

The Obscure: Blanchot at the Limits of Nihilism

Ashley Woodward

Paper based on a presentation at the conference *Blanchot, The Obscure*, organised by the journal *Colloquy: text, theory, critique*, held at the Alliance Française Melbourne, August 2004.

Abstract

This paper examines two important themes in the works Maurice Blanchot, and the relations between them: the obscure and nihilism. It seeks to shed light on Blanchot's recourse to the obscure, both theoretically and performatively, by showing the function of this theme in the problematic of nihilism. Conversely, it seeks to explain Blanchot's original and compelling, but frequently overlooked, interpretation of this Nietzschean theme through the theme of the obscure. Blanchot problematises the possibility of overcoming nihilism through a pure affirmation of life, seeing the problem of meaning in life as ultimately intractable. As Simon Critchley has argued, however, Blanchot contributes towards a positive response to nihilism through a confrontation with the unavailability of finitude and death. This paper explores Blanchot's arguments concerning the obscure and nihilism by drawing on Critchley's reading, and on Blanchot's writings on Nietzsche which Critchley overlooks. It argues that the significance of Blanchot's unique engagement with nihilism, through the theme of the obscure, is that it illuminates the extreme limits of this Nietzschean problematic.

Approaching the Obscure

One of the persistent themes of Maurice Blanchot's often obscure writings is the theme of the obscure itself. What I want to attempt here is an approach to the obscure in Blanchot's thought along a more or less brightly lit path. This approach is guided by the understanding that Blanchot is not *merely* a thinker of the obscure, but of the impossible but necessary relationship between clarity and obscurity, between day and night. For Blanchot there is both a continuity and an interruption between the clear and the obscure, where the clear eventually falls before the obscure, and the obscure inevitably empties out into clarity. The obscure is thus revealed not only through mysterious sounds in the night or unexpected events which shatter a life, but in hitting up against the limits of the clear. While Blanchot pursues something like the first approach to the obscure in much of his literature, the second is sometimes deployed in his

criticism: by pointing to the aporetic limits of thought in the conceptual systems of writers who pursue clarity, Blanchot opens their thought onto a necessarily obscure horizon. In an encounter with the Marquis de Sade, for example, Blanchot shows that the seemingly interminable reasonableness of Sade's libertine-philosophers breaks down in the paradox of attempting to construct a consistent ethics of evil.¹

The approach to the obscure I shall attempt here takes as its subject another of Blanchot's critical engagements, that with Friedrich Nietzsche, and specifically with the Nietzschean theme of *nihilism*. Beyond merely demonstrating how Blanchot approaches the obscure obliquely through bringing out the aporiae in the writings of others, I wish to argue that the theme of nihilism itself illuminates Blanchot's own recourse to the obscure, helping us, as his readers, to understand the necessity of that which resists understanding in his works. Nihilism can be understood as a complex of problems at the heart of modernity and postmodernity, encompassing questions of the meaning of the individual's life and the temptation to suicide, the political broadly understood as being-with-others, and the complex roles that thinking and writing play at the intersection of the individual and the political. Understood as an intervention in this Nietzschean problematic, Blanchot's work engages with problems on all of these levels, and on each level grants that which is obscure a certain exigency. My approach to Blanchot's treatment of nihilism will firstly consider Simon Critchley's reading of Blanchot, which provides a useful guide to some of the major concerns in Blanchot's thought, contextualising these concerns within the broad problem of modern nihilism. Critchley, however, fails to engage Blanchot's explicit treatment of Nietzsche and nihilism in *The Infinite Conversation*, and in the second section of this paper I will take up this task. Here I will attempt to show how Blanchot's writing and thinking of the obscure (both performatively and thematically) illustrates a structural feature endemic to the problem of nihilism, by pushing this problem to its limits. Ultimately I will

thus attempt to show how Blanchot's thought is not only illuminated by the problem of nihilism, but how this problem itself is illuminated by Blanchot. A double illumination, then, but one which attempts to reveal an inilluminable obscurity at the heart of each.

