literal* effacement which is its own most intimate condition? Can literary speech sound with the rumors of the radio (a technology that Blanchot mentions several times)? Unlike Heidegger (as we will see), Blanchot is usually quite careful not to disparage the everyday or its suffusion with technical media; on the contrary, he shows that *their* murmur converges with that of literature, not

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fortuitously but out of a necessity that he understands as both historical and formal. But what does this convergence mean for a writer sent wandering in the immensity of this massively expanding field?<sup>4</sup>

The present essay thus approaches sound in Blanchot less as a thematic element than as a set of structural features attached to the invariable medium of his work, namely language, insofar as, in being written, it plays through the phenomena of a sounding speech and an impossible silence. Blanchot figures and complicates this play in numerous ways – first by displacing it into vision and image, and then, by way of the image, into a generalized call transmitted no less in the banality of public speech than in the literary voice that would somehow emerge from it.

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The purpose of the epigraph above is to indicate from the outset this displacement from image to sound, or to a silence that strangely sounds. In this sentence, silence is something attributed to a gaze, a look, it is what makes of a look the site of something both ungraspable and ineluctable, but it is thereby also, oddly, something to be *heard*: he who hears the silence of a gaze becomes other. Through silence, the gaze – the look, in every sense – makes itself heard and transforms the one who hears. This quotation comes from the “scene,” impossible to see as such, in *L’Arrêt de mort/Death Sentence* when in a dark room the narrator encounters N. – the spectral Nathalie, reborn from who knows what former life-death – and is drawn by her absent and compelling look, “cette flamme morte et vide de ses yeux”/“that dead and empty flame of her eyes,” into a depth of darkness that places all things beside or behind themselves, separating them from themselves by turning them precisely into unplaceable images, objects of vision parallaxed into an unplottable distance. These objects include the narrator himself, who henceforth has no place – except the one that “she” (this *elle* that is both a woman and a “thought,” *une pensée*) imperiously indicates for him. Like “la loi” (the law) in *La Folie du jour/The*

*Madness of the Day* this phantom feminine figure is both an image and, eventually, the source of a call, but one that is also assimilated as “mine,” “united to me” and “in me” in the form of a voice. Blanchot uses these terms in the final long paragraph, writing of “l’appel de l’affirmation toute puissante qui est unie à moi”/“the call of the all powerful affirmation that is united with me,” and, in an inversion of the hierarchy of sovereign law and subject: “Il se peut encore qu’elle ait obéi à un commandement mystérieux, et qui était le mien, et qui est en moi la voix à jamais reconnaissant, voix jalouse elle aussi, d’un sentiment incapable de disparaître”/“it could be that she obeyed a mysterious commandment, which was also mine, and which in me is the ever grateful voice, it too an avid voice, of a feeling incapable of disappearing” (AM 126/DS 80). Having passed through an entire series of visual modulations and spectral apparitions, “she” is heeded in the end as a voice, instantiated as a call, emanating both from elsewhere and from “within” – but a call that scrambles the coordinates of space and calls every fixed place into question. For it calls to an elsewhere, across a border dividing the world from its other, and, in a way, dividing the visible from its audible silence in affirmation and “self”-imposed law. We are here in some proximity to the territory of the sublime, or at least to a late and evacuated form of it, in which the limit of the visible is rendered over to a lawlike voice vibrating in the tonal element of its peculiar *Stimmung*, a singularly unharmonious attunement or mood, that of an impossible, endless, deathly, and groundless (abyssal) transcendence. These terms (*Stimmung*, transcendence) evoke Heidegger, of course, to whom we will return. For the moment, I wish only to establish the knotty circuit in Blanchot’s writing which passes through the image, and in particular through the look, gaze or face, into a more sonorous and vocal experience of a hearing. As the epigraph above indicates, the face of this look resounds with a silence that, when heard, calls one into otherness – surely to be understood at some level as the otherness of writing, an act of futility that is also something of a

vocation, but one emptied of its destination (its *Bestimmung*, to use Kant’s term), and thus deprived, already, of its univocality.

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Blanchot’s gesture of foregrounding “the image” rather than sound, or even speech, is quite striking in the beginning pages of *L’Espace littéraire/The Space of Literature*, where the image is placed, along with the force of fascination that Blanchot attaches to it, at the very center of literary experience. This emphasis on the image has to do in part with the fact that Blanchot is responding critically to a “common analysis” of the image, or to a certain “version” of the imaginary, which gives it a secondary status in relation to the things that images would be images of – especially Sartre’s version, which remains, despite the latter’s emphasis on subjective forms of apprehension, at bottom organized by an oversimplifying realism.<sup>5</sup> That said, and whatever exactly the image may be for Blanchot, he quite earnestly gives it a highly significant, even quasi-transcendental function in the adventure of the writer: by way of the image, in its powerful fascinating draw, the writer’s world (or the exit and exile from world) becomes galvanized into language, which itself becomes an image – an image of itself *in general*. As Blanchot writes in a note at the end of “La Solitude essentielle”/“The Essential Solitude”:

Est-ce que ... dans la littérature, le langage ne serait pas, par rapport au langage courant, ce qu’est l’image par rapport à la chose? [...] est-ce que le langage lui-même ne devient pas, dans la littérature, tout entier image, non pas un langage qui contiendrait des images ou qui mettrait la réalité en figures, mais qui serait sa propre image, image de langage, – et non pas un langage imagé –, ou encore langage imaginaire, langage que personne ne parle, c’est-à-dire qui se parle à partir de sa propre absence, comme l’image apparaît sur l’absence de la chose, langage qui s’adresse aussi à l’ombre des événements, non à leur réalité, et par ce fait que les mots qui les expriment ne sont pas des signes, mais des images, images de mots et mots où les

choses se font images? (“La Solitude essentielle,” EL 31–32)

Would language, in literature, not be, in relation to common language, what the image is in relation to the thing? [...] Does language itself not become, in literature, entirely image, not a language that would contain images or that would put reality into figures, but [rather a language] that would be its own image, an image of language, – and not a language full of images –, or yet an imaginary language, a language that no one speaks, that is to say, that is spoken on the basis of its own absence, as the image appears against the absence of the thing, a language addressing itself to the shadow of events, not to their reality, and this because of the fact that the words that express them are not signs, but images, images of words and words in which things are made images? (SL 34)

Blanchot’s evocation of the “shadow of events” (in part an allusion to Levinas’s “reality and its shadow”) is a critical gesture in the effort to draw the world – and not only the fictional written world – into an ordinary condition of universalized unreality, by way of a language which itself becomes unreal, impersonal, spoken by no one, constituted by absence and groundlessness. This gesture is part of what Blanchot calls (more than once) a “radical reversal” (e.g., EL 37, 50/SL 38, 47, and elsewhere), whereby ontological priority is given to a term or moment previously considered secondary, inessential, or inauthentic, but also where this term or moment *maintains* its secondariness, inessentiality, and inauthenticity – whereby, in turn, it ruins the distinctions these notions are based on in the first place. That is its radicality. In that light, we can add that this gesture helps us to locate (*avant la lettre*) the deconstructive strategy in Blanchot, in a form of inversion that is not merely a turnabout that keeps a conceptual or experiential structure intact, but one that radically reconfigures it, in this case with respect to the relation between the world (the world of things, of objects, of utility and

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practical networks, of projects and work: the world determined by the labor of the negative) and literature, or “the poem” as Blanchot often says in *L’Espace littéraire*.

