

OPEN SECRETS: VIOLENCE, SECRECY, COMMUNITY

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CORY STOCKWELL

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ADVISER: THOMAS PEPPER

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**Dedication**

To K.

For E.

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“Everybody knows.”

– Leonard Cohen

## Introduction

We begin with a text that aches to reveal a secret. We begin with its dark passenger.<sup>1</sup>

We begin with *Othello*, Act 2, Scene 3. The setting is Cyprus, at the palace of Montano, the governor; yet in fact the palace functions more like a courtroom. Someone will be judged here, and he will be judged wrongly. The question is: why?

The judgments commence (and everything, here, will be tied to the question of commencements, of beginnings) at the very beginning of the scene. Othello commands his lieutenant, Michael Cassio, to stand watch during the night, giving this task to his first in command as though he already sensed the approach of danger. This watching is key: as we shall see, it will come up again and again in this scene, fitting for a place in which judgments are to be made; what is more central to a courtroom, after all, than testimony, the reporting of what one has seen? Cassio, of course, obeys his command, responding to Othello thus: “Iago hath direction what to do;/But notwithstanding, with my personal eye/Will I look to’t.”<sup>2</sup> The slippage between I and eye is of course very interesting here, reinforcing the importance of testimony: the very ability to speak (to

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this term from the television series *Dexter*, which revolves around a blood spatter analyst (the Dexter of the series’s name) who works for the Miami police, and who is also a serial killer (whose victims are killers the police have been unable to apprehend). Dexter views himself as an addict (at one point he even begins to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings) who acts on an irresistible urge to kill, and the name he gives to this urge is the *dark passenger*, a passenger who cannot be seen by others, but who is always present, pulling Dexter this way and that, whom Dexter cannot defeat and with whom he must therefore learn to live.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.3.4-6. All further references to Act 2, Scene 3 will be made parenthetically in the body of the text, by line number only. References to other parts of the play, and to other texts, will be made via footnotes.

say I) in this scene will depend upon the ability of the respective characters to see, and to report what they have witnessed. But rather than focusing on this, let us give some thought to the position of Iago, Othello's ensign, in this exchange between general and lieutenant. Othello has told Cassio to stand guard – to watch, in other words; Cassio responds that Iago has already been given this task. Iago, however, answers, ultimately, to Othello – and must we not therefore ask if it is not the latter who has given Iago the task, and who nonetheless decides to “double up” the task, to command Cassio to also keep watch – to keep watch over the watcher, as it were? Of course, the command could have come from somewhere else. Yet it is interesting in this regard that Cassio so immediately acquiesces to the general's wishes. Even though Iago has already been given this order, he seems to say, I will also “look to't,” as though Iago's watch were not enough, as though the latter were not completely trustworthy.

How does Othello respond to Cassio's assurance? He seems satisfied, and immediately retires with Desdemona, followed by their attendants, leaving Cassio all alone (but only for a brief moment, as we shall presently see). Before taking his leave, however, he states: “Iago is most honest” (6). Othello thus seems to concur with Cassio regarding Iago's honesty; indeed, his words complete the line begun by Cassio's last words. And he concurs in more ways than one. For despite the fact that he judges Iago honest, Othello does not for all that change his command: Cassio is still to keep watch, even though Iago is to keep watch. Othello's real agreement with Cassio, therefore, is on the need to keep watch over the watchman: Cassio's injunction is not lessened by the fact that it is identical to that of Iago. It is almost as though Othello were telling Cassio to watch himself, to be careful in the presence of Iago.



And this presence is not long in coming. Immediately after Othello, Desdemona, and everyone else depart – before Cassio can speak a single line (for with rare exceptions, it is only Iago who speaks when alone) – Iago comes upon the scene. He is greeted warmly by Cassio, who tells him “Welcome, Iago. We must to the watch” (12). We will have more to say about the first sentence of this line below. But for now, let us return to the watch (for which, the ensign informs the lieutenant, it is “not yet” the hour [13]). Iago and Cassio spend a few moments conversing about, among other subjects, Desdemona (“What an eye she has!” [21], states Iago; “An inviting eye” [23], concurs Cassio). Iago convinces Cassio to have a drink, to celebrate the averted battle with the Turks, and Cassio, provoked by Roderigo (as per Iago’s plan), soon loses his temper, first attacking Roderigo, and then Montano. Bells are rung in alarm, Othello is called, and Iago once more remarks upon the watch: “Help, masters!”, he states, “Here’s a goodly watch indeed” (150). Upon his return, Othello’s first words are of admonishment:

Why, how now! Ho! From whence ariseth this?  
 Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that  
 Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?  
 For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl! (160-3)

Othello’s first words, then, seek to separate, on ethnic and religious grounds (we will have more to say about this below), those present from their enemies. And after ordering calm on penalty of death, he turns to his ensign for clarification on what has happened: “Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving,/Speak: who began this?—On thy love I charge thee!” (168-9).

Othello's first concern, therefore, is clarification on how the situation *began*. And when the speeches that follow, from Iago, Montano and Cassio, fail to shed light on the matter, Othello repeats himself, with almost the same words. "Give me to know," he states, "How this foul rout began, who set it on" (200-1). And if it is not immediately clear, from these words, to whom Othello is speaking, it becomes so only a few lines down: "'Tis monstrous! Iago, who began't?" (208).

A long speech follows, in which Iago describes Cassio's attacks. In this speech, Iago seems to attempt to mitigate Cassio's blame: "men are men" (232), he states, and a few lines on: "surely Cassio, I believe, received/From him that fled some strange indignity,/Which patience could not pass" (235-7). Othello, seemingly grateful, responds thus: "I know, Iago,/ Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,/Making it light to Cassio" (237-9).

We have, then, three statements by Othello, each of them spoken to Iago. In each, "honest" Iago seems to be posited by Othello as a beacon of trust: in the midst of a room full of men, Othello turns to only one of them, his faithful ensign, to learn the truth of what has happened.

Yet each of these statements says more than it seems. Let us look at them more closely.

"Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving,/Speak: who began this?—On thy love I charge thee!" (168-9). Now on the one hand, the meaning of these lines is clear: Othello looks to Iago for the true version of what has happened. Yet these lines can of course be spoken in a variety of ways; emphasis can be shifted depending on many variables. So that when we hear the words "Speak, who began this?", it is not much of

a jump to interpret them thus: ‘Speak, you who began this.’ Othello, as he states in his very next sentence, can be seen to *charge* Iago with the crime here, with bringing about – beginning – the entire situation.

The same can be said of the next of Othello’s speeches to which we have drawn attention. “Give me to know/How this foul rout began, who set it on” (200-1); “‘Tis monstrous! Iago, who began’t?” (208). Again, Othello seems to be asking Iago for clarification, and yet if we shift our standpoint just slightly, we can view “who set it on” not as an interrogation of the identity of this “who,” but rather as an address *to* this very who: ‘you who set it on’ or ‘the one who set it on,’ Othello seems to state, ‘tell me how you began it.’ A reading that is supported by the last line of this speech, for the words “‘Tis monstrous. Iago, who began’t?”, at the very same time as they ask this question, also utter this accusation: “‘Tis monstrous Iago who began’t.” Othello, who elsewhere in the play charges himself with a lack of eloquence, here proves himself to be an incredibly dextrous speaker, finding the very words that allow him to say two things at once.

We turn, finally, to the last speech: “I know, Iago,/ Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,/Making it light to Cassio” (237-9). ‘If anyone knows Iago, I do,’ Othello seems to state; ‘he has minced the matter completely, forcing it to light upon Cassio. Therein lies his true honesty, his true love.’

Truth be told, none of this should surprise us. Truth be told, we didn’t even have to look so closely at Othello’s utterances to understand Iago’s true role in this play: that of the *open secret*. We could just as easily have looked at another aspect of this courtroom: the adjectives that are used to describe Iago; the words, in other words,

by which Iago is *judged* (or misjudged, as it were; yet this word is also inaccurate, presupposing as it does that an accurate judgment is possible). We have already borne witness to several of these judgments. “Iago is most honest” (6), states Othello at the very beginning of the scene. “Welcome, Iago” (12), states Cassio shortly thereafter, and welcome, we know, can function as an adjective. Indeed, this is possibly the most interesting of all the adjectives that are attached to Iago: the *OED* tells us that the origin of the word welcome is the Old English *wilcuma*, denoting not so much the one whose arrival brings forth joy, causes pleasant surprise, as the guest or comer whose arrival is *willed*, desired, hoped for in advance (we are closer here to the terrain of *wilkommen* than *bienvenu*).<sup>3</sup> A few lines on, Cassio refers to the ensign as “good Iago” (30); and in passages we have cited above, Othello names love as one of the qualities he possesses. Are we to take from this plethora of descriptions that Iago simply possesses many good qualities? Or must we, on the contrary, conclude that he possesses no qualities at all? The fact that he is described in such different ways from one line to the next – he literally seems to stop language in its tracks, as the other characters alight on one word after another without ever finding the right one – reveals something essential about Iago: he is *pure semblance*; there is no essence, no truth, that lies behind his appearances, his various masks. To turn to a near contemporary of Shakespeare – one with whom it cannot be doubted that Shakespeare is in conversation for the entirety of this play – Iago, it could be argued, is a perfect Machiavellian hero: rather than adhering

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<sup>3</sup> Iago, therefore, is very close to the “Mystery Man,” Robert Blake’s character in David Lynch’s film *Lost Highway*, who, when asked by the protagonist (Bill Pullman) how he got into the latter’s house, responds: “You invited me. It is not my custom to go where I am not welcome.” Is this not a perfect definition of Iago’s place in *Othello*?

to a single quality that he would impose on every set of circumstances, Iago changes from one nature to the next depending on the demands of the given situation.<sup>4</sup> He is the perfect shape-shifter, and the adjectives that attach to him – or rather, that slide right off of him – show that everyone knows this, even if they do not want to admit to this knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> Recall that for Machiavelli, virtue has no positive content, and the attributes or qualities that a prince must employ are defined only situationally. “In the actions of men,” he writes, “and especially of princes, where there is no tribunal to which to appeal, one must consider the final result. Therefore, let a prince conquer and maintain the state, and his methods will always be judged honourable and praised by all. For ordinary people are always taken in by appearances and by the outcome of an event” (*The Prince*, 62).

Shakespeare’s references to Machiavelli here are constant and unmistakable, even if we confine ourselves to this particular scene. The word virtue is debated on several occasions, including, most tellingly perhaps, in a certain speech of Cassio. After the latter is relieved of his duty by Othello, Iago advises him to plead his case to Desdemona, at which point Cassio compliments Iago on his good advice; when Iago protests in the name of modesty, Cassio insists: “I think it freely; and betimes in the morning I will beseech the virtuous Desdemona to undertake for me. I am desperate of my fortunes if they check me here” (315-7). In a single speech, Cassio not only names the two driving forces of Machiavelli’s thought – virtue and fortune – but speaks of them just as Machiavelli does, as being in conflict with one another (only Desdemona’s virtue can bring about a change in his fortune). A little earlier, Iago says the following to Cassio: “You are but now cast in his mood – a punishment more in policy than in malice, even so as one would beat his offenceless dog to affright an imperious lion” (263-6). Do we not hear, in this passage – and a little later, when Roderigo refers to himself as a “hound” (348) – a reference to Machiavelli’s statement that a prince must know “how to play the role of the lion and the fox, whose natures [he] must imitate” (*The Prince*, 68)? And finally, Iago himself is described in the following terms by Cassio: “I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest!” (3.1.40).

This is not to say, of course, that Iago is some sort of Machiavellian prince. Speaking schematically, we could say that in Iago we see a lot of fox and not much lion – Iago, in other words, is extremely cunning, but cannot be said to be truly glorious. Should we conclude from this that Shakespeare’s dialogue with Machiavelli is at the same time a criticism of the latter? Iago, it could be argued, is Shakespeare’s vision of the Machiavellian prince gone wrong, or of the prince carried to its absurd yet logical extreme.

Yet there is one adjective that is used more than any other when describing Iago. This adjective, of course, is *honest*. Iago is referred to again and again as “honest Iago,” and not only by Othello: in this single scene, Cassio employs the adjective on several occasions, and Iago even joins in, referring to himself as honest. Our conclusion here, as in any case in which a word is used too often, is obvious: the very fact that Othello must incessantly refer to his ensign as honest is the surest possible proof that he knows the opposite to be true; in repeating “honest Iago” ad nauseam, what Othello is trying to do, above all else, is convince himself that this is indeed the case – convince himself, in other words, of something he knows not to be true.<sup>5</sup>

What Othello is trying to do is keep his secret.

If I have begun with this play, it is because it sets the stage perfectly for the inquiry that will follow. It introduces all, or at least most, of the main themes that will be addressed here. If, in other words, *Othello* can be read, as I have tried to do very briefly here, as an inquiry of sorts into secrecy, then what does it tell us about secrecy – or rather, what questions does it force us to ask? Let us give some consideration to the ways in which secrecy is posited here. This secret drama is couched, first of all, in religious terms: the entire backdrop of the play, to cite the most obvious example, is that

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<sup>5</sup> I do not claim, of course, to be the first to have made such claims about the play. On the contrary, many of the most interesting readings of *Othello* are those that have called into question Othello’s belief in Iago. Stanley Cavell, for example, states: “However much Othello...believes Iago’s tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he also *knows* them to be false...we must understand Othello to be wanting to believe Iago, to be trying, against his knowledge, to believe him” (“Epistemology and Tragedy,” 38). Indeed, one reading of the play, that of Julian Willis Abernethy, is entitled “‘Honest Iago’” – within quotation marks – and begins thus: “I do not believe that I am abnormally sensitive or aesthetically perverse, yet whenever I read or hear of the play of *Othello* my soul is tormented by the endless iteration of the word ‘honest’” (336).

of a struggle between Christianity and Islam (Othello the Moor has arrived in Cyprus to do battle with the Turks). And if we confine ourselves once again to the scene on which we have been focusing, we find Cassio telling Iago that he hopes to be saved by God (“And so do I too, lieutenant” [100], Iago immediately responds); and we find the Moor himself, in a passage we have already read, admonishing those who have let their tempers flare in these terms: “Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that/Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?/For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!” (161-3). Finally, and most tellingly of all, Othello, in the passages we looked at closely above, can be argued to have accused Iago *three times* of betrayal; on two of the three occasions, Iago is accused by Othello of having acted in the name of love: “On thy love I charge thee!” (169), states the general; “I know, Iago,/Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter” (238-9), he states a little later. In this scene of impossible salvation, in this scene of Christian shame, Othello seems to be telling us that Iago’s sin – the sin that “began’t” all – is not that of acting outside of Christian love, but one that is much more grave: that of perverting it.

What are the other terms in which *Othello* tells us we must consider the secret? Let us recall that this play is deeply political, indeed politico-military: virtually all of the main characters are either themselves, or spouses of, political or military officials. We have already briefly examined the many links between this play and the writings of Machiavelli; and let us note that the entire plot, it could be argued, is driven not only by Iago, but by Iago’s resentment at having been passed over, by Othello, for the position

of lieutenant (a position given, of course, to Cassio; cf. Iago's long speech at lines 1.1.7-32).<sup>6</sup>

If the secret is articulated, in this play, by way of both religious and politico-military terms, it is also articulated in and through a reflection on femininity. Iago is resentful not only because of his low standing, but because he suspects his wife, Emilia, of having slept with both Othello and Cassio. And of course, the play ends with the death of Emilia and also Desdemona, in addition to that of Othello. But most telling here, of course, is the role of Desdemona's handkerchief throughout the play. We cannot go into a detailed analysis of the handkerchief, and its embroidered strawberries, here; suffice it to say that the object<sup>7</sup> is taken, by Othello, to reveal a secret he believes Desdemona to have been keeping from him: that of her infidelity with Michael Cassio; and let us also note the provenance of this kerchief: Othello reports to Desdemona that it was given him by an Egyptian woman, "a charmer" who "could almost read/The thoughts of people," and that "there's magic in the web of it."<sup>8</sup>

Othello's description of the handkerchief recalls the words Brabantio, Desdemona's father, uses against him at the beginning of the play: confronting Othello, Brabantio surmises that the only way Othello could have won over his daughter was through the use of some sort of magic. "O foul thief," he says to the general, "where has thou stowed my daughter?/Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her"; shortly

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<sup>6</sup> We would be mistaken, of course, to posit Iago's resentment as the "cause" of the discord he sows. On the impossibility of attributing causes to Iago's actions, see Coleridge's famous remarks on the play.

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting treatment of this "object," see Elizabeth J. Bellamy's essay "Othello's Lost Handkerchief: Where Psychoanalysis Finds Itself."

<sup>8</sup> 3.4.56-7, 68.



thereafter, he refers to the “chains of magic” in which Othello has “bound” Desdemona; and again: “thou hast practised on her with foul charms”; the Moor, Brabantio concludes, is “a practiser/Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.”<sup>9</sup> These words, like Othello’s description of the Egyptian woman, call to mind another of the registers of secrecy in the play: its essential link to alterity; the drama of the secret is always, at the same time, a drama of the other. Suffice it to recall the constant play of light and darkness throughout the play, up to and including all that is said about Othello’s “race”: the very desire of the play is constantly drawn toward the other of knowledge, its “shadows” as it were.

But even more important than the various registers in which the secret is inscribed in the play is the *way* the secret works here. We return to what we have already said above about the articulation of the secret in *Othello*: the secret is that which we<sup>10</sup> all know, but which we somehow do not want to know. The secret is that which we tell ourselves we do not know, in full knowledge – conscious or not – of the fact that we know it. The secret, in its most essential form, is not the property of some cabal, some secret society or brotherhood (or sisterhood, for that matter). The secret, on the contrary, is that which, to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, everybody knows. The secret is essentially *open*.

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<sup>9</sup> 1.2.62-3, 65, 73, 78-9.

<sup>10</sup> And definitely not I: the secret, as I shall try to argue in the inquiry that follows, is essentially plural, essentially *shared*.

Where, then, do we find this secret most at work today? What are the best contemporary examples of this open secret?

Secrecy, it must be said, is everywhere. It is something of a hot topic, in part because, as the cliché goes, our post-1989 era, which was supposed to be the era of openness, has in fact turned out to be an age of secrecy.<sup>11</sup> We can pull examples from literally everywhere: it is widely claimed, for example, that the Bush administration is the most secretive U.S. government administration ever;<sup>12</sup> and our political discourse is marked by debates around secret hideouts of terrorists, the place of the veil in both western and non-western societies, and of course, secret detention, imprisonment, and

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<sup>11</sup> As though these two terms – openness and secrecy – could ever truly be opposed. One of the aims of this inquiry is to deconstruct (in the strict sense of this term) this opposition.

<sup>12</sup> So much has been written on this topic that it is almost unnecessary to give examples here. Cf., however, William Fisher's Sept. 16, 2008 article "The Most Secretive Administration Ever?", published by the website *antiwar.com* (<http://www.antiwar.com/ips/fisher.php?articleid=13464>); the excellent dossier "Secrecy in the Bush Administration" at *The Nation's* website ([http://www.thenation.com/sections/secrecy\\_in\\_the\\_bush\\_administration](http://www.thenation.com/sections/secrecy_in_the_bush_administration)), which includes articles by writers such as Naomi Klein, Christopher Hayes, and Calvin Trillin; and Scott Horton's April 2007 article "Torture, Secrecy and the Bush Administration," published in *Harper's*. And it is not only the left-wing press that is interested in this issue: see, for example, Gabriel Schoenfeld's February 2008 article "The Bush Secrecy Myth," published in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which, despite the title, Schoenfeld seems to accept the labeling of the Bush administration as secretive ("secrecy is an equally essential prerequisite of self-governance," he writes, and a little later: "This is not an ordinary time"), before reaching the following conclusion:

The Bush administration has been lambasted for excessive secrecy. But its persistently passive attitude toward the torrent of leaks that have sprung from its intelligence and national-security apparatus make it one of the country's least-secretive administrations. It would be much better for the country if the administration took seriously the dangers of transparency in an age when the revelation of secrets can get us killed by the thousands. This would involve not only the vigorous enforcement of existing laws, but exercising leadership to change a culture in which leakers are hailed by the press as "whistleblowers," even as they flout their oaths of office and violate the law.

torture, the best recent example of which is probably the debate around “black sites,” secret detention centres operated by the U.S. in various countries, including, allegedly, Poland and Romania.<sup>13</sup>

I will not dwell for long, however, on these examples. The reason is this: what I seek to do here is not so much to look at contemporary political examples of secrecy as the conceptual underpinnings of these examples. I seek not so much to probe these examples in and of themselves, but rather to understand what makes them possible. And I believe that the way to do this is by way of an inquiry into certain key moments in the history of the thinking of secrecy – certain key texts from literature and philosophy in which I believe the thinking of secrecy has been brought furthest.

Let me begin, then, with an initial working hypothesis, or the first of a set of hypotheses, on secrecy – and on secrecy, today (and hopefully, since I seem to have just given short shrift to politics, this hypothesis will inscribe my project as deeply political). The most important contemporary example of secrecy, the secret that it is most important, right now, to understand, consists of the forgetting of entire swathes of the world’s population. “Forgetting” is the wrong word, since we are not dealing with a lack of memory at all. Rather, in the phenomenon I am thinking about here, the vast majority of the world’s population is literally held between life and death, in full knowledge of the powers responsible for this phenomenon; it is akin to a forgetting, however, inasmuch as this knowledge doesn’t matter. The way secrecy works today is

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<sup>13</sup> On this matter, cf. the exemplary work of Seymour Hersh, e.g. his May 24, 2004 *New Yorker* article “The Gray Zone,” and his 2004 book *Chain of Command*. Cf. also Jane Mayer’s 2008 *The Dark Side*, and Alan Brinkley’s August 3, 2008 review of this book for the *New York Times*, entitled “Black Sites.”

this: something – the phrases “swathes of population” or “majority of the population” are also misnomers, since we are not necessarily dealing with people here<sup>14</sup> – is kept in a state somewhere between knowing and not-knowing, somewhere between knowledge and ignorance, in a state that it is perhaps best described as one of *limbo*.

A man rotting away in a prison cell at a black site, hidden away from the world, is an excellent example of the sort of “secrecy-oblivion” I am trying to describe here. But a man selling trinkets on a beach somewhere in Central America, a man whose every waking moment is dedicated to a meagre subsistence, is a no less excellent example. A factory spewing poison into the air is a no less excellent example.

One could argue that there is nothing specifically contemporary about these examples, and I would agree. I do believe that today, there is more secrecy than ever. But what I am speaking of here is more of a quantitative shift than a qualitative one. What we see in the omnipresence of this secrecy-oblivion with which we are faced today is the spread or the logical result of a phenomenon that has been developing for a long time. I don’t believe the question of origins can be adequately posed here, and in any case I think it is beside the point: my aim, as stated above, is to identify certain key moments in this development, in this “spreading,” as it were.

And what spreads is a certain form of *power*. A power that has been described often, and in various ways, by many contemporary theorists<sup>15</sup>: a power without a centre,

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<sup>14</sup> The most pressing example is probably that of environmental degradation.

<sup>15</sup> There are of course many such theorists that one could cite, the most important of whom, to my mind, are the following. First, Deleuze and Guattari, especially their *A Thousand Plateaus*, and especially the more “political” of the chapters or plateaus of this work, located toward the end of the book, e.g. “Nomadology” and “Apparatus of Capture”; I should also make mention here of Deleuze’s extremely important essay

horizontal rather than vertical in its structure, a power not so much of sovereign will as of pure technique, power of a pure middle rather than beginnings and ends or endings. What this form of power produces (has always produced, but now produces more and more), what this form of power *needs*, is precisely the form of secrecy I am trying to investigate here: beside the unknowability of its holders, the pure fluctuation of its workings, a strange absence, a not-caring, of those it “targets”: the most proper production of this nameless, formless power is that which it casts – most of the world, incidentally – into this strange abyss (not somewhere else: right here, beside us...) of oblivion, this strange form of secrecy-oblivion.

Now in producing this form of secrecy, I argue throughout this inquiry, power at the same time produces its own potential subversion.

We can again find an example of this by turning to *Othello*. For isn't Iago – the one about whom, I have tried to argue, everybody knows – the element that constantly

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“Postscript on Control Societies,” in his *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. Second, Hardt and Negri, who have sought to name a form of power very similar to the one I am trying to describe here (and obviously in a much more systematic manner than I am able to do in this introduction) with the concept “empire,” in their book of the same name; I am quite indebted to this concept, even if my approach is very different from that of Hardt and Negri. I must finally recognize my debt to Nancy, especially his concept of “ecotechnics” which he outlines in his essay “War, Sovereignty, Right – Techne,” in the collection *Being Singular Plural*.

The concept of secrecy that I will try to outline in the following inquiry also owes a debt to all of these thinkers: it works both within and against the form of power I am trying to outline here, and thus finds correspondences in the work of all of these thinkers. For Deleuze and Guattari, for example, the *nomad* is both that which is produced by power, and that which, in very complex ways, acts both with and against it. Hardt and Negri locate a potential opposition to empire in their concept *multitude*. Nancy, finally – in any case this is my reading of him – attempts, by way of the concept of the *être singulier pluriel* (at once “being singular plural” and “(the) singular plural being”), to think a form of being by way of which a certain resistance to the ecotechnical would be possible.

strives to bring down any possible order? Isn't Iago precisely that little grain of radical evil described by Kant – not, in other words, some autonomous force opposed to the good, but rather a tiny perversion of the latter, a slight deviation from the straight and narrow, an unstable force nonetheless present from the very foundation of the order into which it introduces instability (hence its designation as *radical*)? Iago's very name tells us this: on the one hand, he is from somewhere else (the Oxford Edition reminds us that Iago is not even a Venetian/Italian but rather a Spanish name, recalling Spain's patron saint, Tiago, or, as the name is *heard*, *Sant'Iago Matamoros* (Saint James, Hammer of the Moors, or literally, Moor-killer); yet on the other hand, his name speaks a distinct familiarity: Iago, I-ago, what I myself was a few moments ago; or even I-ego, the one who is twice me, in me more than me, to paraphrase Lacan. Iago – and such is the logic, as we shall see, of the secret – is radically other only inasmuch as he is radically familiar.

Why, then, does the play, in knowing everything right from the start about Iago, nonetheless insist on keeping him secret? Whence the desire of the play to keep this open secret – to keep secret what it knows about, to know intimately what it holds in deepest secrecy? Why can't the play simply utter the "truth" about Iago once and for all? Or why, seen from the other side, can't it simply keep him secret – why must he straddle this strange border between knowing and unknowing, between secrecy and its avowal or confession? Why must it maintain this secret in suspension, why must it open up this limbo-space, in full knowledge of the fact that this little grain of secrecy will threaten, at every moment, to bring down its order like a stack of cards? What, in other words, is the play's *desire for the secret*?

The answer to this question is, of course, very complex, and it is one of the aims of this inquiry, perhaps its principal aim, to probe this desire or this need. It will do so by examining a cluster of themes in order to analyze the place of the secret in religion, politics, philosophy, and especially literature. Rather than introducing these themes in any depth here, let me simply make note of the writers and thinkers with whom this inquiry will spend most of its time engaging, by providing a simple list: Kant, Sade, Duras, Lispector, Bolaño, and, while he is not the “object” of any single chapter, Blanchot, who is always present. Through an investigation of these writers, and a few others<sup>16</sup>, I hope to say something here about this limbo-space, this form of oblivion, that I will hopefully be justified in calling the secret.

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<sup>16</sup> These “others” include Nancy, Mendelssohn, Abraham and Torok, Sollers, Fanon, and Borges.

## The voice of the secret in Kant

“Il ne s’agit pas de ressusciter la religion, pas même celle que Kant voulait contenir ‘dans les limites de la simple raison.’ Mais il s’agit d’ouvrir la simple raison à l’illimitation qui fait sa vérité.”

– Nancy<sup>17</sup>

What is it that faith does not tell us? What is it that *only* faith cannot tell us, can not tell us?

What does faith keep from us, hide from us, conceal from us? What does faith withdraw from us; what, in faith, withdraws from us?

Does faith “contain,” within it, an essential secret?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *La Déclosion* 9.

<sup>18</sup> It is by design that I mention the word secret here, for this chapter (especially the first half) deals with the place of the secret in religion. As such, my paper owes a great deal to Derrida’s seminal work on this subject, *The Gift of Death*. My aims here, however, are quite different from those of Derrida’s text. Where Derrida turns to the concept of the secret – and specifically as it is articulated by religion rather than philosophy – in order to locate a duty or task (*devoir*) that lies beyond all ethics (and would thus be the foundation of what Derrida calls an “absolute responsibility” [67]), my paper attempts to locate a necessary openness in religious conceptions of the secret (and specifically, the secret in Kant’s *Religionsphilosophie*).

The almost twenty years since the publication of Derrida’s book (originally published in a collection in 1992) has witnessed a flourishing of texts dealing with religious concepts of secrecy, and the way these concepts are taken up in philosophy, theory and literature. These include Derrida’s own *A Taste for the Secret*, a series of interviews published with Maurizio Ferraris, as well as his “La littérature au secret: Une filiation impossible,” published in the 1999 Galilée edition of *Donner la mort*; John Caputo’s “Instants, Secrets, and Singularities,” which deals with secrecy and religion in Kierkegaard; and the excellent collection *Le Secret: Motif et Moteur de la littérature*, which includes several essays that deal specifically with religion. I should also mention here the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*’s recent special issue on “Religion and Secrecy” (June 2006), which includes the very informative “Religion and Secrecy: A Bibliographical Essay,” by Ann Williams Duncan. Finally, let me note Jean-Luc Nancy’s recent paper “Le secret, le sens – du commun,” as yet unpublished, which he presented at the “Derrida Politique” colloquium at the École normale supérieure, Paris, December 2008.



And if so: what is the secret that faith keeps from us?

What does faith not want us – not want *us* – to know?

Not knowing. This is perhaps the experience *par excellence* of faith, or at least the way that faith is usually posited. We have faith, we are told, precisely *because* there is no knowledge, no knowledge at hand, precisely because knowledge is somehow lacking. Or – to view faith in a less negative manner – faith is said to go *beyond* what knowledge can bring us, can give us. In either case, faith, somehow, is outside of knowledge – is outside of reason, is somehow posited as the contrary of or in opposition to *reason*.

Faith *and* reason.

And indeed, this is the way Kant speaks of faith.

There is obviously a risk of oversimplification here. For Kant, in his longest and most famous text on religion – *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* – treats religion as a decidedly complex entity.<sup>19</sup> The title of the book alone tells us as much: Kant, in this text, deals with religion – or rather, a specific religion, *Christianity* – not in opposition to reason, but *within* it: that is to say, his aim, in this book, is to think Christianity as already containing within itself much of reason, much of that which reason teaches; Christianity, for Kant, is a kind of reason in its nascent form, a reason *avant la lettre*; a “reason for dummies,” we could call it, insofar as it provides a body of

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<sup>19</sup> There would of course be much to say here regarding Kant’s distinction between *dogmatic* and *reflective* faith, the latter of which acts as a sort of starting point for the entirety of Derrida’s analyses in his *Foi et Savoir. Les deux sources de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison*, the “subtitle” of which, of course, paraphrases the title of Kant’s book. Derrida states, for example: “*une ‘foi réfléchissante’ (reflektierende), c’est-à-dire un concept dont la possibilité pourrait bien ouvrir l’espace même de notre discussion*” (20, italics in original).

rational lessons to the great mass of humanity who, since their minds are not up to the task, will forever be denied access to the realm of pure reason.<sup>20</sup>

But what of those elements of faith that will not fit within the bounds (*Grenze*) of “reason alone”: what of those aspects of religion – of Christianity, in this case – that stubbornly refuse their incorporation within reason?

Kant in no way shies away from these elements. On the contrary, his treatment of them is extremely interesting. For he treats them – as would seem logical, in a text that announces itself as dealing with boundaries – on the borders of his text. He treats them, that is, in a series of “General Remarks” (*Allgemeine Anmerkungen*) that follow on the heels of each of the book’s four chapters – remarks that, rather than being continuations of the chapters they follow, are, to use Kant’s word, merely “appended” (*angehängt*) to them.<sup>21</sup>

Now what is essential about the themes dealt with in these *Anmerkungen* – in the order in which they are treated: effects of grace, miracles, mysteries, and means of grace – is the fact that they cannot be subsumed within reason. Kant states as much at the conclusion of the first of these remarks – or rather, in a note that follows the first of these remarks and explains the need to treat their subject matter outside of the main “body” of the text; in what amounts, therefore, to a note on a note. And as would be

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<sup>20</sup> Kant’s treatment of religion is therefore very different from the classic (to the point that it has become a cliché) Marxist conception of religion as the “opium of the masses.” Rather than a veil or a cloud of smoke that would conceal or distort rational thinking, religion (that is, Christianity) for Kant is on the contrary a kind of “entry point” or first step on the road to reason.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 72. All further page references to this text, for the first half of this essay, will be made parenthetically in the body of the essay.

expected, he does so through a vocabulary that focuses on the phenomenon of the *border*, that explains the need for these general remarks in and through a reflection on the border. He writes:

This General Remark is the first of four which are appended, one to each part of this writing, and which could bear the labels 1) Of Effects of Grace; 2) Miracles; 3) Mysteries; and 4) Means of Grace. – These are, as it were, *parerga* to religion within the boundaries of pure reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it. Reason, conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to extravagant ideas [*überschwenglichen Ideen*] which might make up for this lack, though it is not suited to this enlarged domain. Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just *cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action*. (72, my emphasis)

Reason, therefore – posited as the subject of the last two sentences – treats these *parerga* in an extremely enigmatic fashion: it neither confirms nor denies their existence; we are unsure, having read this passage, whether they are “possible or actual.” These extravagant ideas nonetheless seem *essential* to reason in some way: in the fact of its own lack, reason seems inevitably to “extend itself” to them. Yet it only confronts them as something completely foreign to it: it only engages with them – it only looks upon this “inscrutable field of the supernatural” (ibid.) – at its limits, its borders.

Of these four *parerga*, in this inquiry into the issue of secrecy in Kant’s treatment of religion, I will focus on a single one, that of *mysteries*. The reasons for this will become clear in what follows.

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It should be emphasized that this border between faith and reason is not the only border with which this text concerns itself.<sup>22</sup> We can point to several other places in the text, or several other aspects of the text, which reveal a continual concern with limits, with the distinction between inside and outside. One of these limits, of course, is the one that provides the context for the entire book, and the one to which Kant explicitly alludes in the book's title: the age-old distinction between reason and religion, between faith and reason. Where, Kant asks throughout the text, does faith end, and where does reason begin? How do we know when we are on the terrain of one or the other – how do we know that the terrain of the one excludes the other? Kant, of course, holds the *Christian* religion in the highest esteem of any religion, precisely for the fact that it does not lie completely to reason's *outside*, for the fact that Christianity, more than any other religion, *lays the ground* for reason, for rational thinking and acting. Still, as the *parerga* to which we have already alluded show, reason and faith do not completely overlap here: indeed, there are aspects of Christianity, as Kant admits, that can never be subsumed within reason, aspects that, far from preparing the ground for reason, seem completely foreign to it and utterly unincorporable within it.

The question of limits is also central to the book's most famous concept: that of radical evil.<sup>23</sup> Does Kant not state, after all, in the very title of the first of the book's

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<sup>22</sup> Given the fact that this essay will concern itself with the question of *borders* or *boundaries* in two of Kant's texts, I must recognize my debt here to Geoffrey Bennington's recent *Frontières kantienne*s – a book that nonetheless deals with “Kantian borders” in a very different way than I attempt to do here.

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting discussion of this concept by a contemporary theologian (a discussion articulated in opposition to those philosophers that he labels “postmodern Kantians”: “Jacob Rogozinski, Slavoj Zizek, J.-L. Nancy” [1-2]), see the first chapter of

four sections, that the place of the evil principle is “alongside” the good, and that the relationship between this evil principle and human nature is one of an *indwelling* (*Einwohnung*)? It is as though, within human nature, this evil that is literally radical (insofar as it concerns the very root of what it means to be human, rather than some outgrowth of our nature) formed a sort of *enclave*, a region completely surrounded by the good principle, but nonetheless independent of the latter, completely autonomous. Indeed, not only would radical evil speak to the theme of limits, but also to that of *secrecy*: for radical evil is not only enclosed within human nature, it is also an aspect of the latter to which we can gain no direct access, which can never truly be brought into the light of day. As it often happens in this text, therefore, two questions that interest us here – that of limits, and that of secrecy – come together in a single theme, in a single concept.

Of all the places where Kant will speak about limits, however, and of all the places where a thinking of limits will intersect with a thinking of secrecy, I would like to begin by focusing on a single example: the example of Judaism.

Not only, of course, does Judaism lie in a liminal relationship to the religion that interests Kant most here – Christianity – but this limit is a very complex one. For if, indeed, Christianity must be said to have grown out of Judaism, this limit would again concern not a simple outside, but rather something within or perhaps beneath Christianity, something that has been incorporated or built upon. And indeed, secrecy would again seem to come into play here, in the guise of something like an “open

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John Millbank’s recent book *Being Reconciled*. I will not deal with Millbank’s book here, since my essay is only peripherally concerned with the concept of radical evil.

secret”: for has this relationship to, this incorporation of or outgrowth from, Judaism, not always been an aspect of Christianity that the latter would prefer not to recognize – that it is forced to acknowledge, as it were, against its will? Christianity, of course, not unlike Islam (in its relation not only to Judaism but also to Christianity), would prefer to posit Judaism as simply laying the ground for its own birth; it is the alterity of Judaism which must always remain a secret of sorts for it, insofar as this alterity problematizes the narrative by which it recounts its origins, its foundations.

This more or less vexing problem for Christianity, however, is one that Kant’s text seeks to *solve*. For it must be said that the relationship Kant seeks to constitute between Christianity and Judaism is not truly one of *incorporation*, nor is it one that would posit the latter as the *foundation* of the former. Kant consciously rejects both of these alternatives. For him, the relationship between Christianity and Judaism can only be one of *exclusion*. An exclusion, furthermore, that is itself based on a certain conception of faith: Kant seeks to exclude Judaism precisely for the fact that, he claims, Judaism does not belong within what we should conceive of as faith. What exactly, then, is the *reproach* Kant makes against Judaism?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout this section, I will be dealing with Kant’s comments on Judaism and its relationship to Christianity. I will not take into account the “other” monotheism – Islam – simply because Kant says very little about it. This in itself, of course, is interesting. On the one hand, it is not surprising that Kant deals with Judaism far more than Islam: while the Jews had been established in Europe since time immemorial (and in the Germanic regions for the better part of two millennia at the very least: Amos Elon notes that the earliest written record of their presence in these territories dates from 321 A.D.; see *The Pity of it All* 21), Islam could be said to belong somewhere “else,” with a European presence, since the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, only in the remote and by this time backward southeast; and if we can infer from Kant’s overwhelmingly negative treatment of Judaism the perception of a certain threat regarding this other in his midst, it is logical that he would not have felt the same way with regards to Islam.

Yet our terms are still somewhat imprecise here. We have called the distinction that Kant seeks to set up as one opposing Christianity and Judaism, or the Christian and Jewish faiths. All of which is true. Yet the terms employed by Kant are not exactly these. Let us look more closely at the text, therefore, to understand exactly what is at stake and what is at work in these terms.

And let us note, first of all, that Kant is speaking, here, of a *history*. Or rather, Kant is *writing* a history: for how else could he “reproduce” a history than by writing a new one, inflecting a well-known history (the history *par excellence*) to make it his own? A very specific *version* of history, of a history, therefore. Now what he says about this history is the following: “This history [what Kant has already called “a universal historical account only of ecclesiastical faith” (129)]<sup>25</sup> can have unity...only if merely restricted to that portion of the human race in which the predisposition to the unity of the universal church has already been brought close to its development” (130). This *unity* is vital here: “we must have a principle of unity if we are to count as modifications of one and the same church the succession of different forms of faith which replace one another” (ibid.). “Forms of faith” (*Glaubensarten*): Kant would seem here to be introducing perfectly the shift by which one of these “forms” (Christianity) splits off from (all the while arising out of) another (Judaism). Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Kant continues:

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Yet one also wonders, given the fleeting and enigmatic treatment of Islam in Kant’s text (and given that most of his criticisms of Judaism would not hold up against it), whether Kant felt a certain need to *avoid* Islam – that “uncorrupted” monotheism, which Kant might have seen as an uncannily perfect reflection of Christianity.

<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting that the section of the text with which we will be dealing here is entitled “Historical representation of the gradual establishment of the dominion of the good principle on earth.”

[W]e can deal only with the history of the church which from the beginning bore within it the germ and the principles of the objective unity of the true and *universal* religious faith to which it is gradually being brought nearer. – And it is apparent, first of all, that the *Jewish* faith stands in absolutely no essential connection, i.e. in no unity of concepts, with the ecclesiastical faith whose history we want to consider, even though it immediately preceded it and provided the physical occasion for the founding of this church (the Christian). (Ibid.)<sup>26</sup>

Now regarding the question of faith, there is little that needs to be said here; Kant is marking out what he perceives as a qualitative difference between the Jewish and the Christian approaches to faith. And yet let us note here that he is not speaking solely of faith. He is speaking, rather, of a *portion of the human race*, one that is marked by its *unity*. Speaking of faith, therefore, he speaks not only of a faith, but of a certain *people*, a people of faith; and indeed, how could this not be the case, given that he has announced his terrain as one not only of religion or philosophy, but *history*?

But let us remain close to the text here, in order to begin to understand the charge being made against Judaism – or, as is becoming clearer and clearer, against *the Jews*. Kant writes:

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<sup>26</sup> In this passage, Kant is clearly taking issue with Mendelssohn, who, in a famous passage in his 1783 text *Jerusalem, Or Upon Ecclesiastical Power and Judaism*, gives the following response to an anonymous “Searcher for Light and Right” who, based on criticisms Mendelssohn is perceived to have made of Judaism, has challenged him to convert to Christianity:

This challenge is stated solemnly and movingly enough. Nevertheless, my dear sir, shall I take this step without first pondering whether it will really extricate me from the state of confusion in which you think I find myself? If it were true that the cornerstones of my house are so out of alignment that the entire building threatens to collapse, would I act wisely if I attempted to save my belongings simply by moving them from the lower to the upper floor? Would I be safer there? Christianity, as you know, is built upon Judaism and would therefore collapse along with it. Thus, when you say that my conclusions undermine the foundations of Judaism and offer me the safety of your upper floor, must I not suspect that you mock me? (58)



The *Jewish faith*, as originally established, was only a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state; for whatever moral additions were *appended* to it, whether originally or only later, do not in any way belong to Judaism as such. Strictly speaking Judaism *is not a religion at all*<sup>27</sup> but simply the union of a number of individuals [*bloß Vereinigung einer Menge Menschen*] who, since they belonged to a particular stock [*da sie zu einem besondern Stamm gehörten*], established themselves into a community *under purely political laws*<sup>28</sup> [*sich zu einem gemeinen Wesen unter bloß politischen Gesetzen...formten*], hence not into a church; Judaism was rather *meant* to be a purely secular state, so that, were it to be dismembered through adverse accidents, it would still be left with the political faith (which pertains to it by essence) that this state would be restored to it (with the advent of the Messiah). The fact that the constitution of this state was based on a theocracy (visibly, on an aristocracy of priests or leaders who boasted of instructions directly imparted to them from God), and that God's name was therefore honoured in it (though only as a secular regent with absolutely no rights over, or claims upon, conscience), did not make that constitution religious. (130-1)

What we find here, on the one hand, is an extremely interesting articulation of the origins of Christianity (an articulation that at the same time reproduces one of the most banal and uninteresting Christian discourses on Judaism, on the supposed inferiority of Judaism), indeed an extremely interesting articulation of the concept of the origin. Judaism, for Kant, is not exactly other to Christianity; yet nor, argues Kant, does it deserve to be viewed as integral to the latter, as the essential foundation that Christianity cannot do without. If Christianity undeniably emerges out of Judaism, it is not in the mode of one religion emerging out of another: it emerges out of Judaism, rather, as a true religion (what for Kant is the only true religion) emerging out of a "non-religion": as a religion, to be more precise, emerging out of a political pact. Kant's reproach against the Jewish religion, therefore, is precisely that *it is not a religion*, but merely a set of "purely political laws," the vision of a "secular state," a "political faith";

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<sup>27</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> My emphasis.

and the division he wants to draw here is clear: on the one hand, religion, and on the other, politics.

Yet we are not dealing here solely with the origins of Christianity (and its supposed inheritance from Judaism), but rather, as the passage above makes clear, with the origins of *the Christians* (and their supposed provenance from *the Jews*). Indeed, Kant's entire lexicon here is not only one of faith, but of the peoples to whom this faith belongs, of the people literally brought about by this faith or these faiths. What is at stake in this passage is, to use Kant's own terms, the question of *community*: what distinguishes the Jews from the Christians is that their community, their common being or essence (*gemeines Wesen*), is purely political, secular and not ecclesiastic, one whose very constitution is areligious. What binds the Jews together, as opposed to the Christians, is not faith as such but rather a "political faith," a faith emptied, as it were, of its religious content – a faith emptied of its very faith.<sup>29</sup>

What places the Jews and the Christians on opposite sides of a division, therefore, is *faith itself*, the extent to which a people can be said to possess a faith, the extent to which a faith can be said to inhere in a people. And what is at stake, therefore, is the very Kantian concept of faith. Again we need to follow Kant closely here, and specifically the continuation of his text, in which he gives three "proofs" that the religion of the Jews is not, and was never meant to be, a religion.

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<sup>29</sup> There would, of course, be much to say here regarding the Christian concept of *kenosis*, itself, of course, denoting a faith emptied of all faith, as it were, a faith that consists in emptying or expelling itself from itself. One even wonders here how it is that Kant, whose text consists, in the main, of a rigorous examination of the New Testament, could possibly have made this charge against Judaism without the slightest meditation on how it might apply to Christianity. I refer here simply to the plethora of recent theoretical texts on Paul, many of which discuss this concept and its importance.

The first and briefest of these proofs, of these charges against Judaism, is the following: “all its commands are of the kind which even a political state can uphold and lay down as coercive laws, since they deal only with external actions” (131). And Kant immediately gives an example – again, the example *par excellence*:

[A]lthough the Ten Commandments would have ethical validity for reason even if they had not been publicly given, yet in that legislation they are given with no claim at all on the *moral disposition* in following them (whereas Christianity later placed the chief work in this) but were rather directed simply and solely to external observance. (Ibid.)

At stake here, then, is again a certain distinction, that between “external actions” and an internal “moral disposition” (*moralische Gesinnung*). What is interesting (yet not the least bit surprising) here is that we are dealing with *the same body of commandments*, taken up differently by two “distinct” religions: while the commandments hold for both religions, only Christianity places its emphasis (its “chief work,” *Hauptwerk*) on the moral disposition that should accompany them (which they should command and out of which they should arise). Mere “external observation,” then, would be not religious but political. From here, we pass to the second proof of the areligiosity of the Jews: the fact that, for them, “all the consequences of fulfilling or transgressing these commandments, all rewards or punishments, are restricted to the kind which can be dispensed to all human beings in this world indifferently” (ibid.). The consequences of obedience or disobedience, therefore, lie, for Judaism, not in an afterworld but in “this world.” While the Jews may conceive of an afterlife, therefore, what is key here is that this is not an *ethical* conception of an afterlife, insofar as “rewards and punishments” in their afterlife do not depend on the “deeds or misdeeds” of this one.

Now since “no religion can be conceived without faith in a future life, Judaism as such, taken in its purity, entails absolutely no religious faith” (ibid.). It is not that there is no conception of the afterlife within Judaism; what is key here is the difference between the Jewish and Christian conceptions of this afterlife. Let us again follow Kant closely here. His above claim, he states, “can be further supported by the following remark”:

It can hardly be doubted that, just like other peoples, even the most savage, the Jews too must have had a faith in a future life, hence had their heaven and hell, for this faith automatically imposes itself upon everyone by virtue of the universal moral predisposition in human nature. Hence it must have come about *intentionally* that the lawgiver<sup>30</sup> of this people, though portrayed as God himself, did not *wish* to show the least consideration for the future life – an indication that his intention was to found only a political and not an ethical community [*dass er nur ein politisches, nicht ein ethisches gemeines Wesen habe gründen wollen*], for to speak in a political community of rewards and punishments not visible in this life would be, on this assumption, a totally inconsequential and improper procedure. Now, although it can also hardly be doubted that the Jews subsequently produced, each for himself, some sort of religious faith which they added to the articles of their statutory faith, yet such a faith never was an integral part of the legislation of Judaism. (Ibid.)

The Jews – referred to in the past tense – must indeed, as human nature requires, have believed in an afterlife; yet this afterlife (as opposed to that of the Christians) is not an

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<sup>30</sup> *Gesetzgeber*, also translatable as “legislator” or “lawmaker.” An interesting choice of word, one that fits seamlessly into Kant’s “secular” conception of Judaism. Kant undoubtedly made use, during the preparation of this text, of Luther’s translation of the Bible. (Though clearly he deviates from Luther where he deems it necessary: Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, in their 1960 translation of *Die Religion*, note that when Kant, in the very section we have been reading, cites the verse from Matthew 5:12, “Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven” [*seid fröhlich und getrost, es wird euch im Himmel wohl vergolten werden*], his use of the term *vergolten* [repaid] differs from Luther’s *belohnt* [rewarded].) One wonders here if this seemingly limited conception of God as “lawgiver” or legislator is influenced by Luther’s translation of the Tetragrammaton as “Lord” (“*Herr*”), a translation implicitly criticized by Mendelssohn in his own translation of *Yehova* with “the Eternal.” On this matter, see Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 52-3.

*essential* part of their “religion,” since their “lawgiver” did not concern himself with it. Even worse, this lawgiver – since human nature compels us to conceive of some sort of afterlife – must *intentionally (absichtlich)*, as Kant emphasizes, have ignored the “future life” (hence even the Jewish God, for Kant, is not an ethical being). While the Jews, therefore – or rather, each Jew for himself – eventually produced a conception of the afterlife (hence adding “some sort of religious faith” to “the articles of their statutory faith”), this conception came only afterward.

Which brings us, finally to the third and perhaps most important proof of Judaism’s areligiosity, an aspect of Judaism so often commented upon (and with such vitriol) by non-Jews. This proof concerns, of course, the absence of a universal project in Judaism – or, we could state, the claim made by the Jews that they are “the chosen people.”

[F]ar from establishing an age suited to the achievement of the *church universal*, let alone establishing it itself in its time, Judaism rather excluded the whole human race from its communion [*Gemeinschaft*], a people especially chosen by Jehovah for himself, hostile to all other peoples and hence treated with hostility by all of them. (Ibid.)

The Jews – and nowhere has it been clearer that Kant is speaking of a *people* here, of what he calls the Jewish communion or community (*Gemeinschaft*) – treat other communities with hostility or enmity, and are treated in like fashion by other communities (indeed, by Kant’s logic they are treated with hostility only *because* of the hostility they first showed to others) precisely because they jealously guard God for themselves: the entire history of this hatred, this exclusion, turns, for Kant, on the question of specificity and universality, universality and singularity. The areligiosity of the Jews – the fact that their faith is not a faith at all but is a mere “political faith” – lies

in the fact that, unlike the Christians (or the Muslims), they have no pretensions to universality: God is not exactly their God alone, but he has indeed *chosen* them, over and above all the other communities.

The *wrong* that the Jews have committed – or, we could state within a Kantian framework, and with no exaggeration, the *evil* they have undertaken<sup>31</sup> – revolves precisely around the fact that they have, to a certain extent, kept God for *themselves*. Rather than opening God to the entire universe, as it were, they have sought to keep him as their own. They have sought, in other words, to keep God a *secret* of sorts: to keep God as that which they and they alone share in amongst themselves, not precisely in exclusion of others but “better” than others, as it were: while others may (indeed should, must) worship or venerate the same God (insofar as God is One), the Jews partake in the Godhead in a *singular* way, the Jewish community has a *singular* relationship with God, the knowledge of which is defined precisely by the fact that is *denied* to others, that it “belongs” to one people *alone*. The Jewish faith is to be neither shared with nor communicated to others: it is to be jealously possessed, guarded, hidden – kept in *secret*.

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Now we have already said that this is not the only secret with which Kant will be dealing here, and that a more sustained and direct treatment of the secret is to be found

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<sup>31</sup> Recall, again, the title of this section: “Historical representation of the gradual establishment of the dominion of the good principle on earth.” Are the Jews not posed precisely in *opposition* to the establishment of this good principle?

in the “General Remark” following the book’s third chapter (the very chapter in which Kant discusses the Jews).

And yet strictly speaking, what Kant is dealing with here, in the third of the text’s appendices, is not secrets but mysteries – or rather, as he insists at the very beginning of this “General Remark,” with *holy mysteries*. *Heilige Geheimnisse*.

What, then, is a *Geheimnis*?

A mystery, of course. And yet the word also translates, in English, by *secret*. In the *Geheimnis*, in other words, we find a cluster of significations that isn’t exactly translatable by a single English word; the *Geheimnis* covers senses or meanings that in other languages – English and the Latin languages at the very least<sup>32</sup> – are conveyed by two words.<sup>33</sup> Kant’s translators, of course, have preferred the word “mystery,” and this is undoubtedly the most logical choice, following with the entire Christian tradition. But can we be so certain that the one sense excludes the other – can we be so certain, in other words, that when we are talking about a holy mystery here, we are not also speaking of something like a *holy secret*?