Finitude and the (Im)possibility of Death: Reading Critchley reading Blanchot

In his book *Very Little...Almost Nothing*,² Simon Critchley explores nihilism through the themes of finitude and death in the works of Blanchot, Stanley Cavell, and Samuel Beckett. Critchley writes that 'to accept the diagnosis of modernity in terms of nihilism is to accept the ubiquity of the finite.'³ On his understanding, nihilism is the apparent meaninglessness of life which results from the death of God and the consequent view of human life as unavoidably finite, without recourse to a transcendent meaning. The first "lecture" in Critchley's book argues for the essential *meaninglessness* of human life considered in terms of this finitude by drawing on the resources of Blanchot's work. Critchley draws out this theme through a consideration of the notion of death in Blanchot as it manifests through his engagement with the problem of literature. By following Critchley's treatment of Blanchot, we shall arrive at a first understanding of both the problem of nihilism and the place of the obscure in Blanchot's work.

According to Critchley, '*Blanchot's work is not philosophy*.'⁴ This assertion must be qualified, however, by stipulating a certain definition of philosophy, one which is well summarised by Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, "traditional" philosophy is concerned primarily with establishing knowledge on the basis of a model of thought which emphasises clarity and comprehension. To comprehend, Levinas argues, is to draw that which is comprehended within the boundaries of that which is already known. Philosophical understanding reduces the new

and singular to that which is familiar, inscribing the whole of thought within what Levinas calls the economy of the Same.⁵ For Blanchot, the apotheosis of this philosophical form of thought is the Hegelian dialectic.⁶ The criticism of philosophical thought that Blanchot advances depends upon the well-known Kantian disparity between the thing-in-itself and the thing as it is represented in conceptual thought and in language. On Critchley's interpretation, Blanchot seems to advance the proposition that '...the condition of possibility for the magical power of the understanding to grasp things as such entails that those things must be dead on arrival in the understanding.'⁷ That is, for Blanchot, the conceptual and linguistic representation of things can only capture a reduced and devitalised image of things-in-themselves. Things-in-themselves thus retain, as a matter of principle, an essential relation with obscurity.

As a first approach then, the obscure in Blanchot's thought is that which falls outside philosophical thought as comprehension, the concept, and the economy of the Same: it is the thing-in-itself itself, which Blanchot alludes to with terms such as "exteriority," "the outside," and "the night."⁸ Seeking a way beyond the limits of philosophical thought, Blanchot approaches the obscure by way of an interrogation of literature, a form of writing which, Critchley emphasises, is '*writing outside philosophy*.'⁹ On Critchley's interpretation, Blanchot approaches the problem of literature by asking the 'strangely transcendental' question, '[w]hat are the conditions of possibility for literature?'¹⁰ In early essays such as "From Dread to Language,"¹¹ Blanchot attempts to answer this question by distinguishing between the Work produced by the writer and the desire to write itself, arguing that the desire to write exceeds the Work produced and that this desire is the true origin of literature. This desire, Blanchot further argues, has its source in a feeling of *dread* which lies before and beyond the possibility of expression in language. This experience is associated with "nothing," and exploiting the semantic ambiguity of this term, which functions as both quantifier and substantive, Blanchot insists that the writer

has *nothing* to express. On the one hand, in a negative sense, this might mean that the writer has nothing at all to express; on the other, the writer actively expresses nothing, understood as a positive power of obscurity. On this account, the nothingness of the writer's desire, sourced in dread, is the obscure origin of literature.

Does this mean that literature succeeds in capturing the obscure where philosophy fails? Critchley finds Blanchot's answer to this question in "Literature and the Right to Death,"¹² where two "slopes" (sides, or tendencies) of literature, and two corresponding forms of "death" (understood symbolically, to mean the failure of literature) are distinguished. Blanchot argues that literature is necessarily divided between these two slopes, which represent two temptations to which the writer is subject, and two forms of death which await those who succumb to temptation. On the first slope, the temptation involves extending the power of literature to a negation the world. This negation of the world as it exists is brought into play in an attempt to change the world through imagination, interpretation, and literary invention. When this tendency is taken to both a literary and a political extreme, the writer becomes a revolutionary and a terrorist. On this slope the writer becomes obsessed by the power of language to master and change reality, and risks becoming a despot both as a writer and as a political actor. On the literary level, Blanchot sees this extreme of writing as falling into the same problem that besets philosophy, where language attempts to capture the world but can only do so by reducing it to a pale shadow of itself. Critchley writes:

Blanchot would here seem to be advancing the proposition that language is murder, that is, the act of naming things, of substituting a name for the sensation, gives things to us, but in a form that deprives those things of their being. Human speech is thus the annihilation of things *qua* things, and their articulation through language is truly their death-rattle[.]¹³

The death which corresponds with the first slope of literature is, then, the death of meaning in language and cognition. This slope of literature corresponds with a hypostatized *prose*.

The second slope of literature takes the opposite path in trying to capture the obscure. Since the thing-in-itself is understood to be beyond the clarity of concepts and the language of the everyday, the writer attempts to express the obscure immediately through poetry or experimental methods such as automatic writing. On this slope literature becomes (in Blanchot's words) 'a search for this moment which precedes literature.'¹⁴ The temptation and the death that this slope represents is the hope that access to things-in-themselves might be gained through an ecstatic *unconsciousness*, a merging of the Self with the world prior to language and conscious thought. Such a hope perhaps recalls the mystical experience of oneness with the cosmos, the identity of Self and World expressed in the dictum of the *Upanisads*, '*Tat Tvam Asi*': "Thou Art That."¹⁵ The second slope of literature is also bound to fail, for even if such a union succeeds, there is no possibility of capturing such an experience in linguistic expression. As the mystics repeatedly tell us, the experience of such a union is fundamentally ineffable.

In practice, Blanchot believes, literature never achieves the ends of either of these two slopes, which might be equated with absolute clarity (first slope) and absolute obscurity (second slope): the most lucid of discourses will have its blind spots, and poetry gives birth to concepts.

Literature, then, is irreducibly ambiguous, and Critchley takes this irreducibility of ambiguity – not just in literature, but in all forms of meaning and in truth itself – as Blanchot's fundamental insight. The domain of consciousness, clarity, conceptual thought and language attempts to capture that which lies necessarily beyond its grasp, whether considered as the thing-in-itself or the experience of nothingness which is the origin of the desire to write. That which is beyond

the mediation of language, however, cannot be captured directly, for in itself it is “nothing” (that is, it is not a thing; it is in principle incapable of being identified). Literature, understood as a model for the ambiguity of all meaning, is the impossible mediation of the two slopes. As a second approach to the obscure, the obscurity Blanchot seeks is this ambiguity itself, the irreducible admixture and conflict between the clear and the opaque, the day and the night. On this second formulation, the obscure is not simply one term in a binary opposition, opposed to clarity, but holds the place of an ambiguous “third term,” and indicates the tension between clarity and obscurity.

Critchley draws his discussion back into the horizon of nihilism by taking up Blanchot's somewhat analogous treatment of the death of the individual in *The Space of Literature*.¹⁶ Critchley interprets this treatment of individual death in terms of his own concern with the meaning of life after “the death of God.” He explains what is at stake as follows:

For all systems of thought that take the question of finitude seriously, that is to say, for all non-religious systems of thought, which do not have an escape route from death (...) through the postulates of God and immortality (...), the fundamental question is that of finding a *meaning* to human finitude. If death is not just going to have the contingent character of a brute fact, then one's mortality is something that one has to project freely as the product of a resolute decision.¹⁷

Critchley interrogates the possibility of finding a meaning in human finitude through Blanchot's concept of “the double death” and his discussion of suicide. Just as with literature, there are two “slopes” to the death of the human being: death as *possibility*, and death as *impossibility*. Expressed in roughly Heideggerian terms, death as possibility concerns the belief that the thought of one's own death forms the horizon of one's selfhood, authenticity, and freedom, since death is most truly one's own, distinguishing the individual from the masses of humanity

and allowing one to grasp the self as totality in a single thought.¹⁸ Critchley further explains: '[t]he romantic and post-romantic affirmation of annihilation is an attempt at the appropriation of *time*, to gather time into the living present of eternity at the moment of death.'¹⁹ Death on this model would therefore give meaning to human finitude by understanding death as *an achievement* which, by virtue of being an end, constitutes a human life as a meaningful whole. Death itself is that meaningful moment in which the whole is grasped. Blanchot explores the possibility of such a conception of death through the test case of suicide, surmising that suicide would be the form of death by which a human life would most fully be summed up and given meaning. In *willing* death, a person may perhaps be understood to be taking control over, and giving meaning to, their life.