Indeed, in this case (which is not merely a case: in a sense, all of phenomenology is at stake in it), in reversing the relation of priority between images and things, and extending this reversal to language itself, Blanchot reconfigures the relation between language *as a whole* and something called “the world” which, as “seen” in this perspective, it no longer “comes after”; and in doing so he evokes an “image” that transforms all speech, including and especially literary speech in its silence and invisibility, *essentially* into a “shadow” of itself (as function and meaning) – and this shadow world gradually becomes the very domain of *being*, a word which itself, in Blanchot’s confrontational repetition of Heidegger’s terms, provides the tonic note of these first pages of *L’Espace littéraire*. But if “no one” speaks this language, this is also because *no one* really does *speak* it. The image of language as image – in which words threaten to turn their gaze on the one who looks/listens for them – implicitly contains the image of its sounding out.

By way of the image, then, we quickly approach another more sonorous set of tropes for language as radically ambiguous and ungrounded, a murmur unmoored from a singular source, a rumor of the outside, oscillating imperceptibly between the literary and the banal, in all its undifferentiated, ungraspable ceaselessness. If in literature (in writing) language is an image or shadow of itself – a generalized but “visible” derealization of speech, brought back to the neutrality of unproductive uselessness (*désœuvrement*) – it is necessarily also a *sonic image* – in which speech can only speak the shadows of words, can only sound echoes with no beginning, and through which it can be, even when it says “being,” only an inessential image of itself, but where the inessential has become a fundamental condition of all speech, even all appearance (phenomena) as such. In the total becoming-image of language, we approach the

space of this dangerous and engulfing region of sounding/silent speech.

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On the way to the indeterminate and porous border just evoked, and to the sonic landscape it opens, I would like to take a step back for a moment to refer to a trenchant gesture performed by Blanchot precisely along this border (sound/silence), many years later and in a very different context, not in his published work but in a letter. It is a fierce but polite gesture that defends the silence of literature against the encroachment of technical media and publicity, but that also reveals some fascinating complications that will be relevant to our questions regarding literature and the murmur of public speech. In 1986 (as the editors of the journal *Trafic* explain in a note), a young filmmaker wrote to Blanchot to ask for permission “to present in a non-commercial setting” a short film he had made based on a section of *L'Arrêt de mort*.<sup>6</sup> Blanchot refuses, first by invoking another refusal, and then by not exactly refusing. Here is the letter's first paragraph (I underscore one sentence with peculiar relevance to our concerns):

Cher Monsieur,

Lisant le récent livre de Deleuze sur Foucault, il m'a remis en mémoire un texte de jadis (qui se trouve sans doute dans *L'Entretien infini*), intitulé “Parler (écrire), ce n'est pas voir.” De là mon appréhension, lorsque je vois l'écrit passer au visible. *Même la lecture à voix haute m'est pénible*. A peine paru, ce texte qui a près de quarante ans, France Culture m'a demandé de le faire lire par un comédien. J'ai refusé, bien que la demande vint d'un ami.

Dear Sir,

Reading the recent book by Deleuze on Foucault, I was reminded of a text from long ago (which is no doubt found in *The Infinite Conversation*) entitled “Speaking (writing) Is Not Seeing.” Hence my apprehension whenever I see the written pass into the visible. *Even reading out loud is difficult for me to bear*. Hardly had it appeared – this text which is nearly forty years old – when

France Culture asked me to have it read by an actor. I refused, even though the request came from a friend. (My trans.)

I hasten to add that the radio, and France Culture in particular, will have its revenge soon enough (more on that in a moment). Blanchot goes on to explain, with a virtually audible sigh, how he has learned over the years that the author in fact has no rights over his texts, and he thus admonishes his addressee to act as though he, Blanchot, had been dead for a very long time. “Passez donc outre,” he concludes: Go ahead, do whatever you want, since (as one infers) the silence of a dead man can do nothing against the noise of the world and the voracious humming of the culture machines.<sup>7</sup>

This letter puts into play not only the ambiguous sound-and-silence of literary language but also the more determinate difference between textual silence and physically audible, technically produced image and sound. It also stages an intense anxiety (not to say impatience) on Blanchot's part with respect not only to the silence of his social withdrawal but also regarding what he no doubt perceived as the encroachments of publicity and technical media on the *literal* silence of the text. The threat of publicity and publicness is directly conjoined to that of technical reproduction and transmission, and thus to the material conditions defining the modern forms of public life as embodied in mass media. In this perspective, turning writing into visible, technically produced images only seems like so much noise, but then – and here is the astonishing and radical moment of this episode – so does *the mere sound of reading out loud*. What to make of this highly sensitive aversion to the sounding out and vocalizing of a written text? What could be so painful (*pénible*) in this passage from the written to the audible word, its sonic image – apparently even before its technical recording and/or transmission? In anticipation, we can say that it must have to do with the silence that, as Blanchot asserts repeatedly, the writer must impose on the generalized murmur of language; this silence is embodied as it were in the concrete density of a book, a

thing full of language but making no sounds (as Blanchot writes elsewhere: “le livre véritable est toujours un peu statue”/“the true book is always something of a statue” (LV 298/BC 220)). But does it not also imply a direct continuity between the sounding voice and the entire technical-mediatic apparatus against which Blanchot here raises a weary protest? If so, then this continuity is also the axis around which Blanchot’s discourse on silence finds itself continually turned toward (if not tuned into) a massive social and public domain of speech, and thus inhabited, already, by forms of technicity constitutive of writing itself. Are we glimpsing a reversal that Blanchot was not quite ready to radicalize? And yet the silence-in-speech that he evokes, insofar as it is already structured as a written voice, necessarily converges with the murmuring noise that would ruin it. Blanchot knows this, and by this point (in the 1980s) has already elaborated this knowledge at some length, as we will see. But it is less clear whether in doing so he has admitted all of its consequences, especially as these relate to the technicity of silence itself, and thus of the most intimate moment of literary specificity. For now we have a clearer sense of how silence – even the ambiguous and impure silence of an unvoiced book, even the unheard silence imposed on and by the writer – is impossible. How did Blanchot understand the necessity of this impossibility?

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As it happens, we can approach this question most directly by way of another excursion into the technical-cultural landscape that Blanchot attempted to distance from writing. I am referring to a recent radio program on France Culture titled, aptly enough, “Blanchot: l’impossible silence.”<sup>8</sup> It is here that the radio takes its inevitable revenge on Blanchot’s apparent recalcitrance. For alongside the justified suggestion that silence for Blanchot is impossible, this radio program also performs a perfectly mundane breach of silence, precisely the “reading out loud” that pained him so, and whose technological mediation and recording he refused, or tried to refuse. The now

post-mortem passage from writing to audible speech/reading is here played out with brio, when the radio host and her guest, Eric Hoppet, interrupt their conversation to listen to the recording of an actor reading a passage from *L’Espace littéraire*.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, and more importantly, this passage – from a subsection of “La Solitude essentielle” titled “L’Interminable, l’incessant” – remarkably condenses many of the terms and figures in question here, particularly the language images of sound, the necessity and impossibility of silence, and a pre-existing murmur that would be the ground and site of their interplay. I give the passage in full as it was read on the radio – not in order to restore a textual silence to it (I would prefer to present the recording out loud right here ...) – but rather to test it, more slowly, for the peculiar placement of its borders and distinctions. It should be stressed beforehand that this passage, in describing the relation between the “giant murmur” and literary language properly speaking, is meant in part to describe an incomplete or compromised relation to this dangerous, depersonalizing experience. This is evident in the language of mastery, virility and power to which it has recourse, ordinarily so foreign to Blanchot. In effect, he is introducing the central motifs of the entire book by dramatizing the extreme difficulty of fully accepting the “invitation” that calls one into literary space, the protective measures that have been used to resist it, and the reluctance with which a writer may “hold back” – no doubt inevitably – from a more complete absorption, a more radical loss of self. Remarkably, Blanchot proffers this passage in a first-person voice, creating a sense of directness which is in fact quite *rusée*:

Écrire, c’est se faire l’écho de ce qui ne peut cesser de parler, – et, à cause de cela, pour en devenir l’écho, je dois d’une certaine manière lui imposer silence. J’apporte à cette parole incessante la décision, l’autorité de mon silence propre. Je rends *sensible*, par ma médiation silencieuse, l’affirmation interrompue, le murmure géant sur lequel le langage en s’ouvrant devient image, devient imaginaire, profondeur parlante, indistincte

plénitude qui est vide. Ce silence a sa source dans l'effacement auquel celui qui écrit est invité. Ou bien, il est la ressource de sa maîtrise, ce droit d'intervenir que garde la main qui n'écrit pas, la part de lui-même qui peut toujours dire non et, quand il faut, en appelle au temps, restaure l'avenir.