We can begin our response to this question by looking more closely at the *Geheimnis*. The word is the noun form of the adjective *geheim*, that which is kept secret, confidential, or *hidden*, and Kant will speak often, throughout the text, of that which, in religion, is undertaken *insgeheim*, secretly – behind closed doors, as it were.

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<sup>32</sup> *Geheimnis* can be translated, in French, as both *secret* and *mystère*, in Spanish as *secreto* and *misterio*, in Portuguese as *segredo* and *mistério*, in Italian as *segreto* and *mistero*.

<sup>33</sup> We should not forget the existence of the German word *Mysterium* here. The word is, however, far less common than *Geheimnis*, and what is key here is that both secret and mystery would most often be translated into German by a single word, *Geheimnis*.

Indeed, the metaphor of the door is an apt one here, for these words make us think of nothing less than those words that begin with the root *heim*, such as *Heimat*, *heimisch*, *Heimelig*, or indeed the noun *Heim* and the adverb *heim*: all of which refer to that which in English we would call the *home* (which is of course itself derived from the German *Heim*). The connection could not be more evident: we think also here of the adverb *heimlich* (secretly, clandestinely), the noun *Heimlichkeit* (secrecy, furtiveness), the verb *heimlichtun* (to be secretive).

And these connections, these etymological links and derivations, should not surprise us. For does the secret not provide a *home* of sorts, a kind of dwelling-place for “information”<sup>34</sup> that is not to be let out into the world? Is the *Geheimnis* not the outcome, the *ge-heim*, of a bringing-close, a holding of information close to the body, as it were, because, for one reason or another, it is not permitted to see the light of day? What is *insgeheim* is no doubt not only that which I do not wish to speak or reveal: it is that to which I have given a kind of dwelling or hearth, that for which I have provided an abode, a staying or resting place – what might be referred to in French as a *demeure*.

A secret, then. But we have already stated that Kant’s translators have justly employed the word “mystery” to render *Geheimnis* here. What, then, would differentiate the *secret* and the *mystery*? Perhaps we can begin to respond to this question by isolating two possible differences, differences that belong largely to the commonplace or everyday notions of these words and that we may have to nuance or

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<sup>34</sup> The word or “concept” “information” is no doubt a weak one, one that is perhaps untenable as a concept. But what, then, is *kept secret*? What does the keeper or bearer of the secret, the *Geheimnisträger*, carry with him – what does he possess if not information? We will return to this question elsewhere.



problematize later on. First, the secret and the mystery would seem to have somewhat different relationships to *language*. The mystery, on the one hand, would be that to which language has no access: mysteries occur when there are no words to describe given phenomena, when events, or rather the reasons behind events, resist attempts by language to explain them. Mysteries would seem to close themselves off to words. This is not the case with secrets: far from being allergic to language, words would seem not only to have an intimate relationship to secrets, but to be *the very element out of which secrets are composed*. Hence, a paradox: secrets, characterized by their silence, are nonetheless comprised of that which seems inimical to silence – in other words, of language. (Indeed, we can suggest another difference based on this distinction, a difference in the respective relationships of secrets and mysteries to *knowledge*: while a mystery is by definition unknowable, a secret is not only known but known intimately – all too well, we could say.)

Which would lead to the second difference that we can suggest here. Perhaps part of what marks the difference between secrets and mysteries is a motivation, one that we would associate most often with negative connotations, and one that we would generally attribute not to the mystery but to the secret: while the knowledge of a mystery is by definition possessed by no one (or almost no one – we will return to this question below), a secret (precisely because it is composed of language, because it is made up of words) is indeed possessed, owned, *kept*: kept not only by those who “keep the secret,” but kept *away* from others, at times for benevolent reasons (as when the “keeper” thinks that harm may come to those who gain knowledge of the secret, or that those who gain access to it may use it in harmful ways), most often for malevolent ones

(the secret's keeper wants to keep all of the benefits that accrue<sup>35</sup> from the possession of the secret for himself). While a mystery does not need to be kept or kept watch over, therefore, a secret, on the contrary, is most often not only guarded but *jealously* guarded. On the one hand, the unknown; on the other, that which is dangerous precisely because it can be known.

Yet just such a motivation – a motivation to *keep* the *Geheimnis*, a motivation on the part of one to keep it from others – is central to Kant's discussion here. We will explore this further below. For now, let us look more closely at Kant's text to see how it is that the thinking of the *Geheimnis* develops therein.

Now from the very beginning of his "General Remark," we can see not only that Kant's *Geheimnis* (unsurprisingly, given the breadth of the German word) seems to exhibit the characteristics both of the mystery and the secret, but also that, whether we think of the first or the second of these translations, his treatment of the *Geheimnis* is a strange one. For one thing that the mystery and the secret would have in common is *silence*, either because nothing is known about it or because its bearer does not want anything known about it. And yet we can see throughout this "General Remark" that what marks the *Geheimnis*, for Kant, is above all its relation to *speaking*.<sup>36</sup> to communication, to profession, indeed to *confession*. Let us look at the first paragraph of this remark:

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<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly, we often seem to find ourselves on the terrain of finance in Kant's text. See especially 84-93, in which Kant speaks at length about debt, credit, estimation... There is a great deal of recent theoretical work on this issue, of which Philip Goodchild is perhaps the most prominent representative; see, for example, his *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*, and his more recent *Theology of Money*.

<sup>36</sup> And is this not logical for an *Anmerkung*, for that which is *angemerkt*?

Investigation into all forms of faith that relate to religion invariably runs across a *mystery* [*Geheimnis*] behind their inner nature, i.e. something *holy* [*Heiliges*], which can indeed be *cognized* [*gekannt*] by every individual, yet cannot be *professed* publicly [*öffentlich bekannt*], i.e. cannot be communicated universally [*allgemein mitgeteilt*]. – As something *holy* it must be a moral object, hence an object of reason and one capable of being sufficiently recognized internally [*innerlich...erkannt*] for practical use; yet, as something *mysterious* [*Geheimes*], not for theoretical use, for then it would have to be communicable [*mittelbar*] to everyone and hence also capable of being externally and publicly professed [*äußerlich und öffentlich bekannt*]. (140)

One cannot think about belief or faith (again, in German we are dealing with a single word – *Glaube* – that covers what, for other languages, are distinct words and meanings<sup>37</sup>), then, without a *Geheimnis*: investigation into faith (*all* forms of faith, not only Christianity), Kant states, must *invariably* – or *inevitably, unavoidably* (*unvermeidlich*) – deal with the question of the *Geheimnis* (which, as he tells us twice here, is *holy* – indeed, is defined in part by this holiness). A *Geheimnis*, furthermore, which cannot be professed or confessed, made known (*bekannt*): and unlike the commonplace Christian conception of confession, therefore, this *Geheimnis*, so central to faith, cannot be spoken away (for we cannot speak of it at all). It cannot be confessed, professed, or *communicated* (*mitgeteilt*), at least not universally or *publicly* (*öffentlich*). The *Geheimnis*, therefore, would seem to stand in the way of Kant's project, that of thinking a *religion within the boundaries of mere reason*: for is Christianity – the only religion that could possibly be spoken of in relation to reason – not characterized (as opposed, as we have already seen, to Judaism) by its *universality*? What we are dealing with here, on the contrary, is the most internal (*innerlich*) of phenomena.

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<sup>37</sup> Again, for the Latin languages as well as for English. Hence, in French: *foi* and *croyance*, in Spanish: *fe* and *creencia*, etc.

Now this emphasis on *speaking* would seem to bring us, in our reflections on the *Geheimnis*, away from the mystery of which tradition speaks, and closer to the *secret*. For are we not speaking, here – does Kant himself not say this – of something that, beyond simply being unknown, is defined by its being *unspeakable* – unconfessable, uncommunicable, unavowable? What seems noteworthy here is that Kant, in the very first paragraph of this excursus on the *Geheimnis*, writes not only of that which cannot be known, but of that which cannot be *voiced*.

The *Geheimnisse* of which Kant speaks, however, while they may not be speakable, are nonetheless not wholly untransmissible. We can know them, we can know of them, they can be made known to us. Now how is this so? The response has to do with the *openness* of these *Geheimnisse*. Kant has already, again, spoken in these terms in the first paragraph of this section, cited above: *Geheimnisse*, he has stated – indeed he has stated it not once but twice – are not *öffentlich bekannt*, are not publicly professed. They are *innerlich* (internal) and not *äußerlich* (external) matters. *Innerlich erkannt*, he states: and given, first of all, that what is *innerlich erkannt* and what is *nicht öffentlich bekannt* are spoken of in the very same breath (coming into contact with one another in and through the opposition Kant draws between them), and given, second, the common resonances between the *kennen* words Kant employs here (*kennen*, to cognize; *erkennen*, to recognize; *bekennen*, to profess, confess, avow), we find another link with the act of *speaking*: as though what we were dealing with here were not simply something that is internally recognized, but internally *spoken*. Spoken with a silent voice, as it were; spoken, paradoxically, in a voice that speaks but cannot be heard.

The *Geheimnis* – at once spoken and silent – that cannot be *öffentlich bekannt*, publicly pro/confessed, is nonetheless, somehow, revealed to us – made *open*, that is, made open to us. Kant says so only a few paragraphs on. Having just spoken of a divine trinity that, he claims, is necessary to any faith – faith in God’s threefold quality as holy, benevolent and just – a faith without which we risk anthropomorphizing God, and which is “by nature available to all human reason and is therefore to be met with in the religion of most civilized peoples” (142), Kant writes the following:

But since this faith [in a divine trinity], which purified the moral relation of human beings to the highest being from harmful anthropomorphism on behalf of universal religion and brought it up to measure with the true morality of a people of God [*eines Volks Gottes*], was first set forth in a certain doctrine of faith (the Christian one) and made public [*öffentlich*] to the world only in it, its promulgation [*Bekanntmachung*] can well be called the revelation [*Offenbarung*] of something which had hitherto remained a mystery [*Geheimnis*] for human beings through their own fault. (142-3)

The *Geheimnis* – in this case, the mystery of divine trinity, which, though it is found in the religion of most “civilized peoples,” *first* came to light in the Christian religion (a strange claim, given the relatively recent birth of Christianity<sup>38</sup>) – though we have already seen that it is never *öffentlich bekannt*, is nonetheless involved, somehow, in an *Offenbarung*, a revelation (a making-open, as it were), one that consists of an *öffentlich Bekanntmachung*, a public (an open) promulgation or announcement (a making-

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<sup>38</sup> A claim, furthermore, that Kant seems to refute in a note on the very same page. Speaking of “the threefold quality of the moral head of the human race,” Kant states that “many ancient peoples hit upon this idea,” including the Zoroastrians, the Hindus, the ancient Egyptians, and the Goths. And as if incredulously, Kant ends the note with the following bizarre passage: “*Even the Jews* [my emphasis] seem to have pursued these ideas in the final period of their hierarchical constitution. For in the charge of the Pharisees that Christ had called himself a *Son of God*, they do not seem to put any special weight of blame on the doctrine that God has a son, but only on Christ’s claim to be the Son of God” (142).

professed or -confessed, one could state). And that which cannot be pro/confessed literally begins to make itself audible here: in and through its revelation/opening, it seems to do that which by definition it cannot: articulate or voice itself.

The secret, then, is literally *open*: what is most proper to this secret, it would seem, is that it reveals itself...*without, for all that it reveals itself, becoming any less secret*: the *Geheimnis* does not cease to be the *Geheimnis*, the *Geheimnis* remains *geheim*, even (and especially, as this is what is most proper to it) in its promulgation, in its profession or confession, in its articulation. *Remaining secret, the secret nonetheless secretes*. Rather than smoothing over this contradiction, we must seek to maintain it, to move about within its tension, as it were, for it is in and by this very contradiction that Kant develops his thinking of the secret.

An *open* secret.<sup>39</sup> Now let us note, if only in passing, that the secret is not merely open. It is always open to *someone*. And yet this is still erroneous, for it is never open to a single person: what is most proper to the secret, on the contrary, is the fact that it is *shared*.<sup>40</sup> We have seen earlier, for example, that one of the reasons for which Kant reproaches the Jews lies in the fact that, in the very non-universality of their religion (or rather, to employ Kant's terms again, their "political faith"), they seem not only to exclude the rest of humanity, but to keep (to share, to hold *in common*) a secret from them: a certain covenant, a certain wisdom, a singular relationship to God. Yet strangely, this very element for which he reproaches the Jews seems now not only to be present in other religions, but indeed to appear as that which is most fundamental to

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<sup>39</sup> The secret is essentially open. Which means, of course, that strictly speaking, the secret is *impossible*.

<sup>40</sup> Has Kant himself not stated in this section that the *Geheimnis* is *mitgeteilt*?

them, for secrecy, we have seen, is essential not only to the Jewish “faith” but to *all* faith, to all faiths. And what is more, if secrecy is, as Kant seems to have stated regarding the Jews, reason in and of itself for guilt (evidence, that is, that evil has been perpetrated, a sin has been committed), is anyone, by Kant’s own account, more guilty of this charge than the Christians? Kant has stated, after all, in the passage we have just read, that the mystery of the holy trinity, while it is “to be met with in the religion of most civilized peoples,” was nonetheless “first set forth in a certain doctrine of faith (the Christian one)” (142). Are the Christians, in other words, not the bearers *par excellence* of the secret – indeed, does the secret of the Jews (and hence also their guilt) not pale in comparison to that of the Christians, to this essential secret that was *first* revealed to them? Confluence, therefore, yet again, between community and secrecy – the secret (the specific *Geheimnis* of the holy trinity), Kant states, is “inherent in the concept of a people regarded as a community [*liegt in dem Begriffe eines Volks, als eines gemeinen Wesens*]” (ibid.) – as though the one could not be thought without the other.<sup>41</sup>

Yet while this secret may indeed be held in common, may indeed be essential to the very concept of community, this secret, in its very openness, must still remain, as we have stated above, open/closed, as it were. For while a community may “possess” the secret, while the secret may “belong” to the community, it does not cease, in its very possession or belonging, to be secret – to be withheld from the very “members” of the

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<sup>41</sup> This inherent link between secrecy and community is the subject of an extremely interesting discussion in Žižek’s *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, where he conceives of the Lacanian superego as the “underside” of the Law, its “‘unwritten,’ obscene secret code,” which constitutes the “‘spirit of community’” (129-30). See especially the third chapter of this book, “Superego by Default.”

community who would purport to guard it. The very *Geheimnis* (and we seem here to be much closer to the terrain of the secret than that of the mystery) that is held by the “people” is also kept from them. The *Geheimnis* indeed has a *bearer*, a *keeper* – and a jealous one at that. We again follow Kant here:

Now regarding these mysteries [Kant has just spoken about the call, satisfaction and election], so far as they touch the moral life-history of every human being – namely how does it happen that there is a moral good or evil in the world at all, and (if evil is in every human being and at all times) how is it that good will still originates from it and is restored in a human being; or why, when *this* happens in some, are others however excluded from it – regarding this God has revealed nothing to us, nor can he reveal anything, for we would not *understand* it [*hat uns Gott nichts offenbart, und kann uns auch nichts offenbaren, weil wir es doch nicht verstehen würden*]. (145)

The jealous keeper of the secret is of course none other than God.<sup>42</sup> A God who, it seems – and here again we are faced with the impossibility of choosing between secret

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<sup>42</sup> In putting things thus (and this has already been the case earlier in the essay), I leave myself open to the charge that I am anthropomorphizing God; and this is no doubt a serious danger, given Kant’s insistence that we avoid doing this at all costs. If I state things in this manner, however, it is not in order to counter Kant. On the contrary, I am attempting here to remain as close to him as possible – as close, in other words, to his text, and to the *articulation of the logic of the secret within this text*, as possible. I have tried to argue that at at least two key points in Kant’s text – his treatment of the Jews, and his “General Remark” on the *Geheimnis* – Kant articulates, even if in spite of himself, a theory of secrecy, and a theory of the specifically and irreducibly religious nature of secrecy. A secret, however – as Kant implies when, in the passage I have just cited, he writes of that which God has not revealed to us – must have a “keeper,” someone who “knows” the secret but refuses to tell it. And the keeper of the secret, I have tried to argue, for the deep logic of everything Kant has said about the *Geheimnis*, is none other than God.

The risk of anthropomorphism, therefore, is admittedly and undeniably present. To my mind, it is all a question of the conception one has of God – of how, exactly, one *names* God, of the name that one gives to God. Derrida, in a discussion of holy or divine secrecy in a text (*The Gift of Death*) cited earlier in this essay, writes the following:

We must stop thinking about God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent, and, what is more – into the bargain, precisely – capable, more



and mystery – is both incapable of revealing the *Geheimnis* to us, and has also *chosen* not to do so. Indeed, there seems to be a strange conjunction of free will and impossibility here, for Kant says that God both cannot and will not reveal the *Geheimnis* to us: surely it must be one or the other? God, in this formulation, sounds like nothing less than a suspect who, while he does not exactly confess, nonetheless cannot get his story straight.

The *Geheimnis*, in any case, is *God's* possession: it is his to keep, both because he can and because he must. And does this fact – the fact that the bearer of the secret is none other than God – not already tell us something essential about the *Geheimnis*? This text is, to my knowledge, the only place in which Kant treats the secret/mystery

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than any satellite orbiting in space, of seeing into the most secret of the most interior places. It is perhaps necessary, if we are to follow the traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic injunction, but also at the risk of turning it against that tradition, to think of God and of the name of God without such idolatrous stereotyping or representation. Then we might say: God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not seen from the exterior. (108, translation slightly modified)

Derrida therefore ties God, the very *name* of God, to the secret – to the possibility that I have (that the subject has) of keeping a secret. My aim here is somewhat different, yet analogous: God, I am trying to state, is in some way nothing other than the name of secrecy itself, a secret withheld from all those who “belong” to a religion, which is nonetheless essential to the very possibility of that religion. In a way, Derrida’s conception of the secret says nothing else, for example when he writes, just a few lines on from the passage cited above, of “a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore *at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself*” (109, emphasis in original) – once this witness exists, writes Derrida, “then what I call God exists” (ibid.). God, in other words, would be that part of me – of *us* – that lies beyond us, a secret we keep from ourselves without even knowing it, without possessing the knowledge either of the secret or of the fact that we guard it from ourselves.

For a slightly different treatment of this issue, see Nancy’s recent essay “Le nom de Dieu chez Blanchot” (in his *La Déclosion*), in which secrecy, though it is never mentioned, is always, it seems to me, present.

systematically – the only place in which he articulates something like a theory of the secret. The only place in which the articulation of such a theory is possible, in other words, is a text on religion; and indeed, the only place in this text at which the secret can be spoken of systematically is at its *borders*, within this “General Remark” that both belongs and does not belong within the text.

What Kant seems to be telling us, in other words, is not only, as we have already seen, that “[i]nvestigation into all forms of faith...invariably runs across a *mystery*” (140) – that we cannot think about religion without thinking about the *Geheimnis* – but also that there is no thinking of the *Geheimnis* which is not also at once a thinking of religion, a reflection on faith. That we cannot think the one without the other: that every time we speak about secrets, we are already, in some way, leaving the terrain of reason (or rather, occupying its *boundaries*), and entering a terrain of faith, or at the very least a terrain on which the distinction between faith and reason becomes problematic, if not impossible. No thinking of secrecy that is not at once a thinking of religion: the secret is, always and irreducibly, as Kant states in the first line of this “General Remark,” a *holy secret*; the secret, in its very essence, is *God’s secret*.<sup>43</sup>

The secret is always, in other words, to some degree, that which God cannot and must not reveal to us. God’s secret is essentially a silent secret: it is, fittingly given the etymology of the word, kept *radically separate* from us. And yet we have already seen that the secret’s relationship with silence is tenuous at best – that the secret is constantly *communicated, confessed, professed*, even if this communication, this con/profession,

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<sup>43</sup> Democracy is unthinkable without the secret. But the secret is essentially “religious.” We will think about this essential co-belonging, co-implication, interpenetration, *blurring of borders*, in the next chapter.

does nothing to render the *Geheimnis* any less secret; that what is most proper to the secret, as it is articulated by Kant, is indeed this continuous relationship to speaking, or rather this inhabiting of a middle ground between speech and silence. And a middle ground, at the same time, between revelation and concealment: the secret of which Kant speaks, we have seen, is literally an *open secret*; an openness that is itself a speaking of sorts (let us recall that its *Offenbarung*, Kant has said, is a *Bekanntmachung*), but a speaking, a sounding, that articulates itself *silently*: it is, we might say, *entrouvert* (as though the door to the *Geheimnis*, the door to this “home,” were ajar<sup>44</sup>). Our reading of Kant’s secret forces us to distrust him, to a certain extent, when he tells us that God cannot or will not reveal the *Geheimnis*, for the deep logic of the text – of this text literally *obsessed* with speaking, of opening (a text with its mouth agape) – says otherwise: the secret always lies in an intimate relationship with “communicating,” with speaking.<sup>45</sup>

With what we could call, perhaps, the *voice*. *The voice of the secret*.

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<sup>44</sup> As though this home, in other words, were not completely secure, lacked the security that is in some ways proper to a home – as though the home were not quite a home, un-home-ly, as it were: *unheimlich*. And perhaps the necessary *openness* of the *Geheimnis* would force us to think, here, a certain *Unheimlichkeit* that is proper to it. Indeed, hopefully my attempt to deconstruct (in the rigorous sense of the term) the *Geheimnis* has been at the same time a bringing to light (?) of the necessary *Unheimlichkeit* of the *Geheimnis*.

<sup>45</sup> We should note here that in the first line of passage cited above (on God’s inability and/or unwillingness to reveal the *Geheimnis* to us), when Kant refers to “these mysteries,” the mysteries of which he is speaking are satisfaction, election, and *the call*.

Such, then, is the treatment of the secret by Kant's religion text.

And yet, though this is, I have argued, the only truly substantive treatment of secrecy in Kant's work, we should not think that this is the first time he has written on the themes that appear here, the themes that dominate this "General Remark" on the *Geheimnis* – the themes, in other words, of *openness*, *the voice*, and *community*. Indeed, on this thematic level, this remark is nothing less than the site of a *repetition*. Not only has Kant already spoken of these motifs, but he has spoken of them *together*, in such a way as to suggest their essential co-belonging.

Kant has already spoken of them, of all three in the very same breath, only three years earlier, in the last major work that preceded the text on religion – and in the last of the three *Critiques*. He has already spoken of them, in other words, in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> While I am suggesting here that the third *Critique* is the best place to think the confluence of these themes in a Kantian framework – given that, as we shall see, Kant develops each of these themes here in and through the others – I am not suggesting that the third *Critique* is the only text in which these themes, even if separately from the others, appears. In his *A Voice and Nothing More*, for example, Mladen Dolar has a very interesting discussion of "The Voice of Reason" (the heading of a subsection of the book's fourth chapter) in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He quotes the following passage from the second *Critique*:

were the voice of reason with respect to the will not so distinct, so irrepressible, and so clearly audible even for the commonest man [*die Stimme der Vernunft in Beziehung auf den Willen...so deutlich, so unüberschreibbar* (literally "unovercryable"), *selbst für den gemeinsten Menschen so vernehmlich*], it would drive morality to ruin. (Kant, quoted in Dolar 89)

And Dolar continues with the following comment on the above quotation: "The proponents of false morals can continue their confused speculations only if the plug their ears against that 'heavenly voice [*himmlische Stimme*]' (ibid.)."

What, then, is repeated here – what will Kant *already have said* about these themes? What are these themes carrying with them, as it were, from the previous text?

This question is more important, to my mind, than it initially seems. For one of the things that immediately strikes us about the work Kant undertakes on these themes in the text on religion is that this work is *limited* – in a sense, it is not work at all, or at least not the same kind of work that Kant has undertaken elsewhere. One of the key observations we can make about the *Religion* text, in other words, is that it is essentially of a *descriptive* nature: the point is obviously debatable, but it is as though Kant, in the text on religion, were aiming principally to think the ways in which Christianity is already a sort of reason, reason in its nascent form, a “reason for the masses,” as it were. And hence, his aim is less to make original statements about Christianity – or to theorize Christianity, to explore new philosophical territory in and through a reading of Christianity – than to *demonstrate* the ways in which, in Christianity, we can find threads of what Kant has *already said* about reason in the three *Critiques*. The entire book, one could argue, reads like a kind of guide to philosophy by way of religion. Or, stated differently, we could say that the book reads exactly like what it is: the observations of a philosopher who has stepped away from the terrain of philosophy, in order to explore momentarily that of religion – but only to glance, from the perspective of this new terrain, back at the old one.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed one wonders if these “terrains” are all that separate in the first place: we think here about all the moments the *sublime* is mentioned in the religion text; or of the examples taken from religion, in the third *Critique*, to illustrate the sublime: see, for example, Kant’s labeling of the interdiction, placed by God upon the Jews, against images, as his most *sublime* command.

My aim here is not to criticize the text on religion. If anything, the text is fascinating for exactly what it is: it is as though, in this late work, the lessons of the earlier texts speak in a new kind of way, with a different voice, as it were. And in doing so are subtly transformed (how could they not be?).

Our task here will be to look back on the third *Critique* – from the perspective, in a sense, of the text on religion. That is: we shall look back on the third *Critique* in order to think the *conceptualization*, in that text, of the themes that repeat themselves in the text on religion, but which Kant, in the latter, treats in a primarily *descriptive* manner.

Yet our task is slightly more nuanced than this. For we must also keep in mind, in and through our reading of the third *Critique* (and specifically, the sections on the beautiful and the sublime), that what interests us about this text is precisely the way in which it seems to repeat itself in the book on religion. Our movement, therefore, will necessarily be back and forth: we shall read the *Critique of Judgment* by way of the *opening* onto this text afforded us by the text on religion, in order to shed light on a concept with which the third *Critique* does not really deal, but which is our primary interest in our reading of the religion text: the concept, that is, of the *secret*.

Yet our concerns here are dispelled somewhat by the fact that this repetition is *untimely*: far from the earlier text repeating itself in the later one, it is the text on religion that repeats itself in the third *Critique*. *In secret*, as it were. I will hopefully have made this clear by the end of my reading of the *Critique of Judgment*, with which the essay continues.

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We begin our reading of the third *Critique* through an analysis of the concept of *Stimmung*, arguably most important concept of the first half of the text (I will address this importance below). Now what is *Stimmung*? As would seem logical given its relation to the verb *stimmen*, the term can refer, in music, to *tuning* or *attunement*, for example of an instrument (“*die Stimmung des Instruments*”). And yet this is not its most common usage. It usually refers, quite simply, to what in English we would call a *mood*: one might say that someone is *in guter Stimmung* (in a good mood, in good spirits), or not in the *Stimmung* (mood) to do one thing or another. Yet a *Stimmung* is not necessarily attached to a particular person or individual: as with the English “mood,” a *Stimmung* can also refer to a sort of general feeling; a *gute Stimmung* could mean, in certain contexts, a good atmosphere. And indeed, these meanings would seem logical, given the *tuning* that we hear in the word. For does a mood or atmosphere, like the tuning of an instrument, not depend upon the conjunction of different forces, a certain relationship (one that depends, to some extent, on chance) *between* different variables? The sound of each individual variable is to some extent irrelevant: what is important, in the *stimmen* as in the *Stimmung*, is what takes place *between* these sounds, the in-between space of their togetherness (of their *with*).

And let us also note here, if only in passing for the moment, that the word *Stimmung* – again, as is logical, given its relation to the verb *stimmen* – also has another meaning: a *Stimmung* is also an opinion. Relation, therefore, already, to the vote or the voice: to a *speaking* of one’s mind, in order to decide one way or another, in order to

lend support, to lend one's voice. A *Stimmung*, therefore, will denote, at the very least, the coming together of opinion, mood, sound, harmony.<sup>48</sup>

If this term is so important to the third *Critique*, it is because for Kant, the interest of aesthetic judgments (on both the beautiful and the sublime) lies in the fact that these judgments reveal a certain *Stimmung* – a certain attunement, in the translation of Pluhar – of our cognitive powers. Kant first speaks of *Stimmung* in §9 of the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” where he writes of a

presentation [*Vorstellung*] that, though singular and not compared with others, yet harmonizes with the conditions of the universality that is the business of the understanding in general, brings the cognitive powers into that proportioned attunement [*Stimmung*] which we require for all cognition and which, therefore,

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<sup>48</sup> Much more could of course be said here about the concept *Stimmung*. In particular, two writers should be mentioned here as those who to my knowledge have done most to contribute to the thinking of this concept. The first is Leo Spitzer, who, in his *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word “Stimmung,”* sets out, as he states in his introduction, to “reconstruct the many-layered occidental background for a German word: the concept of world harmony which underlies the word *Stimmung*” (1), and whose very first claim about this word is the following: “It is a fact that the German word *Stimmung* as such is untranslatable” (5) (hence his retention of the German word in the title of the book).

The second reference here is the most important twentieth-century philosophical treatment of *Stimmung*: I am speaking, of course, of Heidegger. Already in *Being and Time*, we find an extensive treatment of this concept, but the most important text here is probably “What is Metaphysics?,” in which Heidegger sets out to locate “an attunement [*Stimmung*] in which man is brought before the nothing itself,” and locates this attunement in “the fundamental mood of anxiety” (88). Of particular interest to us here is the fact that Heidegger's entire discussion is framed by a back-and-forth movement of concealment and “unveiling” (certain moods, he states, “conceal from us the nothing we are seeking,” whereas it is only the “originary attunement” of anxiety “that in the most proper sense of unveiling makes manifest the nothing” [87-8]; and that Heidegger describes anxiety as a certain uncanniness (“In anxiety, we say, ‘one feels uncanny’” [88]).

While a longer treatment of the concept *Stimmung* would indeed have to deal in a more sustained way with both of these references, my own treatment of *Stimmung* here is very different from that of either Heidegger or Spitzer, and indeed seeks, by way of Kant, to move this analysis in a very different direction, as will hopefully become clear in what follows.



we also consider valid for everyone who is so constituted as to judge by means of understanding and the senses in combination (in other words, for all human beings).<sup>49</sup>

Let us remark, first of all, upon the definition of *Stimmung* that this passage contains – or rather, the explication of that specific *Stimmung* which Kant claims is proper to the act of judging the beautiful. To conceive of an object (to use Kant’s language) is always to arrive at a certain *presentation* of the object; and when we present the beautiful, Kant states, our presentational powers – the imagination and the understanding – are in a certain relation to one another: a relation, that is, of *free play*. This means that when I gaze upon a beautiful object (or listen to a beautiful piece of music, or read a beautiful poem, etc.), the powers of the imagination, along with those of the understanding, begin to work in a certain rhythm with one another, one that Kant describes as “free play” (since, as opposed to judgments upon the good, the just, etc., “no determinate concept restricts” judgments upon the beautiful “to a particular rule of cognition” (62). Our cognitive powers, in other words, arrive at a certain *attunement*: they are brought into *harmony*, and it is precisely those objects that bring about this harmony that we consider beautiful. Our cognitive powers are brought, in other words – let us follow the text to the letter here – into what Kant calls a *Zusammenstimmung*: “the facilitated play of the two mental powers (imagination and understanding),” he states, “quickened by their reciprocal harmony [*Zusammenstimmung*]” (63).

In the discussion of this “free play” of the cognitive powers, then, the *Stimmung* to which Kant refers – the description of which is the object of this section of text –

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<sup>49</sup> 63-4. All further references to this text will be made parenthetically in the body of the essay.

finds itself supplemented, in a manner of speaking. The *Stimmung* of the free play of the cognitive powers to which beauty gives rise is always already a *Zusammenstimmung*.

It is always already a *Zusammenstimmung* because, as Kant will tell us in the very same section of text, what is proper to the cognitive powers in a judgment on beauty is that they achieve a certain reciprocal harmony: they come, in their free play, to work together. But “work” is perhaps not the right word here. It would be more accurate to say that the cognitive powers, here, “sound” together, achieve a common tone of sorts. It would be more accurate, in other words – let us again follow the text closely here – to state that our cognitive powers, in a judgment on the beautiful, *harmonize* with one another: to state, in other words, that they *stimmen zusammen*.

Kant uses this term, again in section nine, when discussing the “universal communicability” of the free play that structures judgments on the beautiful:

This state of *free play* of the cognitive powers, accompanying a presentation by which an object is given, must be universally communicable; for cognition, the determination of the object with which given presentations are to harmonize [*zusammen stimmen sollen*] (in any subject whatever) is the only way of presenting that holds for everyone. (62)

And Kant emphasizes this *zusammen stimmen* a bit further down the page – indeed, in the very next sentence – when he states that

the way of presenting [which occurs] in a judgment of taste is to have subjective universal communicability without presupposing a determinate concept; hence this subjective universal communicability can be nothing but [that of] the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play (insofar as they harmonize [*zusammen stimmen*] with each other as required for *cognition in general*). (62)

The *Stimmung*, already endowed with an incredible richness, and already transported and given a further inflection by the *Zusammenstimmung*, now finds itself echoed – repeated – in a move from substantive to verb: in a move, that is, from *Stimmung* to *stimmen*, from *Zusammenstimmung* to *zusammen stimmen*. And what we find here is an increase, an addition, in significations (a repetition of more and more significations in the very same word): for in the passage from substantive to verb, we come to hear an atmosphere, an opinion, and an attunement, all put into motion (the *substance* of the substantive put into movement in its articulation in and through the verb). And we begin, finally, to hear another echo in this series of terms, one that I will leave aside for a moment but return to below – the echo, that is, of an *agreement* (*Das stimmt!*), insofar as our cognitive powers, when they have entered into a harmonious relationship, can be said to agree with each other.

Now what are the stakes of these echoes, of these repetitions – why is all of this important? First of all, because this specific attunement lies at the very root of cognitive power in general. Decisions upon the good, the just, etc., therefore, though they seem more important than judgments upon the beautiful (and the constant use of words such as “only” and “mere” throughout the third *Critique* betrays Kant’s belief in this hierarchy – a belief of which, furthermore, he is aware, and which he never denies), are in fact presupposed and even rendered possible by the specific attunement that is proper to judgments upon the beautiful: it is precisely because our presentational powers are able to attain a certain rhythm that we may then draw upon their services to think about the good and the just. Despite the fact that this is the third and last *Critique*, therefore, beauty, in a certain way, *precedes* morality.

This free play, furthermore, brings about a certain *imperative*, or at the very least a necessity or requirement. In a judgment upon the beautiful, our presentational powers are in a sort of elemental harmony, a harmony that makes other cognitive operations possible. Now precisely because of the *freedom* that is inherent to judgments upon the beautiful – precisely because, in other words, I see nothing that would condition my judgment upon the beautiful; precisely because, unlike a judgment upon the agreeable or the good, I have nothing at stake in the matter (respectively, the obtainment of the agreeable object, and the imperative to act in a good and just fashion) – I cannot see any reason for which my judgment should not hold for *everyone*.

I posit, in other words, a universality of my *Stimmung*: because I cannot see any private conditions on which my judgment on the beautiful is based, I assume that such judgments – and, of course, the *Stimmung* that is their foundation – must be *universal*. I assume, in other words, universal agreement with the judgment I have made. To use Kant's language: I assume a universal *Einstimmung* or *Beistimmung*.

Indeed, these terms arise precisely where Kant wants to speak of the universality of the *Stimmung*: in the “Second Moment of a Judgment of Taste, As to Its Quantity,” the second of the four “moments” that comprise the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” Indeed, they are the very language of this section – the very language by way of which the *Stimmung* of the beautiful articulates itself (articulates, that is, its own universality). In the eighth section of the text, for example – entitled “In a Judgment of Taste the Universality of the Liking Is Presented Only as Subjective” – Kant explains that, whereas for the agreeable “we allow everyone to be of a mind of his own, no one requiring others to *agree* with his judgment of taste [*keiner dem andern Einstimmung*

zu seinem Geschmacksurteil zumutet]” (57)<sup>50</sup>, things are quite different for the “taste of reflection,” even though, like the feeling of agreeableness, it is “also rejected often enough” (58): “What is strange is that the taste of reflection should nonetheless find itself able (as it usually does) to conceive of judgments that can demand such *agreement* [die diese Einstimmung allgemein fordern können], and that it does in fact require this agreement from everyone for each of its judgments” (58). The very fact that the *Stimmung* proper to aesthetic judgments is not motivated in any way means that this *Stimmung* gives rise to the requirement for an *Einstimmung*: an agreement, as Pluhar has it, but also a sort of “tuning into one” (*Ein-stimmung*), as it were, an expression of unanimity or consensus (*Einstimmigkeit*) – a speaking-with-one-voice. The *Stimmung*, free of motivation, is always already its own *Einstimmung*.

Now if the *Stimmung* repeats itself in its own *Einstimmung*, the *Einstimmung*, granted entry into the text, soon begins to repeat itself almost at will – with, from time to time, slight variations or inflections. Indeed, it has already done so, as when Kant comments, a little earlier in the text, on the senselessness of stating that “everyone has his own particular taste”: for “[t]hat would amount to saying that there is no such thing as taste at all, no aesthetic judgment that could rightfully lay claim to everyone’s *assent* [kein ästhetisches Urteil, welches auf jedermanns Beistimmung rechtmäßigen Anspruch machen könnte]” (56). In this case, what conveys the necessary agreement is not the *Einstimmung* but the *Beistimmung*: the standing-by, -around, or -within the agreement, as it were.

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<sup>50</sup> My emphasis, for this citation and for all citations in the next two paragraphs.

The *Stimmung*, already repeated in and inflected by the *Zusammenstimmung* and the *zusammen stimmen*, repeats itself here on a different register: the *Stimmung* is never merely a *Stimmung*, but always-already the *Einstimmung*, the *Beistimmung*, through which it articulates itself. A singular judgment, it is nonetheless never individual: it is always many – all, in fact – in the very moment, by the very gesture, in which it is one. It is always, and only, to borrow a term from Nancy, singular plural.

Such is – to use Kant’s terminology – the *quantity* of the beautiful. But exactly *how* does it attain this quantity? *How* is the *Stimmung* at once its own *Einstimmung*? We have already seen, in our reading of Kant, the answer to this question: a judgment on the beautiful demands the agreement of all. But the question remains: *how* does it make this demand? The answer here is interesting, insofar as it cannot be the same demand as the one required by judgments on the good. The latter, we recall, are based on *concepts*; their imperative, that is, is grounded. We cannot say the same, however, of judgments on the beautiful: their very uniqueness lies in the fact that they demand universality without a concept. How, then, do they do this?

Kant gives us his response in the very same “moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” When we call an object beautiful, he states, “we believe we have a universal voice, and lay claim to the agreement of everyone” (59-60). A universal voice – *eine allgemeine Stimme*. The *Stimme*, then, is the very voice through which we believe we can speak for everyone: the *Stimme* is the articulation of the attunement’s universality (the *Einstimmung* of the *Stimmung*), and at the very same time the articulation of the attunement of universality (the *Stimmung* of the *Einstimmung*). *Stimme* is the very *sounding* of this co-articulation.

We return, therefore, to the theme of the voice; and indeed, it is as though, through all the movements and variations of the *Stimmung*, *Einstimmung*, *zusammen stimmen*, etc., Kant had been doing nothing but articulating a complex theory of the voice.<sup>51</sup> And yet no sooner does Kant formulate this concept of the “universal voice” than he seems to denigrate this voice – opening spaces in its fullness, as it were. He states the following:

[N]othing is postulated in a judgment of taste except such a *universal voice* [*eine solche allgemeine Stimme*] about a liking unmediated by concepts. Hence all that is postulated is the *possibility* of a judgment that is aesthetic and yet can be considered valid for everyone. The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* everyone’s agreement [*Einstimmung*] (since only a logically universal judgment can do that, because it can adduce reasons); it merely *requires* this agreement [*Einstimmung*] from everyone, as an instance of the rule, an instance regarding which it expects confirmation not from concepts but from the agreement of others. (60)

The voice, then, would seem to crack, at the very moment at which it attains to universality: for far from an imperative, that can be spoken out loud, pronounced to the world, that can give orders and commands, this voice – voice that seems merely a possibility (rather than a “reality”), voice that only requires without postulating – seems to be reduced to a whisper, insofar as it is only able to make hushed suggestions.

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<sup>51</sup> It should be noted here that the common resonance of the terms *Stimme*, *Stimmung*, *Einstimmung*, etc., is dealt with in an extremely interesting manner (one that is nonetheless quite different from my own) in Lyotard’s *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Referring to Kant’s “universal voice,” for example, Lyotard writes:

*Stimme* is quite different from the French *voix*; it evokes the accord of voices, and the mood of a soul (*Stimmung*), and the beginnings of its determination as destination (*Bestimmung*). The term leads one directly to the analysis of *Gemeinsinn*. What is in accord in the latter are the voices of understanding and imagination, the faculties of knowledge taken only in their respective dispositions, the one to conceive and the other to present, taken thus precisely “before” they operate in a determining way. (18)

Suggestions, however, is not the right word, for what is occurring here (what is articulated by the voice) is a requirement or demand, but merely in the form of something that is taken for granted – as something that cannot really be pronounced, but only assumed, presupposed. I require you to agree, and yet at the same time I cannot tell you to do so: I cannot order you, command you, to do so. You should already have done so: the voice is mute, or it has already spoken. And this is why Kant’s very next sentence will state: “Hence the universal voice is only an idea [*Die allgemeine Stimme ist also nur eine Idee*].” Paradoxical voice that articulates itself without making a sound, that speaks not even in whispers but in silence; voice whose very muteness is the sound, the resonance, the tone of agreement, of the injunction to agree. Voice that calls for agreement only in silence.

This voice is therefore not even a voice (what is a voice, after all, that cannot speak?). But that is also *more* than a voice, insofar as the *Stimme* somehow *echoes*, *resonates*, in these “other” concepts, concepts whose alterity to the *Stimme* is at once a sameness: *Stimmung*, *Einstimmung*, *Beistimmung*, *zusammen stimmen*... What is at work here, in this series of repetitions, is not precisely a voice, nor an attunement, nor an agreement, nor a unanimity, but somehow all at once: what we would have to call, in order to even approach the full resonance of this series of displacements and repetitions, a *(B)(ei)(n)stimm(e)(n)(ung)*...

This strange non-word, this jumble or amalgam, clearly communicates *more* than the *Stimme*. And yet it also communicates much less. For let us note the fact that the only portion of this non-word that is not parenthesized – the only portion of this non-word and non-concept that is held in *common* by all the terms we have looked at



here – is the *stimm*. *Stimm*: what is almost, but not quite, a *Stimme*; what sounds, perhaps, like a voice cut short, a voice out of breath, a voice not quite able to attain a fullness or completion. A voice stopped short, stopped in its tracks; indeed, not even a voice, only a *noise* (and this series of letters – *stimm* – seems, onomatopoeically, to attain the “hum” of this non- or almost-voice); the *stimm*, rather than the *Stimme*, would perhaps be the most accurate term to describe this strange “universal voice,” this not-quite-voice whose only sound is that of silence (voice interrupted by its own silence).

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What we find in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” then, is a rigorous examination of at least two of the themes we saw to be at work in Kant’s “General Remark” on the *Geheimnis*: that of the voice, and that of community (the “we” that is presupposed in and through the presupposition of a universal agreement, we that is presupposed in and by the attunement that is proper to the beautiful).

But what of the third main theme we identified in “General Remark,” the third of the motifs that mark Kant’s treatment of the *Geheimnis* – the theme, that is, of openness?

It is in the next section of the third *Critique* – the “Analytic of the Sublime” – that this theme comes to the fore. And it is to this section that we now turn.

A very interesting movement takes place here, regarding the motifs – these resonances, these modulations, of the *stimm* that are the *Stimmung*, the *Einstimmigkeit*, the *Beistimmung*, the *zusammen stimmen*, the *Stimme*, etc. – that have been at work

throughout the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” For we again find these motifs at work in the “Analytic of the Sublime”: a judgment upon the sublime again arises out of a certain *Stimmung*, in which the cognitive powers harmonize (*stimmen zusammen*) in a certain way; this *Stimmung* is once again always-already an *Einstimmung*, a *Beistimmung*, insofar as the one who judges *requires* (again without commanding) agreement; and yet again, we find a certain *voice* at work here, the “voice of reason” (*die Stimme der Vernunft*). And it would seem logical that we would find, moving from the beautiful to the sublime, the repetition of virtually the same terminology: Kant tells us at the very beginning of this section that the “moments” of judgment are the same here, in what is, after all – not unlike the “General Remarks” that deal with the *parerga* of religion within the bounds of reason – a “mere appendix” (100) (*ein bloßer Anhang*) to the first section.

A repetition, then. And yet, as with every repetition, what is interesting here is a certain change that will occur in and through it. But perhaps “change” is not the right word. For what we find, in the repetition of the *stimm*, in all its guises, in the section on the sublime, is not so much a change or variation of the workings we have already seen in the first section. What we find, on the contrary, is that – by way of a strange temporality – the *stimm* of the first section finds *itself* altered by that of the second section: the sublime *stimm*, that is, reveals something about the beautiful that was already at work in the first section, but that remained hidden. Coming after the *stimm* of the first section, the sublime *stimm* somehow reveals itself as more originary, more elemental.

Let us begin, then, as we did in reading the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” with the specific *Stimmung* of which the sublime consists. The main difference between the respective attunements of the sublime and the beautiful are the pleasures to which they give rise. When, in a judgment on the beautiful, our cognitive powers achieve the “free play” that characterizes this *Stimmung*, a pleasure ensues (the very pleasure that we associate with beautiful objects). Things are different, however, in the case of the sublime. In judgments upon the sublime, we feel what might be termed an “indirect” or “negative” pleasure – a pleasure that arises, that is, only because of a displeasure. Let us follow Kant here:

The two likings [for the beautiful and for the sublime] are...different in kind. For the one liking ([that for]<sup>52</sup> the beautiful) carries with it directly a feeling of life’s being furthered, and hence is compatible with charms and with an imagination at play. But the other liking (the feeling of the sublime) is a pleasure that arises only indirectly: it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger...[S]ince the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure. (98)

Why is this the case – why is the *Stimmung* that is proper to the sublime one of “agitation” (“*Bewegung*”) (101), as Kant states a few pages on? The answer has to do, yet again, with a certain demand, this time a demand on the part of our cognitive powers. A demand that, as we will see, is articulated – is *voiced*. This specific demand has to do, again, with a specific difference between the beautiful and the sublime:

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object’s] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness* [*Unbegrenztheit*], either [as] in the object

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<sup>52</sup> Pluhar’s (square) parenthesis.

or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality. (98)<sup>53</sup>

This, then, is the “agitation,” the back-and-forth movement of attraction and repulsion, that is referred to above. For when I gaze upon a sublime object, I am confronted by the fact that, because of its size or the fear it inspires in me, I am unable to place it within boundaries: the object, it seems, is “unbounded.” I add to this unboundedness, however, the thought of the object’s totality.

But how is it that pleasure arises from this? Is Kant not merely speaking of displeasure here, a displeasure that would ensue from my feeling of insignificance before the enormity of the object, or from the fear that the object inspires in me, or from the imbalance, in my mind, between unboundedness and totality? Let us again follow Kant here. We feel a displeasure, he explains, when we are faced with an object that does not allow us to “take it all in,” to take it in in one glance. And yet the mind refuses to give in in the face of this inability and the displeasure to which it gives rise. For the mind, Kant states,

listens to the voice of reason [*die Stimme der Vernunft*] within itself, which demands totality for all given magnitudes, even for those that we can never apprehend in their entirety but do (in presentation of sense) judge as given in their entirety. Hence reason demands comprehension in *one* intuition, and *exhibition* of all the members of a progressively increasing numerical series, and it exempts from this demand not even the infinite (space and past time). Rather, reason makes us unavoidably think of the infinite (in common reason’s judgment) as *given in its entirety* (in its totality). (111)

It is precisely the *voice of reason* that forces the mind beyond the unboundedness with which it is faced, that forces the mind to somehow conceive of the *possibility* of a totality that would be compatible with this unboundedness. And if a pleasure ensues – a

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<sup>53</sup> All square parentheses in this citation are Pluhar’s.

pleasure that is, precisely, *sublime* – when we gaze upon, for example, “shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea” (113), it is because

the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these without concern for their form and abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason that has come to be connected with it – though quite without a determinate purpose, and merely expanding it – and finds all the might of the imagination still inadequate to reason’s ideas. (Ibid.)

This is the specific “agitation” that is proper to a sublime attunement of the mind, as well as the pleasure that arises in and through the sublime: confronted with unboundedness, the mind intuits that it possesses a power – the power of reason – that is able to reconcile this unboundedness with totality, *even if this remains only an intuition* – even if, that is, we can never actually reconcile totality and unboundedness, but only conceive that reason (the reason to which we all aspire) is able to do so. It is this intuition that gives rise to sublime pleasure.

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Let us pause here for a moment to think about the trajectory of those themes that interested us in our reading of Kant’s “General Remark” on the *Geheimnis*. We have seen, in our reading of the *Critique of Judgment*, that Kant is intimately concerned here with the voice, with the *Stimme* – or rather, what we have preferred, given the repetition of this *Stimme* in the *Stimmung*, *Beistimmung*, *zusammen stimmen*, etc., to call the *stimm*. Yet again, a sort of silent voice, a voice that is more and yet at the same time less than a voice.

If we see Kant's interest in the voice "repeated" from the text on religion to the third *Critique*, we also find, yet again, a deep concern with community. We have seen that a certain agreement is postulated (articulated) by judgments on both the beautiful and the sublime, a postulation that indicates that it is never only I who make a judgment, but always *we*. And do we not find, in the section on the sublime, that this concern with community – with the "we" – is deepened somewhat? For we have seen that the sublime consists precisely in a certain conjunction of *unboundedness* and *totality*. What is at stake in the sublime, in other words, is the question of *borders*, of *boundaries* – the very theme that we find not only in the title but throughout the religion text, in the movement between this text and its "general remarks," between rational religion and its *parerga*, and in the discussion Kant undertakes of "actual" religious communities – the Jews, the Christians.

None of which should surprise us. For is there any question that is more central to the thinking of community than the question of the *border*? Must we not, whenever we think about communities, at the same time, even if only implicitly, also be thinking about borders – about the borders that would separate one community from another, that would delimit a community from its outside? *Totality*, in other words – a certain concept of the whole, of the all – would seem to be necessary in order for us even to be able to speak of community; and what would seem to be most problematic, most dangerous, for this totality, would be *unboundedness*: a calling into question of those boundaries that permit us to speak of, to conceptualize, a *we*.

Kant, however, seems to resolve this difficulty in his section on the sublime, inasmuch as he seems to resolve the question of how unboundedness and totality can

come together. For even though we cannot conceive of how this might be possible, he states, we somehow intuit that it is indeed possible – that our reason, that is, is somehow able to make this seemingly impossible conjunction.

Yet Kant gives us very little indication as to what this might *mean*. In a way, he asks us to take him at his word, stating that even though we cannot conceive of this conjunction of totality and unboundedness, our reason – to which we have no direct access – is able to do just that.

Yet this does not point to the poverty but rather to the *interest* of the text. For in order to bring together these two seemingly irreconcilable concepts – totality, unboundedness – Kant does not *transform* the one or the other: he leaves each concept intact, suspended in mid air, as it were; he forces neither to cease to be itself, to try to fit itself into the logic of the other.

Now this co-suspension – this paradoxically non-contradictory co-existence of totality and unboundedness – demands that we mistrust Kant. It demands that we not take him at his word when he tells us that totality and unboundedness meet in a realm of reason to which we are granted no access. It is as though Kant, by laying out the terms in such an interesting and rich way, begged us to betray him: to interrogate, as it were, that which he posits as the uninterrogatable.

It is a demand – a demand made by Kant himself, even if unbeknownst to him – to cross a limit. Or rather, to explore that aspect of the limit (the bound, the boundary) which constitutes its own beyond.

And this non-beyond of the limit – a non-beyond that will bring us, in due time, back to the third theme we identified in our examination of the “general remark” on the

*Geheimnis*, that of *openness* – would be nothing other than unboundedness, unlimitedness. Or, to use Kant’s term, *Unbegrenztheit*.

Let us begin with this word. We will need, first of all, to justify our use of it, for Kant, in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” speaks not only of an *Unbegrenztheit* that is proper to the sublime, but also of an *Unendlichkeit*: indeed, at times he speaks of them, as we have seen above, in the same breath. How, then, are we to distinguish between the two – how are we to think of each, and which, if indeed we must choose, is Kant dealing with in the paragraphs on the sublime? At this point, I would like to introduce another voice into the conversation – that of Jean-Luc Nancy, who, in his essay “The Sublime Offering,” interrogates the concept of unboundedness in the Kantian sublime. His starting point for this interrogation is precisely the distinction between the unlimited or unbounded and the infinite:

The unlimited no doubt maintains the closest and even the most intimate relations with the infinite. The concept of the infinite (or its different possible concepts) gives us, in a sense, the internal structure of the unlimited. But the infinite does not exhaust the being of the unlimited, it does not offer the true moment of the unlimited. If the analysis of the sublime ought to begin, as it does in Kant, with the unlimited, and if it ought to transport into itself and rework the analysis of beauty (and thus of limitation), it must above all not proceed simply as the analysis of a particular kind of presentation, the presentation of the infinite. Nearly imperceptible at the outset, this frequently committed error can considerably distort the final results of the analysis. In the sublime, it is not a matter of the presentation or nonpresentation of the infinite, placed beside the presentation of the finite and construed in accordance with an analogous model. Rather, it is a matter – and this is something completely different – of the movement of the unlimited, or more exactly, of the unlimitation [*l’illimitation*] (*die Unbegrenztheit*) that takes place on the border of the limit, and thus on the border of presentation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” 35, emphasis in original, translation modified.