Blanchot argues, however, that the idea of such a "meaningful death" is internally contradictory. These internal contradictions express the second "slope" of "the double death," death as impossibility. Blanchot writes that

[h]e who kills himself is the great affirmer of the *present*. I want to kill myself in an "absolute" instant, the only one which will not pass and will not be surpassed. Death, if it arrived at the time we choose, would be an apotheosis of the instant; the instant in it would be that very flash of brilliance which mystics speak of, and surely because of this, suicide retains the power of an exceptional affirmation.²⁰

The internal contradiction here lies in the fact that the act of suicide must be both an act of total negation and total affirmation at once: the negation of life is also the affirmation of life.

Moreover, as Critchley emphasises, the event of death cannot act as an event which summarises the life of the individual in a meaningful way *for* that individual, since that individual does not *experience* the death-event. Critchley eludes here to a paradox which might be

expressed in general terms as follows: is the last term in a series a part of that series, or not a part of it?²¹ If death is the last “event” in the series of experienced events which constitute a life, then it is something that is experienced, and which forms a part of the life for that individual. However, by the very fact of it being such, it is not death itself. On the other hand, if death is not a part of the series of lived events, but constitutes an end to that series, then it falls outside the life of the individual, and is not experienced as meaningful *for* that individual.

The difficulty of these internal contradictions and paradoxes leads Critchley to conclude that death – understood as an event which gives meaning to a finite life – is impossible. Although Critchley seems to choose the second slope (death as impossibility) as the “true” account of death, he insists that an irreducible ambiguity remains, since it is not possible to simply abandon that view of death expressed by Blanchot as “possibility.” We may understand this claim by suggesting that death will always inscribe a life within a meaningful narrative, even if that meaning necessarily escapes the experience of the deceased. Crucially, however, life cannot be summed up in a meaningful totality *for* the individual at the moment of their own death. Critchley concludes from his discussion of the double death in *The Space of Literature*, and from his broader engagement with Blanchot, that finite human life cannot be meaningful for individuals: nihilism cannot be surmounted.

The Vicious Circle of Affirmation and Negation: Reading Blanchot reading Nietzsche

While Critchley’s reading of Blanchot interrogates the personal dimension of nihilism – the meaning(lessness) of one’s own life – Blanchot’s engagement with Nietzsche opens out onto the broader world-historical dimensions of nihilism. The most significant site of this engagement is an essay that has been published under the title “The Limits of Experience: Nihilism,” and

which is collected in *The Infinite Conversation* as “Crossing the Line.”²² For Blanchot, nihilism is an intractably obscure thought. Blanchot reveals this obscurity by firstly considering Nietzsche’s apparently clear definition of nihilism, and then by showing how this apparent clarity breaks down on closer analysis. The method Blanchot employs here is analogous to that employed in “Literature and the Right to Death” – he proposes two slopes of Nietzsche’s thought, one apparently clear and one obscure, and then demonstrates a “higher” obscurity (corresponding with the second formulation of the obscure outlined above) which consists in the ambiguity of both slopes, and the undecidability between them.