Lorsque, dans une œuvre, nous en admirons le ton, sensibles au ton comme à ce qu'elle a de plus authentique, que désignons-nous par-là? Non pas le style, ni l'intérêt et la qualité du langage, mais précisément ce silence, cette force virile par laquelle celui qui écrit, s'étant privé de soi, ayant renoncé à soi, a dans cet effacement maintenu cependant l'autorité d'un pouvoir, la décision de se taire, pour qu'en ce silence prenne forme, cohérence et entente ce qui parle sans commencement ni fin.

Le ton n'est pas la voix de l'écrivain, mais l'intimité du silence qu'il impose à la parole, ce qui fait que ce silence est encore le *sien*, ce qui reste de lui-même dans la discrétion qui le met à l'écart. Le ton fait les grands écrivains, mais peut-être l'œuvre ne se soucie-t-elle pas de ce qui les fait grands.

Dans l'effacement auquel il est invité, le "grand écrivain" se retient encore: ce qui parle n'est plus lui-même mais n'est pas le pur glissement de la parole de personne. Du "Je" effacé, il garde l'affirmation autoritaire, quoique silencieuse. Du temps actif, de l'instant, il garde le tranchant, la rapidité violente. Ainsi se préserve-t-il à l'intérieur de l'œuvre, se contient-il où il n'y a plus de retenue. (EL 21–22; Blanchot's emphasis)

To write is to make oneself the echo of that which cannot cease speaking, – and, because of this, in order to become its echo, I must in a certain way impose silence on it. I bring to this incessant speech the decision, the authority of my own silence. I make *sensible*, through my silent mediation, the uninterrupted affirmation, the giant murmur onto which language opens and thereby becomes image, becomes imaginary, a depth that speaks, an indistinct plenitude that is empty. This silence has its source in the effacement to which the one who writes is invited. Or else it is the resource of his mastery, this right to intervene that is retained by the hand that does not write, the part/share of himself that can always

say no, and, when necessary, makes an appeal to time, restores the future.

When we admire the tone of a work, when we are sensitive to this tone as to what is most authentic in it, what are we pointing to in this way? Not the style, nor the interest and the quality of the language, but precisely this silence, this virile strength by which the one who writes, being deprived of himself, having renounced himself [his self], has in this effacement nonetheless maintained the authority of a power, the decision to be silent, so that in this silence that which speaks without beginning or end may take on form and coherence, may be heard/understood [*entente*].

Tone is not the writer's voice, but the intimacy of the silence that he imposes on speech. Which means that this silence is still *his* silence, what remains of himself in the discretion that sets him aside. Tone is what makes great writers, but perhaps the work is not concerned with what makes them great.

In the effacement to which he is invited, the "great writer" still holds himself back: what speaks is not long himself but it is not the pure slipping past of the speech of no one.

From the "I" that has been effaced, he holds onto its authoritarian and yet silent affirmation. From active time, from the instant, he holds onto its decisiveness, its violent rapidity. Thus he preserves himself within the interior of the work, he contains himself [in a space] where there is no longer any holding back. (SL 27; Blanchot's emphasis)

This passage is traversed by the types of sonic images through which Blanchot attempts to figure the strange travail of literary space – beginning with the "giant murmur" itself, the initial image-ground of language, its immense and mumbling shadow world (its underworldly hell...). It is in relation to this dangerous murmur that the writer must work, and unwork, as one who hears and undergoes, but also makes heard, in a more distinct form, the indistinct murmur. This making heard requires a margin of silence that introduces an interruption into "the incessant, the uninterrupted," as Blanchot often says, a break that also turns



this silencing/sounding into a play of rhythm and repetition, into an “echo.” Silence, here and elsewhere in Blanchot, is something like the thin frame that separates the murmur from itself, but that in doing so transforms it into a work, allows for its passage toward the daylight of legibility (of the book, as a thing of culture), and into an “entente,” a hearing, or perhaps *audibility*, that renders it over to *sense*, thus also to “the future,” and to a public. Before arriving there, however, the writer is “invited” – called from who knows where – toward a more and more radical self-effacement. Blanchot says, a bit oddly, that the silence imposed on the murmur, by which it is interrupted and given form, has its “source” in this effacement. Effacement can be this source because it is in part the silencing of a self, but it is likewise (in a more visual and literal register) an erasure of face, of person and persona, leaving the residue of a gaze to wander through this endless space, a gaze that somehow makes silence heard (here we recognize the Orphic dimension of the literary experience so crucial to Blanchot, the adventure of a descent to the depths and the play of a gaze that effaces and is effaced). But this source from which silence is drawn, as from a dried up well of empty images (empty speech), can be *resisted* even as it is set into motion. For Blanchot also says that, on the other hand (“Ou bien ...”), it may become a “resource,” that is, something graspable that can be put to work and manipulated, a form of refusal, negation and “mastery.” On the other hand, he says, there is an *other hand*, the non-writing hand described in an earlier section of the same essay (“La Préhension persécutrice”/“Persecutory Prehension”), the hand that remains on this side of the endless shadow-world, that holds back from becoming (re-becoming) a shadow of itself, that retains the capacity to intervene, to interrupt the limitless and interminable movement called forth by the initial “invitation” to effacement. From “source” to “resource” there is thus a slight shift, a small but decisive turn in silence: toward the extremes of effacement, or away from these extremes into a protective layer of

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sound-in-silence, a containment or container that Blanchot calls *le ton*: the tone of a silence that remains the writer’s own. In this sonic residue, the effaced “I” preserves something of itself, namely its will and strength, its authority and power, and thus its grandeur, that of a “grand écrivain,” a great writer. Despite the theme and indeed the tone of admiration in this passage, Blanchot is not exactly advocating or even entirely affirming this mode of silence; on the contrary, he is undermining and evacuating it (“mais peut-être l’œuvre ne soucie-t-elle pas de ce qui les fait grands”/“but perhaps the work is not concerned with what makes them great”), showing it to be a compromise, if a necessary one.<sup>10</sup> But if it is necessary, if there must always be another hand, a moment of active negativity, a turning away from the fascination of the endless image world and a decisive turn toward the daylit contours of the work, these contours are nonetheless always subject to endless attenuation, the power and strength that imposes them can itself be limitlessly diminished, the one who writes it can wander ever further into effacement, and the work itself can bear these erasures ever more openly on its face.

Blanchot’s *récits* – written during the same period as the critical essays in question here – bear witness to this movement toward complete effacement, and one might well argue that indeed they have no “tone,” or as little as possible, that their silence is more and more coincident with the neutral speech that proffers them. They strive for pure interruption, and they disregard the exigencies of grandeur or greatness. They are small and thin and barely readable, though they are perfectly open, as open as a book can be. They invite one into the simplicity of reading. But they tend to slip past this reading ... They approach – or at least point toward – “le pur glissement de la parole de personne”/“the pure slipping-past of the speech of no one.” This formula from “La Solitude essentielle” points to the outer limit against which a “great writer” finds a certain protection, and thus may indicate the difference between one silence and another, or perhaps between different degrees and manners of silence’s imposition.