Unboundedness or unlimitedness, therefore, is distinct from the infinite insofar as it does not begin “from” or lie to the outside of the border or boundary. It is rather the *edge* of the limit, the border of the border.<sup>55</sup> Unboundedness, states Nancy, is that which “sets itself off [*s’enlève*, removes itself]<sup>56</sup> on the border of the limit, that which detaches itself and subtracts itself from limitation...by an unlimitation that is coextensive with the external border of limitation.”<sup>57</sup> For there are two aspects of the limit: the aspect which *de-limits* (a form, a figure, an entity); and the aspect which *un-limits*, which removes the limit from itself, as it were, and puts it into relation with its outside. And these aspects are but a single moment: each occurs in and by the other, in the very act of the tracing of the limit.

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<sup>55</sup> The Kantian unbounded is thus in no way subsumable to the Hegelian infinite. Indeed, the differences between Kant and Hegel – the specificity or singularity of Kantian concepts in relation to Hegelian concepts that at first seem similar or identical – is one of the themes that interests Nancy throughout his essay. See, for example, his discussion a few pages on of the distinct ways in which Kant and Hegel conceive of union and unity (40).

<sup>56</sup> Expanding upon a point made in the previous footnote, I should note that one of the main themes of Nancy’s essay is the difference between a Kantian and a Hegelian thinking of *art*. From this standpoint, the term *enlèvement* – though this is never explicitly commented upon by Nancy – is striking in its richness: *enlèvement* would describe an entirely different logic, an entirely different movement, than the *relève hégélien* – or in other words, the Kantian *Erhabene* would describe an entirely different logic and movement than (all the while – the proximity of the words itself testifies to this – maintaining the most intimate of relations with) the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. (“Also heißt der Natur hier erhaben,” Kant writes, “bloß weil sie die Einbildungskraft zu Darstellung derjenigen Fälle erhebt” [§28]. -- Or Nancy: “Le sublime n’est pas ‘plus grand’ que le beau, il n’est pas plus élevé – il est en revanche, si j’ose dire, plus enlevé, en ce sens qu’il est lui-même l’enlèvement du beau” [55].)

<sup>57</sup> Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” 35.

*Unbegrenztheit*, then, is that movement by which the limit *overflows itself*<sup>58</sup> – and it is hence that which puts the *Grenze*, the limit, in contact with its own outside (is that which *opens* the limit to its outside). Yet this outside does not lie “beyond” the limit. For unlimitedness, as stated above, constitutes its “own” beyond: the beyond is not “somewhere else,” but is rather inseparable from, occurs at the very same place as, the limit itself – “à même la limite,” to use Nancy’s untranslatable phrase: in, through, at, on, *as* the limit...the limit’s sameness to itself, a sameness at the same time different to or *removed from* (“beside,” as it were) its own sameness (not *même* but *à même*). Unlimitedness is that aspect of the limit which, *in* unlimiting itself to the outside, is at once the trace of this outside, its imprint. The limit, that is – *in* this act of de-limiting itself (in the infinite beginning of this act, its incessant birth) – is at once the act of unlimiting itself: and hence is at once the mark of the *whole*, the *all*, of the outside *against* which it traces itself. It is *in* the very act of its tracing of itself, then, that the limit unavoidably *opens* itself to the all: is the mark of this all, the entirety of this outside, *with which* it has entered into relation in the very act of tracing itself. The limit – its unlimitedness – is that place *at which* the outside remains always present, that place at which it maintains its relation with the limit and that which the limit de-limits.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> It is the “*débordement*” of the *bord*, as Nancy states in the original (54) – the *débordement* without which there would be no *bord*...

<sup>59</sup> We cannot explore this link here – doing so would bring us too far afield of our task – but it is worth noting that the Kantian concept of unboundedness, as we can see even from these few paragraphs, clearly maintains some relation to what Plato, in the *Timaeus*, calls *chora* (and to what Derrida, in his text of this name, has sought to analyze), the maternal “receptacle” that is neither form nor copy but a “third space” which “provides a home for all created things” (50-2) – that which “surrounds” the copy, yet without really being distinct or apart from it.

It is hence impossible to decide *where* exactly we are on the limit, whether we are dealing with that aspect of the limit that *de-limits*, or whether, on the contrary, we are dealing with the unlimiting that takes place in and through (*à même*) this very act of delimitation. Whether we are dealing with *bord* or *débordement*, bound or unboundedness. For in and through the one, we are always already dealing with the other. Each leads, irrevocably, unavoidably, to the other: neither is ever, only, itself, but at once a strange pulling-away from itself, a stretching, a tending, toward that which is its other. A pulling, a tending, that is at the same time an *intensifying*, insofar as it is the product of a tension by which the limit is always at the same time unlimitedness, and vice versa. On the limit, *as* the limit, a certain tension.

This tension between limited and unlimited, between the boundary and its own unboundedness, is at once the tension between totality (the totality of an “entity”) and its beyond, on the non-beyond of the limit. And it is at the moment that he begins to describe this tension that Nancy’s essay begins, almost obsessively, to *sound*. It is in thinking about the taking place in and through one another of the limit and its illimitation that he speaks of the “*battement* de la ligne contre elle-même dans la motion de son tracé”; of “cette infime, infine *pulsation*, cette infime, infinie *déhiscence rythmique* qui se produit continûment dans le tracé du moindre contour”; of “ce qui *tremble* indéfiniment au bord de l’esquisse”; and finally, of the “*syncope* *rythmant* le tracé de l’accord, *évanouissement spasmodique* de la limite, tout le long d’elle-même, dans l’illimité.”<sup>60</sup> Beating, pulsation, dehiscence, *syncope*: such are the words that

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<sup>60</sup> Nancy, “L’offrande sublime,” 59, 60, 60 and 61, respectively. All emphases are mine.

describe (that lend their *voice* to) the constant opening of the sublime limit, the opening that constantly *attunes* totality (that which is delimited) and unboundedness.<sup>61</sup>

Such, then, is the *rhythm* of the sublime: the rhythm of a syncopated pulsation between totality and unboundedness (their missed beat, their shortness of breath), a rhythm that, in its *attuning* of totality, *gives* totality (makes the latter possible).

A *sublime* attunement.<sup>62</sup> For let us note here that we have never left the terrain of the sublime, precisely as Kant describes it. Let us follow him here:

In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated* [bewegt], while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* [ruhiger] contemplation. This agitation...can be compared with a vibration [*Erschütterung*], i.e. with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object [*mit einem schnellwechselnden Abstoßen und Anziehen eben desselben Objekts*]. (115)

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<sup>61</sup> This chapter would be incomplete if I did not in some way make reference to Nancy's recent book on religion, *La Déclosion*. Indeed, what I have tried to speak about here, with Nancy, as *unboundedness*, and what Kant speaks of as an essential element (perhaps *the* essential element) of the sublime, is not without relation to much of what Nancy has to say in *La Déclosion*. Speaking, for example, of Saint Anselm's *Proslogion*, he writes:

L'argument repose tout entier sur le mouvement de la pensée en tant que celle-ci ne peut pas ne pas penser le maximum de l'être qu'elle peut penser, mais aussi un excès sur ce maximum lui-même, puisqu'elle est capable de penser cela même qu'il y a quelque chose qui excède son pouvoir de penser. Autrement dit, la pensée (c'est-à-dire non pas l'intellect seul, mais bien le coeur, l'exigence même) peut penser – et ne peut pas ne pas penser – qu'elle pense un excès sur elle-même. Elle pénètre l'impénétrable, ou bien plutôt elle est pénétrée par lui. (22)

It is my hope that the reading of Kant through an earlier text of Nancy that this essay proposes will resonate, in some fashion, with certain of the insights of Nancy's text on religion.

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the word "sublime," taken in its strictest possible sense, describes this attunement (its pulsation) perfectly, as it designates not the *limen* or limit but that which lies just beneath the limit, that which brushes against it...

The *Stimmung* of the sublime would consist precisely in this “vibration,” this “rapid alternation,” between totality and unboundedness.

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What Kant describes here, then, in and through the play of these themes, is nothing other than *openness* – the essential openness of a totality, of a we.... An openness that does not exactly cancel out this totality, does not negate its possibility, but that undermines its fullness. That *ruins it*, we could state, borrowing a phrase from Blanchot, *all the while leaving it intact*.<sup>63</sup>

An openness that at the same time consists of a *sounding*: an openness essentially auditory, an openness essentially connected to and unthinkable outside the realm of the auditory. Unthinkable (inaudible?) outside of hearing, of listening, of sounding. And the sounding of this *Unbegrenztheit* is articulated in Kant, as we have seen, not so much by a *Stimme*, or a *Stimmung*, or a *Bei-* or *Einstimmung*, or a *zusammen stimmen*, but rather by all at once: by this strange sound, not quite a voice but merely the hum, the murmur, of the *stimm*.

*Stimm*: hum or murmur lacking, perhaps, the fullness of a voice, a communication, a language, yet without which the *we* would be unthinkable. *Stimm* that brings about the *we in and through* its very openness to the outside. *Stimm* of the openness of a totality, of a community.

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<sup>63</sup> See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1.

The *stimm*, in not attaining to but rather preceding language or communication, cannot be said to belong to the realm of the *known*: *stimm* that articulates itself without attaining to knowledge, understanding, reason (yet *preceding* them, without which they would be impossible). *Stimm* most vital to any possible *we*, *stimm* that is the very *with* of this *we*, yet is not some *thing*, some piece of information, some knowledge, that we can share. Even in secret.

*Stimm* that would be us even in our ignorance of it. Or rather: of that which does not and can never belong to the realm of knowledge (but without being outside of it – the *stimm*, rather, would inhabit the *borders* of the known...).

*Stimm*, then, that is not so much *our* secret as a secret that *keeps itself from us*. That keeps itself secret from us even in and by its very constitution of us. *Stimm*, to paraphrase Nancy, that would be “a secret of the common that is not a secret held in common.”<sup>64</sup>

And perhaps this *stimm* is the very voice of God (a paradoxically silent voice, let us recall: mmmmmmm...<sup>65</sup>) to which Kant referred in his “general remark”: the voice of the God who, regarding the *heilige Geheimnisse*, “has revealed nothing to us, nor can he reveal anything, for we would not *understand* it.”<sup>66</sup> A non-revealing which is at the same time a revealing, an opening, insofar as the secret, even withheld, is already a voice – already, that is, a *stimm*.

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<sup>64</sup> Nancy, *La communauté affrontée*, 41. The French text reads: “un secret du commun qui n’est pas un secret commun.”

<sup>65</sup> To paraphrase – parasound? parasite? – the title of a text Nancy co-authored with Susanna Fritscher: *Mmmmmmm*.

<sup>66</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 145.

What God would communicate to us, somehow *offer* us, with this silent voice, is the secret (the open secret) of our openness. Of a boundary of community that is at the same time an open border: a boundary that does not reach beyond itself, but is at the same time its own beyond. A boundary, and hence a totality, unthinkable without the beyond (the non-beyond) that incessantly shakes it, makes it tremble with its pulsation, *syncopates* it with its arrhythmic rhythm. Strange *tone* of the whole: a totality attuned by this very unlimitedness, this very openness.

Such is be the secret of the whole, of the we, of community, a secret perhaps essentially holy insofar as we can never truly conceptualize it, bring it within the bounds of reason. And a secret, at the same time, that announces the possibility – but is it truly, and merely, to come? Is it not at once to come and here, right here? – not of the collapse of beliefs, peoples, or communities into one, but of their openness to one another – of their co-attunement. Not of the revelation of secrets to the outside (for the secret is not ours to reveal), nor of the jealousy of the secret, the secret jealously kept from the other, the others. Rather, perhaps, a certain *faith* in the secret: in the workings of the secret of which we are unaware and can never be aware, of our continual opening, our continual cleavage, in and through the workings of the secret.

Of the secret attunement, the secret co-attunement, of the *we*.

### Sade's book of addresses

- I never knowed there was such a place as this.
- I guess there's probably every kind of place you can think of.
- Cormac McCarthy<sup>67</sup>

Sade has sent you a secret. It is a secret – this being Sade – that is comprised essentially of silence (we will speak more about why this is the case a little later), and as such you cannot hear it, you cannot read it. You know that it concerns various themes: democracy and revolution, the place of the political (what “place” means for the political), the border between death and life, the question of what it means to speak in one's own voice, and the theme of secrecy itself. But you have no way of gaining access to it.

“You” are nothing less than a century, the twentieth century. Or better, an epoch: the present, everything that is encompassed by the word “now.” At times, given that the nineteenth century tried its best to keep Sade under lock and key, it seems that the secret has bypassed everyone and everything, the entire time, between Sade and yourself. And yet upon further reflection, it would appear that these descriptions of you are inaccurate. For can anyone – even those who sought to burn his books, to expel him from public discourse, to cast his works into the famous *enfer* of libraries – truly claim to have silenced Sade? Hasn't Sade anticipated all of his would-be jailers? “You” are no doubt, simply, the inheritor of Sade's works – you are all that Sade has left in his wake.

How is it, then, that Sade addresses you? What is his word? What does he say?

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<sup>67</sup> *All the Pretty Horses*, 182.



This chapter attempts, in a continuation of sorts of the last chapter, to “listen” to Sade’s voice, less through a reading of Sade himself (though nothing, as we shall see, is less possible than reading “Sade himself”) than with certain of the great readings of his work. The chapter is not exhaustive: my aim is not to write an overview of all of the great engagements with the work of Sade,<sup>68</sup> engagements which, taken as a whole, have indelibly marked the course of modern thought, especially over the last hundred or so years. I seek, rather, to investigate certain key moments in this ongoing reflection on Sade, specifically those of Blanchot, Abraham and Torok (who do not, in fact, address Sade directly, but whose thought, I argue, contributes in an essential way to certain key themes in Sade), Sollers...and Blanchot again. In doing so, I aim not only to inquire about the stakes of reading Sade, but also, in a more fundamental way, to ask what it means to be *addressed* by Sade – an address that can only take place, I will argue, in secret.

We begin, however, by attempting to situate Sade in a specifically political manner.

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Sade. Democracy.

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<sup>68</sup> Such an overview would be next to impossible, given even a partial list of those thinkers who have written about Sade, a list which would include Blanchot, Lacan, Bataille, de Beauvoir, Foucault, Sollers.... This is not to say that just such an overview has not been attempted. Philippe Seminet, for example, devotes about half of his recent book *Sade in His Own Name*, a book to which we will return below, to summarizing the positions taken on Sade by the thinkers named above, in addition to those of Paulhan, Klossowski, Barthes, Roger Shattuck, Laurence L. Bongie, Jane Gallup and Annie Le Brun.

What does it mean to put this name and this word together?

There are many possible answers to this question. Sade, for one, is writing at what many call the birth of modern democracy, during the age of revolution. How could anyone writing at this time not be considered in relation to this background? But Sade, of course, did not simply happen to be writing at this moment, was not simply a bystander to the events unfolding around him – one could go so far as to argue that Sade, more than anyone else, was an *instigator* of these events, calling out from his cell in the Bastille, imploring those on the outside to storm the prison and free its inmates from their mistreatment. Once freed, Sade actively took part in the revolution, even becoming mayor of his Paris *arrondissement* for a brief time. In addition to these actions, his writing testifies to a great concern for the political, to the great struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, and even more, to the question of what real democracy, real liberty, might mean. And finally, Sade, one could argue, was imprisoned by democracy, in at least two different ways – imprisoned by the very revolution for which he had fought, in a startling repetition of his incarceration by the *ancien régime*; and imprisoned, long after his death, in the *enfer* of libraries not allowed to display his work, by the censors who deemed his writing too controversial, too *terrible*, to see the light of day. So many threads tying Sade to democracy, with all of its achievements and all of its failings – so many threads joining the destinies of the libertine and the politics with which he maintained such a rich and vexing relationship.

The ground here is of course well-trodden, and for good reason. For doesn't Sade give us much food for thought in our considerations of democracy, from his

famous political manifesto<sup>69</sup> “Frenchmen, one more effort if you want to be republicans,” to all of the discourses, speeches, debates that are to be found in his novels, in which the merits of various political systems are pitted against one another with the greatest possible rigour and passion?

But of all these possible entry points into a discussion of Sade and democracy, I would like to choose one that to my knowledge has only rarely been considered.

I would like to speak about a necessary concealment, hiding, *secrecy* in the texts of Sade.

A secrecy that in some ways seems to contradict what Sade says, and especially what he says about democracy, or, I should perhaps state, the political. For doesn't Sade state, at various moments in his texts, that freedom is not freedom unless *everything* is permitted? That freedom is not freedom unless we can do or say whatever we want, whenever we want; that freedom is not freedom unless we can fuck, torture, kill whomever we want, whenever we want, with no restrictions? If indeed this is the case, then what – where (the question of space will indeed be of prime importance throughout this essay, and perhaps *where* questions will be the most important of those that are asked here) – is the need for secrecy?

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<sup>69</sup> The status of this text as a “political manifesto” is of course highly controversial – what of its being placed in a work of fiction, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*? “Being placed” – is it placed simply at random? What of its being presented anonymously in this text? I leave these and other questions to the side, as they are not central to my task here; note, however, that Blanchot, in his “L'inconvenance majeure,” a text written as a preface to Pauvert's edition of Sade's essay, and to which we will return below, wonders, echoing Gilbert Lely, whether the essay was “écrit pour être publié séparément” and only later, somewhat arbitrarily, placed within the work of fiction, adding that, whatever the case may be, “cette ‘brochure’ a de toutes manières une place à part” (9) in Sade's oeuvre.

And yet even a cursory knowledge of Sade will demonstrate that secrecy abounds in his texts. If indeed the narratives of Sade's most famous works of fiction – *Juliette*, *Justine*, the *120 Days of Sodom* – are driven by act after act of cruelty, and if, as Blanchot says, one of Sade's aims is to reach a sort of zero degree of cruelty, and as such to be the most scandalous literature ever produced, then where, we must ask ourselves, does this cruelty take place?

Let us note from the beginning that it takes place always, and only, in the most secret of spaces. It is hardly even necessary to produce examples here. We think of the great chateau in the *120 Days*, or the myriad secret spaces in which Justine is taken by force: in the midst of a dark forest, in a secret monastery, or, again and again, within the seemingly impenetrable walls of castles. For now, let us ask the following: what is the relationship between these examples and Sade's statements on the nature of liberty? Why, even in a writer who seeks to explore the limits of the sayable, to say all that can be said (Blanchot), does cruelty have to take place in hiding? Cruelty, in Sade's work, functions as both a right and a gift of sorts – why, then, must it be undertaken in secret?

One could respond that in a perfect world this wouldn't be the case: in Sade's works of fiction (where strangely very little "political" activity ever takes place, which are dominated by sexual acts in private spaces), cruelty must be hidden because the world he describes is as yet unfree. This to my mind is no real response, as it seems to me that the link between cruelty and secrecy in Sade is not secondary, but that the two are rather inextricably linked, as though he thought that to investigate one could only take place through the interrogation of the other.

How, then, are we to make sense of this link? But we are perhaps moving too fast in asking this question; first of all, we will need to define our terms more clearly. What, we need to ask, is meant here by *cruelty*? Is there a logic to Sadean cruelty, and if so, what is it? And what, we also have to ask, is the nature, here, of *secrecy*: how can we accurately describe these spaces? What is their topography, their logic? Who, exactly, is placed inside of them – who is the victim of the aforementioned cruelty? How, in short, are we to think the logic of these enclosures, these chambers, these enclaves?

Let us begin by noting that the word “cruelty” is perhaps too weak to denote what we witness in Sade’s secret chambers, his hidden interiors. For the victims of violence in his novels are brought, again and again, within an inch of their lives. Compound this with the fact that many of them will never escape their condition – or will only escape it upon their death – and we are forced to conclude that what is brought about in these spaces is a state in which one is literally somewhere between life and death (in torture, does one not die a thousand deaths, as the expression has it?). The moment the victim enters one of Sade’s secret spaces, it is unclear whether or not she (for it is almost always a she<sup>70</sup>) will survive; the moment she enters these spaces, she knows that her experience will consist of a constant brushing against death. Given that the examples are so numerous here, it will perhaps not be unjust to put forth a single instance of this interplay between life and death, taken from a novel that we will return to at the very end of this chapter, *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*. When Justine is

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<sup>70</sup> The issue of whether there is something essentially feminine to secrecy will be addressed in the next chapter.

threatened with death by one of her many torturers, who tells her that he will soon bring her to a cave in order to kill her, she responds: “Quand vous voudrez, monsieur, quand vous voudrez...je préfère la mort à l’affreuse vie que vous me faites mener. Sont-ce des malheureuses comme nous à qui la vie peut encore être chère?”<sup>71</sup> In spaces like this, spaces that appear again and again in the work of Sade, the distinction between life and death becomes blurry at best.

It will perhaps not be inaccurate, therefore, if the name we give, provisionally, to these Sadean interiors is that of the *crypt*.

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In his essay “L’inconvenance majeure,” Blanchot refers famously to “le *tout dire* de Sade.”<sup>72</sup> Which begs the following question: if, as Blanchot posits, Sade has truly said everything, then what could remain to be said about Sade? Sade has literally said everything, preceded us every time we believe we have something original to say about his work – something, in other words, to *add* to his work. And indeed, what could this mean for an inquiry into *secrecy* that wished to address Sade, to turn to Sade in order to further its observations? First of all, it seems to render problematic our use of Sade. For what can possibly be secret in a work that says everything, in a work that is, to anticipate Blanchot, “monumentale,” “presque sans fin”? If nothing else, to read such a seemingly limitless work is to reveal the extent to which language, our own

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<sup>71</sup> Sade, *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, 287.

<sup>72</sup> Blanchot, “l’inconvenance majeure,” 20.

language, runs incessantly against limits. Sade, in the seeming absoluteness of his freedom, confronts us again and again with the shackles of our own speech. One could call this one of the main “effects” of reading Sade: the heightened awareness that arises of the *unsaid* that dominates our experience, the extent to which we are prohibited, forbidden, from saying what we want to say: the extent to which we lack the courage to do so.<sup>73</sup>

Now what is strange is that this endless, infinite writing is by no means inimical to secrecy; on the contrary, it is the very infinite nature of this writing that grants a certain hospitality to the secret. Blanchot himself says as much: the first long paragraph of his “La Raison de Sade,” the essay with which we will be dealing for the next few pages, deals at the same time with Sade’s secrecy and his inexhaustibility – speaks of them in one and the same breath. Indeed, for Blanchot, it would seem that the two are inseparable: the one cannot be dealt with one without the other. Remarking that it is the very absolute nature of Sade’s *oeuvre* for which both *oeuvre* and man had to be imprisoned (the latter on several occasions, the former for over a century in the *enfer* of libraries), Blanchot, in this single paragraph, deploys several possible concepts of the secret, of which I will here mention two. He writes, first of all, that “Sade, de dix façons, a formulé cette idée que les plus grands excès de l’homme exigeaient le secret,

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<sup>73</sup> And doesn’t this pose a problem of sorts for any reading that would want to situate itself within the tradition of deconstruction? The latter, of course, sets out to find heretofore overlooked moments in the text, places in which the overall logic of the text doesn’t quite hold up – the entrance, in other words, of the *other* in the text. With Sade, everything is different: it is as though the work formed a perfect orb, the shimmering sphere of a *whole*, from which nothing had been omitted and to which nothing could be added.

l'obscurité de l'abîme, la solitude inviolable d'une cellule."<sup>74</sup> We will address this necessary secrecy, this construction of secret spaces that is the condition of the exercise of power in Sade, below. But for now, let us turn to a second conception of secrecy that arises only a few lines on (and are we hence truly dealing with "another" conception here? Is the secret in Sade, is the secret that Blanchot reads in Sade, not sufficiently complex to connote these and other conceptions in a single stroke?), when Blanchot writes:

si après cent cinquante ans *Justine et Juliette* continue à nous paraître le livre le plus scandaleux qui se puisse lire, c'est que le lire n'est presque pas possible, c'est que, par l'auteur, par les éditeurs, avec l'aide de la Morale universelle, toutes les mesures ont été prises pour que ce livre reste un secret, une oeuvre parfaitement illisible, illisible aussi bien par son étendue, sa composition, ses ressassements que par la vigueur de ses descriptions et l'indécence de sa férocité qui ne pouvaient que le précipiter en enfer. Livre scandaleux, car, de ce livre on ne peut guère s'approcher, et personne ne peut le rendre public.<sup>75</sup>

The secret is at work on at least two levels here. First, in the work of keeping Sade's *oeuvre* secret, not only by the "measures" Blanchot refers to but by Sade himself, "lui qui," states Blanchot, "a toujours aspiré à la solitude des entrailles de la terre, au mystère d'une existence souterraine et recluse."<sup>76</sup> To read Sade would be "presque pas possible" simply because the work itself is in one way or another inaccessible. And yet the unreadability of Sade is not only due to this inaccessibility. On the contrary, writes Blanchot, if this *oeuvre* is "illisible," it is not only because the work itself is hidden, but because it remains hidden even when it becomes accessible: the work does not become more readable once we can actually read him! Its breadth, its repetitions, its

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<sup>74</sup> Blanchot, "La Raison de Sade," 218.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



descriptions, its *ferocity*, in and by the very act of continually reasserting themselves, would at the same time mask something, keep something hidden or obscure – keep something unexpressed and unexpressable in this very infinity of expression. Sade, in saying everything, would at the same time withdraw from us – would render himself unapproachable, *unaccompanyable*, impossible to bring out into public, into the *open*.

This Sadean secret, yet another open secret, is inseparable, I will argue, from the question of *death*. From a sort of living death, a death itself inseparable from the question of living (as though any other treatment of death by way of Blanchot could be possible).

Indeed, the destinies of secrecy and death – or rather, secrecy and the border between life and death – in Blanchot’s treatment of Sade seem linked from the very beginning. For in the very first paragraph of “La Raison de Sade,” the paragraph from which we took our examples above, secrecy, life and death confront one another, brush by or against one another, maintain the most intimate of relations with one another – consort, mix, circulate with one another. Blanchot writes:

Quand on voit les précautions qu’ à prises l’histoire pour faire de Sade une prodigieuse énigme, quand on songe à ses vingt-sept années de prison, à cette existence confinée et interdite, quand cette séquestration n’atteint pas seulement la vie d’un homme, mais sa survie, au point que la mise au secret de son oeuvre semble le condamner lui-même, encore vivant, à une prison éternelle, l’on en vient à se demander si les censeurs et les juges qui prétendent murer Sade, ne sont pas au service de Sade lui-même, ne remplissent pas les vœux les plus vifs de son libertinage, lui qui a toujours aspiré à la solitude des entrailles de la terre, au mystère d’une existence souterraine et recluse. (217-8)

In a single long sentence, an emphasis on secrecy in all its forms: secret, but also mystery, imprisonment or incarceration, confinement, interdiction or forbiddance, sequestration, censorship, *immurement*. It is impossible, when speaking of Sade, not to

speak of all these forms of hiding, of concealment, not only of the work but of the man himself. Yet the very same breath that speaks the secret in its multiple “subterranean and reclusive” forms at the same time – in and through this repetition, this *ressassement*, of the secret – utters a certain *undecidability* between life and death. For Blanchot, it seems, the Sadean secret is inseparable from a questioning, to return to the above quotation, “not only of the life of a man, but his survival” (his living-beyond-death, as it were), of what it means to think the incarceration of a Sade “encore vivant” in a “prison éternelle.”

These observations on secrecy, it seems to me, are central to the *stakes* of Blanchot’s reading of Sade; secrecy, in other words, is part of what makes turning to Sade – which Blanchot did again and again, in a more or less continual engagement with Sade – an *urgency* for Blanchot. Sade, perhaps as much as any writer except Kafka, enabled Blanchot to interrogate this Blanchotian theme *par excellence*: the impossibility of deciding, once and for all, between life and death. But Sade, more perhaps than even Kafka, enabled Blanchot to conjoin two trains of thought that would seem separate, discrete: the thinking of life, death, survival, on the one hand, and on the other, the recurring theme – present literally throughout Blanchot’s writing – of *secrecy*.

This is not to say that secrecy is the overarching theme of the essay we have been reading to this point, or for that matter of any of Blanchot’s complex engagements with Sade. Nowhere in Blanchot’s *oeuvre* do we find an essay entitled “Sade’s secret,” “Sade and secrecy,” or “What Sade does not tell us,” to echo the titles of texts Blanchot has devoted to other writers. But the least we can say is that whenever Sade comes up in Blanchot’s writing – either in the essays entirely devoted to Sade, or those that treat

him less systematically or only in passing –we find a conjunction between secrecy, living and dying.

Indeed, it is perhaps this conjunction that, for Blanchot, is most proper to Sade. It is perhaps this conjunction that defines, better than anything else, Sade's *system*. Blanchot examines this system in "La Raison de Sade," an essay that proceeds almost dialectically: in its attempt to define Sade's system, the essay moves from one possible refutation of Sade's reasoning to another, each time moving, in the affirmation Sade opposes to every refutation (the affirmation by which he *negates* every possible refutation), to a different, more complex, higher level of his system.<sup>77</sup> A procedure by which Blanchot eventually arrives at the concept of what he calls the *Unique* in Sade: the individual who is literally beyond the law, the *exception*.<sup>78</sup> Now the sphere of this

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<sup>77</sup> It should be stated here that Blanchot's treatment of Sade is never far from a thinking of Hegel – it is hence logical that this essay on Sade proceeds according to the laws of the dialectic. The reverse is also true: Blanchot's famous essay "Literature and the Right to Death" (which we shall turn to briefly below), arguably a sustained reflection on Hegel (the longest such reflection, to my knowledge, in all of Blanchot – a sort of coming-to-terms with Hegel, perhaps, on the part of Blanchot), turns to Sade precisely at its most telling points, in a discussion of the Terror, for example.

<sup>78</sup> The Unique is beyond the law, but this does not mean that he or she seeks to overturn the law. Rather, the law and the Unique enter into an agreement of sorts, whereby each tolerates the other in order to further its own purposes. This tolerance hinges on a secret (on the promise made by the Unique to undertake his/her unlawful acts in secret):

En fait, la Puissance s'accommode de n'importe quel régime. À tous, elle refuse l'autorité et, au sein d'un monde dénaturé par la loi, elle se crée *une enclave où la loi fait silence*, un lieu clos où la souveraineté légale est ignorée plutôt que combattue. Dans les statuts de 'la Société des Amis du Crime' figure un article qui interdit toute activité politique. 'La société respecte le gouvernement sous lequel il vit, et si elle se met au-dessus de ses lois, c'est parce qu'il est dans ces principes que l'homme n'a pas le pouvoir de faire des lois qui contrarient celles de la nature, mais les désordres de ses membres, toujours intérieurs, ne doivent jamais scandaliser ni les gouvernés ni les gouvernements.' ("La Raison de Sade," 229, my emphasis)

Unique is that of secrecy; and the content of this sphere, indeed what separates it, perhaps, from the sphere of the law, is not so much the cruelty (a truly boundless cruelty) that takes place within it as what this cruelty reveals: an indeterminacy between life and death. Let us follow Blanchot here: speaking of Sade's continual procession of "hecatombs," he writes:

Qui ne se rend compte que, dans ces mises à mort gigantesques, ceux qui meurent n'ont déjà plus la moindre réalité, que, s'ils disparaissent avec cette facilité dérisoire, c'est qu'ils ont été préalablement annihilés par un acte de destruction totale et absolue, qu'ils ne sont là et qu'ils ne meurent que pour porter témoignage de cette espèce de cataclysme original, de cette destruction qui ne vaut pas seulement pour eux, mais pour tous les autres? Cela est frappant: le monde où avance l'Unique est un désert; les êtres qu'il y rencontre sont moins que des choses, moins que des ombres et, en les tourmentant, en les détruisant, ce n'est pas de leur vie qu'il s'empare, mais c'est leur néant qu'il vérifie, c'est leur inexistence dont il se rend maître et de laquelle il tire sa plus grande jouissance. Que dit donc, à l'aube des 120 Journées, le duc de Blangis aux femmes réunies pour le plaisir des quatre libertines? 'Examinez votre situation, ce que vous êtes, ce que nous sommes, et que ces réflexions vous fassent frémir, vous voilà hors de France au fond d'une forêt inhabitable, au delà de montagnes escarpées dont les passages ont été rompus aussitôt après que vous les avez eu franchis, vous êtes enfermées dans une citadelle impénétrable, qui que ce soit ne vous y sait, vous êtes soustraites à vos amis, à vos parents, *vous êtes déjà mortes au monde.*' Cela doit être entendu au sens propre: elles sont déjà mortes, supprimées, enfermées dans le vide absolu d'une Bastille où l'existence n'entre plus et où leur vie ne sert qu'à rendre sensible ce caractère de 'déjà mort' avec lequel elle se confond.<sup>79</sup>

Such is the condition to which Sadean secrecy inevitably leads (such is that which Sadean secrecy, that is, hides or conceals): that of the "already dead," the living dead, the life for which the very fact of living is an annihilation.

A living dead that emerges only in secret, and which is never far from, which is inextricably linked to, an economy of pleasure, desire, *jouissance*. Indeed one could state that within this Sadean structure, as conceived of by Blanchot, these three terms –

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<sup>79</sup> Blanchot, "La Raison de Sade," 241-2, emphasis in original.

desire, secrecy, death (or “death-life”) – act always in concert; neither is ever really to be found in isolation from the others; each is a kind of motor that constantly propels the narrative toward the other two. They are three terms of a single structure, a structure that falls apart the moment that a single one of them is lost.

This structure at which Blanchot arrives calls to mind another body of work, one that, despite its surface differences, seems animated, to a certain degree, by the same concerns. I am thinking here of the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who, throughout their work, seek to interrogate the very nexus onto which Blanchot’s engagement with Sade opens – that of desire, secrecy, and a living death – in and through their concept of *incorporation*. It is to this concept that we now turn.

Now at first glance it might seem to be too big a jump to move from Blanchot to the decidedly foreign territory of psychoanalysis. Yet the work of Abraham and Torok seems at times to be so close to that of Blanchot as to have been written from the same pen. Indeed one would have to say that what these writers have in common is their seeming unclassifiability. An unclassifiability, first and foremost, with regards to the question of *death*, which is perhaps the secret thread that brings these very different writers into contact. And indeed, don’t Abraham and Torok suggest, in their strange treatment of death, a kind of essential relationship between death and secrecy? As though every time we spoke about secrecy, we were at the same time speaking of death, a kind of impossible death?

*What*, then, is this link between death and secrecy? The response, for Abraham and Torok, lies in the concept of *incorporation*.

The *psychoanalytic* concept of incorporation, that is. Laplanche and Pontalis, in their *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, note that Freud introduces this term in 1915, “lorsqu’il élabore la notion de stade orale,”<sup>80</sup> and indeed, we find this concept in several of Freud’s writings from this period, for example in his “Mourning and Melancholia,” where, regarding the object-choice corresponding to identification, he writes: “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it.”<sup>81</sup> Freud also employs the term incorporation in *Totem and Taboo*, again within the context of a discussion of cannibalism. We should keep this link to the oral stage, and the motif of eating or devouring *another*, in mind as we think about this term; we should also note that a more complete discussion of incorporation would have to consider its deployment in other important theorists of psychoanalysis, most notably Karl Abraham and Melanie Klein. For reasons that will become clear below, however, I will focus here on the use of this term by Abraham and Torok, who describe incorporation as a kind of short-circuit of mourning (and their concept is thus greatly indebted to, and takes its bearings from, the concept of mourning developed by Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia”). An incorporation occurs when a loved one is lost: when this occurs, the loved one is literally *incorporated*, stored in a secret space of the psyche. This space must be secret because in order for incorporation to work, the process of incorporation must remain secret not only to others, but to the very subject in

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<sup>80</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, 200.

<sup>81</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 249-50.

whom it occurs. It is this secret space in the psyche that Abraham and Torok call, throughout their work, the *crypt*.

This name, of course, necessitates that we spend some more time here. Why “crypt”? We have of course already stated that the one who is incorporated is dead, either literally or in the unconscious of the incorporating subject. A crypt, then, would seem the perfect metaphor: a vault in which one is laid to rest; a compartment sturdier than an ordinary grave, in which one is literally, to borrow from Blanchot's description of Sadean secrecy, immured.

How are we to think this necessary link to death that is suggested by the word “crypt”? We begin to find elements of a response in Torok's 1968 article “Maladie du deuil et fantasme du cadavre exquis,” in which, following Ferenczi, she takes special care to distinguish the concept of incorporation from that of *introjection*. The latter is described thus in Ferenczi's own words:

J'ai décrit l'introjection comme un mécanisme permettant d'étendre au monde extérieur les intérêts primitivement auto-érotiques, en incluant les objets du monde extérieur dans le Moi... À prendre les choses à la base, l'amour de l'homme ne saurait porter, précisément, que sur lui-même. Pour autant qu'il aime un objet, il l'adopte comme partie de son Moi... Une telle inclusion de l'objet d'amour dans le moi, voilà ce que j'ai appelé: introjection. Je me représente... le mécanisme de *tout transfert sur un objet*, par conséquent de *tout amour objectal*, comme *introjection*, comme *élargissement du Moi*.<sup>82</sup>

Introjection, let us note, does not only occur in neurotics: it is proper to the very act of loving. According to Ferenczi's conception, a subject's love is to begin with only for himself; only secondarily does he love “exterior objects,” and only insofar as he can “adopt them as parts of himself.”

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<sup>82</sup> Ferenczi, quoted in Torok, “Maladie du deuil et fantasme du cadavre exquis,” 235.

How, then, does introjection differ from incorporation? Torok provides an initial response to this question when she states that “la visée de l’introjection n’est pas de l’ordre de la compensation mais de l’ordre de la croissance: elle cherche à introduire dans le Moi, en l’élargissant et en l’enrichissant, la libido inconsciente, anonyme ou refoulée.”<sup>83</sup> Things are quite different for incorporation:

C’est bien ce mécanisme qui suppose, pour entrer en action, la perte d’un objet et cela, avant même que les désirs le concernant aient été libérés. La perte, quelle qu’en soit la forme, agissant toujours comme interdit, constituera pour l’introjection un obstacle insurmonté. En compensation du plaisir perdu et de l’introjection manquée, on réalisera l’installation de l’objet prohibé à l’intérieur de soi. C’est là l’incorporation proprement dite.<sup>84</sup>

Incorporation, then, as opposed to the “croissance” or growth of the self that defines introjection, *always begins with a loss*: the “prohibited object” comes to be incorporated into the self. Further, states, Torok, incorporation “se distinguera toujours de l’introjection, processus progressif, de par son caractère instantané et *magique*.”<sup>85</sup>

Now this magical act must of necessity remain *secret*. Torok continues:

[C]ette magie récupérative ne saurait dire son nom. À moins d’une crise maniaque ouverte, elle a de bonnes raisons de se soustraire au grand jour. Car, ne l’oublions pas, elle est née d’un interdit qu’elle contourne, sans le transgresser vraiment. Elle a pour but, en fin de compte, de recouvrer, sur un mode magique et occulte, un objet qui, pour une raison, s’est dérobé à sa mission: médiatiser l’introjection du désir. Acte éminemment illégitime, puisque refusant le verdict de l’objet et de la réalité, l’incorporation, tout comme le désir d’introjecter qu’elle dissimule, doit se soustraire à tout regard étranger, y compris celui du propre Moi. Pour sa survie, le secret est de rigueur...<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Torok, “Maladie du deuil et fantasme du cadavre exquis,” 236.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 237.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.



And hence the tenacity with which the incorporated object, the “foreign body,” resists its discovery, holds fast to its secret hiding place within the body:<sup>87</sup> it must remain secret even to the very Ego behind which it hides.

Why, then, are we dealing with *death* here? Whence the “cadavre exquis” to which the essay’s title refers, the “crypte au sein du moi,” to cite the title of the section of the book in which this essay is found?<sup>88</sup> The answer has to do with the fact that the act of incorporation has its roots in a *loss*. An object is incorporated only when it cannot be introjected; by definition, therefore, it cannot be loved; and the unlovable body that is incorporated is therefore a kind of “dead” body, a cadaver or corpse. Torok thus explains that the repression by which the incorporated body is kept secret “ne fait pas que séparer; il a encore pour mission de *conserver* précieusement – quoique dans l’inconscient – ce que le Moi ne saurait figurer que comme un cadavre exquis, gisant quelque part en lui et dont il n’aura cesse de rechercher la trace dans l’espoir de le faire revivre un jour.”<sup>89</sup> This “exquisite cadaver” is hence not exactly dead, not precisely a

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<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Abraham and Torok’s most famous book, *Le verbier de l’homme aux loups*, is itself a testament to this tenacity: the secret of this book is that two of the most renowned analysts of all time – Freud and Ruth Mack Brunswick – “got it wrong” with regards to the Wolf-man, precisely because they did not understand (because the Wolf-man was so good at unconsciously hiding) the specific *incorporation* with which he was “afflicted.”

<sup>88</sup> The book is Abraham and Torok’s *L’écorce et le noyau*, comprised of 22 essays (many of them written collaboratively) and divided into six sections. The complete title of the section in which the essay we are reading here is found is “La crypte au sein du Moi. Nouvelles perspectives métapsychologiques.”

<sup>89</sup> Torok, “Maladie du deuil et fantasme du cadavre exquis,” 242.

corpse: it is kept *encrypted* within this “tomb” in the hopes that it can one day be resuscitated, brought back to life, as it were.<sup>90</sup>

And it is for this reason – for the fact that the “foreign body” is not exactly dead, but somewhere between life and death – that the exquisite cadaver, far from being mute, in fact retains the power of speech, on the condition that this speech maintain its distance from everyday speech, on the condition that it speak a kind of “death speech,” that it invent its own “necrology,” its own grammar and vocabulary. On the condition that it invent what Abraham and Torok elsewhere call a *cryptonomie*, a “magic word,” by which it at once expresses itself and keeps itself secret – by which it keeps itself secret *in the very act of expressing itself*. By which it testifies to a sort of half-life that it leads from beyond the grave.

What is of interest here for our purposes in the psychoanalytic concept of incorporation, as it is articulated by Torok, is the complex interplay of love, loss (a synonym, in this case, for death), and secrecy that it seeks to describe. Doesn't incorporation thereby provide an explanatory mechanism of sorts for the passions that arise concerning this incorporated other – all that which can be undertaken, all the fantasies that can be projected upon, this imago “au sein du Moi”? Deleuze, as Žižek is fond of relating, says somewhere: as soon as we are caught in the fantasy of the other, we're fucked. And who, then, could be more fucked than the incorporated object – not merely caught in a fantasy, but completely given over to the fantasies of the other insofar as it is imprisoned within him – and indeed, subject to the cruellest possible

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<sup>90</sup> While I cannot go into this in very much depth, let me note that there is a play on words here: *Cadavre exquis* was a collective writing game invented by the surrealists in 1925.

fantasies, insofar as, placed in the very “sein du Moi,” it must of necessity constitute a threat to this “Moi”?

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It may seem strange to spend all this time on the psychoanalytic concept of incorporation in an essay that is ostensibly about Sade and secrecy. But if we bring psychoanalysis into the fray here, it should not be a complete surprise, and not only because both Freud and Lacan, the latter at considerable length, deal with the work of Sade.<sup>91</sup> We shall see in the reading we are about to undertake that Sade himself (though it is precisely this selfhood that will be in question, as we shall see) has much to say about certain concepts that are essential to psychoanalysis, indeed without which the work of the two psychoanalysts we have just mentioned would be unthinkable.

Yet if we have just dealt extensively with incorporation, it is not least because it provides us with an essential link between death, secrecy and desire – or, to employ the language Sade himself uses in the text we shall be reading: death, secrecy and *passion*. It will do so by way of the concept of the crypt. In Sade’s writings, as we have repeated several times to this point, violence always occurs in secret crypt-spaces in which the borders between life and death are effaced.

Incorporation, therefore, serves as a kind of “way in” to these spaces, a concept that allows us to understand their logic; and indeed, viewed retrospectively, Sade’s

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<sup>91</sup> Indeed Freud spends a considerable amount of time talking about Sade in the essay we mentioned above, “Mourning and Melancholia.”

spaces seem like nothing less than spaces in which the concept of incorporation is enacted or performed *avant la lettre* – so that by the time we get to Freud, to Ferenczi, to Abraham and Torok, to psychoanalysis, these writers seem to be doing little more, where the concept of incorporation is concerned, than describing or picking up on a work already begun – and indeed, already taken to its most obscene and radical possible conclusion – by Sade. It is as though Sade spoke through psychoanalysis, by way of psychoanalysis, presenting us with a concept vital for understanding the links between violence and secrecy.<sup>92</sup>

And this is not the only instance in which we see this act of speaking through, of speaking by way of.

Let us pause here for a moment to think about our reflections, to this point, on the logic of violence in Sade. We have already said, first with Blanchot, and then with Abraham and Torok, that Sade demands that we think a space of concealment or secrecy that is proper to violence, to this extreme violence in which the borders between life and death cease to make sense. Is there a place, however, in which this violence truly comes to the fore, in which this violence breaks through the borders of its concealment to see the light of day, moves from private to public, from interior to exterior? What would become of this violence, what would become of the logic of these spaces of violence, if this were to occur?

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<sup>92</sup> I say this despite the fact that Lacan himself warns against such formulations: “Que l’oeuvre de Sade anticipe Freud...est une sottise” (119), begins his essay “Kant avec Sade.” To my mind, however, the links here are unmistakable.

We are given an answer of sorts to these questions – a strictly Sadean response – in a text that is not exactly by Sade, but in which his voice somehow continues to speak. I am thinking of a recent text by Philippe Sollers, entitled *Sade contre l'être suprême*.<sup>93</sup>

The first thing we need to understand about this text, which is written in the form of a letter, is that it is in fact a hoax: written by Sollers, it was published under the name of Sade, and presented as a recent discovery. It first appeared in 1989, to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. An editor's note informs us that this "extrêmement curieuse" letter (this is the least we can say about it, as we shall see below) "avait été confiée par Apollinaire à Maurice Heine, puis, par ce dernier, à Gilbert Lely" (57) – these being the men who did the most, before Blanchot, to bring Sade back to the center of literary debates,<sup>94</sup> in the wake of a nineteenth century that sought variously to ignore or to censor him.<sup>95</sup> Lely, the editor's note continues, "nous l'a transmise peu avant sa disparition, avec l'instruction de ne la publier qu'en 1989, pour le bicentenaire de la Révolution française" (ibid.). The strange history Sollers invents for this letter is thus entirely plausible. As Armine Kotin Mortimer notes in her recent essay "*Sade contre l'être suprême* de Philippe Sollers: une parodie critique," one of the curiously small number of scholarly articles written on this text,

[c]ette "généalogie" est des plus vraisemblables, car Lely, mort en 1985, était l'éditeur des oeuvres de Sade en 1962-1964, l'auteur d'une *Vie du marquis de Sade* et l'éditeur de sa correspondance, et Maurice Heine (1884-1940), poète érotique comme Lely, avait tiré Sade de l'oubli presque total aux années vingt du vingtième siècle en publiant ses textes. Quant à Apollinaire, on sait qu'il a

<sup>93</sup> All references to this text will be made parenthetically in the body of the essay.

<sup>94</sup> In a note to his "L'inconvenance majeure," Blanchot asks: "Faut-il rappeler ici tout ce que l'on doit aux travaux considérables de G. Lely continuant ceux de Maurice Heine?" (50).

<sup>95</sup> Sollers, "Sade dans le temps," in *Sade contre l'être suprême*, 11.

conçu des oeuvres érotiques et qu'il a proclamé l'importance de Sade pour le vingtième siècle.<sup>96</sup>

The “editor’s note” continues to situate Sade’s authorship of this letter (whose recipient, we should point out, is not indicated by name) within the realm of plausibility when it states that its “destinataire...ne peut être que le cardinal de Bernis, exilé à Rome, et mort en 1794” (7): the cardinal was a well-known and important historical figure with whom Sade could very well have entered into correspondence, given his intelligence and his literary proclivities (the cardinal was a member of the Académie française). Indeed, the very fact that this letter, the content of which is, as we shall see, deeply anti-religious, seems to be addressed to a cardinal acts as a kind of seduction for the reader, for it is entirely plausible that Sade – the most scandalous of writers, Blanchot has claimed – would address his hatred of religion to a religious authority, or would have thought a religious authority the only worthy recipient of his remarks; indeed, Sade’s novels are populated by priests, monks, indeed even popes, whose existence is given over entirely to acts of cruelty. The note continues with further precise references to figures, places, dates: “La date de la lettre est, d’après nous, le 7 décembre 1793 au soir” (ibid.), a conclusion arrived at because the letter makes reference to the “supplice de Mme du Barry qui eut lieu le jour même. Or on sait qu’il [Sade] fut arrêté le lendemain 8 décembre (18 frimaire an II à dix heures du matin)” (7-8). And with this imprisonment, Sade “commence donc la série de ses internements successifs sous la Terreur: Madelonettes, Carmes, Saint-Lazare, Picpus (où il se retrouve en compagnie de Laclos)” (8), only to escape execution for reasons still unknown. The note ends with

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<sup>96</sup> Mortimer, “*Sade contre l’être suprême* de Philippe Sollers: une parodie critique,” 323-4. Henceforth referred to as “*Sade*.”

this reference to the night during which Sade is supposed to have written the letter: “Le marquis, ce soir-là, se sait-il menacé? On peut le penser. D’où l’importance particulière de ce document, dont l’actualité frappera sans doute plus d’un lecteur” (8-9).

The “editor” – Sollers himself, of course – thus seems, with this reference to the letter’s “actuality,” to give a kind of secret nod to the reader, or to the astute reader at the very least. He seems to say to this astute reader: “you have probably already caught on to this hoax, to this joke, if you read carefully you will realize that I, Sollers, am the author of this letter, and you shall enjoy it not only for its literary quality, but also for the chuckle we will have at the expense of those who believe in its veracity.” And this is certainly the opinion of Mortimer, who, concerning this last phrase of the editor’s note, writes: “La dernière phrase fait clin d’oeil pour avertir le lecteur de faire attention à ce que ‘Sade’ (les guillemets serviront à indiquer le Sade inventé par Sollers) aura à dire à notre vingtième siècle finissant.”<sup>97</sup> We will have more to say about the “guillemets” to which Mortimer refers below. For now, let us take note of a footnote that Mortimer attaches to the words we have just cited. I reproduce this long note in its entirety, for reasons that will appear more clearly below:

Malgré cet avertissement, malgré le nom de Sollers sur la couverture,<sup>98</sup> des lecteurs se sont laissé tromper et certains sont encore trompés. J’ai par exemple

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<sup>97</sup> Mortimer, “*Sade*,” 324.

<sup>98</sup> This is in fact only true of certain editions of *Sade contre l’être suprême*. The text was first published in 1989, as we have noted, by Quai Voltaire; this edition, in the form of a “pamphlet,” as Mortimer notes, is entitled simply *Contre l’être suprême*, and omits Sollers’s name completely. The next edition, also a pamphlet, was published in 1992, this time entitled *Sade contre l’être suprême*, and with Sollers’s name appearing on the cover. Finally, in 1996, to cite Mortimer, “Sollers en fait un vrai livre, publié chez Gallimard, en faisant précéder la lettre de son essai ‘Sade dans le temps,’ daté de

trouvé un site web qui donne des paragraphes du texte de Sollers comme venant de *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. Ou veut-on simplement perpétuer la supercherie? Cependant, même des spécialistes sont abusés: sous le titre inconsciemment ironique de *Sade in His Own Name. An Analysis of Les Crimes de l'amour*, Philippe Seminet publie en 2003 un livre qui cite la traduction anglaise du texte de Sollers comme une lettre de Sade (p.79, 201), et la même année Caroline Weber, dans *Terror and its Discontents. Suspect Words in Revolutionary France*, consacre quatorze pages à une analyse de *Sade Contre l'Être Suprême* sans se rendre compte une seconde que le texte n'est pas de Sade (p.178-91). Son analyse fait partie du chapitre 'The Second Time as Farce: Sade Says It All, Ironically'; l'ironie se retourne contre elle.<sup>99</sup>

For Mortimer, therefore, the text is quite simply a hoax, and anyone who allows himself to be fooled by this hoax is quite simply fooled or duped, “trompé.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Mortimer is particularly brutal with the “spécialistes abusés,” whom she implicitly accuses of not being careful enough readers, or perhaps simply not being good enough readers. And it is no doubt true, as we shall see below when we begin to read the letter in earnest, that there are plenty of points in the letter that would seem to very clearly reveal it for the hoax that it is.