Blanchot cites one of Nietzsche’s clearest definitions of nihilism, ‘that the highest values devalue themselves.’²³ The cause of this devaluation is “the death of God,” where God not only means the Christian deity, but also everything that has sought to take his place – ‘the ideal, consciousness, reason, the certainty of progress, the happiness of the masses, culture.’²⁴ According to Blanchot, ‘nihilism is an event accomplished in history that is like a shedding of history’ – the moment when history turns’ which is indicated by both *a negative trait* (‘values no longer have value in themselves’) and *a positive trait* (‘for the first time the horizon is infinitely open to knowledge, “Everything is permitted”).²⁵ For Blanchot this positive trait means that there is no longer a limit to human activity, since it is not restricted by divine commandment. Underlining this point, Blanchot emphasises the complicity between nihilism and science: the possibility of science opens in the horizon of a meaningless world. This means that science becomes possible simultaneous to the decline of the world of values and meaningful interpretations. According to Blanchot, Nietzsche affirms the rational clarity of science, asserting that in the meaninglessness of the nihilistic world after the death of God, only science can provide meaning in a way that doesn’t just set up new categories of valuation in God’s place. According to Nietzsche, “humanist” and other values set up as transcendent sources of

all value perpetuate the *ressentiment* against life that he associates with religious nihilism. In other words, any attempt to ground values by ascribing some ultimate purpose or meaning to life in fact devalues life as it is really lived and experienced (since, Nietzsche argues, we have no access to such an ultimate purpose or meaning, and, if we are intellectually honest, no reason to believe such a meaning exists).²⁶ Science, however, avoids this danger by creating functional values which do not refer themselves to any ultimate purpose or meaning. Blanchot writes:

[W]hen the world no longer has any meaning, ...what alone can overcome the disorder of this void is the cautious movement of science; its power to give itself precise rules and to create meaning, but of a sort that is limited, and in this sense operational – thus the power at once to extend to the furthest limits and to restrict most closely its field of application....At the moment when nihilism shows us the world, its counterpart, science, creates the tools to dominate it. The era of universal mastery opens.²⁷

The response Nietzsche proposes to nihilism is again unfolded by Blanchot according to two “slopes”:²⁸ the “clear” slope of Zarathustra’s bold proclamation of the coming of the overman [*Übermensch*], and the “obscure” slope of the mysterious thought of the eternal return. The proclamation of the overman arises in response to the question of what will become of humanity in the turning of history which is characterised by nihilism and the dominance of science. Nietzsche’s well-known response is that the human being must be transformed; he must become the overman. The overman is defined as “the man who overcomes man,” as one who surpasses himself. According to Blanchot the overman is associated with clarity because he is the being who is able to make bold use of the rational power of science: ‘the lucid man who can rely on nothing and who is going to make himself master of all.’²⁹ Nietzsche posits this new form of man, the overman as self-surpasser, as the affirmative overcoming of nihilism.

Blanchot, however, questions the coherence of the overman as an affirmative response to nihilism, pointing to an internal contradiction in the idea itself. The overman is the being who has overcome the void because he has found in this void the *will* to overcome himself. Self-surpassing is a key feature of the overman's overcoming of nihilism because he has to find the strength to surpass man's need for ultimate meaning or value. In surpassing himself, the overman is thus an affirmation of the void of nihilism, insofar as this self-surpassing is established on the acceptance of a world which is ultimately meaningless.

Blanchot points out that the figure of the overman as self-surpasser remains ambiguous: either self-surpassing is itself overcome in the overman – in which case the overman loses definition - or there is still something to overcome, in which case the overman does not overcome nihilism. Moreover, to deepen this ambiguity into contradiction, Blanchot argues that if the essential trait of the overman is this will to overcome, and if the overman overcomes nihilism and he has nothing left to overcome, then this *will* would make the overman the very definition of nihilism, since Nietzsche gives as one of the formulas of nihilism the fact that '*the will would rather will nothingness than not will.*'³⁰ The overman thus appears as the most purified form of the "will to nothingness," the driving force of nihilism. Blanchot writes that "the overman is he in whom nothingness makes itself will and who, free for death, maintains this pure essence of will in willing nothingness. This would be nihilism itself."³¹ For Blanchot, then, the "clear" slope of overcoming nihilism through the self-surpassing of the overman breaks down into the obscurity of contradiction.