While Blanchot suggests that we read a writer's "tone" as our sense of a work's authenticity ("ce qu'elle a de plus authentique"/"what is most authentic in it"), this is also his way of indicating a certain inauthenticity in the response to the initial call to effacement. For if this tone "rings true" (as we say), it does so on this side of a region in which effacement also effaces the marks that would divide authentic from inauthentic – and thus no doubt, essential from inessential, true from untrue ... "Le pur glissement de la parole de personne"/"the pure slipping-past of the speech of no one": let us retain this formula, as an image – a sonic image – designating the far side of the "great writer's" protective border, the murmur sounding as unmoored *speech*. In that light, this pure *glissement* can be seen and heard as a kind of flowing, eroding river of language, slipping past and beneath us at every moment – even in the clear speech of the day, of the everyday, even in the voices that surround us in the murmur of social existence, and even, or especially, on the radio, over the internet ...

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The electronic transmission of a long and dense passage of Blanchot's writing, and in particular Blanchot's writing on writing and silence, may not be an extremely significant event, but it raises an important question already alluded to, along with a threat of which Blanchot was not unaware: does this public transmission not embody the impossibility of silence that he recognized after all in writing itself? Does it not lie somewhere along a continuum linking the murmur and ... the murmur? Does it necessarily erode the contours imposed by a *masterful* silence? If so, what might this mean for "literature" and "the silence that is proper to it" (to quote the one-line biography on the flyleaf of *L'Espace littéraire*)? Is it possible to draw distinctions, to partition the silence, to dam the murmur so as to isolate and release the thin stream of its properly literary seepage (as Beckett might call it)? At times, indeed most often, Blanchot seems to think so, but he also goes further. It is crucial to note that while he resisted the "passage" of his writing

into other media, just as he resisted the circulation of his image in the press and the transmission of his recorded voice, he did not openly denigrate public discourse as such, nor even the supposedly empty chatter of everyday life, the *bavardage* of idle and "inauthentic" speech. On the contrary, one of the sharpest critical gestures Blanchot ever aimed at Heidegger concerns this very question.

This gesture occurs in an essay whose title evokes the question at hand, "La Parole vaine"/"Idle Speech," which is devoted to a book whose own title does the same, Louis-René des Forêts's *Le Bavard*.<sup>11</sup> Before attacking Heidegger, Blanchot vividly evokes the discourse that condemns the discourse called *bavardage* (chatter). This remarkable page is worth citing at length, especially in its rather different evocations of silence and empty noise, in view of the eroded distinctions it deliberately problematizes, and with an ear for the type of empty, impersonal speech that could easily be confused with the indistinct murmur that permeates literary space:

Bavarder est la honte du langage. Bavarder, ce n'est pas parler. La parlerie détruit le silence tout en empêchant la parole. Quand on bavarde, on ne dit rien de vrai, même si l'on ne dit rien de faux, car l'on ne parle pas vraiment. Cette parole qui ne parle pas, parole de divertissement qui va de-ci de-là, par laquelle on passe d'un sujet à l'autre, sans qu'on sache de quoi il est question, parlant également de tout, des choses dites sérieuses, des choses dites insignifiantes, dans un égal mouvement d'intérêt, précisément parce qu'il est entendu qu'on ne parle de rien, une telle manière de dire, fuite devant le silence ou fuite devant la crainte de s'exprimer, est l'objet de notre constante réprobation. A la vérité, chacun bavarde, mais chacun condamne le bavardage. L'adulte le dit à l'enfant: tu n'est qu'un bavard; comme le masculin le dit au féminin, le philosophe à l'homme quelconque, le politique au philosophe: bavardage. Ce reproche arrête tout. J'ai toujours été frappé par l'approbation empressée et enchantée, donné universellement à Heidegger, lorsque celui-ci, sous prétexte d'analyse

et avec la vigueur sobre qui lui est propre, a condamné la parole inauthentique. Parole méprisée, qui n'est jamais celle du "Je" résolu, laconique et héroïque, mais la non-parole du "On" irresponsable. On parle. Cela veut dire: *personne ne parle*. Cela veut dire: nous vivons dans un monde où il y a de la parole sans sujet qui la parle, civilisation de parleurs sans parole, bavards aphasiques, rapporteurs qui relatent et ne se prononcent pas, techniciens sans nom et sans décision. Cette parole discréditée entraîne dans le discrédit qui la frappe le jugement que l'on porte sur elle. Celui qui traite l'autre de bavard, se rend suspect d'un bavardage pire, prétentieux et autoritaire. La référence au sérieux, qui exige qu'on ne parle qu'à bon escient, en rapport avec la gravité, ou bien qu'on ne parle pas, mais qu'on commence seulement de parler, apparaît bientôt comme une tentative pour fermer le langage; il s'agit d'arrêter les mots sous prétexte de les rendre à leur dignité; on impose silence parce que, seul, on détient le droit de parler; on dénonce la parole vaine et on lui substitue la parole tranchante qui ne parle pas, mais qui commande. (A 145–46; my emphasis)

Chattering is the disgrace of language. To chatter is not to speak. Prattle destroys silence while preventing speech. When one chatters, one says nothing true, even if one says nothing false, for one is not truly speaking. This speech that does not speak, entertaining speech that is always going from here to there, with which one passes from one subject to the next without knowing what is at issue, speaking equally of everything – of things serious, of things insignificant, with as much interest, precisely because it is understood that one is speaking of nothing: such a way of speaking, a flight from silence or a flight before the fear of expressing oneself, is the object of our constant reprobation. In truth, everyone chatters, but everyone condemns chatter. The adult says it to the child, you are just a chatterbox, just as the masculine says to the feminine, the philosopher to the plain man, the politician to the philosopher: chatter. This reproach stops everything. I have always been struck by the willing and eager

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approbation that has been universally given Heidegger when he condemns inauthentic speech under the pretext of analysis and with the vigorous sobriety that is characteristic of him. Speech scorned, which is never that of the resolute "I," laconic and heroic, but the non-speech of the irresponsible "One." One speaks. This means *no one speaks*. This means we live in a world where there is speech without a subject who speaks it, a civilization of speakers without speech, aphasic chatterboxes, reporters who relate and give no opinions, technicians without name and without power of decision. This discredited speech brings the discredit with which it is fraught into the judgment that one passes on it. The person who calls the other a chatterbox causes himself to be suspected of a chattering that is worse still, pretentious and authoritarian. The reference to seriousness, which requires that one speak only advisedly, in accordance with solemnity, or else that one not speak, but that one only begin to speak, soon seems an attempt to close language; words are to be stopped under the pretext of restoring them their dignity; one imposes silence because, alone, one has the right to speak; one denounces idle speech and for it one substitutes a peremptory speech that does not speak but instead commands. (Fr 124–25; trans. slightly modified; my emphasis)

Chatter, this element or milieu inhabited by everyone every day, is nonetheless claimed by no one, and its leveling and indifference give rise to a dread which attempts to violently reassert hierarchies and differences. We recognize here more generally the realm of the Heideggerian "They": *das Man* or, in French *le On* – the flattening and depersonalized mode of social existence in a massified, urbanized world. We also recognize the anxious and haughty Heideggerian response to this realm, which Blanchot incisively criticizes as authoritarian, as a dismissive imposition of silence in the form of a *command*. This harsh appraisal is part of a broader critique of Heidegger's discourse on authenticity that runs through a number of essays in which we see Blanchot refuse to denigrate the phenomena of everydayness and of

modern, urban, public existence, preferring to see in them, however ambivalently, the varied forms of a “giant murmur” – whose status in relation to the literary thus becomes more and more ambiguous. This critique is notably evident in *L’Espace littéraire*, where Blanchot takes on the very core of Heidegger’s early thought, the question of a “proper” or authentic relation to death as “an extreme possibility,” especially as articulated by Rilke (a crucial source for Heidegger’s discourse on death). Against this privileging of death as a possibility of “my own,” as the potential site for a singularizing authenticity, Blanchot emphasizes rather the anonymous, impersonal, and “inauthentic” leveling of death.<sup>12</sup> “*On meurt*”: *One dies*, he writes (in italics), and adds: “La mort est toujours une mort quelconque”/“Death is always a whatever death.” And then, even more strikingly: “la mort est publique”/“death is public,” which is to say “le pur passage à l’extérieur”/“the pure passage to the exterior” (EL 323–24/SL 241). If death itself occupies the “inauthentic” space of the outside, of exteriority and the rumor of public discourse, all the more then does chatter – which, however, places the difference between a *quelconque* language and literary language more directly in question. Returning to the later text, “La Parole vaine,” we see that Blanchot both erodes this difference and yet, in a highly equivocal manner, hyperbolically reasserts it:

Bavarder, ce n’est pas encore écrire. Et pourtant, il se pourrait que les deux expériences, infiniment séparées, soient telles que plus elles se rapprochent d’elles-mêmes, c’est-à-dire de leur centre, c’est-à-dire de l’absence de centre, plus elles se rendent indiscernables, quoique toujours infiniment différentes. (A 146)

To chatter is not yet to write. And yet, it could be that both experiences, infinitely separate, are such that the closer they come to themselves – that is, to their center, that is, to the absence of center – the more they become indiscernible, though always infinitely apart. (Fr 126)

A remarkable and equivocal description. Who can disagree that chatter is not exactly the

same (or somehow is not yet the same) as writing? For we all chatteringly dismiss chatter ... even if we don’t violently condemn it. And yet who can discern an infinite difference between two indiscernible points, two uncentering centers? On the page that follows, Blanchot attempts, in reference to an “inexhaustible murmur” that he associates with Breton, to articulate a difference between these infinitely different and infinitely convergent forms of speech, even while admitting their ultimate indistinction. “L’une est l’autre,” he states unambiguously: “one is the other,” only to add, with a commanding resoluteness that may surprise: “Mais l’une n’est pas l’autre”/“but one is not the other” (A 147/Fr 126). How can this difference in identity be drawn? In this case, Blanchot appeals not to silence but rather, more dangerously, to ambiguity and indecision, precisely to the exigency not to decide: “l’exigence ambiguë qui interdit de trancher une fois pour toutes entre le ‘bon’ et le ‘mauvais’ infini”/“the ambiguous exigency that prohibits one from deciding once and for all between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ infinity” (A 147/Fr 127). But after rigorously indicating a real convergence, so troublingly spoken forth in *des Forêts*’s novel, a convergence so complete that “nous ne savons jamais quand nous passons de l’un à l’autre”/“we never know when we are passing from one to another” (A 147/Fr 127), this is a strange sort of border to lay down, one in relation to which we always remain where we started, and as such it threatens to reduce our distinctions to empty repetitions, vain words, or as Blanchot puts it elsewhere, “le piétinement harassant de la répétition”/“the exhausting movement-in-place of repetition” (EL 324/SL 241). It threatens to strand us in the irreducible and repetitive element we were already trying not to be swept away by, a strangely sonic-aquatic element often figured by Blanchot as such: “l’éternel clapotement du retour”/“the eternal lapping waves of return” (EL 326/LS 243), “la prolixité informe ... où gronde ... le sombre flux et reflux de la dissimulation”/“the formless prolixity ... in which the somber ebb and flow rumbles” (EL 328/SL 244). The profound

insight that the noise of language shares a bed – a riverbed – with the “essential” speech that would silence it, if only for the space of an echo, has already eroded any clear and distinct resolution of these two grounds of language. Their shared ambiguity renders vain any appeal to their difference. Their common indecision, their powerlessness, neutralizes in advance any trenchant demarcation by, or in the name of, the other. Blanchot’s anxious tactic here thus consists in asserting a distinction on the basis of the very ambiguity left by its effacement – a literary tactic par excellence, but also a flight from the extreme consequences of the problem. While this is surely different from the authoritarian gesture of silencing chatter, it provides little assurance that the ambiguous speech that will not be silenced can ever really be divided up into literature and its other.<sup>13</sup>

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The ultimate untenability of this division can be glimpsed in a number of essays that foreground the writer’s specific relation to the murmur at large, and in which we see Blanchot repeating the equivocal double gesture of evacuating a distinction – by indicating a distant but always diffusely present point of indistinction – and attempting to insert a tenuous barrier between the terms distinguished.

In “La Puissance et la gloire”/“The Power and the Glory,” the final essay in *Le Livre à venir*, Blanchot approaches the murmur in just such a double fashion: on the one hand as the indefinite ground of literary hearing/silence and, on the other, in terms of the other realm of noise in the writer’s world, that of publication, publicness and publicity. Here too Blanchot insists on a profound point of convergence. After evoking the conversion of “the public” in general into “a public” – where the latter is a “degraded” object of supposed knowledge, and therefore of manipulation and power – Blanchot writes:

Un peu plus bas, nous aurons toutes les frivolités politiques du spectacle. Mais l’écrivain, à ce dernier jeu, sera toujours mal servi. Le

plus célèbre est moins nommé que le parleur quotidien de la radio. Et, s’il est avide de pouvoir intellectuel, il sait qu’il le gaspille en cette notoriété insignifiante. Je crois que l’écrivain ne désire rien ni pour lui, ni pour son ouvrage. Mais le besoin d’être publié [related earlier to the “value” the writer must acquire, i.e., money] – c’est-à-dire d’atteindre à l’existence extérieure, à cette ouverture sur le dehors, à cette divulgation-dissolution dont nos grandes villes sont le lieu – appartient à l’œuvre, *comme un souvenir du mouvement d’où elle vient*, qu’elle doit prolonger sans cesse, qu’elle voudrait pourtant surmonter radicalement et à quoi elle met fin, en effet, un instant, chaque fois qu’elle est l’œuvre. (LV 335–36; my emphasis)

A little lower down, and we will have all the political frivolities of public spectacle. But the writer, in this final game, will always be ill served. The most famous writer is less well known than the daily radio announcer. And if he is greedy for intellectual power, he knows that he wastes it in this insignificant notoriety. I think the writer desires nothing, either for himself or for his work. But the need to be published – that is to say, to attain outward existence, this opening onto the outside, this divulging-dissolving of which our great cities are the locus – belongs to the work, *like a memory of the movement from which it comes*, which it must endlessly prolong, yet which it wants radically to surmount and which in fact it stops, in effect, each time it is the work. (BC 247; my emphasis)

For the modern writer, the need to be published, to enter the endless flow of exchange and circulation and to be dissolved in it, is a moment whose memory marks the work but by the same token must be overcome in it, must be made to cease. Blanchot has never said anything other than this, regarding the Orphic adventure, from which no one returns with the living shade of Eurydice (rather only with an image, and a drive to vocalize ...). But it is rarer for him to place *within* this adventure the public rumor that will also receive it, that is, in which the work itself, the bounded sphere of

a silenced murmur, will be dissolved, as in the element of its origination. End and origin meet here, at the distant but intimate point where literature *coincides* with publicity, and where the vastness of public speech echoes, always already, within the work. How fitting and strange then to note that the relative levels of renown which Blanchot confidently evokes here, in reference to the writer and the radio announcer, have now been inverted *on the radio* – for there is no question that Maurice Blanchot is much more famous than Adèle Van Reeth.<sup>14</sup>