Why, then, has the letter fooled the “specialists”? I find it difficult to follow Mortimer when she accuses Seminet and Weber of having been duped, and of being poor readers: Weber's book, in particular, presents, in my opinion, a far more interesting, important, and rigorous reading of *Sade contre l'être suprême* than either of

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l'année de la publication” (323; this is the edition I am using here). It should be noted that the “Avertissement de l'éditeur” appears in all three editions, and that Sollers, in the essay that is included only in the third edition, makes no mention of his hoax, treating the letter as having been written by Sade – Sollers's essay, in other words, is itself a kind of hoax, a second-degree hoax or a hoax on a hoax...

<sup>99</sup> Mortimer, “*Sade*,” 324-5.

<sup>100</sup> I myself found myself in this position, and it should thus be kept in mind by the reader that to a certain extent, my attempt, here, to make sense of all of the ramifications of this hoax is at the same time an attempt to understand why or how I was duped, and what it means to be taken in by a hoax, by a literary or an epistolary hoax, or by this particular hoax.



the two articles in which Mortimer deals with this text.<sup>101</sup> And yet perhaps this is exactly the point – perhaps this goes to the very heart of the matter. For perhaps the only way to truly do justice to Sollers’s text is to be duped or abused, to fall for the hoax, whether consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps the only way to do justice to this text is to attribute it to Sade, and not the “Sade” *entre guillemets* by way of which Mortimer seeks to maintain her distance from Sollers’s ruse. Toward the end of her article, Mortimer writes that Sollers’s text acts as a “pastiche de la voix de Sade,”<sup>102</sup> and argues convincingly that that Sade is “le meilleur porte-parole pour Sollers.”<sup>103</sup> But I wonder if we shouldn’t instead turn this relationship around: if the letter is so convincing, if many have already been seduced by this letter and by the desire to attribute it to Sade, it is perhaps because it is not Sade who acts as a “spokesman” for Sade, but the reverse: perhaps it is Sade who employs Sollers as his spokesman. Perhaps it is Sade, in other words, who *ventriloquizes* Sollers.

For Sade to ventriloquize Sollers, for Sade to ventriloquize the twentieth century, for Sade to ventriloquize writing: what would this mean?<sup>104</sup> And how could

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<sup>101</sup> The other is her 2006 article “The Essay According to Sollers: A Personal and Parabolic Genre.”

<sup>102</sup> Mortimer, “Sade,” 331.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 330.

<sup>104</sup> I should note here that there is a rich literature on the concept of “ventriloquism.” To go into this literature would constitute too long of a digression here, but let me simply refer the reader to what I consider an exemplary text on the matter: Nancy’s “Le Ventriloque,” which probes the concept of ventriloquism through a reading of Plato’s *Sophist*. See also Borges’s brilliant “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (we will return to the question of the authorship of the *Quixote* in chapter four), and the hilarious *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq*, written by Borges in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy-Casares, whose eponymous protagonist has a habit of inscribing his name on the covers of books he enjoys, given that these books, he reasons, are perfect expressions of his thoughts and sentiments.

we prove that it was taking place? It would seem that the response would lie in trying to identify Sade in Sollers, in trying to discern his voice in this foreign body of work. And indeed, one of the most uncanny effects of reading Sollers's hoax is that the temptation of falling for the ruse is at all times present, for the simple fact that Sollers's "imitation" is very good. Yet our reading of Blanchot suffices to demonstrate that such an approach is, strictly speaking, impossible. One cannot "sound like" Sade for the simple reason that there is no sound in Sade's writing. To paraphrase Blanchot, we are not dealing with a "style" when reading Sade, but something like a pure limit-experience at every moment: the style, if there is one, is nothing but a pure relentlessness, a zero-degree of violence attained almost immediately from one work to the next, and maintained for the longest duration possible (an almost infinite duration). It is the style of a single piercing note being held for hours on end, in all of its monotony and in all of its horror.

To be ventriloquized by Sade would in all likelihood be something quite different. Rather than the ability to attain a particular style – which, when one thinks about it, is the easiest thing in the world – it would mean to work on the same terrain as Sade, to be seized by the same imperative that seizes him, to respond, we could say, to the same injunction: from our perspective, that of interrogating the nexus of secrecy, desire and the limits between life and death. To be ventriloquized by Sade would mean nothing more (but this is already a great deal) than to have each of these terms speak through the other, to have them speak a common language, as it were. If a writer attains this aim, who is to say that he does a disservice to Sade by signing his work in the latter's name?

Let us take a closer look, then, at this act of ventriloquism. To do justice to *Sade contre l'être suprême* – to do perhaps the only justice possible, in this regard – I will refer to the author of the text, except when otherwise noted, as Sade.<sup>105</sup>

Sade, as we have already noted, writes this letter on his last night of freedom, a fact that only serves to heighten the letter's importance, given that, as we read in the editors note, he had reason to believe he would soon be arrested. And yet far from seeking to appease the authorities who would arrive in a few short hours, he takes aim at an institution dear to the heart of *l'Incorruptible* himself: the Cult of the Supreme Being. A “religion,” the celebration of which Robespierre would proclaim only a few months later, that would replace Christianity: while the God of the Christians was to be abhorred, a revolutionary state, Robespierre reasoned, could not do without a conception of some sort of supreme being.<sup>106</sup> Much, of course, has been written about this, but let us listen here to Sade's words. His letter begins thus: “Un grand malheur

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<sup>105</sup> This very brief discussion of the hoax, of what I have called the “ventriloquism” at work in this text, does not, of course, truly do justice to the theme of the hoax, and the very interesting relations it maintains with secrecy, to the questions that are raised at their point of intersection: is a hoax not always carried out in secret? What are the conditions on which this secret is revealed? Does the status of the text change once the cat is out of the bag, once the “real” author admits his ruse? Or, to look at things from a slightly different perspective: is every hoax an act of ventriloquism? And what does this mean, what ramifications does this have, for the act or for the possibility of speaking in one's own voice? Once the ruse is found out, does the perpetrator of the hoax go back to speaking in his own voice, does he cease to speak in the voice of the other whom he has tried to emulate, or who has taken hold of him – does the other in whose voice he speaks somehow have less of a grip on him, somehow possess him less, once the game is up?

At the center of all these questions is the issue of what it means to speak in one's own name, what it means to speak in the name of another. It is my hope that the rest of this chapter will treat this issue, if not directly, then at least obliquely – and indeed, how else could such an issue truly be dealt with, given that we are never sure, in dealing with it, *whom* we are speaking about?

<sup>106</sup> As such, Robespierre of course owed a great deal to the Deism of Voltaire.

nous menace, mon cher Cardinal, j'en suis encore étourdi. Il paraît que le tyran<sup>107</sup> et ses hommes de l'ombre s'appêtent à rétablir la chimère déifique" (61). And his description of this chimera for the benefit of the distant cardinal continues:

Me croirez-vous si je vous dis que l'évangile secret de la nouvelle religion que j'espère encore impossible (mais nous y allons à grands pas) peut se résumer ainsi: 'Tu haïras ton prochain comme toi-même?' Cela ne vous paraît-il pas bien cocasse, bien effarant? Était-il besoin de briser les autels de la superstition et du fanatisme pour en arriver à reconstruire à l'envers ce culte grossier? Nous pensions avoir déraciné l'hypocrisie, eh bien, on nous prépare, figurez-vous, un autre spectacle. Après les flots de sang, vous savez quoi? Je vous le donne en cent, en mille, en cent mille: *l'Être suprême!* Ne riez pas, c'est le nom regonflé de la Chimère, on nous a changé la marionnette d'habits. (61-62)

Months before its official proclamation, Sade already senses the danger of this "chimera." But what might this danger be? Was the Cult of the Supreme Being not a short-lived and on the whole risible endeavour, relatively unimportant compared to the Reign of Terror during which it was first celebrated? Yet what Sade seems to be saying here is that the two are inseparable – as though the Terror presupposed this Godless religion, this religion of nothingness,<sup>108</sup> whose arrival it welcomed; as though the former could not do without the latter. After all, is the "secret gospel" of this religion not "you shall hate your neighbour as you would hate yourself"; and will its arrival, according to Sade, not increase the Terror's streams of blood a thousand times over?

What Sade seems to suggest, in other words, is that this new religion is a religion of death, a sort of celebration of death, entirely apt for the thanatocracy of the Terror. But again, we would have trouble distinguishing it, solely on this account, from

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<sup>107</sup> The tyrant, of course, can only be Robespierre.

<sup>108</sup> But in this regard can we really distinguish it from Christianity, or from monotheism in general? "Monotheism is an atheism," goes the famous formulation of Schelling. On this topic, cf. Nancy, "Athéisme et monothéisme," in *La Déclosion*, 27-46.

the religion that it is meant to supplant; and are Sade's novels not themselves celebrations of death? When Sade writes "Aurait-on décidé de mettre à nu le noeud des passions humaines serrant l'annihilation de tous par tous, qu'on n'aurait pas mieux réussi" (70), he could easily be describing his collected works of fiction. But there are many possible treatments, many possible conceptions, of death. Sade continues:

Oui, chacun veut la mort de chacun, c'est vrai. Mais qu'on y mette alors de l'invention, du piment, l'infinie ressource des formes, et non cette froideur sentimentale de tribunal mécanique. La *peine* de mort me révulse, la mort devrait être toujours liée au plaisir. Il serait interdit de se moquer de la mort? Voyez-moi ça! La mort sérieuse! Industrielle! Morose! Technique! Et, qui plus est, accompagnée des jérémiades de Saint-Preux, des frilosités de l'Épinette, vous savez, la petite grue de Grimm? (70-71)

What Sade disagrees with, therefore, is not the fact that death is placed at the very heart of this new religion, but the *way* this religion conceives of death: as utterly devoid of passion, of pleasure; as an "industrial," "morose" and "technical" death; a lugubrious death, a death of lamentation, a death with cold feet, as the last sentence would suggest.

And hence it is not surprising that the protagonist of this work – the main character, we could call it, of this letter – seems to be death itself. Or rather, the most dispassionate death possible, the death of the instant, of the moment, a death devoid of adjectives – a death that does not blend with (and hence enrich) life but is separated from the latter by the cleanest of cuts. Death, that is, of the *guillotine*. If we can go so far as to call the guillotine, this guillotine-death, the text's protagonist, it is because, in this thanatocracy of the Reign of Terror, in this thanatotheism that is the Cult of the Supreme Being, it is the guillotine upon which everything depends – the motor that drives both terror and cult forward, and makes each possible. And it is the guillotine, in

this work, that occupies the richest and most striking passages, passages to which we now turn.

Sade introduces the topic of the guillotine rather abruptly, about a third of the way through his letter. And he does so through a hilarious discussion of the nicknames that have been given by the public to this machine of death.

Savez-vous comment on appelle ici la guillotine? “La cravate à Capet”; “l’abbaye de Monte-à-regret”; “la bascule”; “le glaive des lois”; “la lucarne”; “le vasistas”; “le rasoir national”; “la planche à assignats”; “le rasoir à Charlot”; “le raccourcissement patriotique”; “la petite chatière”; “la veuve.” Ces deux derniers noms ne mériteraient-ils pas un long commentaire? Gageons cependant que “la veuve” a un long avenir devant elle et que l’Être suprême sera son éternel mari. (74)

The very least we could say about this almost boundless profusion of names is that it testifies to a deep fascination with the guillotine – in the series of appellations to which it gives rise, it appears as nothing less than a magical object for which many names must be invented, because none of them precisely captures its essence. And yet if this inventory calls to mind another famous categorization – Borges’s oft-invoked Chinese encyclopedia<sup>109</sup> – it is not only because of its humour, or the difficulty one would have of placing these names within a single taxonomical schema, but because one of these names seems to cancel out, or call into question, all the others. I am speaking, of course, of the “vasistas,” which in everyday French refers to a kind of window that is cut into, and can be opened independently of, another window or door. The word, as is immediately evident when we hear it spoken, has as its etymological origin the German “Was ist das?” – and far from being one name among many, therefore, “vasistas” would appear here, like the Polynesian *mana* (or the French *machin*) of which Lévi-Strauss

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<sup>109</sup> In his “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” 104-5.

writes,<sup>110</sup> to function as a name that names that for which no name is possible. The “vasistas” would be the reverse image of all the other names – of their totality, itself revealing an impotence of naming.

These names for the unpronounceable, we know, are always closely related to the holy, and such is the connotation Sade gives to the name “veuve”: the Supreme Being, he states, will be her eternal husband, implying, of course, that the Supreme Being, wed to a widow, is both alive and dead. And this divine name provides a starting point for the rest of this series of names, for Sade is far from finished; the citation above continues thus: “Il y a d’ailleurs eu des discussions autour de l’appellation divine. L’un voulait qu’on l’appelât ‘le Grand Autre.’ Pour une divinité *alterée* de sang, ce n’était pas mal. D’autres hésitaient: le Grand Suprême? L’Autre Suprême?” (74). The “Big Other”: what immediately strikes us, of course, is the foreshadowing of Lacan (and as we shall see below, this will not be the only adumbration in this passage). Let us simply note, with Sade, the divine nature of these names; as with the first list of nicknames, they testify to a kind of unapproachable alterity on the part of the guillotine.

Now at this point in the passage, the register of these names shifts somewhat; it begins to take on a more international or cosmopolitan, and philosophical, flair:

Quelques Allemands qui se trouvaient là ont proposé tantôt “l’Esprit,” tantôt “le Sujet Transcendental.” L’un d’eux, particulièrement obstiné, voulait qu’on se mît d’accord sur “la Chose en soi” ou “l’En-Soi.” Un autre tenait qu’on s’en tînt à “l’Être,” sans adjectif. Il avait une figure très sacrale. Un autre a proposé plus hardiment: “le Néant.” Le Néant suprême? Avouez que ce Dieu, cent fois plus cruel que l’autre qui s’était déjà surpassé, ne sera pas censé avoir des états d’âme. Quoi encore? Un Viennois de passage prétendait que nous devions

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<sup>110</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, especially 50ff.

désormais nous prosterner devant “l’Inconscient.” Il s’est vaguement mis à parler aussi du “Manque-à-Être,” mais c’était assez, il fallait trancher. L’Être Suprême l’a emporté, les préparatifs de son intronisation devraient se montrer bientôt. (74-75)<sup>111</sup>

Interestingly, this entire passage reads like an inventory of philosophemes, of the most important concepts of the last two hundred years and beyond. And indeed the theme of untimeliness is yet again at work here: for as we have seen, just as this letter foregrounds the impossible distinction between life and death, and just as it posits the guillotine as widow to that which, at this moment of Terror, is most alive – the Supreme Being – we are dumbfounded by the actuality of Sade’s voice here. A Frenchman speaking of the “Grand Autre”? A Viennese suggesting the name “Unconscious,” or, alternatively, “Manque-à-Être”? At the very least we can associate the names that are bandied about by the Germans – Spirit, Transcendental Subject, In-Itself – with the philosophy of the late eighteenth century, even if, just as he uncannily prefigures Freud and Lacan, Sade seems to do the same here with Hegel.<sup>112</sup> But let us simply note the following. For Sade, these names that more or less name the entire history of thought – from philosophy, through literature, to psychoanalysis – are the names of the guillotine: the names, in other words, of death, of the most dispassionate, monotonous,

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<sup>111</sup> Sade’s inventory of names does not end even here. A few lines later, he states: “Et pourquoi ne pas appeler notre divinité ‘le Poumon,’ comme aurait dit Molière?” (75). And toward the end of his letter, we find pair of new names with a decidedly religious flair, when he refers to “une procession ininterrompue de saint-sacrement vers l’autel de l’idée-couteau, le tabernacle du tranchant-néant” (88).

<sup>112</sup> In her reading of this text, Caroline Weber suggests that, despite the fact that many thinkers (of whom Lacan is only the most famous) have paired Sade with Kant, there is much more to be gained from a reading of Sade with Hegel. See *Terror and its Discontents*, 266 n.12.



instantaneous death possible. They are the names of a stroke of death identified so closely with the Supreme Being as to be indistinguishable from it.

Let us step back for a moment, if possible, from this hoax, in order to ask: what does it mean for Sollers to play this game of untimeliness; what does it mean for Sollers to posit all of these names as names of the guillotine, to infuse all of these theoremes or philosophemes with this morose, passionless death? Many hypotheses are possible. One could posit that Sollers, quite simply, wants to give Sade his due: perhaps he is arguing that just as the gruesome events being depicted in this letter stand at and mark the very birth of democracy, Sade stands at the birth of all of the most important moments in the thought of the last two hundred years, a thought itself infused and marked by the democratic tradition, a thought that has sought to think the political and that which is specifically modern about the politics of our time. And we would no doubt not be wrong to hypothesize that one of Sollers's interests lies in placing Sade within the ranks of other writers and thinkers who have most often been deemed more important.

But I wonder if, at the same time, Sollers isn't saying something slightly different in this passage, if what he suggests doesn't go beyond the claim that Sade constitutes a kind of origin for all of these thinkers, that he is their equal, that he belongs in their ranks. I wonder if he is also suggesting that, whether they realize it or not, all of the thinkers who are hinted at by the passage above – all of these different “supreme beings” – are in constant communication with, are at all times grappling with, this kind of holy word or name that is the *vasistas*, this nameless death so at odds with and yet so central, so unavoidable, for language. I wonder if Sollers, in listing these

concepts, isn't saying: these concepts are so infused with, infected by, this nameless yet all-pervasive death as to be unthinkable without it, and the only way to truly do justice to these concepts, in the wake of any reading of Sade, is to grapple with this passionless, matter-of-fact, quotidian death that lies at their very heart. This is, of course, the way Sade's fiction works: violence, cruelty, death occur so often that his books, as Lacan states, literally fall from our hands;<sup>113</sup> language itself becomes indistinguishable from the death that pervades it. What Sollers seems to be saying here is that this is not only true of Sade, not only true of language in Sade, but of *all* language, even – especially – that language that considers itself the highest possible language, a holy language of sorts: the conceptual language within which we move about the moment we begin to think.

Let us move back to the intersection with which we began this section – the confluence, in Sade, of death, passion, and secrecy. In our reading of *Sade contre l'être suprême*, we have seen that Sade has much to say about the first two terms of this triumvirate. But what of the third, the one that should, after all, concern us most here – what of secrecy? This letter, it would seem, would have very little to say about secrecy: is the violence described by Sade not marked first and foremost by the fact that it is so terribly *public*? Indeed, is this not the text that of all of Sade's works would have the least to say about secrecy, insofar as, dealing as it does with the Terror, it is the place in

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<sup>113</sup> The boredom inherent in reading Sade, writes Lacan in *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, is absolutely key to understanding Sade, and central to what he calls the latter's *mauvaiseté*. "Que le livre tombe des mains," writes Lacan, "prouve sans doute qu'il est mauvais, mais le mauvais littéraire est peut-être ici le garant de cette *mauvaiseté* – pour employer un terme encore en usage au XVIIIe siècle – qui est l'objet même de notre recherche" (237, emphasis in original).

Sade in which violence – that which so often drives the Sadean narrative – is the *least* secret?

We should perhaps step back here once again, and note that it may be this fact – the fact that violence comes out into the open in this text – that, beyond all the temporal inconsistencies, beyond any of the chronological inaccuracies, makes it clear that this text is a hoax; or rather, since clarity is as impossible as it is undesirable here, it is this coming into the open of violence that does the most to call the authenticity of this text into question. Following Blanchot, we would have to call this open violence distinctly un-Sadean or un-sadistic. Yet perhaps, in bringing violence into the light of day, Sollers does not so much betray Sade as bring something out in Sade that already existed but lay dormant in his work, something that existed in a kind of potential form. What Sollers does here, I think, is to perform an experiment on Sade, asking: what if we took this violence that always remained concealed in Sade, and somehow brought it beyond the threshold and into the exterior? What would the ramifications be for Sade, and what would the ramifications be for this violence? What would the ramifications be for the concept of secrecy in Sade?

We will deal with these questions – especially the last – soon, but for now let us state the following: perhaps what Sollers is saying, perhaps what Sade is saying, by placing violence out in the *open* here in a way that he doesn't anywhere else, is nothing other than this: the Terror (or simply terror?) is that moment in which secrecy is impossible; and once this occurs, violence, coming out in the open, breaking what had appeared to be the shackles of secrecy, loses its creativity, becomes *utterly dispassionate*, and death becomes nothing more than a monotonous repetition. After his

long passage on the names of the guillotine, Sade, for the rest of his letter, never truly moves away from the “widow,” and indeed, some of his most striking passages deal with the monotony of the death that it brings about, the sheer boredom of its uninterrupted slaughter.

On dit à présent que le sang, coulant à travers les madriers sous la guillotine, sert de nourriture aux chiens en plein jour. Il se coagule trop vite pour être absorbé par la terre et produit, en se corrompant, une infection qui s'étend sur toute la place. D'après les témoins, le peuple danse la carmagnole autour de l'arbre de la liberté et de la machine à meurtres, sans se soucier une seconde des cadavres que l'on emporte. Jamais on n'a été si dédaigneux de vivre, et l'insouciance, parfois, est portée à tel point qu'on assiste à des scènes inouïes. Ainsi Joseph Chopin, hussard, vingt-trois ans, a continué à fumer sur la bascule, la tête et la pipe sont tombées ensemble dans le panier. Les prisonniers ne demandent plus qu'à en finir, Sanson [the famous executioner of the revolution] en convient: “J'ai pu m'habituer à l'horreur que nous excitons, mais s'accoutumer à mener à la guillotine des gens tout prêts à vous dire ‘Merci,’ c'est autrement difficile. Et encore: “En vérité, à les voir tous, juges, jurés, prévenus, on les croirait malades d'une maladie qu'il faudrait appeler *le délire de la mort*.” (85-86, emphasis in original)<sup>114</sup>

Yet perhaps even the eloquent Sanson's appellation is inaccurate, for far from a *délire*, we are much closer here to what Sade calls the “mécanisation générale” (77) of a death without pleasure, the “abattoir patriotique” (ibid.) of a death become life.

Now let us take note of the following fact: in Sade's fiction, as we have already sought to establish, death – the experience of a life become death – is unthinkable outside of the concept of the crypt. Yet here, in this letter, it is this very all-pervasiveness of death, this impossibility to distinguish between death and life, that marks the public sphere as such – indeed, that *constitutes* the public. For what, in *Sade contre l'être suprême*, constitutes the relations between subjects if not the guillotine?

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<sup>114</sup> While Sade sprinkles his letter with quotations from great figures such as Rousseau and Voltaire, no one, tellingly, is cited more often than Sanson. The latter's journals can be read in *La Révolution française vue par son bourreau*.

What else but the guillotine brings them together, puts them into proximity with one another, brings about their *relation*? The very first condition of belonging to the *we* of the public space Sade describes here is existing in some relation to the guillotine, speaking the language of this death-machine. Opposition is voiced to its workings only at the risk of a literal *excommunication* (and is it any wonder, therefore, that Sade must keep the opinions expressed in this letter absolutely secret?).<sup>115</sup>

Yet if we follow the strict logic of the Sadean text, we must state that it is not, in fact, the case that violence has simply passed to the outside of the crypt. Why would Sade need to betray his principles in order to conceive of a public violence? If this death/life indistinction moves to the outside, it is not that it “escapes” the crypt. What must occur, on the contrary, is the spreading of the crypt-space beyond the walls that once enclosed it. And this is precisely what is most horrifying about this letter: it speaks not only of a society ruled by violence, but of a public sphere that has itself become indistinguishable from the crypt. What Sade describes in this letter is quite simply a generalized sphere of the crypt.

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<sup>115</sup> That this death machine literally constitutes the possibility of saying “we” in all that is described by Sade’s letter is manifested by Sade himself, when he states: “Je ne veux pas qu’on dise *vive* pour: à mort! Et pas davantage *nous* pour: vive la mort!”(89). A few pages earlier, he mentions a certain Montjourdain who, on his way to the gallows, spent his last moments composing a song, of which Sade transcribes the following lines:

Quand au milieu de tout Paris  
 Par un ordre de la patrie,  
 On me roule à travers les ris  
 D’une multitude étourdie,  
 Qui croit que, de sa liberté,  
 Ma mort assure la conquête,  
 Qu’est-ce autre chose, en vérité,  
 Qu’une foule qui perd la tête. (87)

What Sade speaks of here is a generalized secrecy.

For if it is not simply violence that moves beyond the walls of the crypt, but on the contrary the crypt itself that moves beyond its own walls, we must state that the rules of the crypt do not change because of this extension. On the contrary, the logic of the crypt that we described at the beginning of the essay is still intact. What we are left with, therefore, is a bizarre situation in which the most public act is at once the most secret act. And since the secrecy of the crypt is precisely the secrecy of the indistinguishability of life and death, it is this very indistinguishability, in all its secrecy, that comes to reign supreme – that determines the logic of the public, of space in general.

It is this extended crypt-space that, for Sade, names the revolution.

We are not far here from the terrain on which Blanchot is working in his “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” in which he writes that “dans le monde libre et dans ces moments où la liberté est apparition absolue, mourir est sans importance et la mort est sans profondeur. Cela, la Terreur et la révolution – non la guerre – nous l’ont appris,”<sup>116</sup> and in which, moments later, he states that Sade “s’identifie parfaitement avec la révolution et la Terreur.”<sup>117</sup> In this essay, let us recall, Blanchot defines revolution and the Terror as the moment in which death is “without importance.” Only a moment before doing so, however, he puts forth a very different definition of terror: in such moments, he writes, “[p]ersonne n’a plus droit à une vie privée, tout est public, et l’homme le plus coupable est le suspect, celui qui a un secret, qui garde pour soi seul

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<sup>116</sup> Blanchot, “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” 310.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 311.

une pensée, une intimité.”<sup>118</sup> A pair of seemingly contradictory definitions for revolution and Terror, then: on the one hand, it is the moment at which death is so commonplace as to be without importance, and on the other, it is the moment at which keeping a secret renders one guilty. But are these definitions really so mutually exclusive? For Blanchot, each points to a situation in which “personne n’a plus droit à sa vie, à son existence effectivement séparée et physiquement distincte. Tel est le sens de la Terreur.”<sup>119</sup> The ban on secrecy in the Terror is thus at once a kind of ban on life, insofar as keeping a secret and keeping one’s life both point to a “separate and distinct” existence – that which, in a time of revolution, renders one suspect.

But is it not in keeping with Blanchot’s hypotheses to state that, in this revolutionary moment (as it is described by Sade), secrecy and death collude in a very different way? Blanchot states that in the Terror’s reign of death, secrecy becomes impossible. But is it not this very impossibility that renders secrecy omnipresent? Haven’t we already seen that in this reign of living death, what rules above all else is death as *vasistas*: this strange, unspeakable guillotine-language that, insofar as it is everywhere, is precisely nowhere?

*Vasistas*, guillotine-language, death-language. What we are dealing with here is literally a *cryptic* language, a language of the crypt.<sup>120</sup> But a language that is *no less*

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 309. I must express my gratitude to Thomas Pepper for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> We are very close here to the terrain staked out by Abraham and Torok in their famous study *Le Verbier de l’Homme aux Loups*, and indeed, one of the neologisms from this book, “cryptonomy,” describes very nicely what we are trying to deal with here: a language that is essentially cryptic (secret, hidden, codified), and whose cryptic nature is intimately related to the theme of death, as suggested by any crypt. What we

*secret* for having passed by the walls of the crypt, for having extended itself into a generalized crypt-space. For just as, according to the logic of incorporation, the other is kept in the crypt in complete secrecy from the ego, and just as the subject who speaks the crypt-language does so unbeknownst to himself (just as he is ventriloquized), the language of this generalized crypt, of this crypt as public sphere or public language, keeps itself secret, a secret to those very beings who pronounce its words. If this crypt-language literally constitutes the public sphere, this means that it has no real outside: what is articulated is articulated in and through it, and even that which is in opposition to it must be made sense of through it, by way of it. Furthermore, this crypt-language does not announce itself, does not announce itself as such: on the contrary, it announces itself as revolution, as liberty, as equality – as *democracy*, as an absolute democracy. To speak out against it, therefore, is in a way to incur your own death, to have your death literally pass through you, to announce it to yourself and to all those to whom you address yourself.

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are dealing with here is a language with its own grammar, a language with a kind of secret grammar, if you will. Our distinction from Abraham and Torok's work, however, is that here we are not dealing with the language of a single subject, like the multilingual "Tierka"-language of the Wolfman's unconscious. On the contrary, what marks the cryptonymy described in Sade's letter is that it is a language in a more traditional sense of the word, a language that literally holds a community together, constitutes a common bond, a field in which a common sense or signification, a shared meaning, is produced. It is a language in which the seemingly most remarkable events become commonplace, even necessary, a language that, in making these events common currency, renders them absolutely banal and deprives them of their noteworthiness.

And for this very reason, what we state about Sade's cryptonymy also differs from Abraham and Torok's crypt language, inasmuch as we are not dealing with an interior here. On the contrary, Sade's crypt, his crypt-language, complicates any distinction between inside and outside.



This is perhaps why Blanchot refers to Sade as the writer of the revolution *par excellence*, as the absolute incarnation of the revolution in writing: it is as though his writing literally performs the revolution, articulates it, enunciates it. Between Sade and the revolution, there would be absolutely no distance: the two coincide with one another perfectly.<sup>121</sup>

This observation is obviously a dangerous one for democracy. For insofar not only as democracy is inseparable from a thinking of revolution, insofar not only as the destiny of modern democracy is linked to the *French* Revolution,<sup>122</sup> but also insofar as, as many have noted, democracy holds this moment of absolute violence within itself as a kind of essential kernel, an origin always present and always capable of bursting forth, we must conclude that what we have been talking about thus far, what Sade deals with in his letter, is in no way foreign to democracy. On the contrary, the death-language we have tried to stake out here is always whispering, in one way or another, through the very words spoken by democracy, and is always in danger of coming to the fore – of completely hijacking the language of democracy. What is most proper to democracy is the fact that it holds this possibility within itself. But it is precisely when this secret comes out into the open, when it ceases to be a secret, or when it becomes a generalized secret, that democracy puts itself at risk: at risk of a kind of suicide, a sort of self-cannibalization, as it were. And this is why Blanchot's labelling of Sade as the absolute

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<sup>121</sup> See p.311 of "La littérature et le droit à la mort," where Blanchot writes that Sade "s'identifie parfaitement avec la révolution et la Terreur."

<sup>122</sup> This is no doubt one of the reasons for which Blanchot privileges the *French* Revolution in "La littérature et le droit à la mort." Speaking of the all-pervasiveness of death that comes to the fore in every revolution, Blanchot nonetheless states: "En cela, la Révolution française a une signification plus manifeste que toutes les autres" (309).

writer of revolution extends to the democracy that holds its revolutionary moment always alive-dead within itself, and why there is in fact no distance between the letter we have been reading and Sade's great works of fiction: each is simply the reverse of the other. And indeed, in light of the absolute violence of this letter, must Sade's fiction not be looked upon as a plea of sorts? A plea, that is, for the *secret*; a plea to keep the secret just what it is, a plea to keep the secret a secret, to keep it in secret. A plea to keep the death that becomes generalized in his letter within strict walls, a plea for the *passion* of death that is only possible, he seems to suggest, in secret. Or, "stepping away" once more from the hoax, we could state that if Sade never, or almost never, allows violence to move beyond its concealment, it is for good reason: because he understands very well the forms that this unveiled violence would take; or quite simply, because he himself bore witness to this unveiled violence during the Terror.

The alternative that Sade seems to lay before us, therefore, is this: either a democracy become thanatocracy, or a series of hidden, secret sites – not really so secret – in which life and death become indistinguishable, interchangeable. But is there a language in Sade that is not a death-language? Is there any way to think the questions Sade lays before us without having to choose between a specific and a general death-space? Is there a way of saying "nous" without saying "à mort"?

Perhaps there is yet another level of secrecy in Sade; perhaps we can locate this secrecy in a certain form of address.

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An address, for let us recall that over the last several pages we have been reading a letter. And letters, as we know, are most often addressed. *Sade contre l'être suprême* is no exception: in the very first sentence, as we have already seen, we read the words “mon cher Cardinal” (61). And the references to the dear cardinal abound in the letter: the address is the second person singular formal, and the word “vous” makes an appearance on almost every page. But this is not the only form of “address” we find in this letter. We will move toward the very end of the text here, to its last few sentences, where Sade writes the following: “Il faut maintenant finir, mon cher Cardinal, mon messenger frappe à la porte les coups convenus” (97). Sade is in a hurry to hand his letter off to the messenger, because he knows that the hours of his freedom are numbered; Sollers adds in a note that “[l]e Marquis est donc arrêté le lendemain matin, 8 décembre 1793 à dix heures” (ibid.). In a hilarious final flourish, Sade asks the cardinal not to forget him in his prayers, and gives him the following advice, or command: “Promenez-vous, lisez, écrivez, vivez comme le subtil Arétin voulait qu'on vécût en ce très bas monde qui n'a rien de suprême. Et croyez-moi toujours votre non humble et non obéissant non-serviteur, c'est-à-dire votre ami” (ibid.).

The very last address of the letter, then, is one of friendship, and this is no doubt the most natural or common thing in the world: for to whom else would one write a letter, especially such a rich and beautiful letter, if not a friend? Everything we have read to this point tells us that Sade is very fond of the distant cardinal, that the bond between them is indeed very strong. But something beyond this specific friendship is at work at the end of the letter, in this last address. For this is far from the only place at which we find the *ami* in Sade's work. What we are witness to here is a repetition, one

that promises, perhaps, to lead us beyond the crypt-language to which we seem to have been brought by our reading of *Sade contre l'être suprême*.

It is at this point that we turn, finally, to Sade. That we turn, in other words, to Sade's own writing,<sup>123</sup> to one of his most famous novels, the first of his novels published during his lifetime: *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*.

Our reading of this novel will perhaps best be described as *peripheral*. We will be reading its perimeter or its borders, we could state. We will take this approach in part because the "body" or "content" of the novel is, quite simply, unapproachable: Sade, from the standpoint of content, has quite simply said everything, to return to Blanchot's formulation. Perhaps we could put it better by saying that there is nothing much that we can add here, no real commentary we can make, on what takes place in the novel: it consists, quite simply, of act upon act of cruelty undertaken upon its eponymous heroine or protagonist.<sup>124</sup> As such, it is quite easy to summarize: Justine, orphaned at fourteen, is expelled from a convent for financial reasons, and, separated from her sister Juliette, is left to fend for herself; she spends the next thirteen years wandering through France and being made to undergo successive acts of cruelty and torture. It is interesting that Lely, in his authoritative work on Sade, does not attempt to describe these acts, but rather includes a long citation (a little more than a page) taken from Maurice Heine's description of the novel, preceding this citation with these words: "le résumé qu l'on va lire est trop digne de son objet pour que nous ayons cru devoir le

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<sup>123</sup> Though the question of the proper is far from clear here, as we shall see below.

<sup>124</sup> Though neither "heroine" nor "protagonist" seems appropriate for this figure caught between life and death.

refaire.”<sup>125</sup> Following Lely, let us read Heine’s description here: “Elle s’évade à seize ans de la Conciergerie, mais c’est pour courir au-devant d’un viol dans la forêt de Bondy”; “Recueillie et soignée par Rodin, aussi habile chirurgien que libertin instituteur, elle en est marquée au fer rouge et chassée quand elle cherche à l’empêcher de disséquer vive une enfant dont il est le père”; “Un pèlerinage auprès de la Vierge miraculeuse de Sainte-Marie-des-Bois la fait devenir victime et rester six mois captive des quatre moines lubriques et meurtriers de cette abbaye”; “Incarcérée de ce chef à Lyon, elle y est tourmentée et condamnée par un juge prévaricateur et débauché.”<sup>126</sup> The novel, in other words – “pas si roman que l’on croirait,”<sup>127</sup> writes Sade at the very beginning of the book – is in a certain sense nothing more than an inventory of sorts: in recounting the “malheurs” of Justine’s virtue, Sade seeks a kind of taxonomy of the most barbaric acts he can imagine; it is as though his aim in writing the book were to outdo himself from one page to the next.

Justine is thus the perfect embodiment of this zone of indistinction between life and death that has been our theme here. But we have not yet said everything about this zone, this state. To delve into it further, we will have to address the form of *address* that is proper to this novel.

The theme of the address here should perhaps begin with the question of how the narrative itself is addressed. Who speaks in this novel? The answer seems straightforward: Justine quite simply tells her own story. She recounts it in the first person. She recounts it in the past tense, with the exception of dialogue, which is

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<sup>125</sup> Lely, *Vie du Marquis de Sade*, 481. Henceforth referred to as *Vie*.

<sup>126</sup> Qtd. in Lely, *Vie*, 481-2.

<sup>127</sup> Sade, *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, 51. Henceforth referred to as *JMV*.

reported in the present. She recounts it to a man and a woman; she will find out only later that the woman is her sister, Juliette. The story she tells is no doubt gruesome, horrific, but she tells it in the most straightforward, uncomplicated way possible.

But the story of Justine, the story of this strange existence, begins even earlier. I am not speaking of the fact that she does not begin to tell her story until about ten pages into the novel, that her narrative is preceded by several pages which introduce Madame la comtesse de Lorsange (Juliette) and her companion, Monsieur de Corville, and describe the meeting of these two figures with Justine. I am not even speaking of the very first two pages of the novel, three strange paragraphs which introduce the novel that follows as a philosophical lesson of sorts. I am speaking, rather, of what comes even before the beginning: a series of epigraphs, dedications, even illustrations, that we might, following Genette, call the novel's paratext.

I will introduce this paratext by following Gilbert Lely:

Le premier ouvrage de Sade publié de son vivant est sorti des presses de Girouard, rue du Bout-du-Monde, a Paris, en 1791, probablement vers le milieu du second semestre. L'édition originale de *Justine*, en deux volumes in-octavo, est ornée d'un frontispice allégorique de Chéry représentant la Vertu entre la Luxure et l'Irréligion. Le nom de l'auteur ne figure pas sur la page de titre, et, comme dans beaucoup de livres sans privilège, le nom de l'éditeur y est remplacé par la rubrique: *En Hollande, chez les Libraires associés*.<sup>128</sup>

As with almost all of the works of Sade published during his lifetime, *JMV* is published anonymously; officially, at least, it must not be known that this work is written by Sade or that it is published in France. This should not surprise us, given the content of Sade's novel, and that it was a relatively common practice at the time. More interesting for our purposes is the frontispiece on the page facing the title page. Rather than giving my

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<sup>128</sup> Lely, *Vie*, 480.

own detailed description of this image, let me simply quote here from the Cercle du Livre Précieux edition of the novel, which gives the following description in lieu of a reproduction of the image:

*La vertu entre la Luxure et l'Irréligion. A gauche est la Luxure, sous la figure d'un jeune homme dont la jambe est entourée d'un serpent, symbole de l'auteur de nos maux; elle enlève d'une main le voile de la Pudeur, qui dérobaient la Vertu aux regards des profanes, et de l'autre, ainsi que de son pied droit, dirige la chute dans laquelle elle veut la faire succomber. A droite est l'Irréligion qui retient avec force un des bras de la Vertu, tandis que d'une main perfide elle arrache un serpent de son sein, pour l'empoisonner. L'abîme du Crime s'entr'ouvre sous leurs pas. La Vertu, toujours forte de sa conscience, lève les yeux vers l'Eternel, et semble dire:*

Qui sait, lorsque le Ciel nous frappe de ses coups,  
Si le plus grand malheur n'est pas un bien pour nous !

*(Oedipe chez Admète.)*<sup>129</sup>

Put simply, then, the image represents the temptation of Virtue by Lust and Irreligion. From the excellent description above, let me emphasize the words that Virtue seems to speak (words quoted from Ducis's *Oedipe chez Admète*): perhaps, she intimates, the great misfortune that we undergo when struck by blows from the sky is in fact a kind of good for us.

This is essentially the message of the novel's enigmatic first two pages, but also of another piece of "paratext," this one more of a traditional preface or dedication. It is entitled "À ma bonne amie," and here are its first few words: "Oui, Constance, c'est à toi que j'adresse cet ouvrage." Now we know that this "bonne amie," this Constance, is a real person. In the "Livre de poche" edition of *JMV*, we read: "Justine est donc dédié à Marie-Constance Renelle (Mme Quesnet) avec qui Sade était lié depuis août 1790.

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<sup>129</sup> *JMV* 53

Ce fut le début d'une liaison qui dura jusqu'à sa mort."<sup>130</sup> And Sade goes on, in the

dedication, to explain the "dessein" of this novel to his amie:

[O]ffrir partout le vice triomphant et la vertu victime de ses sacrifices, montrer une infortunée errante de malheurs en malheurs; jouet de la scélératesse; plastron de toutes les débauches; en butte aux goûts les plus barbares et les plus monstrueux; étourdie des sophismes les plus hardis, les plus spécieux; en proie aux séductions les plus adroites, aux subordinations les plus irrésistibles; n'ayant pour opposer à tant de revers, à tant de fléaux, pour repousser tant de corruption, qu'une âme sensible, un esprit naturel et beaucoup de courage: hasarder en un mot les peintures les plus hardies, les situations les plus extraordinaires, les maximes les plus effrayantes, les coups de pinceau les plus énergiques, dans la seule vue d'obtenir de tout cela l'une des plus sublimes leçons de morale que l'homme ait encore reçue; c'était, on en conviendra, parvenir au but par une route peu frayée jusqu'à présent.<sup>131</sup>

The dedication thus seems to repeat the outline of the novel already offered by the frontispiece: Virtue will be debased in all sorts of ways, but only in order to arrive at "the most sublime moral lesson that man has ever received"; therein, suggests Sade at the end of this passage, lies the novel's uniqueness. The word "sublime" should be taken as literally as possible: the third *Critique*, after all, has just been published (the year before *JMV*), and sublimity – whether or not Sade's text can achieve it – is key to the question of whether or not the lesson will succeed, as we see in the final two paragraphs of the dedication:

Aurait-je réussi, Constance? Une larme de tes yeux déterminera-t-elle mon triomphe? Après avoir lu Justine en un mot, diras-tu : « Ô combien ces tableaux du crime me rendent fière d'aimer la vertu ! Comme elle est sublime dans les larmes ! Comme les malheurs l'embellissent ! »  
 Ô Constance ! que ces mots t'échappent, et mes travaux sont couronnés.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>130</sup> The note is found on page 27 of the Livre de Poche edition of *JMV*.

<sup>131</sup> *JMV* 51-2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 52.



The portraits of crime offered by the novel, far from inducing Sade's *amie* to libertinage, should rather make her all the prouder of loving virtue; indeed, this virtue should be so sublime as to induce tears.

More could no doubt be said about this dedication, but I want to leave it behind for the time being to focus on one last piece of paratext, the one that, for our reading, is the most key. We thus turn back one last time to the title page. Now we have already noted that the book, opened to this page, offers much to our eyes: on the left side, there is Chéry's allegory; on the right, the title of the book at the top of the page, with the date and place of publication at the bottom. We have also noted that, since the book is published anonymously, Sade's name does not appear on the title page.

That is not to say, however, that there is a simple absence here. On the contrary, in the space we would usually expect to find the name of the author – directly below the book's title – we find not an empty space, a simple blank, but rather more text. On the one hand, the text is not all that interesting, as it simply repeats, for the fourth time, the novel's *dessein*, at once its outline and its method: the lesson the novel should provide is that of the glory of virtue, not of crime. On the other hand, the text holds a special significance for us. Let us look at it more closely:

O mon ami! la prospérité du Crime est comme la foudre, dont les feux trompeurs n'embellissent un instant l'atmosphère que pour précipiter dans les abîmes de la mort le malheureux qu'ils ont ébloui.<sup>133</sup>

The first few words, then, constitute a kind of repetition (a sort of untimely repetition, a repetition of what has not yet occurred) of the address of the dedication, with the difference that the *amie* of the dedication here becomes an *ami*. The novel's lesson,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 54.

then, should not only be for a single reader: the address of its moral lesson is both specific and general, masculine and feminine. How, then, does this final piece of paratext articulate this lesson? Let us look at Richard Merkin's translation of this extremely difficult piece of text: "The prosperity of Crime is like unto the lightning, whose traitorous brilliancies embellish the atmosphere but for an instant, in order to hurl into death's very depths the luckless one they have dazzled."<sup>134</sup> Modifying this translation slightly, we might render the passage thus: the prosperity of crime is like lightning, whose deceptive brilliance embellishes or beautifies the atmosphere for a single instant, only to thrust into the abysses of death the luckless one it has dazzled.<sup>135</sup> Again, we find the repetition of the novel's lesson, but the terms are very interesting here: crime is literally a bolt of lightning, a bolt that dazzles but is ultimately deadly – but for whom, exactly? Not necessarily for the one who commits the crime, but for the unfortunate one whom this lightning has dazzled. Perpetrator or victim? The question or the opposition calls to mind Blanchot's observation that in a true Sadean universe, the distinction is meaningless, and the lines certainly do not seem to specify. It is the novel itself, however, which provides us with an answer.

The end of the novel, in other words. Let us recall what happens at the end: Justine, having finished her story, is finally recognized by her sister Juliette; a tearful embrace by the sisters follows this recognition; M. de Corville is also left in tears, and

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<sup>134</sup> *Justine; or, Good Conduct Well Chastised*, 5.

<sup>135</sup> I do not include my own translation – much less graceful than Merkin's, it must be said – to criticize that of Merkin, but to underscore the difficulty of these seemingly simple lines.

then, since Justine's "vertus restent toujours sans récompense,"<sup>136</sup> begins the process of pursuing her torturers, with mild success. Justine is taken to M. de Corville's chateau, where, finally at peace, she at first seems happy. But soon enough her mood changes; she becomes "sombre, inquiète, rêveuse";<sup>137</sup> and soen announces to her sister: "Je ne suis pas née pour tant de félicités...Oh! ma chère soeur, il est impossible qu'elles soient longues."<sup>138</sup> And predictably, perhaps, it turns out that she is right: during a violent storm, Justine, while closing the windows of the chateau, is struck by lightning.

Unsurprisingly, this is described by the text in a gruesome fashion: "à l'instant un éclat de foudre la renverse au milieu du salon...[elle] est frappée de façon que l'espoir même ne puisse plus subsister pour elle; la foudre était entrée par le sein droit; après avoir consumé sa poitrine, son visage, elle était ressortie par le milieu du ventre."<sup>139</sup>

At this point, M. de Corville orders that Justine, who now "faisait horreur à regarder,"<sup>140</sup> be taken away. Her sister, however, intervenes, and it is at this point that we see the novel's moral lesson mirrored in the narrative: Juliette explains that she wants to contemplate her sister's deformed body, in order to strengthen her own resolutions. She has decided, she explains, that her sister's misfortunes have forced her to look more closely at herself; and after telling M. de Corville that "[c]es caprices de la main du ciel sont des énigmes qu'il ne nous appartient pas de dévoiler, mais qui ne doivent jamais nous séduire,"<sup>141</sup> she continues thus:

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<sup>136</sup> *JMV* 341.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* 342.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 343.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

*O mon ami! la prospérité du Crime n'est qu'une épreuve où la providence veut mettre la vertu; elle est comme la foudre, dont les feux trompeurs n'embellissent un instant l'atmosphère que pour précipiter dans les abîmes de la mort le malheureux qu'ils ont ébloui.*<sup>142</sup>

All that is left is for Juliette to leave the chateau, return to Paris, and enter the order of the Carmelites, where she becomes “l'exemple et l'édification,”<sup>143</sup> and for the narrative, in the book's final paragraph, to once more address the reader: “O vous, qui répandites des larmes sur les malheurs de la vertu...puissiez-vous tirer au moins de cette histoire le même fruit que Mme de Lorsange,” explaining that if God permits virtue to be persecuted on earth, it is only “pour l'en dédommager dans le ciel par les plus flatteuses récompenses!”<sup>144</sup>

What, then, of this strange repetition of the lines from the beginning of the book – *O mon ami! la prospérité...* What can we say about these words, these words that seem so strangely to frame the entire narrative? Who speaks them? The answer, here at the end of the text, seems clear: it is Juliette; the words, in fact, constitute the moral lesson that the book has sought to teach. And hence it is we, of course, we readers, we *amis*, from whose mouths these words should escape, much as was the case for the *amie*, Constance.

But what is key here is not so much who speaks these words as where they are placed.

They are placed within the narrative, of course – right at the end of the novel. The words are in fact the crowning glory of the novel, the “moral lesson” offered by the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 343-4, emphasis in original.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 344.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 344-5.

novel. And no doubt the inclusion of these words on the book's title page is intended only to introduce the main theme of this novel, as a kind of blurb that should entice the reader to want to proceed further, into the heart of the novel's lesson. The words on the title page are a promise of sorts of their own repetition.

But let us return to the title page, to the kind of reverse repetition of these words, and to the point we were already in the process of making a moment ago. Let us open the book again at the same page. On the left, the frontispiece; on the right, at the bottom, the oblique reference to the publisher; at the top, the name of the book. And directly below the book's name, in the place normally reserved for the name of the author, the excerpt from the very end of the book. But must we not therefore follow the logic of this title page to the letter – must we not conclude, in other words, that these words constitute the very authorship of the book?

It is these very words, these words that compose this moral lesson, that will speak at every turn in this text. Sade merely ventriloquizes them, or perhaps they ventriloquize him. These words that in as many different ways as possible articulate themselves at every turn of the text.

But it is not only the moral lesson that is key here, but this specific articulation of this lesson. The lesson is spoken by way of the *foudre* – the lesson is the bolt of lightning.

For it is the bolt of lightning whose *feux*, even if they are *trompeurs*, provide the very light that allows the lesson to take place. And yet this is still not quite accurate: recall Nietzsche's words here about lightning being nothing other than the bolt itself. Indeed, if this lightning has the text's first word, it also has its last: it is lightning that

utterly destroys Justine (the text's narrator, after all), that disfigures her face, her breast, her chest...her stomach. Her *ventre*. And if there is a ventr-iloquism occurring here, it is precisely that of the lightning: the lightning, already placed by the title page in the position of the text's author, speaks the very last word of the text, in the very gesture in which it reduces the one who has spoken the entire story of the text to an eternal silence. It is this bolt which speaks last.

Which speaks first, last, and throughout the entire text inasmuch as it is placed in the position of author. But which also brings about complete, inexorable silence. And there is no distance here between speech and silence: each articulates itself (like a bolt of lightning) in and through the other.

What is articulated is the very space between life and death that Justine inhabits, her half-life.

The lightning is at once the danger of the text (it fulfills the promise of all the violence that has been undertaken here, "finishing the job" that violence, as regards Justine, could never quite complete), and its hope. A hope of "something else," and we are not even constrained by the Christian direction that seems to impose itself at the end of the novel.

What the lightning promises, perhaps – what we can say in spite of Sade yet also with him – is nothing but its own singularity: for what is a bolt of lightning if not a tiny slice of absolute singularity, that which, as the saying goes, "never strikes twice"? What is lightning if not that which only has the tiniest chance of striking any particular place? What is this bolt from the sky if not the promise that Justine, the one who is never heard, the one who is placed somewhere between life and death in absolute

secrecy, can somehow be heard – that something like her voice can somehow be discerned? What is this bolt from the sky if not the possibility that, in this death-life that is the very language of Sade (and in which Sade hears the language of the world), there exists something outside the alternative of a secret torture chamber, and a generalized death-secrecy that would pass beyond the walls of this chamber? What is the bolt of lightning if not (the word “promise” is perhaps too strong here) this very possibility, this very hope?

Not so much an outside of Sade as a border. Here, on the border, the possibility of a voice of secrecy that is not simultaneously a voice of death. Of a politics in which secrecy is not generalized and from which it is not expelled, a politics in which secrecy has another destiny: a politics in which the lightning flash of secrecy brings about nothing more and nothing less than a dazzling singularity.

### **Duras to Lispector, the time of the veil**

There was gauze or a kind of veil in front of my eyes...But in fact I was more awake than ever.

– Roberto Bolaño<sup>145</sup>

What does it mean to lead a veiled existence?

What does it mean to live behind a veil, to live in concealment – in hiding?

What is the secret that the veil conceals?

And indeed, how can we truly interrogate this existence?

For surely one of the problems that anyone who wishes to interrogate the veil inevitably runs up against is this: an interrogation into the veil cannot simply seek to look behind or beyond the veil, to lift the veil, as it were, and reveal what lies underneath. Wouldn't this be to commit an injustice on many levels: first, to the veil itself, inasmuch as we would thereby view it as a simple intermediary, that which must be removed for understanding to occur; and second, to the "object" behind the veil, since to view a veiled object without its veil is to view another object entirely, to do violence to this object?

It would seem logical, therefore, that any interrogation into the veil would have to begin with the following question, or questions: how can we view the veil on its own terms? How can we resist the temptation to "unveil" our object of study, when this is the very methodology of so much scientific or critical inquiry? How can we do justice to the veil, how can we approach the veil in and of itself, without simply viewing it as an obstacle to some truth that we suppose to lie behind it?

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<sup>145</sup> *Amulet*, 31.



This is not the first time, of course, that these questions have been asked. The most obvious reference here, to my mind, and especially from the standpoint of philosophy, is Heidegger, in whose thought the veil is an extremely important motif.<sup>146</sup> Rather than beginning with Heidegger, however, I would like to look elsewhere for our starting point; I would like us to turn our attention to another great twentieth century thinker who deals specifically with the question of the veil, for reasons that will become clear below. I would like to begin with Frantz Fanon, and specifically his 1959 text *Sociologie d'une révolution (L'an V de la révolution algérienne)*.

One of the reasons I have decided to begin with this text is its decidedly political nature. As its title indicates, its object of study arises out of a very specific political context, what Fanon calls the Algerian Revolution, and what is more commonly known as the Algerian War of Independence, or more simply the Algerian War. This title is

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<sup>146</sup> A lot of time could obviously be spent here meditating upon the Heideggerian discourse, or rather discourses, on the veil. This meditation is beyond the scope of this chapter, but let me point here to a text that I consider exemplary in this regard: the book entitled *Veils*, co-authored by Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, and especially Derrida's contribution to this book, "A Silkworm of One's Own." Without going too deeply into this essay, let me simply point out here that Derrida spends a great deal of time discussing the feminine essence of the veil. To my mind, it is difficult not to see in this concentration on the feminine an implicit critique of the philosopher (Heidegger) with whom Derrida must be said to be in a constant dialogue: for is Heidegger's discussion of the veil not notable for the fact that for him, the veil is essentially without gender, and is of interest solely for the fact that it lies in a specific relation to being?

We should also make note of the fact that the veil has been a vexing problem for philosophy, and for thought in general, long before Heidegger; thought has in fact been investigating the veil from its very beginnings. Derrida, in the text mentioned in the preceding paragraph, takes many of his examples from the Bible, but let us make note of a different example here: that of scholasticism. For Maimonides, Averroës and Aquinas, the veil is an irreducibly ontological category (or, this being scholasticism, onto-theological): each of them, in his own distinct and singular way, speaks of a "veil of being" that is necessary to all philosophical and religious thought. The word employed by both Maimonides and Averroës is of course *hijab*.

interesting not least for the relationship it seeks to construct with time. Just as the title foregrounds a specific geographical location, it also calls attention to a particular moment, the moment at which it is written or published. Yet this date is referred to not as 1959, but as “year five of the Algerian Revolution,” or rather, “year V of the Algerian Revolution” (the reasons for which I prefer the latter formulation will become clear below). This is interesting, of course, on many levels. First, because it recalls that other revolution that sought to mark a new beginning in time, that sought to begin time anew, that most famous of revolutions – the French Revolution. (It is hence no surprise that Fanon prefers the word “revolution” over “war,” for surely a revolution is far more propitious than a war to enact a recommencement of time.) The formulation “year V of the Algerian Revolution” is hence an interesting choice for this book written in French and published in France, for the title is no doubt a provocation of sorts for the book’s French readers: Fanon seems to be asking them why they refuse to accord to the Algerian people the same right to revolt against their oppressors that they took for themselves some 170 years previous; and he seems, by using the same terminology the French use to describe their own revolution, to compare the glory of the Algerian Revolution with that of the latter.

If time has begun anew, if a true commencement has really occurred for this new political entity that is revolutionary Algeria, then it must be said that one of Fanon’s aims, in this as well as in his other books, is to articulate a language – a *political* language – that is adequate to this new beginning and the new realities it reflects. A new political entity, after all, an entity that breaks absolutely with the past (in such a radical manner that the counting of time must begin again), always requires

the construction of a new political language if it is to have any hope of succeeding, inasmuch as the language that has been used to this point is the language of the previous regime, and is thus imbued with the very grammar of the previous regime, if one can put it this way.<sup>147</sup> How, then, does Fanon, in this foundational text of the Algerian Revolution, attempt to articulate this new language? Let us turn our attention once more to the titles that are employed in this book. After a brief introduction, in which he outlines the stakes of the text that will follow, and writes, toward the end, “Nous voulons une Algérie ouverte à tous, propice à tous les génies” (15), Fanon arrives at his first chapter, which he entitles “L’Algérie se dévoile” – Algeria unveils itself.

Much has been written on this text, and I don’t want to spend too much time on it here, in part because of the length of what is still to come. If we begin with this text, however – a text in which Fanon discusses the practice of veiling in Algeria, and seeks to understand the continuous transformations of this practice outside of the European enlightenment discourse that would view unveiling as a necessary step in the progress of women’s rights, and the advancement of “traditional” societies in general – it is because Fanon, simply in his choice of theme, does something that is extremely interesting for our purposes. For Fanon says several things with this gesture. He says, first of all, by beginning this overtly political text with a reflection on the veil, that the act of veiling, and its seeming counter-act, the act of unveiling, are specifically *political*

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<sup>147</sup> The most famous “proof” of this fact undoubtedly comes to us once again from the French Revolution. Consider, for example, all the different renamings of *time* by the French Revolution, from its literal recommencement (from the year I) to the renamings of months and even days to reflect the natural cycles of the year.

acts, acts that, if they are to be treated with justice, must be treated in a political language and considered from the standpoint of their political import.<sup>148</sup>

Beyond this, however, he seems to say something even more essential about the question of the veil, and the way this question must be treated. It is as though Fanon states, in other words, that in order to begin this book – in order to begin, that is, to articulate a political language in which it will be possible to do justice to revolution, in order to begin to articulate a truly revolutionary political language, a language of freedom and emancipation, a language for a new country that is “ouvert à tous” – he must begin with the question of the veil. This book must begin, this new political language must begin, in other words, *with the question of secrecy*, and further, *with a secrecy that is specifically feminine*.

And finally, what Fanon seems to be positing, in reflecting upon the veil at the beginning of this book written at the beginning of time, written in year V of the revolution, is an essential relationship not only between politics, secrecy, and femininity, but a relationship, also, between these three elements and the question of *time*.

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<sup>148</sup> It would be interesting to think about the veil as a metaphor of sorts for the entirety of Fanon’s work, or as a metaphor that in some way underlies all of this work, that informs his every concern. For isn’t one of Fanon’s primary interests (and indeed this is why Fanon, fifty-odd years after the publication of his most famous works, seems so stunningly contemporary) the plight and possible emancipation of what the title of his most famous work calls “the wretched of the earth”? And isn’t the plight of the wretched not only their wretchedness, but the fact that this wretchedness is somehow hidden, secret, *veiled*, despite the fact that it is so glaring, despite the fact that it is literally everywhere? Isn’t the wretchedness that Fanon so perspicaciously describes, in other words, the open secret *par excellence*?

What, then, is the nature of this relationship, of this nexus of four “objects”?

This is the question that this chapter seeks to address. Let us keep in mind this particular nexus, this particular *constellation*, with which Fanon presents us, as we proceed.

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This essay, however, will not concern itself (not primarily, in any case) with Fanon, or with any “political” text, or with any political situation or context. It will do so only secondarily – it is my hope that the specifically political note on which I have begun the essay will resonate throughout the entire text. What follows, however, is a reflection upon two literary texts, two novels: Duras’s *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, and Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*.

Why, in an essay that purports to treat the theme of the veil, and to state something of political import about the veil, will I focus on literature? The answer is simple: it is my hope that this essay, an essay comprised almost entirely of a series of close readings of these novels, will add something new to recent debates around the veil, debates that to this point have taken place mostly in the political realm. It is my hope, in other words, that this essay will say something new about the veil, and those other deeply political themes – women, time, oblivion – onto which the veil opens.

In the last chapter, we dealt with that strange phenomenon by which entire populations are cast into a state of living death. And the two books with which we shall deal in this chapter, I want to argue, are also deeply concerned with this state. This state

is one that we could perhaps call, along with Marguerite Duras, *oblivion*. What does this word, this word from my language, *oblivion*, speak in this book of Marguerite Duras?

Now the word *oblivion*, both noun and verb, we should recall, is extremely interesting in this context, inasmuch as the word, untranslatable in a certain sense, and especially from the perspective of a French speaker, nonetheless has a Latin root – the word, in fact, the *OED* tells us, comes from middle French. And of course any French speaker, hearing but especially seeing the word written down, immediately notices the link to the verb *oublier*, to forget, and the noun *oubli*, forgetting. And strictly speaking, this is the meaning of the word *oblivion*, as stated by the *OED*: “The state or fact of forgetting or having forgotten; forgetfulness; (also) freedom from care or worry.” *Oblivion*, however, while it is intimately related to and indeed has come out of French, has at the same time, strangely, been forgotten by the French language. For what is missing from the French *oublier* and *oubli* is precisely this final sense denoted by the *OED* definition, that of “freedom from care or worry” – a sense that is strangely joined with a parenthesized “also” to those parts of the definition having more strictly to do with forgetting. It is this word, however, this word “forgotten” by French itself, that will paradoxically lead us straight into the heart of this canonical text of French literature, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.

Approaching this novel from outside of the French language, a translation was always going to be necessary. A translation from the novel into an English word with a French provenance, *oblivion*, but which French has nonetheless forgotten. And yet this novel translates back to us, or rather takes our translation back from us. (Perhaps what

it translates back to us is a kind of double forgetfulness, the forgetting of forgetfulness. It is as though, to the claim made by English that French has forgotten this very French word, the French language had responded: I have indeed forgotten it. It is of the very essence of the forgetfulness beyond forgetfulness that is conveyed by oblivion that it be forgotten; any other response to this word would be a betrayal of the word.) For the proper translation, the only translation, of oblivion proposed by this novel, the word that is the name for and that so perfectly expresses oblivion within this novel, is a word that appears again and again, a word that goes so far as to bring oblivion, and any of its possible synonyms – nothingness, forgetfulness, neutrality – beyond themselves, into a realm that expresses them better than they could express themselves, into a realm that perhaps constitutes their beyond. A realm, it should be said in passing, though this will be explored further below, that is decidedly feminine.

The word is the *ravissement* of the book's title, a ravishing that names the oblivion that defines the existence of Lol V. Stein.

A quick word, first of all, about this novel. In the broadest terms, it deals with a kind of love triangle between the character named by the book's title, her friend Tatiana Karl, and the book's narrator, Jacques Hold. Tatiana and Jacques have already been lovers for some time when Lol, returning to S. Tahla after many years, reunites with her childhood friend and meets the man who will tell her story. And the story that Jacques Hold tells, the story he constructs or, to use the word to which he constantly has recourse, "invents" with the help of Tatiana, is perhaps not so much about Lol as about her *ravissement*, this strange state of being that so attracts and perplexes everyone around her. How is it that she has come to exist in such a state? Tatiana Karl, for one,

thinks it was always there. She says so – Jacques Hold tells us she says so – at the very beginning of the book. “Tatiana,” says Jacques, even if we don’t yet know it is he, even if we don’t yet know that it’s a man who is speaking, “ne croit pas au rôle prépondérant de ce fameux bal de T. Beach dans la maladie de Lol V. Stein” (12). And starting a new paragraph, he continues:

Tatiana Karl, elle, fait remonter plus avant, plus avant même que leur amitié, les origines de cette maladie. Elles étaient là, en Lol V. Stein, couvées, mais retenues d’éclore par la grande affection qui l’avait toujours entourée dans sa famille et puis au collège ensuite. (Ibid.)

Let’s spend some time here; we’re at the very beginning of the novel, on its second page, to be exact, and this strange state of Lol V. Stein hence acts as a sort of starting point for the narration of Jacques Hold, as though he were announcing to the reader that the interrogation of this state is the very reason for the narrative’s being. Let’s listen further, then, to Jacques Hold, and to the words of Tatiana Karl that he relates:

Au collège, dit-elle, et elle n’était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit : là. Elle donnait l’impression d’endurer dans un ennui tranquille une personne qu’elle se devait de paraître mais dont elle perdait la mémoire à la moindre occasion. Gloire de douceur mais aussi d’indifférence, découvrait-on très vite, jamais elle n’avait paru souffrir ou être peinée, jamais on ne lui avait vu une larme de jeune fille. Tatiana dit encore que Lol V. Stein était jolie, qu’au collège on se la disputait bien qu’elle vous fût dans les mains comme l’eau parce que le peu que vous reteniez d’elle valait la peine de l’effort. Lol était drôle, moqueuse impénitente et très fine bien qu’une part d’elle-même eût été toujours en allée loin de vous et de l’instant. Où? Dans le rêve adolescent? Non, répond Tatiana, non, on aurait dit dans rien encore, justement, rien. Était-ce le cœur qui n’était pas là? Tatiana aurait tendance à croire que c’était peut-être en effet le cœur de Lol V. Stein qui n’était pas – elle dit : là – il allait venir sans doute, mais elle, elle ne l’avait pas connu. Oui, il semblait que c’était cette région du sentiment qui, chez Lol, n’était pas pareille. (12-13)

And a few paragraphs on, Tatiana’s report to Jacques Hold continues thus:



Je lui ai demandé si la crise de Lol, plus tard, ne lui avait pas apporté la preuve qu'elle se trompait. Elle m'a répété que non, qu'elle, elle croyait que cette crise et Lol ne faisaient qu'un depuis toujours. (13)

What can we say, then, about this long passage? If we have started with a citation of this length, it is because of the way the theme at hand, not yet named, seems to insist throughout this passage. There are several things we can say, in other words, about the “state” of Lol V. Stein, which the rest of the novel will seek to interrogate. Here, at the beginning of the book, the foundations of this interrogation are laid.

First off, the “famous ball of T. Beach.” Jacques Hold – whose hold or possession on the narrative, one must state, is tenuous at best, removed in so many different ways from what happened: from the story itself (he hears it second hand, after all, from Tatiana Karl), at a remove of many years (ten, to be exact), and at the remove that always separates man from woman (forcing a certain kind of translation, as it were) – sets the stage in this way: he states that Tatiana Karl does not believe in the “rôle prépondérant de ce fameux bal de T. Beach dans la maladie de Lol V. Stein.” And several things jump out at us right from the start. First, that what will be at stake in this novel is a *sickness* or an *illness*. We have already said that the novel will interrogate the “state” of Lol V. Stein. But now we know that this state is perhaps an illness, or at least that the origins of this state lie in an illness: Lol V. Stein, perhaps, is eternally convalescing. An illness, however, that perhaps has a starting point: the “famous ball of T. Beach.” And if this ball is famous, it is because everyone has heard of it, everyone knows what happened there. To wit: Lol, attending a ball with her fiancé, Michael Richardson, watches as he begins to dance with another woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, with whom, at daybreak, he leaves, impervious to the screams of Lol, whom he will

never see again. Hence the fame of this ball: everyone has heard the stories of how Lol was driven to madness, to her “illness,” by the actions of her fiancé, a well-known figure due to his wealth. Everyone has heard the stories, even though – given that all this occurred at, indeed was perhaps brought on by, daybreak – few actually saw it: in a way, Tatiana was the only witness, as she states at one point in the novel, the only one who has stayed at the ball, with Lol, through the night.

Tatiana, however, sole witness to what occurred at T. Beach (and it is interesting that none or almost none of the locations mentioned in the novel are fully named: the action moves from S. Tahla, to T. Beach, to U. Bridge, and back again), does not believe in the “rôle preponderant” of the ball in her friend’s illness. At worst, what the ball did was aggravate something that was already there – Tatiana tells Jacques that the origins of the illness “étaient là, en Lol V. Stein,” long before the ball, “couvées, mais retenues d’éclore” by the affection of those around her. It is difficult, therefore, to call Lol’s state an “illness” (and it is no coincidence that the naming of this state is a truly vexing issue for the novel), for how could this illness always have been there, waiting? But on the other hand, “illness” is perhaps a perfect word for what is at work here – after all, doesn’t a virus often lay dormant in its host until such a time as a given turn of events propitiates its surfacing? Interestingly, however, this illness is not really spoken of in negative terms: on the contrary, it is as though Lol V. Stein were the perfect host for this guest, building a nest around it, until it is ready to hatch, come forth into the world. The illness, one could state, paraphrasing one of the greatest readers of Duras, is

“in her more than her,”<sup>149</sup> the very essence of Lol, who, once it comes forth, can finally be the person she always was. Lol *is* the illness, then, to some extent, nothing more, nothing less. This is perhaps one of the reasons for which her name can change so often, from Lol, to Lola, to Lola Valerie, to Lol V., back and forth with all the possible combinations the name allows. For there is nothing stable here, no fixed identity to which one could attach a name, only the constant mutations of an illness, the illness of Lola Valerie Stein.

Mutations, however, is perhaps the wrong word. For what this illness does, what Lol V. Stein does, is not so much mutate as *repeat*; she is the agent or the bearer of a repetition of which it is hard to make sense, since – given that the events of the ball are not the determining cause of the illness – it is hard to know what exactly is repeated, what exactly it is that repeats. Indeed, the repetitions in the book can seem, at first glance, aimless at times. Aimless or not, however, they are there; repetition seems at times to constitute the entire narrative, from the actions portrayed right down to the speech of the characters. It should be stated from the outset that the book unfolds in a series of mostly extremely brief paragraphs, a brevity that can be frustrating (this is perhaps its very aim) in that it breaks up the rhythm of the reading. One is constantly trying to get one’s bearings while reading the novel, constantly trying to find a flow that is in fact impossible to locate for the simple reason that it is not there. Sentences end in mid air, tenses change in a seemingly haphazard fashion, conversations seem like endless series of non sequiturs. And even when the paragraphs attain a certain length,

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<sup>149</sup> I am referring, of course, to Jacques Lacan. The quotation does not come from his essay on Duras’s novel, however, but from his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. “In You More than You” is the title of the book’s final section.

as with the one cited above, we are still continually forced to try to get our bearings: we think we are moving somewhere, and we find ourselves right back where we started. Let us pick up the report of Tatiana's narrative once again: "Au collègue, dit-elle, et elle n'était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit : là." Jacques Hold draws our attention once again, towards the beginning of the sentence, to the fact that Tatiana is speaking here, even if only by way of him. Yet at the end of the sentence, he finds himself forced to repeat this point: the "dit-elle" of the beginning becomes the "elle dit" of the end. Why this repetition, why this emphasis? It is as though he needed to highlight the fact that someone else has related this to him for it all to be believable: he needs the constant support of the one who has told him the story, even in her absence. And what, then, is unbelievable? Perhaps not so much unbelievable as defying description, and this is why he, following Tatiana, will resort to the simplest of words: *là*. It is as though something were missing from Lol Valerie Stein that would enable her to be – she says: there. She is somehow absent, absent even when she is present; this is what her illness, and indeed her very being, consists of.

Lola was missing, or something was missing from Lol. And later on in the paragraph, Tatiana puts forth a hypothesis on what exactly this missing element is, when she, or he, states: "Tatiana aurait tendance à croire que c'était peut-être en effet le coeur de Lol V. Stein qui n'était pas – elle dit : là." Now could any statement be less sure of itself than this one? Tatiana – Jacques again finds the need to draw upon the support of the one who told him the story – doesn't believe so much as she has a tendency to believe; but even this is stating too much: it is not that Tatiana has, but that Tatiana *would have (aurait)* the tendency to believe...that *maybe, in fact*, what is

missing is Lol Valerie's heart. Or, to follow her to the letter: that it is Lol V. Stein's heart "qui n'était pas – elle dit : là." Repetition, therefore, of the very phrase with which the paragraph began: absence that continues to insist, repeating itself through these words that, in their repetition, seem frustrated by their inability to do anything more than approximate this essential absence.

What, then, does it mean for absence to repeat itself? And how and where does this occur?

\* \* \*

Absence repeats itself, first of all, in the act of seeing.

What does Lola Valerie Stein see?

In fact, it is not only what Lol V. Stein sees. From the very first "traumatic" moment, the entire narrative is overtaken by the gaze – as though the various characters of the novel were mere stand-ins for the gaze, different articulations or versions of the gaze. This "traumatic" moment, at the ball at T. Beach, is the "moment précis où les dernières venues, deux femmes, franchissent la porte de la salle de bal du Casino municipal de T. Beach" (14).

What happens at this moment? First of all, we get the sense that the entire ball, all those present, turn their eyes toward these two women. After all, how does Duras – or Jacques Hold? – set the stage for their entry? S/he writes: "L'orchestre cessa de jouer. Une danse se terminait." And beginning a new paragraph: "La piste s'est vidée lentement. Elle fut vide" (15). Two brief paragraphs, each composed of two brief

sentences, crashing against one another in a kind of staccato rhythm; and the second of these paragraphs is the scene of a repetition, almost a redundancy: the dance floor emptied, it was empty.<sup>150</sup> The stage is set, then, for the two women to cross the floor at precisely the moment at which all eyes will be turned toward them. And indeed, the way the narrative describes them, it would be impossible to turn one's gaze from them; they comprise nothing short of a spectacle:

La femme la plus âgée s'était attardée un instant à regarder l'assistance puis elle s'était retournée en souriant vers la jeune fille qui l'accompagnait. Sans aucun doute possible celle-ci était sa fille. Elles étaient grandes toutes les deux, bâties de même manière. Mais si la jeune fille s'accommodait gauchement encore de cette taille haute, de cette charpente un peu dure, sa mère, elle, portait ces inconvénients comme les emblèmes d'une obscure négation de la nature. Son élégance et dans le repos, et dans le mouvement, raconte Tatiana, inquiétait. (Ibid.)

Such elegance is remarked upon precisely because it could not fail to be noticed by anyone. Lol's fiancé, Michael Richardson, takes notice; and indeed, his gaze at the ball is itself the repetition of a gaze: "Elles étaient ce matin à la plage," he states. And he is joined in this gaze by Lol, who, "frappée d'immobilité, avait regardé s'avancer, comme lui, cette grâce abandonnée, ployante, d'oiseau mort" (ibid.).

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<sup>150</sup> The repetition here, and those we have spoken of above, call to mind what Julia Kristeva refers to as Duras's "aesthetics of awkwardness" in her book *Black Sun*. In opposition to "the affected rhetoric of literature and even the common rhetoric of everyday speech," which "always seem somewhat festive," Duras's awkwardness, far from a defect, Kristeva argues, allows her to "speak the truth of pain...by holding in check the rhetorical celebration, warping it, making it grate, strain and limp" (225). See the final chapter of this book, entitled "The Malady of Grief [*Douleur*]: Duras," a conjunction of sorts of the titles of two of Duras's books: *La Maladie de la mort* and *La douleur*.

Not only are these women, the last to arrive, gazed upon; their own eyes meet this gaze, or more precisely, the eyes of the elder of these two women, Anne-Marie Stretter:

Avait-elle regardé Michael Richardson en passant? L'avait-elle balayé de ce non-regard qu'elle promenait sur le bal? C'était impossible de le savoir, c'est impossible de savoir quand, par conséquent, commence mon histoire de Lol V. Stein : le regard, chez elle – de près on comprenait que ce défaut venait d'une décoloration presque pénible de la pupille – logeait dans toute la surface des yeux, il était difficile à capter. Elle était teinte en roux, brûlée de rousseur, Ève marine que la lumière devait enlaidir. (16)

The gaze of Anne-Marie Stretter, then, is not so much a gaze as a “non-gaze” that she passed over the entire ball. It is impossible to say if she really looked at Michael Richardson, or if she really looked at anything in particular.

There are gazes working in all directions, therefore. There is that of everyone present at the ball, fixed upon these women, and especially the eldest of the two, floating across the dance floor; there are the specific gazes of Michael Richardson and Lol V. Stein, staring in wonder at the *nouvelles arrivées*; and there is the strange gaze of Anne-Marie Stretter, a pure surface, difficult to capture. And finally, there is also the gaze of Tatiana Karl. Perhaps this is the most fundamental gaze of all, for Tatiana Karl's gaze, this evening, is the one that will bear witness to everything: she is the one who watches from behind the stage, as it were, who gazes upon the others who gaze only upon one another; she is the one who sees without being seen, the witness for whom there is no witness.<sup>151</sup> Reporting to Jacques Hold, she states that the elegance of the two women was worrisome (15); later, watching Michael Richardson invite Lol to

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<sup>151</sup> Unless this “last witness” is the one who truly does not see – Jacques Hold, the one to whom the witness, Tatiana Karl, tells her story?

dance “pour la dernière fois de leur vie,” Tatiana knows instantly that “il avait bien regardé, lui aussi, la femme qui venait d’entrer” (17).

It is Lol’s gaze, however, that will feature most prominently in this strange primal scene. As with Tatiana, she “s’aperçut de ce changement [qui] portait sur la personne même de Michael Richardson” (ibid.). Lol, Tatiana, everyone present gazes upon this transformation: “Il était devenu différent. Tout le monde pouvait le voir. Voir qu’il n’était plus celui qu’on croyait. Lol le regardait, le regardait changer” (ibid.).

Let us try to follow this gaze closely. The strange thing about Lol’s gaze – what she is gazing upon, of course, is the transformation of her fiancé, from her fiancé to the lover of Anne-Marie Stretter – is that it is not characterized by any sense of pain. Commenting upon the irreversibility of the change in Michael Richardson, the narrator – Tatiana? Jacques? Marguerite? – writes: “Cette vision et cette certitude ne parurent pas s’accompagner chez Lol de souffrance” (ibid.). Lol – for whom vision and certainty now seem to be the same thing – is not in pain while she watches her fiancé move inexorably away from her. Like Michael Richardson, Lol undergoes a transformation as she watches, but it is a move toward certainty, perhaps toward the truth of the moment, as Tatiana, looking at Lol, seems to suggest: “Tatiana la trouva elle-même changée. Elle guettait l’événement, couvait son immensité, sa précision d’horlogerie. Si elle avait été l’agent même non seulement de sa venue mais de son succès, Lol n’aurait pas été plus fascinée” (17-18). Lol is not the agent of the event, but it is as though she were...as though she came to possess the event in and through the gaze she throws upon it, in and through her fascination.



Fascination with the couple formed by her fiancé and Anne-Marie Stretter. For once they begin to dance, they will not stop for the rest of the night. Michael Richardson asks Anne-Marie Stretter to dance; and after the first dance, when her fiancé returns to her, this is what Lol sees: “[i]l y eut dans ses yeux l’imploration d’une aide, d’un acquiescement.” And her response? “Lol lui avait souri,” after which “Anne-Marie Stretter et Michael Richardson ne s’étaient plus quittés” (19). Lol inhabits her fascination for the rest of the night.

Until daybreak. At which point the spell is broken – at which point the gazes, so fluid during the night, are suddenly interrupted. “Michael Richardson avait cherché quelqu’un des yeux vers le fond de la salle. Il n’avait pas découvert Lol” (20). And a little later: “Michael Richardson se passa la main sur le front, chercha dans la salle quelque signe d’éternité. Le sourire de Lol V. Stein, alors, en était un, mais il ne le vit pas” (21). Paradoxically, the arrival of the day announces the impotence of vision (“il ne...vit pas”), the interruption of this play of gazes. The new couple begins to leave. At which point Lol, overwhelmed, cries out: “il n’était pas tard, l’heure d’été trompait” (22). But it is no use: as they leave, “les yeux baissés, ils passèrent devant elle...Lol les suivit des yeux à travers les jardins. Quand elle ne les vit plus, elle tomba par terre, évanouie” (ibid.).

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Of course, we probably shouldn’t be surprised that so much of what happens in this opening scene is determined by vision. For isn’t the entire novel a continual spectacle

of seeing, an unceasing examination of the gaze, and in particular that of Lol V. Stein?

We move from her gaze at the ball, to her patient pursuit of Jacques Hold through the streets of S. Tahla, ten years after the famous ball and shortly after her return to her native city, with the narrative painstakingly describing all that she sees from behind him (from outside of the scope of his vision); to her strange observation of the meetings of Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl at the Hotel des Bois.

But is this really a novel about seeing? Does it not concern itself, rather, much more with the act of *not-seeing*?

Not seeing. *Not-seeing*. Far more important to the text than seeing is the act, or non-act, of not-seeing; even vision, in this novel, one would have to say, is a kind of blindness.

We find this not-seeing in a variety of guises, and already in the scenes we have already read. In the eyes of Anne-Marie Stretter, for example, this gaze that is “difficile à capter,” gaze that rests on the surface of the eyes so that it is never quite certain whether she is truly looking at you, or elsewhere. In the gaze of Lol, also, who, as we have seen, sees without being seen – indeed, the entire narrative is the narrative of Lol looking at others *in secret*.

But we also find this not looking in the objects of the gaze – objects that don’t reveal themselves as much as we would like, or would like to think, objects that remain hidden even in the act of being observed by the narrative. Anne-Marie Stretter herself, for example.

Let us return to Lol’s gaze at the ball:

Lol, frappée d'immobilité, avait regardé s'avancer...cette grace abandonnée, ployante, d'oiseau mort. Elle était maigre. Elle devait l'avoir toujours été. Elle avait vêtu cette maigreur, se rappelait clairement Tatiana, d'une robe noire à double fourreau de tulle également noir, très décolletée. Elle se voulait ainsi faite et vêtue, et elle l'était à son souhait, irrévocablement. L'ossature admirable de son corps et de son visage se devinait. Telle qu'elle apparaissait, telle, désormais, elle mourrait, avec son corps désiré. (15-16)

What does Lol see at the ball when she turns her gaze toward Anne-Marie Stretter? The narrative doesn't really focus on her traits – we learn about her eyes that are pure surface, and the fact that she has always been thin, but not much more. Rather, what we hear about much more is the way she is clothed – the way she is *vêtu*. The way she clothes not so much her body as her thinness, with her black dress and equally black tulle. She is doubly *vêtu*, then, first with the dress and then with the tulle that overlays it, just as a tulle clothes the face, in a manner of speaking, when it is used, as it often is, as a *veil*.

And in fact what we see throughout this book is often not the thing itself, not an in-itself, but an *impediment to seeing*. If anything is on display, it is this: the impossibility of a clear vision, of an unobstructed vision. As Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter are about to leave the ball, Lol's mother "découvrit son enfant derrière les plantes vertes" (21); her mother then comes to form a sort of screen: "L'écran de sa mère entre eux et elle" (22); this screen acts, to Lol, like a kind of "signe avant-coureur" of the end of the ball, a screen that Lol cannot bear: hence, "De la main, très fort, elle le renversa par terre" (ibid.). When the new couple finally leaves the ball, Lol "avait couru vers la porte, s'était jetée sur ses battants. La porte, enclenchée dans le sol, avait résisté" (ibid.), and Lol is forced to watch them walk away, until, when she can no longer see them, she faints.

Always something between the seer and what is seen, therefore. It is as though seeing could not take place without this impediment, as though looking were granted its possibility only by that which it had to avoid in order to accomplish its task, to fulfill its nature.

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Lola Valerie Stein. Lol V. Stein. What is pronounced when we pronounce this name, when this name is pronounced? What does this name speak?

We find the name repeated, as we have already briefly mentioned, in as many different ways as possible, in all its variants. Lola Valerie, Lol, Lola Valerie Stein, Lola V. “C’est bien Lola, je ne me trompe pas?” asks Tatiana the first time Lol visits her after her return to S. Tahla; and then, an instant later: “Non, mais c’est Lol?” (73). As though her name bore a slight variation each time it was pronounced; as though her name necessitated this variation, as though this variation were essential to the name, so that to repeat her name without this slight transformation would be to lie, or at least to miss something of the truth of this name. What, then, does this essential variation indicate – what does it bring forth, or, perhaps stated more accurately, what does it hide?

Lol V. Stein...everything comes back to this name, the name inscribed in the title of the work. Perhaps this particular articulation of the name acts as something like an anchor for all the other variations. Perhaps, to borrow from Duras, and to do some sort of justice to what one might call a theory of language that is articulated by this

book, “Lol V. Stein,” paradoxically the most visible of the “words” uttered by the text insofar as they are located in the book’s title, and repeated endlessly by the narrative (one could almost go so far as to say that part of the pleasure that the narrative finds in itself is that of being able to repeat these words, this name, *ad infinitum*), paradoxically (insofar as they form part of the work’s title) lying on the *border* of all the other words enunciated by the text, and paradoxically lying on the border of language itself, insofar as names both belong and do not belong to language, perhaps these “words,” *Lol V. Stein*, form something like what Duras calls a “mot-trou,” a hole-word that, as Jacques Hold postulates, is the key to the *silence* of Lol V. Stein:

J’aime à croire, comme je l’aime, que si Lol est silencieuse dans la vie c’est qu’elle a cru, l’espace d’un éclair, que ce mot pouvait exister. Faute de son existence, elle se tait. Ç’aurait été un mot-absence, un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d’un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés. On n’aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide, il aurait retenu ceux qui voulaient partir, il les aurait convaincus de l’impossible, il les aurait assourdis à tout autre vocable que lui-même, en une fois il les aurait nommés, eux, l’avenir et l’instant. Manquant, ce mot, il gâche tous les autres, les contamine, c’est aussi le chien mort de la plage en plein midi, ce trou de chair. Comment ont-ils été trouvés les autres? Au décrochez-moi-ça de quelles aventures parallèles à celle de Lol V. Stein étouffées dans l’oeuf, piétinées et des massacres, oh! Qu’il y en a, que d’inachèvements sanglants le long des horizons, amoncelés, et parmi eux, ce mot, qui n’existe pas, pourtant est là : il vous attend au tournant du langage, il vous défie, il n’a jamais servi, de le soulever, de le faire surgir hors de son royaume percé de toutes parts à travers lequel s’écoulent la mer, le sable, l’éternité du bal dans le cinéma de Lol V. Stein. (48-9)

This *mot-trou* or *mot-absence* would be what Lol awaits in her silence. Paradoxical waiting, for this word “does not exist.” It is nonetheless there, “around the corner of language” (as Richard Seaver’s translation admirably puts it), somehow resonating.

I wonder, however, if there is not something in Duras’s beautiful formulation of this “absence-word” that would burrow a hole in language, and the theory of language

that it calls into being, that forces us to mistrust Duras, to mistrust Lol and the one, Jacques Hold, who recounts her story (who invents, as he states repeatedly). For far from being unutterable, unpronounceable, must we not postulate that this *mot-trou* is uttered time and again by the narrative? Wouldn't this *mot-absence* be the very word, or series of non-words, that is spoken and then repeated in the passage cited above? "Lol V. Stein," states the passage; and then, at the very end of the paragraph from which the passage is taken, "Lol V. Stein." The very word that cannot be spoken, in this hypothesis, would be the words that are spoken again and again by the text. With this caveat: first, that these "words," as stated above, are not truly words at all, occupying as they do the borders of language; second, that these "words" are not even full words, or a full name.

For the name that is constantly uttered here is Lol V. Stein. The V., of course, is a placeholder of sorts: it stands in for Valerie, because according to custom, and in order that speaking be less onerous, only the initial is required. It could even be omitted: "Lol Stein" would have sufficed, especially in a narrative in which so few people are actually named. Why, then, this insistence on the name "Lol V. Stein"? Why does everything, even in those rare moments in which the middle name, Valerie, is stated in its entirety, just like those moments at which it is omitted completely, seem to radiate outward from the name announced by the title, "Lol V. Stein"? One could even state that the V., this mere abbreviation, is the most truthful articulation possible of the name, given all the variations it is made to undergo: "V." incorporates both the fullness of the name "Valerie," and the absence of those moments in which it is omitted entirely, "Lol Stein." The abbreviation, here – of the name least essential to the name as a

whole, the name most often forgotten, the name that only Lol, in contradistinction from all the other characters in the book, possesses – could be looked upon as the most precise possible formulation of a name that never stands still, a name that announces itself differently at each moment, at each “tournant du langage”: the abbreviation, that which can literally become anything at any given moment, would serve as the only truthful and thereby, perhaps, ethical articulation of this continual metamorphosis that is the name “Lol V. Stein.”

Far from a *mot-trou*, then – but isn’t this exactly what Duras indicates by the formulation *mot-trou*? – Lol V. Stein, or rather, simply, V., would be that non-word through which the rest of language would come rushing through, at every single moment of its utterance.<sup>152</sup> Or rather, not exactly every one of these words, but these words that are able to resonate through this V., the words that co-resonate in it and, in this co-resonance, come to form something completely original, completely new, proper to this book. The words that together come to form what the title of the book names Lol V. Stein’s *ravissement*.

*Ravissement*: for is this “v-word” not one of the first words we hear in the utterance of “Lol V. Stein”? We hear it, of course, right from the beginning of the

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<sup>152</sup> I must recognize my debt here to Derrida, who, in his “Un ver à soie,” a reading of Hélène Cixous’s text “Savoir” (these are the two texts that make up the book *Voiles*), remarks on the *fil* or thread constituted by the letter V that runs through Cixous’s text, writing: “Les V de *Savoir*, on peut à peine les compter, mais les lèvres y font ce qu’elles disent. Elles tissent, en la secrétant, une tunique irremplaçable de consonnes, une tunique presque invulnérable et qui ne manque de rien, fors, justement, un mot, comme à dessein” (56). He goes on to ask what word is missing from the long list of V words that runs through Cixous’s text, concluding that “un mot est omis, je dis bien omis, omis sans doute à dessein, *la voile* n’est pas nommée” (ibid.). Derrida plays here on the distinction between *le voile* (the veil) and *la voile* (a sail), arguing that it is the latter that is missing, by design, from Cixous’s text.

book, right from the moment we read, or hear, the book's title. "Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein": is there not a kind of beautiful poetry accomplished by this title, a strange rhythmic metre accomplished by the repetition of certain letters or sounds? Le, Lol; V., ravisement; S., ss; and even ssement, Stein, sort of incomplete or imperfect anagram available only to the eyes, not the ears. But it is the V.-ravisement repetition that is most key here, and that leads us to consider other words from which we might come to form a chain. To wit: we have already seen that the act most proper to Lol V. Stein is that of seeing, or perhaps not-seeing. The act, in other words, of the *voir*, or the *non-voir*. This impossible seeing is already announced in the title, in this imprecise and yet radically precise V.: Lol Voir Stein. This *voir* leads us to one of its homonyms, a word likewise central to this text just as it is to the act of seeing. For one of the things that will constantly be in question in this text is just what it is that Lol knows: what she can be said to *savoir*. Her ignorance, at times, seems almost complete, and yet the irritation that this seeming ignorance constantly provokes, among all the other characters in the book, but especially Tatiana Karl and Jacques Hold, must be seen as a strange kind of knowledge, the *savoir* that it is perhaps the central task of the book to investigate. "Nous allons vers quelque chose," states Lol at one point to Jacques Hold. "Même s'il ne se passe rien nous avançons vers quelque but." To which a frustrated Jacques can only cry "Lequel!" "Je ne sais pas," responds Lol, "Je ne sais quelque chose que sur l'immobilité de la vie. Donc lorsque celle-ci se brise, je le sais" (130).

We have already seen that the vision and hence no doubt also the knowledge of the book is essentially *obstructed*. There is always a blockage of some sort, a *screen* as in the case of the famous ball, to the extent that one begins to wonder if these



blockages, these screens, aren't themselves the very aim of seeing. Everything, in the language of the book, and to use a word to which the book returns over and over, is *vêtu*. What is aimed at by the gaze, what is glanced at but never quite achieved, must always be *vêtu*, clothed in something or other...and this clothing, again and again, becomes the object of the gaze's ruminations (of the *savoir du voir*). The way Anne-Marie Stretter's thinness is clothed by her dress and by her tulle...and how dress and tulle become not so much the coverings as the *adequate expressions* of her thinness (is this not always what separates a beautiful garment from a merely average one...does a garment not always reveal something essential about what it nonetheless conceals, something that without this concealment could never be revealed?). And Tatiana, each time she meets Jacques Hold at the Hôtel des Bois: it is true that Lol sees her in all her nudity (even if only ever through the obstacle, the screen, of the window), but what Lol in fact sees, what the narrative repeats again and again, is not so much the naked body of Tatiana as that which covers it, the sheets in which she buries her head, or just as often her hair. "Tatiana Karl...nue dans sa chevelure noire" (64),<sup>153</sup> as the narrative describes her the first time Lol watches the lovers through the hotel window; and a bit later: "l'homme vient tandis qu'elle s'occupe de sa chevelure, il se penche, mêle sa tête à la masse souple et abondante, embrasse, elle, continue à relever ses cheveux, elle le

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<sup>153</sup> This sentence is repeated, with a slight variation, later in the book, when Lol is describing to Jacques what she saw through the hotel window: "Votre chambre s'est éclairée et j'ai vu Tatiana qui passait dans la lumière. Elle était nue sous ses cheveux noirs" (115). And again, on the next page, in Jacques Hold's narration: "La voici, Tatiana Karl nue sous ses cheveux" (116); and again: "Nous sommes deux, en ce moment, à voir Tatiana nue sous ses cheveux noirs" (116-7). Always this mass interrupting her nudity...

laisse faire, continue et lâche” (65); and finally: “Tatiana revient encore seule, sa chevelure de nouveau retombée” (ibid.). Tatiana, *vêtu* by her own *chevelure*.

Not seeing, not knowing, the object of the gaze always closed off to sight, always clothed in something or other. If we were going to name the vision of Lol V. Stein accurately, we would have to call it something like *une vision voilée*, a veiled vision. And indeed, the narrative names the veil on at least two occasions. The first is when Lol watches Tatiana Karl descend from the bus to meet Jacques Hold. The narrative is again fixated not so much on the person but the way the person is clothed; we read:

Elle était vêtue discrètement d’un tailleur de sport noir. Mais sa chevelure était très soignée, piquée d’une fleur grise, relevée par des peignes d’or, elle avait mis tout son soin à en fixer la fragile coiffure, un long et épais bandeau noir qui, au passage près du visage, bordait le regard clair, le faisait plus vaste, encore plus navré, et ceci qui aurait dû n’être touché que par le seul regard, qu’on ne pouvait sans détruire laisser au vent, elle avait dû – Lol le devine – l’avoir emprisonné dans une *voilette* sombre, pour que le moment venu il soit le seul à en entamer et à en détruire l’admirable facilité, un seul geste et elle baignerait alors dans la retombée de sa chevelure, dont Lol se souvient tout à coup et qu’elle revoit lumineusement juxtaposée à celle-ci. (58-9, my emphasis)

Tatiana’s clothes and her hair all seem to be summed up in this word, *voilette*, *voilette*. The narrative continues:

On en disait alors qu’elle serait obligée un jour ou l’autre de la couper, cette chevelure, elle la fatiguait, elle risquait de courber ses épaules par son poids, de la défigurer par sa masse trop importante pour ses yeux si grands, pour son visage si petit de peau et d’os. Tatiana Karl n’a pas coupé ses cheveux, elle a tenu la gageure d’en avoir trop. (59)

And later, when Jacques and Lol meet in “un salon de thé près de la gare de Green Town,” a town that is “à moins d’une heure de S. Tahla,” and one that strangely is the only place name that is not veiled by an abbreviation like the others (S. Tahla, T. Beach,

U. Bridge), Jacques Hold describes Lol thus: “Elle m’a accueilli presque poliment, avec gentillesse. Mais lorsqu’elle a levé les yeux j’ai vu une joie barbare, folle, dont tout son être devait être enfiévré : la joie d’être là, face à lui, à un secret qu’il implique, que jamais elle ne lui *dévoilera*, il le sait” (129-30, my emphasis). Strange formulation of the secret held by Lol V. Stein: it is in fact Jacques Hold who seems to hold this secret just as he holds the narrative, it is he who implies it, but it is Lol who can decide whether or not to reveal this secret, or rather to *unveil* this secret – and of course he knows that she never will.

This secret knowledge, this seeing, this clothing of each and every object of knowledge or of vision: isn’t the *veil*, twice named within other names by the narrative, the perfect name for everything in this narrative that is seen or known only imperfectly? Isn’t the *ravissement* of Lol V. Stein, the *bonheur* that literally makes everyone else crazy, not defined precisely by the fact that it can never truly be *dévoilé*, that it always lies behind a *voilette*, a tiny piece of cloth or fabric? This *V.*, this *veil*, would be the *mot-trou* of which Duras writes, and indeed would do justice to this *mot-trou* inasmuch as it can never reveal what it purports to conceal, can never unveil that which it veils. Such is the *mot-trou*, the *mot-absence*, of Lola Voile Stein, sa “*voilerie*.”

\* \* \*

The unseen, the unknown, the withheld, the unrevealed. These words provide us with a segue to another, related oblivion, that of Macabéa, the main character of Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*.

Now the first thing one might say about this novel is that it is a story about no one. Strictly speaking, of course, this is not exactly true: the novel deals with Macabéa, a girl from the North-east of Brazil who has migrated to Rio de Janeiro (emigrated, one could say, for it is almost like moving to a different country) and earns a meager living as a typist. Macabéa, strictly speaking, is the protagonist of this story, and here we seem to find another link to the novel we have been reading thus far, in which another woman – the one named by the title – was the protagonist.<sup>154</sup> But it is not certain that this can really be said to be the case. For this woman is almost invisible, invisible to the very narrative that purports to tell her story (witness the constant complaints of the story's narrator, to whom we shall soon return, especially toward the beginning of the novel, about how Macabéa seems to continually elude his grasp, fall between his fingers), just as she seems invisible to the world around her. Lispector writes:

There are thousands of girls like this girl from the North-east to be found in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, living in bedsitters or toiling behind counters for all they are worth. They aren't even aware of the fact that they are superfluous and that nobody cares a damn about their existence. Few of them ever complain and as far as I know they never protest, for there is no one to listen. (14)

I should begin by noting that the translation with which I shall be working here – Giovanni Pontiero's 1986 translation – is extremely free.<sup>155</sup> The above passage, for example, reads as follows in the original:

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<sup>154</sup> And hence the question arises: is Macabéa named by the title of Lispector's novel, just as Lol V. Stein was named by Duras's title? Would Macabéa, in other words, lie in some relation to the *star* named by Lispector – would this strange name, *Macabéa*, not exist as a stand-in of sorts for the star of the book's title? We shall return to this question below.

<sup>155</sup> A fact that seems doubly problematic for a text that mistrusts freedom to such a great degree: "I am powerless to invent with any freedom," writes the text's narrator at one point, "I follow a secret, fatal line" (20).

Como a nordestina, há milhares de moças espalhadas por cortiços, vagas de cama num quarto, atrás de balcões trabalhando até a estafa. Não notam sequer que são facilmente substituíveis e que tanto existiriam como não existiriam. Poucas se queixam e ao que eu saiba nenhuma reclama por não saber a quem. Esse quem será que existe? (16)

Pontiero's translation of this passage seems, in certain instances, highly questionable.

In the second sentence, for example, we find "facilmente substituíveis," literally "easily substitutable" or "replaceable," translated by "superfluous," which to my mind connotes something very different from what Lispector intended. Pontiero has also either combined Lispector's third and fourth sentences into one, or completely omitted the fourth. A more literal translation of these sentences might read as follows: "Few of them complain and as far as I know none of them protest because they don't know whom to protest to. Can this whom be said to exist?" The gracelessness of my translation highlights, of course, the difficulties associated with all translation, and above all the pitfalls to which all demands for "direct" translation lead. My point, however, is that Pontiero's translation changes the text's meaning. Given that the kinds of problems associated with this short passage occur throughout the translation, I will have at times to include long portions of the original text, cumbersome as this may be to those who do not read Portuguese.

But let us move from the translation back to the original passage: it is clear that the girl from the North-east is to a certain degree invisible, or, perhaps more accurately, inaudible. And if the story is no doubt about this silent girl (silent even – especially – when she speaks), perhaps it should be said that the main aim of the narrative is not to tell her story: if the passage cited above is to be believed (if it is truly to be heard, to be listened to, in other words), perhaps the main aim of the narrative is to find the *quem*

referred to at the end of the passage,<sup>156</sup> the *quem* the identity of whom the passage's penultimate (in the original) sentence describes as perhaps simply not yet located, but of whom the very existence is called into question by the last sentence. Perhaps the question of whether anyone can actually hear this story, of whether the *quem* of the narrative has simply not yet been located, or more radically must be said not to exist, is the central question posed by this book, the question around which all the other questions that are posed here revolve.

The text nonetheless immediately proposes an answer to this question: the one who listens to the girl from the North-east, the one who can see or hear her specificity, her singularity, in the very midst of her replaceability, is the story's narrator. Not Clarice Lispector: the writer of this novel, like the writer of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, is not its narrator; and like Duras's novel – another link between these two very different texts – this narrator, the one who steps in and tells the story in the place of its writer, as it were, is not even a woman. Let us listen to the way this narrator describes himself:

I do not intend to write anything complicated, although I am obliged to use the words that sustain you. The story – I have decided with an illusion of free will –

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<sup>156</sup> Hélène Cixous, who has probably done more than anyone else to bring Lispector beyond the boundaries of Brazil, locates in Lispector's *quem* a way of thinking about *freedom* in her texts:

*Quem?* asks Clarice Lispector.

Answer: someone elusive, someone who runs, escapes, hides, evades, doesn't yet know, needs two sexes to make headway, who gets lost, so much the worse, so much the better, who is not afraid to get lost, to be getting lost, still and always in the process of getting lost towards life, stripping her or himself down, tearing the scales from their eyes, the clichés from their tongues, throwing down the crutches, the false legs, to go and write free. ("We Who Are Free, Are We Free?" 216)

should have some seven characters, and obviously I am one of the more important. I, Rodrigo S.M. A traditional tale for I have no desire to be modish and invent colloquialisms under the guise of originality. So I shall attempt, contrary to my normal method, to write a story with a beginning, a middle, and a 'grand finale' followed by silence and falling rain. (13)<sup>157</sup>

The narrator, just like Jacques Hold (though Rodrigo S.M. will play a very different role: he will never interact with any of the other characters, for instance), introduces himself to the reader by name, though much earlier than in Duras's novel. He even tells us why it must be a he and not a she who writes this novel:

[T]he person I am about to describe [Macabéa] scarcely has a body to sell; nobody desires her, she is a harmless virgin whom nobody needs. It strikes me that I don't need her either and that what I am writing could be written by another. Another writer, of course, but it would have to be a man for a woman would weep her heart out. (14)

The writer of this story therefore does not need to be this particular writer, Rodrigo S.M. But it absolutely cannot be a woman: once more, only a man is capable of "holding" the narrative.

The question of who wrote the book is actually a very complicated one. For despite the fact that the narrator introduces himself by name, the actual author of the book also introduces *herself*, and also by name. This text, as is well known, has a rather strange structure: the actual body of the text is preceded by an "Author's dedication," and following this dedication, a strange title page on which, as we eventually learn, an entire series of titles, alternate titles, we could say, are given for the book. Let us look, first of all, at the dedication: what we read, as the title of the dedication, is simply "*The Author's Dedication*," or "DEDICATÓRIA DO AUTOR": this title is capitalized in the

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<sup>157</sup> Translation slightly modified: Pontiero begins a new paragraph between the second and third sentences; Lispector does not.

original, italicized in the English translation. Immediately following upon this title, however, is a kind of subtitle, parenthesized, which reads “(alias Clarice Lispector),” or “(Na verdade Clarice Lispector)” in the original. In truth, therefore, and before we ever get an inkling that the book is “really” written by Rodrigo S.M., we learn that the author of the work is Clarice Lispector. But the very fact that she has to tell us that the author is “in truth Clarice Lispector,” as the original has it, the very fact that she posits Clarice Lispector as an “alias,” already – before the question of authorship is ever raised – inserts a distance, a gap of uncertainty, between Lispector and the authorship of the book. This title, or title and accompanying subtitle, is followed, of course, by the dedication, which consists of just over a page of text. But what we immediately find out is that someone other than Lispector is writing this dedication, simply because (as was the case in Duras’s or Hold’s novel) the adjectives the narrator uses to describe himself are in the masculine: “a mim mesmo,” he/she states, or “tão tonto que sou, eu envidado” (10).

The male narrator of the novel is interrupted from time to time, we could state, by the book’s “real” author, by his alias or his truth (*verdade*), his feminine truth. And this interruption continues on the title page, where, as stated, we read a list of possible titles for the book, printed vertically and separated by the word “or.” Yet there are two exceptions to this rule. The first is constituted by the actual title of the book. At the top of the page, we find the title “A Hora da Estrela.” Immediately following this title, but not separated from it by the word “or,” we read “A CULPA É MINHA” – “the blame is mine.” This is followed by an “OU” – or – and then three more titles, each separated from one another by “OU”: “A HORA DA ESTRELA” (“the hour of the star”: strange



repetition of the book's actual title), "ELA QUE SE ARRANJE" ("let her fend for herself"), and "O DIREITO AO GRITO" ("the right to protest," or more literally: the right to yell or to shout). At this point, however, this list of titles – we find nine more titles written on the page (we will speak more about them later) – is interrupted once more, with no "or" to precede it (or to follow it), by the name of the book's "actual" author: Clarice Lispector. What is more, this name, as opposed to the other "subtitles" that are written in upper case letters, is in fact *signed*: Lispector's name is the facsimile of a signature, what we imagine to be her signature or autograph. Is Clarice Lispector, then, yet another title for the book? More precisely, does her signature form another title, another alternative to "the hour of the star"? Is the book, perhaps, as the fact that her name or signature is now a title would seem to indicate, *about* Clarice Lispector – is there, in other words, some form of identity between Lispector and Macabéa (both of them, after all, grew up in the North-east and moved south, as did Rodrigo S.M.)? Why does this name arise here, as the fifth of fourteen possible alternative titles? And why is it not separated from the other subtitles by an "or"? This lack of separation, this immediacy (in the most literal sense of the word), gives the impression of a certain urgency: perhaps the titles were already written, and this name or signature had to forge a space in one of the gaps between titles, taking the place of an "or"; perhaps the name had to be written down (literally) so quickly that there was no time to write "or" either before or after it – after all, hasn't the "Author's Dedication" told us that "[t]his story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity" (10)? The name literally explodes onto the page, just like the "explosions" that dot the narrative (every few pages, the

book's narrative is interrupted by the word "bang," *explosão* in the original, written in parentheses).<sup>158</sup>

Whoever the narrator is – the text, like Duras's, leaves his or her identity up in the air – it is only he (let us call him he), perhaps, who listens to Macabéa. And we are unsure as to whether or not this is by choice. As we saw above, he writes that he doesn't need her, that what he is writing "could be written by another," as long as the other were a man. And yet at other times he admits that he cannot get clear of her, that she is somehow forcing him to put pen to paper. He states: "What I am writing is something more than mere invention; it is my duty to relate everything about this girl among thousands of others like her. It is my duty, however unrewarding, to confront her with her own existence" (13). A little later: "I must write about this girl from the North-east otherwise I shall choke. She points an accusing finger and I can only defend myself by writing about her" (17). And finally: "The typist doesn't want to get off my back" (21). Macabéa literally forces herself upon Rodrigo; it is as though she spoke *through* him; after all, he tells us that "I write by ear" (18), and it is clear that in some way he is simply transcribing what she is telling him (we thus find yet another level of

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<sup>158</sup> It should be said that this whole group of titles functions in a somewhat analogous fashion to the title *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, or, to be more precise, the proper name that is contained in Duras's title. For we have already seen that in stating this name – Lol V. Stein – we are at once uttering all of its possible variations, and we are also uttering, I have tried to show, everything in this novel that can stand in for the letter V. Likewise, as a result of Lispector's title page, when we read the novel we will not only be reading *The Hour of the Star*: we will at the same time be reading all of these other books, these books within the book, *The Blame is Mine*, *A Record of Preceding Events*, *She Doesn't Know how to Protest*, etc. As with the name Lol V. Stein, the title of this book, *The Hour of the Star*, at once contains all of its variants; the moment we speak one name (the name of the woman, the name of the book), we are at once speaking *all* of the names.

indeterminacy regarding the sex of the narrator), transcribing her *secrets*, as it were (hasn't he already said that "I follow a secret, fatal line" [20]?).

If the text, as we suggested above, is first and foremost about how to hear or listen to the girl from the North-east, its first response to this problem lies in the figure of the narrator himself. We don't know *how* he listens to her, but we do know that his entire task as a writer lies in "writing by ear," listening to the story he must tell, and his success depends on whether or not he will be able to do this, whether he is up to the task. Can his words render her visible or audible?

In any case it is some time before the narrative introduces its heroine, Macabéa, as though even the narrative that existed ostensibly to tell her story had trouble finding her, locating its "object," or the language by which to describe that object. Or we might say, the language by which to *watch* her: when she finally arrives upon the scene, before she is even mentioned by name, she is described, as we have just seen, as the "typist" who "doesn't want to get off my back" (21), thus not quite in the line of sight of Rodrigo S.M. And indeed, this is a novel, like *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, that never truly obtains a direct line of sight toward its protagonist, that sees her only with difficulty, a novel that sees its protagonist only through what we might call her veils.

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Lispector's novel, like Duras's, is a literature of the veil.

What we are dealing with here, in other words, is a narrative obsessed with what conceals, that which covers, a narrative for which that which cloaks is as important or

more important that that which is cloaked – in which the only way to get at that which is cloaked is by way of, *through*, the cloak itself. Not by parting or removing this cloak: the cloak, to a certain extent, is the thing itself.

This is perhaps strange for a novel whose protagonist's vision seems clear indeed – she is described as having “questioning eyes,” eyes that are “enormous, round, bulging and inquisitive” (26). Yet any possible vision in this narrative, regardless of the nature of the eyes that purport to see, inevitably encounters obstacles. Obstacles that distort, for example, as when, early in the narrative, Macabéa (but she has not yet been introduced by name) enters the lavatory at her place of work:

She examined herself [*Olhou-se*] mechanically in the mirror above the filthy hand basin that was badly cracked and full of hairs: the image of her own existence. The dark, tarnished mirror scarcely reflected any image. Perhaps her physical existence had vanished? This illusion soon passed and she saw her entire face distorted by the tarnished mirror; her nose had grown as huge as those false noses made of papier mâché donned by curious clowns. She studied herself [*Olhou-se*] and mused: so young and yet so tarnished. (24-5)<sup>159</sup>

Macabéa, therefore, cannot even see herself properly in the mirror, so greatly does it distort her features; and yet this dark, dirty mirror seems to say something essential

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<sup>159</sup> I have drawn attention on two occasions in this citation to the original, for reasons that go back to our discussion about Pontiero's translation: on this occasion, I think that he betrays the original twice, both times when faced with the phrase “*olhou-se*,” “she looked at herself.” First, by trying to make Lispector's writing more ornate than it is (replacing “looked” with “examined” and “studied”); second, by eliding the repetition that marks this passage in the original. In fact, one of the keys to Lispector's writing is what might be called its clumsiness or its awkwardness: very simple words or phrases are repeated almost at will, sentences end before they really get going, people talk past one another in what amounts to a series of grunts or murmurs. Here we find another similarity to Duras, and to Kristeva's reading of Duras.

Strangely, the repetition that occurs in Pontiero's translation, that of the word “tarnished” (which occurs three times in this short passage), is one that does not occur in the original.

about her *in* the very fact that it distorts her, showing her to herself, as it does, as “so tarnished” (“*com ferrugem*”).

A little later, a mirror – we are not told whether it is the same one – allows her to cover herself, in a manner of speaking:

Lost in thought, she examined the blotches [*manchas*, also “stains”] on her face in the mirror. In Alagoas they had a special name for this condition – it was commonly believed to be caused by the liver. The girl concealed [*Disfarçava*, also “disguised”] her blotches with a thick layer of white powder which gave the impression that she had been whitewashed but it was preferable to looking sallow. (26)

And this concealment or disguising of the face repeats itself often throughout the narrative: Macabéa’s four roommates, for example, each of them named Maria,<sup>160</sup> all work at a shop counter, and yet Lispector/Rodrigo pays special attention to the specific duties of one of them who “sold Coty face powder. What a curious occupation [*mas que ideia!*]” (31). And we are also told, shortly thereafter, of one of Macabéa’s “little pleasures,” that of collecting newspaper advertisements:

On wintry nights, shivering from head to foot under a thin cotton sheet, she would read by candle-light the advertisements that she had cut out of old newspapers lying around the office. She collected newspaper advertisements, and pasted them into an album. The advertisement she treasured most of all was in colour: it advertised a face cream for women with complexions so very different from her own sallow skin. Blinking furiously (a fatal tic that she had recently acquired), she imagined the pleasure of possessing such luxuries. The cream looked so appetizing that, were she to find enough money to buy it, she wouldn’t be foolish. Never mind the skin! She would eat the cream, she would, in large spoonfuls straight from the jar. She was needing to put on some flesh, for her body was drier than a half-empty sack of toasted breadcrumbs. (38)

So luxurious is the cream that Macabéa dreams of incorporating it, so that rather than simply applying it onto her skin, it might literally become her, filling out her flesh.

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<sup>160</sup> There is of course much to be said about the names of this novel’s characters – Macabéa, Glória, Olímpico, the four Marias...

As we have just seen, the same passage that describes cream that covers the face also pays close attention to fabrics that cover the body, in this case the thin cotton sheet (*o lençol de brim*) under which she shivers. And a few pages earlier, we found Macabéa occasionally wandering “into the more fashionable quarters of the city” and “gazing at the shop windows displaying glittering jewels and luxurious garments in satin and silk – just to mortify the senses” (34). Later in the novel, when Macabéa goes, for the first time in her life, for a medical examination, she states: “I’ve been told you have to take your clothes off when you visit a doctor, but I’m not taking anything off” (68); and a little later, a fortune-teller reveals to her that she will meet a rich foreigner, stating: “he is going to show you a great deal of affection: and you, my poor little orphan, you will be dressed in satin and velvet, and you will even be presented with a fur coat!” (77).

And indeed, the novel describes one of its most telling moments, the moment at which Macabéa will meet her first and only boyfriend, thus:

On the morning of the seventh of May, and unforeseen ecstasy gripped her tiny body. The bright, open light from the streets penetrated her opacity. May, the month of *bridal veils floating in clouds of white* [*véus de noiva flutuando em branco*]. [...] May, the month of brides, transformed into butterflies *floating in white tulle* [*mês das borboletas noivas flutuando em brancos véus*]. (42)<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> My emphases. The final sentence might also be translated thus: “May, month of butterfly brides floating in white veils.” Pontiero again feels the need here to elide one of Lispector’s repetitions: whereas in the original we find the word *véu* on two occasions, the translation renders the second instance of *véu* as “tulle.”

Since this is the moment at which Macabéa meets her boyfriend, Olímpico, I might point out here that from the standpoint of the veils on which the novel continually focuses, men are treated very differently from women. The third time Macabéa and Olímpico meet, for example, we read that Olímpico drops “that superficial veneer of politeness [*o leve verniz de finura*] that his stepfather had inculcated with some effort” (43-4). Olímpico’s truth, therefore, lies not *in* that which conceals, but *behind* it; and we are hence much closer, with this male character, to the way we are accustomed to

The veil (*véu*), and its repetition. What, then, is the nature of this veil, of these veils – what exactly does this veil, do these veils, hide? But the novel itself tells us that this might be the wrong question. Perhaps the veil is indeed keeping something secret here; perhaps it exists so that we might not see behind it. But we are not the only ones afflicted with this non-seeing. Let us look at an extremely telling passage from toward the beginning of the book:

I see the girl from the North-east looking in the mirror and – the ruffle of a drum – in the mirror there appears my own face, weary and unshaven. We have reversed roles so completely. Without a shadow of a doubt she is a physical person. And what is more: she is a girl *who has never seen her naked body* because she is much too embarrassed. (22, emphasis mine)

Veils, then, whether in the form of creams and powders or of satin and fur, come forth again and again in this novel to conceal bodies. And yet these bodies, these faces, are concealed not only from the reader (as though someone else held a secret truth disguised from us) but also *from the characters themselves*. Veils here do not hide something that Macabéa is concealing from us – she has never even seen her naked body, and neither has anyone else (the narrative repeats again and again the fact that she is a virgin, and suggests a certain repulsion on Macabéa’s part for all sexual acts; and even if this were not the case, we are continually told how repulsive she is: no one, the book insists, would or could ever desire her, not even – especially not – Olímpico). For

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think about the relationship between truth and its veils. Much might also be made here of the particular cloak with which the narrative brings Olímpico into relation: “The one thing [Olímpico] would like to have been was a bullfighter. He had once witnessed a bullfight at the cinema and he had shivered from head to foot when he saw the bullfighter *extend his red cape [quando vira a capa vermelha]*” (45, my emphasis).

all we know, for all anyone else knows, there is nothing at all behind the veil: the very existence of her body may well be a myth.<sup>162</sup>

And indeed, this is precisely what the narrative tells us. What, after all, is Macabéa? The text tells us over the space of a few pages in which the writing's intensity rises just a pitch, pages reminiscent of Duras/Hold's words about the *mot-trou* or *mot-absence* of Lol V. Stein, of the word that one cannot speak but can make resonate. Immediately following an argument between Macabéa and her workmate, Glória, we are told that "[p]eace was soon restored between them, and Macabéa continued to be happy thinking about nothing. Empty, empty" (62). Macabéa would thus consist of a kind of void – fitting for a girl who "did not know that she existed [*não sabia que ela era o que era*, literally: did not know that she was what she was], just as a dog doesn't know that it's a dog" (27), for a girl whose "life was one long meditation about nothingness" (37). And this void, this nothingness, becomes the language of these few pages in the novel, as when we are told that Macabéa "had tried to confide in Glória but decided against it. She didn't know how to express herself and what was there to confide? The atmosphere? One doesn't confide everything, for everything is a

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<sup>162</sup> One gets the sense that the narrative *wants* to pierce through its own veils and cloaks, wants to penetrate past them to the nakedness that lies beneath or beyond, yet is constitutionally incapable of doing so. In an enigmatic parenthesis toward the end of the novel, Lispector/Rodrigo writes: "(I give the bare essentials, enhancing them with pomp, jewels and splendour. Is this how one should write? No, not by accretion but rather by denudation. But I am frightened of nakedness, for that is the final word.)" The narrative seems, therefore, to hold "denudation" as its object, to seek not to pile layers onto itself but on the contrary to peel back these layers. And yet if this is the case, the narrative, by its own admission, is a failure: it cannot hold to its standard of denudation because of a fear that inhabits it; it betrays itself by not writing as it should; the moment it arrived at its ideal of "nakedness" (*nudez*), it would exhaust itself: it would die.



hollow void” (63).<sup>163</sup> Macabéa literally has nothing to confide; or rather, what she has to confide is precisely the nothing – a void, “*um oco nada.*” And this hollow void that she does not express or tell is no doubt simply herself: the very next paragraph tells us that at times, “grace descended upon her as she sat at her desk in the office. Then she would go to the washroom in order to be alone. [...] Standing and thinking about nothing, a vacant expression in her eyes [*os olhos moles*]” (63).

Macabéa, therefore, *is not*; she is nothing rather than something. And yet the text tells us that this is not exactly true. For it tells us, toward the beginning of the book, that “within her there is a seclusion,” that “in her poverty of body and soul one touches sanctity” (*porque nela haja um recolhimento e também porque na pobreza de corpo e espírito eu toco na santidade*) (21). It is as though there is a something within the nothing, in Macabéa just as in the narrative, just as in “this story [which] will consist of words that form phrases from which there emanates a secret meaning that exceeds both words and phrases” (14-15). Within the *mots-trous* and *mots-absences* that form

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<sup>163</sup> I must once again bring attention to the original here, which reads: “Tentara contar a Glória mas não tivera jeito, não sabia falar e mesmo contar o quê? O ar? Não se conta tudo porque o tudo é um oco nada.” An alternative translation might run as follows: “She had tried to tell Glória but decided against it, she didn’t know how to speak properly and what was there to tell? The air? One doesn’t tell everything because everything is a hollow void.” The translation I have proposed here is less elegant than that of Pontiero, but once again, this is precisely the point: where Pontiero employs the words “confide” and “express,” Lispector uses the less ornate “tell” (*contar*) and “speak” or “talk” (*falar*). (Pontiero also strangely translates *ar* – “air” – with “atmosphere.”) The style here, again like that of Duras, is one of discomfort, inadequacy, in concert with its “object.”

Macabéa and the story of Macabéa, there is something beyond the void, the *vazio*, nothingness, a secret that one cannot speak but can make resonate.<sup>164</sup>

Indeed this *vazio* or *oco nada*, these *olhos moles*, these *trous* and absences, lead us to think of a certain concept, one deployed specifically in the field of literary criticism, that seems to describe perfectly all these variants of nothingness: I am thinking of Blanchot's concept of the *neutral*. In one of the essays in which he most explicitly deals with this concept, "La voix narrative (*le 'il,' le neutre*)," an essay that deals mainly with, or at least takes the majority of its examples from, Kafka, Blanchot even makes reference to one of the passages in Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* that we looked at above, the passage in which she writes of the *mot-trou*. Let us take a look at how Blanchot develops his concept, paying attention to the way he employs Duras's text in this development:

Le "il" narratif, qu'il soit absent ou présent, qu'il s'affirme ou se dérobe, qu'il altère ou non les conventions d'écriture – la linéarité, la continuité, la lisibilité – marque ainsi l'intrusion de l'autre – entendu au neutre – dans son étrangeté irréductible, dans sa perversité retorse. L'autre parle. Mais quand l'autre parle, personne ne parle, car l'autre, qu'il faut se garder d'honorer d'une majuscule qui le fixerait dans un substantif de majesté, comme s'il avait quelque présence substantielle, voire unique, n'est précisément jamais seulement l'autre, il n'est plutôt ni l'un ni l'autre, et le neutre qui le marque le retire des deux, comme de l'unité, l'établissant toujours au-dehors du terme, de l'acte ou du sujet où il prétend s'offrir. La voix narrative (je ne dis pas narratrice) tient de là son

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<sup>164</sup> Again we find a difference here between the masculine and the feminine in Lispector's novel, a difference specifically concerning secrecy. The main male character, Olímpico, also has a secret: "he had killed a rival in the heart of the backwoods: his long, sharp knife had punctured his victim's soft liver with the greatest ease. He had kept this crime a secret [*Guardava disso segredo absoluto*], and he enjoyed that sense of power which secrecy can bestow" (57). Unlike Macabéa's secret, then, Olímpico's secret is known to him; it is comprised of no *mot-trou*, but of everyday words that can be spoken, communicated; he simply chooses not to do so, to keep these words for himself. This masculine secret has a different relationship to language, to knowledge.

aphonie. Voix qui n'a pas de place dans l'oeuvre, mais qui non plus ne la surplombe pas, loin de tomber de quelque ciel sous la garantie d'une Transendance supérieure : le "il" n'est pas l'englobant de Jaspers, il est plutôt comme un vide dans l'oeuvre – ce mot-absence qu'évoque Marguerite Duras dans l'un de ses récits, "un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres mots auraient dû être enterrés," et le texte ajoute : "On n'aurait pas pu le dire, mais on aurait pu le faire résonner – immense, sans fin, un gong vide..." C'est la voix narrative, une voix neutre qui dit l'oeuvre à partir de ce lieu sans lieu où l'oeuvre se tait.<sup>165</sup>

If Blanchot comments upon Duras's novel, it is because he locates, in Duras's narrative, the work of the *neutral*, just as he locates the neutral in Kafka's writing. And what we have seen in the texts of both Duras and of Lispector no doubt engages in some sort of relationship with Blanchot's neutral, this emptiness or nothingness, this "vide dans l'oeuvre," which is not so much a voice as a silence, or perhaps somewhere between the two, inasmuch as it is in this neutral voice that "l'oeuvre se tait."

And yet I wonder if what we have already said about Duras and Lispector forces us to call into question, or at least to attempt to disturb or agitate somewhat, Blanchot's comments about this text. I wonder if Duras and Lispector do not demand that we seek to go *beyond* what Blanchot says about the neutral – if, in other words, Duras and Lispector do not ask us to shift the register of the neutral somewhat, to expose it, we might say, since we are not really moving from the language of Blanchot to "another"

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<sup>165</sup> Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 564-5. We should keep in mind that this is only the first of two references to Duras's novel in Blanchot's essay: the second is in a footnote to the very last word of the essay, and hence in an ending beyond the ending, a *tout dernier mot* following the *dernier mot*. The note – too long to truly do justice to here; indeed, the length of the note, to my mind, is a lovely window into the excitement and urgency with which Blanchot must have read Duras's recently published novel – begins as follows: "C'est cette voix – la voix narrative – que, peut-être inconsidérément, peut-être avec raison, j'entends dans le récit de Marguerite Duras, celui que j'ai évoqué tout à l'heure" (184); and the note goes on to propose the "coordinates" of a reading of the famous night of the ball, and all that follows it.

language here or seeking to drop his concept and move on, to *its own outside or its own beyond*. One of the things that we can say about Blanchot's neutral is that it exists on a kind of border, occupying a strange non-space (as is proper to any border) between the active and the passive, but also between the masculine and the feminine, themselves so often associated with, to the point at which they are indistinguishable from, the active and the passive, respectively. Between these two extremes, the neutral, again like any border, forges a kind of third space, a third space that, as Blanchot tells us in the passage cited above, *intrudes* upon that which it is supposed to merely separate or distinguish, an alterity that refuses its incorporation into one or the other side of the division.

The neutral would hence lie not only between but also *beyond* active/passive, beyond masculine/feminine. But can the term "neutral" truly be said to describe the work of Lispector's *vazio*, the work of Duras's *absence*? Both of these terms, it is true, indicate a kind of register at which *nothingness* speaks in their respective novels. And yet we get the sense that this is not, in fact, an ungendered nothingness – a nothingness that lies purely and simply in between. This nothingness, this neutral voice, at work in both of these novels, is nothing, we have already seen, if not gendered – nothing if not distinctly *feminine*. And yet it is not simply a femininity of the kind we usually assume to lie in opposition to the masculine. On the contrary, what Duras and Lispector give us to think, not in opposition to but by way of Blanchot's neutral, is what we might call a *femininity beyond neutrality*: a void or a nothingness, undoubtedly, but one that would be tinged or colored by femininity, one whose silence would articulate itself in the

register or the voice of the feminine.<sup>166</sup> A fourth space of sorts, a border of the border, an outside of the beyond. A feminine nothingness or hollow beyond nothingness itself, and beyond its own opposition to masculinity.

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What, then, is the feminine secret, the secret veiled in and by these two texts, the secret that is articulated only by way of the veil?

What lies behind the veil, we have seen, is *nothing*: it is a void. But perhaps the name of this void is *time*.

Time: a theme that forces itself upon us in Duras's text, that insists throughout the text, that returns again and again. The text, one could argue, is literally obsessed by it: one can open it at almost any point and find reference after reference to this theme. And indeed, it would be strange to expect anything else here, given the story line: isn't Lol V. Stein's predicament, the predicament into which all of the other characters also end up falling, that time, for her, has been loosened from its moorings, that she has become unstuck in time as it were: she seems never to have quite "moved on" from the famous ball at T. Beach, she seems to replay its events over and over in her mind.

And yet this is only one of the ways in which time works in this novel. This is only one of its many *temporalities*.

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<sup>166</sup> I should make clear here that this is how I understood my earlier claim about the "essential femininity" of the secret to be understood.

We have just said that this novel is literally obsessed by time: it cannot stop speaking about time, referencing time over and over. We can open the book almost at random to find temporal references, to minutes, years, instants, moments, etc. In the space of a few pages: “Tatiana est toujours si pressée” (136); “Je vais l’emmener à l’instant pour toujours” (139); “Je dois voir Tatiana jeudi à cinq heures” (140); “Je suis le dernier arrivé” (141); “Dans un temps mort du dîner” (144); “la sempiternelle répétition de la vie” (145). Time, like the veilings we looked at earlier in the book, cannot stop uttering itself, articulating itself, forcing its way into the narrative.

And if there is one thing that can be said about the workings of time in this novel, it is that these workings are *untimely*. What is key is not only that temporal references arise again and again in this novel, but that the various times in this novel work in strange, even contradictory ways throughout.

The most obvious way time works here is through repetition, and this is perhaps unsurprising for a novel that begins with what is arguably a moment of trauma – the night of the famous ball – and then picks up again ten years later, but with what seems only to be a pathological desire to return to that night. Don’t Jacques and Tatiana continuously suggest that Lol is “still there,” still in the ballroom at T. Beach, even now, so many years later; and doesn’t Jacques come to postulate that everything Lol has done since their first meeting has been done with the aim of recreating, re-enacting, reliving the ball at T. Beach? (Though the musings of Jacques and Tatiana on this subject are never completely free of doubt; and the fact that they are repeated over and over should make us ask whether something else is going on entirely.)

Yet the narrative here is not simply “about” repetition, about the endless repetition of a single night. On the contrary, the narrative – how else to do justice to a founding repetition? – is repetition itself: the very language through which it tells this story about repetition is a language that constantly cuts back on itself, returns to itself, returns to what has already been said. Let us look at a passage in order to think about how exactly this repetition works: we follow Jacques Hold here, at the moment at which he begins to follow Lol V. Stein through the streets of S. Tahla:

J’arrête l’auto et je la suis à pied. Elle va jusqu’au bout du boulevard. *Elle marche assez rapidement*, sa démarche est aisée, belle. *Elle me paraît plus grande* que les deux fois où je l’ai vue. *Elle porte son manteau gris, un chapeau noir sans bords*. Elle tourne sur la droite dans la direction qui mène vers chez elle, elle disparaît. Je reviens vers l’auto, épuisé. Elle continue donc ses promenades et je pourrai, si je ne peux pas arriver à l’attendre, la rencontrer. *Elle marchait assez rapidement*, elle ralentissait parfois jusqu’à s’arrêter puis repartait. *Elle était plus grande* que chez elle, plus élancée. *Ce manteau gris que j’ai reconnu, ce chapeau noir sans bords*, non, elle ne l’avait pas dans le champ de seigle. (128)<sup>167</sup>

It is as though there were a slippage in time here: Jacques Hold makes a series of observations, seems to move elsewhere, then returns – using only very slightly different words – to the observations he has already made, concerning Lol’s gait, her size, her clothes. Such repetitions occur throughout the novel, for instance a few pages on, when Jacques, speaking about Lol, remarks that “l’idée de son absence m’est devenue insupportable,” an idea to which Lol, when Jacques communicates it to her, responds thus: “*Elle, elle n’éprouvait rien de pareil, elle était surprise. Elle ne comprenait pas*” (136).<sup>168</sup> So many words in this novel that repeat themselves in the space of a single sentence, phrase or paragraph, echoing one another in the space delimited by two

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<sup>167</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>168</sup> My emphasis.

periods<sup>169</sup> or indentations...as though there were something here that required a time that mirrored itself, that folded back upon itself, in which that which comes later makes reference to what has already occurred, and what occurs already repeats what is yet to come.

But sometimes the language of this novel, instead of referencing earlier instances of itself, or anticipating its own future mirrorings, simply stops in its tracks. And this always occurs through the mouth of Lol V. Stein: a progression that seems to be taking place simply comes to a halt. After the soirée at Lol's house, for example, when Lol and Tatiana are alone, with the sound of Jean Bedford's violin in the background:

- Écoute Jean. Parfois il joue jusqu'à quatre heures du matin. Il nous a complètement oubliées.
- Tu écoutes toujours?
- Presque toujours. Surtout quand je  
Tatiana attend. Le reste de la phrase ne viendra pas. (93)

And unsurprisingly, these instances of speech stopping mid-sentence occur more frequently as the novel progresses. Here is Lol speaking with Jacques Hold, following the dinner at her house; it is Jacques who begins:

- Vous êtes allée au bord de la mer.
- Hier je suis allée à T. Beach.
- Pourquoi ne rien dire? Pourquoi? Pourquoi y aller?
- Je croyais que  
Elle ne termine pas. J'insiste doucement.
- Essayez de me dire. Que...
- Vous auriez deviné. (153)

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<sup>169</sup> We will give more thought to this space "between periods" when we return to Lispector.



This series of Lol's interrupted utterances continues a little later, while she is speaking with Jacques on the train to T. Beach. The first: "Oui. Surtout de cette façon. Vous êtes si près de" (169). The second instance is something of an exception, as here Lol hesitates only for a moment but then takes up her sentence again. "C'est peut-être dans ces moments-là, quand j'arrive à croire que vous avez disparu que" (170); and after pausing: "que je suis le mieux, celle que je dois"(170). And finally, speaking about Tatiana: "Peut-être qu'il ne faudrait plus que je vous voie ensemble sauf" (175). The last occurrence of these cut phrases occurs as Lol is having lunch with Jacques in the town of T. Beach: "Je vais téléphoner à mon mari. Ce n'est quand même pas suffisant que je sois à T. Beach pour qu'il" (185). There are of course many possible hypotheses we could make about these sentences that seem to stop in the middle of nowhere. At times, it seems that Lol, looking at Jacques Hold, confuses him with Michael Richardson, as could be argued for the examples taken from the train ride; her interruptions would then be due to a confusion on her part as to exactly where she is located in time. And yet not every one of these interrupted phrases can be made to fit within this logic; indeed it is the very fact that these utterances are all so different from one another, arising in different contexts, dealing with different issues, and even spoken to different people (recall that the first phrase is uttered to Tatiana), that frustrates our ability to come up with some overarching logic behind their workings.

Let us instead take a different approach, and examine them not for their content but simply for their structure. We made note above of the repetitions that occur throughout this novel, and noted that, at their most compact, these repetitions occur within the space of a single sentence – within the space delineated by two periods. If

there is a difference, then, between what we might call these two different kinds of stuttering – the one that occurs through repetition, and the one that occurs through cessation – it is that in the former case, the stuttering is *contained*, in a manner of speaking; while in the other, the stuttering is not contained at all: stopping in mid-air, seeming to be on the edge of a precipice, the space opened by the stutter is not one that is closed, but rather one that is *open*. Seeming to stop in mid-sentence, perhaps Lol does not stop at all, but rather opens the narrative, and the time in which the narrative unfolds, to a kind of infinity, eternity, boundlessness.

Open, first of all, to the past.

And to the only past that really matters to this book: the ball. Lol stands, the narrative stands, in a position of openness relative to this ball, to this ball which is nonetheless literally inaccessible, not so much the past as the other of the present, non-event with which the present is obsessed because it is both so near and yet so far from it. This is why Lol, returning not from U. Bridge but from T. Beach – from the ball, her only provenance (doesn't she say that she could see the sea from her house in U. Bridge...which was in fact two hours from the sea?) – returns from a kind of infinite distance. A distance that literally makes her *ancient*, a kind of relic of the past: we hear of her “curiosité brisée, émigrée centenaire de sa jeunesse” (99), we are told of her “folie ancienne” (144), and when Lol dances with Jacques Hold, he remarks: “Il y a cent ans que j'ai Lol dans les bras” (153). If Lol has returned to the narrative, she has returned from an infinitely distant past – yet from a time that is not exactly dead, for even now, “[l]e bal tremblait au loin, ancien, seule épave d'un océan maintenant

tranquille” (45). It is from an ancient wreck or ruin that Lol has had to return – but returned she has. *Lol V. Stein est revenu.*

And what the narrative is open to, therefore, is this kind of living dead of the distant past, this ancient figure come from the ball trembling in the distance. It grants a certain hospitality, it opens itself, to this ghost from the past, to her *revenance*. Not everyone, of course, is granted this power of return: Tatiana says of Michael Richardson, for example, “Il n’est jamais revenu, jamais” (101). Lol, however, is different: she somehow, impossibly, returns. “Que chachait cette revenante tranquille d’un amour si grand, si fort, disait-on, qu’elle en avait comme perdu la raison?” (80). She returns, however, without ever exactly arriving: her very function in the narrative, one could argue, is to continually return, always to come back, *toujours revenir*.

She comes, incessantly returning, re-coming, never exactly stopping; her place in time is never precisely assignable (she is always “somewhere else”: even in her youth, we have already heard Tatiana say, “il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit : là” [12]); her presence in the novel is always untimely, calling into question the very words we use to describe presence. But it may also be that this lack of presence isn’t strictly concerned with the past, even though everything seems to come back from there, to return from there, even though the present here only exists in and through its unceasing dialogue with the past. Perhaps at an even deeper level, the novel is concerned with a different temporality. Perhaps the novel is concerned, first and foremost, with the future, with what is to come: with *l’avenir*.

For this text that seems, at times, wholly consumed with the past is just as often turned toward what is still to come. We learn, as Lol crosses the garden to meet Tatiana

for the first time in ten years, that “[l]e lendemain est là” (74); Jacques Hold mentions, when he and Lol are alone for the first time: “Sa main ouverte posée sur mon bras préfigure un avenir multiforme et unique” (113); and later, in the tea room in Green Town, Jacques describes himself as “toujours dans le même état ignorant et averti à la fois d’un avenir qu’elle seule désigne sans le connaître” (132). This book about the past, therefore, is also about the future, a future alternatively conceived of as unknown, multiform, unique...and already there, already in the present. But perhaps it is even earlier that the narrative begins to concern itself with the future, perhaps it is in that moment in the ancient past – the ball at T. Beach – that this future is already being sketched out, already arriving somehow. Perhaps it is in this distant past that tomorrow is already there.

Let us return, then, one last time, to the famous ball. Not to the moment at which Michael Richardson leaves Lol to dance with Anne-Marie Stretter; not to the moment when Michael Richardson, confronted with his own destiny but perhaps not wanting to face it, “chercha dans la salle quelque signe d’éternité” (21), not seeing the smile of Lol V. Stein as she watches them dance, which, we are told, is precisely such a sign. Let us move, rather, forward in time slightly, to what is perhaps erroneously referred to as the moment of trauma. To the end of the ball.

The end of the ball: if there is indeed a trauma that occurs here, it is precisely concerned with this ending. The end of the night. We see the first signs of this ending when Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter, having noticed that daylight has begun to enter the hall, gaze at one another, “ne sachant que faire, comment sortir de la nuit” (ibid.); and then when Lol’s mother enters the hall: Lol “avait compris seulement

à cet instant-là qu'une fin se dessinait mais confusément, sans distinguer encore au juste laquelle elle serait" (22). It is at this moment – at the moment her mother comes between Lol and the dancers, the moment at which her mother interrupts Lol's gaze by forming a "screen," that Lol begins to understand that the night is coming to an end. And what the narrative tells us is that it is this ending – not so much the end of her engagement to Michael Richardson, which seems not to have affected her in the slightest (hasn't she gone so far as to encourage Richardson's seemingly endless dance with Anne-Marie Stretter?), but the end of her vision, her gaze – that for Lol is unbearable. After throwing her mother to the ground, "Lol cria pour la première fois" (ibid.), and as Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter begin to leave the hall, to look for the door, at the moment at which the "pénombre de l'aurore était la même au-dehors et au-dedans de la salle" (ibid.), Lol continues to scream: "Lol avait crié sans discontinuer des choses sensées : il n'était pas tard, l'heure d'été trompait. Elle avait supplié Michael Richardson de la croire" (ibid.). After which Lol faints and is taken home...but she does not return home alone: she brings this statement, this cry, with her. Her convalescence is accompanied by this cry, and by her name, described in two single-sentence paragraphs:

Elle disait toujours les mêmes choses : que l'heure d'été trompait, qu'il n'était pas tard.

Elle prononçait son nom avec colère : Lol V. Stein – c'était ainsi qu'elle se désignait. (23)

What do these two sentences, these two brief paragraphs, tell us?

On the most obvious level, what Lol says, when she cries that it is not late, that it is only the summer – the summer hour – that makes it seem so, is that the night has

not yet come to an end: at any other time of the year, we would still be engulfed in darkness, and hence, for all intents and purposes, it is still night, despite what the early morning light seems to be telling us. And hence, this must not come to an end: this gaze, my gaze upon you, upon your dancing, upon your coupling, upon Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter, and later upon Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl, need not end so quickly. Time has not yet been cut short: there is still, in other words, a future to this gaze. And indeed, couldn't one argue that this is Lol's motivation, ten years later, when she enters the life of Jacques Hold and re-enters – comes back to – that of Tatiana Karl: doesn't she tell Jacques Hold again and again, in response to his declarations that he will leave Tatiana, that he must at all costs not do so, that they must continue their affair – that her gaze at their love must not come to an end?

That there is still, in other words, a future for this gaze. And perhaps the outline of this future is the deepest lesson of the time announced by Lol V. Stein's "il n'est pas tard."

Perhaps, in other words, this is the kind of future Lol indicates to us. A time of the not late, the not yet...a time before itself, a time that has not yet arrived at itself. It is not late, I can still watch...and yet of course I cannot, the time to come is the very time of my not-watching, my not-seeing. Time here – the time to which perhaps only Lol V. Stein is granted access – is the time of the not yet, a time that puts itself off, that can never quite arrive at...itself. A time that can never quite arrive *at its end*. A time in which "le lendemain est là," a present in which the next day has already somehow arrived, all the while being not yet there. A night in which the dawn has already, and has not, arrived – this is the time that the name Lol V. Stein, as the passage above

suggests, names, the time of her existence, this pure time that she cannot bear to see end. Lol V. Stein: “Elle vient. Continue à venir, même en présence des autres. Personne ne la voit avancer.” An opening...through which we seem to see perfectly, and yet through which, by way of which, there is nothing to see. Through which there is only a slight opening to see...somewhere between *présent* and *avenir*, darkness and dawn, between the night and the rising sun. *This is the hour of Lol V. Stein's star.*

For we are of course quite close to Lispector's novel here, a novel that is, like Duras's, deeply concerned with time – how could it be otherwise for a novel entitled *The Hour of the Star*? A novel that, again like Duras's, is worked over, worked upon, traversed by, several distinct temporalities. It is a novel, of course, about beginnings, as we are told in the very first paragraph:

Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before prehistory there was the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. There always was. I do not know what there was, but I know that the universe never began.<sup>170</sup> (11)

From the very beginning we are given to think about beginnings. Yet in this opening passage about beginnings, we are told that there is no such thing, that beginnings are, in fact, impossible, that “there always was” (*sempre houve*), a “there was” without object. And hence we are faced with the seeming contradiction between a universe that never began, and a universe that began with a yes...which, when one thinks about it, is perhaps the same thing. The past, in any case, is a long prehistory, a prehistory that precedes prehistory that precedes history (fitting, perhaps, for a story about an “anonymous girl” who is “so ancient that she could be described as biblical” [30]), a

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<sup>170</sup> Translation slightly modified. Pontiero omits the fourth sentence of this passage, and changes the fifth quite substantially.

prehistory that, for its never having begun or for its having begun with a yes, seems resolutely *open* (we will return to this openness of time below).

But this novel that begins with a reflection about the past is also a novel about the present, the now, the present moment or *instant*. Speaking, toward the beginning of the book, about himself and Macabéa, the narrator seems to step back for a moment, as he often does, to engage in philosophical reflections: “we live exclusively in the present because forever and eternally it is the day of today, and the day of tomorrow will be a today. Eternity is the state of things at this very moment” (18). Interestingly, these reflections would seem to intersect quite nicely with what the narrator has already said about the past, for just as “there always was,” aren’t we told here, essentially, that the present always, eternally, is? This eternal present would seem to encompass both past and present in a time of the *now*. And indeed, this now is marked in several different ways throughout the book. It is marked, for example, by an all-encompassing oppression, a market-based or capitalist domination that defines, in some way, the entire context of the book, despite the fact that this context is easily forgettable:

I forgot to mention that the record that is about to begin – for I can no longer bear the onslaught of facts – the record that is about to begin is written under the sponsorship of the most popular soft drink in the world even though it does not earn me anything; a soft drink that is distributed throughout the world. It is the same soft drink that sponsored the recent earthquake in Guatemala. Despite the fact that it tastes of nail polish, toilet soap and chewed plastic. None of this prevents people from loving it with servility and subservience. Also because – and I am now going to say something strange that only I can understand – this drink which contains coca is *today*. It allows people to be modern and to move with the times. (23, emphasis in original)<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> We should note that this drink (and all it represents) that defines *today* also defines the girl’s existence:



The present is hence marked by oppression and an accompanying servility. And we should keep this in mind even if, as the narrator himself states, the narrative often seems to forget about it: it is nonetheless always there, for example when Macabéa finds a book that her boss has left on a table, entitled *The Shamed and the Oppressed* (*Humiliados e Ofendidos*) – the text of course refers here to Dostoevsky’s great novel, the title of which has most often recently been rendered in English as “Humiliated and Insulted,” in line with the title given in Portuguese. Upon reading this title, Macabéa “was pensive. Perhaps for the very first time she had established her social class. She thought and thought and thought! She decided that no one had ever really oppressed her and that everything that happened to her was inevitable. It was futile trying to struggle. Why struggle?” (40). But perhaps, if Macabéa sets aside the idea that she belongs to the class of the humiliated or oppressed, it is because the present is marked not only by oppression, but also but its regularity, its uniformity. Eternity and oppression, or a seemingly eternal oppression, are not even noticed anymore; they are as regular as clockwork. And hence it is no surprise if the present, in this novel, is also marked by the constant ticking of a clock:

Every morning she switched on the transistor radio loaned by one of her roommates, Maria da Penha. She switched it on as low as possible so as not to disturb the others, and she invariably tuned into Radio Clock, a channel that broadcast the correct time and educational programmes. There was no music, only a constant ping like drops of falling rain – a drop for every minute that passed. This channel took advantage of the pauses between each ping to broadcast commercials. She adored commercials. (36-7)

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And when she woke up? When she woke up, she no longer knew her own identity. Only later did she reflect with satisfaction: I am a typist and a virgin, and I like coca-cola. Only then did she get dressed, and spend the rest of the day passively enacting the role of being. (35)

The present is thus marked perfectly, in a perfect rhythm marked by “*pingos de tempo*,” little droplets which provide perfect minute-long spaces for market-speak. The whole novel, one could argue, is marked by these “pings” – by their routine, their repetition, by the fact that, as Macabéa notes, “every day at the same hour, it was exactly the same hour” (40). And hence, is it any surprise that one of the primary features of this novel, as with *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, is repetition? This is a narrative that repeats itself, that often proceeds by way of repetition, as we see in the description of Macabéa laying her eyes on a very handsome man (I cite the original here as the translation does away with many of the repetitions): “a moça um dia viu num botequim um homem tão, tão, tão bonito que – que queria tê-lo em casa. Deveria ser, como – como ter uma grande esmeralda-esmeralda-esmeralda num estojo aberto. Intocável” (45).<sup>172</sup>

The present, the current moment or instant, is thus marked, at the very least, by eternity, oppression, humiliation, regularity, repetition. But it is also marked by death. It is the narrative itself that tells us so, at the very end of the book, at the moment at which Macabéa dies. At this point, the translation reads: “She is finally free of herself and of me. Do not be frightened. Death is instantaneous and passes in a flash” (85). Yet the original tells us something very different, something far more radical: “Ela estava enfim livre de si e de nós. Não vai assusteis, *morrer é um instante*, passa logo...” (92-3, my emphasis). It is not, therefore, that death is instantaneous, but rather

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<sup>172</sup> Here is Pontiero’s translation of this passage: “one day the girl saw a man in a snack-bar who was so amazingly good-looking that she would have loved to take him home. It would be like – like possessing a large emerald – emerald – emerald displayed in a jewel box. Forbidden to touch” (40).

that *death is an instant*: the instant, the moment, the now, the *pingo de tempo*, is marked, finally, here at the end of the narrative, by death itself.

And moving down the page, we arrive at the book's final discussion of the instant, and a repetition of the instant and death brushing against one another: "She died in an instant. An instant is that particle of time in which the tyre of a car going at full speed touches the ground, touches it no longer, then touches it again. Etc., etc., etc." (85-6).<sup>173</sup> We have already learned that death is an instant, and now we are told that an instant is a particle of time. But let us look again at the original, where things are somewhat different: "O instante," the narrator tells us, "é aquele *átimo* de tempo..." (93, my emphasis). What, then, is an *átimo*? Quite simply, it is a brief interval of time, and is to some degree synonymous with words such as *instante*, *momento*, *segundo*. The specificity of *átimo*, however, lies in its provenance: sharing the same etymology as the word *atom* (in Portuguese, *átomo*), deriving from the Greek *atomos*, the *átimo* is a particle of time (as Pontiero rightly, in my opinion, translates) that is indivisible, that cannot be divided any further, time in its smallest, narrowest possible unit.<sup>174</sup> The *átimo* would be that most ephemeral possible unit of time (and is it any surprise, then, that one of the words whose meaning escapes the typist Macabéa is "ephemeris," "*efeméride*," that she finds this word "absolutely mysterious" (39), that she is "passionate" (40)<sup>175</sup> about this word?).

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<sup>173</sup> Translation slightly modified.

<sup>174</sup> The Portuguese *átimo* corresponds to the Italian *átimo*; strangely, however, there seems to be no corresponding word in either Castilian or Catalan.

<sup>175</sup> I have slightly modified the translations of the last two citations in this sentence.

But the *átimo*, in *Lispector*, is not only the purest possible definition of the present, of the present moment or instant. The *átimo* also somehow links present and past. For if the *átimo* is referred to at the end of the book, if it is the time or temporality that marks the ending, it also resonates with the beginning of the book, with the very first sentence of the narrative. The novel, let us recall, begins (once we get past the dedication and list of titles) with the following words: “Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born” (11). We are back, then, to the realm of beginnings, and indeed the very next sentence is the one that refers to prehistory and its prehistory. In atom and molecule, then – let us recall that a molecule, a very recent word in comparison to atom, and which now denotes, as the *OED* tells us, “a group of atoms chemically bonded together and acting as a unit,” originally signified “one of the minute discrete particles of which material substances were thought to be composed” – past and present are joined as one; the particle of time with which the book seems to deal both at the beginning and the end is a strange, indivisible unit that is nonetheless caught somewhere between past and present, in which past and present mirror one another in their very indivisibility.

Death, therefore, would seem to belong to this pure instant somewhere between past and present, the *átimo*, the “fraction de seconde,” as Marguerite Wünscher’s French translation puts it. And yet, for all this obsession with time, there is yet another temporality, yet another conception of time, at work here.

Let us return to the strange enumeration of titles, of possible titles, that follows the author’s dedication, and precedes the “beginning” of the narrative. The list begins, of course, with a title that is also the “real” title of the book: *The Hour of the Star*. And

this title is repeated two titles down the list, right after the enigmatic “the fault is mine.”

But looking a little bit further down the list – right after the handwritten “Clarice

Lispector” – we find another reference to time, to a time we haven’t yet looked at

closely, but which appears over and over in Lispector’s narrative. About halfway down

the list, we read:

.QUANTO AO FUTURO.

“As for the future,” in Pontiero’s translation; “Quant à l’avenir” in Wünscher’s. But we

should perhaps begin not with the title itself, but with the strange use of punctuation

here. This is the only one of the titles listed on this page in which we find any

punctuation, and we find it, of course, used in a strange way, with a period not only at

the end but at the beginning of the title – enclosing, bordering or delimiting the title, as

it were. The narrator makes mention of this only a few pages into the novel, right after

he introduces himself by name, and in the context of a discussion of the type of story he

aims to write:

A story that is patently open and explicit yet holds certain secrets – starting with one of the book’s titles ‘As For The Future,’ preceded and followed by a full stop. This is no caprice on my part – hopefully this need for confinement [*necessidade do delimitado*] will ultimately become clear. (The ending is still so vague yet, were my poverty to permit, I should like it to be grandiose.) If, instead of a full stop [*punto*], the title were followed by dotted lines [*reticências*], it would remain open to every kind of speculation on your part, however morbid or pitiless. (13)

If we have arrived at this future tense, or rather this mention of or gesture toward a

future tense, last of all, it is perhaps because, as the narrator suggests in this passage,

this is the most secret of all the tenses employed here, the tense that brings the story

away from its otherwise “open and explicit” (“*exterior e explícita*”) nature. Indeed, in

opposition to this openness or exteriority, the very mention of the future brings about an uncharacteristic need to create an interior (a secret interior), to confine or to delimit.

This secret tense, this secret time, appears at many instances in the text, often in discussions about whether or not it is possible to have a future. Macabéa, he suggests often, doesn't have a future at all. "As for the girl [*Quanto à moça*]," he states at one point, "she exists in an impersonal limbo" (23); she "didn't worry too much about her own future: to have a future was a luxury" (58); and when her office-mate Glória asks her "do you ever think about your future?" there is no response: "The question remained unanswered, for Macabéa had nothing to say" (65). It is unsurprising, then, that this tense is described as a secret, given that, for Macabéa, it is so uncertain, there is so little to say about it: at times the narrator hints that her future might be brighter than her current state gives us to hope, but then he quickly moves on to another aspect of the story.

Yet everything in this narrative seems to move inexorably toward this secret future, and in fact Macabéa's very last act is to attempt to find out about her future – to visit a fortune-teller, a *cartomante*, on the advice of Glória. And it is during Macabéa's visit to the fortune-teller that her future seems suddenly to begin to take shape. For the first time in her life, we are told, Macabéa "was about to know her own destiny" (75). At first the news is not good. "As for your present [*Quanto ao presente*], my child, that's miserable," states the clairvoyante, but we immediately realize that she is not speaking of the present so much as the immediate future:<sup>176</sup> she tells Macabéa that she

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<sup>176</sup> Indeed, Pontiero translates the "*Quanto ao presente*" of this sentence as "As for your immediate future." I have modified this translation.

will soon lose her job, just as she has recently lost her boyfriend. Soon, however, things take a turn for the better: the fortune-teller tells Macabéa that her life is about to change, that her boyfriend will come back to her, that her boss will decide not to fire her. At this point, for the first time in her life, Macabéa's relationship to the future begins to change: her "eyes opened wide as she felt a sudden hunger for the future (bang)," to which the narrator adds "And I, too, am beginning to cherish hope at last" (76). And the fortune-teller continues, telling Macabéa that she will soon meet a rich foreigner names Hans who will dress her in satin and velvet, and present her with a fur coat.

Macabéa is therefore utterly transformed by this visit to the fortune-teller, so much so that the narrator describes her as "a new person," a "person enriched with a future" (79). So different is she that, upon leaving, she doesn't know exactly what to do: she "stood there in bewilderment, uncertain whether she should cross the street now that her life had been transformed" (78-9). The future, however, is not as it seems:

The moment she stepped off the pavement, Destiny (bang) swift and greedy, whispered: now, quickly, for my time has come!  
And a yellow Mercedes, as huge as an ocean liner, knocked her down.  
At that very moment, in some remote corner of the world, a horse reared and gave a loud neigh, as if in response. (79)<sup>177</sup>

It is tempting to say that the fortune teller has made a mistake: did Macabéa, approaching her house, not cross paths with a teary-eyed girl, and does the fortune-teller not tell Macabéa that she "just told that girl you saw leaving that she's going to be knocked down in the road" (77)? Yet the narrator tells us that, even after being hit by the car, Macabéa realized that the fortune-teller's prophecies were coming true: the car, after all, was luxurious, and we learn a little later that it was driven by a fair-haired

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<sup>177</sup> Translation slightly modified.

foreigner. Indeed, being hit by the car, for Macabéa, is strangely something positive: lying in the road bleeding, she has the time to think: “Today...today is the dawn of my existence: I am born” (80). The future, it would seem, has arrived: there is no going back to that other time, that prehistoric time, in which she gave no thought to what was to come, to her destiny, and nothing can change the euphoria with which she has entered this new time, not even its seemingly imminent end. Indeed, lying in the gutter, she “seemed to become more and more transformed into a Macabéa, as if she were arriving at herself” (81).

There is indeed hope: we need not worry, for surely Macabéa will not die; the narrator himself tells us as much: “To my great joy,” he states, “I find that the hour has not yet come for the film-star Macabéa to die” (82). And after a few paragraphs that describe her thoughts, her feelings, her struggle to live as she lay in the gutter, we read the following:

At that instant, Macabéa came out with a phrase that no one among the onlookers could understand. She said in a clear, distinct voice:  
– As for the future. (84)

The most hopeful line of all. And yet these turn out to be her last words: just a few lines later, the narrator admits that he has betrayed us, and that Macabéa has indeed died.

Must we not insist, therefore, on the betrayal of the narrator? Has he not promised us that Macabéa would pull through (but did we ever really believe him?), that the hour of this star had not yet come? What, then, is the hope that resounds throughout the last pages of the book, the craving for a future that animates these pages,



the passage from a hopeless life to one that has a future? What is the future that is described here? What is the future that is at stake here?

As for the future – *quanto ao futuro*, “quant à l’avenir.” What is a to-come that has already been invaded by death, this future that lies in a gutter simply awaiting its own death?

Perhaps, quite simply, it is a time of the “not yet,” a time that already stores within itself its own end, and yet somehow cannot bear for this ending to take place. A time that already glimpses the approach of the end and cannot bear it, no matter what form this ending might take, no matter what the hour of this star might be, whether it is the “hour...for the film-star Macabéa to die,” or the hour of the star creeping over the horizon, announcing the death of Lol V. Stein’s gaze. “No,” this time seems to want to say, seems to cry out, “it is not late, not yet, not yet.”

And yet...what is the hope that is somehow captured by, contained by – confined by, delimited by – this time?

We must in fact insist on the essential hopefulness of this temporality. And it is a difficult thing to do, in the face of Lispector’s devastating ending, this ending in which the star Macabéa dies like a dog. We would no doubt like to simply mourn her death, but the narrative again steers us away from such a response. The narrator himself, soon after he announces her death, writes of “a longing for happiness,” and states: “I try forcing myself to burst out laughing” (85), even if he tells us in the very next sentence that he somehow cannot do so. He writes that Macabéa, having died, is “finally free of herself and of me” (*ibid.*), and urges us not to be frightened. And with the last words of the book, he states: “Don’t forget, in the meantime, that this is the

season for strawberries. Yes” (86). The book thus ends just as it began, when we were told that “Everything in the world began with a yes” (11), and what could be more hopeful, more open to hope, than this yes that seems to delimit the book in a very different way from the periods, the points, that confine the words “as for the future”? What is this hope, this optimism, that is almost imposed upon us by the narrative, when we would much rather mourn the passing of our dear Macabéa, when we would much rather feel anger at this narrator who has betrayed us?

But perhaps it is too simple to refer to all this as a betrayal; perhaps the narrator has not lied to us after all. Perhaps we have not yet read him, we have not yet read her, closely enough.

Let us look again at this last paragraph, these final two sentences, of the book. “Don’t forget, in the meantime, that this is the season for strawberries. Yes” (86). Something of a liberal translation, if only for the fact that this passage, in the original, comprises two paragraphs:

Não esquecer que por enquanto é tempo de morangos.  
Sim. (93)

These are the final words of a narrative that ends in death. Indeed, immediately prior to this, the narrator has announced his own death, in a way – we can almost hear him trying to put it off. “And now – now it only remains for me to light a cigarette and go home. Dear God, only now am I remembering that people die. Does that include me? [*Mas – mas eu também?*]” (86). But in this moment of panic (“but – but me too?”), he seems to find some solace in the last lines, about strawberries and the word yes. Whence, therefore, this affirmation? I wonder if the nature of this affirmation isn’t

somehow intimately tied to the “por enquanto” of this passage. “Por enquanto”: “in the meantime,” for Pontiero, “en ce moment” for Wünscher. But of course what we hear in these words is also the repetition of the last words of Macabéa, themselves the repetition of the title to which we have paid some attention here: “Quanto ao futuro.” “Quanto” in this sense is almost untranslatable (though it is admirably translated by Pontiero as “as for”); the word is also used in Portuguese to inquire about quantity, for example in the phrase “quanto tempo,” or “how much time?” And indeed, throughout this text, the word is always close to time, whether it is the future or the “meantime” or “meanwhile” designated here at the end. Given this strange overlapping between future and present, isn’t Lispector telling us something essential about this word and its place in the narrative – isn’t he/she designating, with this word, a kind of overlapping of present and future, just as we have already seen a similar overlapping here between present and past?

A time, in other words, that is irreducibly present...but in which the future has somehow, impossibly, already made an appearance. It is this temporality, perhaps, that is announced in a passage that appears just before the book’s ending:

Macabéa is dead. The bells were ringing without making any sound. I now understand this story. She is the imminence in those bells, pealing so softly.

The greatness of every human being. (85)

Now this is yet again an incredibly difficult passage to translate; it is no doubt best to cite the original before continuing:

Morta, os sinos badalavam mas sem que seus bronzes lhes dessem som. Agora entendo esta história. Ela é a iminência que há nos sinos que quase-quase badalam.

A grandeza de cada um. (93)

Let us turn our attention to the final sentence of the first paragraph. A more literal translation than Pontiero's might look something like this: "She is the imminence that there is in those bells that are just about to ring." We should take note of a couple of repetitions here. First, that of the bells, "os sinos," about which much could of course be said; second, that of the ringing of these bells, the verb "badalar," which appears once in the imperfect and once in the present. It is this second appearance that interests me, and that leads us to the final repetition here. "Badalam" is indeed the third person plural form of "badalar" in the present tense. And yet this ringing, written in the present tense, has nonetheless not yet occurred: it is in fact ever so close to occurring, just about to take place. Rather than ringing, the bells "quase-quase" ring: in other words, as I have translated above, they are "just about" to ring. But this does not quite do justice to the original either. "Quase," in Portuguese, and of course intimately related to the English "quasi," means, in relation to time, "almost," and here Lispector's use of the word is interesting: it is as though she were suggesting that a single "almost" does not quite suffice; the bells are so close to ringing that they are – to translate completely literally – "almost-almost ringing." They are ever so close, Lispector seems to say, so close that something that has not yet occurred must nonetheless be written in the present – or in a tense that, following Lispector, we might describe as the "almost-almost future." In the tense, in other words, that is proper to *imminence*...the imminence that, as Lispector specifies in the next sentence, is "*a grandeza de cada um*," the greatness of us all, of every one.

And yet this *cada um*, this every one, is not just anyone. The text is adamant on this point: the greatness, the imminence, to which it refers is gendered. *She* is the imminence in those bells, let us recall; unless she refers to the story itself: “Agora entendo esta história. Ela é a iminência que há nos sinos que quase-quase baladam” (93). In either case, the imminence, be it Macabéa or the story of Macabéa, is definitely *ela*, she. And the specific gender of this temporality should not surprise us, as just a few paragraphs earlier, Macabéa’s femininity, the femininity of *ela*, was emphasized: “Were she about to die, in death she would pass from being a virgin to being a woman” (83)<sup>178</sup>; and then: “Her struggle to live resembled something that she had never experienced before, virgin that she was, yet had grasped by intuition. For only now did she understand that a woman is born a woman from that first wail at birth. A woman’s destiny is to be a woman” (84). Macabéa is first and foremost a woman, and the imminence that is proper to her, the greatness of this imminence, is first and foremost feminine.

This secret time or temporality, we would have to say, this time of the not yet, the imminence of that which one can already make out, is something like the other side – the reverse, the flipside – of that secret that is proper to the veil. Or rather, it is the *limit* of this secret – the edge of the veil, the garment’s border. Its seam, perhaps – what the *quase-quase* reveals, or what it voices without revealing.

A time, in other words, in which any time, any *thing*, at all could arise. Or rather, it is simply an infinitesimal sliver of time, the shortest possible interval between two times, in which what is put off is a sort of death. A death that is *quase-quase* there,

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<sup>178</sup> Translation slightly modified.

but has not yet, *not yet*, arrived. It is a time that is gray, neutral, that doesn't really have any qualities, a time the only quality of which is perhaps that we hold it in common. But it is not so much a question of "holding" here, any more than Duras's narrative could be contained by Jacques Hold, or Lispector's narrative "held" by Rodrigo S.M. It is a death-time that makes possible, I want to argue, a certain *us*, a certain *we*. In this border of imminence, of past and future, the almost-space in which what is already arriving is not quite there, we don't really "know" anything – except, perhaps, for the fact of our being held together in this non-knowledge. The death about to arise, about to arrive, "senseless" death, is the very stuff of which our link is formed, the only stuff, perhaps, that in being indivisibly unique, irreducibly singular, allows us to truly say *we*.

That allows us, in other words, to *name* ourselves, even if only for the most fleeting of moments. This singular act of naming, of a naming at once secret and open to the world (as befits the very essence of the secret and of the world), is the theme of the next chapter.

**Bolaño, the disaster of writing**

“Release the stars.”  
– Rufus Wainwright

Hans Reiter sits down to write. To write one of the novels that he writes so quickly, so incredibly quickly that we almost can't believe it's true. He writes in German of course – the greatest language, the only language, the language that so draws and fascinates Roberto Bolaño, the only language that could comprise this fifth part of *2666*. He writes, in this final part of Bolaño's posthumous magnum opus, the books that tie the different parts of *2666* together, the novels with which the novel begins, the novels that comprise the novel's red thread, as it were.

Except that the writer here is not in fact Reiter. Or rather, Reiter does indeed write these novels, but he employs a pseudonym, a pen name, and that pen name is Benno von Archimboldi.

How has Reiter chosen this strange name, this name so foreign to the German tongue, as one of the critics from the first part of *2666* remarks? He seems to come up with the name on the spot: when asked his name by a man in the rubble of post-war Germany who is willing to lend him a typewriter, he simply responds “Benno von Archimboldi,” though we have never read of him ruminating on a pseudonym. The man with the typewriter does not believe him, of course, and nor does his future publisher, Jacob Bubis, who insists that Reiter, or that Archimboldi, tell him his real name. Realizing that he is getting nowhere, however, Bubis finally asks Archimboldi whom he is named after. And at this point we are in for another surprise, for Bolaño

has told us nothing about any reflections on the part of Archiboldi about the provenance of his name. He answers Bubis without hesitating, however: he is named after Benito Juárez.

Reiter, then, is a man who does not write; it is Archiboldi, Benno von Archiboldi, who writes. Benno von Archiboldi, named after Benito Juárez, the Mexican president of pure Zapotec blood who gave his name to Ciudad Juárez, previously Paso del Norte, the sprawling Mexican city that lies directly across the border from El Paso. Ciudad Juárez, the city of the crimes.

The crimes, as the killings of dozens of women over the past twenty years in this city are often simply referred to, and which name the fourth part of 2666, “The Part about the Crimes.” For the fourth part of Bolaño’s novel, which takes place in the fictional Mexican border city Santa Teresa,<sup>179</sup> is a direct literary treatment of the crimes of Ciudad Juárez, crimes so brutal and incomprehensible that they require only the name “the crimes,” crimes so horrific that in their wake it is as though no other crime deserved the name crime.

Crimes that are essentially mute, inasmuch as they leave nothing in their wake: not only are their victims dead, but their investigations, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are botched so badly that no sense is ever made of them. Crimes that, when they do speak, speak lies: progress is made, state the police, men are apprehended and then released, or wrongfully convicted, and yet everyone knows that the truth is

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<sup>179</sup> There is much to be said about this name; let me simply note that Thérèse is the pseudonym chosen by Justine in the novel we read in chapter two.



elsewhere, that the truth remains concealed. Juárez, the crimes that have literally come to define the city, remain silent.

But perhaps their transcription is possible: this, it seems to me, is Bolaño's wager.

Ciudad Juárez will indeed speak. Won't every sentence written by Benno von Archimboldi consist, in some way, of the articulations of Juárez, as Ciudad Juárez is most often called? The problem being, of course, that we will never be able to read these sentences, these books: we hear of them, we read about them, indeed at the very end of the novel we even touch them, in a way: one of Hans Reiter's last acts, before he leaves Hamburg to fly to Juárez, where his nephew, Klaus Haas, is awaiting trial for the murder of Estrella Ruiz Sandoval and is suspected of murdering several other women, is to run his fingers across the spines of his books, copies of his books that are lying on his sister Lotte's bookshelf. But we never read them, we shall never read them, despite the fact that the entire first part of *2666*, "The Part about the Critics," deals with four literary critics whose specialty is the work of Benno von Archimboldi. The novels are discussed in passing from time to time, and we hear of their beautiful titles: *Rivers of Europe*, *The Endless Rose*, *The Leather Mask*, *Bifurcaria Bifurcata*. But the novels are never so much as cited, nor are their themes ever discussed in detail. The novels of Benno von Archimboldi, as would befit this writing of Juárez, are mute.

Bolaño keeps them secret, no doubt even to himself.

And if the crimes are to speak, they will somehow have to do so in a secret, silent voice.

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In the fourth part of *2666*, “The Part about the Crimes,” the crimes themselves are set up as a kind of secret from the very start, and secrecy is the language by way of which Bolaño describes them. Shortly after the killings begin, a madman who comes to be known as the Penitent begins desecrating churches in Santa Teresa, and injuring or killing those who try to stop him. The focus of not only the media but also the police shifts immediately to this strange, compelling figure, whom the police are unable to apprehend. Meanwhile, however, the killings of women continue unabated. Here is the scene the morning after one of the Penitent’s most gruesome crimes; Bolaño is writing about a police inspector, Juan de Dios Martínez, who had been working on “the crimes” but was reassigned to the case of the Penitent:

By six he was at the station. A group of patrolmen were celebrating the birthday of a colleague and they offered him a drink, but he said no. From the offices of the judicial police inspectors, which were empty, he heard them singing “Happy Birthday” over and over again on the floor above. He made a list of the officers he wanted to work with him. He wrote a report for the Hermosillo office and then he stood out by the vending machine and drank a cup of coffee. He watched two patrolmen come down the stairs with their arms around each other and he followed them. In the hallway he saw several cops talking, in groups of two, three, four. Every so often one group laughed loudly. A man dressed in white, but wearing jeans, pushed a stretcher. On the stretcher, covered in a gray plastic sheet, lay the body of Emilia Mena Mena. Nobody noticed.<sup>180</sup>

“Nobody noticed”: this, we could say, is the most perfect possible formula for the form that secrecy takes in this novel. Yet again, we are dealing with a perfect example of an open secret here. It is not that there is some sort of conspiracy to hide the killings of

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<sup>180</sup> Bolaño, *2666*, 372. All further references to this book will be made parenthetically in the body of the essay.

women, a kind of cabal or secret society whose members undertake the killings and then conceal the evidence under lock and key. On the contrary, *all the police officers need to do is turn around*, and they will see the killings with their own eyes. Of course, throughout the novel, the police of Santa Teresa are witness to a great number of killings: there is a dead woman every few pages or so, and if it is Bolaño's aim to shock or horrify the reader with this seemingly endless procession of death, he succeeds brilliantly. But there is a strange sort of disconnect going on here: the police officers, indeed the entire city – and perhaps the reader as well? – see the women without seeing them, read of them without, for all that, the fact of their deaths being able to “register.”

In a sense we are on well-trodden territory here, as this “open secret,” this secret that is not so secret at all, that one could see if only one had the will or ability, has been the theme of the entire dissertation to this point; and the specifically feminine nature of the open secret was the theme of the entire last chapter. If this, as I am arguing here, is also Bolaño's subject matter, then what does he bring to the table that we haven't seen before?

Perhaps nothing at all, only an accentuation, a focus, an emphasis, on a theme that has already been introduced. Let us give some thought here to the darkness in this novel, the darkness of not-knowing, of secrecy, the darkness in which any possible knowing is shrouded. Indeed, we see that things are not so different here from the novels we looked at in the third chapter. At one point in *2666*, Estefanía Rivas and Hermina Noriega, two girls in their early teens, are kidnapped, and this kidnapping is witnessed by their two younger sisters. The little girls tell a neighbour what they have

seen, and this neighbour phones the maquiladora, MachenCorp, at which their parents work.

At MachenCorp, she was told that personal calls were forbidden and the operator hung up on her. The woman called again and gave the name and job title of the girls' father, since it occurred to her that their mother, being an ordinary worker like herself, must be considered of lower rank, meaning disposable at any moment or for any reason, and this time the operator kept her waiting for so long that she ran out of coins and the call was cut off. That was all the money she had. Despondent, she went back to her house, to the other neighbor woman and the girls, and for a while the four of them experienced what it was like to be in purgatory, a long, helpless wait, a wait that begins and ends in neglect, a very Latin American experience, as it happened, and all too familiar, something that once you thought about it you realized you experienced daily, minus the despair, minus the shadow of death sweeping over the neighborhood like a flock of vultures and casting its pall, upsetting all routines, leaving everything overturned. (527-8)

A little later, a woman whose daughter has been killed speaks to Sergio González, a reporter from Mexico City, about the dreams she has been having since she first saw a clairvoyant named Florita Almada on television. When González asks her who Florita Almada is, she responds: "She an old woman who's on Hermosillo TV every so often [...]. She knows what's hidden behind the crimes and she tried to tell us, but we didn't listen, no one listens to her" (562). And finally, we should take note of the words at the very end of the previous part of the novel, "The Part about Fate," words remembered by the eponymous main character of this part, Fate, who is nonetheless unsure of who spoke them (before remembering that they were spoken by the suspected killer whom he met the day before, Klaus Haas, nephew of Hans Reiter, of Benno von Archimboldi): "No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them" (348).

The secret of the world, a secret right before us but nonetheless shrouded in darkness. In a certain kind of darkness. Here are the very last words of the novel's fourth part:

The last case of 1997 was fairly similar to the second to last, except that the bag containing the body wasn't found on the western edge of the city but on the eastern edge, by the dirt road that runs along the border and then forks and vanishes when it reaches the first mountains and steep passes. The victim, according to the medical examiners, had been dead for a long time. She was about eighteen, five foot two and a half or three. She was naked, but a pair of good-quality leather high heels were found in the bag, which led the police to think she might be a whore. Some white thong panties were also found. Both this case and the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted investigations. The Christmas holidays in Santa Teresa were celebrated in the usual fashion. There were *posadas*, piñatas were smashed, tequila and beer were drunk. Even on the poorest streets people could be heard laughing. Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes [*Algunas de estas calles eran totalmente oscuras, similares a agujeros negros*], and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost. (632-3)

It is not the first time in the novel that we have seen such "halfhearted investigations"; at one point, another dead woman is found, and the crime scene is visited by Epifanio Galindo and Lalo Cura, two of the most competent of the officers in the Santa Teresa police force.

As they walked away, Epifanio asked Lalo Cura what he thought. About the dead woman? asked Lalo. No, the crime scene, said Epifanio, lighting a cigarette. There is no crime scene, said Lalo. It's been deliberately wiped clean. Epifanio started the car. Not deliberately, he said, stupidly, but it doesn't matter. It's been wiped clean. (580)

An interesting exchange, one that brings up the spectre – a spectre that looms large throughout the novel – of direct police involvement in the killings; and one that causes us to call into question the motives of Epifanio Galindo, generally portrayed as a trustworthy detective (he is also the detective who arrests Klaus Haas). But let us look

more closely at the next to last passage I have cited. From the “halfhearted investigations,” Bolaño moves to a description of the Christmas holidays, and how these holidays are celebrated boisterously even on the poorest streets. It is his description of these streets that I find key here: they are “completely dark, like black holes,” in which both residents and strangers would get lost if it were not for the laughter emanating “from who knows where.”

The streets, the very streets on which the kidnappings and killings take place, are black holes, and perhaps we should take this formulation as literally as possible, for the black hole does indeed seem like a perfect description for what is occurring in this novel: women are taken, never to be heard from again; once they are captured within the black hole, no light can ever be shed upon the mysterious forces that drew them in. In other words, perhaps the black hole is the best possible description for the specific type of secrecy that is at work here. Perhaps the black hole is the best possible name for this secrecy.

A black hole, of course, is formed by the gravitational collapse of a star.<sup>181</sup> And Bolaño is nothing if not fascinated by stars.

Indeed, stars seem to appear everywhere in this novel, and specifically in “The Part about the Crimes.” Only a few pages into this part, we read that “[t]he last dead woman of May was found on the slopes of Cerro Estrella, the hills that lend their name to the Colonia that surrounds them unevenly, as if nothing could easily grow or expand

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<sup>181</sup> In fact this is not the only way black holes are formed, but this is the explanation that has the most resonance in common understanding of black holes. And this explanation, I will argue, has a great deal of poetic resonance in this novel, in the work of Bolaño as a whole, and in the general theme that interests us here.

there” (360). And this is not the last we will hear of either Star Hill or Star Colony, which appear many times throughout this part of the novel, for example about halfway through, when “the body of another girl, approximately sixteen years old, was found, stabbed and mauled (although the mauling might have been the work of the dogs in the area), on the slopes of Cerro Estrella” (503); or a bit earlier, when “[a]t the end of September, the body of a thirteen-year-old girl was found on the east side of Cerro Estrella” (466); and a little later, toward the end of “The Part about the Crimes”: “On October 14, by the side of a dirt road leading from Colonia Estrella to the ranches on the outskirts of Santa Teresa, the body of another dead woman was found” (591). And when Albert Kessler, the former FBI agent and part-time action film advisor, is hired by the Santa Teresa police to help with the investigation of the crimes, one of his very first gestures is to visit Cerro Estrella.

But the language of stars here is not only reserved for place-names. We also find it at work in the names of people, and specifically of women. For example: “In September, on an empty lot in Colonia Sur, wrapped in a quilt and black plastic bags, the naked body of María Estela Ramos was found. Her feet were bound with a cord and she showed signs of having been tortured” (577). Interestingly, we have already seen the name Estela in this part of the novel, in a strange meditation on the term “snuff film”: according to an Argentine reporter who visits Santa Teresa to write about the crimes, the term was invented in Argentina, by an American couple who were there to make a movie. The cameraman for this film, a certain JT Hardy, falls in love with the owner of the ranch on which the crew is filming: “The ranch owner’s name was Estela

and JT could repeat it until his mouth was parched. Estela, Estela, he said over and over again, under the blankets, like a worm or an insomniac mole” (544).

Yet the most important star in this novel is someone else, yet another victim of the crimes. Her name is Estrella Ruiz Sandoval, and her killing is reported in the middle of a paragraph that is three pages long and reports on all seven killings that occurred in the month of August 1995.

A week later the body of Estrella Ruiz Sandoval, seventeen, turned up next to the Casas Negras highway. She had been raped and strangled. She was dressed in jeans and a dark blue blouse. Her arms were tied behind her back. Her body showed no signs of torture or beating. She had disappeared from home, where she lived with her parents and siblings, three days before. (460)

If Estrella Ruiz Sandoval is absolutely key in this novel, if she somehow stands out from the hundreds of other women who are killed, it is because hers is the only case for which someone will be charged *as a serial killer*. In other words, the killers of other women are occasionally located and charged, but these other killers are most often jealous husbands or boyfriends, whose aim is solely to kill a single woman. With the killer of Estrella Ruiz Sandoval, however, the Santa Teresa police believe (or want to believe) that they have located someone who has killed many women, someone responsible for many crimes. The arresting officer in the case is Epifanio Galindo, the suspected killer’s name is Klaus Haas, and Haas is the nephew of Hans Reiter, a.k.a. the famous German writer Benno von Archimboldi.

This Star, therefore – the horrific case of this Estrella whose case will never really be illuminated (months after Klaus Haas, who never admits to the killing, is arrested, for example, we read the following about another dead woman: “Her hands were tied behind her back and a little later someone noticed that the rope was knotted in



the same way as the rope that had bound Estrella Ruiz Sandoval, which made some policemen smile” [495]; Haas makes note of this fact a little later, in one of the strange press conferences he holds from within his prison), this Estrella who really does seem to constitute a sort of black hole – somehow ties the novel together, constituting a link for the novel’s different parts. But it is not only this novel in which the star (the figure of the star?) plays a prominent role. Throughout his work, Bolaño is constantly obsessed by stars.

The most obvious reference here is of course his novel *Distant Star* (*Estrella distante*, 1996). This novel begins with the following epigraph, this beautiful line from Faulkner: “What star falls unseen?”, and is itself the story of a falling star of sorts, the artist and Chilean Air Force pilot, Carlos Wieder.<sup>182</sup> Much of this novel revolves around writing, and its links with fascism – fascist writers, fascist literary movements and magazines, books about fascism – but the most important form of writing, and of particularly fascist writing, is the skywriting of Carlos Wieder, the strange slogans the pilot Wieder occasionally takes it upon himself to write in the sky above Chile. We will return to these slogans – this strange poetry – later, but for now let us take note of the fact that Wieder’s skywriting is also a “starwriting” of sorts. After his first unexpected and unannounced exhibition, which won him supporters among the military and political elite of the recent coup (the novel is set against the backdrop of Pinochet’s Chile), Wieder is hired “by a select group of high-ranking officers and businessmen,

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<sup>182</sup> A character who had already appeared under a different name, Ramírez Hoffman, in Bolaño’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (*La Literatura nazi en América*, also published in 1996).

accompanied by their families”;<sup>183</sup> on this occasion, Wieder “drew a star, the star of our flag, sparkling and solitary over the implacable horizon”;<sup>184</sup> the performance is repeated some time later, at an air show, where he collaborates with two other pilots: “the three of them drew a large (and rather wobbly) Chilean flag in the sky.”<sup>185</sup> And the novel ends, just as it has begun, with the invocation of stars. A few paragraphs from the end of the book, the narrator (who is never named) waits in a park as an associate goes off to kill Wieder: “As his footfalls grew fainter, I sat there watching the dark shrubs, their tangled branches weaving random designs as they shifted in the wind. Then I lit a cigarette and began to think about trivial matters. Like time. The greenhouse effect. The increasingly distant stars.”<sup>186</sup>

Not only *Distant Star*, but also another of Bolaño’s novels, *The Savage Detectives* (*Los Detectives salvajes*, 1998), the only one of his novels that even approaches 2666 in length, ends with the invocation of a star. At various points in this novel, the reader is confronted with ambiguous images, and at each of these points, various characters attempt to deduce what is portrayed in the images. As the novel ends, Juan García Madero, one of the poets who belongs to the movement called “visceral realism,” draws three of these images in his diary. After writing the words “What’s outside the window?”<sup>187</sup> he draws a rectangle, inside of which he draws a

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<sup>183</sup> *Distant Star*, 31.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>187</sup> *The Savage Detectives*, 576.

triangle, which takes a segment of the rectangle's left side as its base. Immediately beneath the drawing, García Madero answers the question he has just posed: "A star."<sup>188</sup>

If we are spending so much time here on the figure of the star in Bolaño's work, it is in part to build a bridge of sorts from the third chapter, in which stars played an important role. In *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, for example, Lol's breakdown occurs at the precise moment at which the sun's rays begin to appear – the moment that we called the hour of Lol's star. We were of course paraphrasing the title of Lispector's book, and in *The Hour of the Star*, as would seem obvious in a book that has the word "star" in its title, stars play an important, indeed a definitive role. On several occasions, Macabéa is referred to as "the film star Macabéa," and at the very end of the novel, the narrator refers to the moment of her death, this strange moment that is also "the dawn of her existence," as the hour of the star. In the work of all three of these writers, therefore – Duras, Lispector, and Bolaño – the very least that we can say is that stars play an important, indeed a vital, role.

Yet perhaps, in our attempt to build a bridge between this chapter and the last chapter, we have moved away from Bolaño too quickly. For there is yet another reference to stars in his work, a reference that deserves to be mentioned and on which we will have to spend some time. I am thinking of his short story "Last Evenings on Earth," which appeared in English in the 2006 collection of the same name. It is the story of an adolescent boy, B, and his father, who are on vacation in Acapulco. At one point they are walking along a beach, and the boy's father decides to go for a swim, despite the choppy sea and the warnings of a fisherman. The boy lies on the sand and

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

thinks about his arrival in Acapulco from his native Chile the year before (1974), about seeing the “orange light with blue and pink overtones” which told him that he was “back in Mexico and safe at last, in a sense.”<sup>189</sup> In his reveries he misses the fisherman’s cries of alarm, but “[w]hen he opens his eyes he sees his father coming out of the sea.”<sup>190</sup> This long paragraph ends with the father suggesting to the boy that they go eat turtle eggs, after which Bolaño writes the following short paragraph: “There are things you can tell people and things you just can’t, thinks B disconsolately. From this moment on he knows the disaster is approaching [*a partir de este momento él sabe que se está aproximando el desastre*].”<sup>191</sup>

What can we say about Bolaño’s disaster, about the disaster of this writer so concerned with and so fascinated by stars? The first observation we can make is that his disasters aren’t disasters in the everyday sense of the word: the disaster, as we see in the above example, occurs in Bolaño precisely when *nothing happens*. B’s father, against the odds, emerges from the water rather than drowning, and yet his emergence is perhaps the very fact that leads B to “know the disaster is approaching.” There is seemingly no “real” disaster here, and nor will there be by the end of the story, which occurs only a few pages later. Nor does there seem to be any disaster when, in another of Bolaño’s books, *Monsieur Pain*, the novel’s eponymous protagonist reflects on a friendship he has just capriciously ended:

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<sup>189</sup> *Last Evenings on Earth*, 148. The return from Chile to Mexico, along with the initial by which the boy is referred to (characters named only with the initial B occur frequently in Bolaño’s stories), suffice to indicate that the story is intended to read as to some degree autobiographical.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

Poor, venerable Monsieur Rivette, none of it was his fault, but nor was he the elder with immaculate hands, living in neutral territory. In fact, I thought with wicked satisfaction, old Rivette deserved a good dressing-down. I lingered over the expression: *dressing-down*. In some bizarre way, the disaster lay hidden behind it.<sup>192</sup>

Yet again, as was the case with “Last Evenings on Earth,” *nothing* seems to have happened here, or nothing much; and yet this is precisely what marks the approach of the disaster.

Let us give some more thought to this word, the first meaning of which, as the *OED* tells us, is “[a]n unfavourable aspect of a star or planet”; the *OED* goes on to quote a certain Whitney, no doubt William Dwight Whitney, and specifically his 1875 book *Life and the Growth of Language*, in which he writes: “*Disaster* is etymologically a mishap due to a baleful stellar aspect.” The victim of a disaster is the one who suffers from a bad twist of fate, the one who is literally, as one also says in English, “ill-starred”; and indeed, this *malastre*, as one might say in Spanish or Portuguese, is perhaps one of the best ways to approach the figure of the star in the work of Bolaño. The disaster, one could say without exaggeration, is the driving force behind all of Bolaño’s writing. One could say that it is at work throughout his writing, if it were accurate to speak of the work of the disaster.

From what we have said thus far about the disaster, let us note the following: both the *OED*’s definition of disaster, and Bolaño’s use of the term, lead us to the concept, or non-concept, of the disaster as it is formulated by Maurice Blanchot.

I am thinking, of course, of his *The Writing of the Disaster*, and it will be worth our while to pause for a moment and reflect upon this text before continuing our reading

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<sup>192</sup> Bolaño, *Monsieur Pain*, 82.

of Bolaño. Let us begin by observing that Blanchot foregrounds the etymology of the word disaster from the very beginning of his book. He writes:

Si le désastre signifie être séparé de l'étoile (le déclin qui marque l'égarement lorsque s'est interrompu le rapport avec le hazard d'en haut), il indique la chute sous la nécessité désastreuse. La loi serait-elle le désastre, la loi suprême ou extrême, l'excessif de la loi non codifiable : ce à quoi nous sommes destinés sans être concernés? Le désastre ne nous regarde pas, il est l'illimité sans regard, ce qui ne peut se mesurer en terme d'échec ni comme la parte pure et simple.<sup>193</sup>

The disaster signifies: being separated from the star (we will speak further of this separation below), a kind of decline or fall; and the name of this fall, this dis-aster, suggests Blanchot, is the law, that “to which we are destined without being concerned.” In contrast to the order or law of the constellations, then, the disaster is our “égarement,” our wandering or free-fall, with respect to or in relation to (in non-relation to?) the law, this celestial order. And if this relation is essentially a wandering or non-relation, we are destined to the law without being concerned by it, because the disaster does not concern us. As Blanchot states further down the page: “Le désastre dont il faudrait atténuer – en la renforçant – la couleur noire, nous expose à une certaine idée de la passivité. Nous sommes passifs par rapport au désastre, mais le désastre est peut-être la passivité, en cela passé et toujours passé.”<sup>194</sup>

The disaster, in naming this strange law, this law that does not concern us and in regard to which we are passive, thus links up to one of the themes we have been discussing throughout this text: this existence that is somehow held as an open secret of sorts by what we have variously called the law, sovereignty, society.... Blanchot

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<sup>193</sup> Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 9.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

describes this state a few pages on, in one of the book's most beautiful fragments: "Il n'est pas exclu, mais comme quelqu'un qui n'entrerait plus nulle part."<sup>195</sup> What we are dealing with here cannot therefore precisely be called an exclusion – hasn't Foucault taught us that every exclusion is at once an inclusion? – but rather, perhaps, the state of one who "would prefer not to" enter, to paraphrase Melville's *Bartleby*, passive preference of the one who would not enter, as Blanchot's use of the conditional in the preceding quote suggests. Not merely an exclusion, but a much more radical detachment: the state in which one is, again to quote one of Blanchot's fragments in its entirety, "Détaché de tout, y compris de son détachement."<sup>196</sup> Or, as Blanchot suggests on the very first page of his book: "Le désastre est séparé, ce qu'il y a de plus séparé."<sup>197</sup> What is most separate, and what is (it's the same word, after all) *most secret*.

There is one final link between the disaster and our discussions thus far about secrecy, and it concerns the disaster's relation to time. We have already seen, a couple of paragraphs above, that the disaster, inasmuch as it is passivity, is "past and always past." But Blanchot also hints, in these first pages of his book, at another relation to time that is proper to the disaster. The disaster, he writes, may have always already occurred, but in another sense, it has never quite arrived: it is always in the position of *not yet* arriving. The disaster, in other words, is always *imminent*. "Le désastre," he

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 7.

writes, “c’est ce qu’on ne peut pas accueillir, sauf comme l’imminence qui gratifie,

l’attente du non-pouvoir”;<sup>198</sup> and again, on the book’s first page:

Quand le désastre survient, il ne vient pas. Le désastre est son imminence, mais puisque le futur, tel que nous le concevons dans l’ordre du temps vécu, appartient au désastre, le désastre l’a toujours déjà retiré ou dissuadé, il n’y a pas d’avenir pour le désastre, comme il n’y a pas de temps ni d’espace où il s’accomplisse.<sup>199</sup>

The disaster, then, at once belongs to the future (inasmuch as it has not yet arrived), and yet, insofar as it shall never arrive as such – “Nous ne sommes pas contemporains du désastre”<sup>200</sup> – in another way it does not belong to the future. Or rather: it comprises something like a pure future, a future to come, perhaps, but which will never arrive, a future of absolute deferral, pure not-yet (even though it has already taken place).

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The disaster, of course, is also *written*.

We need look no further than Blanchot’s title to understand this. The writing of the disaster: not only that the disaster will be written, transcribed, in a writing both always-already past and yet to come, but this title also suggests that writing somehow belongs inherently to the disaster, that there is no writing that isn’t saturated through and through by the disaster. Blanchot’s title tells us that writing shall always, whether it is aware of it or not – and it can never be fully aware, this awareness continually escapes it – be a writing *of* the disaster, and that there is no disaster that is not also a

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 16.



writing, even if this writing is a writing stopped in its tracks, broken up into fragments – essentially fragmentary, even when it doesn't come across to us as a series of fragments, even when it appears essentially “whole.” No pure event of the disaster, no disastrous event, that is not already an echo of writing and that does not anticipate a writing to come, a writing that is always *not yet*.

These traits of the disaster run parallel to many of the ways in which writing occurs in Bolaño. The first reference here is to that astral work, *Distant Star*. We have already noted that the star of the title, Carlos Wieder, is a skywriter, a pilot who writes messages in the sky. But we should note that this book is not so much about Wieder as the relationship *between* Wieder and the book's narrator, who, despite playing a prominent role throughout the text, remains unnamed.

The link between Wieder and the narrator is established at the very beginning of the book, when Wieder begins to attend the poetry workshops in which the narrator also takes part – a narrator who, it should be said, has many characteristics in common with Bolaño himself, and who writes the book, as he announces in the preface, in collaboration with a certain Arturo Belano, who appears often in Bolaño's work as a kind of *alter ego* of the author. Like the narrator, therefore, Wieder – who at this point uses the pseudonym Alberto Ruiz-Tagle – is identified from the very start of the story as a writer. But what kind of poems does he write? The nameless narrator tells us the following: “He read his own work with a certain disengagement and distance, and accepted even the harshest comments without protest, as if the poems he has submitted

for our criticism were not his own.”<sup>201</sup> Indeed, the narrator is not the only one to notice this distance; his friend and one of the leaders of the workshops concur: “Bibiano and I were not the only ones to notice this; one night Diego Soto told him that there was something distant and cold about his writing. It’s as if they weren’t your poems, he said. Ruiz-Tagle nodded in agreement. I’m still trying to find my voice, he said” (11). And Diego Soto’s words are echoed by another of the workshop’s participants, Fat Marta. One night, the narrator, Bibiano, and Fat Marta (referred to simply as *la Gorda* in the original Spanish) are deciding which writers to include in an anthology of work by young poets, and when Ruiz-Tagle is mentioned, Fat Marta insists that he not be included. When asked why, she responds: “It’s as if they weren’t his poems. His real poems, if you see what I mean”(14). It is not that *la Gorda* thinks Ruiz-Tagle is a bad poet; on the contrary, further down the page she states that he “is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry” (ibid.). When pressed by the two friends to tell them what she knows about Ruiz-Tagle, Fat Marta first “smiled to herself, as if she were in possession of a great secret” (ibid.), and then announces: “Well, he tells me about his new poetry, what else? You mean the poetry he’s planning to write? asked Bibiano sceptically. That he’s going to *perform*, said Marta. And you know why I’m so sure? Because of his will. She waited a moment for a question from us, then added, He has a will of iron. You don’t know him” (15).

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<sup>201</sup> *Distant Star*, 11. For the next several pages, all references to this text will be made parenthetically in the body of the essay.

What, then, is this writing, this poetry, that will not be simply written but performed, not only spoken but done?<sup>202</sup> In fact, Ruiz-Tagle will not do anything, will not act at all. Carlos Wieder, however, is most definitely a man of action.

Let us back up for a moment. All the characters I have mentioned so far – the nameless narrator, Bibiano O’Ryan, Fat Marta, Diego Soto, and Alberto Ruiz-Tagle – took part in poetry workshops. However, I have not yet mentioned the two best poets of this literary circle. The two best poets, by far, are the Garmendia sisters, Veronica and Angelica: “identical twins and the undisputed stars [*estrellas indiscutibles*] of the workshop” (5).<sup>203</sup> The workshop here refers not to that of Diego Soto, but to another workshop run by Juan Stein, about which the narrator says that “we sometimes felt, Bibiano and I, that Stein was running the workshop for their benefit alone” (ibid.). The Garmendia sisters are by far the best poets of the group, and it is only with the Garmendia sisters that Ruiz-Tagle seems to strike up a real friendship – only with the Garmendia sisters, in other words, that he is warm and attentive, rather than distant. And indeed, Veronica Garmendia ends up falling in love with him.

Soon we get the following one-sentence paragraph: “A few days later the army seized power and the government collapsed” (16). And the next paragraph begins thus: “One night I rang the Garmendia sisters, for no particular reason, just to see how they were. We’re leaving, said Veronica. With a lump in my throat I asked when.

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<sup>202</sup> The word “perform,” a few lines above, translates the Spanish *hacer*.

<sup>203</sup> At this point I should mention, though I will not have time to discuss it here, another exemplary book that deals with twins and with stars: Michel Tournier’s *Gemini*, the French title of which is *Les météores* (which hence recalls Descartes’s book of the same name). The conjoining of these two seemingly disparate themes – stars and twins – goes back, of course, at least as far as Castor and Pollux.

Tomorrow” (ibid.). The sisters soon set off for their country house, with their aunt (their parents died in a car accident years ago) and their maid, an old Mapuche woman. There, they are visited “say two weeks or a month later (although I doubt a month had gone by)” (19), by Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. The twins and their aunt – though not the Mapuche maid, who is clearly terrified – entertain Ruiz-Tagle by reading him poetry, and after a few hours they show him to his room.

Then, another one-sentence paragraph: “A few hours later Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, although from here on I should call him Carlos Wieder, gets up” (21). And the name change, of course, is highly significant. For where Ruiz-Tagle was only able to read a few bits of his poetry from time to time, poetry he read in a distant voice and that may not even have been his own, Carlos Wieder will truly *perform*: in the words of the narrator, “the ‘New Chilean Poetry’ is about to be born” (20). Wieder gets up, goes into the aunt’s room, and kills her; he hears the sound of a car pulling up; he walks into the maid’s room, but her bed is empty; getting over his momentary anger, Wieder goes to open the door for the four men who have come in the car:

With these men the night comes into the Garmendias’ house. Fifteen minutes later, or ten perhaps, when they leave, the night leaves with them. The night comes in, and out it goes again, swift and efficient. And the bodies will never be found; but no, *one* body, just one, will appear years later in a mass grave, the body of Angelica Garmendia, my adorable, my incomparable Angelica, but only hers, as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god. (22-3)

This, then, is Wieder’s first act, the first act of Carlos Wieder, man of action, who has left behind the passive Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, indeed, the condition of whose action is the

passage from Ruiz-Tagle to Wieder. His first inscription onto the world – his first writing. Though it will not be his last.<sup>204</sup>

We have already made mention of his next poetic act, of his next act of writing – his skywriting. The first in this series of acts takes place after the narrator, a few months after the coup, has been taken prisoner (his detention will last only a few weeks), and is being held in a transit center on the outskirts of a city. At one point, he and the other prisoners are passing time in the yard, when they hear a plane approaching. The plane – “a Messerschmitt 109, a Messerschmitt fighter from the Luftwaffe, the best fighter plane of 1940!” (26), according to a prisoner named Mad Norberto – soon begins “to write a poem in the sky” (25): “the letters appeared, as if the sky itself had secreted them. Perfectly-formed letters of grey-black smoke on the sky’s enormous screen of rose-tinged blue” (ibid.). And the plane’s poetry reads as follows: “IN PRINCIPIO...CREAVIT DEUS...CAELUM ET TERRAM” (25). It soon becomes clear that the pilot is transcribing the beginning of the Book of Genesis, in Latin: “TERRA AUTEM ERAT INANIS...ET VACUA...ET TENEBRAE” (26); DIXITQUE DEUS...FIAT LUX...ET FACTA EST LUX” (27); “ET VIDIT DEUS...LUCEM QUOD...ESSET BONA...ET DIVISIT...LUCEM AC TENEBRAS” (27-8). An entire battle of light and darkness in the sky. The pilot goes on writing, as both prisoners and guards – and the entire city, surmises the narrator – stare transfixed at the sky. Until the show ends as suddenly as it had begun, with one last word, the only word written not in Latin but in Spanish: “LEARN” (29).

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<sup>204</sup> Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to state that this entire novel is a story – a tracing, almost a stenciling – of the writing of Carlos Wieder.

This first poetic performance – literally, this birth or genesis – wins Wieder admirers in the new regime, and he is soon “in demand for more sky-writing displays” (31). He draws a star, and then begins to write poems, one of which seems to obliquely mention the Garmendia sisters; in other poems, several women are mentioned by their first name. He flies to Antarctica, where, “[i]n the crystal clear sky over the Arturo Prat base,” he writes “ANTARCTICA IS CHILE” (45). He is the pride of the dictatorship – of fascist Chile – and in 1974 “he was called upon to undertake something grand in the capital, something spectacular to show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary” (77). And thus begins Wieder’s greatest act of poetry: an air show, to be followed by the unveiling of a photographic exhibit in a small room in a flat belonging to a friend. Wieder trains for several months, putting together his exhibit and practicing manoeuvres in his plane, but when the day of the show finally arrives, the sky is stormy, and Wieder is advised not to fly. Taking no heed of these warnings, he takes off, disappearing inside a black cloud “like Jonah inside the whale” (79), until he emerges, far from the airstrip, and begins to write.

This is what he writes: “*Death is friendship.*” Then: “*Death is Chile.*” And then: “*Death is responsibility.*” Given the stormy conditions, however, it is difficult to understand what he is writing: “Very few could decipher his words: the wind effaced them almost straight away” (80). Ignoring calls to end the air show in the dangerous conditions, however, Wieder continues to write: “*Death is love,*” “*Death is growth,*” “*Death is communion.*” As the lightning begins, he writes: “*Death is cleansing,*” but at this point, the writing is all but indecipherable: “All that was left in the sky were dark shreds, cuneiform characters, hieroglyphics, a child’s scribble” (81). Yet Wieder

continues: “He wrote, or thought he wrote: *Death is my heart*. Then: *Take my heart*.

And then his name: *Carlos Wieder*, undaunted by rain or lightning. Undaunted, above all, by incoherence” (82). And this is where things get extremely strange, where poetry continues to be written in spite of its impossibility:

And then he had no smoke left to write with (for some time it had looked as if the plane were on fire, or drawing out wisps of cloud, rather than sky-writing) but still he wrote: *Death is resurrection*, and the faithful who had stayed by the airstrip were bewildered, but they knew that Wieder was writing *something*. They understood or thought they understood the pilot’s will, and they knew that although they couldn’t make head or tail of it, they were witnessing a unique event, of great significance for the art of the future. (Ibid.)

Wieder, then, proceeds from words that are difficultly legible to words that are completely illegible: he essentially writes his final words without a pen, without ink. And yet he nonetheless seems to write. But what is truly strange here is not so much that he continues to write, but that the narrator, who may or may not have witnessed the air show, *is able to understand absolutely everything, even the words that, strictly speaking, are not written*. None of the spectators are able to read the last words, not the generals, the high-ranking government officials, the journalists, or the poets. The only ones who know what is written – or rather, precisely what is not written, or written by way of its not being written, what is *unwritten*, we would have to say – are Carlos Wieder and the nameless narrator.

Something similar is at work in the narration of Wieder’s *vernissage*, which takes place a few hours after the air show. The narrator is of course not among the invitees, and yet he is able to write what he describes as an “accurate” (83) account of the exhibit and the events surrounding its opening. He attributes this ability to a certain Lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Cano, who has written an account of the *vernissage* that

we assume to be first person; what is strange, however, is that Muñoz Cano is mentioned by name an astonishing number of times over the ten or so pages during which the exhibit is described – twenty five, by my count; we never go more than a few lines without reading “according to Muñoz Cano,” “writes Muñoz Cano,” “Muñoz Cano describes,” etc.; he even calls into question, at times, Muñoz Cano’s reliability (“says Muñoz Cano in a rare moment of lucidity” [89]). The entire narration here seems like an exercise in overcompensation, and what we are left with is a sense – especially given how detailed the description is here – that the narrator knows much more than he is letting on.

What does he say – or what does he say that Muñoz Cano says – about the opening? First off, that at exactly midnight (the guests had been trickling in since 9:00), Wieder calls for silence and says that it is “time to plunge into the art of the future” (84), at which point he begins to let the guests into the spare room one at a time (“the art of Chile is not for herds” [ibid.]). The first person to enter the room is Tatiana von Beck Iraola, a slightly mad young woman, according to Muñoz Cano, from an illustrious military family. Less than a minute later, she emerges “pale and shaken” (86), vomits in the hallway, and leaves the party. Then a captain walks in, and Wieder shuts the door behind him. After a few minutes, and in an increasingly tense atmosphere, Wieder’s father walks into the room, followed by the owner of the flat – who almost immediately exits, takes Wieder by the lapels, and, rather than hitting him, goes off in search of a drink. At this point, everyone presses into the room; the scene is described thus:



There they found the captain, sitting on the bed. He was smoking and reading some typed notes that he had torn off the wall. [...] Wieder's father was contemplating some of the hundreds of photos with which the walls and part of the ceiling had been decorated. [...] Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. The background hardly varied from one photo to another, so it seemed they had all been taken in the same place. The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. In general (according to Muñoz Cano) the photos were of poor quality, although they made an extremely vivid impression on all who saw them. The order in which they were exhibited was not haphazard: *there was a progression, an argument, a story (literal and allegorical), a plan*. The images stuck to the ceiling (says Muñoz Cano) depicted a kind of hell, but empty. Those pinned up in the four corners seemed to be an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos the dominant mood was elegiac (but how, asks Muñoz Cano, could there be anything "nostalgic" or "melancholy" about them?). The symbols were few but telling. A photo showing the cover of a book by Joseph de Maistre: *St. Petersburg dialogues*. A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement. (88-9, my emphasis)

So continues Carlos Wieder's poetry: a series of photographs of dead women, or women about to die, women whom he has killed, or in whose killings he has no doubt taken part. The status of this writing is again very interesting. Immediately after viewing the photographs, about half of the guests leave (those who remain are shaken, and most – especially the military personnel – are both angry and offended), and after a few hours, three military intelligence agents arrive at the flat, pack up all the photographs in boxes, and immediately leave, accompanied by the captain, who advises the remaining guests to "get some sleep and forget everything that happened here tonight" (92). Of course, given what has happened, rumours of the exhibit are bound to start circulating, and yet, by the time dawn arrives, the status of this photographic poetry is much like that of Wieder's skywriting: it has disappeared without a trace, as it

were; if anything, it was even more ephemeral than the skywriting, given that so few people actually “read” it. The narrator, one assumes, must have had to wait several years to read Muñoz Cano’s account of the night in question. Once again, as with the words Wieder wrote in his plane, nothing remains – nothing, that is, except for the narrator’s second-hand yet intimate knowledge of the events he relates.

After this exercise in both diurnal and nocturnal poetry, Wieder essentially disappears, his writing too fascist, the narrative would seem to suggest, even for the Pinochet regime. The narrator’s friend, Bibiano O’Ryan, while researching a book on Nazi literature in the Americas (unsurprisingly, the actual book of that name and *Distant Star* cross paths on several occasions), catches glimpses of Wieder from time to time – or rather, he catches glimpses of work that, he surmises, *must* have been written by Wieder, even though it is published under different names. His work of poetry, in other words, continues, even if in haphazard and anonymous fashion.

Until the point at which the narrator reappears on the scene.

For the narrator has been absent for most of the book – the last news we had that specifically concerned him was that of his brief detention in the early days of the dictatorship. In the interim, we have heard about many different figures, almost all of them poets; most of all, however, we have heard the story of Carlos Wieder. The narrator, however, has always seemed strangely present – as evidenced by his somewhat too accurate descriptions of Wieder’s skywriting and his photographic exhibit.

The narrator – it is now the “present day,” i.e. post-dictatorship Chile, and he has been living for some years in Barcelona, eking out an existence as a writer – returns to the scene when a man named Abel Romero shows up at his doorstep. Romero had

been a famous detective in pre-Pinochet Chile, but like the narrator, he has also been in Europe for many years, working odd jobs – menial labour, for the most part – in Paris. He shows up on the narrator’s doorstep, however, because someone in Chile has hired him (he refuses to reveal the identity of his employer to the narrator) to find Wieder. Naturally, Romero wrote to Bibiano O’Ryan, given that the latter wrote about Wieder in his work on fascist writing, and O’Ryan gave him the narrator’s address; Romero explains that “although he seems to know a great deal about Mr Wieder, he thinks you know more” (117). Romero offers the narrator a great deal of money to assist him with his research, and the narrator of course accepts; Romero proceeds to deliver him an envelope full of pesetas and a suitcase filled with literary magazines. And the narrator thus begins, after a hiatus of twenty-odd years, to read Wieder once more – or rather, to attempt to locate him in a mass of writing.

The narrator thus sits down to read. The magazines are all European; they range in quality from professional to poor and cheap; and they are all right-wing, though they are extremely varied. By the second day, the narrator is extremely engrossed in his task; he describes his work thus:

I was living on my own, had no money and was in pretty poor health. None of my work had been published anywhere for ages, and for a while I hadn’t even been writing. My lot in life seemed miserable. I think I had begun to make a habit of self-pity. Romero’s magazines piled up on the table (I took to eating over the sink so as not to disturb them), arranged according to nationality, date of publication, political orientation or literary genre, *worked on me like a kind of antidote*. (121, my emphasis)

To what are we to attribute this improvement in the health of our narrator? Perhaps it is the increased focus that comes with a clearly defined task; yet we get the sense that

there is something else going on, some form of recognition, some form of desire. The narrator tells us of a dream he has during his days of reading:

I dreamt I was travelling in a big wooden boat, a galleon perhaps, crossing the Great Ocean. There was a party on the poop deck and I was there, writing a poem, or perhaps writing in my diary, and looking at the sea. Then an old man, on a yacht, not the galleon, or standing on a breakwater, stared shouting “Tornado! Tornado!” just like the scene from *Rosemary’s Baby*, the Polanski film.<sup>205</sup> At that point the galleon began to sink and all the survivors were cast adrift on the sea. I saw Carlos Wieder, clinging to a barrel of brandy. I was clinging to a rotten spar. And only then, as the waves pushed us apart, did I understand that Wieder and I had been travelling in the *same boat*; he may have conspired to sink it, but I had done little or nothing to stop it going down. When Romero returned, after three days, I was very glad to see him. (121-2, emphasis in original)

What the narrator sees in the magazines, therefore, or what he imagines he sees, even if he hasn’t yet located Wieder’s contributions, is a kind of reflection of himself, a sort of neighbour in the figure of Carlos Wieder. We will return to this theme below.

When Romero returns, he brings with him a television, a VCR, and three pornographic films, which he instructs the narrator to watch, without giving him any clues as to what he should be looking for. The narrator – perhaps at this point we should call him the reader – therefore takes a break from his magazines to watch the films. After watching them several times, he writes: “Wieder didn’t appear in any of them. And Romero didn’t turn up the next day. I thought the films must have been one of his jokes. Yet within the four walls of my flat, Wieder’s presence kept growing stronger, as if in some way the films had conjured him up” (124). Romero, upon his return, tells his reader that he suspects Wieder of having been the cameraman in the films – a few years earlier, all the members of an Italian pornographic film crew had

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<sup>205</sup> This is the second mention of this film in *Distant Star...*

been found dead, and the cameraman, or rather the second cameraman (“a certain R.P. English” [125]), had never been found by the Italian police. (Strangely, however, Romero never explains how he has come to the conclusion that Wieder is the cameraman; he goes to far as to deny all interest in pornography, stating “I’m a married man and too old for all that” [128].)

When Romero returns to the flat the next day, the narrator – our reader – says that he thinks he has identified Wieder, somehow picking out his style, even at a distance of two decades, in two of the publications he has been poring over (the only two, he states, that “had the *élan*, the singularity of purpose, that would have attracted Carlos Wieder” [130]). Let us follow along, then, with our reader – let us read over his shoulder, as it were – to catch a glimpse of the man he has been tailing.

The publications in question, both French, are entitled the *Evreux Literary Gazette* and the *Arras Nightwatchman’s Review*, the latter actually published by a collective of nightwatchmen. This is key: what these magazines have in common is the fact that their contributors are not “professional writers,” but rather everyday people, non-specialists. And both of them are dedicated to a movement known as “barbaric writing,” a style of writing pioneered in the late sixties (not in the streets, on the barricades, but in seclusion), in which, according to its founder, a caretaker and former Legionnaire named Raoul Delorme,

one had to commune with the master works. Communion was achieved in a singularly odd fashion: by defecating on the pages of Stendhal, blowing one’s nose on the pages of Victor Hugo, masturbating and spreading one’s semen over the pages of Gautier or Banville, vomiting onto the pages of Daudet, urinating on the pages of Lamartine, cutting oneself with a razor blade and spattering blood over the pages of Balzac or Maupassant, in short, submitting the books to a process of degradation which Delorme called “humanization.” (131)

Just as the barbaric writers were not professionals, the rituals that accompany this writing are designed to bring the classics down to size, as it were, rendering them “human”; and after a week of these rituals, the idea goes, one emerges with the “inner strength” (132) required to write. Delorme soon developed a following, a group of writers seeking to “prepare the advent of a new literature, a literature that *could* in principle belong to everyone, according to Delorme, but that in practice would only belong to those who dared to cross the bridge of fire” (ibid.). Of all the contributions, however, only two really stand out to our reader: an essay and a poem by a certain Jules Defoe.<sup>206</sup> The essay is described thus:

In a jerky and ferocious style, the essay argued that literature should be written by non-literary people, just as politics should be and indeed was being taken over by non-politicians, as the author was delighted to observe. The corresponding revolution in writing, Defoe went on to say, would, in a sense, abolish literature itself. When poetry is written by non-poets and read by non-readers.<sup>207</sup> (135)

And even though, for our reader, any of the contributors could have written these lines, “something” – he does not say what – “told me this particular champion of barbaric writing was Carlos Wieder” (ibid.).

Romero, provided with this information, goes in search of Defoe, and two months later, he returns to Barcelona. Here are his words: “I’ve tracked down Jules

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<sup>206</sup> The pseudonym is of course interesting, referencing as it does the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, the civilized man who, all alone on a seemingly desert island, comes face to face with a barbarian... -- One could even view the given name here as a nod to Jules Verne, and other encounters between civilization and the unknown, this time in the form of the depths of the ocean, the center of the earth, the moon...and another island.

<sup>207</sup> The poem, on the other hand, is simply described as “one of Carlos Wieder’s ultimate jokes. And it was deadly serious” (135).

Defoe, he said. You know, all this time he's been living practically next door. How about that, eh?" (136). Wieder – whom Romero has located in Blanes, a small seaside town just outside Barcelona<sup>208</sup> – has been the narrator's *neighbour* all along. And this is the time to give some consideration to Carlos Wieder's strange name, or rather to give some thought to the consideration of this name, early in the text, by the narrator's friend, Bibiano O'Ryan, in the context of a conversation with the narrator and Fat Marta.

Wieder, Bibiano informed us, meant "once more," "again," "a second time," and in some contexts "over and over"; or "the next time," in sentences referring to future events. And according to his friend Anselmo Sanjuán, who had studied German philology at the University of Concepción, it was only in the seventeenth century that the adverb *wieder* and the accusative preposition *wider* came to be spelt differently in order to differentiate their meanings. *Wider* (*wider* or *widari* in Old High German) means "against," "contrary to," and sometimes "in opposition to." (40-41)

The implication is clear: Carlos Wieder, the *neighbour* (and we should think here especially of the psychoanalytic implications of this term<sup>209</sup>) of our narrator/reader, the one whose presence in the narrator's flat seems to grow stronger each day, is a kind of mirror image of the narrator: he is literally his *Wiederholung*, his repetition, the narrator again or a second time, despite the fact that – indeed, precisely because – he seems to exist *wider* the narrator, seems to lie in opposition to him. Just like Lacan's neighbour – at once radically different from you, and yet "in you more than you" – the relationship

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<sup>208</sup> The town is in fact the one Bolaño himself lived in during the final years of his life.

<sup>209</sup> The key texts here are Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, especially the book's fifth chapter, in which he discusses the commandment to "love thy neighbour," and what he calls the "narcissism of minor differences"; and Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the fourteenth chapter of which is called "L'amour du prochain" and consists primarily of a reflection on Freud's text. The neighbour is also an abiding concern of Žižek's; see, for example, his contribution to the volume *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*.

between the narrator – the reader – and Wieder is at once too close and too far (too distant), close in its very distance, distant in its very proximity. As the novel has progressed, it has become increasingly difficult – impossible, by the end – to say where Wieder ends, and where the narrator begins.

Or rather, where Wieder ends and where the *reader* begins. Where Wieder ends and where the *writer* begins. For what we are dealing with here, of course, is writing: from the skywriting that, besides Wieder, *only* the narrator can decipher (it exists as a sort of secret that they share); to the photographic exhibit about which the narrator simply knows too much (which he seems to observe from a kind of omniscient viewpoint); to the barbaric writing about which “something” told him it could only have been written by Wieder. It is not so much two figures who are indistinguishable here, but two sets of writing, two *oeuvres*, in which the same voice seems, bizarrely, to be at work, in spite of (indeed, in and through) their differences, two works very different from one another but which seem, at their most essential respective points, to overlap.

And this, perhaps, is the dilemma Bolaño presents us with, the problem he struggles with throughout this novel and which he lays before us: how does writing – even (especially) the most determinedly anti-fascist writing – *know that it is not itself fascist?* How does writing know that it is not in some sort of secret collusion with fascism, that it has not entered into a kind of secret pact with the very fascism that it



seeks to combat? Is it possible for the essence of writing not to overlap with that of fascism? Must fascism always be writing's strange neighbour, in it more than itself?<sup>210</sup>

The end of the book provides a sort of answer. Romero and the narrator board a train to Blanes, and during the trip the narrator asks Romero if it isn't Bibiano O'Ryan who has hired him. Romero responds in the negative, saying only someone with real money could afford his services – someone, he seems to imply, who has done very well for himself under the dictatorship... They walk to a café frequented by “Defoe,” where the narrator waits alone, reading, yet again, this time *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*. Wieder arrives for his afternoon coffee, at which point the narrator states: “For a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin, looking over his shoulder at the book he had opened (a scientific book, about the greenhouse effect or the origin of the universe), so close he couldn't fail to notice” (144). Wieder, however, does not recognize the narrator. After he leaves, Romero shows up, and after ascertaining that Defoe is indeed Wieder, the pair walk toward his apartment building, where Romero, of course, has a job to do – or rather, where “We have a job to do, I realized, horrified” (146, emphasis in original). The narrator waits for Romero in a courtyard, thinking about “trivial matters. Like time. The greenhouse effect. The increasingly distant stars” (147), and afterward they take the train back to Barcelona and bid each other farewell.

The narrator's reading, in other words, has ended where he knew it would end from the very beginning: with the death of Carlos Wieder. And again just like Wieder,

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<sup>210</sup> The links between writing and fascism are a constant concern of Bolaño's, especially in *Distant Star*, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, *By Night in Chile*, *Monsieur Pain*, and, as we shall see below, *2666*.

he has produced a kind of strange poetry here, a poetry inseparable from death, a poetry that leads inexorably toward the death that it knows, even if it doesn't want to know that it knows, is its logical outcome, its result, its fabrication, its poiesis.

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How does writing know that it is not fascist? *Distant Star* is not the only one of Bolaño's books to take up this question. He returns to a very similar set of questions, I will argue here, in his magnum opus, *2666*, and particularly in the last part of this book, "The Part about Archimboldi." Archimboldi, however, arrives on the scene, even in this part dedicated to him, quite late. Most of this part of the novel is in fact about Hans Reiter. Hans Reiter, the boy born in Germany, or more precisely in Prussia, in 1920. Who is drafted into the German Army at the beginning of the Second World War, and spends most of the war fighting, bravely or foolishly, on various fronts. Who only after the war adopts the pen name Benno von Archimboldi, and writes a series of novels that lead him to be considered one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

But now what is the nature of this writing? Or, stated in a different way: what is its provenance? (These are perhaps one and the same question.)

Hans Reiter, we should point out from the beginning, has very little formal education. As a boy, he goes to school like all the other boys and girls of his town and of his country. However, at a very young age the headmaster of his school informs his parents that Reiter is not really cut out for school, and he begins to take a series of odd and mostly menial jobs. It should not be said, however, that he is not interested in

books. Or rather, that he is not interested in a book. For in fact Reiter reads only one book, over and over, obsessively: a volume, which he steals at age six, entitled *Animals and Plants of the European Coastal Region*.<sup>211</sup> For years, it is the only book he ever reads, until at one point, when he is a teenager and working as a servant at a country

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<sup>211</sup> It should be noted here that Reiter, from his earliest years, is a child of the sea. Bolaño explains this in a beautiful and extremely enigmatic passage:

In 1920 Hans Reiter was born. He seemed less like a child than like a strand of seaweed. Canetti, and Borges, too, I think [*Canetti y creo que también Borges*] – two very different men – said that just as the sea was the symbol or mirror of the English, the forest was the metaphor the Germans inhabited. Hans Reiter defied this rule from the moment he was born. He didn't like the earth, much less forests. He didn't like the sea either, or what ordinary mortals call the sea, which is really only the surface of the sea, waves kicked up by the wind that have gradually become the metaphor for defeat and madness. What he liked was the seabed, that other earth, with its plains that weren't plains and valleys that weren't valleys and cliffs that weren't cliffs. (639)

Much time could of course be spent in this passage, which is interesting for a variety of reasons. First, the references to Canetti and especially Borges, to whom Bolaño is often compared, and justly – this chapter could very well have focused on the strange concept of secrecy that seems so often to join these writers, whose voices are often uncannily similar. (Indeed, my original intention was to write just such a chapter.) The passage is also interesting for the fact that it marks the only time, to my knowledge, in this part of the novel, and perhaps in the entire novel, that Bolaño really appears on the scene as such – the only time, in other words, that the novel's narrator refers to himself with the pronoun "I" (and is it not interesting that he does so in such close proximity to his only mention of Borges?), even if, in the original Spanish text, the I (*yo*) is not present as such, but only in the conjugation of the verb *creer*. Finally, there is a certain treatment of language here which is also very interesting, which we find toward the end of the passage, when the narrator suggests that what we usually refer to as the sea is not actually the sea, and speaks of the features of this "other earth" as "plains that weren't plains and valleys that weren't valleys and cliffs that weren't cliffs." In the space that Reiter inhabits, in other words, things aren't what they seem, and the relationship between words and things will be ceaselessly called into question.

Let us simply take note of the fact here that Reiter, from his very earliest years, inhabits the bottom of bodies of water: when he is a baby, he is constantly swimming down to the bottom of his washbasin; and as soon as he is old enough, he begins to explore the bottom of the sea, on two occasions coming close to dying because his desire to inhabit the sea, and to leave dry land behind, is so strong.

estate, one of the frequent visitors to this estate – a certain Hugo Halder, who becomes Reiter’s first real friend – decides that he should read something else, and gives Reiter the choice of any of his books to borrow. Reiter picks Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, which turns out to be a canny choice, as Reiter, just as Halder predicts, finds in Wolfram, the man who “fled the pursuit of letters” and “was denied (or denied himself) all training, all clerical schooling” (658), a resemblance to himself; and what Reiter likes most about the book is that “Parzival sometimes rode (*my hereditary office is the shield*) wearing a madman’s garb under his suit of armor” (659).

Reiter, however, soon returns to his obsessive – or perhaps not obsessive, perhaps simply pleasant – reading of *Animals and Plants of the European Coastal Region*. His relative ignorance of literature, however, does not mean that he does not hold strong opinions on the subject. This is exemplified, first of all, in a discussion he has with Halder. Reiter explains to Halder that he doesn’t “know the difference between a good refints (reference) book and a good litchy (literary) book” (657), and here we should note something that we have to this point overlooked: Reiter, until he is an adult, speaks, as exemplified by this citation, in a strange shorthand, one which seems to result from a lack of learning, but which we might instead think of as a kind of relentless questioning of language, a sort of excavating and reforming of words from within to make them correspond to his internal grammar, in which things make sense in a way that is very different than that of the outside world. Halder, in any case, explains to Reiter, after recommending that he read more literary books, that he has recently been reading mostly history books, in order, he says, to fill a void. To which Reiter simply responds: ““Voids can’t be filled”” (ibid.). Halder protests, but we find, in this

passage, our first glimpse into Reiter's unique approach to literature – not so much to its power as to its lack of power, its sheer senselessness (which is why, perhaps, he only ever reads one book).

We get further insight into Reiter's approach to literature a few pages on, when Reiter, now living in Berlin, accompanies Halder and another friend, a young Japanese man named Nisa who works at his country's legation, to a salon in which a certain prominent orchestra conductor holds court. At one point, in response to the conductor's claim that music constitutes a kind of fourth dimension, Reiter wonders aloud "what those who inhabited or visited the fifth dimension must think" (665). And Reiter continues:

what would those who had ready access to the sixth dimension think of those who were settled in the fifth or fourth dimension? What would those who lived in the tenth dimension, that is, those who perceived ten dimensions, think of music, for example? What would Beethoven mean to them? What would Mozart mean to them? What would Bach mean to them? Probably, the young Reiter answered himself, music would just be noise, noise like crumpled pages, noise like burned books. (666)

At this point, the conductor interrupts him by saying "Don't speak of burned books, my dear young man," but Reiter insists: "Everything is a burned book, my dear maestro. Music, the tenth dimension, the fourth dimension, cradles, the production of bullets and rifles, Westerns: all burned books" (ibid.).

Literature, therefore, encompasses everything...but only if said literature is already conceived of as destroyed, as already having burned. Or, from a different angle: everything is always already destroyed, always already burned, but not burned as it is: it is burned, rather, *as* a book. And as with the last chapter, we begin to see an interesting relation to time develop here: everything, the whole, must be conceived of as a book, but we exist, according to Reiter (according to Reiter's conception of "litchy," of literature), in a time *after* which this book of everything has already burned – in a time, in other words, after the holocaust. And perhaps there is no other time.

The disaster, then – always, essentially, a written disaster, a disaster of writing – has already taken place. And this motif, that of arriving too late, that of being confronted with nothing but ashes, will continue once the war begins, once Reiter is drafted into the army and becomes a soldier. At one point during the war, while he is serving on the eastern front, near Sevastopol, a bullet pierces his throat, leaving him for a time unable to speak. Rather than returning to Germany to recover, since it is the middle of winter, Reiter is sent to a village called Kostekino, on the banks of the Dneiper, and far from the front, where he takes up residence in common quarters with other convalescents. Most of the houses in the village have been abandoned, and there are different theories as to why this is the case: some say the villagers fled the advance of the Germans, others that they all joined the Red Army. After a few days, however, Reiter hears a different account of the villagers' disappearance: a detachment of Germans, he is told, eliminated all the Jews in the village.

Reiter soon tires of the common quarters, and decides to move into one of the abandoned houses. There, he finds a number of books, most in Russian, but a few in

German, and he thus guesses that the house had in fact belonged to a Jew. The house is ordinary in every way, though it seems to Reiter that there is “something undeniably feminine” (706) about it. At some point, Reiter finds a mirror in a corner of the house, sees his reflection, and realizes that he needs to change the bandage on his throat. And it is while he is looking all over the house for something to use as a bandage that he comes upon “the papers of Boris Abramovich Ansky and the hiding place behind the hearth” (707).

A hiding place the existence of which, despite the fact that Reiter has already explored the house and lived in it for some time, has to this point escaped him; a hiding place that, though it was no doubt built to hide someone, some person, at this point contains only words, the papers of someone who, it is no doubt logical to assume, is dead. A kind of crypt, in other words, since death literally inhabits this hiding space...but a crypt of words, perhaps of dead words. This secret space is described thus:

The hiding place was extremely simple but extremely clever too. The hearth, which also served as cookstove, was wide enough and the flue deep enough so that a person could crouch inside. If the width was apparent at a glance, it was impossible to tell the depth from outside, because the soot-blackened walls afforded subtle camouflage. The eye couldn't discern the gap at the rear, just a crack, but big enough so that one person, sitting with his knees drawn up, could be safe there in the dark. Although for the hiding place to work perfectly, mused Reiter, alone in the solitude of the farmhouse, there had to be two people: one to hide and one to stay in the room and put a pot of soup on to heat and then light the fire and stoke it again and again. (Ibid.)

The hiding place is thus not exactly hidden: if one doesn't see it at first glance, it is not exactly because it is concealed from view, but rather because one somehow isn't looking at something that lies almost in plain view. Who, then, was to hide there?

Reiter discovers the answer to this question not outside but within this crypt-like space, as it soon becomes his favourite place in the house: “Sometimes, in the afternoons, he got into the hiding place, armed only with Boris Ansky’s papers and a candle, and he sat there until well into the night, until his joints were stiff and his limbs frozen, reading, reading” (708). Reiter, in other words, performs an act of mimicry, repeating the dwelling of this hiding space by someone who has come before. Ensnared in this crypt, he reads about the one who preceded him: Boris Abramovich Ansky.

What is the importance of this act, for Reiter? We will again understand this importance through the act of looking over a shoulder – by following along as Reiter reads Ansky’s notebooks.

These notebooks seem first and foremost to be the story of a man of action. And this is indeed true. At fourteen, Ansky enlists in the Red Army; after three years of travel, he settles down in Moscow, where he plays an active role in the cultural life of the capital, and meets the science fiction writer Efraim Ivanov (the genre of science fiction – or “science writing,” as Ivanov insists, “rejecting the official and popular label of fantasy writer” [710] – appears again and again throughout *2666*; indeed, at many parts of the novel it seems as though this might be the best genre within which to place Bolaño’s novel); he has passionate love affairs; and finally, in the late thirties, during the Great Purge, he flees Moscow under the threat of arrest.

Yet what we see unfold in these notebooks is first and foremost a drama of words.



At fourteen, as we have just mentioned, Ansky leaves home to enlist in the Red Army. His parents weep inconsolably when he leaves – we will give more thought to them later – but finally he embarks upon his journey. The journey is described thus:

The trip to Moscow was unforgettable. Along the way he saw incredible faces, heard incredible conversations or speeches, read incredible proclamations on the walls that announced the paradise at hand, and everything he came upon, whether on foot or on the train, affected him deeply because this was the first time he'd left the village, with the exception of two trips he'd taken with his father to sell shirts in the region. (708)

When he arrives at the recruitment office in Moscow, however, Ansky, the character Ansky, is already staged by Bolaño as a repetition. When an old soldier asks if he is Jewish, and Ansky replies yes, the following exchange takes place:

“I had a Jewish comrade, in the campaign against the Poles,” said the old man, exhaling a puff of smoke.

“What's his name?” asked Ansky. “Maybe I know him.”

“Do you know all the Jews in the Soviet republic, boy?” the one-eyed, one-armed soldier asked.

“No, of course not,” said Ansky, flushing.

“His name was Dmitri Verbitsky,” said the one-eyed man from his corner, “and he died fifty miles from Warsaw.” (709)

From his first day in the army, therefore, from his first day in Moscow, Ansky is staged as the one who will replace Verbitsky, *Verbitsky*; and as if on cue, Ansky seems to steal into Verbitsky's thoughts, into Verbitsky's words. Not only Verbitsky, in fact, but also the thoughts and words of Korolenko, the commander of the unit, who died the same day as Verbitsky:

[A]t supersonic speed, Ansky imagined Verbitsky and Korolenko, he saw Korolenko mocking Verbitsky, heard what Korolenko said behind Verbitsky's back, entered into Verbitsky's night thoughts, Korolenko's desires, into each man's vague and shifting dreams, into their convictions and their rides on horseback, the forests they left behind and the flooded lands they crossed, the sounds of night in the open and the unintelligible morning conversations before they mounted again. He saw villages and farmland, he saw churches and hazy

clouds of smoke rising on the horizon, until he came to the day when they both died, Verbitsky and Korolenko, a perfectly gray day, utterly gray, as if a thousand-mile-long cloud had passed over the land without stopping, endless. (Ibid.)

Somehow – “at supersonic speed” (we are still on the terrain of science fiction here) – Ansky steals into not only Verbitsky’s but also Korolenko’s dreams, into the dreams of both Christian and Jew, and is staged therefore as a repetition not only of Verbitsky but of the pairing of the soldier and his commander – the pairing of these two figures who, though they may have lived very differently and even, to some degree, antagonistically, died indistinguishably, or at the very least were brought together by death and its monotonous, perfectly gray cloud. And the scene ends with a little drama of writing, in which Ansky, suddenly against his will, joins the ranks of Verbitsky and Korolenko, by signing the paper that makes him a soldier.

This is only his first of many acts of writing in revolutionary Russia. After his three years of travels, Ansky returns to Moscow, and meets Efraim Ivanov, the science fiction writer, on the terrace of a literary café. The two immediately become friends, “in part because Ivanov was interested in Ansky’s outlandish ideas and in part because Ansky displayed, at least at the time, unqualified and unreserved admiration for Ivanov’s science writing, as Ivanov liked to call it, rejecting the official and popular label of fantasy writer” (710). Ansky, with his “outlandish ideas,” is no doubt drawn to the science writer Ivanov because his ideas belong to the realm of science fiction (and indeed, we are told in the following passage that this is why Ansky was drawn to the revolution in the first place):

In those days Ansky thought it wouldn’t be long before the revolution spread all over the world, because only an idiot or a nihilist could fail to see or sense the

potential it held for progress and happiness. Ultimately, thought Ansky, the revolution would abolish death.

When Ivanov told him that this was impossible, that death had been with man from time immemorial, Ansky said that was precisely it, the whole point, maybe the *only* thing that mattered, abolishing death, abolishing it forever, immersing ourselves in the unknown until we found something else. Abolishment, abolishment, abolishment. (Ibid.)

Writing, somehow – the writing of outlandish ideas, science writing – must thus take as its task the abolishment of death. And we see another kind of time open up here, a different temporality than that of the disaster that has always already taken place, a temporality closer to the one we discussed in the last chapter: a time of deferral, of putting off, of the “not yet.” For between Ansky’s desire to abolish death, and Ivanov’s response that this is impossible, perhaps what we are left with, once again, is a strategy of deferral, the opening of a gap in which we can exist before the arrival of the inevitable, or a gap that somehow turns back or folds in upon itself and really does put off the arrival of the inevitable forever. (And is it any surprise that so much of this narrative is centred around science fiction, a science fiction, in this case, of revolution? Science fiction is the genre, after all, for which, as the narrative states about Ivanov’s stories, the future is the present [713]; and is the time of revolution not also an overlapping of present and future, in which the greatest excesses are permissible in the present precisely because of the utopia they will bring about in the future?)

In any case, by the time Ivanov, who has been a party member since 1902, meets Ansky, he is already a well-known writer. His success, however, is flagging: not only is his popularity down, but he also “felt that something was missing. The decisive step, the bold stroke” (ibid.). In the past, he has emulated the style of other great Russian or Soviet artists, but now, considering them – Mayakovsky, Lermontov, Pushkin – he sees

in them only a model that should be avoided. He reflects: “They think they’re suns, setting everything ablaze, but they aren’t suns, they’re just plunging meteors and in the end no one pays them any heed. They spread humiliation, not conflagration” (713-4). Where, then, is the inspiration for this new writing to be found? In Ansky, of course. For Ivanov, “what Ansky had to offer was too tempting...to pass up, despite his reservations. The pact, it seems, was sealed in the science fiction writer’s room” (714).

What is the nature of this pact? It seems difficult to understand at first, for we are told that from this point, “at least in appearance, Ansky’s and Ivanov’s lives took different courses” (716). Ansky, we read in an extremely Borgesian passage, engages in a multitude of activities, almost all of them directly or peripherally literary: “he participated in the creation of magazines (in which none of his writing ever appeared) in Moscow, Leningrad, Smolensk, Kiev, Rostov”; “as a reporter for a paper that never saw the light of day, he interviewed General Tukhachevsky and General Blücher”; “he wrote a strange poem in German on Trotsky’s exile”; “he wrote a poem in Yiddish, laudatory, vulgar, full of barbarisms, on Ivan Rajia (1887-1920), one of the founders of the Communist Party of Finland, probably assassinated by his own comrades in a leadership struggle” (716-7). He also becomes obsessed for a time with Alfred Döblin. What all of his activities have in common, of course, is a certain obscurity: he writes for nonexistent publications, he writes strange poems that will never be published, he reads in solitude. At the same time, Efraim Ivanov’s life seems to be moving in the opposite direction, for he publishes his first great novel, the novel that cements his fame

throughout the Soviet Union, a science fiction novel entitled *Twilight*<sup>212</sup> about a boy of fourteen who leaves his family to join the revolution, and ends up travelling through time in the company of an extraterrestrial, “a very thin, very tall creature, more like a strand of seaweed than a human being” (718). Ivanov receives a congratulatory letter from Gorky (who calls him a great writer), is allotted a dacha outside of Moscow, has a table reserved for him each night at the writers’ restaurant, and spends his holidays in Yalta. It is true that “thunderclouds hovered over him” (722) – we are not far, of course, from the beginning of Stalin’s purges – but for the time being he is one of the most respected and popular writers in the Soviet Union.

Stardom for Ivanov, obscurity for Ansky. Yet as we have already remarked, Ansky’s and Ivanov’s lives diverge only in appearance (the divergence, we could say, to use a term on which Bolaño reflects again and again in the novel, is only a *semblance*). For at a certain point, after the accolades, after the holidays, after the lectures, and contemporaneous to the warnings of the approaching storm, Ivanov grows antsy. It is time once again to set to work, he decides – it is time once again to write. And so “he shut himself up in his Moscow room again and stacked up reams of paper and changed the ribbon on his typewriter, and then he went in search of Ansky, because he wanted to deliver a new novel to his editor in four months, if not sooner” (723). The question therefore arises: is it in fact Ansky who writes these novels, all the while pretending to be engaged in less glamorous literary activities? Or does Ansky perhaps

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<sup>212</sup> From this point on, the titles of all the books that are published by Ivanov – after *Twilight*, he publishes *Midday* and *Dawn* – recall the titles of certain books, stories or publications in the third part of *2666*, “The Part about Fate.”

dictate the novels to Ivanov? Or is the latter simply inspired by the former – does Ivanov seek out Ansky's company as a source of stories and ideas?

We learn the answer only after Ivanov is killed – shot in the back of the head, his corpse tossed onto the bed of a truck. We can again look over Reiter's shoulder here, at Ansky's notebook, in which, after Ansky's death,

there are chaotic jottings, the schedules of trains leaving Moscow, the gray noon light falling vertical on the Kremlin, a dead man's last words, the flip side of a trilogy of novels whose titles he notes: *True Dawn*, *True Dusk*, *Tremble of Twilight*, whose structure and plots might have lent a bit of order and dignity to the last three novels published under Ivanov's name, the ice-beam of the tapestry, though Ivanov probably wouldn't have agreed to take them under his wing, or maybe I'm mistaken, Ansky thinks and writes, perhaps I judge Ivanov unfairly, since based on all the information I possess he didn't betray me, when it would have been so easy, so easy to say he wasn't the author of those three novels, and yet that was the one thing he didn't do, he betrayed everyone his torturers wanted him to betray, old friends and new, playwrights, poets, and novelists, but he didn't say a word about me. Accomplices in imposture until the end. (731)

Ansky thus muses that things might have been different if the titles of Ivanov's novels had been *True Dawn*, *True Dusk* and *Tremble of Twilight*, rather than simply *Twilight*, the name of the novel that made him famous, and later, *Midday* and *Dawn*, the novels Ivanov published on the heels of this first success. Or rather, published *under his name*: for here it seems, though we cannot know for sure, that Ansky has in fact written these novels, all three novels, despite the fact that it was Ivanov who chose the names. And interestingly, this "imposture" is the one fact that is not revealed by Ivanov – Ansky is the one friend he doesn't betray, perhaps because his interrogators or torturers do not suspect anything about Ansky, perhaps because Ivanov doesn't want to reveal the secret provenance of the novels...or perhaps simply because Ivanov holds firm.

Ivanov never betrays, in other words, even under the harshest possible interrogation, that the novels, though we will never know the exact way *in which* this is the case, are not exactly his; he never gives away the fact that the novels, though we will never know exactly how, come from somewhere else. After signing declaration upon declaration against his friends, after giving up many false secrets, in other words, he never really confesses the only true secret here: the strange double-edged provenance of his novels, of his writing. Although, truth be told, he does give a hint of this fact at one point. Shortly after the publication of *Twilight*, Ivanov gives an interview to the “Literary Newspaper of the Komsomols of the Russian Federation,” in which the following exchange takes place:

*Young Komsomols: Why do you think your first great work, the one that won the acclaim of the worker and peasant masses, was written when you were already nearly sixty? How many years did it take you to come up with the plot of Twilight? Is it the work of a writer in his prime?*

*Efraim Ivanov: I’m only fifty-nine. I won’t be sixty for some time. And may I remind you that Cervantes wrote Don Quixote more or less at the same age I am now.*

*Young Komsomols: Do you believe your novel is the Don Quixote of Soviet science fiction?*

*Efraim Ivanov: There’s something to that, no doubt. (723, italics in original)*

Beyond the ridiculousness and presumptuousness of this exchange, we should recall that it contains a certain truth, a truth at the level of *writing*. For does *Don Quixote* not call its own provenance into question from the very beginning? Recall that the *Quixote*’s narrator is not so much the father as the stepfather of the text,<sup>213</sup> for in actual fact he has not written it at all: the book, we are told in the ninth chapter of its first part, is in fact a manuscript written by a certain Cide Hamete Benengeli, in Arabic no less,

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<sup>213</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 25.

which the book's narrator pays a "Spanish-speaking Moor" to translate into Castilian.<sup>214</sup>

Like the *Quixote*, therefore, Ivanov's novels are not so much Ivanov's novels as translations, translations undertaken by Ansky or by Ansky and Ivanov, translations of the strange dream-world and the strange temporalities that Ansky inhabits.

A theory of writing is being sketched here – what we could call a theory of writing of the one who came before, the voice that continues to accompany the one who is writing, the one who drafts the work that the writer in question will merely translate. Accompaniment of the one who has disappeared...a writing of ashes, a writing that follows upon the heels of the disaster. Writing, as we already saw in the case of *Distant Star*, of the strange, vanishing double. Ansky, the vanished Moor to Ivanov's Cervantes, or perhaps the Sancho Panza – the narrative here tells us that Ivanov, rather than seeing the gathering storm clouds, really "saw only himself riding alongside a mysterious and indispensable Sancho across the steppes of literary glory" (723). Ansky's writing somehow precedes that of Ivanov – if we don't know whether Ansky actually wrote every word of the novels, the least we can say is that Ansky is somehow the *outside* of these novels, their border, as it were, that aspect of Ivanov's writing that goes beyond itself and puts itself in contact with its own outside. And perhaps this is unsurprising – perhaps we have known this from the moment Ansky appeared on the scene, from the moment that Boris Abramovich Ansky was first mentioned. Abramovich, of course, because his father's name is Abraham. His parents, we are told, "had just one son, Boris, when they were already approaching old age, like the biblical

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. 76-7.



Abraham and Sarah, which filled them with happiness” (708); and the narrative continues thus:

Sometimes, when Abraham Ansky saw his friends, he would joke about it, saying his son was so spoiled that every so often he thought the boy should have been sacrificed when he was little. The village’s Orthodox Jews were scandalized or pretended to be scandalized and the others laughed openly when Abraham Ansky concluded: but instead of sacrificing him I sacrificed a hen! a hen! a hen! not a sheep or my firstborn but a hen! the hen that lays the golden eggs! (Ibid.)

How could anything but a plurivocal, multilingual writing be engendered by this Abraham; and how could anything else be conveyed by his offspring, the unsacrificed?

And how could anything else arrive at, anticipate, Hans Reiter, sitting in his crypt? For everything we have spoken about here has of course been read by Reiter, by the one who will soon no longer be Reiter.<sup>215</sup> Shortly after the death of Ivanov, in notes that grow increasingly chaotic, and “long before he sees a painting by the man,” Reiter first reads about the Italian painter Arcimboldo, Giuseppe or Joseph or Josepho or Josephus Arcimboldo or Arcimboldi or Arcimboldus (1527-1593). When I’m sad or bored, writes Ansky, although it’s hard to imagine Ansky bored, busy fleeing twenty-four hours a day, I think about Giuseppe Arcimboldo and the sadness and tedium vanish as if on a spring morning, by a swamp, morning’s

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<sup>215</sup> Who, to become a writer, must forego the name Reiter...

imperceptible advance clearing away the mists that rise from the shores, the reed beds. (729)

Ansky then goes into a long digression about Courbet – his famous work *The Return from the Conference*, bought only to be burned, the ashes of which “float not only over Paris, reads Reiter with tears in his eyes, tears that sting and *rouse* him, but also over Moscow and Rome and Berlin” (730) – before returning to Archimboldo, to whom he turns whenever he is in despair, and whose paintings strike Ansky as “happiness personified. The end of semblance...Everything in everything” (734).

It is at this moment that Benno von Archimboldi is born, out of the ashes, out of the absence, out of the disaster of Boris Abramovich Ansky. Out of the notebooks, out of the crypt, of Ansky – the crypt in which we are told he probably never hid, the crypt made for him but from which he remained absent. Hans Reiter will write a draft of a novel, *Lüdicke*, once the war is over and he is safely installed in Cologne; but when he finds a man willing to rent him a typewriter, and is asked his name, he replies: Benno von Archimboldi. After this page, the narrative never again mentions the name Hans Reiter: writing is the concern only of Archimboldi. And the lesson of the name, despite or because of the fact that Reiter had not planned this transformation – it was simply the first name that came to his mind – is that everything that will ever be written by the man who bears it, every book ever published under the name Archimboldi, will possess a secret, ancient source: a notebook and a hiding place, words in a crypt read by a soldier now disappeared, during a time in which he was unable to speak.

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What we find in Bolaño is a general theory of names. Names that seem to signify half-way, as it were. Names that, rather than revealing a meaning or concealing it, find a voice that seems to refuse this alternative, this false choice. Names that exist only to keep secrets.

And isn't this the logic, quite simply, of the name? Names, after all, constitute a kind of border of language, inasmuch as they both belong and do not belong to language, inasmuch as they are essentially words without meaning. A name is pure specificity, making reference to a meaning that cannot be generalized.

But what is it that makes us turn to the theme of names in Bolaño? Or, put differently: what is this army of names that overwhelms us in *2666*?

This barrage of names (inasmuch as it constitutes both a wall and an explosion) is nowhere more evident than in the fourth part of the novel, "The Part about the Crimes," where the reader is exhausted, and where the writing is exhausted, by the names of dead women that appear on virtually every page, from the very first page (Esperanza Gómez Saldaña), to almost every random page to which one opens this section (Rosa López Larios, Linda Vasquez, Silvana Pérez Arjona, Claudia Pérez Millán, Leticia Contreras Zamudio...).<sup>216</sup> Yet these women's names are only the most politically urgent example of this general fascination with names. We see it

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<sup>216</sup> This list of names extends even to those many women in the novel who are not named, those women whose bodies turn up in dumps and ditches and who are never "identified": the most important fact about these women is precisely that they remain anonymous, literally, nameless, and hence still within the confines of the logic of the name.

everywhere, for example in the novel's fifth part. At one point, after Reiter's girlfriend, Ingeborg, falls ill, the couple goes for an extended stay in a mountain village on the advice of a doctor. There, they stay with a man named Leube, who has been accused of killing his wife. Interrogated by Ingeborg – “they say you pushed her into a ravine” (828) – he asks her which ravine she is referring to, before going on to explain:

“There are lots of ravines around here, ma'am...there's the Lost Sheep ravine and the Flower ravine, the Shadow ravine (so-called because it's always deep in shadow) and the Children of Kreuze ravine, there's the Devil's ravine, and the Virgin's ravine, Saint Bernard's ravine and the Slabs ravine, from here to the border post there are more than one hundred ravines.” (Ibid.)

And when Ingeborg responds that it could have been any of the ravines, Leube insists: “No, not just any of them, it has to be one in particular, because if I killed my wife by pushing her into any old ravine it's as if I didn't kill her. It has to be a specific one, not any of them” (ibid.). A fascination with names on the part of the narrative, then; a link or intersection between names (and their logic) and death; and an insistence on the part of the deft Leube on the specificity of the name: Ingeborg's question, he suggests, only has meaning once the generality of language is wiped away, once the specificity of the name is respected. Names, here, are nothing less than divine.

But the particular barrage of names on which I want to concentrate here is the one comprised of the names of Archimboldi's novels. Let us take a closer look at these names, and at these novels, though as we shall see, a closer look is to a certain degree impossible.

The names of Archimboldi's novels are first mentioned in the first of the novel's five parts, “The Part about the Critics.” The critics in question are four European university professors, from four different countries (France, Spain, Italy and Britain), all

of whom specialize in the work of Archimboldi. And these names, of course, return in “The Part about Archimboldi,” beginning from the moment at which Hans Reiter becomes Benno von Archimboldi. As far as I can tell, the first time we hear the name of a novel, in “The Part about Archimboldi,” occurs just after Archimboldi has typed his first novel, just after he has borrowed or rented a typewriter from an ex-writer (a writer who has ceased to write) who is the first person to whom he announces himself as Benno von Archimboldi. After handwriting his novel, Archimboldi takes twenty days to type it up, and then he sends it to two publishers, one in Cologne, the other in Hamburg.<sup>217</sup> We are then told the following: “A month after both were sent, the Cologne publishing house wrote back to say that despite its undeniable merits, his novel *Lüdicke* regrettably wasn’t the right fit for their list, but he should be sure to send them his next novel” (793). What, then is the meaning of *Lüdicke*? In fact there is none, and the name of the book is a perfect name of sorts, inasmuch as it can only really be a proper name. A name, therefore, that like any proper name signifies nothing but itself. An evocative name, nonetheless, that calls to mind the English word ludic, “of or pertaining to undirected and spontaneously playful behaviour,” according to the *OED*, which comes from the Latin *ludere*, to play, by way of the French *ludique*, and which also corresponds to the Spanish *lúdico*. (There is, however, no directly related word in German.)

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<sup>217</sup> The Hamburg publisher is Jacob Bubis, a German Jew who had been one of Germany’s foremost publishers before the war, and who, after spending the war in exile in London, returns to Hamburg to begin publishing books again. Bubis ends up publishing all of Archimboldi’s novels.

The novel is thus announced, in a way, as playful, and yet we will never really find out if this is the case, for we are given no clue as to what the plot of the novel might be, as to what the novel might be about. When the novel is refused by the Cologne publisher, Archimboldi takes it to a second publisher in the same city, who meets him personally and asks him about it. This is their exchange:

Then Mickey Bittner wanted to know what Archimboldi's novel was about and whether it was his first novel or whether he already had a body of work behind him. Archimboldi told him it was his first novel and described the plot in broad strokes. Sounds like it has potential, said Bittner. (795)

We find out no more when, a little later, Archimboldi receives positive news from the Hamburg publisher, Jacob Bubis:

One morning he received a letter from Hamburg. The letter was signed by Mr. Bubis, the great editor, and in it he said flattering things, or at least flattering things could be read between the lines, about *Lüdicke*, a work he would like to publish, that is, of course, if Mr. Benno von Archimboldi didn't already have a publisher, in which case he would be very sorry, because the novel wasn't lacking in merit and was, in a certain sense, rather original, in any case, it was a book that he, Mr. Bubis, had read with great interest, a book he felt he could take a gamble on... (800)

We learn next to nothing, then, about this playful text, and before we can ponder this fact we are already on to the next novel. "*Lüdicke* had yet to come off the presses," writes Bolaño, "when Mr. Bubis received the manuscript of *The Endless Rose*, which he read in two nights, after which, deeply shaken, he woke his wife and told her they would have to publish this new book by Archimboldi" (815). And from this point on the novels come fast and furious. Two pages on, we learn of a third novel, *The Leather Mask* (817); then a fourth book, *Rivers of Europe* (we learn that "it was really about only one river, the Dnieper. One might say the Dnieper was the protagonist and the other rivers were the chorus" [823]); and then *Bifurcaria Bifurcata*, "about seaweed, as

the title clearly indicated” (824). There is then a break of four years, during which time Archimboldi’s lover, Ingeborg, dies, but then another book appears: “*Inheritance*, a novel more than five hundred pages long, full of crossings out and addenda and lengthy and often illegible footnotes” (837). The steady stream of writing then begins anew, with *Saint Thomas*, “the apocryphal biography of a biographer whose subject is a great writer of the Nazi regime, in whom some critics wanted to see a likeness of Ernst Jünger, although clearly it isn’t Jünger but a fictional character” (846); and then a group of novels written by Archimboldi on the Greek island of Icaria, where he has taken up residence:

*The Blind Woman* [...] about a blind woman who didn’t know she was blind and some clairvoyant detectives who didn’t know they were clairvoyant. [...] *The Black Sea*, a theatre piece or a novel written in dramatic form, in which the Black Sea converses with the Atlantic Ocean an hour before dawn. *Lethaea*, his most explicitly sexual novel, in which he transfers to the Germany of the Third Reich the story of Lethaea, who believes herself more beautiful than any goddess and is finally transformed, along with Olenus, her husband, into a stone statue (this novel was labelled as pornographic and after a successful court case it became Archimboldi’s first book to go through five printings). *The Lottery Man*, the life of a crippled German who sells lottery tickets in New York. And *The Father*, in which a son recalls his father’s activities as a psychopathic killer, which begin in 1938, when his son is twenty, and come to an enigmatic end in 1948. (847)

Beautiful, evocative titles, titles straight out of a Borges story, each of which evokes something important, something urgent. And even more titles will follow.

And yet we are always in the same situation as we were with the first novel, *Lüdicke*: in this book about books, in this writing about writing, and in this part in which these novels play such an important role, we are never given any sense of the nature of the writing that is contained therein. We are given the occasional brief plot summary, we are given clues by the nature of the titles, we are told how certain

important people react or respond to certain novels. But truly, we have no sense of the writing that takes place therein. We get the sense that the novels (and one collection of short stories, *The Berlin Underworld*), consisting entirely of their names, play an important role here, almost as protagonists, inasmuch as the writing of these novels drives the narrative along and holds the disparate parts of the story together. And yet these novels, these names, are like stones, or perhaps (to use a metaphor dear to Borges) mirrors: pure surfaces, beyond which there is nothing at all, or at least nothing that we are told by the narrative (in other words, absolutely nothing).

Is there a way to do justice to these titles, to these secrets that Bolaño scatters throughout the text, without leaving them to their indecipherability?

An indecipherability that is perhaps best thought of as impure. For as we noted above, these titles cannot really be said to tell us nothing. On the contrary, they suggest a great deal to us. But in painting only the faintest glimmer of what they might contain, it must be said that they make these suggestions only in the most playful, ludic way, telling us only enough for us to understand that they tell us nothing. Revealing nothing...and yet not really concealing anything, either, for the plot of *2666*, even of its last part, doesn't really revolve around any sort of hidden meaning of these books.

What these novels do, what these names do in the text, rather than any sort of revelation or concealment, is perhaps best considered as a continual *withdrawal*. No sooner do we think we have understood the meaning of these novels, no sooner do we believe ourselves to have grasped them, than they slip away, retreating into the distance – unless they simply stand before us and smile at us, without ever giving away anything that we might consider their essence. In fact, all of Bolaño's fiction could be



considered to work in this way: a building up of suspense, indeed, of incredible intensity, only to leave this suspense, in total faithfulness to the word, utterly suspended, in a state of suspension.

This is by no means the failure of the writing to come to some sort of conclusion. It is a particular treatment of the secret, the workings of a particular concept or at least conception of the secret. A secrecy that here works through the transmission of names (and perhaps it couldn't work in any other way). What we are told by the names is nothing but the names themselves.<sup>218</sup> A secret, or a mystery: names (could they be other than sacred names, holy names?) that do not reveal their secret to us, not exactly, as Kant would have it, because we would not understand these secrets, but because their logic is not that of revelation in the first place (and isn't this in fact the deep meaning of Kant's remarks on the *Geheimnis*, of Kant's conception of the *Geheimnis*?). Names that somehow withdraw from the very writing that conveys them, from the very language in which they are supposedly contained. Names that name, without either revealing or concealing, the writing's secret *from itself*.

All that remains is to read, to read these names, these open secrets that expose themselves to us throughout the text without telling us anything, but without, for all that, telling us nothing. These names that tell us nothing but ourselves, our us, our *we*. The name of this we, in all its possible variations: Benno von Archimboldi, Benito Juárez, the *ciudad* that calls itself Santa Teresa; Rosa López Larios, Linda Vasquez, Claudia Pérez Millán, Leticia Contreras Zamudio, *Estrella Ruiz Sandoval*; Boris

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<sup>218</sup> And also death, for what remains of the dead, as Thomas Pepper recently reminded me, is the name...

Abramovitch Ansky, *True Dawn, True Dusk, Tremble of Twilight*; Germany, and, as the novel's very last word has it, *Mexico*. Our chance, our star. Our disaster.

## Conclusion

Here is the scene: twelve families of asylum seekers are placed in a large shipping container in the middle of Vienna, where they will live for several weeks. Cameras are set up to film everything that happens inside the container, turning the entire spectacle into a reality TV show. And a website is created at which Austrians can vote the families they don't like not only off the show but out of the country, at the rate of one family per week.

Much could be said about this project; in fact, much has already been said about it – I am speaking of Christoph Schlingensiefel's controversial 2000 installation, which was initially entitled *Please Love Austria*, but soon came to acquire a nickname of sorts, by which it is more commonly known today: *Foreigners Out*. What I want to do here is use the exhibit as a starting point, irresponsibly perhaps, in the creation of a fiction.

It is early morning. You are a tourist, excited to be in Vienna, and though the city has not yet begun to stir, you can't sleep. You go out for a walk, and you soon come across the exhibit, at the only hour at which there are no crowds of people to gaze at it. You haven't heard of the installation, and at first you don't know what to make of it – though the sign on top of the container, *Ausländer Raus*, makes you uncomfortable. You are about to continue your walk when one of the container doors opens, and a man walks out into the light, no longer separated from you by the steel container wall, now basically inhabiting the same space as you. Perhaps he is simply stretching his legs; perhaps he doesn't even notice you.

You look at him. What do you see?

You don't really see your gaze reflected back at you: the man isn't even looking at you. You don't see a refugee "telling his story": he is completely silent, and has nothing whatsoever to say. He is simply going about his business. It is true that he is on display; this is an art exhibit after all, and in a way he is there for you. But it is not a display that gives you anything, that panders to you in any way, that seeks to educate you, to break through any barriers of ignorance (after all, somewhere deep inside, you probably know all about it). The man does not empower you, does not give you any information – in this interaction that is not an interaction, you acquire absolutely nothing new.

Far from bringing forth any sort of catharsis, what the spectacle reveals to you – reveals without revealing – is its own impossibility. There is literally no language that could cross the gap between you and this man, even if he – this asylum seeker, this refugee, this immigrant, this undocumented migrant (the very proliferation of names testifies here to an impotence of naming) – were to turn around and begin speaking to you, in your language or in another language. Somehow there is a complete rupture in communication.

Yet perhaps we are not framing things properly. For as with any work of art, what is key here is not so much what you think of it as what it thinks of you; it is not so much an object for you as you are an object for it. Your task is simply to listen, to understand how it positions or places you.

And perhaps in this sense there is a message after all. Perhaps this work of art, this man, has something to tell you. Perhaps he turns and looks at you (his gaze upon you, after all, is far more important than your gaze upon him), and then calmly walks

over to where you are standing. He doesn't open his mouth to speak, however, for his is a message that has no content – or rather, then content of the message has already been given, long ago, when you first arrived, or even before that. The message is the simple fact of you and he existing, here, in the same place. This doesn't bring him into your world – on the contrary, it brings you into his (this is why the exhibit is so troubling). You are – this has been the case since the moment he stepped out of the container, or even before – already part of the show.

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I am concluding the dissertation with this example or this fiction because I have attempted, throughout the dissertation, to engage with a tradition, one that seeks to understand a certain form of existence. This form of existence is one that somehow exists without being seen: it is an existence that is evident to the senses, an existence apparent in the light of day, but that somehow – as a result of some sort of cognitive dissonance, because of some strange motivation, for one reason or another – remains hidden even in its visibility, inaudible even in its sonority.

The tradition I have just alluded to includes, to my mind, works such as Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, and Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. (It is of course by no means limited to these works.) Each of these works, I would argue, aims at investigating the form of existence I have just tried to describe or at least quickly sketch. Now the words used by the authors of these works to describe this existence are extremely interesting. For Fanon, this existence or these existants are best

described by the word wretched, or, to remain closer to Fanon's title in the original, *damned* – as though God had simply turned his back on these beings, as though an act undertaken by such a being could never be anything more than an expression of his damnation. For Buñuel, the name of these beings, a name somewhere between a common name and a proper name, is *Los Olvidados* – the forgotten ones. This is an extremely evocative name, calling to mind a series of forgettings in film but also in literature and philosophy; one example among many, but perhaps one of the more pertinent, is Kafka's "Prometheus," in which, in the third version of the legend, Prometheus's treachery, over the course of thousands of years, is simply forgotten – "forgotten by the gods, by the eagles, forgotten by himself"<sup>219</sup> – a forgetting which doesn't change the fact, of course, that Prometheus is clamped to a rock.

Finally, for Agamben, this existence is *sacer*, sacred, an existence which, in Agamben's words, "is situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law."<sup>220</sup>

Each of these articulations of this form of existence is interesting in its own right, and merits, of course, further comment. For now, I will simply say this: as opposed to, or rather alongside, Fanon's wretchedness or damnation, Buñuel's forgetting, and Agamben's sacredness (or *sacer*: perhaps the term should simply be left untranslated, given the remoteness of its meaning from everyday notions of the sacred), I have tried, in my dissertation, to give this existence a different articulation, or a

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<sup>219</sup> Kafka, "Prometheus."

<sup>220</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 73.

different name: that of secrecy. Why, then, have I adopted this strategy? Why am I suggesting here that this strategy is a productive one?

First, it seems to me that the term secrecy is able to say something very specific about this kind of existence, *if* one thinks of the secret in a specific way. What, then, is a secret? The secret, I have tried to argue throughout this dissertation, is not something that is hidden away, kept from the light of day, concealed, that to which we are granted no access. It is, on the contrary, irreducibly *open*: this is one of the fundamental and defining properties of the secret. Consequently, I have tried to argue, the secret is interesting insofar as *it has no opposite*: it is concealed in its very revelation, and revealed in its concealment; it is open in its closure, and closed off in its openness; it is uttered in and through its silence, and silent in the very act by which it is uttered. The secret resists these oppositions, refusing to choose one side or the other, instead charting a middle course. It withdraws, retreats, refuses to accompany us.

The secret is also, I have tried to argue, essentially *literary*. This is not to say that the secret does not have an essential place within, for example, politics or philosophy. There is, however, a literary specificity to secrecy. Or perhaps I can make the point even more strongly: literature is the dwelling place *par excellence* of the secret. Secrecy, it is true, is everywhere, but the specificity of secrecy's relationship to literature is that the latter would literally be unthinkable without the former. The secret, therefore, seemed to me to be a concept (though perhaps it is wrong to think of it as a concept) by way of which the existence I spoke of above could be approached in a specifically *literary* manner, or by way of an investigation that took literature as its main object.

What, then, does secrecy have to tell us about the concerns mentioned above?

What can an investigation into the forms of secrecy that we find in selected works of literature tell us about the “open secret” that defines this form of existence? In what way can “secrecy” come to resonate alongside the terms – “wretchedness,” “damnation,” “forgetting,” “*sacer*” – that we spoke of earlier?

This is the theme of the entire dissertation, and of course I can’t go into it in very much depth here. Suffice it to say that this inquiry, as opposed to the majority of non-literary treatments of secrecy, does not simply view the secret through what might be termed a negative lens. My argument is not that we must simply “unveil” the secret – on the contrary, as I have just suggested, the secret, were an attempt made to “unveil” it, would simply cease to be secret; the strategy of unveiling is the surest possible way of losing the object here. On the contrary, I have tried to argue that the secret – this is what literature shows us – is not simply a threat to our communities (to use a word I detest but that to a certain extent seems unavoidable here). Community, on the contrary, as Blanchot and Nancy have both, in their own ways, stated, is unthinkable without secrecy, without what Nancy calls “a secret of the common that is not a secret held in common.”<sup>221</sup> If the secret has an essential relationship to violence, as I have suggested above by trying to place the secret in a relationship of resonance with Agamben’s, Buñuel’s, and Fanon’s terms, this does not mean that our strategy, as regards the secret, should simply be to obliterate it – this would simply repeat the very violence we seek to combat. The secret is not simply a threat to our communities. It is at the same time a *chance*: a chance that, in seeking neither to simply accept the secret

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<sup>221</sup> *La Communauté affrontée*, 41.



nor to do away with it, an undermining or at least a questioning of this violence might be possible. If secrecy must, to a certain degree, be combated, then it is within the secret that the tools of this combat shall be located, that the means of combat might be discerned.

The means of combat: the secret as starry messenger.<sup>222</sup>

\* \* \*

*From dark passenger to starry messenger.*

*Surely, just as we affirmed in the first chapter, we never truly leave the religious behind when we inquire into the secret, when we are caught up in the secret. Surely the stars of Galileo are still those of Dante – surely the light of this beyond, the light emanating from those infinite distances, is never truly desacralized. And surely, what this light brings to us, to us, what it emits to us, what the starry skies above us send to us, is not “God” so much as awe, as wonder. This is the stars’ message to us.*

*The secret and the star. The stars leave us in the dark, as it were: we are none the wiser for the awe and the wonder that is their message to us. Any possible “content” is concealed to us here.*

*And yet this dark message is at the same time infused with light. It is not a light of the supreme being any more than it is a light of redemption. Its light is wholly other, regardless of how much we might “know” of the stars, regardless of how much we*

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<sup>222</sup> I am referring, of course, to Galileo’s great book – it is by *Starry Messenger* that the original (Latin) title of this book, *Sidereus Nuncius*, has most often been translated into English.

*might understand their composition, their formation, their distance from us. It is the border of this knowledge, that which, in them, remains unapproachable (their very being, in other words).*

*Ancient light (from millions of light years ago, from millions of light years away), light that tells us nothing but ourselves – light that gives nothing but our sharing in it. The risk of the secret, of this dark passenger, is at the same time the chance of this star, its message.*

*Its disaster. Our disaster.*

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