Blanchot approaches the second slope of Nietzsche's response to nihilism – the eternal return – by firstly suggesting that it may be a more effective affirmative response to nihilism than that of the overman. The eternal return overcomes *ressentiment* against the past – that which

cannot be changed – by conceiving time as eternal, and giving the stamp of necessity to the apparently contingent.³² According to Blanchot, the eternal return signifies the defeat of the overman as will to nothingness, because the eternal return is not of the order of things that are in our power to will.³³ In the thought of the eternal return, the will that wills nothingness becomes the will that wills eternity, and all personal, subjective willing is transformed into the impersonal necessity of “being.”³⁴ Blanchot seems to be suggesting here that in contemplating the eternal return, the overman realises the impotence of his will and the insignificance of his subjectivity in the face of eternity. The eternal return becomes the great movement of eternity returning to itself, having dissolved the overman with his subjective willing, his nihilistic will to nothingness, into the positive movement of being.

In the eternal, Blanchot then asks, are we sheltered from nihilism? In fact, he replies, we are at the heart of nihilism.³⁵ Nietzsche expresses the nihilism of the eternal return as follows:

Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence, as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: the eternal recurrence’ – ‘the most extreme form of nihilism.’³⁶

Blanchot explains that while we had thought that nihilism is tied to nothing, nihilism is in fact tied to being. It is ‘the impossibility of being done with it and of finding a way out even in that end that is nothingness.’³⁷ Blanchot thus conceives of the eternal return – to freely adopt Pierre Klossowski’s phrase – as a kind of “vicious circle” of affirmation and negation, where affirmation and negation both lead to nihilism.³⁸ The affirmation of being ties us to an interminable, meaningless existence, thereby simultaneously constituting the negation of meaning constitutive of nihilism. For Blanchot it is the paradoxical logic of the eternal return which indicates most clearly that the attempt to overcome nihilism head-on inevitable falls into a

trap:³⁹ the extreme of nihilism is reached at this point where it reverses itself, and we realise that both affirmation and negation inevitably lead to nihilism.⁴⁰ In his explicit treatment of the Nietzschean theme of nihilism, then, Blanchot arrives at a formula of the same kind as that of the impossibility of death. He concludes: 'Nihilism thus tells us its final and rather grim truth: it tells of the impossibility of nihilism.'⁴¹

The Limits of Nihilism

As Blanchot himself notes in his pages on Nietzsche, these aporetic arguments have the appearance of a joke.⁴² However, the theme of nihilism, and the limits any attempt to overcome nihilism runs into, arguably give us an insight into the attempt to think the obscure in Blanchot's work. Blanchot shows the limits of any attempt to gain access to a "full presence" of meaning, whether through an exemplary work of literature, the personal project of a meaningful life, or the march of modernity towards scientific and technological domination of the world. He shows that both "slopes" which approach this meaning, the day side of science, rationality, consciousness, and language, or the night side of unconsciousness and brute materiality, are both forms of nihilism insofar as they lead to the death of meaning and the meaninglessness of death. In revealing and defending the ambiguous necessity of negotiating these two slopes, Blanchot can be read as proposing the obscure itself as a response to the nihilism of modernity. The obscure thus preserves meaning, albeit precariously, between the modern project of the rational Enlightenment and the Romantic counter-movement towards ecstasy and death. In this way Blanchot also contributes to our understanding of the mysterious problem of nihilism, warning that any countermovement which aims at a complete overcoming will entrench nihilism all the more deeply. Blanchot's lessons leave us with no hope for ultimately overcoming the meaninglessness of human finitude, but point to the indestructibility of meaning

in the radical irreducibility of ambiguity in life and thought. Blanchot thus helps us to understand that it is not through a head-on confrontation with nihilism that the problem of meaninglessness in life is to be overcome. Rather, this problem appears as one which can only be *negotiated* by the production of ambiguous or obscure meanings which occupy a precarious position between nihilism's all-too-slippery "slopes."

¹ Maurice Blanchot, "Sade," in Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* (London: Arrow, 1991).

² Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

³ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* 1st Ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 24.

⁴ Critchley, 2nd Ed., 37. (Henceforth, all Critchley references are to the 2nd Edition of *Very Little...Almost Nothing*.)

⁵ See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982).