Blanchot goes on to liken these co-incident “sources” of the literary work, these “currents” from which it is drawn, precisely to a river: the mythical river Styx. Or rather, at first, to two distinct but communicating rivers: a “nocturnal” Styx for Orpheus, descending in search of the legitimate work, and a “diurnal” one, “le fleuve de la rumeur publique”/“the river of public rumor,” for the writer’s daytime being – a temptation with its own fascinating emptinesses and vanities, its own neutralizing anonyms and ceaseless fascinating murmurs, its own compelling effacements. For intellectuals in particular there is a temptation to get lost in a “nullité bavarde,” a chattering nullity that already knows and has already said, heard and read everything. Blanchot’s mapping of these similar-but-different forces is once again decisive but deeply *ambiguous*, an ambiguity he very deliberately intensifies:

Si aujourd’hui l’écrivain, croyant descendre aux enfers, se contente de descendre dans la rue, c’est que les deux fleuves, les deux grands mouvements de la communication élémentaire, tendent, passant l’un dans l’autre, à se confondre. C’est que la profonde rumeur originelle – là où quelque chose est dit mais sans parole, où quelque chose se tait mais sans silence – n’est pas sans ressembler à la parole non parlante, l’entente mal entendue et toujours à l’écoute, qu’est “l’esprit,” et la “voie” publics. De là que, bien souvent, l’œuvre cherche à être publiée, avant d’être, cherchant sa réalisation, non pas dans l’espace qui lui est propre, mais dans l’animation extérieure,

cette vie qui est de riche apparence, mais, lorsqu’on veut se l’approprier, dangereusement inconsistante.

Une telle confusion n’est pas fortuite.  
(LV 340)

If today the writer, thinking of going down to the underworld, is content with going out into the street, that is because the two rivers, the two great movements of elementary communication, passing through each other, tend to become confused. That is because the profound original rumor – where something is said but without speech, where something keeps silent but without silence – is not unlike the unspeaking speech, the badly understood and always listening understanding that is “the public mind” and the public “way.” Often the work wants to be published before it exists, seeking realization not in the space that belongs to it but in outward activities, the life that seems rich but, when one wants to appropriate it, becomes dangerously dissipated.

Such a confusion does not happen by chance. (BC 250)

Such a confusion – such a flowing together, one might say – is not fortuitous, is not a matter of chance, because, as Blanchot so vividly shows, the rumor of the writer’s “public” is already internally constitutive of the movement of writing itself. The ambiguous separation between resemblant spheres of ambiguity may have been dissolved before it was ever in operation.

Elsewhere the division of these converging realms takes on the intensified image of a walled fortification (an indication, no doubt, of the level of anxiety in play here). This is the case in “Mort du dernier écrivain”/“Death of the Last Writer,” where we read of an all-devouring speech that is “au-dessous de tout ce qu’on dit”/“beneath everything that one says,” a speech that is constantly “submerging” and “engulfing” (*engloutissant*) every ordinary form of speech, a speech that “dissipates and dissolves all things like fog ...” – but over and against which the writer is there to hold back the slowly seeping flood:

Un écrivain est celui qui impose silence à cette parole, et une œuvre littéraire est, pour celui qui sait y pénétrer, un riche séjour de silence, une défense ferme et une haute muraille contre cette immensité parlante qui s'adresse à nous en nous détournant de nous. (LV 298)

A writer is someone who imposes silence on this speech, and a literary work is, for the one who is able to enter into it, a rich sojourn of silence, a firm defense and a great wall against this speaking immensity that addresses itself to us by turning us away from ourselves. (BC 219)

In the absence of this protective layer (the imposition of which is not without its own heroic overtones), “ce qui ferait défaut, c'est le silence, et c'est ce défaut de silence qui révélerait peut-être la disparition de la parole littéraire”/“what would be lacking is silence, and it is this lack of silence that would perhaps reveal the disappearance of literary speech” (LV 298/BC 220). Blanchot frames this essay as a thought experiment, a fantastical scenario in which the “last writer” would disappear – a kind of science fiction somewhere between the feverish city of *Le Très-haut/The Most High* and a Borgesian (or anti-Borgesian) civilization expunged not only of its writers but eventually of its books. It is across this protective imaginary distance (so fascinating in its projection of Blanchot the former novelist ...) that the writer is here able to say the words at the source of the trouble we are sounding here: the disappearance of literary speech, that is, the global and definitive liquidation of the writer and his *semblables*.<sup>15</sup> But it may be that this process has already been underway for quite some time, perhaps even from the very moment when this very modern creature called “the writer” first appeared, and that it is rapidly accelerating.<sup>16</sup> In an earlier essay, “Le Dehors, la nuit”/“Outside, Night” (1953), Blanchot had already emphasized the porous seepage passing through any such wall. In a brief discussion of Kafka's “The Burrow,” that great discursus on the omnivorous threat of noise, he remarks that the burrow edifice is

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constructed in order to impose silence on the world, but that this only encloses its noise all the more intimately, and more dangerously, such that “celui qui l'entend devient l'autre”/“the one who hears it becomes the other” (EL 222/SL 169). The one who hears it becomes the other of the one he is, the other of the self and of the excluded other he refuses. This is precisely the image of “the other night,” which Blanchot thus renders as a sonic image, here generalized as a “whispering immensity” that permeates every border and, in a radical reversal, opens onto an other of every other. Placing the emphasis on this opening, Blanchot does not insist in “Le Dehors, la nuit” on the literary difference his examples efface, preferring to dramatize *the danger* without relief. But in the end he does evoke with a certain pathos those who “neglect to build the burrow” and so are swallowed in universal oblivion: “ils ne laissent pas de carnet de route, ils n'ont pas de nom, anonymes dans la foule anonyme, parce qu'ils ne se distinguent pas, parce qu'ils sont entrés dans l'indistinct”/“they leave no record of their passage, they have no name, anonymous in the anonymous crowd, because they do not distinguish themselves, because they have entered into the indistinct” (EL 224/SL 170). The question that begins to emerge here is whether one can *write* one's way into this oblivion, this noise and indistinction, without the guarantee of something called literature. Does this question have to do with the social ceremonies – and the concrete procedures – of publication and publicity? Is there an invisible everyday writing of the murmur *without distinction*?

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“La Parole quotidienne”/“Everyday Speech” (1962) is one of the few essays in which Blanchot speaks of mass media, the technical transmission of words and images, and the social and political world which they permeate.<sup>17</sup> It is in this context that that essay makes a clear suggestion regarding the automatic inscription of the everyday. “Sur nos écrans, dans nos oreilles, non seulement s'inscrivent sans retard les images des événements et les mots qui les transmettent, mais il n'y a plus d'autre événement, en fin de compte,



que ce mouvement d'universelle transmission”/ “Not only are the images of events and the words that transmit them instantaneously inscribed on our screens and in our ears, but, finally, there is no longer any other event than this movement of universal transmission” (EI 358/IC 240). In this perspective, Blanchot returns to the radio, which in fact he reduces – or expands – to the noise of pure signification. With mass media, he writes,

en réalité nous n'avons plus affaire qu'à une prolixité ressassante qui ne dit rien et ne montre rien. Combien de personnes mettent en marche leur poste de radio et quittent la pièce, satisfaites de ce bruit lointain et suffisant. Cela est absurde? Nullement. *L'essentiel*, ce n'est pas que tel homme s'exprime et tel autre entende, mais que, personne en particulier ne parlant et personne en particulier n'écoulant, il y ait cependant de la parole et comme une promesse indéfinie de communiquer, garantie par le va-et-vient incessant des mots solitaires. (EI 358; my emphasis)

in reality we no longer have to do with anything but a repetitive prolixity that says nothing and shows nothing. How many people turn on the radio and leave the room, satisfied with this distant self-sufficient noise? Is this absurd? Not in the least. What is *essential* is not that one particular person expresses himself and another hears, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there is speech nonetheless and something like an indefinite promise to communicate, guaranteed by the incessant coming and going of solitary words. (IC 240; my emphasis)

The essential, the true event taking place here, is that *someone is communicating*, a message is being sent: the murmuring noise that signifies this is enough. Enough for what? For contact with *the outside*. Blanchot never mentions literature in this essay, devoted to Lefebvre's work *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, and indeed – alongside “La Puissance et la gloire” – this is about as “sociological” as Blanchot gets. But Blanchot's “sociology,” his reading of the everyday, is clearly a version of his *literature*. His description of the unlistened-to radio, which could easily apply not only to the giant murmur

but also to his own *récits*, designates a sphere of sounding language – a sonic image – in which the literary voice and the indifferent voice of pure public technical transmission cannot be rigorously delineated. And here again, Blanchot moves decisively toward this sphere even as he recoils in the end from its “dangerous essence” (EI 365/IC 244). But he goes on to conclude that “il faudrait bien plutôt chercher à ressaisir la secrète capacité destructrice qui est là en jeu, la force corrosive de l'anonymat humain, l'usure infini”/“it would be much more necessary to seek to grasp again the secret destructive capacity that is at stake here, the corrosive force of human anonymity, the infinite wearing away”: the banality of erosion. And then, evoking a sort of literary hero after all, he continues: “Le héros, pourtant homme de courage, est celui qui a peur du quotidien et qui en a peur, non pas parce qu'il craint d'y vivre trop à son aise, mais parce qu'il redoute d'y rencontrer le plus redoutable: une puissance de dissolution”/“the hero, who is yet a man of courage, is someone who is afraid of the everyday, and who is afraid of it not because he fears living in it too easily, but because he dreads in it an encounter with the most dreadful: a power of dissolution” – a power, he adds, that ruins the “abusive difference” between authenticity and inauthenticity and bears in itself the principle of a “radical nihilism” (EI 365/IC 244–45). And what if this power of dissolution also actually does dissolve in its wake the writer as such? Is it possible that the radical nihilism of a massive murmuring technically proliferating world could render the literary writer, to whom this world gave birth, quite literally a thing of the past? Of course this need not mean that such writing would cease and cease to sound, but hearing its thin still voice in the midst of the roiling clamor may be another matter entirely.

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What is perhaps most striking, and disturbing, in the techno-sociological moment of Blanchot's critical discourse from this period is that it expands the space encompassed by the murmur's *indistinction* to envelop the world at large: not only the imaginary language of an



endless murmur that tends often (if erroneously, in Blanchot's case) to be assimilated to an "inner voice" but also (to put the point hyperbolically) every form of audible and/or legible language, and image, everywhere and at all times.<sup>18</sup> We can see that in any case the murmur is not an obscure force indistinctly flowing underneath the everyday world; it *is* the world, especially in its dimension of grinding everydayness and ceaseless public (transmitted) speech. I believe that Blanchot knew this, for he said it clearly enough, and in these very terms (the everyday, publicness and publicity, the city, the street ...); but it is equally clear that he did not quite want to know it, or did not want to pursue its most extreme consequences. One of which may be that literature, what is left of it, is vulnerable to dissolution in the very element of its initial *entente* and audibility, in the noise that calls it into being, and inversely that its silence may be imperceptibly displaced into another indiscernible silence, one imposed, this time, as if by a dictator – that distorted mirror image of the writer, engaged in an equivocal *Dichtung*, a dictation both passive and active, a reception of murmured language that is also its transmission.<sup>19</sup> The sole difference is less one of ambiguity than one of *power*. And as we've seen, the writer's powerlessness is also the element of a dissolution of difference, the essential neutering of distinction, including the one that would separate literature from its others, and thereby preserve it.

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Translations are in some cases my own, or are based on existing translations but are slightly modified (for the sake of literalness), or are taken in their entirety from existing translations. In every case, page numbers of existing English translations are provided for reference. I have occasionally added brief interpolations, in square brackets, to translated passages.



## disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## notes

1 My emphasis. The sentence is on page 109.

A look is very different from what one might think, it has neither light nor expression, nor force nor movement, it is silent, but from the heart of strangeness its silence crosses worlds and the person who hears that silence becomes other. (DS 68; slightly modified)

2 This statement was made in an interview from 1968 (Juliet 13).

3 Insofar as my concern is the specific moment of indistinction as related to sound, what I propose here takes a somewhat different approach from the commentaries presented in two studies on a similar and overlapping topic: the "disappearance of literature." Aaron Hillyer takes up this question in his penetrating book with that title, as does Anne McConnell in her *Approaching Disappearance*. I would add that, rather than disappearance, I rely more on the notion of *effacement*, an erasure that is never complete, thus one that leaves indistinct traces of the border in question – or, as with Kafka's *Great Wall of China*, fragments and remnants of its now illegible past.

4 A field that, of course, now includes the internet and every form of digital media. This immense murmur is the outer horizon of the present, much more restricted, discussion. A rough way of posing the question at issue here in view of this horizon would be to ask how "literature" sounds there, and how long it can survive as such – assuming it still does.

5 See especially Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*. On this front, Blanchot is very much in league with Levinas, who offers a strong critique of Sartre at around the same time, to which we will return in a moment. See especially Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre."

6 The text was published as "Lettre à un jeune cinéaste," a title added by the editors. This letter is also accessible on the Espace Maurice Blanchot website (<http://blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=73&Itemid=47>).

7 Here is the remainder of the letter. This astonishing document calls for extended reflection:

Quant à mes livres, il y a eu des exceptions mais non autorisées. Ainsi l'ORTF a tiré un

petit film de Thomas l'obscur (La Mort d'Anne) avec des images en couleur et la voix de Lonsdale. J'ai protesté en vain. A partir de là, je me suis rendu compte que je n'étais pas "propriétaire" de ces textes, et qu'en tant qu'auteur, je n'avais aucun droit, à condition précisément qu'on ne me demande pas d'autorisation.

Donc, ne m'en demandez pas. Faites comme si j'étais mort depuis fort longtemps et donc incapable de vous donner un avis d'outre-tombe.

Autrement, il faudrait passer par Gallimard qui détient le "copyright," donc la moitié des droits d'auteur. Passez donc outre. Agissez comme si j'avais, sinon les dons, du moins l'âge d'Homère.

Maurice Blanchot

As for my books, there have been exceptions, but they were not authorized. Thus the ORTF shot a small film based on Thomas the Obscure (The Death of Anne), in color and with the voice of Lonsdale. I protested in vain. This made me realize that I was not the "owner" of these texts and that, as an author, I had no rights, precisely on condition that no one ask me for authorization.

So do not ask me for any. Act as if I had been dead for a very long time and were therefore incapable of giving you a response from beyond the grave.

Otherwise, it would be necessary to pass through Gallimard, who holds the "copyright," and therefore half of the author's own copyright. So then just go ahead. Act as if I were as old, if not as talented, as Homer.

Maurice Blanchot

It is quite ironic that, in the name of the silence of the purely written text, Blanchot here evokes Homer, who of course recited poems orally to a public audience. But then Homer was also blind, and never saw any movies.

8 Presented under the rubric "Silence!," a four-part series broadcast as part of the regular program "Les Chemins de la philosophie" hosted by Adèle Van Reeth, the episode on Blanchot was aired on 2 March 2017. A podcast of the episode is available online: <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-chemins-de-la-philosophie/silence>

44-blanchot-impossible-silence> (accessed 23 July 2017). I would like to thank Patrick Lyons for bringing this program to my attention. The web page also includes a color photograph of Blanchot reading a book, one of many photographs of the writer that have appeared in the last few years. See especially the *Cahiers de l'Herne* volume devoted to Blanchot, published in Paris in 2014, co-edited by Eric Hoppenot (not coincidentally, Van Reeth's interlocutor for the radio program) and Dominique Rabaté.

9 The reading begins a little over fourteen minutes into the program and lasts for about two and a half minutes. After listening to the recording, both host and guest praise the actor's reading for its clarity in presenting a very dense text with complex syntax. One could be excused for also finding it a touch melodramatic – and thus for empathizing, after all, with Blanchot's sensitive refusal years earlier. From my point of view (as a reader/listener), the trouble can be stated simply: what I hear is not Blanchot's writing as I read it, which is in fact different every time, and even within each time, but the actor's recorded voice, its rhythms and intonations, which inevitably distort the written text as such, and so fix it, stabilize it in a statue of sound, always ready to step in and take over – a disturbing sonic image, a persistently resounding echo. This is, of course, also the power of sound, which from Blanchot's perspective is surely part of the problem. In any case, it is a question of interpretation, in every sense. One is reminded here of Adorno's praise for the silent reading of music, which was also directed at the tyranny of mass media and technical reproduction (see *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*). Likewise, anyone closely familiar with the texts of Beckett's plays is all the more sensitive to the facile betrayals readily summoned by the expressive demands of humanizing interpretations. Needless to say, it's inconceivable that Blanchot would ever have written for the theater.

Finally, I can't help referring in passing to a public event I attended in Paris in September 2007, for Blanchot's centenary, at which, among other speakers, Jacques Dupin (not an actor but a poet, aged 80 at the time) read a long passage from *Au moment voulu*, the section where the narrator knocks his head while walking in the dark down a hallway in the apartment. It was very impressive, an extremely beautiful and memorable reading, sounding as though called up by and from within the text, not imposed upon it.

10 A compromise that can be read in Blanchot's own work. As Christophe Bident remarks, in a biographical commentary on "La Solitude essentielle": "La véritable autorité du discours, son véritable ton, Blanchot l'emprunte à une expérience qui, fût-elle de dépossession, demeure radicalement personnelle"/"Blanchot draws the true authority of discourse, its true tone, from an experience that, be it one of dispossession, remains radically personal" (Bident 308; author's emphasis). The nature of this deep and inevitable "personal" residue is highly complex; I have offered some comments on its paradoxes in *The Imperative to Write: Destitutions of the Sublime in Kafka, Blanchot, and Beckett*.

11 "La Parole vaine" was reprinted in *L'Amitié/Friendship* (A 137–49/Fr 117–28); *Le Bavard* was first published in 1946. Blanchot's essay first appeared in a 1962 re-edition of the novel. Eleanor Kaufman comments insightfully on the relation between speech and silence in Blanchot's essay, and on the key passage on chatter that I cite here, in "Chattering Silences" (see Kaufman 24). McConnell devotes a helpful chapter to *Le Bavard* in *Approaching Disappearance* (116–44). See also Ann Smock's broader discussion of des Forêts's work, which intersects with many of the questions posed here: "Whatever Do We Need a Tongue For? Des Forêts" in *What Is There To Say?* (73–113).

12 "L'Expérience originelle"/"Original Experience" (EL 313–33/SL 234–47). Here too Blanchot uses the term "renversement radical"/"radical reversal" for the reconfigured understanding of death articulated in this essay. See especially EL 321–24/SL 240–41.

13 In the penultimate paragraph of the essay, Blanchot does attempt to say the specific difference that is legible in *Le Bavard* as its peculiar literary illumination, but this difference is precisely one that effaces specificity, in that he describes it in terms of an "immense vision" and ultimately evokes it as "l'équivalent spectrale du silence et peut-être de la mort"/"the spectral equivalence of silence and perhaps of death." The entire paragraph calls for a commentary that would test it against the text under discussion; let it suffice for my purposes to point out that in the end it explicitly returns, compulsively if also compellingly, to "the gaze of Orpheus," and so repeats the mythical schema of Blanchot's most cherished topology.

14 This strangeness persists even when we acknowledge the peculiarities of the case (a small-

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scale cultural program often devoted to well-known figures, often no longer living – a more familiar phenomenon in France, to be sure), and instead draw a more proportionate comparison between, say, any number of moderately well-known contemporary writers and a daily radio announcer at a major station in a large city. In that respect, Blanchot's point holds well enough – though, in his terms, it then resolves into the dwindling notion of "intellectual power," as though, whatever this might be, it would have nothing to do with mass media.

15 Hillyer devotes some thoughtful pages to this essay in *The Disappearance of Literature* (see especially 52–56).

16 This is an enormous statement that cannot be fully defended here, but we have some sense of its parameters in Foucault's work in general, and most directly in "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?"/"What Is an Author?" which can be read, at least in part, as a critique of Blanchot. This article pays homage to Blanchot in much of its language, as when it refers to an "anonymat du murmure"/"anonymity of the murmur" (Foucault 812). But it says much more squarely (in a textual variant) that "la fonction-auteur va disparaître"/"the author-function will disappear" (811). It also expresses a concern which may well be aimed at Blanchot: "Une autre notion, je crois, bloque le constat de disparition de l'auteur et retient en quelque sorte la pensée au bord de cet effacement; avec subtilité, elle préserve encore l'existence de l'auteur. C'est la notion d'écriture"/"another notion, I believe, blocks the acknowledgment of the author's disappearance and in a way holds thought back at the edge of this effacement; with subtlety, it still preserves the existence of the author. This is the notion of writing" (795). The concern is that this notion may transcribe the author into "transcendental terms" and risks preserving a theological dimension (ibid.). While this reservation cannot fail to evoke Blanchot, it is all the more clearly aimed at Derrida.

17 See William S. Allen's commentary on this essay, under the heading of "The Language of the Everyday," in *Aesthetics of Negativity* 14–26, and especially 20–21, where Allen writes of the surrealists' automatic writing and the "swirling commotion of unrealized significations," a fitting formula for what Blanchot calls the murmur.

18 The notion and figure of an "inner voice" and its relation to the murmur and to literary writing

deserve to be integrated more directly into the analyses offered here; I have left them to the side for the moment out of concerns for simplicity and length. Such a discussion would bring out a number of specific issues, but its main thrust would be to locate the murmur of the inner voice, as "heard" by the writer, no less in the element of an "outside," as an always prior exteriority, than the phenomena that Blanchot figures under that term.

19 Such a mirroring is suggested in "La Parole vaine," cited above, and even more explicitly in the section of "Mort du dernier écrivain" titled "Le Dictateur"/"The Dictator": in the imagined scenario, it is the dictator's commandment that supplants the writer's imposed silence, as a response to the "murmure sans limite"/"limitless murmur" and in opposition to "le danger de la parole étrangère"/"the danger of strange speech" (LV 299; BC 220). At another level, consider the strange situation of dictation staged in the *récits*, especially in *Le Dernier Homme/The Last Man* and *L'Attente l'oubli/Awaiting Oblivion* (though the gesture of an imperious dictation is also evoked in *L'Arrêt de mort*): a feminine companion speaks to the narrator, a writer-figure whose writing appears to depend intimately, and yet disjointedly, on the reception of this speech. It is interesting to note that in *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas/The One Who Stood Apart From Me*, the male companion does not appear to dictate but rather only to converse (although the many verbatim repetitions and echoes complicate this question there too). For these and other reasons, a thorough interrogation of listening, writing, and literary speech in Blanchot would have to take the *récits* into account, for it is there that his writing comes closest to the murmuring outside so often evoked in the critical essays.

## abbreviations

A	<i>L'Amitié</i> .
AM	<i>L'Arrêt de mort</i> .
BC	<i>The Book to Come</i> .
DS	<i>Death Sentence</i> .
EI	<i>L'Entretien infini</i> .
EL	<i>L'Espace littéraire</i> .
Fr	<i>Friendship</i> .
IC	<i>The Infinite Conversation</i> .
LV	<i>Le Livre à venir</i> .
SL	<i>The Space of Literature</i> .

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