⁶ Critchley himself contrasts Blanchot with 'a certain Kojévian Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*' for whom 'philosophy is fundamentally bound up with the movement of the *Begriff* [concept], which is the movement of comprehension itself, a bipolar movement of negation whereby the Subject comes to Spirit and Spirit to the Subject, a dialectic that is always governed by the horizon of recognition, reconciliation, daylight and the production of the work...' *Ibid*.

⁷ Critchley, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁸ See for example "The Outside, the Night" in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955]).

⁹ Critchley, 38.

¹⁰ Critchley, 41.

¹¹ Trans. Lydia Davis in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. George Quasha (New York: Station Hill, 1999).

¹² Trans. L. Davis in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*.

¹³ Critchley, 62.

¹⁴ Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death" in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. L. Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill, 1981), 46. Cited by Critchley, 63.

¹⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7.

¹⁶ See 9.

¹⁷ Critchley, 79.

¹⁸ While Blanchot does reference Heidegger, he draws on wider sources as well for his idea of "death as possibility." See "Death as Possibility" in *The Space of Literature*, 87–108.

¹⁹ Critchley, 82.

²⁰ *The Space of Literature*, 103. Cited by Critchley, 81.

²¹ This paradox is to be found in the works of (among others) Jean Baudrillard, and is discussed by Rex Butler in his *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London et. al.: Sage, 1999).

²² Blanchot, "The Limits of Experience: Nihilism" in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1985 [1977]). Blanchot, *The Infinite*

Conversation, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). These are different translations, and “The Limits of Experience: Nihilism” is a shortened version of “Crossing the Line.” In what follows, I cite exclusively from “Crossing the Line” in *The Infinite Conversation*. It is worth noting that the title “Crossing the Line” alludes to an exchange between Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger on the issue of nihilism, which Blanchot discusses in this version of the essay. In his essay “Over the Line,” Jünger argues for the necessity of a clear definition of nihilism. In his response, originally titled “Concerning ‘the Line’” (later changed to “On the Question of Being”), Heidegger problematizes Jünger’s position. See Heidegger, “On the Question of Being,” trans. William McNeill in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §2, p. 9. Cited by Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation*, 144.

²⁴ *The Infinite Conversation*, 144.

²⁵ *The Infinite Conversation*, 145.

²⁶ Some of these themes are summarily expressed by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* §12 “Decline of Cosmological Values,” 12-14.

²⁷ *The Infinite Conversation*, 145-6.

²⁸ While Blanchot does not use this term in the essay on Nietzsche, I will employ it in my reconstruction of his argument in the interests of highlighting the structural symmetry of his argument here with those examined previously.

²⁹ *The Infinite Conversation*, 146.

³⁰ Quoted by Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation*, 148. In Douglas Smith’s translation, this line of Nietzsche’s reads: ‘...the fundamental truth about human will, its *horror vacui*: it must have a goal – and it would even will *nothingness* rather than *not* will at all.’

³¹ *Infinite Conversation*, 148.

³² This reading follows Heidegger’s influential interpretation of the eternal return. See his “Who is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?,” trans. Bernd Magnus in *The New Nietzsche*.

³³ *The Infinite Conversation*, 149.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §55, 35-6. As quoted by Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation*, 149. In the English translation, Nietzsche in fact writes here: ‘This is the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the “meaningless”), eternally!’ (36).

³⁷ *The Infinite Conversation*, 149.

³⁸ Blanchot discusses Klossowski’s interpretation of the eternal return sympathetically in another chapter of *The Infinite Conversation* (“On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return”), highlighting another sense in which this mysterious idea may be understood a figure of paradox: ‘Affirmation of the Eternal Return. This is a thought of the highest coherence insofar as coherence itself is thought in it as that which institutes it and such that nothing other than this coherence can ever be thought; nonetheless also such that this coherence could not be exclude the coherent thought that thinks it; thus always outside the thought that it affirms and in which it is affirmed: the experience of thought as coming from Outside and in this way indicating the point of disjunction, of non-coherence, at which the affirmation of this thought, ever affirming it, already unseats it. Such is the sign – from now on inscribed at night on our walls – to which Pierre Klossowski gave such a dazzling quality: *Circulus vitiosus deus*’ (273-4).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴² *Ibid.*