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2015

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

THE (DIS)UNITY OF THE WESTERN MODERN PROJECT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Shawna R. Vesco

June 2015

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Abstract

Shawna Vesco

"THE (DIS)UNITY OF THE WESTERN MODERN PROJECT"

In this dissertation I explore the crumbling foundations of the Modern Project in order to assert that not only has “modernity” itself collapsed, but that many of its attendant institutions have as well: the State, the Individual, the Nation, and even Literature. Literature has always been bound up and complicit in these now defunct formations through an alliance forged around the concept of “unity.” The Modern Project and Literature in its wake each posit unity as a constitutive principal of the Individual, the Work of Art, sociality and order in general. The thought of unity dangerously implies that disunited things must be violently subsumed into unification, and I endeavor to trace the fault lines of modernity in order to reckon with the remainders, the “what” or “who,” that have been discarded and erased in the exchange of disunity for unity. I pit against Literature (understood as a homogenizing or institutional force) what Maurice Blanchot terms “*écriture*” (writing). *Écriture* is a mode of witnessing that, rather than making the unseen visible, intimates an irrecoverable silencing and erasure. I then assemble a counter-tradition to the Modern Project through a reading of texts by Maurice Blanchot, Assia Djebar, Tom McCarthy, Franz Rosenzweig, William Gibson and Bilge Karasu.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee: Tyrus Miller, whose thoughtful feedback and timely interventions helped shape this project and the next; Chris Connery, who encouraged me to pursue an experience of time beyond the reach of capital's long arm by not uttering the word "busy"; Kitty Millet, who has tirelessly and enthusiastically shepherded me through all of my degrees; and above all Wlad Godzich, who taught me how to read.

I am extremely grateful for the Qualifying Exam and Dissertation Fellowships, Teaching Fellowships, and Travel Grants offered to me by the Literature Department. I also would like to express my gratitude to Heather Shearer for inviting me to be a Teaching Fellow in the Writing Program. Many thanks to Carla Freccero for her attention and advice, to Peter Kenez for upbeat early morning conversations about death, and to Murray Baumgarten, a dreamer. I would also like to thank my colleagues for their support even if it usually came in the form of funny cat pictures or Bildwirkerey von Bayeux (I'm looking at you, Fritzie de Mata and Christine Turk!). Jackie Sloderbeck and Andrew Sivak have been endless sources of amusement and encouragement. Jimi Wallen, too. Thank you also to my family and friends: Aimée Crook, who *throws book and who helps me remember The Dark Room days of San Francisco; Marilet Martinez, for tikka masala; Liz Carr, for walks; Andrew Carr, for beard; @thejonahkit, for courage; Anne Wheeler, for bright ideas; Simon Critchley, for tobacco-analog; Pumpkin, for keeping it real when I refuse to; David Hernandez, for everything; and Peanut and Miko, for being fluffy.

For Florence

Introduction

Our Modern Disorientation

"'False' unity, the simulacrum of unity, compromises unity better than any direct challenge, which, in any case, is impossible."

-Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

"I think therefore I am not."

-Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*

"*Gestell*. Disaster. 'Disaster' does not mean catastrophe but disorientation--stars guide."

-Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*

"Don't get me wrong: the Project was important. It will have had direct effects on you; in fact, there's probably not a single area of your daily life that it hasn't, in some way or other, touched on, penetrated, changed; although you probably don't know this. Not that it was secret. Things like that don't need to be. They creep under the radar by being boring. And complex."

-Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*

"Into Life."

-Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*

I. Break with the Star: Literature, Community, Technology

"The disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality," writes Maurice Blanchot in his 1980 text *The Writing of the Disaster* (hereafter referred to as *Disaster*). Blanchot's disaster, because it breaks with "the star," provokes a loss of

guidance (fixed stars are used for navigation after all) and therefore it marks the experience of modernity as one of disorientation. But what is "the star" and why is Blanchot so invested in this disaster that brings about our modern disorientation? Of course there is the natural starry firmament above us which helps determine our position on the globe, but there's also another dimension of this dome, this "'whole' which shelters us," and Blanchot writes in *Disaster* that "we dissolve therein" (75). The "star" then is anything that is totalizing or unifying, anything that generalizes particulars and universalizes singulars; the star is God, the Absolute, or such substitutes as suggested by the Modern Project: the Nation, the Subject, History, and so on. To this list of substitutes, Blanchot will add "Literature" and "Community," and to his list I would add "Technology." The difference, however, is that while "Literature," "Community" and "Technology" in their traditional and colloquial determinations are aligned with the universalizing and unifying tendencies of the Modern Project, they can also become sites of contestation. Blanchot disorients Literature's cardinal orientation¹, for example, through *écriture* (writing). Likewise, Community is un-worked through the thought of what Blanchot calls "literary communism." Finally, I propose that "Technology" takes a similar turn toward disaster as *tekhnē* and *technics* in the work of Bernard Stiegler, and as individuation in the work of Gilbert Simondon. What disorientation gives to Blanchot is a way of thinking about modernity outside of the terms, systems and narratives handed down

¹ In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot introduces the phrase "the work of literature" (*le travail de la littérature*). Blanchot's use of "*travail*" signals to me that Literature's "cardinal orientation" involves a goal, a cause, or a certain kind of messianism: a productive labor (negativity in action) that operates between *arche* and *telos*.

by the Western Modern Project. Yet this is not to say that Blanchot poses a counter-tradition or alternate modernity, since either would itself be haunted by the spectres of "tradition" and "modernity" respectively, thus producing a binary construct that is nevertheless unified. Rather, disaster as a "break with the star," as de-starification (*dés-astre*), ruins all modalities of orientation (calculation, Reason, logic, language, the Concept) in order to expose the Modern Project as always already (dis)united.

Essentially, the notion of modern disorientation suggests a sort of disentanglement from the sidereal sky, the bearings it provides, and the fact that, as Blanchot points out, under its dome "we dissolve" (75). This dome where singularities disappear by way of incorporation becomes, in Blanchot's writing, synonymous with "star." This "star" with which we must break takes many other names (God, Reason, Universality, History), but always proceeds through the same operation: that of Unity. The Star is at once purely abstract, separate from the physical sphere of human experience, but also the guiding force behind the social and political systems that have very real effects on real bodies. The philosophical or intellectual trend from the Enlightenment² onward that proposes emancipation (Freedom) through reason, thus operates on a purely conceptual level until it motivates a retooling of societies based on rational and universal principles. From Descartes to Kant, and through Rousseau, Marx and Hegel, emerge perspectives of Modernity as a Project where the centrality of the human mind is constitutive of the

² This is a relatively arbitrary marker for "modernity" on my part. One could reach back further to the Protestant Reformation or even into the works of Duns Scotus and find variations of the trend about which I am writing here.

world and identity, and human labor (as work or Project) is not only constitutive of history and society, but also ultimately the operation through which Freedom would be achieved and History would be completed³. This is the Modern Project in which "we dissolve," in which singularities and multiplicity are exchanged for forms of unity like the Individual, the Collective, the Nation, the Work of Art, and in which experience, life itself, is given over to Concepts. Blanchot mobilizes disaster as a salvage operation that attempts to build a bulwark against unifying and totalizing concepts of modernity (such as those we find in Hegel's "Spirit" of a "People," or in abstractions like "the human") because attempts to historically realize these universal categories ended in catastrophe (not disaster): the totalitarian state of Nazi Germany, Fascism, Communism and the conflagration of colonialism, particularly in relation to Algeria.

Crucially, *écriture* (a modality of disaster) is not just one concept among others; rather it is a practice of un-working (*désœuvrement*) that gives way to an ontology. Discussions of the Modern Project in the writings of Jürgen Habermas,

³ The qualification of "human labor" as "work or Project" is important because not all human labor or craft is "work." By "work or Project" I indicate a kind of human activity that is telos-driven and related to "production." There are, however, generative ways to labor that do not fall into "work or Project" and, for example, in *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, Rob Wilson proposes his own counter-narrative to work as Project when he suggests that the "critical tactic [known as] worlding" occurs as a "world-becoming process of renewal and transformation" (222), in "sites where we labor within what Hesiod called our 'works and days': in the house, academy, disciplinary formation, workplace, the city, self, community, family, street, neighborhood hangout, machinic assemblage, bioregion and watershed, the body, the mass media, the lyric poem and cultural essay, the multi-worlding globe" (ibid).

Jean-François Lyotard, and Georg Simmel⁴ take place on the planes of historicism and sociology, but Martin Heidegger, for example, proposes *Entwurf* (project) as neither cultural movement nor a "project to be accomplished" (à la Habermas or Hegel), but as an ontological condition, *Geworfenheit* (thrownness). It is toward the *Entwurf* aspect of "project" that the title of this dissertation hints. In particular, the title-phrase "(dis)Unity" highlights the tension or rift between the singular, existential experiences that make up a life and the abstractions which attempt to subsume and nullify life's irreducible multiplicity. What "(dis)Unity" attempts to account for with its parenthetical "(dis)" are the remains and remainders, the excess that exceeds unity, the revelation of which is Blanchot's political and ethical task, a task that demands "the writing of the disaster."

In the pages that follow, I retain Blanchot's phrase "*écriture*" in order to emphasize the challenge that writing issues to Literature. The term "Literature" represents a construct that forms in the late eighteenth century and is firmly institutionalized or consolidated by the nineteenth. Part and parcel of modernity, literature fleshed out in the language of experience (and gave representational force to) key notions of modernity: the loss of the sacred, rationalization, nationalism, urbanization, and many more. However, when modernity becomes modernization, which is to say when it becomes the enactment of modernity as ideology, literature

⁴ In 1980, Habermas received the Adorno Prize and at the awards ceremony in Frankfurt he delivered a lecture entitled "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge* (1979), Lyotard writes: "My argument is that the modern project (of realizing universality) has not been abandoned or forgotten, but destroyed, 'liquidated'" (36).

splits: one strand becomes the bastion of the anti-Modern, and the other (literary Modernism) attempts to universalize this enactment. Once "established" in this way, Literature transcends other histories outside of universal modernization and the notion of modern literature as such has become untenable. In its place is Blanchot's *écriture*, which comes to stand in for a literature that has been too complicit with modernity's philosophical and political systems of unification and erasure. *Écriture* also therefore designates a mode of writing that is ruinous to modernity's Enlightenment legacy as well as Literature, an attendant institution of the Modern Project.

If Literature is, as Blanchot claims, a "perfect sphere" in which the writer "will make himself master of blood, of pride, of tenderness, of paradise, of hell, in short all the truth in the world" because he is able to find orientation, i.e. he "knows how to find the right altitude and height,"⁵ then *écriture* is quite something else. Blanchot's *Disaster*, one example of *écriture*, escapes the "perfect sphere" that is Literature through fragmentary writing. The shards, fragments, and wreckage that make up the pages of *Disaster* do not assume or anticipate a redemptive totality⁶, whether this totality is thought of as a plot, an Idea, a Concept, a completion, and so on. In this way, *écriture* suspends or interrupts the "perfect sphere" of Literature in a radically passive mode of *désœuvrement*. Radical passivity, patience, inoperativity or un-working--all of which are suitable translations of Blanchot's phrase

"*désœuvrement*"-- propose a thought of writing outside of operativity, work and

⁵ See Blanchot's essay "Literature" in *Faux Pas*, p. 94.

⁶ Unlike the shards of Issac Luria's vessel, which must be collected in order to perform a redemptive healing of the world (*tikkun olam*), Blanchot's fragments are therapeutic in their infinite disarray.

labor, and specifically outside of dialectical thought whether it be Marx's dialectical materialism or Hegel's *labor* of the negative. *Écriture* is thus far removed from *oeuvre* as both work (labor) and Work of Art (that "perfect sphere").

The force of *écriture*, which is to say, its disastrous effect, is at least two-fold:

1) Because *écriture* consists of language that has been passively mobilized in unfamiliar and unexpected ways (fragmentary writing in the case of *Disaster*, but there are other ways too) it therefore defies meaning and threatens readability; and, 2) *Écriture* is a writing that wrecks work, and works, and also un-works both writer and reader in its approach. Writers and readers of disaster are laid bare by *écriture*, or in other words, they are stripped of the predicates that would make them sovereign subjects or Individuals. Evacuated of subjectivity and lacking all coordinates as a result of their break with the star, they are anonymous, which is to say not properly an "I," and not properly a Subject. *Écriture* is exilic insofar as it ex-poses writers and readers, it poses in exteriority both to a "Self" and to the text. As such, the practice of *écriture* is the condition and law for community, opening onto what Blanchot calls "the literary community" and also "literary communism." In this way, literary community only arises between anonymous and singular writers and readers, and its arrival defies traditional figurations and constellations of community because, unlike these which are grounded in Identity and commonality (shared traits of geography, ethnicity, gender, religion, affiliation, and so on), literary communism relies on a particular notion of "solidarity."

Raised to a concept or to the level of a star, Community and Communism (as indicated especially by the capital "C") have very little to do with the community of readers and writers that Blanchot gestures toward with his "literary communism." In much the same way *écriture* un-works the concept of Literature, it responds also to the exigency of community through a kind of solidarity that becomes possible only in the wake of the disaster, which is to say, only in the wake of *écriture* itself. Of the twin stars Community and Communism, Blanchot writes in *The Unavowable Community* that they appeal to equality and thus produce an "immanent humanity" (2). What exists between equal Individuals is not a relation but a communion. Isolated and Absolute Individuals cannot relate, they can only form a Community because Community "dissolves its constituent members into a heightened unity" (8). Writers and readers devastated by their encounter with *écriture* are fissured, un-worked, exposed. They are singularities that communicate (as opposed to "commune"), and the "ideal community of literary communication" (21) that their contingent encounter (and subsequent dispersal) forms is founded strictly on solidarity. Solidarity is here understood as a momentary sharing out of ethical and political responsibility that assembles singularities by neither unity nor bond (nor the force of law), but by a particular experience of a demand. The community of literary communication is not produced (it cannot be arrived at through human labor), it happens, and the ground of this happening is the groundless ground of disaster.

For Blanchot the question posed by Communism and Community haunted the twentieth century: for me it is the combined question of Technology and Community

that haunts the twenty-first. Traditional determinations of "Technology" configure the human as the tool-bearer and technology as the tool. This arrangement seems to suggest that technology is supplementary to life (*physis*), merely prosthetic to the human, and again the human is figured as the worker who labors to craft or organize the raw material of the world. This discourse of "the Fall" (the fall out of the human body and into exteriority, sin, prosthetics) runs from Plato through Rousseau and into Heidegger, with stops along the way too numerous to account for here. This narrative of disenchantment and loss (of interiority, totality, unity, authenticity), also becomes a narrative of domination when it is fashioned into a critique of modern technology by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), and by Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954). Adorno and Horkheimer peg technology as the essence of the Enlightenment and declare that in modernity "what humans beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and other human beings" (2). Heidegger expresses a slightly different yet still distressing power dynamic when he writes that, "everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology...the actual threat has already affected man in his essence" (4, 28). In these critiques, the human masters nature in order to also master other humans, and in the case of war technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries this cold view of the nexus between community and technology seems particularly well founded. Beyond technologies of war, our contemporary everyday digital technologies seem to affirm the bleakest aspects of the critiques from the 1940s and 1950s. From compulsive gaming communities to disenfranchised otaku

factions, digital technologies seem to be responsible for a general loss of knowledge, loss of social interaction and loss of an "authentic" way of living in the world.

And yet, is this truly the legacy of the digital age? Following the work of Bernard Stiegler, I attempt to render the Fall narrative of Technology un-worked. Against the narrative of loss and dominance⁷, Stiegler proposes a more economic relationship between *physis* and *tekhnē* by demonstrating that the-thing-we-call human is affected by the world just as it affects the world. The permeability of the human and its affective relationship with the world and others in it resonates with Blanchot's figure of the writer/reader and Stiegler likewise recognizes the exigency of a kind of "literary communism" which he terms *philia*, or a social economy of care and contribution. In this way, Steigler places *tekhnē* at the heart of an emergent therapeutic community for our digital epoch.

II. Writing in the Aftermath of Blanchot (a methodology)

The related yet independent chapters of this dissertation are anchored by different writers who each, in the aftermath of Blanchot and the wake of his disaster, practice their own variety *écriture*. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida refers to the eschatologically themed intellectual projects circulating in the twentieth century as the "bread of apocalypse" (14), which he and those of his generation including Blanchot held in their mouths daily. Against these projects of apocalypse, which includes the "end of history," the "end of Marxism," "the end of philosophy," the

⁷ A narrative that, by the way, is anchored by the liberal, humanist, and *masculine* Subject.

"ends of man" and the "*clôture* of metaphysics," I insist pursuing the "aftermath" of Blanchot by assembling in the pages that follow an "ideal community of literary communication" around the three thematics of literature, community and technology. From the Old English word "mæð" (mowing, cutting of grass), "aftermath" gestures toward the second crop of grass that grows after the first has been harvested. Though it may be called "disaster," it is neither catastrophe nor apocalypse, it is an arable *écriture*, the regenerative capacity of which has barely been discovered.

Chapter **One**, "*Écriture*: 'The Disappearance of Literature'," positions Blanchot's practice of *écriture* (writing) as a counter-discourse to aesthetic modernism and the thought of the Absolute that underwrites it. Stéphane Mallarmé's longing for an absolute "Book" stands as representative of what *écriture* seeks to un-work. Mallarmé designs his project as the synthesis of a totality that would replace "books" in their fragmentation and incompleteness with The Book, or in other words, The Book here is posed as the *Aufhebung* (sublation) of all books. Crucially, I show that Mallarmé turns out to be not only the culmination of the Romantic or Hegelian project, but the culmination and *failure* of that project. In striving to complete an Absolute Work of Art, Mallarmé merely succeeds in demonstrating the impossibility of such a thing. I frame his totalizing project as an encapsulation of what one usually means when one refers to "Literature," and the failure (what Blanchot calls "*désœuvrement*," which is "inoperativity" or "un-working") of such a project is what Blanchot refers to with "*écriture*." The final part of the chapter engages Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* in order to build an ethics and politics of *écriture* based

on "disaster" as a modality of disorientation that un-works the major totalizing concepts of modernity such as the Individual, the State, the Community, and Literature.

Chapter **Two**, "Literary Communism: A Technology of Un-working," explores the "Community Debates" of the 1980s that surfaced on the French intellectual circuit between Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. Out of the debates emerge figurations of community that do not rely on the dominant Western political formation's concepts of unity, or on its bizarre notions of "the common" that tend to fall back into identity politics and sovereign subjectivity. Blanchot's particular interest in writing leads him to craft a notion of community that he intimates through the phrase "*communisme d'écriture*." English language translations and commentaries render this phrase as "literary communism," but it should be emphasized that the community Blanchot proposes is assembled around *écriture* and not "literature" as an institution. I argue that because *écriture* renders readers and writers anonymous and ex-posed (posed in exteriority, exiled from subjectivity), it lines up with Bernard Stiegler's work on *technics* which proposes technology as another modality that un-works concepts of the human and the world that have been endemic to modernity. By reading Stiegler alongside Blanchot I demonstrate how literary communism is a technology through which the evacuated "I" meets the multiplicity of the "We," yet not with the fusional undertones that "communism" usually summons. Rather, literary communism signals the relation to the other as other through the modality of

solidarity, which is what Blanchot proposes as the heart of *écriture* and (the literary) community⁸.

Chapter **Three**, "Like a Signal, Dispersed: *Écriture* and Technology in Tom McCarthy," reads English novelist and artist Tom McCarthy as surfacing in the "aftermath" of Blanchot's disaster, the effect of which is a project that bears a distinctly Blanchotian cast but with a few crucial modifications. I argue that in *Remainder* (2007) and *C* (2011), McCarthy develops notions like the "dividual" and "literature as transmission and remix" that are highly suggestive of Blanchot's *écriture* and literary communism. Both McCarthy and Blanchot attempt to think through the relation of the human to the space of literature and to the space of death in a way that simultaneously draws into conflict modernity's insistence on the sovereignty of the individual, the idea that the human is the reference, measure and purpose of all things, and the notion that the human (both in its individual and collective determinations) is an autonomous, closed and unified totality. Against the liberal humanist concept of the Individual, McCarthy suggests that our encounters with technology (itself an avatar of death) and literature expose us as "dividuals," which is to say, as fissured and networked beings. McCarthy's figure of the dividual is strikingly similar to Blanchot's figures of reader and writer who, through solidarity, participate in literary communism. In this way, McCarthy approaches Blanchot's

⁸ In a similar movement, Hardt and Negri write of a multitude that, if it is to form a body, "will remain always and necessarily an open, plural composition and never become a unitary whole divided by hierarchical organs" (*Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, p. 190).

thought on *écriture* and community from the perspective of technology, and language and literature as technologies.

Chapter **Four**, "The Situationist *dérive* as a Mode of Reading in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*," complements Blanchot's practice of *écriture* (writing) as disaster with Gibson's practice of reading as *dérive* (wandering). In this chapter, I explore the Situationist tactic of wandering through the writings of Guy Debord, and I determine that not only is this kind of wandering too invested in the encounter between body and world as one of interpretation, but Debordian wandering is moreover founded on strict notions of sovereign subjectivity, individuality and collectivity (as an aggregate of individuals). I instead appeal to the notion of a "readerly" or "reading" body which, modeled on affect theory, circumvents pesky Enlightenment ideals and constructions like the Individual. At stake in this circumvention is a readerly body that gives way to Gilbert Simondon's ontological process of individuation which suggests a generative movement of circulation that is in direct opposition to the mode of circulation inscribed in neo-liberal economic thought. So while Debord's work on the spectacle hints at several issues bound up with capitalism, his double-inattention to the actual workings of capital, i.e. currency, and semiology (the social work of sign production) means that ultimately his *dérive* fails to adequately address the central tenet of liberalism: deregulation. The reading body, by contrast, gives circulation as an ontological process of individuation that remedies deregulation. In order to explore the reading body fully, I turn to William Gibson and his 2003 novel, *Pattern Recognition*, which performs a liberatory practice

of reading that emerges somewhere between a Fukuyama-esqu world of late-capitalism and the digital era. The narrative backdrop of the text suggests that universalization and homogenization are complete and that history has ended, but the emphasis on the digital world suggests otherwise. Gibson delivers us a reader who, through her interface with the digital, demonstrates the possibility of emergent subjectivities and worlds through the materially situated act of reading.

Chapter **Five**, "Bilge Karasu: Unworking Kemalist Turkey through some very mean books," argues that Turkish author Bilge Karasu embraces a form of *öz Türkçe* (Pure Turkish) in order to render modern Turkish (with all its Kemalist connotations) un-worked. The chapter begins by asserting that Kemalism (the official ideology of Turkey) appears to be the farcical return of the German romantic project insofar as it attempts to assemble a *Volk* through notions of purity, completion and totalization. Through a reading of Karasu's 1971 book *A Long Day's Evening* (*Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı*), I show how he hopes to assemble a new readership through his "very mean book," a phrase his translator Aron Aji uses to describe *Evening*. What Aji calls "mean books" is what Blanchot would call "disastrous writing." Karasu's books are bound up in Blanchot's disaster because they push modern Turkish to its breaking point through the use of poetic and literary devices for which Kemalist language reforms of the 1930s did not account, especially serialization and simile. Taking into consideration the narrative backdrop of *Evening* (the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis of the 8th Century), I argue that serialization and simile un-work the totalizing project of theological iconicity through their alliance with *oikonomia* (economy) i.e.

relationality. The classical and juridical determination of *oikonomia* is extended through a theological framework by the church fathers, especially Paul, who link it to the trinitarian economy in which Christ, the incarnate Son, is an economy of the Father. The theological economy is not just about placing the visible in relation to the invisible, it is about the living linkage between them, the "relation" of their essential similitude. I depart from the Christological economy and place *oikonomia* in a discourse about representation in order to show how *Evening* demands a thought of writing that approaches language as neither a copy of the material world, nor as a formal resemblance. If *oikonomia* names an act or event that is transfigurative, then Karasu recuperates this transfigurative capacity through a demonstration of the performative power of signs in the un-worked economy of stories that make up *Evening*.

Chapter Six, "Vastness and Arability: The Blood of Writing in Assia Djébar's *So Vast the Prison*," proposes that Assia Djébar's 1995 novel *So Vast the Prison* mobilizes the tropes of arability, vastness, encirclement and heterophony as a therapeutic mode of witnessing that relies on the alignment of women with the act of writing. Djébar's mode of witnessing, however, does not give way not to redemptive narratives that will make the unseen visible. Rather, she pursues, outside of traditional modes of signifying and signification, a mode of witnessing based in soundings (hubub, murmuring, uluation) and imagings that intimate an irrecoverable silencing and erasure. I read Djébar's notion of "the blood of writing" (*le sang de l'écriture*) alongside Blanchot's "the disaster of writing" (*l'écriture du désastre*) in order to

suggest that much like disastrous writing, blood produces a writing rooted in flight, a writing that cannot dry, harden, or become legible. The word "vast" of Djébar's title is etymologically related to "waste," "wasteland" and ultimately "ruination," a space or in Djébar's case, a desert on which traces are made. Rooted, like blood writing, in permanent fugitivity, trace inaugurates a movement that has no beginning and no end, it is to wander the desert infinitely. Trace, as that which properly has no site thus suggests vastness (desert) not as site or ground, but as a condition for tracing, for *différance*, for writing.

Chapter **Seven**, "Franz Rosenzweig's figure of 'the We,'" suggests that there is a notion of community in Rosenzweig's magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption (Der Stern der Erlösung)*, that seems to anticipate the themes and problems that arise during the "Community Debates" of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. The figure of the 'We' that emerges from the pages of *Star* has as its condition the revelation of divine love. Revelation, when understood as an economy (as presented in Chapter Five) opens onto the discourse of the neighbor, of neighborly love (Leviticus 19:18, and Gospel of Luke), and thus also of community. Revelation exposes the human not as the Individual, but as a "dividual" (as explained in Chapter Three), and it does so in terms that invoke Blanchot's later formulation of literary communism. Rosenzweig writes that his We is made up of "Anyones" (suggestive of Blanchot's anonymity of the writer and Giorgio Agamben's *whateverbeing*, stripped of predicates) who are assembled through choral chanting where the use of modulation allows for a multiplicity of voices (similar to Djébar in Chapter Six) to all

chant the same melody (just like the "solidarity" proposed in Chapter Two) but from singular positions. The figure of the We becomes even more provocative when read against Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus* project not only because it throws into sharp relief his perspective on corporeal communities but because it reveals the force of the We as that of un-working (*désœuvrement*). By reading the We of *Star* alongside the We of the *Lehrhaus*, I show that Rosenzweig exits the horizon of the messianic (which is itself a totalizing project of completion) through an appeal to the deictic here and now that makes the contingency of life rather than eternity the condition of the community.

The dissertation ends with a **Coda** that explores the art of Japanese-New Yorker artist On Kawara, which was displayed at the Guggenheim in 2015 in an exhibit entitled *On Kawara--Silence*. I argue that Kawara provides a theory of disaster-reading that maps onto Maurice Blanchot's disaster-writing (*écriture*), as well as onto Franz Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus* project. If literature is an operational mode of production in which authors and communities produced works and produced themselves through works, then Kawara's "reading" (like Blanchot's *écriture*) becomes a practice that attempts to find a motor to the signifying economy in un-working (*désœuvrement*). As in the larger economy, the active pole moves from producer to the consumer, from writer to reader, and ultimately from producing to reading. The mode of disaster-reading that I find in Kawara is particularly ruinous to both language and experience, and it poses questions of vital importance about the ethical and political implications of reading in modernity.

Chapter One

Écriture: "The Disappearance of Literature"

"It was inevitable that, after the death of God, the old Dream of the Absolute should have to contend with its absolute denial in all its unyielding obstinacy. It was inevitable that the combustible mixture producing all these conflicts should explode in one memorable conflagration. This conflagration was nothing other than Mallarmé himself."

-Jean-Paul Sartre. *Mallarmé, Or the Poet of Nothingness*

"It re-creates the temptation that is figured by the World Wide Web as the ubiquitous Book finally reconstituted, the book of God, the great book of Nature, or the World Book finally achieved in its onto-theological dream..."

-Jacques Derrida. *Paper Machine*

"I do not cry, I am the cry, stretched out into resonant blind flight..."

-Assia Djebar, *So Vast the Prison*

1.1 Introductory Remarks

Maurice Blanchot makes wonderful use of a *double entendre* in the title of his 1959 essay on "The Disappearance of Literature."⁹ What may strike the casual reader as a breaking news headline or a nostalgic lament over the fact that literature has disappeared is actually a bold proclamation not only that literature works toward its own disappearance, but in doing so it's not even literature anymore: it's *écriture* (writing). Blanchot pursues *écriture* rather than whatever it is that "literature" has

⁹ All English-language citations of the essay "Disappearance of Literature" are taken from: Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford U Press, 2003. Print.

come to designate because, as he explains, "it is not even certain that the word *literature* or the word *art* corresponds to anything real, anything possible or anything important" (*Book to Come* 201). Again, this does not indicate some ailing state of literature, but rather what is at the heart of literature itself: "the essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never already there, it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented" (ibid). Blanchot's allergy to orientation, stability and realization comes on the heels of a literary modernism that, "beginning in 1798 with a review, the *Athenaeum*,...and ending in 1898 with the death of Mallarmé in Valvins,"¹⁰ is obsessed with the Absolute. More broadly conceived, Blanchot is responding both to the epoch of modernism (from the French Revolution and into his own time), and an aesthetic modernism, couched within that larger epoch, as represented by Nietzsche, Wagner, Hegel, Mallarmé, Schiller, Hölderlin and others. Out of this epoch emerge various strands of thought concentrated on multifarious forms of absolutization: the reconciliation between individual and society, nature and culture, knowledge and life, nature and spirit. Crucially, and this is where aesthetic modernism comes back into play, it was suggested by many¹¹ that this kind of socio-

¹⁰ This is a quote from Roberto Calasso who writes that his own project on "absolute literature", along with the "literary absolute" of Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (a study on German romantic literature) defines the heroic age of literary modernism. See Calasso, Roberto. *Literature and the Gods*. Trans. Tim Parks. London: Vintage Books, 2001. p. 170.

¹¹ Schiller, for example, in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1794) proposes (in response to Rousseau and his *Social Contract* [1762]) that the totality of man that was destroyed by art, could in fact be regained again through a higher art, through aesthetic education. Similarly, Wagner proposes the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total

cultural regeneration must happen through art. The romantic-revolutionary task of art would be to produce a people through a totalizing and utopian aesthetic-social (almost aesthetic-religious) operation.

In positing disappearance as the constitutive heart of *écriture*, Blanchot is opening a counter-discourse that attempts to un-work or loosen the bonds of the Absolute (and of totalization) as it was imagined in various ways by the writers and artists of aesthetic modernism. Rather than taking on an entire epoch all at once, though he very well could, Blanchot directs the force of his inquiry on the work of Mallarmé, and specifically, a very Hegelian Mallarmé. The extent to which Mallarmé actually read Hegel himself or just received Hegelian insight second-hand from his friends is as hotly disputed¹² as is Mallarmé's employment of Hegelian terminology in his letters and conversations. It is clear however, for me as well as Blanchot, that Mallarmé's work is Hegelian enough in nature to make for the cornerstone of a counter-tradition. The counter-tradition proposed here sees in Hegel (and then again in Mallarmé) a dangerous inclination toward totalization and the Absolute that is predicated on a process in which negativity is put to work in its dialectical movement from *Grund* (ground) to *Bedingungen* (thinglyness) to its final arrival (completion) in the Concept. In this System, animated as it is by negativity, meaning is arrived at only

work of art). For more insight on the pitfalls of having a people born to itself through art, see Lacoue-Labarthe on "national aestheticism" in *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990.

¹² For an extended engagement on the topic of Hegel's influence in the work of Mallarmé, see: De Man, Paul. "Mallarme, Yeats and the Post-Romantic Predicament." Diss. Harvard U. 1960. Print. Footnote 83.

through contradiction and determinate negativity, and the *Aufhebung* (sublation) of particulars into the universal of the Concept becomes the rule of the day.

Écriture becomes the bastion of an abstract negativity meant to rival the determinate negativity of a Hegelian System. Blanchot (and Nietzsche along with him), see abstract negativity as a powerful form of affirmation directly linked to the brand of nihilism that comes from practices of writing. The nihilism of *écriture*, unlike garden variety of nihilism that negates or denies particular things thus leading to identity and meaning, denies only negativity in an act that is therefore affirmative. Mallarmé, representative both of the culmination and the failure of the Hegelian project, unsuccessfully attempts to craft what he calls in some places *le Livre* (the Book), which was to represent the *Aufhebung* of all books. In this failed attempt of Mallarmé to create the Book "where the spirit lives satisfied,"¹³ Blanchot finds an appeal of the poet to the astral¹⁴ that presents itself as a closure, as a totality, as that which brings a "holy and unreal unity" (*Writing of the Disaster* 88). Yet Mallarmé discovers that the Absolute he seeks, like the thought of being itself "never fails to enclose; it includes even what it cannot take in--its boundlessness is always confirmed by its limits" (ibid). This is what compels Blanchot to write: "The disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality..." (75). To break with the star,

¹³ The original French reads: "*Le Livre, où vit l'esprit satisfait...*" and is taken from "*L'Action restreinte*" located in: *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. Print. p. 372.

¹⁴ One could further suggest a connection here between Mallarmé's *Igitur* to the Vulgate text of Genesis 2:1, which reads "*igitur perfecti sunt coeli*" or, "*thus the heavens were finished*". In this case, Blanchot's project of de-starification is made even more powerful, insofar as it un-works creation as another figure of the Absolute.

to de-star (dés-astre), there must come an excessiveness, a remainder, a "naught left over" (45) or in other words an *écriture* that would claim that there *is* nothing, i.e. nothing is what there is. Mallarmé is this poet of abstract negativity, and Blanchot draws this dis-astral (*dés-atre*) thought from him., and from the recognition of the disappearance of literature.

1.2 (In)completion of the Absolute

Mallarmé, throughout his works and correspondences, indicates that his poetics is drawing him toward the Book, and in fact he will spend the last twenty-six years of his life attempting to bring this project to completion. In a letter to Henri Cazalis dated 14 May 1867, he indicates the nature of this Book by referring to its other code name: "the Work (*L'Oeuvre*)."¹⁵ He further qualifies "the Work" as "the Great Work (*le Grand'Oeuvre*), as the alchemists, our ancestors, used to say." Already there is a tension here between what can be read as a 'mere book' or perhaps as 'book form' (simply *livre*) against something like *un oeuvre* (work) which, in its relation to *opus*, has a determinate beginning and end and thus presupposes a totality while additionally summoning forth Hegelian undertones of "accomplishment" and "completion." The use of alchemy suggests this direction as well, and the phrase *Grand'Oeuvre* also means the philosopher's (a.k.a sorcerer's) stone used to transmute metal into gold.¹⁵ Indeed Mallarmé (the master transmuter) initially designs his

¹⁵ This goes against what Blanchot expresses when he writes that "alchemy tries to create and to make. Poetry decrees and institutes the reign of what is not and cannot be..." (*The Book to Come* 227). But the operation of transmutation is different from

project as the synthesis of a totality that would replace "books" in their fragmentation and incompleteness with The Book, or in other words, The Book here is posed as the *Aufhebung* of all books.

In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man describes Mallarmé's project of the Book as "the timeless project of the universal Book...the *telos* of his and of all literary enterprise" (180), and this falls in line to some extent with the German Romantics' impulse to achieve the absolute book (here, Novalis and Schlegel are representative). A critical element of comparison here revolves around the form that the absolute book must take, which is also to say, the book's schema, its system. In *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, Novalis writes that "the fully executed Bible" is "a *complete, perfectly organized library*--the plan of the Bible is at the same time the *schema* of the library. The authentic *schema*--the authentic *formula*..." (100).

Mallarmé, though his blueprint for the Book changes, asserts in 1855 that it has "many tomes," and later he revises this assertion to a very specific "five volumes" (1866). There is for Novalis and Mallarmé a plurality assumed and consumed (sublated) through the process of the construction of the Bible/Book; for the former it is a "library" and for the latter "tomes" and "volumes." But this plurality is in no way like the famous *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert (1751-72), which attempted to compile all of human knowledge. For Diderot (and Hegel was quite suspicious of this), this *Encyclopédie* was not properly a system but rather a modality of incompleteness, an open totality that left space for undiscovered knowledge. In fact,

either generation or destruction, because it is merely circulation, a movement of information, a change of form not of matter.

Hegel declared in *Science of Logic* that the "encyclopedia of philosophy must not be confused with ordinary encyclopedias" because "an ordinary encyclopedia does not pretend to be more than an aggregation of sciences, regulated by no principle" (398). The issue is that unity as it is presented in "ordinary encyclopedias" is artificial, or, as Hegel explains it, "they [the several branches of knowledge] are *arranged*, but we cannot say they form a *system*" (ibid). System, in the strict and Hegelian sense of the word, cannot be incomplete, open, unfinished. And so it is for Mallarmé, who attempts this impossible Hegelian project of closing the circle (en-cyclo-pedia), frustratingly unachievable to craft the Book in which "all earthly existence must ultimately be contained."¹⁶ In his book *Mallarmé, Or the Poet of Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre calls him the herald of the twentieth century, in part, because "more and better than Nietzsche, he experienced the death of God" (126). This is yet another way to speak of his (in)completion of the Absolute, the failure of Mallarmé's transcendent Book, the faltering of the "old Dream of the Absolute" (ibid).

Mallarmé, if viewed as he is here, as the culmination and the failure of the Hegelian project, is such it is because of a problem concerning language. Paul de Man describes this problem in his dissertation when writes:

The poetic development of a poet like Mallarmé is not essentially different from that of Hegel, except for the fact that it encounters the problem of language in a different way. [...] In Hegel's philosophy, language first appears as one among other entities susceptible of

¹⁶ All references to "As for the Book" come from *Selected Poetry and Prose*, by Stéphane Mallarmé, ed. Mary Ann Caws. New York: New Directions, 1982. p. 72-80.

achieving a mediation between opposites. Later [...] it becomes the last link in a long chain of mediations leading up to the absolute Spirit. It reaches this final stage, however, in the form of a *science* of reflective language, or logic. This logic is detached from its previous history, from the successive approximations and errors that have led to its ultimate perfection. Up to the final moment, language *follows* the experience in which it does not participate... (de Man 83)

This idea that "language *follows* experience" for Hegel but not for the poet is expanded upon by de Man in his later work, *The Post-Romantic Predicament*, when he writes that "for a poet, there exists in fact only one experience, that of language, and he encounters it in a multiplicity of forms, whereas for a philosopher like Hegel, a multiplicity of significant experiences are contained within the single language of his Logic" (9). The very materiality of language prevents Mallarmé from "closing his circle" (of the Book): the realization of the ultimate book is contingent on the realization of the ultimate form however, and as de Man points out, "negation can never be overcome, the ultimate form must contain its negation, concretely inscribed into the form itself" (ibid). This amounts to, as expressed in Mallarmé's "*Un Coup de dés*," the attempt to overcome "*le hasard*" or, "the final form in which the separation between consciousness and natural objects is revealed to us" (de Man 10). And so it is that Mallarmé's "*Un Coup de dés*" comes to be considered by Blanchot (if not other commentators) not "as" the Book, but as that which "gives the Book support and reality; it is its reserve and its forever hidden presence, the risk of its venture, the

measure of its limitless challenge. It has the essential quality of the Book: present with this lightning-strike that divides it and gathers it back together..." (*The Book to Come* 234). This dispersion that gathers is more than an unresolved tension, it is a putting into circulation. If the Book first calls to mind Hegel's *en-cyclo-pedia* that would allow "the Spirit to fold up into itself and find joy in itself within its own realm," (*Logic I* 320) it is this circle-thwarted by the circulation inaugurated by "the lightening strike" of gathering and dispersion that summarily dismisses him. The circulation presented in Mallarmé's fiendish pursuit of the Absolute is why Blanchot is able to write in *The Infinite Conversation* that "...one can say that the work hesitates between the book (vehicle of knowledge and fleeting moment of language) and the Book raised to the Capital letter (Idea and Absolute of the book)..." (425). Writing, in its hesitation and impropriety, passes through the book and produces worklessness in the Work.

Where Blanchot proposes the Book as a luminous lightening flash that gathers and disperses the night sky, Mallarmé figures writing as black stars scattered on a white sky of paper. Of the confluence of stars in the sky and words on the page, Mallarmé writes that "one doesn't write luminously, upon a dark surface, only the alphabet of the stars is thus indicated, sketched out or broken; man pursues in black on white."¹⁷ He pursues this "black on white" in the poem "Un Coup de dés" ("A throw of the dice"), a poem of typographical majesty that casts inked letters across the

¹⁷ The original French reads: "*on n'écrit pas, lumineusement, sur champ obscur, l'alphabet des astres, seul, ainsi s'indique, ébauche ou interrompt; l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc.*" See: Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. Print. p. 284.

pages, and in varying fonts and sizes. As an effect of this typographical playfulness, constellations and celestial assemblages made out of words begin to emerge against the background of paper. It is not within the purview of this chapter to give a complete exegesis of this remarkable poem, rather it will suffice to elucidate some of the more general points. A well-worn acknowledgement or observation within Mallarméan criticism is that of a "title-phrase"¹⁸ that serves as the core of the poem. Conspicuously large, emboldened and capitalized words draw not only the eye but also our indefatigable reason, and when read these words that do not appear related by any laws of logic or syntax form the phrase, "*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*" or "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance." In an essay on Mallarmé in *The Book to Come*, Blanchot writes of "*Un Coup de dés*" that there is a strong correspondence between the title-phrase that declares chance to be invincible and the "renunciation of that least chanceful form, traditional verse" (233). He goes on to say that, "from the moment there is a precise correlation between the form of the poem and the assertion that pervades it and underlies it, necessity is reestablished" (ibid). In this way, the poetic space of the poem is traversed by the a dialectical play that will underwrite Mallarmé's entire poetical project, a project that in fact haunts much of Blanchot's own writing. Critical not just to Mallarmé's poem, but to Blanchot's reading of this poem is again how writing inaugurates the dynamic gathering/dispersion. In other words, what "*Un coup de dés*" offers us, is a way to approach Blanchot when he enigmatically states in *The Infinite Conversation*, "The

¹⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the poem, see: Cohn, Robert Greer. *Mallarmé's Un coup de dés: an exegesis*. New York: AMS Press, 1949. p. 9.

book: a ruse by which writing goes toward *the absence of the book*" (424). Through the very failure of the Book Blanchot opens his thought to Mallarmé and this "mad game of writing" (vii) that at every turn renders the Absolute impossible. As Mallarmé's Book works toward totalization "the mad game of writing" instead demands that the Book break "with every form of totality" (*Writing of the Disaster* 75), the very designation in fact that Blanchot reserves for "disaster."

The aleatory nature of Mallarmé's "*Un coup de dés*" must be read against Blanchot's commentary on it, a commentary that ends with the subtle omission of a very important word: "constellation." Blanchot writes of Mallarmé's poem that the sense of the force of closure it gives actually reveals that closure as opening:

the end of the work is its origin, its new and old beginning: it is its possibility opened one more time so that the dice thrown once again can be the very throw of the masterful words that, preventing the Work from existing---*Un Coup de dés*--lets the final wreck return in which, in the profundity of place, everything has already disappeared: chance, the work, thought, EXCEPT *on high* PERHAPS... (*The Book to Come* 244)

Mallarmé's poem ends "EXCEPT *on high* PERHAPS a Constellation" and yet here Blanchot places an ellipse next to "PERHAPS,"¹⁹ at once inviting and refusing

¹⁹ In *Paper Machine*, Derrida terms this perhaps an "irreducible modality" (74) that was mobilized by Nietzsche for whom "a great number of perhapses have rained down...becoming a theme, almost a name, perhaps a category." In *Friendship*, Derrida concludes that in the work of Nietzsche, the perhaps is "far from being a simple indetermination, the very sign of irresolution," and while it does not "settle the

"Constellation." The play of typographical mutations in "*Un Coup de dés*" leads the reader to rescue groups of words out of their "chaos" and thus construct seemingly less than arbitrary arrangements (constellations). If one takes, as Blanchot does in the quote above, the words that appear in all capital letters and un-italicized, it would read:

even when truly cast in the eternal
circumstance
of a shipwreck's depth
is (can be)
the master
were it to have existed
were it to have begun and ended
were it to have amounted
were it to have illuminated
nothing
will have taken place
but the place
except
perhaps
a constellation²⁰

The combination of "eternality" and "circumstance" with a stress on the *circum* evokes the shelter, the abode, the totality, the encircling void of the sky or the depth of the sea that cradles the shipwreck. The masterful words, which are meant to conquer chance word by word are instead only masters of absence:

contradiction or suspend the oppositions" it signals the "non-dialectical passage from one to the other" (30).

²⁰ The original French reads: "*Quand bien même lancé dans des circonstances/éternelles/du fond d'un naufrage/soit/le maître/existât-il/commençât-il et cessât-il/se chffrât-il/illiminât-il/rien/n'aura eu lieu/que le liu/excepté/peut-être/une constellation*". For the full text see: Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1914. Print.

Words, we know, have the power to make things disappear...But words, having the power to make things 'arise' at the heart of their absence--words which are masters of this absence--also have the power to disappear in themselves, to absent themselves marvelously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves endlessly. (*Space of Literature* 43)

The "*du fond*" of the shipwreck is but the seafloor. In this sense the shipwreck is *sans-fond* or *grundlos*. Groundless and unbound, the shipwreck (but is it the "final" wreck?) enters the temporality of the eternal recurrence and, according to Blanchot's reading "returns" to the profundity of place in which everything has already disappeared (chance, the work, thought) "except on high perhaps..." (*Book to Come* 244). The ellipsis in Blanchot's comment suggests two readings that are and are not mutually exclusive. According to the first reading, the only thing that has not disappeared is the 'perhaps,' so it seems that 'perhaps' is a state of virtuality from which possibilities can be actualized. Like Deleuze's body without organs, the zero state of pure virtuality from which the assemblage issues forth. According to a different reading, the ellipsis could be ushering "*une constellation*" forth: "everything has already disappeared: chance, the work, thought, EXCEPT *on high* PERHAPS..." THE CONSTELLATION. The second reading proposes an ever-shifting configuration organized according to the temporality suggested by the eternal return.

In the rhythm of the "final" wreck that returns, everything has always already disappeared in its appearance.

1.3 An *écriture* of Un-working

What Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé delivers is that writing is not about constellations of letters ("black on white") perfecting the Book, but rather words as vehicles of the absence of the book, the very unsettling of constellations. Blanchot relates this thought of language to change and disorientation when he writes "Rhythm or language. Prometheus: 'In this rhythm, I am caught.' Changing configuration" (*Writing of the Disaster* 5). Benveniste who performs an etymological study on *rhythmos* concludes that it is erroneous to consider 'the regular movement of waves' as its signification and rather it refers to an idea of form that is related to *schema*. Where *schema* is a constituted and fixed form, *rhythmos* is the fluid form that has no 'organic consistence.' As Heidegger reminds Fink, the Heraclitus seminar (*Sprache als Rhythmus* by Thrasybulos Georgiades) shows that *rhythmos* (the Ionian variant of *rhythmos*) has nothing to do with *rheo* (flow), but rather is understood as imprint. In this sense, and as shown through a verse from Archilochos and a passage from Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, *rhythmos* can be understood as a bringing into a measure of time or proportion, and Prometheus is bound, joined or "rhythmed" by his chains. In this way, Heidegger explains, measure or *rhythmos* is the substrate of language, language that approaches us, and language like that of Heraclitus, that knows no

sentences or meaning. Blanchot complicates this notion of rhythm as a "bringing into measure" when he compares it to constellations:

Everything comes from the sea for men of the sea, just as everything comes from the sky for others, who recognize a given cluster of stars and who designate, in the magic 'configuration' of those points of light, the nascent rhythm which already governs their entire language and which they speak (write) before naming it. (112)

This passage highlights the tendency of these "others" to "recognize" and "designate," or in other words, to capture *rhythmos* into an artificial *schema* or configuration. This kind of rhythm, paradoxical because it is "nascent" and yet "already" governing, is the chain that binds Prometheus. Blanchot therefore attempts to expose another thought of rhythm, a thought that takes him closer to *rhythmos*:

Rhythm is not the simple alternation of Yes and No...Rhythm, while it disengages the multiple from its missing unity, and while it appears regular and seems to govern according to a rule, threatens the rule. For always it exceeds the rule through a reversal whereby, being in play or in operation within measure, it is not measured thereby. The enigma of rhythm--dialectical-nondialectical... (113)

Beyond designating parts in a whole, undulating rhythm operates in a unity that is ever-emergent, only duration--always to come and always already past, thus an

annulment of the present.²¹ The structure Blanchot elaborates above has spatio-temporal implications when considered through the occasions of repetition and anticipation in poetic forms, especially "*Un Coup de dés*." The movement of repetition and anticipation that is advanced through rhythm resists lexicality, syntagmatic linearity and causality, as well as totality in general. Rhythm is not "an isochronic recurrence of identical elements" (*Difference and Repetition* 21), it is not a returning of the Same. Rather, rhythm cannot happen except through difference, and essentially rhythm is about becoming. In *Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari confirm rhythm as dynamic phase marking when they write "what chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between---between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the *chaosmos*...there is rhythm whenever there is...a communication of milieus, coordination between heterogeneous space-times" (345). It is the persistence of the "in-between," i.e. the radically dynamic metastability of milieu that underwrites Blanchot's *écriture*, which suspends all figures of the One (*L'Un*), the Absolute.

In Mallarmé's failure then, there takes place a reformulation of Hegel's *aufhebung* into what Blanchot designates as *déouvement* or un-working. And if for

²¹ In his essay "Joining the text", Rodolphe Gasché indicates that "both Mallarmé and Heidegger refer to the genuinely Greek meaning of rhythm as the well-proportioned arrangements of parts in a whole" (162). Blanchot is clearly proposing a thought of *rhuthmos* that tends toward dynamism rather than static *schema*. For Gasché's essay see: *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*. Ed. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, Wallace Martin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1983. Print.

Mallarmé the star figures for the literary work itself, then de-starifying is the un-working task of *écriture* as *dés-astre*. Blanchot therefore systematically hijacks and detours not only Hegelian terminology, but the Hegelian operations behind the buzzwords. Against restless negativity, the operator in Hegel's System, Blanchot will position a thought of inoperativity:²² patience and passivity. In *Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot signals this assault on Hegel by simply writing of "the patience of the concept" (51) and elsewhere transmuting this into "the patience of the cry" (31). While the former can be read as an explicit readjustment of Hegel's *labor/work/operation* of the concept, the repetition of "the patience of..." suggests a further reworking that outright replaces "concept" with "cry." What is at stake here is not only a movement of thought that departs from a Hegelian labor of the concept in order to arrive at a Blanchotian patience of the cry, but also a substitution, or an un-working, that underwrites Blanchot's project of *écriture--l'écriture du désastre*. Where Hegel's Concept (*Begriff*), the condition of knowledge and of comprehension, is replaced by a "cry" so too is the Concept's labor of negation, in its endless deployment, which rattles onward toward reconciliation or the production of the work, is replaced by patience.

In *The Culture of Literacy*, Wlad Godzich suggests of this cry that it is neither the cry of Rousseau that "proclaims the possibility of arriving at a universal

²² In the French, *desoeuvrer* indicates "to render inoperative," a word used by Jean-Luc Nancy in the title of his *Inoperative Community* (*La communauté désœuvrée*). The word constellations that form around "*désœuvrement*" all have a long and distinguished trans-linguistic theologico-philosophic history dating back to Luther (*Aufhebung*) and St. Paul (*katargein*).

agreement between all human beings" nor is it the cry of the prophet in the desert which is "meant to awaken or summon forth a community," but rather it is a "cry of difference" that is more closely aligned with the cry found in Lévinas which is "let out by an injured person even if there is no one to hear it" (27). This voiceless cry of difference which is "addressed to no one and which no one receives" (*Writing of Disaster* 51) exceeds language and knowledge, and thus linked in intimacy to Blanchot's *écriture*.

Where the Concept evinces Hegelian dialectics, totalization, and an appropriation that has as its horizon a flattening capture or homogenization that leads to sameness and absolute knowledge, the cry of difference interrupts immanence and opens onto radical alterities. *Écriture*, the space or place of the cry, is outside of knowing, experience, and discourse. And where Hegel makes contradiction the very possibility of meaning, *écriture* holds antinomies in patience, and yet without cessation, it holds. Doctrines, systems, arguments--the very fodder of philosophy--are interrupted by an *écriture* that is provisional, uncertain, and fragile. Often, as in Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, *écriture* is tied to weariness, a lack of energy or an inability to sustain deadening discourse: "To write is perhaps to [...] welcome the passive pressure which is not yet what we call thought, for it is already the disastrous ruin of thought. Thought's patience" (41). Blanchot, signaling another decisive element of *écriture*, that of *désœuvrement* (inoperativity, un-working), writes aphoristically in *Writing of Disaster*: "Patience again---the passive. The *Aufhebung* turns inoperable, ceases. Hegel: 'Innocence alone is nonaction (the absence of

operation)" (40). Passivity and patience, borne through and of *écriture*, are not to be understood as merely the opposites of activity and impatience, but rather are in a neutral relation of strangeness that defies the logic of the either/or and instead gestures toward the outside, the unknown, or the otherwise. Passivity in its relation to *désœuvrement* is unshackled from connotations of meekness and serene immobility, and it thus comes to suggest instead an endless labor that never reaches closure, or the perfection of a work (*oeuvre*). Blanchot, suspicious of movements, dialectical ones specifically, tends to hold things in the "between," in fragment or in suspension as interruption. And it is this radical passivity that counters all machines of operativity and totalization.

1.4 Of fragments and dis-asters: Breaking with the One (Star)

Blanchot, through the use of fragments in *Writing of the Disaster*, not only writes against the totality that the Book sought, he also writes a modality of disorientation. Disaster is the very collapse of constellations. The very same constellations of Walter Benjamin who writes in his Goethe essay of the figure of a shooting star that appears with the "*Schein* of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*)."²³ Here, *Schein* suggests both "the illumination" and "the illusion" of reconciliation. The firmament likewise invokes Kant who, in his *Second Critique*, writes "The starry sky above me and the moral law within me."²⁴ Or, again, the sidereal sky of the EU Flag,

²³ See Walter Benjamin's *Selected Writings* vol. 1.

²⁴ In Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, the original German reads "*Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, und das moralische Gesetz in mir*" (288).

and the Anthem of Europe modeled on Schiller's celebration of fraternity in "Ode an die Freude" ("Ode to Joy"), which reads "Brothers--over the starry heavens."²⁵ Or the nostalgic Lukàcs whose *Theory of the Novel* begins with a fugue for the bygone era of "happy ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths--ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars" (29). But also the Magi and shepherds are lost, they will not find the Messiah. And in this dissertation doubt is cast on the pole star, and the star of redemption of Rosenzweig is suspect. These (and others!) are the constellations against which Blanchot writes, and the bursting of the starry sky is reflected in the fragmentary shards that compose *Writing of the Disaster*.

The fragments of *Writing of the Disaster* are neither posed "against" unity, nor do they seek to be a unity. Rather, in their relation to the disaster they remain outside of such binaries, without resolution. Outside of all beginnings and endings, the fragment is foreign to any dialectical process. Blanchot is not like Schlegel for whom the romantic fragment "is complete in itself like a hedgehog," as he suggests in *Athenaeum* fragment 206. Rather the fragmentary imperative of Blanchot defies equally and thus impossibly absoluteness and relativity, immanence and transcendence, continuity and discontinuity. Blanchot intimates this when, in *Writing the Disaster*, he writes that the fragmentary "promises not instability (the opposite of fixity) so much as disarray, confusion" (7). The relation of the fragment is only of "other" to "the other" wherein "the other repeats, but this repetition is not a repetition

²⁵ "Brüder--über'm Sternzeit/Muss ein lieber Vaterwohnen...Droben über'm Sternzeit/Wird ein grosser Gott belohnen." For full text, see *Schillers sämtliche Werke in zwei Bänden, Vol 1*.

of the same" (34). The fragment is only the mark and unmarking of the fragmentary, of the power of the disaster. This writing of effraction "should not appear as moment of a still incomplete discourse" (*Infinite Conversation* 168), but rather as that which allows chance to be affirmed. The fragments are the Mallarmean tossing of the dice that affirm the whole of chance in the 'every time of tossing,' or as Deleuze says in *Difference & Repetition*, "the repetition of throws is not subject to...the identity of a constant rule" (248). For Mallarmé "all thoughts emit a throw of dice," and for Blanchot perhaps it is writing that does so.

Fragmentary writing is a major theme of *Writing the Disaster*, and in that text Blanchot notes that it "does not belong to the One" and "the fragmentary imperative signals to the System which it dismisses (just as it dismisses, in principle, the I, the author) and also ceaselessly invokes..." (61). Fragmentary writing, in its impropriety escapes the rule of secure meaning as it interrupts, and interrupts itself. In *Step Not Beyond*, Blanchot suggests that this interruption is "of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing" (92) yet it is a continuous interruption underwritten not by infinity but by interval. Blanchot affirms this relation of interval and fragmentation when he explains the nature of the writings in *Comité* like this: "Thus the texts will be fragmentary: precisely to make plurality possible (a nonunitary plurality), to open a place for it and at the same time never to arrest the process itself."²⁶ Discontinuity here is not opposed to continuity as it would be in a System, rather it is that which provokes becoming. It is the mode of becoming, which

²⁶ *Écrits politiques: Guerre d'Algérie, Mai 68, etc. (1958-1993)*. Ed. posth. Lignes/Léo Scheer, 2003, p. 97.

is outside of all systems, that corresponds to the space of the between or the elsewhere that becomes most difficult to think. And as Blanchot suggests in *Infinite Conversation*, it is becoming as the energy of intermittence" (417) that speaks in the space of the between where nonunitary plurality is made possible.

In *Writing of the Disaster* Blanchot continues his exploration of the relationship between fragment and totality through the figure of shards from exploded books. He twice quotes Mallarmé's "*There is no explosion except a book*" (7, 124), which is itself a play on Edmond Jabès's "exploded book." Jabès, haunted by the smashing of the tablets at Sinai, explores the exploded book's scattering of God's word as the condition of legibility. In the same way that our fall from Eden is a fall into knowledge and into language, the breaking of the tablets insists *frayage*, rupture, *brissure*, effraction as the originless origin of writing. This is why Blanchot, when he offers an exegesis on Mallarmé's "*There is no explosion except a book*" affirms that the explosion of the Book (of the book, of any book) is its mode of becoming, the mode of gathering dispersion that resists at every turn what Mallarmé meant by the Book:

...that the book is not the laborious gathering of a totality finally obtained, but has for its being the clamorous, silent bursting which without the book would not take place (would not affirm itself). But it also means that since the book itself belongs to burst being--to being violently exceeded and thrust out of itself--the book gives no sign of itself save its own explosive violence, the force with which it expels

itself, the lightning refusal of the plausible: the outside in its fragmentary becoming...which is that of bursting"²⁷ (124 translation modified)

Writing, for Blanchot, is not only exteriority, but it contains exteriority, it is the nameless exteriority of disaster, an exteriority without limitation that yet presents itself under the sign of the law. Writing as stratified into the form of the book becomes exteriority as law: just as the universe does not expand into pre-existing space but rather expands the very space that it occupies. In order to draw out the notion of exteriority without limitation that *écriture* proposes, Blanchot again approaches Sinai and the breaking of tablets in *Infinite Conversation*:

The breaking of the first tablets is not a break with a first state of unitary harmony; on the contrary, what the break inaugurates is the substitution of a limited exteriority (where the possibility of a limit announces itself) for an exteriority without limitation--the substitution of a lack for absence, a break for a gap, an infraction for the pure-impure fraction of the fragmentary....(432)

²⁷ "Explosion, un livre; ce qui veut dire que le livre n'est pas le rassemblement laborieux d'une totalité enfin obtenue, mais a pour être l'éclatement bruyant, silencieux, qui sans lui ne se produirait (ne s'affirmerait pas), tandis qu'appartenant lui-même à l'être éclaté, violemment débordé, mis hors être, il s'indique comme sa propre violence d'exclusion, le refus fulgurant du plausible, le dehors en son devenir d'éclat."

The first writing is without origin and "foreign to...the categories" or mediate and immediate it is alterity itself (432). After the fall, the immediate experience of the Word of God belongs only to prophets. With the second break and the institution of law as word and word as law, the first limitless exteriority (writing) is substituted for law. Unity, or God, is posited as a lack rather than absence, the tablets are considered broken rather than open, and the play of the fragmentary is exchanged for the thought of transgression which always presupposes the system, a unity, a god, *L'Un* (the One). Or again, from *Writing the Disaster*: "The disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality..." (75).

Blanchot writes that the problem with the law of the One is that unlike nonunitary plurality, it excludes the multiple *as* multiple. Written under the law of the One, the 'as' opens onto the logic of the trait and the question of analogy (which depends on difference as well as resemblance) where the 'as' prevents the terms on either side from ever completely coinciding. Yet the *Als-Struktur* appears here as a double-edged knife where in the first instance, "the structure of the *as*: [refers] to a *plurality removed from unity* [my emphasis], and from which unity is always removed...introduces us to difference, not to be confused with the different, to the fragmentary without fragments, to the *remainder*..." (131). The hermeneutical 'as' points to the disunity of thought and being through a non-reflexive instance of language that affirms that 'something' precedes and ruins language. Yet, on the other hand the structure of the *as*, "the multiple as multiple, *as such* or in itself--tends to reestablish the identity of the nonidentitcial, the unity of the not-one" (131) in which

case, "the thought of the multiple is once more deferred" (ibid). So here we have 'as' as *kath'auto* rather than the more relational 'as' of the *Als-struktur*. The as-such-ness of the *kath'auto* reading of the multiple implies only "not otherwise" which places it again under the law of the One and unifies it in its self-sameness, while the multiple as multiple signals the originary repetition contained in the 'as.' Through detour and return, this nonunitary multiplicity becomes indeterminate, it is multiple as neither other than multiple nor multiple same as multiple. The noncoincidence brought about by the 'as' of *écriture* (which is not subject to the law of the One) opens onto Blanchot's heteronomous thought of the Other and of the Outside.

1.5 Outside *écriture*

In the original French title of *Writing of the Disaster*, *L'Écriture du désastre*, one can glimpse several permutations like *l'écriture du dés-astre* (the writing of the de-staring), *le désastre d'écrire* (the disaster of the writing) or even *le dés-astre d'écrire* (the star unwriting). As Bernard Stiegler faithfully notes in an implicit reference to Blanchot in *Technics & Time I*, "Disaster does not mean catastrophe but disorientation--stars guide" (287). The disaster of which Blanchot writes exceeds the standard determinations of the word "disaster" and instead bespeaks an experience (that one cannot experience) that is bound to the de-staring (suggested in the French rendition of *dés-astre*) of the myriad of constellations partially enumerated above: those of Walter Benjamin, Schiller, Kant, the EU, the Messiah, Franz Rosenzweig. The etymology of the French *dés-astre* reaches back to the fifteenth century when it

crossed over from the Italian *disastro*, a term that emerged with the practice of astrology. *Astro*, however, was not used to reference stars, but rather it refers to a heavenly body that exercises benevolent influence, so when it moved into French it came to be rendered as fortune (*astre*) and misfortune (*désastre*). When Blanchot invokes this term, he also summons this linguistic history as well as the Mallarmé's poem "*Un Coup de dés*" which unfurls in his present moment. Crucially, Blanchot never loses sight of the transformation that occurs between the "benevolent influence" to a "maleficent" one, and this determines his disaster as a loss of bearings and stable points of reference, a kind of modern cosmic disorientation. The sidereal sky (as that which embodies constellations, modernity, calculation, reason, and logic) is inseparable from the atrocities to which it bears witness in the twentieth century, and Blanchot places certain political and ethical exigencies on the experience of *écriture* (writing) by pitting it against this sidereal sky.

The disaster then is related to our passage (*pas, passage, passivité*) into the order of signification, the order of meaning, through the use of language. Blanchot phrases this differently when he writes, "The disaster is separate; that which is most separate," or similarly, "the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact." and again "...we suspect the disaster is thought" (1). And to write is always to write this disaster, or in other words to write "is perhaps to bring to the surface something like absent meaning, to welcome the passive pressure which is not yet what we call thought, for it is already the disastrous ruin of thought" (51). In this way,

écriture as disaster un-works the premise of what has traditionally been referred to as "Literature" because it endlessly reasserts its own failure and disappearance.

Language is directed toward concrete particulars yet because words are always in the service of the universal, the particular can never be realized. The task of *écriture* is to reveal through language what always already withholds itself from language. In *Infinite Conversation* Blanchot explains in similar terms that "Literature professes to be important while at the same time considering itself an object of doubt" (301), in the sense that it, "by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents" (310), and thus is "its own negation" (301). For Blanchot, in a very fundamental way, *écriture* or writing is un-workingly undertaken "not simply to destroy, in order not simply to conserve, in order not to transmit," rather we are enjoined by Blanchot to "write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks" (*Writing the Disaster* 38). It is in the experience of writing that which stands outside of all experience, that Blanchot's *écriture* arrives at a materiality of language that is annihilated by language. Yet, for Blanchot as for Mallarmé it is the very nullity of literature that is its force. Both writer and world slip into the work, and yet "whoever writes is exiled from writing, which is the country--his own--where he is not a prophet" (63). The writer slips away from the world and into the work, but the work refuses it, thus another circulatory movement is enacted in the practice of *écriture*. To not be a prophet means to not achieve immediacy, not even with writing "the country that is his [the writer's] own." What Blanchot is proposing with this circulatory modality of exile is

an evacuation of subjectivity called also "anonymity" that forms the heart of the ethics of *écriture*.

Exilic *écriture* forces reader and writer alike out of self and out of the work. The nature of this exile is better understood when placed alongside another fragment in *Writing the Disaster* that reads:

Schleiermacher; by producing a work, I renounce the idea of my producing and formulating myself; I fulfill myself in something exterior and inscribe myself in the anonymous continuity of humanity--whence the relation between the work of art and the encounter with death: in both cases, we approach a perilous threshold, a crucial point where we are abruptly *turned back*. (7)

This quote first of all refers one back to the debate between Schleiermacher and Fichte on the question of the "determination of humanity" wherein Schleiermacher stresses that the *Dasein*, the particular determination of the I must be thought adequately before approaching the generality that "humanity" designates.

Furthermore, the 'producing' and 'formulating' (to be read as *Machen* or even *poiesis*) are for alchemists, not poets. And as for the "perilous threshold," on one side of the coin, the work of art, the literary work, is constantly becoming, it is neither finished nor unfinished it only *is*--a separate and absolute relation of self-relation. On the other side, there is the non-experience of death, the death that cannot happen to *me* opens onto this unrealizable and unrecognizable "I." In other words, because for Blanchot immediacy and absolutism go hand-in-hand, the only recourse left is to propose

practices that destabilize the very foundations of both immediacy and absolutism: namely, un-working of the subject, of the world, of the work.

1.6 Un-working anonymity: The ethics of *écriture*

Beyond Mallarmé, Blanchot targets Lévinas as another writer whose tendencies toward the absolute and immediacy have "grave consequences" (24). Lévinas defines language as contact or immediacy and Blanchot rebukes this stating that "the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of, for the relation itself...has burned up all at once in a night bereft of darkness. In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond--in this night God himself has annulled himself" (24). This other night of the disaster swallows ethical and ontological relations while rendering experience impossible. Against this manner of night, Blanchot places another night, "*Night; white, sleepless night--such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light*" (2). As such, Blanchot's disaster makes it so there can longer be an appeal to "any ethics, any experience, any practice whatever--save that of...an un-practice, or (perhaps) a word of writing" (26). This "(perhaps)" as passivity or course gestures to the "*peut-être*" of Mallarmé's "*Un Coup de dés*" where "nothing takes place but place itself, except perhaps...a constellation." By the transitive property the "word of writing" is that constellation. The "(perhaps)"²⁸ appears one other time in *Writing the Disaster*

²⁸ For an interesting intertextual adventure see also Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* p. 255, where he writes at great length about what happens "under the sign of the

when Blanchot notes that, "...whereas passivity is, perhaps (perhaps), that 'inhuman' part of man which, destitute of power, separated from unity, could never accommodate anything able to appear or show itself...passivity is posed or deposed as that which would interrupt our reason, our speech, our experience" (16). Writing, the perhaps, interrupts all that would fall under the sway of the One. Thus the writer, a *subjectivity without subject*, is wounded, opened, exposed, and "inhuman," or simply "man deprived of humanity, the supplement that supplies nothing" (30) because he approaches the night without darkness, the night that is incompatible with humanity.

And here, after having discovered the subject deprived by *écriture* of the power to say "I," we arrive at the inevitable question of selfhood and Otherness (a question that further invokes the work of Lévinas). In the second section of the essay "The Limit-Experience" (which incidentally is entitled "Humankind") in *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot develops this thought of the subject deprived of the power to say "I," and "deprived also of the world, we would be nothing other than this Other that we are not"²⁹ (130). This experience of strangeness that does not properly 'belong' to the writer wounded by writing, is the experience not only of the literary exigency but of *malheur*, sometimes translated as misfortune, but most often as

"Perhaps." During Redemption, Rosenzweig's vectors depart from Euclidean geometry in that they are now guided only by contingency, the Perhaps.

²⁹ I would be remiss not to mention that the conversation of humanity, the Other, affliction and attention bears upon the work of Robert Antelme which "not only testifies to the society of the German camps of World War II, [but] also leads us to an essential reflection." Crucially, Blanchot says what I am nevertheless trying to reproduce here which is: "But even without taking into account the time or the circumstances it portrays (while nonetheless taking them into account), what impels this work toward us is what remains of the question's interrogative force.

affliction (recall here the etymology of *désastre*). The writer who, through the literary experience, has been exhausted and whose "selfhood" is "gangrened and eaten away, altogether alienated" (*Writing the Disaster* 23) enters in *weakness* into a separate, an "other relation." Blanchot writes that weakness "be in man the inhuman part" (29) again, where "inhuman" is qualified as "man deprived of humanity, the supplement that supplies nothing" (30). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes Of the supplement that it "is maddening, because it is neither presence nor absence. No ontology can think its operation" (314). In *Spectres of Marx*, he proposes that since the supplement cannot be thought in terms of ontology it must be thought in 'hauntology.' As a ghostly spectre, the supplement leaves a trace that is not contingent upon its ever having been present, and it is this feature that gestures toward the supplement's strange temporality in that "one must recognize that there *is a supplement at the source*" (304). Blanchot posits "humanity" as a supplement and in so doing, removes his remarks on the Other from both the horizon of a "first philosophy" or ethics, thus distancing himself from Lévinas. The idea of humanity as supplement diverts not only the question of origin, but also the question of being. By situating the encounter with the other as immediate presence *and* radical alterity--the inaccessible-- Blanchot approaches the idea of the other on much different terms than Levinas. For Levinas, the other is almost like god, a face of the divine (the face of *l'autre*), while for Blanchot the Other (*autrui*) is language. Sartre and Lévinas make the distinction between *l'autre* (a specific other you can imagine) and *autrui* (the other in a generic sense). For Sartre, the very idea that existentialism is a humanism has to do with the

fact that it extends to *autrui*, while with *l'autre* it is conflictual and dialectical. Where we imagine a generality in *autrui*, we are fixed within the specificity of *l'autre*.

Lévinas writes against this directly by saying that when we are faced with the face of *l'autre* we are drawn out of our place, thrust out. In other words, the experience of otherness throws us out of the kind of *gesellschaft* ("society") that we are and places us in a different relationship which is the beginning of an ethical community founded on the call of the other to which we respond in (as a hostage of) responsibility.

This "call" of the other is for Blanchot, however, more closely related to the "cry of difference," the discussion of which began this chapter. This cry, addressed to no one and received by no one in particular, maintains itself not as "responsibility" as in Levinas, but as "affliction." Blanchot elaborates the sense of affliction when he writes in *Writing the Disaster* that, "when we are patient, it is always with respect to an infinite affliction which does not reach us in the present, but befalls by linking us to a past without memory. Others' affliction, and the other as affliction" (25).

Affliction and weakness, like writing, have to do with limit-experiences, the processes that evacuate the "I." Blanchot confirms this in *Infinite Conversation* in an essay on Simone Weil when he notes that "affliction makes us lose time and makes us lose the world. The individual who is afflicted falls beneath every class...Affliction is anonymous, impersonal, indifferent" (120). Where the call of the other for Lévinas would follow with the injunction "you must," the other as affliction induces the passive construction "it is necessary." Blanchot specifies in *Writing the Disaster* that the first formula is addressed to a *you* while the second "is an affirmation outside law,

without legality, an unnecessary necessity" (44). Responsibility forms and is formed by order, while affliction exceeds all that would order and enclose.

1.7 Materiality as Interruption

For Blanchot, the materiality of language and *désœuvrement* (worklessness) are inextricably tied together. It is the materiality of language that speaks the singularity of *écriture*, thus holding at bay any tendency toward totalization. In his essay "A Matter of Life and Death: Reading Materiality in Blanchot and de Man," Hector Kollias notes that "Blanchot mentions the words 'materiality,' 'material,' or 'matter' in his critical writings only a few times."³⁰ The citation usually offered comes from *Work of Fire* wherein Blanchot says that literary language, "observes the word 'cat' is not only the nonexistence of the cat, but nonexistence become *word*, that is, a perfectly determined and objective reality" (325). Rather than letting the word "cat" exist as a sign of something absent, the word exists as a thing itself. This is not to suggest that Blanchot's materiality deals with the physical realm like rhythm, weight, shape, matter like graphemes that appear on a page once blank. Blanchot's peculiar notion of materiality has to do also with the determined material effect of words. Blanchot says of the first negating force of literature that "even if it [literature] stopped here, it would have a strange and embarrassing job to do. But it does not stop here. It recalls the first name, which would be the murder Hegel speaks of. The

³⁰ This essay is located in *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, ed. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark: U of Delaware Press, 2005), 123-36.

'existant' was called out of its existence by the word, and it became being" (326). For Blanchot this points precisely to the 'torment' of language because the word is only the appearance of that which has disappeared and thus language is necessarily what it lacks: the circulation of worklessness and interruption. Yet this only applies to "literary language" as a language that is put in the service of representation or mimesis. This is why Blanchot is partial to Mallarmé and his conception of language as that which creates, or that which provides a space where nothing *takes place*.

Paul de Man, in his essay on Mallarmé in *Blindness and Insight*, writes that what propels the Mallarméan dialectic is the "underlying polarity between the world of nature and the activity of consciousness" (69). This dialectic "on which he had founded his poetic strategy" possesses an "illusory character" however that goes unnoticed until "*Un Coup de Dés*." This "philosophical blindness" is related to "a persistent negative movement that resides in being" from which "we try to protect ourselves against this negative power by inventing stratagems, ruses of language and of thought that hide an irrevocable fall" (ibid.). Of particular interest here are these very "ruses" that hid the irrevocable fall. To this let us add Derrida who, in *Writing in Difference*, likewise suggests the "sliding word" of Bataille as a word (a silence) that interrupts articulated language:

It [the sliding word] risks *making sense*, risks agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy, of Hegel, who is always right, as soon as one opens one's mouth in order to articulate meaning. In order to run this risk within language, in order to save that which does

not want to be saved--the possibility of play and of absolute risk--we must redouble language and have recourse to ruses, stratagems, to simulacra...To masks... (263)

Here the sliding words risks falling into meaning. In the case of de Man, who invokes Heidegger through the concept of *Verfall* (fall, deterioration), the question of language is addressed in ontological and theological registers. *Verfall* and its attendant designations of loss, negation, and separation points precisely to the "sin of language," the groundlessness of inauthentic speech. For Heidegger (as well as Herder), though this fall is inevitable, it is not the end of language. This "ruse of language" is not, however, to be confused with the "ruse of idealism" mentioned by Blanchot³¹, which is already a play on the Hegelian "ruse of reason." The "ruse of reason" references the terms in which Hegel attempts to explain the nature of history, where he affirms that everything occurs rationally. In Hegel, though he couches his system in terms of negativity, in a rational manner there is always something there that tends toward the positive, which is to say that via rationality, the negative is always the auxiliary of the positive. Unlike the ruse of reason, or for Blanchot the ruse of all Idealism, the ruse of language finds nothing that would head toward higher syntheses, it is the voice of interruption. The only absolute that language would tend toward is "absolute risk," that very risk, risk which is not "proper" to it, which it inherently turns from. Derrida, who understands metaphysics to be always

³¹ "...we are remembering the steps Hegel took: can the confusion--what is termed confusion--ever be dissipated otherwise than by a sleight of hand, the ruse (conveniently) called idealist...." (*Writing the Disaster* 68).

metaphysics of the proper, recognizes in the Blanchotian determination of writing a closure of metaphysics. As Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*, in order to arrive at a Hegelian "metaphysics of the proper" which seeks "self-presence, unity, self-identity, the proper," (66) both the trace of materiality, of writing, and irreducible difference, fall within the horizon of absolute knowledge under the sign of the Book. Writing, or *écriture*, as that which eschews this horizon undermines the concept of truth in its traditional philosophical determinations.

Derrida tries to redeem Mallarmé and his adventure to craft the Book when, in *Writing and Difference*, he argues that while Mallarmé recycles the language of philosophical idealism, this actually just produces a "simulacrum of Platonism or Hegelianism..."(235). Derrida sees in Mallarmé a resistance to meaning which he classifies as antilogocentric. In "Mimique" Derrida focuses on Mallarmé's work in terms of *blanc* (white, but also blank) in order to demonstrate that rather than a lack of semantic values, there is an inexhaustible surplus. The "blanks" become for Derrida the very possibility of textuality, and as his own reading of Mallarmé tends toward the total erasure of meaning, he departs from the "hermeneutic concept of *polysemy*" and arrives instead at *dissemination*. It is hardly surprising that the single dedication of Derrida's *Writing and Difference* reads:

*Le tout sans nouveauté
qu'un espacement
de la lecture*

Mallarmé,
Preface to *Un Coup de dés*

(the whole without novelty)

other than a spacing out
of reading)

Mallarmé is here declaring that the only new thing there is the spacing of the reading, or in other words, since the only "new" thing there is a different spacement of the text, new readings are there as well. In Derrida's appropriation of the preface, one is led back to the *blanc*, the basis of textuality that allows for a play and an indecision that will not be subsumed by signification and meaning. Or, as Blanchot writes of (nearly corporeal) absent meaning and not of the absence of meaning, "*The danger that the disaster acquire meaning instead of body*" (*Writing the Disaster* 41). The aporia that the *blanc* is for Derrida refers also to the space of play, an assemblage, a web, and an enfolding. In "Mimique" Mallarmé writes, "Hymn, pure set of the relationships between all things."³² Derrida relates *hymen* as membrane, or marriage, to *hymn*, *humnos* (a weave) and *huplos* (net, spider's web, a verbal text). Pure poetry as a hymn-hymen gathers together the Spirit and Nature in an ever divided union, the between place of writing.

What is posited here in the figure of the hymen is neither a mediate nor immediate relation between the word and the thing itself. This power of language is explored most explicitly in Blanchot and Derrida through the movement of naming.³³

³² "Hymne, pur ensemble des relations entre tout..." *Le Livre, instrument spirituel Oeuvres Complet*, p. 378.

³³ For Mallarmé, symbolism is naming: "*Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve*" [To name an object is to suppress three quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which is made to be divined bit by bit: to suggest it, that is the dream] (OC, 869). Yet this naming is not quite the violent pure idealization that it is in Hegel.

As is often noted, Derrida and Blanchot seem to rely on renditions of Hegel rather than Hegel himself when discussing language. For example, Dana Hollander writes in *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy*, that "Derrida's references to Hegel here are secondhand citations: one is to Jean Hyppolite's *Logic and Existence*; the other is to Maurice Blanchot's essay 'Literature and the Right to Death'" (83). Hollander goes on to quote a line of Blanchot's essay that Derrida in turn picks up: "Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)" (ibid). Following this line is a footnote that reads, "Blanchot in this turn refers the reader to Kojève's 'demonstration' in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* of 'how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder'" (ibid). In a word, there is no recourse to an "original" mention of language qua poetics within Hegel, because he simply does not discuss it. It is precisely the point that Hegel treats this language as transparent that unleashes this citational frenzy. In other words, while one can attempt to harvest a Hegelian theory of language from his work on aesthetics or a few passages from the *Science of Logic*,³⁴ what Hegel actually provides are theories of the sign, language qua language. For Blanchot and Mallarmé language is not a mere signifier, it cannot be reduced to a sign, rather it signals a materiality that is at the very heart of its un-working.

Rather, Mallarmé's writing produces what Derrida will affirm as traces or signature effects.

³⁴ See Derrida's "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology."

What is at stake here in part is the strange materiality of Mallarmé's poetics, especially as revealed in "*Un Coup de dés*." For Mallarmé it is precisely the materiality of poetic language that gives it the power to annihilate the world of objects. Materiality here refers to the contingency of poetic language on patterns and system. In *Crise de vers* he writes, "I say: a flower! And, beyond the oblivion to which my voice relegates any contour, as far as it is something other than known chalices, musically there arises, the idea itself and suave, the one absent from all bouquets." Mallarmé takes this further and in an interview says, "the world is intended to result in a beautiful book."³⁵ It is difficult not to read Blanchot where he says, "It is as if the reversal which Marx proposed with regard to Hegel--'to pass from language to life'--had in turn been reversed, and life, having been finished off (that is to say, fully realized), were restoring to a language without referent...the task of saying everything by saying itself endlessly" (*Writing the Disaster* 73). The difference between Blanchot and Mallarmé is that for Mallarmé even after the world and the author slips into the Work, the work remains, but for Blanchot, the materiality of *écriture* points to an un-working, to *désœuvrement*, to the very absence of the Book.

At stake in Blanchot's title "The Disappearance of Literature" is nothing less than an ethics and politics of *écriture* founded on un-working and disaster. By placing failure and disappearance at its very heart, Blanchot figures *écriture* as a modality of

³⁵ The original French reads: "*Le monde est fait pour aboutir à un beau livre*". For the complete script see: Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres Complètes*. "Interview with Huret" Paris: Gallimard, 1945. Print. p. 872.

disorientation that un-works totalizing concepts like Mallarmé's Book and the traditional determinations of Literature. The implications of such a disastrous un-working are not, however, bound only to discourses of philosophy and literature. Blanchot's powerful thought of *écriture* takes aim at the very foundations of modernity itself by un-working other totalizing notions such as the Individual, the State, and the Community.

Chapter Two

Literary Communism: A Technology of *Un-working*

"Love, technology, community."

-Dominic Pettman, *Love and Other Technologies*

"But reading--the un-working labor of the work-- is not absent from it [friendship], though it belongs at times to the vertigo of drunkenness."

-Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*

"What's valuable about [the tower of Babel] is its uselessness. Its uselessness sets it to work: as symbol, cipher, spur to the imagination, to productiveness. The first move for any strategy of cultural production, he'd say, must be to liberate things--objects, situations, systems--into uselessness."

-Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*

2.1 Introductory Remarks

The so-called "Community Debates" were launched on the French intellectual circuit in the late 1980s into the early 1990s, by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot through a series of "call and response" publications over the notion of community and its place in modern thought. In 1983, Nancy received a call for papers from the journal *Aléa* for a forthcoming issue for which publishers Jean-Christophe Bailly and Christian Bourgois had proposed the title "Community, number." Gripped by this title with "the perfectly executed ellipse contained in this statement--where prudence rivals elegance," Nancy wrote what would be published in 1983 as the article "*La Communauté désœuvrée*" (*The Inoperative Community*), and later in 1991

as an extended book of the same title. Months after the 1983 article came out, Maurice Blanchot penned an extended essay entitled "*La Communauté inavowable*" ("*The Unavowable Community*"). That Blanchot would respond was so striking to Nancy because it signaled that the motif of community "once put back into play a first time, could seize hold of people's interest," and it further showed "how necessary it was to attempt to redescribe this sphere of man or of being that was no longer borne by any communist or communitarian project."³⁶ The response from Blanchot, however, was not simply a pale intellectual engagement with Nancy's piece. Rather it was, as Nancy himself writes of it, "simultaneously an echo, an amplification and a riposte, a reservation and, for that matter, in some ways a reproach."³⁷

The correspondence between Nancy and Blanchot that attempted to unravel Western conceptions of community founded on the totalizing myths of unity, continuity, and immanence, and in so doing ignited the interest and passion of many. And over the decades that have elapsed since, a diverse host of writers and thinkers have participated to varying degrees with the dialogue initiated in 1983 by Nancy and Blanchot.³⁸ In so doing, these writers address issues of identity, multiplicity, and

³⁶ Nancy, Jean-Luc. "The Confronted Community". *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1. 2003, 30. This article was in fact written as a preface for the reprinted edition of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*. Beyond my dry rendition of the publication history, Nancy provides a gloss on the larger context of the motif of community in intellectual history as well as a hilarious aside about the reception of his work, which in Germany especially, elicits snide and incredulous comments regarding "the return of communism."

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ I will not delve into an intellectual genealogy here in a lengthy footnote. I will, however, mention in brief a few writers who have greatly contributed to the conversation started so many years ago: Giorgio Agamben *The Coming Community*

universality in order to suggest a new thinking of community that does not rely, much like the dominant Western political formation, on unity or on bizarre notions of “the common” that tend to fall back into identity politics and sovereign subjectivities. This chapter emerges not only as an attempt to understand these debates in their historical, political, and ontological registers, it also seeks to traverse these debates in order to determine the possibilities and perils of thinking community.

Intriguingly, both Nancy's *Inoperative Community* and Blanchot's *Unavowable Community* arrive, at the limit of their thought on community, at something ambiguously termed "*communisme d'écriture*," which is often rendered into English as "literary communism." As Blanchot made perfectly clear in *The Writing of the Disaster*, *écriture* has very little to do with the institution of "literature," and thus the translation of "literary communism" serves to highlight something inherent even in the French-language phrasing: the slippage in meaning that occurs during the deployment of textured and weathered phrases like "communism" or "literature." Both "literature" and "communism" become un-worked throughout Blanchot's writings. It is precisely the "equivocal character" of the phrase "literary communism" that made Nancy reject it after his initial usage.³⁹ As with the word "community," the words "literary" and "communism" must be treated as the

(1990); Gilber Simondon *L'individuation psychique et collective* (1989); Roberto Esposito *Communitas* (1998); Jacques Derrida *Voyous (Rogues)* (2003) and *The Politics of Friendship* (2000); Dominic Pettman *Love and Other Technologies* (2006).
³⁹ Nancy, J-L. *Community at Loose Ends*. "On Being-In-Common" ...that might conjure up the figure of a 'thinking community'...or of a romantic literary society fancying itself a republic (a republic of kings), or something like a 'literary communism.' (I recently used that expression; its equivocal character makes me reject it now. I am not speaking here of a community of letters...)" p. 10.

slippery terms that they are, which is to say we mustn't take "literary communism" at face value but rather let it pose itself to us as a question. This phrase, while it makes cameos in the critical scholarship⁴⁰ produced on "community" or "Blanchot" or "Jean-Luc Nancy," is often only casually dropped or referenced in a provocatively evasive manner. The task then, it seems, is to furnish a framework through which we can begin to reckon with this phrase. For that reason, I propose here tentatively and perhaps cryptically: literary communism is a technology of *détournement*, a technology of inoperativity, a technology through which community itself becomes un-worked.

2.2 *Détournement*

Both Nancy and Blanchot use Georges Bataille as their main interlocutor. They recognize in his work a certain fullness of thought with regard to the motif of community, and Bataille's writings thus present a theoretical legacy, which they befriend, sustain, challenge, and in some ways surpass. Chapter three of Nancy's *Inoperative Community* is titled "Literary Communism" and it is prefaced by a quote from Bataille's *La littérature et le Mal (Literature and Evil)* that reads, "Literature cannot assume the task of directing collective necessity" (71). From this quote we get whiffs of antidialectical (counterdialectical?) thought, and the idea that literature and poetry are rather modalities of disruption that are not tasked to "direct collective

⁴⁰ See Hasse, Ullrich & Large, William. *Maurice Blanchot* (2001). Also, Armstrong, Philip. *Reticulations* (2009). Likewise, J. Hillis Miller's *The Conflagration of Community* (2011) invokes the phrase haphazardly.

necessity." And yet, the use of Bataille here as preface is a bit misleading because it suggests it is perhaps through his views on literature that one would arrive at literary communism.

What is at stake here is not a petty discussion of attribution or citational practices. Rather, it is simply to draw attention to the fact that this phrase 'literary communism' has useful baggage that has been lost because it has not been addressed from the perspective of its original appearance among the writings of Guy Debord in the period right before the formation of the Situationist International. This context that, with its imbrication of cultural, aesthetic, political movements and general foment of thought, elucidates the complications of this so-called 'literary communism' also complicates the elucidation of it.

The over-looked progenitor of "literary communism" comes to us in "A User's Guide to Détournement"⁴¹ which appears in the May 1956 issue of *Les Lèvres Nues*. Written by Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, this brief yet foundational essay harbors a peculiar passage that reads:

Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding.* It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a *literary*

communism. (Emphasis and asterisk included in the original document.)

Debord and Wolman, who join Isidore Isou and Gabriel Pomerand in their Letterist group in 1951 and 1950, respectively, eventually split from the Letterists and instead create the Letterist International (*Internationale Lettriste*) in June of 1952. Many of the writings among the group that appear after this split develop ideas (like *dérive* and *détournement*) that come into their full power under the group known as The Situationist International (*Internationale Situationniste*), that Debord forms in 1957. The passage quoted above, which includes a quote from *The Communist Manifesto* itself, suggests that in the interest of possibly discovering what literary communism might entail, it is necessary to first explore the nexus where *proletkult*, communism, and its spectre seem to collide, which is to say: in *détournement*.

The French word "*détournement*" suggests both rerouting and hijacking, and indeed it becomes a technique for disruption, subversion, and displacement⁴². The technique itself is to simply gather elements or fragments of culture (text, music, poetry, art, advertisements, etc.) and then remix them in unexpected ways. The fallout of this practice, however, is much more complex. In *Guy Debord and the Situationist*

⁴² The issue of *détournement* is tied to, among other things, the notions of discourse and sign as they were taken up by structuralism in France in the 1960s. By looking at *détournement* through this lens, as well in its non-linguistic impulses as found in the Situationist project, not only will the idea of how this could be a "first step" toward a literary communism be made more clear, but the differing approaches that Blanchot and Nancy take to this same problematic will be stated. What is at stake here is meaning and its production and reproduction as systems of signification. In Asger Jorn's 1959 article "Detourned Painting" he writes, "Détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*."

International: Texts and Documents, Tom McDonough suggests that the tactic of *détournement* is so complex because it operates not just on a material level, but also on theoretical and semiotic ones. Ultimately then, it's not just a tongue-in-cheek remixing of materials, it is actually "diverting elements of affirmative bourgeois culture to revolutionary ends, of distorting received meanings" (xiii-xiv). In his later work Debord traces the development of modern society and he concludes that authentic social life has been replaced with its representation, or, as he writes in *Society of the Spectacle*, "All that was once directly lived has become representation" (12). He theorizes this modern predicament where "the commodity completes its colonization of social life" in terms of the "spectacle" which is an inverted image of society in which "passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity." *Détournement*, then, can be read as part of Debord's larger project to "wake up the spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images." Remixing cultural artifacts is not as easy as completely evacuating the "old meaning" of the selected pieces and then assigning a new meaning to the resulting ensemble. Rather, the technique of *détournement* requires careful consideration of the best ways detour, subvert or otherwise contest the value, meaning, and significance proposed in the original assemblage.

At first glance, *détournement* might seem perfectly in line with other forms of revolutionary sabotage that preceded it. A certain poetics of *détournement*, for example, can be found in the work of the Italian Futurists (1909-16) in the journal *Documents* that Bataille edits between 1929-31, and in the fragment as the "romantic

form," or the montage of Fassbinder and Döblin, or even in the "ready-made" of Marcel Duchamp (though the SI would argue against putting a moustache on the Mona Lisa as a form of *détournement*). However, when read against Debord's theory of the *dérive*, or especially his later articulations of "situations,"⁴³ it becomes clear that these practices of detouring are unlike other seemingly similar practices because they are, in the truest sense of the word, technologies.

The Greek word "*tekhnē*," from which we get our contemporary word "technology," means something close to "crafting" or "making." It is quite useful, then, to note that one of Debord's pieces on situations is titled "Report on the Construction of Situations." Whatever a situation may be, it definitely requires an element of construction, of craft, of *tekhnē*. It is crucial to understand that craft does not imply artifice, and a situation is not some artificially concocted moment. Rather, there is an element of chance at play, or, as Debord tells us, in "Preliminary Problems Constructing a Situation," a situation "is composed of gestures contained in a transitory decor. These gestures are the product of the decor and of themselves. And they in turn produce other forms of decor and other gestures" (43). The "transitory decor" required for situations obviously comes about from the passage of time and the

⁴³ The efficacy of situations as viable theoretico-aesthetic weapons comes very much into question by many; a point well captured by Astrid Vicas who states that the "switch to prerehearsed Marxian stances on culture and representation" that occurred when Debord followed the group *Socialisme ou barbarie* in the 1960s "ended up watering down the Situationists' more original contributions during their Letterist stage." Vicas here suggests that "prerehearsed Marxian stances" form their own sort of spectacle, the spell of which Debord and others have fallen under. To what extent this is true or not falls beyond the purview of this chapter, but it's interesting to think about.

confluence of bodies, ideas, things etc. in space/time. But, and here is where situations get dicey, situations require an element of constructedness in order to fully realize the aleatory. In "Report on the Construction of Situations" Debord writes that a person's life is "a succession of fortuitous situations, and even if none of them is exactly the same as another the immense majority of them are so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a definite impression of sameness."⁴⁴ In place of undifferentiated moments (sameness), situations are singular, unrepeatable instants. These technologies (situations) allow not only chance encounters between bodies, or between bodies and world, they make possible "transitory decor" in which things happen, in which cultural weapons "in service of the class struggle" are forged.

To return to a truncated version of the quote above about literary communism, Debord and Wolman write that "the cheapness of the products" of *détournement* "is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding.*" And that *détournement* "is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a *literary communism*." The function of the phrase "Chinese walls of understanding" is twofold. First, it conjures up Marx and the Communist Manifesto, and second, in this conjuring *détournement* is performed. In the Manifesto it is written that "the cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it [the Bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls..."⁴⁵ The context of this line in the manifesto concerns the flow of capital in a global economy and the modes of

⁴⁴ Debord's "Report on the Construction of Situations" is located in *Situationist International Anthology*. Knabb ed., p. 42.

⁴⁵ Marxists.org

exploitation that this gives way to. Additionally, the mention of Chinese walls in the Manifesto (1848) references the Opium War (1839-42) between China and Britain in which China was forced to open their closed-economy to British imports such as opium.⁴⁶ It is clear to see here that Debord and Wolman are enacting a bit of *détournement* between the commodity and a detoured artwork. But what does it mean that the heavy artillery of *détournement* can batter down Chinese walls, or in other words, open up closed markets? And what are we supposed to make of the qualifier ("of understanding") suggested by Debord and Wolman for "Chinese walls"? In French, "of understanding" is rendered as "*de compréhension*" which points us toward comprehension as understanding and as concept. The etymology of *compréhension* (Latin *com* + *prehendere* [to grasp]) suggests this alliance between seizure, concept, and understanding, where the movement from apprehension (what is perceived) violently is corralled through the operation of comprehension. In this case, *détournement* is the technique that exposes this operation through an un-working, through a loosening of the bond between signified and signifier. Thus viewed, it seems that literary communism takes shape not as an equitable sharing out of revolutionary art ("heavy artillery"), nor as a commune that would produce such works. Rather, "the proletarian artistic education" that constitutes the "first steps toward literary communism" consists in the crafting (*tekhnē*) of techniques

⁴⁶ I can't help but to mention that after the great stock exchange crash of 1929, the term Chinese Wall became quite common place in financial institutions. It refers to a barrier placed between individuals and/or groups within that institution to avoid conflict of interest. This kind of Chinese Wall is somewhat given over to the aleatory in that it could transform from transaction to transaction, thus reformulating constituencies on a case by case basis.

(technologies) such as *détournement*, that detour, upset, and otherwise un-work the normal order of things.

2.3 Technology

Literary communism is a technology. Bernard Stiegler, one of the best contemporary theorists of technology, defines technics as "the pursuit of life by means other than life." Already then, the definition of technology here seems to expand beyond FaceBook, twitter, CCTV, and other "machines that go beep."⁴⁷ If we were to rework Stiegler's statement a little, "life" could be rendered as *physis* and "things other than life" could be *tekhne*. In this reformulation, *physis* is pursued through anything that is prosthetic to *physis*, which is to say, the raw unorganized material of the world. Stiegler goes on to write that the human finds itself engaged with these "things other than life," these prosthetics, in a transductive way. In other words, technics does not merely consist of raw material that the human works upon thus crafting a tool for use by the human. Rather, through a process of exteriorization, the human and raw material engage in a co-constitutive relationship. Stiegler uses the example of the flint and the human cortex to illustrate how the flint, as technical support of the human and not just a tool, also works upon the cerebral capacities of the human. The human crafts the flint as the flint writes the cortex--and as such, I prefer to think of it in terms of flint and cortex(t). The human and the material world

⁴⁷ Dominic Pettman coins this adorable formulation in his 2006 book *Love, and Other Technologies*. In all seriousness though, "machines that go beep" perfectly capture the modern conception of technology that seeks to reduce *tekhne* to materials (gadgets) thus ignoring the theoretical stakes of this reduction.

are engaged in a process of co-inscription, a becoming in which each writes the other. At stake for Stiegler is how layers of inscription are also layers of memory, and essentially, of time. The materialization and spatialization of psychical flows and individual time coalescences into a fund (the "epiphylogenetic layer") of technical supports that in turn form collective time. In this way, technology is where the "I" comes to meet the "We" but only if we understand that the "I" was, primordially so, never an isolated being because it was always pursuing life through "means other than life," i.e. through technology.

In *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stiegler takes up the question of originary technics as well as the myths of brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus. At stake in his inquiry is nothing less than the reformulation of the relation of being to technics, which in its modern (metaphysical and Heideggerian) register is one of ends and means. Heidegger emerges as Stiegler's main interlocutor because while he is one of the greatest thinkers of technics, Heidegger also remains negligent and forgetful of originary technics and, in a conflation of inauthenticity and technicity, relegates technics to the side of equipment, concern, means and use. In *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, Stiegler suggests that tools and instruments go beyond Heidegger's sense of equipment (industrial objects for Stiegler) because tools can have an "instrumental vocation that is not merely utilitarian" (34). Like the sculptor's chisel or the musician's instrument "the tool utilizes [*utilise*] the world, to which it is nevertheless also a mode of access; the instrument *instructs* [*instruits*] this world, *makes* the world" (35). One of the major

points Stiegler makes in *Time and Technics, I* is that in our contemporary technical reality we must achieve sustainable hypomnesic milieux by reworking the notion of exteriorization and tertiary retention in order to see that the "technical object cannot be a utensil" (22). Rather, the human and the technical object are co-constitutive. At the heart of what Stiegler finds troubling and in need of revision is Heidegger's regression to origin, so in place of origin Stiegler suggests this notion of technical co-constitutivity that poses technics not as origin, but crucially as a fault or *lack* of origin (*défaut d'origine*). Bound up in this *défaut d'origine* is necessarily a *défaut de la fin* (lack of an end) and a *défaut de qualité* (lack of quality), which means that language, invention, politics etc. come by way of a technical dynamic from *défaut*. Stiegler furthers this thought of technics as originary through his reading of the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus. From the Platonic dialogue Protagoras, we read that both Prometheus and Epimetheus were charged by the gods with the task of equipping creatures with powers, and yet Epimetheus begged his brother to let him take charge of the distribution himself with the clause that Prometheus could review it after it had been done. As Epimetheus was nearing the end of his task, he noticed that he had used up all the available powers and had forgotten the humans. Prometheus, in turn, steals the gift of arts and fire to give to the humans. This is the double-fault, first Epimetheus's act of forgetting, and then to compensate Prometheus performs an act of theft. Of these faults, Stiegler writes, "Humans only occur through their being forgotten; they only appear in disappearing" (188). Not only does this present an originary bond between forgetting, mortality and technicity, but it also shows there

was no manner of a "fall," just a fault--the only origin of the human was a de-fault of origin. Of this origin of man Stiegler writes that "the being of humankind is to be outside itself. In order to make up for the fault of Epimetheus, Prometheus gives humans the present of putting them outside themselves" (193). In other words the gift of Prometheus, fire, is prosthetic and comes from the outside of the humans yet is constitutive of the humans and thus assembles them as the community of default.

The default of origin that constitutes this community, this *We*, at the same time constitutes *philia* and gives the idiocy of singularity. In *Acting Out*, Stiegler proposes a model that is unwittingly relevant to the community debates. This model forsakes the fraternal bond for a therapeutic economy of care, of contribution, and essentially of *philia*. In this way, *philia* as a relation to oneself and to the world, emerges as a modality of idiomaticity in that "insofar as I belong to a group, I am, within the group, a singularity that nourishes the group in alterity" (77). Idiomaticity as expressed in Stiegler's figure of *philia* un-works traditional determinations of the "collective" as an aggregate of "individuals" because it presents an assemblage of singularities that has alterity at the heart of their grouping.

In situating the human and technology as co-producers Stiegler is actually suggesting that the human in fact only accedes to its status *as* human by way of its relation to the organized matter which is only organized matter by way of its relation to the human. The implication of primordial technicity not only de-centers the human, but it calls into question that very categorization, while at the same time dismantling a discourse of "the fall" that runs from Plato through Rousseau and into Heidegger

(with many stops along the way!). What "the fall" marks is any disastrous falling-outside-of the human body into prosthesis, exteriority, and essentially, into technology. For Plato, inscription and writing present a dangerous falling-out-of-the-body that wrecks memory and authenticity. In addition to this, and particularly relevant to Stiegler's critique of the discourse of the fall, is the material, bodily, deadening and deadly "turn" technology takes in modernity. In fact, if we look at the trajectory of technology from the nineteenth century onward, one is nearly convinced of the validity of "the fall" narrative.

In 1810 the first tin can is invented, by 1814 the first steam locomotive, and by 1829 we see the typewriter. Already we have the first inklings of what Stiegler will refer to as the "pharmacological" nature of technology, which is to say that it is both curative and poisonous. In the case of the tin can, for example, it was at first a wonderful thing to be able to preserve food for extended periods of time (especially for battalions of troops during extended periods of warfare), yet later of course Bisphenol A (BPA), which lines cans, was revealed to be a cancer causing agent. Beyond this, though, technological advances like 1837's telegraph and 1876's telephone begin to collapse space and homogenize time. Our experience of the world becomes hemmed in by abstract and arbitrary systems related to these advances in technology. It is around this time that, inspired by the themes of "alienation" and the loss of knowledge wrought by machinery (the knowledge of the worker passes into the machine itself), Marx writes the Communist Manifesto (1848). Technology traverses scientific, economic and political registers and by the 1860s, crosses firmly

into the realm of culture. The 1860s were a particularly fruitful time for artists and thinkers working through these emergent technologies and we get Dostoyevsky writing on the Crystal Palace and Baudelaire's flâneur appears on the streets, and later Benjamin will recuperate the Arcades of 19th-century Paris as a defining experience of modernity. Moreover, we have Marx again with the first volumes of *Das Kapital* in the 1860s writing about alienation and the pitfalls of mass production. Most importantly, we get the U.S. Civil War, which can be regarded as the marker of the boom in warfare technology. Everyone likes to talk about WWI, but really it was the Civil War that first encountered the new era in which flesh meets metal, and out-moded weapons and tactical advances were rudely greeted by modernity. Following WWI and the "new death" wrought by technologically accelerated warfare (gas, tanks, submarines, machine guns, planes) we read about both the devastation and fascination brought on by this new death. Painter/combatant Beckmann writes that "It was so marvelous here that even the savagery of the mass killing, of its insistent rhythms continually ringing in my ears, cannot spoil my pleasure." And writers like Cather, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Faulkner will all, in their own way, conceal, refigure, and most importantly, aestheticize the violent deaths they witnessed. This movement of concealment, refiguration and aestheticization of death follows Europe as she falls further into the barbarism of WWII.

The Nazis, the Soviets, and British secret agents begin experimenting with technologies that exhibited a bizarre combination of techne and physis, like for example exploding rats and bombing bats.

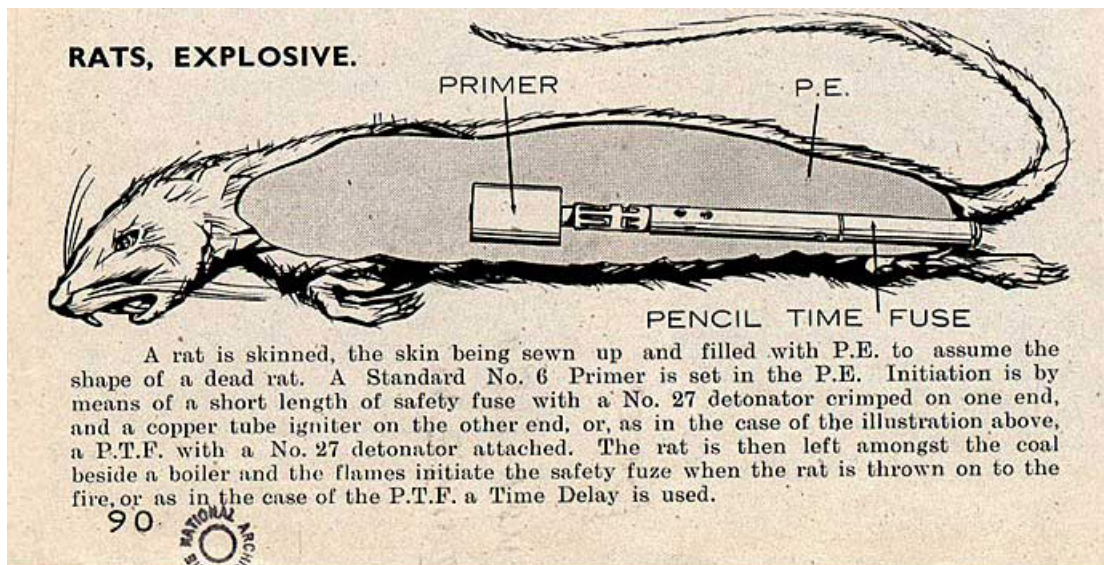


Figure 1 "Rats, Explosive" from the United Kingdom's National Archive

These rat bombs were developed by the British for use against the Germans. The idea was that a rat would be killed and a small amount of explosives would be placed inside its carcass, and then the carcass could be placed in boiler rooms. It was hoped that the stoker would shovel the seemingly run-of-the-mill rat into the boiler, thus igniting it and causing a massive explosion. In a similar fusion of flesh and warfare technology, the United States developed bat bombs to be used against the Japanese. These Mexican free-tail bats would be able to access hard to reach Japanese cities, and their incendiary devices would quite effectively destroy the industrial cities of Osaka Bay.



Figure 2 Bat Bomb from United Kingdom National Archive

It is of little wonder, then, that in 1944 we have Adorno and Horkheimer perpetuating the narrative of the fall in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* where they write that "what human beings seek to learn from nature (*physis*) is how to use *tekhnē* to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts" (2). And Heidegger will echo this bleak sentiment in his statement that "Everywhere in Europe, man remains unfree and chained to technology" and "technology advances itself the more it threatens to slip from human control" (4). Getting bats to carry technology is suggestive of this attempt to master *physis*. But more to the point, the British exploding rats in particular signal the underlying assumption in these critiques, namely, that there is a difference between *physis* and *tekhnē* the rats, after all, attempt to make use of this division by "hiding" technology where it would not "naturally" be found, i.e. within the flesh or body of a rat. And rather than resolving the binary that would place *physis* on one end and *tekhnē* on the other, Stiegler exacerbates those very poles until one isn't even sure to what they refer. The purpose of doing this is to rescue (from modern thought) what

is at the heart of technology (and possibility the heart of community as well):
relationality.

In *Love and Other Technologies*, Pettman espouses a Stieglerian position when he writes that by thinking of technology "as a set of relations" we can dismantle the "anthropological machine" that, with its "daily discourse of belonging...calculates who is human and who is not, what is of value and what is not, what matters and what does not" (198). And it precisely this "daily discourse of belonging" that returns us to our topic at hand: community. I propose that both Dominic Pettman and Stiegler enter into the "community debates" with Nancy and Blanchot through their attention to technology. At play here between Pettman and Stiegler is a thinking that attempts to draw attention to the fact that the human (or at least whatever that term is commonly accepted as designating) is an always-already fissured and networked being. To speak of the "self" or the "individual" or even the "human" is already to unwittingly participate in the "discourse of belonging" which is necessarily a discourse predicated not just on exclusion, but on coded existences which make possible this (ex)(in)clusion movement. This is why Pettman is so taken by Agamben's call for an "inessential commonality" in *The Coming Community*. In a rather lengthy quote that gets right to the heart of what is at stake in Agamben's articulation of *whateverbeing*, Pettman writes that Agamben's argument suggests the need for a "fundamental revision of what it means to be a person" which means that we need "to declare that uncoded existence precedes the modern circumscriptions of citizenship, family, religion, ethnicity, and other blood-soaked calls to an essential identity" (7). While

this seems obvious in the wake of Darfur, Rwanda, the Balkan Wars of the 90s, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict of the 2000s, and other countless political and social upheavals, Pettman steers this argument into slightly more troubled and dangerous waters when he writes that "According to such a perspective, even the United Nations' alleged mandate of defending 'human rights' colludes with the tyranny of essentialist discourses, smuggling all sorts of assumptions about human nature across the disrupted borders of the planet" (ibid).

Postmodern and postcolonial thought had already made us suspicious of such formulations as "human rights" but here Pettman nails with great specificity the problem: "colluding" and "smuggling." The strong language of deception used here is not to be taken lightly. Having been duped by its commitment to "liberty, equality, and fraternity," modern thought has failed to consider the implications underwriting modern systems of governance and general being-together, which is to say, it has failed to adequately think essentialist discourses. "Surely," one might think to oneself "rights for humans is a good thing!". And here again we arrive at another stumbling block: the human. Sack of flesh though it may be, it participates in the world and with other sacks through technologies. Pettman will propose one such technology under the name love, Jean-Luc Nancy proposes another under the name community and Blanchot proposes language and ultimately literature as yet another. The question that remains is in what ways do love, community, and literature bespeak the "uncoded existence" mentioned by Agamben? To what extent is the un-working work suggested by these technologies merely an abstraction?

In the preface to *Love and Other Technologies*, Pettman states simply: "Love, technology, community." In much the same way that Jean-Christophe Bailly's title "Community, number" gripped Nancy, this thoughtful expression from Pettman grips me. Pettman of course does not leave this line to steep in its simplicity and complexity, as he naturally goes on in the next line to clarify that through this formulation he is suggesting "that these three terms in fact designate the same thing, or at least the same movement--specifically, a movement toward the other" (xiii). Elsewhere he writes that "technology is, above all, a set of relations" (198). With the addition of "movement" and "relationality" to our understanding of technology, it becomes clear what socio-political tasks are bound up in this thought. To think technology, or in Pettman's case to think love, is already to think community and the conditions of its coming.

Eros, technics, communitas. We have discussed already how Stiegler helps us to redefine for ourselves the parameters of *technics*, and how this redefinition completely decenters modern thought. Pettman rides this force of decentering and uses it to declare that "love *is* a technology" (17). At stake for Pettman is nothing less than an assault on all contemporary discourses concerning singularity, universality, commonality, identity, otherness etc. By refracting the thematic of love and the lover's discourse through a "technological drift" (xvi), Pettman is able to systematically disorient our readings of the most celebrated writers on this topic. From Levinas, to Lacan, Luhmann to Girard, or even Heidegger to Nabokov to Kubrick: after Pettman, we can never read the same way again. Curiously, Pettman

not only explicitly states that "language...qualifies as a form of technics" (17), but he implicitly tends toward the literary (and filmic) as "proof texts" for his theories and yet he never fully pursues the line of thought suggested by Blanchot's "literary communism." Between my insistence that literary communism is a technology and Pettman's work on love (which is itself an echo of Stiegler's work on technology), Blanchot's mysterious literary communism has been rendered slightly less opaque. Literary communism clearly has something to do with relationality, that much was signaled by the use of "communism." And yet, that very usage also obscures the mode of relationality implied by Blanchot and tempered by "literary" because while communism is suggestive of communing Blanchot's determination of literariness is suggestive rather of un-working (*désœuvrement*). In this way, the "communism" of "literary communism" is closer to *comme-unisme* ("as-one-ism", "like-one"), where the *comme* (the prospect of likeness) of *comme-unisme* already differentiates and this offers an opening to the thought of the common.

In his article "The Compearance" Nancy pursues the thought of likeness and *comme-unisme* through poet Michel Deguy, who himself goes on to quote Isidore Ducasse. From within these nested quotes emerges a notion of community that attempts to move away from the traditional determinations of "a people" and by extension, a "nation." Of particular interest is the figure of the "we" that Nancy suggests one can find in Ducasse because this "we," assembled by the practice of poetry, resonates to some extent with Blanchot's literary communism. The lines of Deguy that Nancy highlights are these:

And we who are neither Jew nor German, but similar to them 'feature for feature,' by a communal feature not visible in the visible, held in thought as the *as* of analogy, entrusted to the art which makes it work (*qui le figure en oeuvre*) we hope to make a *we* (as in the wish of Ducasse that 'poetry should be made by all')" so thus that only perhaps there would be 'neither man nor woman, neither Jew nor Gentile,' but one *as* the other. (394)

Ducasse, who went by the pseudonym of Comte de Lautréamont, and who wrote *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*, greatly influenced Debord and Wolman's articulation of *détournement*. In "A User's Guide," they announce that Lautréamont's slogans "Plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it" and "poetry must be made by all" are poorly understood by both those who laud him and those who would view his use of *détournement* throughout *Maldororo* and *Poésies* as despicable. However, Nancy reading Deguy reading Ducasse provides a path. Deguy's poetry deals with the "thing itself" (*la chose même*) or the "thing in itself" of philosophical discourse. Much like Derrida the discussion of sameness (*mêmeté*), the resemblance between self and self, the *as* of *as such*, gives way to difference and *différance*. In this way, "...the *as* or *like* extends to the resemblance, general difference, liberty-equality-fraternity, of the *as-one*, the "as-one-ism" [*comme-unisme*, i.e. communism] that he [Deguy] applies to 'us'..."¹ which, as cited above, is the 'we' who are neither German nor Jew, the 'we' who by *un trait comme-unaire*, the 'we' who would be one *as* the

other return to the same only by differing indefinitely from each other--as plurality, as the "common measure of the incommensurable commensurability of everything."

In "Deguy l'An Neuf!," Nancy notes that Deguy's "poem is not organized according to the organicity of a work" and "poetic 'making' is...not a 'producing' but a proposition." In other words, the poetic proposition is to acknowledge the thing itself in passing. Through poetry, and specifically Deguy's poetics of *l'être-comme*, the character of a thing enters into similitude with the transcendental from the ontic realm. "*Poiesis*" from the Greek means to make, and it poetry, in making, accomplishes itself and something each time. It is in within the infinite play of signs that we understand Lautréamont's injunction "Plagiarism is necessary" and, it is through Deguy's "we" who is *as* "tous" in the maxim: "La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un." Poetry cannot be "made by one," it cannot issue forth from *comme-unisme*, unless, and in the sense that Lautréamont uses plagiarism, the difference that arises out of repetition is not the difference between two things, distributive or false difference, but difference in itself. The *comme* of *comme-unisme* already differentiates and this offers an opening to the thought of the common--and of communism. Just as in Ducasse's maxim that "Poetry must be made by all," where each and every one, and essentially one *as* the other, stands in contrast to "the one"--not a particular "one" but rather the totality or substance that would subsume singularities. This joining together that the *as* suggests implies a sharing and a spacing by the very prospect of likeness or similitude.

2.4 Un-Working (*désœuvrement*)

Having approached Blanchot's oeuvre first in English and then, only much later, in the original French, I am all too aware of the frustration and unease translators might feel when confronted with the task of translating his writing. Part of Blanchot's project is precisely to create for his readers this feeling of discomfort or alienation within their "own" or "native" language in order to declare an assault on meaning and significance. The effect of this is multiplied when moving Blanchot from one language into another. In particular, translators meditate and provide lengthy footnotes on this curious word "*désœuvrement*" before rendering it into English as "un-working," "inoperativity," "idleness," "worklessness," or even "uneventfulness."⁴⁸ There is a kind of beauty to the proliferation of footnotes and phrase-suggestions: the gap between the word and that which is being described has always been Blanchot's favorite playground, the playground of literature itself. And yet, Blanchot's usage of the word is very purposeful and demands a kind of associative reading practice across different texts within his oeuvre, and this mode of reading Blanchot becomes nearly impossible with the abundance of different renderings in the English language. After arriving back at the French through the multiplicity of alternate phrasings, the word *désœuvrement* has only gained in texture and layers with its non-equivalence to itself. Since Nancy's article surfaced in 1983 bearing the title "*La Communauté désœuvrée*," the tack of most commentators has been to go directly for Hegel's "labor of the concept" and as assume that *dés-œuvrée*

⁴⁸ Ann Smock translates *désœuvrement* as "inertia" and *desœuvre* as "idled."

provides some sort of anti-Hegelian un-working. This is not that far off, in fact, but it does cut out the obvious interlocutor, Blanchot. This has not been lost on Pierre Joris or on Christopher Fynsk. Joris, who translates Blanchot's *Unavowable Community*, provides in his preface an archaeological excavation of *désœuvrement* and its derivate *désœuvré* in the work of Blanchot. In a footnote of his *Inoperative Community* Foreword, Christopher Fynsk elaborates the sometimes problematic semantic constellation surrounding "*désœuvrement*":

...I cannot help but remain slightly puzzled by Nancy's use of a term like '*désœuvré*' or '*désœuvrement*,' terms with a distinctly Blanchotian cast. One can see how Blanchot would develop the term in relation to his meditation on death and the neutral, and in stressing the community's *undoing*, one can see how he might call upon his notion of the quotidian. But to my knowledge, Nancy never explores these senses of *désœuvrement* in any of his writings. I would have to say that whether we understand the term in a Blanchotian sense or even in a more everyday sense, 'idleness' is not part of Nancy's understanding of community (and if I may say so, the term is profoundly foreign to his way of being in the world). Nancy is driven to write because the community (or its concept) has grown idle, and if he tries to turn *désœuvrement* into an active trait of the community he is trying to think, we must surely understand this 'activity' more as an un-working

(a praxis that is not a production: the key term is 'work') than an undoing. (154)

I agree with Fynsk both that Nancy utilizes a word with a distinctly Blanchotian cast, and that it's unclear to what end. The one comment that I would add to Fynsk's comment is simply that "idleness" in Blanchot has very little to do with normal determinations of the word and that in fact Fynsk's suggestion of "un-working"⁴⁹ is actually already inherent in the Blanchotian *désœuvrement*. Fynsk suggests that the Blanchotian cloak implies idleness and that Nancy's conception of community in no way participates in the idea of "idleness" or "passivity" etc., and this accusation of idleness is understandable. Yet the thrust of *désœuvrée* becomes more clear through the consideration of both Blanchot and Bataille's attempts to escape dialectics. Rather than denoting passivity, it is an endless labor that never reaches closure, or the perfection of a work. For Blanchot who is suspicious of movements, dialectical ones specifically, he tends to hold things in the "between," in fragment or suspension as interruption. For Bataille, "inoperative" has a certain relationship to "unemployed" or the surplus of nothing (*surplus de néant*), which cannot be integrated in any dialectical moves--this is for him workless negativity. Basically, Fynsk is correct in

⁴⁹ Pierre Joris, the translator for Blanchot's *Unavowable Community*, writes in his preface (1987) that he decided to use "the un-working" at the suggestion of Christopher Fynsk.

spotting the Blanchotian tinge and in suggesting un-working, but he's incorrect in not finding this "praxis that is not a production" within the writings of Blanchot.⁵⁰

Let us return briefly then to Pierre Joris who notes in his translator's preface that *désœuvrement* and its derivatives appear in Blanchot's fiction "as far back as the 1952 book *Celui Qui Ne M'Accompagnait Pas*" as a play on the core-word *oeuvre*, and the "full philosophical and literary complexity of the term is worked out later, most fully in the 1969 essay 'The Absence of the Book'" (*Unavowable Community* xxiii). What Joris leads us to is this: The word *désœuvrement* has "at its core the concept of the 'oeuvre' (work, body of work, artistic work, etc.)" (xxii). Readers of Mallarmé, would spot here immediately an anti-Hegelianism that hijacks *Aufhebung* and renders it actively inert, workingly un-worked, through modalities of "betweenness," "incompletion," "interruption" and "suspension." Likewise, particularly theological-minded readers would notice a detour around the Christian narrative of the productive community, which revolves around the redemptive nature of death. I would only add to this archaeology the critical peppering of the term that takes place in Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre* (1980):⁵¹ what *désœuvrement*

⁵⁰ This is hardly a critique of Fynsk, whom I admire. In fact, I laud the fact that he arrived at "un-working" on his own without going through Blanchot (although Blanchot had already been saying as much, though in slightly different ways).

⁵¹ The term *désœuvrement* appears seven times: "...le désœuvrement du neutre" (29); "Écrire pour que le négatif et le neutre, dans leur différence toujours recouverte, dans la plus dangereuse des proximités, se rappellent l'un à l'autre leur spécificité, l'u travaillant, l'autre désœuvrant" (65); "...le laissant désœuvré" (80); "...mais comment ne pas entendre dans le redoublement le répétitif qui désœuvre, évide, désidentifie, retirant l'altérité (le pouvoir aliénant) à l'autre..." (91); "...*alèthéia*. L'oubli inopérant, à jamais désœuvré..." (135); "...le non-travail du désœuvrement" (182); "oeuvre du désœuvrement" (182). All citations have been taken from: Blanchot, Maurice.

designates for Nancy as "inoperativity," is truly for Blanchot "disaster without end," literary communism, or, in other words, "To write is to produce *désœuvrement*" (*Unavowable Community* xxiii).

When Nancy makes use of *désœuvrement*, it seems to be perfectly in line with this Blanchotian trajectory. Nancy himself declares as much when he writes that "the community cannot come within the province of the work [*l'oeuvre*]. One does not produce it...[this] would presuppose that the common being, as such, is objectifiable and producible (in places, persons, edifices, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subject)" and therefore "the community takes place of necessity in what Blanchot has called the un-working" (xxiv-xxv). This is why the force of his thought is directed, from the outset, against "communism" or whatever it is that this emblem has come to designate. Nancy writes that under communism or other forms of immanentism that "human beings [are] defined as producers...the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work" (*Infinite Conversation* 2). In fact, I think Blanchot would go along with Nancy on this assault on the Absolute with the Absolute defined as "Idea, History, Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art." Nancy, of course, launches this assault through a demanding meditation on ecstasy and finitude, both of which point to what he terms "compearance" (*com-parait*). For Nancy, singular beings only appear insofar as they *com-parait*, or appear together. This fits with his other ontological determinations of being-with or being-in-

L'Écriture du désastre. Paris: Gallimard, 1980. Print.

common, or being-together: "there is no singular being without another singular being" (27). Exposure (finitude as ex-posure) and communication (the between) are bound up in this ontology that seeks to say "you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I" (29). And while Nancy's use of *désœuvrement* leads him to this framework that successfully avoids the Cartesian subject, the Rousseauian society, and the communist agenda, his inattention to the literary foundations and implications of inoperativity lead him to his critical error: fraternity.

2.5 "Chatter about fraternity", or, *La comparution vs. écriture*

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy brazenly designates community as "Fraternity" when he writes: "In the motto of the Republic, fraternity designates community: the model of the family and of love" (9). This is his most forceful assertion regarding what can be interchanged with "community." Elsewhere in the text he merely uses paraentheticals to intimate "community" as a qualification or addition to certain formulations. For example, he writes "the relation (the community) is...nothing other than what it undoes..." and "ecstasy (community) happens *to* the singular being" (7). In these lines, the nature of community is supplementary, yet when it comes to fraternity he says "fraternity designates community." This does not seem to perturb Blanchot, who thrice recycles this vocabulary of fraternity when discussing models of love, friendship and other chanceful, effervescent events of explosive communication (26; 30; 32). For Blanchot, "fraternity" seems to be perfectly in line with his determination of

"friendship" as "camaraderie without preliminaries" which is "vehiculated by the requirement of being there, not as a person or subject, but as the demonstrators of a movement fraternally anonymous and impersonal" (32). In Blanchot, writing (*écriture*) and especially literary communism have always had elements of anonymity and impersonality, and it seems that the addition of "fraternity" as a qualifier is nullified by the very thing it would seek to qualify. Derrida, however, cannot let this go.

In at least three texts⁵² Derrida questions why one would retain this model or suggestion of brotherly-love that cannot be evacuated of religious, phallic, familial, ancestral, mythical etc. connotations. And indeed, in *Experience of Freedom*, Nancy does try and perform a bit of *détournement* on the term by qualifying it left and right:

It is also fraternity, if fraternity, it must be said, aside from every sentimental connotation (but not aside from the possibilities of the passion it conceals, from hatred to glory by way of honor, love, competition for excellence, etc.), is not the relation of those who unify a common family, but the relation of those whose *Parent*, or common substance, *has disappeared*, delivering them to their freedom and equality. Such are, in Freud, the sons of the inhuman Father of the horde: becoming brother in the *sharing* of his *dismembered* body. Fraternity is equality in the sharing of the incommensurable. (72)

⁵² See Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, *On Touching--Jean-Luc Nancy*, and *Rogues*

Unfortunately, Nancy's attempt to assemble a fraternity through the consumption of the flesh of the father fails to impress Derrida who writes:

My concern here stems not simply from my regret that Nancy did not put more quotation marks, in either letter or in spirit, around the word *fraternity*...Nor that he risks over-Christianizing the wonderful concept of 'sharing' at the very heart of his thought. No, I am simply concerned that when it comes to politics and democracy this fraternalism might follow at least the temptation of a genealogical descent back to autochthony, to the nation, if not actually to nature, in any case, to birth, to *naissance*. (*Rogues* 61)

It seems that Derrida will follow Nancy when Nancy writes that we cannot understand "communism" in the normal way, and we cannot think of "literature" in the normal way, and we certainly cannot think of "community" as it is traditionally used either, but here when he's appealing to "fraternity" the hijacking stops short. The crux of Nancy's whole take on community is where *naissance* meets "the clinamen" or, where *la comparution* (the compearance) of singular beings gives way to a being-together that "is the sharing of the incommensurable" (72). This is why Blanchot writes that in his solitude, Bataille realizes more than ever that community is not meant to heal his "malady" or "protect him from it" but to expose him to it as the "heart of fraternity: the heart or the law" (26). Community consists in nothing other than the sharing of exposure, the exposure that we ourselves are. Put otherwise, "singular beings themselves are constituted by sharing" (25), but the question

remains, why must this be fraternity?⁵³ Taking from Derrida only this idea that *naissance* ("by birth" discourse) leads right back to operations that Nancy and Blanchot try to render inoperative (sovereignty, citizenship, democracy), the larger issue that emerges for me is around the modality of *comparution*. Derived from fraternity ("Fraternity is equality in the sharing of the incommensurable."), and entrenched in ontology, *comparution*, the cornerstone of Nancy's thinking on community, is incapable of accounting for Blanchot's literary communism. In a very basic way, we arrive here at an incompatible discourse between ontology⁵⁴ (*being-in-common*) and primordial technicity (literary communism), which under the sign of *tekhne* requires an amount of crafting, doing, making. The reliance of fraternity on being and on birth discounts figures of community that would assemble around other modalities.

As invested as Nancy is in interrupting myth and interrupting the scene of myth it is suspicious that his fraternal horde remains untouched and untroubled. Derrida spots this immunity too when he writes that "must not the interruption of this mythical scene also, by some supplement to the question concerning what transpires

⁵³ To some extent this could be a reference to the German romantics. The Schlegel brothers (August Wilhelm and Friedrich) start the journal *Athenaeum*, and as Lacoue-Labarthe points out, this journal *is* German romanticism. In the introductory "Notice" the brothers write of "the fraternization of knowledge and talents" and Lacoue-Labarthe remarks of this that "in the last analysis, fraternization means collective writing" (*The Literary Absolute* 9). Curiously, the heavy female presence withing the Jena circle (Dorothea Schlegel here is representative), confuses the phallogentrism inherent in its own figuration.

⁵⁴ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. "And so, Being "itself" comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will--in any case this is what I am trying to argue--as community" (6).

'before the law', at the mythical moment of the father's murder (from Freud to Kafka), reach and affect the figure of the brothers" (*Politics of Friendship* 48)? With Nancy's refusal to forsake brotherly love, Derrida (and Steigler as well) are forced to reckon with the question that Derrida poses simply as "Who are the others of brothers, the nonbrothers" (*Rogues* 63)? Derrida thematizes these nonbrothers as the rogue, "the other, always being pointed out by the respectable, right-thinking bourgeois, the representative of moral or juridical order. The voyou is always a second or third person, always designated in the second or third person" (64). Stiegler, as mentioned above, finds the work-around in his figure of the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus by demonstrating that through fault, the community arises as a community of default, of lack. In this way, Stiegler is able to situate the *philia* against the model of brotherly love and devotion. In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida takes to task the "original Greek model" of friendship, *philia*, but this is quite a different model than the one Stiegler is proposing under the same name. In fact, what Stiegler calls *philia*, Blanchot calls literary communism.

2.6 Literary Communism and deproletarianization

Stiegler's notion of *philia* is very much bound up in his work on (de)proletarianization and political economy. Stiegler recognizes in our post-global society what he calls a state of generalized proletarianization, a state in which there is a *loss* of knowledge on the part of individuals and collectives in terms of both *savoir-faire* (know-how) and *savoir-vivre* (knowing-how-to-live). The very question of

(de)proletarianization is itself underwritten by the problematic of the pharmakon, and specifically of hypomnemata *as* pharmaka. Pharmakon is that which is at the same time both poison and antidote, and hypomnemata are artificial memory supports that, as Stiegler will show, take shape through the coupling of the human and matter where the human exteriorizes knowledge into and by way of matter. The hypomnemata that form from this exteriorization are pharmacological insofar as they promote equally the definitive loss and the infinite preservation of *savoirs* (knowledges), which is to say the possibility of (de-)proletarianization. As Stiegler makes quite clear, proletarianization is much older and goes much deeper than the Industrial Revolution, and the process of (de-)proletarianization begins with this exteriorization of knowledge by way of technical supports, or in other words, the process of (de-)proletarianization begins with *technics*. In approaching the relation between society and the technical system as the very question of the pharmakon, Stiegler perhaps treads where Jacques Derrida did not. One reads in Stiegler the moment wherein the pharmacological nature of the process of technical exteriorization, and of the hypomnemata or the artificial memory supports themselves, carries the logic of the pharmakon to the realm of the ethical. In this way, Stiegler's work allows ethical questions to eschew sites of transcendental judgment as well as ethical absolutes in order to instead become questions of art--of *ars* and of *tekhnē*. The pharmakon possesses the dual-characteristics of being both poisonous and curative, yet through a *system of care* the practice of hypomnemata can fall on the side of curative, with de-proletarianization as a result.

This *system of care* is an economy of contribution (a.k.a. political economy) that thrives on commerce and exchange, but only insofar as commerce and exchange are understood in terms beyond those designated in a commercial register. In other words, the sociotherapeutic political economy is no longer an economy of subsistence in which exchange is strictly related to capital. Rather, when political economy is also (curative) libidinal economy and spiritual economy, commerce is an exchange of *savoirs*, circulation of conversation, and "all forms of fruitful social relation" (*For a New Critique of Political Economy* 16). Human commerce is both geophysical and psychosocial so to that end Stiegler's thought necessarily tends toward the interfacing of the technical, psychic, and social systems. The question of the proletarianized consumer emerges from within this interfacing precisely because both the arts of living and the arts of knowledge are destroyed when the consumer's libidinal energy has been exploited by industrialized mnemotechnical systems of retention. The destruction, moreover, changes both the libidinal economy and the economy as a whole "to the point where the former is destroyed just like the latter, and the former by the latter" (25). The pharmacological critique of the libidinal economy then consists in showing that while libidinal economy can help build the social as *philia*, (as contribution, care and love), libidinal economy as capitalism (as market economy) can also disintegrate the social by rendering relations as mere relations of consumption. At stake here are processes of transindividuation as well as psychic and collective individuation. Stiegler finds that in the epoch of reticulated capitalism, grammatization can either create long circuits "that is, *accumulate libidinal energy by*

intensifying individuation" or it can provoke short-circuits "that is, disindividuation" (42). Thus, in *The Decadence of Industrial Democracy*, Stiegler issues a call for a new order, a new order that not only imagines new models of industrial development and of cultural practices, but one that aims to reconstruct "*a libidinal economy (a philia)*, without which no city, or democracy, or industrial economy, or spiritual economy, is possible" (15). This new order is founded on a default of origin and the community of default, i.e. the community that Blanchot invokes in his call for literary communism.

In a letter to Jean-Paul Sartre on December 2, 1960, Blanchot teases out the relationship between anonymity and community when he writes that *Comité* (the journal that published the work of the *Comité d'action étudiants-écrivains* [the Students-Writers action committee]) would only publish submissions under the cloak of anonymity. He goes on to explain further: "The texts will be anonymous. Anonymity aims not to remove the author's right of possession over what he writes nor even to make him impersonal by freeing him from himself (his history, his person, the suspicion attached to his particularity), but to constitute collective or plural speech: a communism of writing."⁵⁵ This communism of writing, as Nancy rightfully points out, has nothing to do with a group of writers who "produce" texts, or who produces themselves in and through their "work" and "works." Nancy, who really does understand most aspects of Blanchot's *désœuvrement*, says rather that literature is the "voice of interruption" and literary communism is "something that

⁵⁵ Lignes 11 (1990): 219-220.

would be the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature"(26). But we can no longer hear "sharing" without also hearing "fraternally" and "ontologically."

A decade after "Inoperative Community" came out as an article, Nancy published it in a book (of the same title) alongside various other chapters, one of which is entitled "Literary Communism." Here he beautifully captures the relationship between un-working (*désœuvrement*) and literature when he writes that in the suspension that literature is, "it is here...that the communionless communism of singular beings takes place. Here takes place the *taking place*...of community: not in a work that would bring it to completion, even less in itself as work (family, people, church, nation, party, literature, philosophy), but in the un-working and as the un-working of all its works" (72). It remains frustrating then, that with such great insight into the operativity of inoperativity, Nancy misses the point. Blanchot explicitly states that "to write is to produce *désœuvrement*." There is no productive power in compearing, in popping into being-in-common, in mere relationality. Un-working doesn't take place (active, indirect, passive), it is produced, unproductively granted, but produced nonetheless. If Nancy views Blanchot's response to his "Inoperative Community" as "simultaneously an echo, an amplification and a riposte, a reservation and, for that matter, in some ways a reproach," it is because of this neglectfulness toward the explosive communication that can take place only in the streets, and only through a spontaneous solidarity. Blanchot says this much in the vignette "May '68" (located in *The Unavowable Community*) where he writes that "without project" and out in the streets "calculating intelligence expressed itself less than a nearly pure

effervescence" and "because of that one could have the presentiment that with authority overthrown or rather, neglected, a sort of *communism* declared itself, a communism of a kind never experience before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or claim as its own" (30). So while Nancy might treat literature and literary communism as a theme that runs adjacent to his ontological (and fraternal) agenda, it is never bracketed in such a way for Blanchot. Nancy boldly claims that by taking up the use of the emblem (word) "communism," Blanchot was "able to communicate with a thinking of art, of literature, and of thought itself--other figures or other exigencies of ecstasy" but he was not "truly able to communicate...with a thinking of community" (*Infinite Conversation* 7). So essentially, Nancy sees Blanchot's use of literary communism as strictly another example of a figure of ecstasy (among many), and while he does put this notion to decent use, he undermines *écriture*, dulls the power of literature, and thus has put *désœuvrement* to questionable use in his own work.

In the end, "literary communism" is another way for Blanchot to talk about *écriture* and to talk about disaster. It is a technology of inoperativity by which writers and readers are un-workingly exposed, rendered anonymous, and exiled (from both themselves and the work). This technology is "literary" insofar as it concerns practices of writing, of *écriture*, that with aggressive passivity challenge the foundations of meaning, significance and politics in modernity. And it is a "communism" insofar as it assumes effervescent (indeterminate) and spontaneous (unstructured) solidarity as its groundless ground. In "Communism without Heirs"

Blanchot writes that "Communism is what excludes (and excludes itself from) any already constituted community,"⁵⁶ and thus solidarity acts as a way to account for the indeterminate and transitory sparks of literary communism that occur as "the incommensurable communication where everything that is public--and then everything is public--ties us to the other (others) through what is closest to us" (*Friendship* 149). The relation to the other as other through the modality of solidarity is ultimately what Jean-Luc Nancy was unable to think, and it is precisely communism as solidarity and not as communion that Blanchot proposes as the heart of *écriture*.

Blanchot's use of the word "solidarity" or course calls forth Marxist usages of the same word, though the nature of Blanchot's solidarity is of course quite different. In *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea*, Steiner Stjernø notes that Marx himself rarely used the word "solidarity" but the term was common several political projects in nineteenth-century Europe. Stjernø goes on to draw out from the writings of Marx an idea of solidarity that is two-pronged political and social. Marx invokes bonds of brotherhood and fraternity frequently, which points to a solidarity of the *Gemeinschaft* (community) vein. But the political form of solidarity, the one that the Marxist left popularizes, refers not just to a unity among the proletariat, but a unity formed with a common struggle against industry as its condition and law. Not only is the "unity" of the international working class not the mode of revolution imagined by Blanchot, but certainly not a unity that proceeds from a struggle, the perfect

⁵⁶ Blanchot's "Communism without Heirs" is located in *Political Writings, 1953-1993* ed. Kevin Hart. New York: Fordham U Press, 2010. p 93.

resolution of conflict, a unity imbued with meaning and the purpose of achieving individual freedom. This solidarity is a fragile union made among autonomous individuals. Rather, for Blanchot, when the community is avowed, in this instance through solidarity, it is no longer community. This is the kind of solidarity that happens, it is not made or crafted. Without common identity and without common ends, solidarity happens, and it assembles the ideal community of literary communication.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, Tayeb Salih depicts an effervescent community that assembles according to the principles of solidarity as set forth by Blanchot. The unnamed narrator journeys in a lorry along a desert road to Khartoum. The road is repeatedly described as "monotonous" (87), and "endless" (89; 92) and "without limit" (89). Overhead "there is not a single cloud heralding hope in this hot sky which is like the lid of Hell-fire" (87), the effect of which makes the sky a dome encasing the road and desert landscape in the unity of a stifling snowglobe. The movement of the lorry along the road that rhythmically yet monotonously "rises and falls" (87) is captured in the repetitious depictions of the road. And yet the sun, "merciless" (91) and "indefatigable" (89), subsumes and nullifies this movement, it is the "lid of Hell-fire" (87) that seals the jar-desert in its wholeness. As day gives way into night, the lorry stops to rest. And the driver of the lorry "who had kept silent the whole day" (93) raises his voice in song with "a sweet, rippling voice that you can't imagine is his" (ibid). Soon, without warning and without purpose, other voices join that of the driver and "every vehicle, coming or going, would stop and join us until

we became a huge caravanserai of more than a hundred men who ate and drank and prayed and go drunk" (94). But this fraternal gathering of male travelers gives way to another configuration:

The light and the clamour attracted the bedouin from the neighboring wadi ravines and foothills, both men and women, people whom you would not see by day, when it was just as if they melted away under the light of the sun. A vast concourse of people gathered. (95)

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot describes reading as "the un-working labor of the work" that "belongs at times to the vertigo of drunkenness" (23). And in the passage quoted above Salih gives us this same drunkenness, the same un-working labor of singing, dancing and "clamour," here understood as communication, circulation, a "crying out" that provokes solidarity.

The explosive cries and ex-clamations that open the innumerable gathering are not injunctions, imperatives or cries for help. They are merely the calls that take place in the absence of the sweltering sun (that stabilizing star), voices that in the darkness open the whole of the gathering according to the nature of integrality, which in any case surpasses the whole. Suddenly and without project the feast is "without a meaning, a mere desperate act that had sprung up impromptu" (95) and thus it fulfills one condition of Blanchot's solidarity. Another condition is met in the unavowable nature of the feast that renounces itself "like the small whirlwinds that rise up in the desert and then die" (ibid). The community of communication that gathers suddenly and according to the principles of solidarity should, as Blanchot writes, "have no part

in any kind of duration" (32). And much like the explosive community Blanchot is describing in the pages of *The Unavowable Community*, no one had to order the desert gathering to disband because "dispersal happened out of the same necessity that had gathered the innumerable" (ibid). The gathering Salih writes about disperses at dawn as "the engines revved up and the headlights veered away from the place which moments before had been an intimate stage and which now returned to its former state--a tract of desert" (95).

Chapter Three

Like a Signal, Dispersed: *Écriture* and Technology in Tom McCarthy

*"There is a crack in every thing,
That's how the light gets in."*

-Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" (1993)

3.1 McCarthy in the Wake of Blanchot's Disaster

British novelist Tom McCarthy was recently (as well as backhandedly and jokingly)⁵⁷ hailed as *the* writer of our generation and he's best known for his books *Remainder*, *C*, and *Men in Space*. In an interview published in Bookninja magazine, Tom McCarthy states that "Literature has to remain frustrating"⁵⁸ and, if we listen to the critics (which is never advisable) it seems he has taken this task of frustration quite seriously indeed. A *New York Times* review of Tom McCarthy's *C* is perhaps even more revealing than its author, Michiko Kakutani, knows. In a rather disparaging tone, Kakutani writes of *C* that it:

neither addresses larger questions about love and innocence and evil,
nor unfolds into a searching examination of the consequences of art.

⁵⁷ In an article entitled "Tom McCarthy is no longer a well kept secret," Christopher Bollen states that "there is a vicious rumor circulating that Tom McCarthy is *the* writer of our generation." This article is located in *Interview Magazine*. Accessed May 24, 2014.

⁵⁸ Please see Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer's "Interview with Tom McCarthy." *Bookninja Magazine*. Accessed May 4, 2014.

Worse, 'C' fails to engage the reader on the most basic level as narrative or text.⁵⁹

Kakutani's critique shifts from thematic concerns to the very mechanics of McCarthy's writing by stating that while the novel has "carefully manufactured symbols and leitmotifs," these unfortunately "prove to be more gratuitous than revealing...the most persuasive and memorable parts of 'C' are not coded, intertextual ones, but simple, straightforward passages of description." In another review, Ellen Wernecke, likewise lauds McCarthy's attempts at straightforwardness and condemns the infiltration of a technologically-inflected writing style in an otherwise nice description of 20th-century Britain:

Without a compelling reason to follow its subject's development, or any clear evidence that he does develop (beyond the unerring passage of time), *C* resembles a series of snapshots of 20th-century Britain, rich in individual detail, but lacking a connecting thread. Like the coded classified ads Sophie spots in the newspaper and shows her annoyed brother, the significance is lost in the mechanics.⁶⁰

Kakutani's critique bemoans the loss of riffs on universal themes ("love and innocence and evil"), and suggests that McCarthy would be better off trading "technology references" which "seem meant to remind the reader of Thomas Pynchon" but "feels both derivative and contrived," for "description." As if

⁵⁹ Kakutani, Michiko. "War Intrudes on a Man's Bucolic Idyll." *The New York Times*, September 5, 2010, accessed May 4, 2014.

⁶⁰ Wernecke, Ellen. "Tom McCarthy: *C*" Book Review. September 9, 2010. Accessed May 4, 2014.

description itself were not a technology! Kakutani's sentiments are echoed in Wernecke's critique where "the significance" of *C* "is lost in the mechanics," but at least Wernecke elevates the criticism to how the text operates. In other words, where Kakutani reads references to technology, Wernecke reads references to technology that are delivered technologically, the result of which is the erosion of significance and the loss of a "connecting thread," or a larger unified and unifying meaning.

All in all, reviews on McCarthy do point to the current ailing state of literature, but not quite in the expected way. It's not that McCarthy is a "bad" author or that *C* is somehow a "hoax" or worse yet (in Kakutani's view) "derivative," rather these reviewers have unquestioningly and unwittingly taken up the legacy of the modernist project and for whatever reason, have decided to make that problematic legacy the measure by which McCarthy is to be judged. McCarthy himself declares, "I'm not trying to be a modernist, but to navigate the wreckage of that project."⁶¹ McCarthy's use of the term "wreckage" in fact indicates that the modernist project has suffered some sort of dismantling disaster that has strewn it around in bits and pieces. The modernist project, built by "connective threads," a fullness of meaning and a roundness of first person narrative meets its disastrous end in *C*. If we take *C* as the pinnacle of "navigating the wreckage" of the modernist project, it seems clear that this includes but is not limited to the following: the loss of significance in the face of the mechanical aspects of a text, the abeyance of traditional modes of narrative, and the cultivation of frustration and disorientation in readers through the indeterminacy

⁶¹ McCarthy, Tom. Interview. *The Observer*, 2010.

and overabundance of meaning, and many more techniques. In setting for his own task the navigation of the wreckage of the modernist project, McCarthy shares a critical framework with Maurice Blanchot who cultivates disaster in the face of the modern project. Together, they explore the stakes of disaster-writing: Blanchot proposes that writing wrecks the very foundation of modernity and disturbs (or un-works) the pillars of identity, selfhood, meaning, and significance, and McCarthy continues to write in the wake Blanchot's disaster.

In *Writing of the Disaster (L'Écriture du désastre)*, Blanchot places certain political and ethical exigencies on the experience of *écriture* (writing) by suggesting that it has the power of disaster, or, the power to de-star (*dés-astre*). Just as actual stars are fixed points (*les fixes*) that provide navigation, the stars to which Blanchot refers are fixed concepts, ideas, or constructs that have emerged out of modernity as bearers of orientation: God, Nation, History, and so on. *Écriture*, pitted against this sidereal sky, has at its heart the force of dis-orientation, de-starification, and essentially, disaster. The etymology of the French "*dés-astre*" reaches back to the fifteenth century when it crossed over from the Italian *disastro*, a term that emerged with the practice of astrology. *Astro*, however, was not used to reference stars, but rather it refers to a heavenly body that exercises benevolent influence, so when it moved into French it came to be rendered as fortune (*astre*) and misfortune (*désastre*). When Blanchot invokes the term "disaster," he emphasizes the "*astre*" aspect as "star" in order to invoke Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dés*, which is written in the shape of constellations, but he also is playfully alluding to the transformation

that occurs when you go from a state of "benevolent influence" (say, fate or fortune) to a "maleficent" one where *fortuna* reigns no more.

Beyond the pole stars of God, Nation and History, Blanchot sees the sidereal sky (as that which embodies constellations, modernity, calculation, reason, and logic) as inseparable from the atrocities to which it bears witness in the twentieth century: totalitarianism, fascism, communism, colonialism and others. In Blanchot's estimation, the literary space has the privileged position from which it is able to issue challenges against traditional formulations that have pervaded modernity and laid the foundation for catastrophe. Namely, *écriture* is a practice that confronts the attested sovereignty of the individual, the idea that the human is the reference, measure and purpose of all things, and the notion that the human (both in its individual and collective determinations) is an autonomous, closed and unified totality. Readers and writers (i.e. those who practice *écriture*) are rendered by it un-worked and stripped bare of abstractions rooted in identity, subjectivity, and otherwise "oriented" modern notions of selfhood and community.

Where Blanchot takes up the figure of the un-worked reader/writer, McCarthy pursues what he calls the "dividual" (as opposed to the liberal humanist "Individual"). In either case, the traditional parameters of the human are being explored so that new articulations of the relationship between human and world, and human and other humans, might emerge. For Blanchot, this new articulation is the ethico-political assemblage of literary communism. For McCarthy, this new articulation involves taking seriously how the ultimate border-regions of the human come into play

through death, sex, technology, and language. Central to each author's accounts of the "Individual come un-done" is death. For Blanchot, the literary space, like death, is figured as inescapable but also inaccessible, in other words it is the event that befalls us all yet no one experiences it; and for McCarthy, death loses this relation of non-relation to the human and instead enters the world through its avatar, technology.

Throughout *Remainder* and *C*, McCarthy pushes up against the limits of language and of representation through the thematics of technology and death in such a way that he eventually seems to be articulating something that remains latent within Blanchot's *oeuvre*: that literature itself is a technology, and every encounter with it is an encounter with death, an encounter with "the Outside," an effacement of identity and sovereign Selfness. In this way, literature, technology and death are drawn into proximity as operations that un-work the notion of the human as Individual along with all of its attendant philosophical baggage like sovereignty, ipseity, or autonomy. The human is instead figured like literature, which is to say, like a transmission that emerges from static to signal, and fades back again. This is not to be taken, however, as something close to the process expressed by German Idealism wherein the human emerges out of a shared nothingness and returns to that unity. Neither is it to be thought of as a form of nihilism, for while McCarthy does tend in that direction he stops short. Rather, the movement between static and signal is to be thought more along the lines of what Deleuze attempts to think in *Difference and Repetition*: difference-in-itself. The thought of difference-in-itself dismantles the structure that would keep difference as a co-component of sameness, i.e. pure difference does not

compare the difference between things, nor does it assume a pre-existing unity, or that somehow there is unity behind or beyond difference. Difference-in-itself reveals the world as a complex of singularities, of signals, that are constantly engaged in processes of individuation that point not only to the fact that nothing coincides with itself, but that there is no "itself" with which to coincide. These propositions will be elaborated in the pages that follow, and the stakes of these claims will become clearer through an exposition on McCarthy's *Remainder* and *C*.

3.2 Writing as Technology

In *C*, McCarthy offers us a wonderful moment that encapsulates much of the project of Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre*. The main character, Serge, is excavating a tomb in a Qufti village in Egypt near the Saqqara escarpment when he finds scarabs. The scarabs, it is explained to him, contain the "secrets of the heart" which is to say that "in New Kingdom burials, the deceased's unreported deeds, clandestine history and guilty conscience were confided to these things" (290). The scarabs have hieroglyphic phrases carved into their underside, and these are spells meant to censor these secrets, or, as Serge questions with wonderment, "so the scarab *withholds* the vital information even as it records it? Even as it *prints*?" The practice of scarabic-writing, a writing that withholds or effaces even as it writes, is articulated against the very assumptions of modernity with regard to the perceived fungibility of language. McCarthy and Blanchot recognize precisely that "vitality" is always withheld from language and writing. Blanchot will pursue this thought as the general problem of

representation, where language represents but can neither capture nor deliver life. McCarthy, however, will extend the questions posed to us by representation to the idea of prosthetics, or essentially, the idea of technology.

What representation and technology have in common is that they refer to the same problematic: mediation, or the contact points between "human" and world. The word "technology" comes from the Greek word *tekhnē*, which means skill, art, craft and essentially some sort of "doing" or "making." When thinkers like Rousseau, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Heidegger take up the question of technology and its place in modernity, *tekhnē* gets placed into opposition with *physis*, and the relationship between the organic and the technical is rendered as strictly antagonistic, sometimes by virtue of the human attempting to master nature and thus also attaining mastery over other humans, and sometimes (and this is Heidegger's view) because humans themselves have become chained to technology. Not only is the *physis/tekhnē* binary just one more opposition in the long line of oppositions bequeathed to us by metaphysics (inside/outside, nature/culture, dynamic/mechanic, etc.), but it's quite a dangerous thought as well because often it leads to discourses that value nostalgia and promote a "return" to an authentic way of life far removed from our contemporary experiences. Rousseau, for example, longingly speaks of a human of pure *physis* (pure nature) who is uncontaminated by artifice, and Heidegger stresses the inauthentic nature of our lives and yearns for a "return."

However, Bernard Stiegler (one of the greatest thinkers of technology) will go to great lengths to show that in fact, there is no such thing as a human of pure *physis*,

and that it is in fact our relationship with such "artifice" that constitutes us *qua* human; there is no "before" technology, and there is no authentic way of life to which we would return. Against the ideas that technology is the tool for the human, or that the human is chained to technology, Stielger instead proposes that the human and the world are engaged in a relationship of co-constitutivity, whereby as the human works on the world, the world works on the human as well. The lithic stone tool flint is quite instructive in this regard. Stiegler uses this example of the flint and the human cortex to illustrate how the flint, as technical support of the human and not just a tool, it also works upon the cerebral capacities of the human. It's not that human produces in its mind the idea of a tool and then finds the material out of which to achieve this ideal form, rather, the human approaches the unorganized raw material, and this material has an affective relationship with the human's cortex. Vying one off the other, the cortex and the flint emerge through the singular process of co-constitutivity. This idea of co-constitutivity does several things. First, by showing the human as primordially permeable and mediated, which is to say as affecting and affected by the world, Stiegler's account of co-constitutivity is also able to redefine the parameters of "technology," so that it is not merely a tool that must be put to use. Next, it dismantles a certain narrative of "the fall" that runs from Plato through to Rousseau and Heidegger. This narrative sees "the fall" as always a fall outside the human body and into technology, into prosthesis, and into exteriorization of all kinds, including language. It is important to dismantle this narrative because otherwise language (and *écriture* along with it) is merely a tool that humans use, rather than practices that

shape the world and the things and people in it. Stiegler, McCarthy and Blanchot would probably agree that writing in fact has techno-ontological implications. Finally, co-constitutivity, because it un-works the human and because it un-works traditional discourses on technology, has far-reaching implications for figurations of community, and especially those founded on the foundationless practice (or technology) of writing.

Crucial to the flint/cortex example, is that there takes place a materialization and spatialization of the psychical flows of the human. Eventually, these exteriorized flows will merge and coalesce into a fund, a shared tertiary memory, i.e. our world. And thus, technology is the way in which the "I" meets the "We." It's easier to see from this perspective of technology as the nexus between the "I" and the "We" that technology necessarily includes language. Language is artificial, it is exterior, it is a technology by which we engage with the world and with others in the world--it assembles us. We, as always already technical beings, exceed the traditional biological and anthropological determinations of the human, as well as the qualities exemplified by modernity's traditional, liberal, humanist "Individual." Against this kernel-like Individual, autonomous and closed-up upon itself, we instead become McCarthy's "dividuals": fractured, fissured subjects who, opened by technologies, are always-already networked.

The notion of the "dividual" plays itself out in two distinct ways in the pages of *C* and *Remainder*. In *Remainder*, the main character is the stubborn Individual who, in the very first line of the book, is traumatized by technology falling out of the

sky and fracturing him (both his head, but also his subjecthood). This accident leads him to a feeling of "inauthenticity" and he spends the rest of the book searching for moments of authenticity, moments often tempered by death. In these moments, the unnamed man is truly Heideggerian in that he feels death is when one achieves authenticity. Blanchot, however, has shown us that this is not quite the case as no one can ever utter: "I am dead." For Blanchot, death is the experience which everyone undergoes and yet no one experiences, but the unnamed man challenges this by reenacting deaths of others in order to get a "hit" of authenticity. In this way, *Remainder* delivers a tale of a man who is not only uncomfortable with his status as a dividual, but who is also unconvinced that there is no more authentic way to exist, short of living while dead, I suppose. The relationship between authenticity, technology and death becomes much more complicated in *C. Serge*, through his fascination and love for telecommunications technologies and other warfare technology, is shown to also be a dividual. And yet, unlike the unnamed man of *Remainder*, *Serge* allows the readers to think of a world, our world in fact (and the one which Stiegler has exposed for us), where inauthenticity is what is most authentic to humans.

3.3 Dividuals: Subjects of *écriture*, subjects of death

McCarthy, a self-confessed "Blanchotian," uses much of Blanchot's thought on literature as his own literary backdrop, but he does so in a way that pays particular attention to his own interests, namely technology, sex and death. In order to fully

understand what it is that McCarthy draws from Blanchot, we must revisit Blanchot's famous question "how is literature possible?" and the position he grants language in general. He writes of two slopes [*deux versants*] of literature: One is where language murders the thing itself in its attempt to possess it, and this, in the words of Simon Critchley makes "Adam the first serial killer."⁶² The second is, in the manner of Ponge, to let the "orange orange," or in other words to try and "take the side of things and try and evoke their nocturnal, mineral quality."⁶³ In other words, one slope murders the vital object by furnishing a representation, and the other slope attains a sort of fullness of object through the prosthetic representation. Blanchot doesn't suggest that literature adheres to one slope or the other, but rather that it is precisely within the tension between these two slopes that literature moves. Literature, for Blanchot and McCarthy after him, is precisely this inadequacy and failure, and Robbe-Grillet understood precisely this. In "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet", Roland Barthes writes, "For Robbe-Grillet, the function of language is not a raid on the absolute, a violation of the abyss, but a progression of names over a surface...a patina of tentative identifications..."⁶⁴ The prosthetic quality of language makes meaning and significance always tentative, indeterminate, questionable. Blanchot's writings move away from Robbe-Grillet's attention to things, and instead

⁶² Critchley, Simon. *Very Little, Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 53.

⁶³ *International Necronautical Society's New York Declaration on Inauthenticity*. September 25, 2007.

⁶⁴ Barthes, Roland. "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet." *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: "Jealousy" & "In the Labyrinth."* New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965, 12.

gives language as the "patina" that covers but never touches the secret of being: singularity. This secret of being is a "secret" because it cannot be said, nor written, it cannot be disclosed or delivered in language. As Blanchot writes rather cryptically in a fragment from *The Writing of the Disastrer*: "He says nothing. He will henceforth live in the secret. He will weep no more" (72). Crucially, Blanchot will decide that the secret of being can be approached only through the experience of *écriture* and the experience of dying, but not in the expected way one might think. In the same way that *écriture* gestures toward this secret, that is to say, in the same way that the writer, bound to language, "is not free to be alone without expressing that he is alone" (*Faux Pas* 10), the self who would enter into death is effaced in the process of dying. The figure of this writer, made anonymous by way of impersonal language, finds itself echoed in the anonymity of the one who dies. In this way, death and *écriture* are linked in Blanchot as operations that point to the "secret" of being not because they affirm selfhood or identity, but precisely because they divest the writer and the one who dies of these markers.

McCarthy will reformulate this movement of divestment in his own work through the figure of the "dividual" but also through the thematics of transmission and remix. Essentially, he suggests that humans, as technical beings, as those who are prosthetically adorned, in fact have a manner of "inauthenticity" as what is most authentic. Where the poor unnamed man in *Remainder* laments "My undoing: matter" (17), Serge of *C* feels at ease being an undone dividual. In other words, where *Remainder* delivers a narrator who, in being at odds with the material world,

experiences sensations of loss, looping, confusing, disorientation and inauthenticity as highly traumatic, *C* delivers a narrative that tirelessly posits looping, prosthesis, illegibility and meaninglessness as that which, in their impropriety, is most proper, most authentic. In McCarthy, death, writing and technology become responsible for the articulation of the *dividual*, a de-centering of the subject who writes and the subject who dies. Another way to phrase this is simply that death, writing and technology are for McCarthy what *l'écriture du désastre* is for Blanchot: our modern disorientation.

In 1999, McCarthy, along with his friend Simon Critchley (a British fringe philosopher who has an affection for e-cigarettes), launched a semi-fictitious society called the INS or "The International Necronautical Society." And like every good semi-fictitious avant-garde society, this society has a manifesto. The manifesto and other various writings of the INS seek the ruination of all "cults of authenticity" and the rearticulation of death as "a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit." We know from an interview that McCarthy and the other INS members are interested in "replacing the notion of the individual with that of the 'dividual'—a subject always-already ruptured, networked, given over to contingency. This applies to literature and art as much as to politics." But what role does death, and specifically death as a space, play in this replacement? To clarify this somewhat, the INS states that their task is "...to bring death out into the world" and to "chart all its forms and media: in literature and art...in science and culture...[w]e shall tap into its frequencies--by radio, the internet and all sites where its process and avatars are

active."⁶⁵ In this passage, death assumes the same operations and movements of technology, which is to say that McCarthy and friends posit technology as an avatar of death. At stake here for McCarthy is a reformulation of death and technology that answers to certain political and ethical exigencies, as expressed in the work of Blanchot. Remember that Blanchot grants to death and *écriture* the task of unworking the Individual, of exposing the human to the outside that it already is. So, for both McCarthy and Blanchot, Death loses that capital "D" and enters the world much in the same way as technology. In another movement, death loses the status as "ultimate parameter" of human existence and thus loses the ability to give the ultimate "meaning" to human life. The effect of this is one of de-centering, the human is no longer hemmed in by the Big Sleep. Rather, every time the human comes into contact with technology, it comes into contact with an "Outside," with the other that itself is. When we consider once more that *écriture* is a technology, then this seems to all be an acknowledgement of writing as that which is always and absolutely secondary, and a confession that the writer is not the "originary speaker" but rather "a receiver, modulator, retransmitter: a remixer."⁶⁶ It is no secret that McCarthy views literature as remix, or as he explains it: "what's going on in a literary work are other literary things disinterred, cannibalized, and recombined."⁶⁷ This formulation of the writer as a node, a receiver, a modulator etc. is not quite a full on evacuation of subjectivity, an

⁶⁵ The International Necronautical Society's manifesto first became available in 1999 when it ran as an advertisement in *The New York Times*. Currently, the full text is available online at www.necronauts.org

⁶⁶ McCarthy, Tom. *Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works* (Vintage, 2012 Kindle e-book).

⁶⁷ Interview Mag.

assault on the human, or an accusation of crass plagiarism. Rather, it's in an intervention that, in drawing "the self" into question, attempts to put the human back where it belongs, namely, in mediation.

In configuring the human as perpetually and primordially mediated, McCarthy is also pursuing a techno-ontology that insists that our being is essentially technical and thus he shows that any claims made about "authenticity" are severely misguided. Central to his un-working of authenticity (understood as an "authentic way of living," or being "authentically human") is the role of finitude and death. McCarthy's project elaborates the strange compulsion of us, finite beings, who insist on participating in the infinity of language. In this way, death, as it is presented in *C*, makes humans into signals that have been dispersed, we become part of the static out which other signals blip in and out. We witness the entire life (from birth to death) of the main character Serge, and against all modern narratives and representations that attempt to imbue death with meaning (I am speaking here of Heidegger, but also Christianity), we are left with nothing in the last pages of *C* but a signal, Serge himself, dispersing over the surface of water "although no one is there to see it go" (310). In *Remainder*, however, McCarthy goes through great pains to show the consequences of upholding "cults of authenticity" which is to say, any philosophy, any organization, any prevailing attitude that would claim that there is authenticity to be gained, and especially that it would be gained through death. For the main character of *Remainder*, the search for authenticity ultimately leads to psychosis. Moreover, as he re-enacts the deaths of strangers in order to feel more authentic, he merely discovers what Blanchot had been

saying all along: the only experience of death comes from the death of another, and you do not become authentic in death, you become naught. In this way, McCarthy situates the main character of *Remainder* as impossibly Humanist but also impossibly Heideggerian: the unnamed man attempts to live various philosophies of humanism and even antihumanism, and in so doing, succumbs to trauma, obsession, and catastrophe. Then, having exhausted the foundations of (anti)humanism, McCarthy delivers in *C* new ways to think about the sacks of flesh formally known as "humans."

3.4 Fissures, Looping, and Trauma in *Remainder*

Remainder is the first-person story of an unnamed man. We learn that some sort of accident happened, an accident that he does not remember, where something fell from the sky and hit him on the head. The first sentence reads, "ABOUT THE ACCIDENT itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge" (3). This opening line echoes the aforementioned narrative of the "fall," equates the expulsion from Eden with a falling out of the self into technology or into mediation. For the unnamed man, this bonk to the head from falling technology is a painful fissuring, a splitting of literal cranial bone but also a sundering of subjectivity. This event, the moment of rupture or breach, is written into the text as a case of trauma insofar as the man cannot remember the occurrence of the event. For him it's "a blank: a white slate, a black hole" (ibid). The story thus opens on a narrator, a man without name, without memory, past or origin, essentially an unstable and non-descript "it." This unwilling

"dividual" (he would prefer to be an Individual), pitifully laments his state when he exclaims to no one in particular: "My undoing: matter" (17).

What is suggested in the exclamation, "My undoing: matter," is that matter aggravatingly challenges the notion that he is an Individual, or an autonomous and closed Self. In fact, the unnamed man is dramatically and affectively linked to the material world. When he has an encounter with materials that lend him a sense of "authenticity" he tingles pleasantly, and when he feels confusion due to materials, he experiences a bout of dizziness. The man suggests the root of his inauthenticity and his propensity for dizzy spells is tied not only to the accident but to his physical recovery process post-accident--he must understand his movements before completing them. He had to undergo a procedure called "rerouting" which re-circuits or blazes a new path through an unused part of the brain, the "tiddlywink" (18) part. During this re-circuiting treatment, his seemingly "on-track" recovery is halted by a carrot. His tendons, which had been trained to react to imaginary or ideal carrots, could not control the "gnarled, dirty, irregular" (21) carrot presented to them. His "eternal detour" (23) through "Understanding" presents matter to him as imperfect, external, challenging. Crucially, later he'll praise a dead drug-dealer as a man who "had become a symbol of perfection--he merged with the space around him. He'd stop being removed, separate, imperfect. Cut out the detour" (198). Unbeknownst to the man, he is actually suffering from a classic case of representation sickness.

To say that the unnamed suffers from the sickness of representation simply means this: he is realizing what literature has already taught us, which is namely that

all external stimuli, the world, other humans etc. must pass through the "detours" of Reasoning, language, representation. For the unnamed man, this issue he has surrounding matter extends beyond the physical carrot and even encroaches on his sexual fantasies, during which make-believe mouldy coffee cups, dirty sheets and seatbelts all conspire against him. Matter, in this way, is just as bad as thought-up-matter, or as bad as thought itself, which continues to prove itself external to his "authentic self." Thought, then, is given materiality. It is this externality of thought that inaugurates looping, doubling--for the unnamed man, thought and language are always a repetition, feedback arcing off the things-themselves. The doubling produced through and by language as "detour" shares this thematic of "looping" with the notion of trauma, and specifically *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup* or afterwardsness). By exploring his trauma according to the terms of *Nachträglichkeit*, it becomes clear that his "loop" can only be broken through death ("cutting out the detour") or by recovering the moment of trauma, which in any case, is impossible.

The traumatic accident, or as it is also referred to, "the event" (1) must not be, according to the terms of a settlement, recorded. The event of the accident escapes his experience, his memory and language, and this is why he can recall nothing and "can say very little." The accident, while it may imprint or leave a trace on the man, is separate from his experience of it, an experience that necessarily attempts to make sense of the event, or make it known. The trace of this event, in the manner of *Nachträglichkeit*, will return as both surplus and as fissure when the unnamed man stares at a fissure, that is to say, a crack in a bathroom wall. While not couched in

these terms, and quite unknown to the man, it is this very space between the event and the experience of the accident that drives him to his reenactments. The gap, the event which never is recorded in memory as memory, is precisely what brings on the reenactments, the looping logic, the repeating sequences. The memory of the building that returns to him that night in the bathroom isn't quite a precise recollection of a particular building, rather it is forgetting and a withdrawal or loss of the event that impels him forward. Yet the event, transformed into an experience produces a doubling, an excess--a *remainder*.

Without beginning and without end, the missed event of the accident, the trauma that could not be inscribed, compels the man toward acts of marking, capturing, inscribing. From the moment in the bathroom where he copies the details and colors of the crack that sets off his enactments, he relentlessly pursues acts of representation: oil slicks, blood stains, figurines of re-enactors, models of artificial apartment complexes. The practice of lifting fingerprints from a crime scene, or identifying tire or shoe tracks involves always taking the negative of the object. The powder sprinkled on the print and the moulds created for the tracks are capturing only the thing-itself negatively. He hates matter, so inscribing matter isn't an act of reverence, rather, he's collecting absence and stockpiling spectres. He can never experience the moment of his fissuring, of his trauma, so locked out of "presence" he is left to wander from one representation to the next.

Representation draws attention to the fact that the unnamed man is "inauthentic" because of the strained relationship he has with the world with which he

must interact via the "detour" of technologies of thought and language. He comes across a dead man who was a "symbol of perfection" because he had "merged with the space around him, sunk and flowed into it until there was no distance between it and him" (198). In this way death, as the evacuation of subjectivity, makes the cadaver the only thing capable of cutting out the detour. Yet, if it were this simple, the unnamed would simply kill himself and there would be no story. As it stands, the man admires cadavers but he also seems to recognize that he can never subjectively experience death. There would no longer be a "him" there to experience it, so that is why he enacts death. But even these enactments don't provide him with the greatest sense of "tingling." Rather, moments where transubstantiation is involved help him accede to his most authentic state.

The unnamed man, having come "undone" by matter (technology), attempts (to no avail) many things to remedy his "inauthentic" state. He begins by collecting the absence of matter, representations. He finds this somewhat fulfilling, but it doesn't make him tingle with authenticity enough. Next he tries re-enactments, where he controls matter (enactors). Then, when he stumbles across the dead body, he considers the possibility of merging with matter, of cutting out the detour, getting rid of the remainder that he himself is. This, however, is an impossible solution. He could never be there to experience death, to experience authenticity in that way. In other words, none of us can ever rightfully declare "*I am dead.*"

The crux of the book, then, is the maddening quest he undertakes in order to become, himself, matter. More than that though, he wants to be sentient matter! He

wants to be a subject who experiences himself as matter, and this is, for him, an aporia. He does, however, manage to think up a solution and like most clever thoughts, this solution comes to him in the bathtub. He watches the water morph into steam and meditates on the qualities of vapor. This reminds him vaguely of an earlier scene in which he becomes enraptured with the thought that he witnessed the transubstantiation of blue windshield liquid. The moment of transubstantiation that captured the unnamed man's fascination is described thus: "[two litres] vaporized, evaporated...these two litres of liquid--becoming un-matter--not surplus matter, mess or clutter, but pure, bodiless blueness. Transubstantiated" (171). The blue goop comes pouring back out of the car onto his shirt and pants, and he realizes that it was indeed a false miracle. Perhaps then, if he cannot be matter, if he cannot *be* dead, he can become "un-matter" or "bodiless blueness." The philosophy of neutrosophy posits "un-matter" as neither matter nor antimatter. Rather, un-matter presents the idea that between the entity and its opposite, there are intermediate entities. In this case, between the Individual and the cadaver, there exists other entities, namely the entity known as the dividual.

Un-mattering takes a central role in the narrative later when, due to some pending legal troubles that occur because of a "fake" robbery that he commits, the unnamed man is forced to get rid of his entire crew of enactors. Naz, his organizer, suggests that they secure a plane and take them "up into the air so they could vaporize, dehisce" (277). Does this not just mean to murder them? The use of "dehisce" as a qualification of "vaporize" is quite questionable. The term "dehisce"

refers to a split along a natural line, to yawn open, to gape. This strong imagery of a split or fissure seems antagonistic to the softer-seeming "vaporize" which essentially refers to a transformation, a change, or a dissipation of one thing turning into another. Yet, they both point to the same thing: intermediate entities. Vapor forms from water making its way into gas, and the fissure gestures toward the Individual having come undone, un-mattered, and essentially having become a dividual. Furthermore, becoming undone, becoming bodiless blueness, they and their plane will have transubstantiated into what the opening line of the novel describes as: "something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts. Bits" (3). The unnamed man foolishly posits death as a condition of dehiscing, of becoming un-matter. We, as readers of Blanchot, know that death cannot disarticulate the Individual because death is separate from the Individual. Death cannot make the unnamed man feel "authentic" again, because he cannot experience death. The alternative with which we are left is to recognize that every encounter with technology is in fact a moment of dehiscing, and an experience of death having been brought into the world.

3.5 A Deleuzian riff on McCarthy

What else is the unnamed man's main problem if not precisely the idea that not only does he not coincide with himself, but that there is no proper "himself" with which to coincide? Again and again he bemoans his lack of authenticity and the fact that he cannot cut out the detour, the very detour that is inextricably bound up with our ontological position. A Deleuzian reading of McCarthy, however, greatly extends

beyond just this point. *Remainder*, for example, garners some important insights as to how difference relates to repetition, and specifically it disrupts a discourse of reproduction that values such things as authenticity and originality. Perhaps more clear in the closing bank robbery scene than anywhere else, it is quite easy to see how each of the unnamed man's "re"enactments, each simulacra, is its own model as opposed to being a copy of a model. While (re)hearsing for the bank robbery, an actor trips on the carpet, and the unnamed man loved it so much they decided to keep the kink in the carpet. During the event itself, the actor anticipates the kink, but there "was no kink in this carpet. Why should there have been?..." (289). The actor flies forward and sets of the seminal chain of events that leads to another actor's death and the confusion between the "event" and the "enactment." Reflecting on this, the man says, "That's the beauty of it. It became real while it was going on. Thanks to the ghost kink, mainly--the kink the other kink left when we took it away" (296). Here there is the acknowledgment that "why should there have been" a kink at the "real" bank when the kink was located in the carpet of the warehouse space, yet at the same time, it was precisely the absence of the kink that kinked the situation. The kink provides a way for McCarthy to exit a discourse of reproduction that focuses on the totality of the prototype, and a discourse that therefore supposes that some sort of loss occurs in repetition. Rather, McCarthy here takes up a Deleuzian discourse that proposes repetition as a way of acknowledging or even apologizing for lack in the prototype, the repetition compensates for this lack.

C, however, pushes the stakes of a Deleuzian reading beyond *Difference and Repetition* and into the territory of pure becoming and eternal recurrence. In fact, the techno-ontology that McCarthy anchors around signals, static and machinic becomings is perhaps best glimpsed from the perspective granted by Deleuze. Firstly, McCarthy plays out the revelation that death and technology are mutually implicated in the disclosure of the human as dividual. Serge, a.k.a "Pylon man" (347), is granted a particularly strange relationship with military and telecommunications technologies, and it's difficult to tell at times where the machines end and man emerges. Secondly, and through this relationship, Serge goes from being a mere witness (in a Freudian way through repression, in a mythological way as Ascalaphus, and probably in a few other ways as well), to being the "the gate, bulb, aperture and general projection point" that has brought about a new world, a new paradigm. Rather than Serge "the witness" he becomes Serge "the plane": a "tar-coated orb around which all things turn" (201). Thirdly, the play between static and signal comes to not only be a commentary on the nature of death, but it serves as a budding theory that language, literature and life are nothing more than transmission and remix. In this system, where transmission echoes "pure difference" and remix echoes repetition, signal can be read as a singularity, or as a becoming-singularity, as an ever-renewing experience of static in a here and a now. Signal is an uncoded existence driven by the power of difference.

Serge, then, seems to be positioned as the subject of the eternal return in the sense that Deleuze means it when he writes that "[t]he subject of the eternal return is

not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many . . .” (DR 126). Serge, as a dividual, and as a being who is engaged in a constant becoming (a differing-from-himself), corresponds to Deleuze's other articulation of the eternal return that states that it "refers only to the 'devenir' (becoming), to the multiple. It is the law of a world without being, without unity, without identity...."(Nietzsche and Philosophy 24). When Serge is being gunned down by a plane with the phrase *Kennscht mi noch* inscribed on its belly, he "murmurs the words himself this time, letting them echo from him as though he were some kind of sounding box, hollow and resonant" until he finally "knows exactly what he's saying" and "[t]he question of who 'me' is, or what time the 'still' refers to is no longer irksome" (189). In an orgiastic moment of ec-static fusion of flesh and machine, inside and out, bodies and bodies, moments and moments Serge meditates on the nature of synthesis brought on by the message "*Kennscht mi noch*" bearing down:

the dispersed, exterior *mi* previously held captive by the air, carried within its grain and texture, has joined with the interior one, their union then expanding to become a general condition, until 'me' is every name in history; all times have fused into a *now*. It all makes sense. He's been skirting this conjunction, edging his way towards it along a set of detours that have curved and meandered like the relays of a complex chart...and now the conjunction, its consummation...Serge feels ecstatic. (ibid)

But, just as this absolute unity is about to be achieved, just as the soldiers await the order to commence their actions and bring about this project of completion, the war abruptly ends. Crushed and stricken, Serge calls after the soldiers, "Hey!...you can't do that. Wait!" (190). What we witness here is a slight permutation of what happens in *Remainder*. In *Remainder*, the unnamed man was uncomfortable being a dividual, and he sought out some sort of more authentic state of being. In *C*, Serge loves being a dividual, but he mistakenly subscribes to the notion that being a "network" of dividuals means that a flattening out must occur, or, in other words, that some sort of homogenous state of unity must be reached, where all dividuals unite as One. McCarthy halts this by ending the war, but also by having the narrative carry on. The multiple wins out over the One, and Serge as witness-turned-aperture-turned-civilian must find a way to navigate the post-war world, to continue to "meander the relays" (189), until he dies and becomes "a signal, dispersed" (83).

3.6 Transmission, Signals, Literature

Remainder delivers a main character who is nameless, originless, and who progresses through a looping narrative in a manner dictated by the trauma of having been "undone" by technology. In *C*, however, no such trauma "occurs" because birth *is* the very trauma of coming into the world as a dividual. The condition of being a mediated, technological being is, in *C*, precisely the human's originary, primordial condition. The upshot of this in the narrative is that Serge has a difficult time squaring the phenomenal world with the language we use to discuss that world. The artificial nature of language doesn't bother him at all, it merely leads to some hilarious word-

play on the part of McCarthy. And the semiotic dissociative disease with which Serge is afflicted, is intimately felt by the reader who finds herself struggling to secure meaning (what *does C* reference? Chute? Caul? Carrefax? Carbon? The c-c-c-c sound static makes?) in the midst of an overabundance of references. In this way, death and language are interrelated as technologies that indicate certain tensions between the finite and the infinite, and McCarthy plays this out through the modality of transmission.

Born in England at the turn of the twentieth century, Serge is delivered into the house of Versoie, a house that keeps up with the cutting edge technology and science of its day. The obsession with technology, and its subsequent incorporation into the household is almost antithetical to the pastoral world of Versoie. Veiled behind a "curtain of conifers", contained under a "concave vault of sky," and nestled among forking pathways and labyrinth walls and hedges, Versoie resembles a snow globe or as Mr. Dean says, "...a tomb," (4) or even a womb. The story opens on a dual-delivery: that of a parcel containing technological bits and pieces, and that of the child, Serge (pronounced Surge, incidentally). Dr. Learmont has come to Versoie both to deliver the child, but also to drop off zinc, selenium and reels of copper for Mr. Carrefax's telegraph system. One would expect that this technology, and the sounds it emits would stand in stark contrast to pastoral stillness of the natural world of Versoie. Yet, Mr. Carrefax's affection for telegraphic equipment becomes very much part of the landscape of Versoie to the extent that buzzing of the electricity blurs with the buzzing of the beehives and the clicking and shuffling of a Kinetoscope

is more real than the buzz of the grasshoppers (46). And in a moment that fully captures the seamlessness between the organic and technological worlds, the narration describes a room that, "is silent but for the clicking lips of the sucking baby and the copper buzzing rising from the garden" (13).

Versoie is also a school for deaf children. Serge's father, Mr. Carrefax, runs the school in accordance with the thought of language which derives from the biblical fact that "in the beginning...was the Word" (14) or, in other words, Mr. Carrefax holds that "speech is divine" (ibid). For him language is solely for straightforward and verbal communication, and he often expresses his distaste for "signaling" as found in sign-language, codes and encryptions. Yet Serge and his sister, Sophie, recognize these signals as not exterior to, but constitutive of, being. For them, the ability of things to conduct, resonate, and transmit is their pleasure and their psychosis. From their earliest lessons with their tutor, Mr. Clair, to rainy days spent in the attic, Sophie is shown to be obsessed with insects, flowers, chemicals, and always taxonomic systems of some kind or other while for Serge, objects and words are formless and fluid, never subsumed or lifted up to a concept, never sublimated as an object of representation. While Serge's experiments with wire technology and signal transmissions are yet another indication of his penchant for network, for mutability, volatility, he has no mind for code because "the sequences, their transpositions and substitutions, are too convoluted for him to keep track of" (47). He is, in some respects, a character given over to Blanchot's disaster insofar as language is static and signal. Meaning, significance and determinacy are traded by Serge for pure

transmission and signal. But how are they also traded by McCarthy himself? What does it mean for a text, this text, to be a transmission? An uncoded signal?

McCarthy gets at the heart of this through the question of the "witness" raised earlier. Not only does McCarthy position Serge as a witness, as someone who sees but does not understand or experience, he troubles the position of the reader of *C* by dropping uncoded transmissions that tickle reader's brain in a way similar to the operations of repression and trauma according to psychoanalysis. The confluence here between literature as trauma, as transmission, and as related to Deleuzian difference and repetition is not to be taken lightly. *C* proceeds by way of the power of pure difference, and at every turn new paradigms emerge because of this. Outside of the regimes of signification and understanding, the text constructs itself out of repetitious images, a gesture toward pure difference, but also a gesture that is suggestive of trauma. The proliferation and multiplication of possible references (both textually and paratextually) further recuperates a Deleuzian suggestion of difference and repetition, while simultaneously begging the parsing out of such instances of repetition. One such repetitious motif worth visiting here is the motif of "slotting" which McCarthy weaves into the mode of witnessing.

The biblical and the psycho-analytic merge and confuse as the story of Surin resembles that of Noah, and his "several-times-great-grandson Serge, seven and sprightly" (28) exits the garden and enters the hatching room. Not only does Serge emerge from the garden and into language and knowledge, but he is "seven" when this "fall" occurs. As for the age of seven, the British documentary films that form the

Up Series reiterate what Freud already determined about the age of seven: it's formative. Rather than delving into theories of physical, cognitive or psychosexual development, the age seven will be treated as a marker or possibly a cypher for Freud's "primal scene" because of my own associative complexes and interpretational biases. The "primal scene" in Freud comes from his "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" and refers to Sergei (!)⁶⁸ Pankajev (known as the "Wolf Man"), and concerns framing, experience, and the subject who experiences. Where Freud's theories on perception and preservation (or reservation) in the unconscious concern the adolescent observation of parental intercourse, McCarthy's "primal scene" concerns the sexual relationship between Sophie and the much older Widsun. Add to this *L'écriture du désastre* in which Blanchot recuperates and modifies Freud's primal scene, and it becomes clear that McCarthy is mobilizing a thematic that has preoccupied the greatest thinkers and writers of twentieth century, but to what end?

Serge's moment of trauma is foregrounded and foreshadowed in the hatching room where the clicking sound of "scores of coupling white moths" pervades the air. Serge *sees* or *observes* that "some are crawling around, their antennae twitching...some are bumping blindly...but most are slotted into other moths..." and perceiving that they wish to fly, he places a couple in his palm, launches them into the air and exclaims, "You can do it, Orville and Wilbur!" (29). This vague and indeterminate encouragement of Orville and Wilbur indicates that Serge *merely* observes the scene, it is neither understood nor analyzed. This moth scene gains

⁶⁸ Even the story of Lemech naming Noah presents the language of the snake, where word is divorced from referent, through the language act of punning.

interest in its iteration as the Sophie/Widsun incident, and later in Serge's sickness.⁶⁹ Again, it is first an aural perception, sound, that establishes Serge's approach to the scene. He hears a "rhythmic scratching, a rubbing chafe that carries on its back a higher sound..." and as he advances across the lawn he *sees* not the image of the sexual encounter, but the negative of the image: a small lantern casts its light behind a sheet and he sees shadows, silhouettes, "it's some kind of moving thing made of articulate parts. One of the parts is horizontal, propped up on four stick legs like a low table; the other is vertical, slotted into the underside of the table's rear end but rising above it...the grunts grow more intense..the squeaks grow louder..." (60-61). While the narration of this scene is ostensibly third-person, it is refracted through Serge's childish perspective. The scene merely unfolds, it is grasped neither by the reader nor Serge--it just happens. The prevailing image of the moth scene is the thorax: "The males crouch over the females, thorax stacked above thorax..." and eventually he picks a moth up and "pinching its thorax in the fingers of one hand, plucks first one and then the other of its wings off" (29). Then, behind the sheet Serge sees "the thing pulses like a insect's thorax..." (60). Earlier his father declared "No human born with thorax, throat and mouth is incapable of speaking..." (16) and later in the feverish mania of Serge's final hours, Sophie appears before him and the narration explains "the word is welling, not so much in Sophie's lungs and thorax as in space itself..." (307). In the same way that there is a fissure between what the young Serge

⁶⁹ He is described at the end of the moth scene as "seven and splenetic" which is a reference to medieval physiology and links the moth sex, the Sophie/Widsun sex and his black blockage, his *mela chole*.

encounters by way of his perceptual qualities and the subsumption of this data under concepts or into thought and language, there is a gap between signifier and an authentic signified. Each scene, by way of the thorax, references the other yet none of them point to an ultimate meaning or origin. The signifier here is exposed as totally inadequate. Serge, the subject of these experiences, registers this inadequacy by way of repetition as an impossible experience in the present.

At stake here is the movement of *Nachträglichkeit* and the temporality of trauma and subjectivity. While a traditional reading of the narrative structure of *C* would suggest that the hatching room scene foregrounds the Sophie/Widsun scene (i.e. because it comes first, before, initially), the invocation of Freud troubles this reading. The logic of *Nachträglichkeit* dictates neither a linear succession of events nor a cyclic one. The initial event, which is not perceived as such, makes an impression that gets stored until its activation in a present moment (deferred action)--it only ever appears in/as repetition. The accumulative effect of this is lost on Serge, but not on his reader. Between the proliferation of thoraxes, his preference of the *a tergo* sexual position, and the splenetic condition that carries from the moth scene through to his adulthood, the reader is caught in a return⁷⁰ that issues from nowhere. McCarthy here sets up the crux of *C* which involves Serge's embeddedness in a world of signs and the sheer gratuitousness of associative webs that, like the fall or the

⁷⁰ His mother, drugged and dazed "looks down at him and her eyes look like **honey**, warm and **murky**" (24). Drowning he notices the water is "bright and **murky** at the same time, like **honey**" (25). Flying with Gibbs over the warzone, Serge "looks down onto a vapour blanket that's darker and more **murky**" (139). In Egypt, "the water's **murky**, full of the silt..." (279).

primal scene, result from the "encryption" or the concealment of the origin of the trauma.

Where Freud places the moment of trauma in the observation of the sex-act, McCarthy and Blanchot invoke a much more primordial trauma. One must not ignore that the detail of Serge's age (which has been determined as a cipher for other ciphers dealing with subjectivity, experience, repression etc.) appears as he, the antediluvian grandson, exits the garden. The problematic of Freud's primal scene must be thought in conjunction with its edenic percursor. In Eden there is no gap between language and referent. The expulsion from Eden is the entrance into knowledge and into language, and a return to a primordial or presymbolic origin is impossible. There is no lost Eden of infancy that can be invoked, thus the first rift is between the word and the thing and the second is between the subject and himself. This fall remains the event that can never be experienced, never be captured nor reproduced. It is an event with loss inscribed in its very heart, and every transmission or signal that follows this event seeks not to reproduce this event, but to apologize for the lack in the prototype.

3.7 Like a Signal, Dispersed

In what is truly a tip of the hat to a Deleuzian groundlessness of repetition, McCarthy's *C* determines the human as a singularity and as a signal. In the same way that McCarthy shows literature to be "transmission and remix" (i.e. proliferation and generation without ground and without origin), he likewise suggests the human as signal in order to disavow any notion that there is a relationship to the transcendent or universal subject. The first way in which *C* unworks the human is to tirelessly

supplant the human and "the natural" with the technological throughout the narrative. An obvious example of this is how Serge's plane becomes almost an extension of his body, and the points he plots on maps become the harbingers of death. Less obvious examples pepper the text too, however. We are told Serge looks out into the dusk and he "can see a firefly pulsing photically, in dots and dashes" (254). In this firefly example we get an adverb ("photically") restricted for organisms qualified by Morse code. Serge's observation that this firefly is performing Morse code may strike the reader as funny because of the juxtaposition of organic pulsing and the artificial coding applied to it, but this is precisely the tension that McCarthy elaborates in *C*. Language, for us, is prosthetic, we do not pulse photically. The second way in which McCarthy unworks the human is to show that we are born into the world and into language, and we participate in both for a short time, and then we disperse. We are not the origin or master of either, and this is precisely what the last lines of *C* capture: "[t]he moon's gone: only the ship's electric glow illuminates the wake...[t]he wake itself remains, etched out across the water's surface; then it fades as well, although no one is there to see it go" (310). The moon may have been eclipsed by the electric glow, but more to the point, the wake like all things fades regardless of whether anyone is there to witness it or not. This seems to be a commentary on McCarthy's part that aligns human life with literature and with a pinging, blipping signal as things that are groundless, originless and that emerge through the power of pure difference.

As Serge matures he begins to build resistors and search through static for frequencies, he is not the origin of these signals, merely the finder, the tuner, the

transcriber. As *C* progresses, the material wires and coils merge with the pastoral landscape as the people seem to blend with the frequencies until, as Serge notes, the sound of static is "like the sound of thinking...the sound of thought itself" and his controlled breathing even becomes "an extension of the frequency of air he's riding on" (63). Sophie, as she descends into madness, wanders the lawns speaking gibberish and Serge observes that "[s]he looks as though she were tuning into something--as though she had somehow turned *herself* into a receiver" (74). In *C*, the becoming-signal of people is second in importance only to what happens when they die, when they disperse. Late at night, with his headphones on, he becomes ensnared in the invisible sea of signals, and he comes to see other people (104) as conduits and receivers of the transmissions coursing through the universe. One night, he picks up the frequency of a sinking ship and "among its breaks and flecks" Serge hears "the sound of people treading cold water, their hands beating small disturbances into the waves that had come to bury them" (67). These disturbances, signals in the process of becoming dispersed, are not the only time that McCarthy links technology to death.

As Serge and Sophie play in the attic they listen to cylinders on the gramophone. These discs, some zinc and others the black shellac so familiar now, are recordings of the deaf children repeating sequences and patterns. One of these discs in the voice of Rainer "a half-German boy who lost his hearing, then his life, to a cancer that developed in his ear," and as Serge listens to the voice and looks at the horn of the gramophone he notices that "the tube darkens as it narrows" and he "thinks of entrances to caves and wells, of worm- and foxholes, rabbits' burrows, and all things

that lead into the earth" (44). McCarthy here collapses in on each other the gramophone, the cancerous ear, cervixes, worms eating flesh and the trenches of WWI. This sentence, with its overabundance of references and coding, is a remarkable example of McCarthy's literary project and how that project entails some cross-over with Deleuze. Each image (the cave, the tube, the borrow etc.) opens a space where singularity, the signal that each image is, touches the totality of images. In other words, each images points to itself and to difference. The images maintain a ghostly or spectral relationship with one another not because they share the common predicates of darkness or holeness, but because they expose the difference that makes their very manifestation possible. Crucially, this is what makes McCarthy's writing so frustrating, but also so poetic. The reader can almost imagine a giant ear as a gramophone, or the hole left behind by a hungry worm as a cervix. The point is that one walks away from such a sentence with the knowledge that sex, death and technology are related, but it's nearly impossible to establish how this understanding was arrived at. McCarthy pursues this nexus between technology and death by way of military technologies and Serge's peculiar perspective of the realities of war.

Death on the scale of the first world war, a scale unprecedented in human history and made possible by the development of new technologies of war and death. Serge, a good "witness" in the Freudian way, becomes an "observer" during WWI, which is to say that he is in charge of working out the cartography of a warzone in order to transmit signals back to the ground, telling the artillery where to discharge: the observer commands death. Serge, however, does not see it this way. He comes to

describe his role in the war as "bringing about a New Age" of dispersion of signals, not the murder of people. In this way he views death as a kind of quickening and not as a mode of decay. This is expressed elsewhere when Serge's pilot describes the site of their most recent mission by stating "The whole sector's dead now... You've killed it" (200). But Serge doesn't understand; he doesn't see it that way:

Quite the opposite: it's a quickening, a bringing to life. He feels this viscerally, not just intellectually, every time his tapping finger draws shells up into their arcs, or sends instructions buzzing through the woods to kick-start piano wires for whirring cameras, or causes the ground's scars and wrinkles to shift and contort from one photo to another: it's an awakening, a setting into motion. (200)

In what others call death, Serge sees the birth of something else, of a signal being dispersed through its transmission. Serge as the conduit through which impulses flow "is like the Eiffel Tower, a pylon animating the whole world, calling the zero hour of a new age of metal and explosive, geometry and connectedness—and calling it over and over again, so that its birth can be played out in votive repetition through these elaborate and ecstatic acts of sacrifice" (200). In these moments, he, the plane, and the shells are all "bodies in space" interchangeable and he feels himself "godlike, elevated by machinery and signal code" (141). Through "death" as sacrifice, and through the repeated rebirth that is the decay of singular bodies into a dispersion of signal, Serge will call forth this "new age" wherein he, a tar-coated plane/man hybrid, replaces the sun which is itself "a relic of the old order" (159). Having ushered in the

new age, “the world seems to anoint him, through its very presence, as the gate, bulb, aperture and general projection point that’s brought it about: a new, tar-coated orb around which all things turn” (201).

At his sister's funeral, Serge comes to the conclusion that the whole affair is farcical, a charade (a representation, perhaps), because “[b]oth death and she are elsewhere: like a signal, dispersed” (83). And what is a signal dispersed but precisely static, noise. The human is the conduit that, when it comes into being, participates in the totality of the infinite signal, but at the moment of our death we disperse into static. In the moment of death, Serge can no longer persist as “gate, bulb or aperture” through which the world is brought about. In the final passage of the novel, his “exhalation sound[s] as a long, drawn-out ssssss...” then his “throat contracts three or four times in quick succession... every time, with a strange regularity: ssssss, c-c-c-c; ssssss, c-c-c-c; ssssss, c-c-c-c...” (388). When, as with Sophie, he becomes like a signal, dispersed, the signal Serge transmits is the sound of static. And yet this is not a fizzling and a fading of human life, it is the becoming-static of the human: “it’s a burst of static—a static that contains all messages ever sent, and all words ever spoken; it combines all times and places too, scrunching these together as it swallows them into its crackling, booming mass, a mass expanding with the strength and speed of an explosion of galactic proportions, a solar flare” (385). And just like the burst of static, perhaps *C* (as in the sound “c-c-c-c”), writes all messages ever written, and, like the human life, is nothing but transmission and remix.

Chapter Four

The Situationist *dérive* as a Mode of Reading in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*

"There is a mode of vital experience--experience of space and time. Of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils--that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity.'...Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"

-Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts Into Air*

"Society is not the product of the reciprocal presence of many individuals; but neither is it a substantial reality to be superimposed over individual beings, almost as if it were independent of them."

-Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*

"'To 'transcend' means 'to go beyond'...we can 'go beyond' the 'ordinary' powers of the material world through the power of patterns...It's through the emergent powers of the pattern that we transcend..."

-Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*

4.1 Debord's *Dérive* (Wandering)

"*Ne travaillez jamais*" or "never work" is the now iconic chalk-graffito message that was scrawled across a wall on the rue de Seine in Paris in 1958, captured by photograph, and reproduced in the journal of the Situationist International (hereafter referred to as the SI). Guy Debord would later admit to authoring this piece

of street art, and much later thousands of students and workers would rally behind it during the May '68 riots as the phrase began to sprout up all over Paris. In *On Terrorism and the State*, Gianfranco Sanguinetti notes that by February 1977 "this same watchword reappeared on the walls of Rome, greatly enhanced by the simple fact that in the meantime it had been translated into Polish by the workers of Stettin, Gdansk, Ursus and Radom, in 1970 and 1976, and equally into Portuguese by the workers of Lisbon in 1974" (42). From the mid-2000s onward, of course, you can find this phrase doodled on bathroom stalls on the UC Santa Cruz campus, or silk-screened on mass-produced t-shirts on Etsy and Zazzle (which, by the way are sold for hard capital) that you can wear to various Occupy movements. Clearly the phrase "never work" means many different things to many people. When it appeared in the SI journal it was accompanied by a caption that reads: "minimum program of the situation movement." Like many of the situationist tactics (*détournement* ["hijacking"], *dérive* ["wandering"] and playfulness for example), this "minimum program" involves the subversion or disorientation of the capitalist agenda and the commodity reification that hides ordinary life behind the spectacle.

In *The Beach Beneath the Street*, McKenzie Wark elaborates the slogan in similar terms when he writes that it "frees time from its binary form of work time and leisure time" and it gives way to a "time inhabited by neither workers nor consumers" (25). And while this might well be the intention of the slogan, and while this is certainly what inspired its many (translingual, transgeographic, transcultural) after-lives, it falls flat in practice. Take Michèle Bernstein, a prominent SI member and wife

of Guy Debord, for example. Her realization of this freed time concept was to write horoscopes for racehorses in the newspapers (for which she was paid). While Bernstein does seem to be mobilizing "play" and playfulness here, one cannot just work at tongue-in-cheek jobs as a political practice: no amount of theorizing is going to rescue horse horoscopes as a revolution. Wark recognizes this tendency for childlike play to not only fall outside of critical practice, but to also get subsumed back into forms of commoditization, so toward the end of the book he concludes that to the lists of nevers "perhaps we could add, never play! For play is becoming as co-opted as work, a mere support for the commodity form" (157). In an interview with Ilias Marmaras, Wark clarifies that by "never play" he's trying to indicate that particular "playforms invented under particular historical circumstances," and he explores the playforms of the SI "not so they can be imitated, but rather, so we can learn how to make new playforms under different historical circumstances. We are in an age of inventing new aesthetic practices directly within the everyday."⁷¹ In the spirit of invention then, this chapter will explore the major SI tactics of *dérive* and *détournement* in order to show not only how William Gibson, so-called noir prophet, father of the beloved term "cyberspace" and prolific writer of speculative fiction, updates these practices for our digital era, but also how writing and reading have always been revolutionary political technologies. In *Pattern Recognition* in particular the very act of reading becomes a liberatory practice of *dérive* that seems to amend the slogan "Never work" to something like "Endlessly un-work!" The phrase "un-

⁷¹ www.dapperdanmagazine.com accessed Jan 2015.

work" of course is a reference to the word "*désœuvrement*" that appears in the works of Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. *Désœuvrement*, sometimes translated as "inertia" or "inoperativity," attempts to signal a passive labor that breeches the binary of work and leisure. "Inoperativity" preserves the distinction (more clear in French or Greek) between *travailler* and *ouvrer*, or *ergon* and *energeia*. In other words, rather than a state of passivity, *désœuvrement* is an endless labor that never achieves the perfection of a work (in a Hegelian sense). For Blanchot this unraveling takes place through *écriture* (writing). The work of literature (*oeuvre*) is this interminable un-working (*désœuvrement*) that radically calls literature itself into question. For the SI, the endless labor of un-working is precisely what is at stake in the graffiti-injunction "Never work," even if the slogan and its after-lives missed the mark. "Un-work!" like "Never work" is not a call to inaction, but a rallying cry for lived practices that give "work" the old work-around, as it were. In his chapter, "The work idea: Wage slavery, bullshit, and the good infinite," Mark Kingwell explains the failure of "never work" like this:

The great Marxist and Situationist critics of work hoped that critical theory--accurate analysis of the system's pathologies--would change the system. The latest crisis in capitalism has shown that it will not. But a system is made of individuals, just as a market is composed of

individual choices and transactions. Don't change the system, change your life. Debord's "never work" did not go far enough.⁷²

So where "Never work" encourages people to merely seek out practices that fall outside of production and consumption in hopes the system would crumble of its own accord, "Un-work!" demands an epochal shift through performative and affective engagements with others and the world, and these engagements in turn render modes of production and consumption if not untenable, then unthinkable. And while *dérive* is one such tactic that presents a critical engagement with the world, many of its theoretical under-pinnings re-inscribe it in the very framework that it attempts to subvert.

From Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin and beyond, modern literature and cultural theory is riddled with confrontations between people and the cities in which they inhabit, and in which their subjectivity is formed. Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* opens with such a scene as Ulrich, the quality-less main character, stands there "gauging their [passing cars, trucks, trolleys, and pedestrians] speeds, their angles, all the living forces of mass hurtling past that drew the eye to follow them like lightning, holding on, letting go, forcing the attention for a split second to resist, to sap, to leap in pursuit of the next item" (6). Attention, in this scene, jumps and leaps from one source of stimulus to another and the observer, Ulrich, seems to be less engaged with the act of observing and has rather become engulfed by the big city and the "collision of things and affairs, and fathomless points of silence in

⁷² This essay is located in *The Economy as Cultural System: Theory, Capitalism, Crisis*. Ed. Dufresne, Todd & Sacchetti, Clara.

between, of paved ways and wilderness, of one great rhythmic throb and the perpetual discord and dislocation of all opposing rhythms" (4). The city Ulrich describes is Vienna but it might as well be Berlin, Paris or London, all of which, like Vienna, "resembled a seething, bubbling fluid in a vessel consisting of the solid material of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions" (ibid). Musil's modern city is one of flux, the dynamic force of people "bubbling" up and out of the concrete vessel that is the urban cityscape. And Ulrich, the locus of perception and reception, produces a type of reading through his encounter with the city that overwhelms his sensorium.

Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1856) describes a similar ecstatic experience of London, brought on more by opium of course than by the act of wandering or observing:

sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, open nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such noddy problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares. (79)

The difference between Ulrich and De Quincey is that where Ulrich stands like a stone in a rushing river, letting the simuli flow over him (similar in fact to the *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Benjamin), De Quincey harnesses the techniques of nautical navigation and against "fixed points" like the pole-star and a north-west passage he

instead encounters the others of those fixes: enigmas, alleys, riddles. De Quincey's "North-west passage" not only dictates the bearing that Debord will wander the streets (literally, he walks north by north-west) but it also finds its way into the pages of Debord's *Memoires* as a guiding metaphor for Debord. De Quincey's wanderings are therefore figured as "a harbinger of the *dérive*."⁷³ Between Ulrich and De Quincey there emerges two distinct types of readings, and with Debord's *Memoires*, a third: Ulrich is a passive observer, a poor reader; De Quincey fares a little better through his active engagement with the text of the city; and Debord elevates De Quincey's mode of engagement, wandering, by crafting a text out of stolen snippets of words and images, thus forcing its reader to "wander" among them rather than passively consume prefabricated meaning or structure. However, all three of these kinds of reading still rely on a reader who operates on the level of interpretation. In this sense, the *flânerie* of Ulrich, De Quincey, and Debord remains operative, which is to say, it remains bound up in macrosystem of work, capital, and labor which has as its microthemes the sovereign subject (who interprets instead of reads) and the spectacle.

Debord attempts to depart from the aesthetics of urban wandering that preceeded him in the early writings of surrealists Andre Breton and Louis Aragon. The type of *flânerie* exhibited by the surrealists holds too deeply to dreaming, dreamscapes, and ecstatic modes of trance-wandering than a political practice for Debord's liking. Breton writes of Aragon (with whom he used to wander the streets of Montmartre at night) that "no one could have been a more astute detector of the

⁷³ L'urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50" (*Internationale situationniste* 3, Dec 1959).

unwanted in all its forms: no one else could have been carried away by such intoxicating reveries about a sort of secret life of the city."⁷⁴ The surrealist program takes up as its task the "finding and fixing"⁷⁵ of the point where contradictions like life/death and real/imagined cease to be contradictions. This idea of "fixing" plays too closely with the modern project of stability, constellations (*les fixes*), adherence to meaning, and "finding" betrays a sense of discovery or unconcealment of things covered over, or in other words, authenticity. Reveries, intoxication, concealment and secrets ("secret" here meaning "set apart" or "divided" "undisclosed") all strike different registers than the wanderings of the SI. While the *dérive* involves the visceral experiences of attraction and repulsion as one wanders (amongst a collective) through the streets, it stresses political engagement over the mere experience of wandering. In similar terms, Conor McGarrigle, who authors an essay entitled "Forget the Flâneur," admits that yes, "everyone loves the flâneur" but ultimately he was a detached observer and he did not "intervene in the streets he traversed, or seek to change society." McGarrigle calls for an "alternative model" in which a "disruptive activist" can "create alternative narratives and shape outcomes." In no way were the SI merely "observers," and in fact I read in the SI practices the need to find or locate alternative narratives, but in locating these narratives that remain beholden to interpretation, the privilege of the unified subject. So while Debord and the SI viewed experimental behavior and the "systematic construction of situations" as having the

⁷⁴ This quote is used on the jacket-cover of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*. Exact Change, 2004.

⁷⁵ Breton, André. *Surrealist Manifestoes*. (1988). Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: Uni of Michigan Press, 1972. p. 123-4.

potential to uncover new desires and form the so-called "hyper-political" (which seeks to "publicize desirable alternatives to the spectacle of the capitalist way of life, so as to destroy the bourgeois idea of happiness"⁷⁶), in the end, their spontaneous and random acts of art didn't actually reach the level of "subversive," and they certainly didn't topple consumerist society. Much like Duchamp's antics, which for Debord "become pretty much old hat" because the "drawing of a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* is no more interesting than the original version of that painting,"⁷⁷ the tactics of the SI failed to effect real change on political or social systems.

Most of what we know about *dérive* has come down to us through the SI journals and Guy Debord's essay "Theory of the *Dérive*." *Dérive* arises as a critical response to commodified existence, a frozen or eternal sense of "the now," and the social patterns that emerge within a modern capitalist context. It is a psychogeographical mapping that attempts to tap into both ludic and analytical dimensions in order to locate consistencies or what the situationists call "unitary ambience" or the unity of ambiances. Found among the pages of the SI journals is a list of definitions and under "*dérive*" it reads: "A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. The term also designates a specific uninterrupted period of *dériving*."⁷⁸ Basically, the *dérive* is a collective and ambulatory way to reimagine the locus of "the city" outside of the grids and flows imposed by authoritative power, whether this be

⁷⁶ *The Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. p. 41.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 52.

urban planning, sites of civic memory, flows created by subways and passageways to capital centers of commerce and work, and so on. Those who undertake the *dérive* drop "their usual motives for movement and action"⁷⁹ and are thus able to detect the "varied ambiances." Ambiance itself has soft and hard qualities. Soft ambiance seems to be strictly related to environments, human activity, light, sound, a consistency of some kind in terms of emotion or ideas. Hard ambiance, as one might assume, concerns the materiality of space and place and this includes objects. McKenzie Wark suggests that *dérive* is a situationist tactic of "exploring forms of life beyond capitalism and the capitalist work ethic," and indeed "unitary ambiance," which can only be discovered by way of the *dérive*, is a constructed collision site of various ambiances, a hub, that existing outside of the spectacle of capitalism, generates new social structures.

Dérive, when it is carefully cultivated, participates in what Debord calls pure consumption. Debord refers not to the consumption of commodities, but to an ingestion of environment and especially a consumption of time. *Dérive*, as a passage, as an opening of oneself to contingencies of time and place is meant to propel the wanderer beyond the constraints of commodified life. With a mix of nostalgia and luddism, he couches the wanderings of the *dérive* within the critique of capitalist technological civilization that he unfurls in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord seems to yearn for the "authentic" existence of yesteryear, some sort of pre-historical potlatch era to which the spectacle (which is for him always mediated through

⁷⁹ *ibid.* p. 50.

technology) has made "return" an impossibility. Another way to phrase this problem comes from Eustace Conway, an American naturalist and man of the mountain, who echoes a certain SI perspective of modernity:

What do I do for a living? I live for a living. When I moved out to the forest 35 years ago, people said 'you can't escape reality.' I went to reality, you're living in a virtual reality--you don't even know where your stuff comes from, or where your poop goes.⁸⁰

For Conway, knowledge of the origin of "stuff" (commodities in SI terms) and the fate of poop dispels the spectacle, and there is quite a bit of truth in this, but does one need to return to the mountain to exit what he designates as "virtual reality"? Perhaps if Conway had been around at the time of the SI, his musing on poop might have resulted in a playful yet politically-rooted mapping exercise. But in the end, conflicts over what a politically viable form of contestation looks like eventually led to the disintegration of the SI. The crux of these disputes (notably between Asger Jorn and Debord) comes down to the distinction posed by Conway: reality vs. virtual reality. For Conway, reality is the plane of existence in which you possess knowledge of your poop's voyage, for Debord it's much more complex.

Debord's yearning for a mythic pre-industrial utopia registered as problematic on several radars, including those of Constant Nieuwenhuys (who was also a founding member of the avant-garde CoBrA, and responsible for the SI treatise on

⁸⁰ The American television series "Mountain Men" aired on the History Channel on May 31st, 2012. This quote from Eustace Conway is located in the first episode, "Winter is Coming."

"New Babylon") and Lefebvre (author of *Critique of Everyday Life*). Lefebvre, never a member of SI, was definitely in dialogue with members of the SI, but his misgivings aligned with Constant's, and together (yet independently) they view the SI as politically impotent. In 1962 in *Introduction to Modernity* Lefebvre relates the Situationists to a "new Romanticism" and Constant, during one of the final meetings he attended with the SI, cited a "romanticised notion of a past reality"⁸¹ as one of the many reasons he was cutting ties with the group. The crux of the issue is always the same: on the one side resides romanticism with its bohemian artists and on the other side is radical and political revolution. In *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, Simon Critchley captures perfectly the problem of romanticism in an excursus about Punk music which "like romanticism, began well...[and] also ended badly, in a nihilistic stupor of distrust and drug abuse, its *spectacular* energy recuperated by the very music industry whose codes and conventions it had, if only for a few months, so beautifully subverted" (116). Unlike punk music, *dérive* does not quite exude "spectacular energy," nor does it get recuperated back into the system, but it does express a very problematic streak in Debord's thought: that there is an opposition between lived experience and spectacular appearances.

To the combination of his romantic nostalgia for pre-spectacle society and the narrow definition of lived experience, Debord adds another debatable element to his system in the very opening of *Society of the Spectacle*. In an almost imperceptible elision, Debord conflates "spectacle" with "representation" when he writes that "in

⁸¹ 'Discussion sur un appel aux intellectuels et artistes révolutionnaires' *Internationale Situationniste*, 3 (1959), p. 23.

societies where modern condition of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (Thesis 1). In this quote, representation seems to be complete artifice, an aggregate of signs that no longer signify, and if they do signify it doesn't matter. What we are starting to get here from Debord is a political economy of the sign, where the focus shifts from the power of the commodity to the power and proliferation of the sign. As Debord expands on this idea of spectacle as representation, it becomes clear that the spectacle operates on the plane of vision through the order of the image, and he holds cinema as a particularly invasive case of spectacle because it is a technology that gives "the world at once present and absent" and this world which only "the spectacle *makes visible* is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived" (Thesis 37). This is strikingly similar to Baudrillard's concept of "radical semiurgy" which Douglas Kellner, in his article "Baudrillard, Semiurgy and Death," defines as "the production and proliferation of signs" which as "created a society of *simulations* governed by *hyperreality*: images, spectacles, simulations proliferate and terrorize, fascinate, and mesmerize" (127-28). Baudrillard attributes the loss of the signifying function of images to the TV or the "mediascape" in which images are sucked into and nullified by "the whirlpool and kaleidoscope of radical semiurgy." The difference between Debord and Baudrillard is summed up in Baudrillard's main critique of Debord, namely that he did not perceive "the passage from the form-commodity to the form-sign, from the abstraction of the exchange of material products under the law of general equivalence to the operationalization of all

exchanges under the law of the code [i.e., the semiological structure that governs all meaning, reducing value to merely utilitarian form]." By writing off modalities of representation, i.e. cultural productions, cinema and art (and for our current moment things like internet and the digital world) as spectacle, Debord (essentially he is a "bad reader") ignores the very processes or technologies (the "semiological structure" according to Baudrillard) that produce meaning and distribute value. In so doing, tactics like *dérive* becomes no more politically efficacious than its predecessors (like the *flâneur* or even the anemic surrealist wanderings), because it fails to locate and subsequently revise, re-imagine or un-work the source of all social and political programming: representation.

If *dérive* had been theorized as a mode of reading (as partially suggested by Baudrillard's work on radical semiurgy), it could effectively escape the oppositional thought that posits it as a "production" of situations against the "consumption" of spectacular images. Intriguingly, the work of Asger Jorn (some of which was in collaboration with Debord) stresses this need for a politics or ethics of reading. In particular, something like Jorn's development of *détournement* ("detour" or "diversion" in English) engages with representational modalities like advertisements, pictures, words, and so on, in order to remix spectacular language and images so that emergent meanings disrupt the flow of the spectacle. In *Detoured Painting*, Jorn describes this process of *détournement* as "a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*." *Détournement* gains its force not just from the appropriation and evacuation of cultural artifacts and linguistic signs (which is actually a form of

preservation via recuperation similar to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* for example), but from revaluation of signs. In this way, Jorn proposes a technique of both ludic and analytic dimensions that, by participating in cultural hijacking or jamming, effectively un-works systems of authority by un-working systems of meaning. And once one has move beyond logic, beyond language and beyond meaning, one has necessarily exhausted the capacity for interpretation. Ultimately, *détournment* comes closest to what Andrew Ross refers to as "hacker's knowledge" which is "capable of penetrating existing systems of rationality that might otherwise be seen as infallible; a hacker's knowledge, capable of reskilling and, therefore of rewriting, the cultural programs and reprogramming the social values that make room for new technologies."⁸² I believe it is this "hacker's knowledge" to which Debord and the SI aspired, but failed to attain.

By constructing situations in order to furnish experience (i.e. "lived reality") outside of systems related to commodity reification, *dérive* fails to take seriously the very experience of living under such systems. Additionally, *dérive* assumes that the embodied experience of roaming can somehow negate systems of representation without even touching them. Wandering becomes a mode of escape and vagrancy rather than change. Cultural hijacking on the other hand proceeds from the very experience of the spectacle as our "lived reality" by integrating sign systems in order to generate new meanings and perhaps new social structures. Unlike the *flâneur* or

⁸² Ross, Andrew. "Hacking Away at the Counterculture." *Technocluture*. Ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1991. p. 107-34.

dérive, only *détournement* offers a therapeutic way to read the world--a therapy session modeled on Blanchot's disaster. Disaster is for Blanchot a modality of disorientation that interrupts meaning and renders signification suspect, and the detouring of language and images has a similar effect. The question, then, is who can read in the aftermath of such a disaster and how?

Dominic Pettman echoes a similar call for a figure of a reader when, in *In Divisible Cities* he notes that there is a pressing need to move "beyond the *dérive*, and beyond the *flâneur*" (3). Beyond the official maps like "road maps, sewage maps, drainage maps, pollution maps, heat maps, and so on," Pettman writes that we also "carry in our heads the personalized Baedeker of things which matter to us: shopping maps, eating maps, browsing maps, narcotic maps, erotic maps" (ibid). Beyond even these unofficial maps, Pettman hints at something takes us closer to the mapping practices of the SI when he writes that "some corners of the city make us anxious, others curious, and still others strangely empty" (ibid). Yet while these things matter, and they mattered especially to the SI, Pettman declares:

but beyond the *dérive*, and beyond the *flâneur*, I can picture another kind of mattering map. A map which *generates* territory, rather than the other way around. Not as simulacra, but as affective blueprint. A map which does not *represent* cities that exist independently, but a map which *brings cities into being*; turning their potential and promise into brute matter. (3)

In part this is a critique of the SI theory of psychogeography that consists of everting

the whims, projections and opinions of the individual as a manner of mapping or representing city quarters. In Ivan Chtcheglov's 1953 text "Formulary For a New Urbanism" he marries together psychogeography and *dérive* when he imagines a city in which districts "correspond to the whole spectrum of diverse feelings that one encounters *by chance* in everyday life...Bizarre Quarter...Happy Quarter...Useful Quarter...Sinister Quarter" and the main activity of the inhabitants will be "CONTINUOUS DRIFTING*," the result of which is "total disorientation."⁸³ The writings produced by Chtcheglov and Guy Debord in the fifties on new urbanism and architecture coalesce by 1955 into psychogeography, which, Debord writes, "sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."⁸⁴ Where for Debord and Chtcheglov the environment seems to affect and shape individuals, for Pettman it is nearly the other way around insofar as humans affect and generate new territories. I say "nearly" because in Pettman's mattering map affect, energy, and perceptions are treated as dynamic information that is constitutive not only of new territory but of new subjectivities. Pettman's mattering map is not "produced" and certainly not by the "individual" of psychogeography, or by extension, of the *dérive*. Moreover, the mattering map does not concern itself, like *dérive*, with "fleeting" and "individual moments" (3). The mattering map is "narrated," and at that, the narrator is multiple, indeterminate, not simply "collective."

⁸³ Knabb, Ken. ed. *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. p. 7.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* p. 8.

And perhaps most importantly, by narrating "hidden cities, secret cities, imaginary cities, impossible cities, and overlapping cities, existing beneath the familiar Atlas of everyday perception," Pettman's narrators manage to un-work the blanket of "everyday perception" through the power of revelation. This is not merely an appeal to authenticity, as is the case with the *dérive* and Debord who insists on finding an authentic existence beyond the reach of the spectacle. Rather, Pettman's mapping is a generative reading that, in disrupting "everyday perception," activates the potential of worlds through differentiation. Pettman delivers a narrator-city assemblage engaged in an endless process of becoming that proposes a relationship between organism and inert matter that escapes the essentialist ontology proposed by Debord. The confluence between traveler and city not only brings back the technogenesis that Debord tosses out, but it also draws attention to the world of objects as one which is always a historical world of layered temporalities. The mattering map touches on what I propose as Gibson's practice of "reading as *dérive*" because through a modality of reading (in his case, mapping), traveler and city are locked in an endless but changing assemblage.

4.2 Gibson's Reading Body

If I insist here, and I do, on retaining the word "*dérive*" in order to propose that Gibson exhibits a practice of "reading as *dérive*" it must certainly be because the *dérive* of the SI and Debord, despite its many flaws, still has much to offer. What I appreciate about *dérive*, and what carries over into "reading as *dérive*," is the

embodied wandering that, through its attention to the material world (soft and hard ambiances: light, shadow, buildings, causeways, patches of community greenery, etc.), attempts to combat spectacle-effects. Where the theory of the reading body departs from Debord, however, is on the issue of affect. The kind of wandering proposed by Debord is too deeply rooted in processes of language and reason, so while the body did the wandering, the center of meaning, and the faculties of interpretation, significance and logic remained entirely too alert. Modeled on affect theory, the relationship between the readerly body and the world easily circumvents otherwise pesky Enlightenment ideals and constructions like the Individual and the Collective. At stake in this circumvention is a readerly body that gives way to Simondon's ontological process of individuation, which suggests a movement of circulation that is in direct opposition to the mode of circulation inscribed in neo-liberal economic thought. So while Debord's work on the spectacle hints at several issues bound up with capitalism, his double-inattention to the actual workings of capital, i.e. currency, and semiology (the social work of sign production) means that ultimately his *dérive* fails to adequately address the central tenet of liberalism: deregulation. The reading body, by contrast, gives circulation as an ontological process of individuation that remedies deregulation, which, as Rimbaud taught us,⁸⁵ is nothing other than a severing of the link to the real by extension, the birth of value.

The "Nixon shock" of 1971 effectively suspended the relationship between

⁸⁵ In Rimbaud's *Lettres du voyant*, debauchery, drugs, poisons, crime, and sickness as methods to bring about "deregulation."

sign and referent when the Federal Reserve was no longer obligated to tie the dollar to gold. Much like Saussure's language system, the deregulated currency market consists in autonomous circulation. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure famously remarks that, "it is not the metal in a coin which determines its value" (117). Saussure's point was that without a gold standard, the coin is arbitrary. He continues on to explain that the value of the coin "varies somewhat according to the effigy it bears" (ibid). This example of the coin hints at the larger implications that underwrite claims Saussure makes about language, namely, it indicates the economic basis of his theory of value. Coins and linguistic signs both operate as a "system of pure values" (18), insofar as they don't attain value from external and material sources, only from the placement and relation between components within the system. Or, as he writes of linguistic signifiers, "They are not physical in anyway. They are constituted solely by difference which distinguish one such sound pattern from another" (139). In this way, economic production refers equally to sign production and money production. So much like the political economy, the linguistic one also relies on the dialectic of use-value and exchange-value. Saussure breaks down how all value is constituted:

- 1 by something *different* which is liable to be *exchanged* with the thing whose value is to be determined;
- 2 by *similar* things that can be *compared* with the thing whose value is in question

These two factors are necessary for the existence of a value. Thus, in order to determine what a five franc coin is worth, one must know: 1. that it can be exchanged with a determinate quantity of a different thing, for example, bread; 2. that it can be compared with a similar value in the same system, for example, a one franc coin, or with the currency of another system (a dollar, etc.). Likewise, a word can be exchanged with something different: an idea; moreover, it can be compared with something having the same nature: another word.

The homology that Saussure is building here between political economy and linguistics points to the central aspects of all value: it is created through an autonomous free play of signs that bears no link to the material world. And despite the fact that "a community is necessary in order to establish values...values have no other rationale than usage and general agreement" (157), there is still no proper or natural connection between coin and gold (the representation and the material world), only a link that is tenuous at best. And it is the reading body that, through its encounter with this tenuous link, is able to intuit the integrity of the connection. Gibson demonstrates this in two ways: 1) on a representational level through the figure of Cayce whose affective relationship to the world and the semiotics of the market gives her the ability to recognize patterns (in an embodied and affective way) that are actually linked to reality; and 2) in a performative way that commandeers the reader of *Pattern Recognition* into a reading body.

William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* is the first of the unofficial "Blue Ant

Trilogy." The world in which the trilogy takes place is not unlike our own: the major cities of London, Moscow, New York City, Tokyo and Los Angeles maintain their non-fictional geographies and ambience, certain historical and cultural markers (like Bay of Pigs, 9/11, WWII, and the fall of the Berlin wall, pilates, coca-cola and the color of River Phoenix's hair the night he died) indicate a productive overlap between fictional and non-fictional worlds. Gibson is particularly interested in tracing the flows of capital and information and the novels take shape under the themes of advertising and espionage. The trilogy itself takes the name of the most insidious advertising corporations of them all, Blue Ant. The main character of *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard, is a "cool hunter" for a living (she detects emergent trends and has the super-power of feeling if a logo will be marketable or not), and she reluctantly joins forces with Blue Ant, which she describes as:

Relatively tiny in terms of permanent staff, globally distributed, more post-geographic than multinational, the agency has from the beginning billed itself as high-speed, low-drag life-form in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivore. Or perhaps as some non-carbon based life-form, entirely sprung from the smooth and ironic brow of its founder Hubertus Bigend, a nominal Belgian who looks like Tom Cruise on a diet of virgins' blood and truffled chocolates. (7)

Though it would never occur to Cayce to express it this way, her reluctance to join Bigend's corporation stems from the fact that Gibson's trilogy seems to implicitly take up Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" formulation in which this mode of capitalist

existence has brought us to the fulfillment of the Hegelian dialectic. Or, in other words, as Fukuyama himself explains this circumstance in his essay "The End of History?" (published in *The National Interest*):

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Gibson's article, "Will We Plug Chips into Our Brains," very much echoes this statement when he writes that "our real future" is nothing other than our "ongoing present" (84). In *Pattern Recognition*, Fukuyama's idea of the "end of history as such" resonates with how Cayce frames Bigend's exploits, yet it hardly aligns with how he frames his own philosophy of the future and of historical consciousness. She senses that Bigend tends toward homogenization and universalization because he strives to hail from "a country without borders...where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of, all experience having been reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price-point variations on the same thing" (352). This is perhaps a miscalculation of Bigend, because this Fukuyama-esque account of the future seems to be at odds with Bigend's own image of the future and the present:

...we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater

duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. [...] We have only...Pattern recognition. (58)

Against the homogenous present that would come after history's "final" realization, Bigend suggests that the "now" is actually radically volatile. It's not that Fukuyama was saying that things stop happening after history ends, but whatever does happen is subsumed or sublated into the last stage. Bigend's cyber-techno-hyper modernity, which is at once triumphantly and bleakly capitalist, follows Fukuyama as far as it can go, but ultimately it suggests that we have not arrived at the end of history. Edging in at the corners of the narrative of *Pattern Recognition* are indications of a life not fully hemmed in by the spectacle, or by capital.

Bigend is not quite the hard-nosed capitalist he first appears to be because he is less interested in capital and commodities, and more interested in the kinds of games capitalism affords him, or as he says "I don't count things in money. I count them in excellence" (68). One such conquest comes in the form of a piece of cinematic artwork known as "the footage." The footage is a series of fragments that mysteriously appear on the internet, and despite or due to the lack of narrative, purpose, era, and origin, it has assembled around itself a cult-like following. Cayce's compulsion to unravel the mystery of the footage is what compels her to join forces with Bigend (who has the cash and contacts she needs), but she remains suspicious of his motives for wanting to discover the maker of the footage and she fears that the footage will fall victim to Bigend's tendency toward commodity reification.

Both Debord and Gibson recognize a kind of "spectacle" inherent in the experience of late capitalism. For Debord, the spectacle-effect is brought on by capital and technology, and it dulls the experience of life, so against it he proposes against it the tactic of the *dérive*, which appeals to notions like authenticity and utopia. The spectacle, as Debord speaks of it, is unwittingly and passively "consumed" by society, so *dérive*, undertaken by "individuals" (i.e. by sovereign subjects, or even "individuals collectively"), attempts to "produce" spaces beyond the reach of the spectacle. In Gibson's world, the spectacle is likewise all-encompassing but he nonetheless proposes lived reality *as* technologically and capitalistically augmented. There is no "beyond" the spectacle to which his *dérive* would aspire. Wandering, as a modality of reading, is not an attempt to exit the spectacle, it is a way to navigate it and ultimately to un-work it. In this way reading, which is often thought of as a passive activity, is instead revealed to be outside of a consumer economy, but unlike Debord's *dérive*, this does not automatically place it within a productionist one. Reading neither consumes nor produces worlds, it is itself economic, which is to say, relational in a fundamental way. Gibsonian *dérive* is not about "reading between the lines," i.e. revealing the authentic life that exists beneath the spectacular one, nor is it about producing an abstract world through reading into which one can escape. It is a tactic of economic interfacing through which we experience the world and others, and as such it becomes a political practice undertaken neither by the "individual" nor "the collective" (as is the case with Debord's *dérive*), but by some other as-yet-unthought

figures: the reader, and "the literary community."⁸⁶ Reading as *dérive* exposes both humans and world not as "things" but as processes of pure becoming. This dynamic process relies on and is hemmed by the historical world of objects, and thus is it reading that un-works the bonds suggested by Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis. There is a tension at the heart of *Pattern Recognition* between emergent worlds and readers, and the capitalist telos that suggests such becomings are impossible.

As I mentioned earlier, Cayce is only one type of readerly body that emerges through Gibson's text, and the other type is the reader of the text itself. A minor example of this comes by way of the reader's affective relationship to the text. The heart-pounding espionage element spills off the page and into the reader's pulse. When Dorotea offers Cayce water you practically scream at the book "don't drink that, idiot!" and as Cayce passes out from the (obviously!) poisoned beverage you panic about what is going to happen next. Beyond moments like these, *Pattern Recognition* solicits an apophenic response from its reader. We the readers become aligned with Cayce's mom who hears Win's voice in static because every time we read we risk "reading into" things like how the rose petal fell in the same moment bodies fell from the tower during 9/11. Our paranoia over an apophenic reading of the text multiplies and with each page we wander or detour through and we are forced to wonder if we too mistake noise for signal. This is the first sense in which reading as

⁸⁶ In *The Unavowable Community*, Maurice Blanchot writes of an "ideal community of literary communication" (21) that assembles writers in an asymmetrical relationship of communication founded on the "infiniteness of abandonment" (25). Rendered anonymous, neutral, and open by the practice of writing, writers gives themselves (*don*) through abandonment. I propose here a complimentary figure of the Reader.

dérive manifests itself, Cayce delivers us the next.

Cayce who is a literal wanderer (she jet-sets a lot), is also a "cool hunter" who performs an embodied reading of the world for a living which entails both figurative and bodily wandering. Blue Ant, the corporate face of its founder Hubertus Bigend, hires Cayce because of a certain sensitivity she has regarding the hyper-industrial material semiotics of logos and branding. Trademarks, which operate on the levels of the symbolic and the iconic, make her physically ill. This is the source of her genius, because "serving as a very specialized piece of human litmus paper" (13), she knows (or rather, "feels" or "senses") whether or not a new logo or branding campaign will be successful on the market. Bigend has his own theories about how her "allergies" or her "tame pathologies" (67) operate. He explains to Cayce that her maladies regarding advertising as well as her intuition regarding the footage reside in her "limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain. Deeper, wider, beyond logic. That is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex" (71). Part of what makes Bigend such an effective (if not slightly sinister) player in the world market (and in both legal and "criminal" enterprises) is that he has made this philosophy the "core tenet" of Blue Ant, namely, "that all truly viable advertising addresses that older, deeper mind, beyond language and logic" (71). The reason Bigend needs Cayce, "a dowser in the world of global marketing," to aide in his pursuit of the footage is precisely because she is equipped, as a reading body that relies on affect, with the skills and tactics necessary to navigate a world of *Pattern Recognition*, a world overrun by spectacular hand of the market where signs don't congeal into a grammar and the symbolic

(arbitrary) and iconic threaten the indexical at every turn.

American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, furnishes a sign theory that classifies three types of signs that humans use to represent the world: icons, indexes, symbols. His account has become the textbook standard in many discourses including the semiotics of advertising. What Peirce delivers is an account of a system of signification, representation and reference that is neither self-contained nor entirely dependent on social or biological factors. It is an economy of meaning wherein signs, signification and the external world interface endlessly and in varying arrangements. In *Global Marketing and Advertising*, Marieke de Mooij elaborates Peirce's sign theory by writing that "an *icon* bears a resemblance to its object. An *index* is a sign with a direct existential connection with its object--smoke is an index of fire. A *symbol* is a sign whose connection with its object is a matter of convention, argument, or rule" (64). I would add to Mooij's definition of symbol that signs that function as symbols are arbitrary and so the interpreter relies on habituated patterns of association to arrive at a relation of meaning. Peirce's trichotomy of signs are not mutually exclusive, take for example the Christian cross which is both iconic in the sense that it bears the shape of the cross upon which Christ was crucified but it is also symbolic in that it has been generally (and habitually) agreed upon that it represents Christianity. Mooij suggests that culture itself "is the shared ability to recognize, decode, and produce signs and symbols" (ibid), or in other words it is the ability to discern patterns from a deluge of information, to read. But in the world of *Pattern Recognition* all culture has been reduced to the violent semiotics of the market place

(4) and that is why Cayce pursues the footage, "an experience outside of culture" (137), with almost religious fervor.

Cayce's first violent phobic reaction occurs at the age of six when she was confronted with the Michelin Man mascot: Bibendum.⁸⁷ Bibendum, with its "bloated, maggot-like form" (35), is purely symbolic, a manifestation of commodity meaning. As a six-year-old, her reaction does not stem from a rationalization of the mascot in these terms, rather, it's as Bigend said, there's something in her limbic brain (unlike the limbic brains of the rest of the consumer market), the seat of all affect, that is disoriented and repulsed by strong symbolism and weak indexicality (existential contiguity). Cayce's disease is so nuanced that even she doesn't understand the ins and outs of it, and she catches herself wondering why do "Japanese franchises like Hello Kitty not trigger interior landslide" (128)? Likewise she notes that in Tokyo "whole seas of Burberry plaid have no effect...nor Mont Blanc nor even Gucci" (130). The provisional answer she suggests is because, in Tokyo, "certain labels are mysteriously recontextualized here" (130). In Gibson's writings, Japan and by extension Tokyo operate as a kind of "elsewhere," a vortex of consumer-culture that appears absolute. Anthony Bourdain, in *Kitchen Confidential*, gives his own description of Tokyo as this kind of elsewhere when he writes:

The city of Tokyo is an amazing sprawl--something out of William

⁸⁷ Stephen L. Harp performs a wonderful reading of the Michelin Mascot in *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France*. He notes that "in several important respects, Bibendum revealed and humorously reinforced gender, racial and class hierarchies in early-twentieth-century France" (16).

Gibson or Philip Dick--seeming to go on forever. [...] As I got closer to my destination, it was getting dark, with giant, screaming video screens advertising beverages and cellphones and recording artists, garish signs in English and Japanese, lines of cars, crowds of people -- row after row after row of them, surging through intersections in orderly fashion. This was *not* America or anyplace remotely like it.

Things on the other side of the world were very, very *different*. (275)

The hyper-capitalist aesthetic of the electric Tokyo skyline is indeed part of the ambiance that Gibson creates. On the other side of this accelerated and decadent capitalist aesthetic is a post-commodity approach modeled on obsession. The otaku makers of Cayce's MA-1 jacket, for example, have re-issued this vintage jacket but unlike Tommy Hilfiger whose "stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row..." (18), her Rickson's has been "created by Japanese obsessives driven by passions having nothing at all to do with anything remotely like fashion" (11). In fact, her MA-1 is not merely a knock-off or imitation or reproduction because of its indexical value:

Cayce knows, for instance, that the characteristically wrinkled seams down either arm were originally the result of sewing with pre-war industrial machines that rebelled against the slippery new material, nylon. The makers of the Rickson's have exaggerated this, but only very slightly, and done a hundred other things, tiny things, as well, so

that their product has become, in some Japanese way, the result of an act of worship. It is an imitation more real somehow than that which it emulates. (ibid)

The jacket is not a representation of an object, nor is it a replication of an original. Through something very much like *détournement*, the jacket has become a new assemblage, and one that points to the historical conditions of its emergence: "pre-war industrial machines" (ibid). Just as a knock at the door is indexical of someone wanting to enter, the exaggerated seam is indexical of the technogenesis of sewing processes. In Gibson's novel, commodity reification passes through commodity deification ("acts of worship"), and powerfully remixes signs until complete disorientation ensues. But this disorientation provides "recontextualization" that soothes Cayce and allows her to operate differently than she otherwise would under the normal circumstances of fast capitalism where novelty and commodity are engaged in a constant tug-of-war, tugging at her field of vision. Tokyo, which is perceived as more heavily saturated by "the digital" and by the spectral hand of the market than other world cities, is actually more invested in disrupting the spectacle through a penchant for the indexical. Indexicality, which tethers itself to material referents, is very important to Cayce's practice of reading because it is the ground of experience, a formative encounter with information. Unlike her encounters with the symbolic that leave her floating from empty sign to empty sign, indexicality forecloses the possibility of apophenia, a paranoid reading of the world.

As a "cool hunter," Cayce must employ her powers of pattern recognition in

order to detect emergent trends, i.e. novelty, or a disruption in the pattern, and then hand that information over to commodifiers who short-circuit that disruption and restore the smooth calm of spectacular commodification. Pattern recognition is described in the text as both a gift and a curse insofar as humans can recognize patterns (and in the case of marketing, capitalize on them), but they can also falsely perceive (i.e. generate) ones that aren't really there. This flipside of pattern recognition is apophenia or "the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things (117). Bibendum seems to operate precisely on the level of apophenia because as part and parcel of the language of advertising or commodity reification, he evacuates the indexical in favor of the symbolic, which is nothing more than the cultural (arbitrary and eternal) injection of meaning or connection. The trouble with consumer culture is that it cannot read in the same way that Cayce does, and the semiotics of the marketplace can secret-in all kinds of apophenic connections through the use of symbol, emblem and icon. Apophenia and pattern recognition seem to be two sides of the same coin insofar as they both rely on tenuous connections between signs and referents that, with the exception of the indexical, are wholly arbitrary. Patterns, apophenic or not, are immaterial, and they come from sorting through information, which itself is distinct from the markers that embody it. In the case of advertising, which relies on heavy symbolism and iconicity and not indexicality, the meaning that arises is strictly apophenic. While neither apophenia nor pattern recognition are able to make claims to "truth" or "fidelity" of meaning at least pattern recognition is essentially, as Bigend says, "risk management.

The spinning of the given moment's scenarios" (59). This definition confirms that to some extent, patterns are always apophenic, but it likewise accounts for the contingency of the moment as well as the material conditions of the experience of that moment. Information, when it is controlled by the apparatus of the advertising industry, communicates in a sphere independent of social and biological environments through its appeal to the symbolic which does not point the information back at its material markers. However, reading as *dérive* indicates an experience of information that maintains a deictic link between it and the "given moment's scenarios" (ibid), i.e. the confluence of time and space in the material world. In this way, the material world is not subsumed, homogenized and eternalized by apophenic logos like Bibendum, it is incorporated in an on-going process of the formation and re-formation of patterns, and essentially, of history.

And yet the perspective granted by the thematics of advertising and pattern recognition, delivers only part of the foundation needed for a theory of reading as *dérive* (and sometimes as *détournement*). While the backdrop world of *Pattern Recognition* explicitly links the realm of advertising to the space of the digital, the narrative itself un-works this coherence. As a reader of marketplace semiotics, Cayce senses in her limbic brain when she has successfully stumbled upon a piece of advertising that will be effective, and usually this makes her very ill. I suggest that these symptoms are produced through the larger disease of empty-sign syndrome (and thus all manner of deregulation), where signified and signifier don't match up, reference of all kind is endlessly deferred, and the material world slips away into

abstraction. Contemporary discourse about the "reality" and ramifications of internet and other digital devices, seems to suggest a similar definition of the digital.

However, the major manifestations of "the digital" in *Pattern Recognition*, namely the internet and the mysterious digital footage, challenge the idea that the digital is not grounded in any way in the material world. If the footage and the forum were not somehow physically or causally linked with the material world, they would trigger Cayce's phobic reaction like *Bibendum*.

The stakes of the argument that the digital is indexical become more clear if you consider the medium of *Pattern Recognition* itself, that is to say, a modality of representation: literature, writing, *écriture* in the Blanchotian sense. The same logic that privileges the photograph over the digital image as a "true" bearer of reality, also attempts to sever any ties between the "immaterial" book and the material world. Reading as *dérive* demonstrates that information is not simply a pattern that exists beyond its material markers because not only does information interface the reader and the environment, it intervenes, or, as Gilbert Simondon will formulate it, it participates in a transductive modulation. Before moving into Simondon, it suffices to say here that reading is a modality of disorientation and disaster insofar as it takes the reader outside of language and logic, i.e. outside of signification as a system of communication, and the reader engages in her activity not to interpret and not to arrive at meaning, but to form and be formed through the materially situated act of reading. The reading body and its alliance with indexicality therefore deliver circulation as ontology, unlike the circulation of the neo-liberal economy, which is

founded on deregulation, the severing of the link to the world.

4.3 Liminality and Indexicality of the Digital

Pattern Recognition's investment in the interface between reader and world is marked by the theme of liminality that appears throughout the text in many different guises. Through liminality (like rites of passage, initiations, pilgrimages) new systems and paradigms emerge, and a mode of "becomingness" rules the day. The word "liminal" is, according to Cayce's therapist, the "word for certain states: thresholds, zones of transitions" (263). Not only are there many "zones" in the text ("time zone," "design-free zone," "all-night zone," "pink zone," "Frozen zone"), but the prefix "trans-," which indicates a movement of crossing, the traversal of zones, occurs an astonishing fifty-two times: From objects like "the transparent mouse," "transatlantic zeppelin," an advertising firm called "TRANS," "transcripts" (4, 10, 86, 269), to acts such as "transgression," "transferring," "translation," "transaction," "transmission," "transfusion" (20, 47, 53, 154), to other assorted descriptive qualities and states of being, like "translucency," "transitory," "transport," and "transfixed" (57, 41, 94, 190). The main action of *Pattern Recognition* is also tied to hubs or nodes wired into a larger circuit. In fact, one can read spaces like hotels, airports, and "the street" as threshold zones rife with "betweenness." Gibson further suggests certain figures of liminality like Win, Cayce's father who disappears on the morning of 9/11. Win is perpetually locked between the time of death and the time of burial, just as Cayce is trapped between the time of his disappearance and the arrival of her grief in the last pages of the novel. Or there is Hobbs-Baranov who, we are told, "emails from within

the hyphen" of his name. Likewise, the teenagers at the dig (neither boys nor men, they are at a threshold), and otaku (like Taki) are the figures *par excellence* of the non-socially integrated and hence liminal characters.

But the strongest marker of liminality is the footage. Cayce and other footageheads gather in the internet of F:F:F (Footage:Fetish:Forum), and together they "comprise the first true freemasonry of the new century." This is to say of course that, guided by the principles of fellowship and ritual, bordering on obsession, this autonomous guild dabbles not in stone, but in networks, systems, and all that makes up the digital modern epoch. There are seventy-eight segments of footage and what draws Cayce in is the fashionless, timeless, semiotic neutrality that draws her in, as well as the question of provenance, which has been tantalizingly obscured by its mysterious circulation on the net. The affective impact of the footage is remarkable and for the footageheads, "the opening of an attachment containing unseen footage is profoundly liminal. A threshold state" (22). Footageheads do not passively consume segments, rather, as "fanatical investigators" (49) they collectively share, disseminate, remix, discuss, and argue over the scraps of film. For many footageheads, their relationship to the footage, and to F:F:F, is so "profoundly liminal" (*ibid*), in that it shapes the course of their life and in some cases it does so through the quintessential liminal process: everting. "Everting" is when the digital world manifests itself physically in the material world. For example, by the end of the book "Parkaboy" is no longer an internet handle on F:F:F, he is a man in Cayce's bed.

The inescapability of the liminal in *Pattern Recognition* suggests circulation not just as a mode of "doing" but as a mode of "being." This notion of circulation and interface as ontology is reinforced when Cayce meets the makers of the footage: Stella and Nora. When Cayce finally is able to contact who she assumes is the singular maker of the Footage, Stella Volkova, Stella tells her "I am twins...Nora is the artist. I, I am what? The distributor" (296). Neither an "I" nor a "We," the makers of the footage defy these typical determinations of the human and instead exist as a conduit through which art flows. With a piece of the Claymore mine's arming mechanism lodged in her brain, Nora's body operates as both a traditional human body and also an assemblage of military technology.⁸⁸ The actual crafting of the footage is so indelibly tied to Nora's health that the distinction between "doing" (*tekhnē*) and "being" (*physis*) falls away--the moment she ceases to "zoom. Point. Click. zoom out" she also ceases to breathe and eat. Nora's injury, her wound, as neither internal nor external is precisely a fissure, a rupture, or a liminal wound "speaking wordlessly in the dark" (316).

⁸⁸ The fusion of the human and the technological or mechanical, or what I like to think of as interfacing, occurs with great frequency throughout the novel thus pointing to the convergence of body, technology and the social body: "whatever weird, sad, scary, deeply Russian scenario Stella and her twin are socketed into" (303); "Cayce bookmarking like the shutter of a camera" (297); "A woman jogs past, crunching gravel, breathing like a piston" (267); "mechanically consuming a bowl of Thai salad" (ibid); "if a mechanism can slither" (261); Greenaway's shop is called "Greenaway" suggesting a confluence of man and store (258); "lungfish primitive connection machine" (225); and the fact that Cayce's clothing is referred to as "CPU" (central processing unit). Cayce often fights interfacing through compulsive showering, exercise and mantric chanting (all activities that attempt that center the body in itself), but finally she "gives herself over to the dream," a phrase used to reference the footage, which is produced at "Dream Academy" (265) and a phrase used when she enters the Moscow metro (307).

The indexical nature of the footage is tied to the trauma that has left Nora unable to speak or interact, and only able to generate footage. The injury to Nora came from the T-shape of the arming mechanism on a M18A1 Claymore mine which is firmly lodged in her brain and thus "her consciousness, Cayce understands, somehow bounded by or bound to the T-shaped fragment in her brain..." (316). In *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, Philip Rosen writes that "digital imaging is not just a matter of technically efficient inscription, but of sundering the contact between world and image, and between machine and reference, which is the very currency of the indexical" (306). Well, what Gibson gives us here is a situation in which new relationships between the material and digital world must be redrawn.

If index is a sign that is linked to its object by a real relation held to a definite time and place, then it seems to be strictly relevant to photography whose photochemical process is the mark of its indexicality. I would argue, however, that the digital images that Nora remixes takes data sets (pixels) and turns them into visible analogs thus maintain an indexical relationship despite the fact that the mediating materiality is numbers. Take for example, the Judy/Keiko character. Cayce and Musashi photograph the twenty-seven year old bartender, "long tall Judy" (133), and then "reduced her by at least a third, in Photoshop" (ibid) in order to "maximize libidinal disturbance" (ibid) for Taki. Judy was imported as a data set into Photoshop and then reassembled in a new visual order, as Keiko, his "big-eyed, Clydesdale-ankled love" (180). As proof that Keiko must have maintained some indexical relationship to here Judy-referent, Taki eventually does "reverse the flow of data" so

that they "psychosexual cruise missile that is Judy, tweaked, has found its mark" (175).

Cayce and her footagehead friends discover that each of the segments of footage is encoded with a watermark that, when decoded, places the segments on a T-shape map (maps themselves are inherently indexical). The significance of this is revealed (to some extent) after Cayce learns about Nora's trauma and the T-shaped fragment lodged in her brain, grafting her consciousness to the material object. In this instance, the indexical value of the footage stems from the interface between consciousness and shrapnel, which in turn determines their placement. The footage itself, however, comes from frame grabs of CCTV footage. The process through which Nora's art flows may strain normal determinations of "indexicality," but it strengthens the definition that I am attempting to build here. Nora zooms in on tiny aspects of the referent captured by surveillance footage and then wrenches it from its context and recontextualizes it digitally. For example, Cayce watches Nora build up segments of the footage "from almost nothing" (315) like when a man "stood on a platform in a station, and turned, and raised his hand, the motion captured, the grainy image somehow finding its way, however much later, to one of Nora's subsidiary screens" (ibid). The existential aspect of indexicality, i.e. the "fact" of that man's gesture in a particular place at a particular time, is seemingly severed by the "darting cursor" that isolates the gesture from the man that once stood on a platform and places it "today" on a screen. However, the "fact" of that man's gesture has merely

been recoded and transmitted as information, there is no loss only movement and circulation.

The movement of vital life force as information is captured in a special turn of phrase that Gibson invents in *Pattern Recognition*: "zaprundered." The footage affected and inspired some footage heads to create fan-fiction type footage of their own, or, as the narration reads: "zaprundered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own" (24). In the exact same way that Cayce's MA-1 jacket is not a knock-off of some original, but "an imitation more real somehow than that which it emulates" (11), these clips are not mere mimicry. Of course "zaprundered" refers to Abraham Zapruder who, with his home camera, captured the footage of the Kennedy assassination. Øyvind Vågnes also turns Zapruder's name into verb for the title of his book *Zaprudered: The Kennedy Assassination Film in Visual Culture* and, as the introduction explains, "...the subject of this book, which, as the title suggests, explores the journey of Zapruder's images rather than his film" (6). The film taken by Zapruder is accidental and it is indexical, i.e. legitimated and connected to the historical circumstance through the chemical process of his 8mm film in his Bell & Howell Zoomatic Director Series Model 414 PD. What happens to the index in the post-photographic (digital) after-life of something like this? Vågnes suggests that Zapruder's images function as a "Rorschach of cultural memory" because:

If we see them in a clip in one of the televised specials that map the major events of a century, they are placed within a larger narrative

structure that is specific to the medium of television. If we see them in a theater, they have been edited into a movie and figure there in a way that is integral to a corresponding logic of storytelling. If we see images on the Internet, on a website like YouTube, amateurs have played around with them on their desktops before posting something that yet resisted generic description...Unlike the film, which seems to have reached its final destination in a vault at the National Archives, the journey of Zapruder's images has no end. (6)

Were the images to have reached a post-indexical state in their digital afterlives, this would be a simple case of quotation. Essentially, the YouTube afterlives of the footage take a turn for the hyperindexical insofar as they manufacture the indexical relationship in their pixels. The primary photochemical relationship is coded and transmitted endlessly, rather than becoming infinitely diluted or completely severed.

The revelation that the digital possesses indexical capacities is important because if indexicality implies a relation to the real world, then the digital when seen as non-indexical appears to be completely artificial and separate. The move of the material object from perceptual to conceptual (math) and back to digitally perceptual does not negate indexical links. Rather, it implies coding, the movement of information, as a dynamic process of change. Where a photograph represents the appearance of an object, the digital circulates the behavior or information of that object. This circulation is, furthermore, outside of the regime of representation because it concerns a modification of form rather than the question of presence or

absence. In the end, the digital world, and especially how it is figured in *Pattern Recognition*, highlights not only that the living being is a nexus of communicative information for other living beings, but that it is an internal resonance that is part of a process that includes the physical world as well. Simondon elaborates this process as that of "transduction," which in basic terms implies that everything is affected by everything else on four major levels: physical, biological, psychic and social. The transduction of information allows for a thought of the living being as a phase of individuation rather than as something beholden to form. The theory of individuation, therefore, retools "circulation" as an ontological process that is grounded in the reality of the material world.

4.4 Simondon and an Ontology of Information

In *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* Simondon declares that "it is necessary to replace the notion of form with information" (211). This marks a departure from the hylomorphic thought as presented through the works of Aristotle wherein matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*) combine to create the individual, a substance. This model not only insists on the union between pre-formed elements (which moreover is an imposition of form upon matter), but it ignores any operation or genesis of that formation. Simondon's attention to information is also therefore attention to the "zone" between form and matter, "a zone of medial and intermediary

dimension,"⁸⁹ where information ignites individuation. Information is the cause or operation that, through an affective relationship with both transmitter and receiver, is the source of all mutation, change, and it points to the "individual" as a result of a process, a unit of "howness" and not the unit of "whatness" proposed by Aristotle and later, the scholastics. This ontogenetic account also gives the human not as the "Individual" of the liberal humanist tradition, but only as individuation arrested for some practical purpose at a certain moment. The notion of "arrest" and "phase" indicate the non-totalizing and metastable nature of the system proposed here. In other words, the "individual" in Simondon's account is grasped as a phase of being (as opposed to a state) which supposes before it a pre-individual reality and which, even after individuation, does not exist alone because individuation does not exhaust at once the pre-individual milieu. Information then is never something that flows between two terms that could be thought of as fully formed individuals, or between an individual and finalized world, it is energy modeled on tropism. Tropism indicates information as a stimulus that provokes a response and a rearrangement of the elements affected--not a shift of state, but a shift of phase--and it places emphasis on experience rather than totality, stasis or equilibrium. Information in this sense is a productive disturbance, the results of which are new dispositions and new forms.

Simondon rests his metaphysical account of individuation on the physical (biochemical) process of crystallization, a brief summary of which is offered here in order to better elaborate the stakes of the transductive relationship between pre-

⁸⁹ See Simondon's *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1989. p. 60.

individual milieu and singularity (that which bears information). The process of crystallization begins in an amorphous mother-liquor or mother-water. This mother-water is characterized by its molecular instability, but it is neither this phase nor a phase of molecular stability that will produce crystals. Rather, the mother-water much reach a state of what Simondon calls "metastability." This process occurs with the introduction of a disturbance, in the case of the crystal, the "seed" or "germ-cell," i.e. information, or singularity. Simondon explains the exchange of energies and information between mother-water and germ-cell in *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* when he writes that:

A crystal that, from a very small seed, grows and expands in all directions in its supersaturated mother liquid provides the most simple image of the transductive operation: each already constituted molecular layer serves as an organizing basis for the layer currently being formed. The result is an amplifying reticular structure. (11)

The disparity or heterogeneity between elements allows for an internal resonance between mother-water and germ-cell, and this transductive tension determines the mother-water as a pre-individual milieu just as it determines the germ-cell as a singularity. In other words, the terms are not given in advance, they are formed through the process of individuation. The resulting formation of the crystal resolves the disparity between pre-individual milieu and germ-cell just as it introduces a new metastable milieu, the amplification of the "reticular structure." Simondon figures both human and crystal as "responses" to the information encountered in the on-going

process of individuation, and in so doing, he proposes a generative notion of circulation where information intervenes in the space between human and world.

Chapter Five

Bilge Karasu: Un-working Kemalist Turkey through some very mean books

"The labor of sign production releases social forces and itself represents a social force. It can produce both ideologies and criticism of ideologies. Thus semiotics (in its double guise as a theory of codes and a theory of sign production) is also a form of *social criticism*, and therefore one among the many forms of *social practice*."

-Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*

"Is this system gonna last forever?" (*Bu düzen böyle mi gidecek?*)

-Timur Selçuk

"*insiticii facti*." (Become united.)

-Paul the Apostle, Epistles to the Romans

5.1 Kemalism: The Farcical Return of German Romantic Literature

In 2012, San Francisco's City Lights bookshop released their second Bilge Karasu novel, *A Long Day's Evening* (*Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı* [1971], hereafter referred to as *Evening*), which is composed of three narratives, the first two translated by Aron Aji, and the last by Fred Stark. In his thoughtful preface, Aji notes of *Evening* that it is "one of those rare works that alter a nation's literature" (9). In an interview, Aji elaborates this sentiment by saying that in terms of contemporary Turkish texts, no book since *Evening* has been written independently of this book, and all writers must inevitably pass through Karasu. Intriguingly, Aji also comments

that Karasu writes "very mean books," or, as he later qualifies, books that are difficult to read. The difficulty of Karasu's work is in fact the very quality that allows him to not only foster a new generation of writers but a new generation of readers as well, for what else could "alter[ing] a nation's literature" through "mean books" suggest but the formation of a new readership? In part, what makes Karasu's books so mean yet simultaneously so inescapable to readers and writers of modern Turkish is the fact that he embraces the Kemalist and neo-Kemalist project of the purification of the modern Turkish language.

With the declaration of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk instituted a series of reforms that reverberated across religious, political, cultural and other planes of Turkish life. These reforms, which form the base of what is referred to as Kemalism or Atatürkism, sought to lend a smooth, homogenous, and modern identity to the newly formed nation-state. This project of Kemalism involves the stripping away of modern renditions of Ottoman-era borrowings from other languages, in order to engineer "*öz Türkçe*" or "pure Turkish" for the new Turkish nation from pre-Ottoman Turkic sources. Encouraging a strict monolingual paradigm, the language reforms in 1936 did away with all Ottoman vocabulary and syntax and installed instead a "newspeak" that was invented specifically with the intent to foster a contemporary "people" for the state, through a tie-cutting with *this* past. I emphasize "*this*" past (that is, of Ottoman rule), because in fact the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language (est. 1932) reached back to pre-Ottoman times in order to furnish a truly original and authentic, and in all senses *mythic* (pure and

essential) Turkish language for the modern age. And yet, the alphabet reform of 1928 led to the abandonment of the Arabo-Persian alphabet for the adoption of the Latin alphabet so in fact the unity and purity of *öz Türkçe* was to be the product of both a reaching back and reaching forward, an appeal to an authentic language catapulted into Western modernity through Western script.

It is widely accepted among literary critics that Karasu is indeed a proponent and master of *öz Türkçe*,⁹⁰ yet in what follows I will suggest that his admiration and mastery of *öz Türkçe* is not a simple homage to the purity and unity of the modern Turkish language, but is rather an un-working of the notion that such a thing as "purity" or "unity" in language exists. By embracing *öz Türkçe* and pushing it up against previously unexplored boundaries, Karasu flips the entire modern cultural project of Turkey on its head. If the modern Turkish language was meant to synthesize and complete its pre-Ottoman antiquity (an *Aufhebung* of sorts), Karasu shows only the failure of this project. Unity, community and completion were promised by Kemalist reforms and rhetoric, but Karasu's literary landscapes expose a different Turkish modernity, one that is multiple, un-worked and reveling in incompleteness.

In terms of Karasu's advocacy for language purification, he wrote a 1958 essay, "Irresponsible Purification" ("*Özleştirilmede Sorumsuzluk*"), in support of the Turkish Language Association (*Türk Dil Kurumu*, hereafter called TDK) and their project of

⁹⁰ See Gürbilek, Nurdan "Yazı ve Arınma" *Bilge Karasu Aramızda*, İstanbul: Metis Yayınları. 1997, 182-204; and also, Açıık, Tansu. "Bilge Karasu'nun Yapıt'ına bir çala bakış". *Virgül* 42 (Temmuz 2000): 42-46.

trying to westernize and modernize the Turkish language. The force of the title "Irresponsible Purification" was directed at the previous incarnation of the TDK, known as the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language, which was established in 1932 by Atatürk and which engaged in some "irresponsible" modes of purification like hemming in methods by which new words could or could not be created. In fact, his mastery of *öz Türkçe* is very much tied to his ability to find "work-arounds" grammatically and syntactically. For example, in *Evening Karasu* never uses the word "and" (*ve*) because it is linguistically related to its Arabic counterpart (*wa*), but far from posing a problem, it encourages his structures to take on new forms and ways of conjoining clauses. For Karasu, *öz Türkçe* isn't the static stratified language implied by the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language, it's a dynamic and evolving organon that, through the efforts of the TDK, has emerged on the other side of linguistic engineering not unharmed, but definitely with a sense of resiliency.⁹¹ While it might be a crass oversimplification to state it this way, the reforms wrought by the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language led to a stalemate and its reincarnation, the TDK, was left to clean this mess up. The deadlock produced by the Society occurred because they failed to effectively and uniformly strip the living language of the words that they intended to replace with recovered words and grammatical structures from long-gone sources (like epic tales). The co-existence of the new and old, the correct and incorrect, the

⁹¹ Give a gloss of the TDK's mission as delivered by Karasu in that essay in order to compare it to the "irresponsible" purifications suggested by the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language.

living and the dead words created an artificial language that was unevenly embraced by the people meant to use it, and therefore hardly intelligible to the community it attempted to assemble. The TDK, however, in addition to paying attention to the formal aspects of linguistic engineering through the production of dictionaries and grammar books, publishes stories, narratives, literature, essays and translations. What I characterize here as the "unevenness" of the Society's reforms are further characterized in Karasu's essay as "scattered" and, most importantly, as "individual" (*"kişisel"*). This suggests that the TDK and their promotion of a dynamic and living Turkish language through writing assembles a literary community quite different than the community imagined by the Society and by extension, by Kemalism.

The Kemalist project was not the only one to recognize the importance of language in nation-building. The German romantics too recognized a certain continuity between culture, language and national sovereignty. As Omer Taspinar notes in *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey*, "in the writings of Herder, Schleiermacher, and Fichte, language was described as the distinctive expression of a particular form of life, and its purest authentic form became the key test of the existence of a nation" (61). In fact Herder goes so far as to call folk poetry "the archive of a nationality" and "the living voice of the nationalities."⁹² The trouble, though, with the Kemalist agenda to craft a modern concept of "Turkishness" was that pesky Ottoman-era baggage. Taspinar writes that because of this unwillingness to "glorify the Islamic-Ottoman past, the references of Kemalist nation-building had to

⁹² Quoted in William A. Wilson's "Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1993): 819-35, p. 832.

extensively rely on the *mythomotheur* of pre-Islamic Turkish civilizations as the fountainhead of all civilizations and languages" (57). Taspinar is of course referring to the "Turkish Historical Thesis"⁹³ as well as the "Sun The Sun-Language Theory," which was presented at the third Turkish Language Conference in August 1936. This theory, as presented by Necmi Dilmen and supported by Atatürk, figures Turkish as if not *the* primeval language then at least "the closest before its contamination by Arabic and Persian" (Taspinar 57). Yet, as proven by the Society for the Investigation of the Turkish Language a "pure language" might be a useful strategy to assemble a nation in theory, but in practice it's a catastrophe.

Karasu, who recognizes the folly of the Kemalist nationalist brand of *öz Türkçe*, offers a different and more redemptive brand. In fact, his brand of *öz Türkçe* finds an unlikely counterpart in the *Hochdeutsch* (High German) of the early German romantic, Heinrich Heine. Heine's relationship with Romanticism is quite complicated and his writing on the issue ranges from strong defenses to fierce critiques of it. Heine campaigned against that which in Romanticism deified the German *Geist* (spirit), particularly among the nineteenth-century nationalists, yet he nonetheless "remained a Romantic" and "longed for the blue flower in the dream-land of Romanticism."⁹⁴ This avowal of the aesthetic substance of romanticism couples

⁹³ In *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey*, Taspinar writes that this theory "held that the Turks had been forced by drought and hunger to migrate from Central Asia, and in time created the world's great civilizations in the Near East, such as the Sumerians and the Hitties" (57).

⁹⁴ This quote is of course an allusion to Novalis who famously writes of the "*Blaue Blume*" (blue flower) in his unfinished work *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. For the quote

with his searing displeasure with what Walter Benjamin will phrase as "the aestheticization of the political" that he finds in romanticism, and creates a project that maintains this tension at its heart. In *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840*, Thomas Pfau captures beautifully Heine's project of un-working:

The German Jew Heine effortlessly simulates *Hochdeutsch*, thereby evincing its serial reproducibility, its modernity as an arbitrary and manipulable semiotic system, while simultaneously unraveling romantic nationalism's mystification of language as strictly autochthonous matter, the quintessence of linguistic and ethnic purity.

(466)

Both Heine and Karasu provoke movements of inversion and subversion through recuperation, and the closer they follow the patterns and rules of the language that they are attempting to render un-worked, the more effective their projects becomes. In a striking way, Heine and Karasu manage to write in such a way where "impurity" bursts at purity's seams. And very much like Heine, Karasu manages to draw out of the TDK's reforms an *öz Türkçe* that, far from being a sterile Mad Libs template, has generative powers that rely on formal and "pure" structures that in turn un-work the very premises of purity and national identity. In Karasu's case, one such formal structure of Turkish is agglutination. By playing with suffixes and root words, Karasu

from Heine regarding the flower, see Heine, Heinrich. *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb. Munich: Hanser, 1969. vol. 6/1, p. 447.

pushes the boundaries where legibility and intelligibility meet. Something like the root *gül-* which means "to laugh" can, over the course of a few sentences, take on shades of meaning:

Ioakim **gülüyor**, sessizlik içinde, sessiz sessiz **gülüyor** kendi kendine. Kendine **gülüyor**. Daha demin, tepeye çıkarken, bir şey ler bulmak istemesi, bulmadan inmeyeceğine karar vermesi, indi ği halde ağaca dayanıp beklemesi, buraya, döşeğine dönmeđi bu kadar geciktirmesi **gülünç** deđil mi? İnsanın bu yaşa geldikten sonra bile gücünü ölçememesi, yeteneklerini tartamaması, zama nı öğrenmemesi, öğrenememesi, **gülünecek** bir şey deđil mi?[...] **Gülümsedim** (96, my emphasis)

Silently Ioakim **laughs** to himself, **laughs** at himself. Is it not **ridiculous** that, just a little while ago, when he started climbing a hill, he was determined not to descend unless he made a new discovery, then, even when descending, he leaned against a tree, waiting, delaying his return as much as he did? Is it not **laughable** that a person, even at his age, cannot estimate his own strength, his abilities, grasp the meaning of time [...] I **smiled**. (120, translation modified)⁹⁵

While it is not uncommon among root-based languages to form constellations of

⁹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are taken from: Trans. Aji, Aron & Stark, Fred. Karasu, Bilge. *A Long Day's Evening*. City Lights Books, San Francisco. 2012.

similar words, what is highly uncommon is the kind of associative thinking Karasu provokes in his readers. The play of *gül-* in this passage as "to laugh," "laughable," "smiling," "ridiculousness," etc. also calls forth an earlier passage about a rose (*gül*):

Koyulan bir şerbet düşünüyör İoakim, **gül** yapraklarının, rengini yitirdiđi halde, incelik say damlaştığı halde, o şerbetin içerisinde **güllükten**, yapraklıktan, salt tatlılıktan öte bir nesne oluvmelerini düşünüyor. Koyulan, olgunlaşan -aradığı söz, bu- bir

Olgunlaşan. Yemişler düşünüyor şimdi, olgunlaşan, derileri incelen, çatlayan, içlerindeki yumuşaklığı, tatlılığı, artık kapalı, örtülü tutamazmış gibi çatlayan yemişler. (63)

He thinks of a thick nectar, how, suspended in that liquid, the faded, translucent petals of a **rose** suddenly become something beyond **roseness**, beyond petalness, beyond pure sweetness. Dense, ripening-- this, the word he's been looking for--one

Ripening. He is thinking of fruit now, ripening fruits, their skin growing thinner, breaking open, as if they can no longer remain hidden, covered, no longer contain the softness, the sweetness teeming inside of them. (81)

What Karasu says of the rose (*gül*⁹⁶) is perhaps true of language, with the root *gül-* as a representative case: the skin or words that attempt to encase materiality break open, and the sweetness that "teemed inside" seeps out while the "edges of the split skin" (in this case, the edges of the word itself) "blacken quickly...call it rot, call it mold, call it blackness" (81). What is most curious is that Karasu doesn't "need" the rose for this thought, and in fact it appears almost unwieldy to work it in alongside a description of "fruits" (*yemişler* [also nuts, berries]), the rose appears as an afterthought or needless addition. Furthermore, this thematic of ripening as expressed by the Turkish word "*olgunlaşan*" loses a striking connection between the rose and maturation: efflorescence, which is etymologically related to the Latin *efflorescere* which means "to bloom or flourish." By coupling rose with fruit in an allegorical discussion about the bursting skin of words, he invites the reader to make this leap. The skin bursts not due to an inadequacy, the skin is not meant to hold back the sweet fruit but rather to cradle the fruit and mature it, to prepare it for the bursting. Therefore the play of *gül* is at least threefold: 1) As a root, *gül* gives way to a litany of other words with both complimentary and divergent meanings; 2) The process of *gül* linguistically "bursting" is reflected by the imagery of ripening fruit and the petals of a rose (*gül*); 3) The process of maturation, in its alliance with not just fruit but the rose too, engenders a translingual reading that gestures beyond the confines of *öz Türkçe* to Latin's "efflorescence." This is neither a coincidence nor is it a paranoid

⁹⁶ Speakers of Urdu or Arabic might here be questioning the "purity" of a Turkish that uses "*gül*" for rose since Urdu and Arabic also use that word. This sort of occurrence has been accounted for by the Sun-Language Theory mentioned above.

reading based on apophenia, this is what it means to say that Karasu un-works
Kemalism and the premises of *öz Türkçe* from within the confines of Kemalist *öz
Türkçe*.⁹⁷

Words and icons are both technologies that participate (albeit differently) in
an economy of meaning, and Karasu's invocation of iconography from within a
language that has undergone strict "purification" procedures according to Kemalist
reforms demands a reading of his own brand of *öz Türkçe*. I will therefore analyze
Evening's poetic structures (primarily simile, ellipsis, and allegory) against its
narrative backdrop, the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis of the 8th Century, in order to
elaborate the mode of un-working that underwrites Karasu's text. Beyond the
validation or invalidation of the iconophile or iconoclast's position, Karasu's
exploration of similarity and similitude crafts through language a movement that
renders iconicity (of any representational modality whether language [a literary text],
sculpture or painting [an icon]) un-worked. The operation of iconicity that Karasu
interrupts shares some startlingly similar qualities with both Kemalism and the
literary project of the German Romantics. *Evening* is comprised of three separate
narratives,⁹⁸ the last of which ("The Mulberry Trees") departs from the historical
circumstance of the iconoclastic crisis in order to arrive at a narrative that, while set
in 1960s Istanbul, is a reflection on Italy in the late 1930s. This, along with the

⁹⁷ In her article "Where Language is Ripped Apart: Absence and Illegibility in Bilge
Karasu's *The Garden of Departed Cats*", Kristin Dickinson writes that Karasu
"reveals the impossible purity of his own language, by rendering *öz Türkçe*--and its
myth of an original and authentic Turkish vernacular--Other to itself" (107).

⁹⁸ The original Turkish edition clearly divides the book in half with part I consisting
of "The Island and The Hill" and part 2, "The Mulberry Trees."

autobiographical nature of "The Mulberry Trees," has allowed Karasu's readership to perceive the iconoclastic crisis as an allegory of Karasu's own historical moment.

What I'm suggesting, however, is that Karasu's assault on iconicity and Kemalism is actually an assault on notions of purity, completion and totalization (which, incidentally or not, are the buzzwords of German Romanticism), and against these notions Karasu mobilizes certain tactics: simile, ellipsis, and seriality. These techniques give Karasu a basis for un-working through their allegiance to endlessness, deferral and difference, the very root of all "likeness." In this way, writing mean books has intellectual, ethical and political stakes for Karasu who proposes techniques of reading and writing that far from challenging tenets of the official ideology of modern Turkey, simply renders them un-worked.

5.2 Economies of Meaning

Economies of meaning and the ideologies that attempt to rule them comprise the narrative backdrop of *A Long Day's Evening* as well as the historical backdrop of its composition. The first two narratives in *Evening*, "Island" and "Hill," are meditations on the relationship between representation and power, a topic born from Karasu's own experience of a very turbulent 1960-70s Istanbul. The 1960s fall into an epoch sometimes (and quite contentiously) labeled the "neo-Kemalist" period, and the first *coup d'état* of the Republic of Turkey (known as "the coup of May 27th") unfolded in 1960 as the salvation of Kemalist values in a confrontation between the "Kemalist" military and the Democratic Party. When the government was deposed Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was arrested and eventually executed on the

island Yassıada. Menderes had acceded to the role of Turkish Prime Minister in 1950 alongside Celâl Bayar, the third president of Turkey. Menderes and Bayar essentially came to power in the first free elections in the Republic's history, elections which ousted İsmet İnönü who had been Atatürk's successor and thus the second president of the Republic of Turkey. İnönü waited out the ten years of Menderes rule as the Leader of the Opposition before returning to a power position as Prime Minister after the 1960 coup. While the power hand-off in 1950 from İnönü to Bayar/Menderes had been peaceful, it is critical to note that one of their first actions in office was to remove pictures of İnönü from coins, banknotes and stamps, illegally replacing his image with that of Atatürk. Turkish law under Celâl Bayar stated that the image of the current president should circulate on such materials, but Bayar/Menderes wanted to harness the symbolic power of Atatürk to bolster their own political agenda.

Unknown to Karasu of course, as late as 1998 generals would "in the name of Atatürk" violently oppose the first democratically elected Islamic government. This is merely a later example of what Karasu in the 1960s had already tapped into: modalities of representation, whether they are words, icons or symbols, create bonds between signifieds and signifiers that are neither natural nor artificial, they are economic.

In Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary, Marie-José Mondzain explores the iconoclastic crisis of the 8th Century not as a struggle between iconoclasts and iconophiles, but rather as a conflict between ecclesiastical and imperial powers attempting to control a visual economy. She argues

that the Byzantium Christian (Imperial) project presents an "iconocracy" from which "the process of globalizing the image across the whole world has begun" (162). In Mondzain's configuration, the image is the invisible and the icon is the visible, and they are bound up together via "economy," a term she returns to its polysemic fullness beginning with an exploration of its Greek etymological ancestor: *oikonomia*. Mondzain is careful to point out that across many translations of texts "the word *economy* is rendered by different terms such as *incarnation, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, duties, compromise, lie or guile*[...]without the reader being warned of the return of the same Greek word--*oikonomia*--in each case" (13). The term, which does not appear in Homer, Hesiod or Herodotus, but does appear in Xenophon and Aristotle, comes with a certain amount of Aristotelian baggage, particularly from his *Rhetoric*, which bestows a "quasi-judicial" quality that is reflected in Nikephoros's *Antirrhetics*. Literally meaning "household law" (*oiko+nomos*), *oikonomia* is the model of a pre-historical order that is at once natural, sacred and rational. In elaborating this pre-Christian Greek conception of *oikonomia*, Susan Buck-Morss writes in "Visual Empire" that it "provides social cohesion as the precondition for political life" yet it occurs within "a historically prior moment: the original appropriation of the land on which households are established." From this it is clear that beyond the distribution and appropriation of land, *oikonomia* also concerns the distribution and relation between people. Theologians (like Gregory of Nazianzos for instance) however, will turn the determinations of *oikonomia* toward the relational intimacy of *skhesis* by configuring the divine uniplurality economically.

The classical and juridical determination of *oikonomia* is extended through a theological framework by the church fathers who link it to the trinitarian economy in which "the incarnate Son...and his imaginal and historic nature...[are] conceived as an 'economy of the Father'" (21). Specifically, Paul ushers *oikonomia* into ecclesiastical discourse when he uses it to reference the plan of incarnation.⁹⁹ Thus it is truly in the figure of Paul that we find the convergence of *eikôn* and *oikonomia*, for as Buck-Morss points out "... the New Testament never mentions the icon, nor does it deal specifically with issues of visual representation...But...Paul affirms the foundational idea of the icon, the relation of the visible to the invisible, in his repeated assertions that Christ was born 'in the image [*eikôn*] of the invisible God [*tou Theou*]' [Eph. 1: 10 and 3: 9; Col. 1: 15]." In this way, *oikonomia* as refracted through divine uniplurality determines economy not just as what sets the visible and invisible in relation, but rather as "the concept of their *living* linkage" (3). What is most striking in Mondzain's articulation of the visual economy of the image are the ramifications to notions of temporality, specifically the relationship between the eternal and the historical. According to Mondzain, the image is invisible, the icon is visible, and the economy was "the concept of their *relation* and their *intimacy*. The image is eternal similitude, the icon is temporal resemblance. The economy was the theory of the *transfiguration of history*" (3). Economy is thus the historical unveiling of the divine plan, the "temporal unfolding of God's design, through which his substance is distributed and revealed and [...] saves us" (26). The interjection of history allows for

⁹⁹ 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15.

the holding of the natural and consubstantial image with the artificial icon in (dis)unity, insofar as with likeness comes distinction. Or, in other words, what Paul calls the enigma or the secret of the image is precisely the economy in which "the Word marries the flesh" (82), the Christological economy.

The question posed by consubstantiality and Christ as "economy" is also the question that takes us back to Karasu: how can there be a Christological *economy*, that is to say *relationality*, when consubstantiality implies a shared substance, or in other words, when the "image and the prototype are one" (77)? At stake in Mondzain's answer to this question of how economy (relation) can underwrite an essential similitude is a reconfiguration of divine uniplurality that in turn breaks up theological iconicity making totalization impossible. The impossibility of totalization arises because the "relation" of essential similitude is "neither a relation of pure logical identity nor a homonymic relation because it does not refer to an equivalence of signs in the unity of the signified" (77). For Mondzain and the Christological economy the upshot of all this is that "the foundational model of the consubstantial relation makes the image into a figure of meaning *forever*, not into a referential sign cut off from signification, and it is this that the church fathers call a symbol" (77, my emphasis). One of Mondzain's points here is that the iconoclasts build their critiques of icons from within sign-system theories while the church fathers (she cites specifically Nikephoros) will build their defenses from the position granted by the perspective of the image as symbol. Where Karasu begins to intersect with Mondzain is on the point of temporality where the image is a "figure of meaning *forever*." While

economic thinking does much to rescue iconicity from totality by escaping an equivalence between artificial image and denotata, the figural character of the incarnation as eternal (forever-meaning) reinscribes iconicity as an operation of totalization. The historical instantiation of the artificial, visual image (the icon) no longer has the force necessary to render eternity and totality un-worked when the nature of divine plurality as "both imaginal and pneumatic" (77) has the status of a symbol that has a "plural unity of meaning," and has it moreover, forever.

In the same way that the German romantic symbol operates, the image as a "figure of meaning *forever*" produces likewise the unity of the transcendent and the material that creates a miraculous hegemony of symbolic power. Let me be clear that I am not equating the theological conception of symbol with its German romantic counterpart. As Walter Benjamin was eager to point out, romanticism inaugurated an illegitimate discourse around the symbolic and notions of the symbol. In *Allegory and Trauerspiel*, Benjamin explains the usurpation of the theological determination of the symbol by romantic forces occurs because "the unity of the material and transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence" (160). Paradox is integral to the theological symbol and it is paradox that leaves the symbol open and un-worked, yet paradox becomes "a relation" in the wake of romanticism and symbol becomes the image of organic totality. Mondzain, however, shows us that while indeed pure paradox is maintained because "the relationship in question oscillates between the rigor of the Aristotelian *pros ti* and the relational--that is, economic--

mystery of the procession of the divine uniplurality" (77), theological iconicity (even as economic symbol) gives itself over to totality through eternity, and in this sense it remains operational. Karasu's task then is to conceive of an inoperative economy that skirts the issues of totality and eternity and he does so by writing *Evening* serially, or in other words, as an economy of stories.

5.3 Economies of Stories

In the previous section I suggested that in part Karasu's task is aligned with that of Mondzain, which is to say, both expose the theological icon as essentially economic, or, as an "open place, a site for the inscription of the invisible in the visible" (Mondzain 329). Karasu, of course, deals neither with divinity nor with properly theological icons, but his particular mode of writing (and especially given the narrative context of *Evening*) lumps together representational practices with iconicity in intriguing ways. Where Mondzain's discussion focuses on the noneconomic thought of the iconoclasts as evidenced by Nikephoros who delivers to us fragments, or *Questions*, from Emperor Constantine V, *Evening's* plot focuses on the fallout of the noneconomic thought of Leo III, Constantine's father. Mondzain shows how the economy of divine uniplurality resists the totalizing notion that would posit unity between the artificial image (icon) and its invisible divine denotata (similar in fact to the way in which the romantics crassly suggested that allegory is a relationship between appearance and essence). Ultimately, however, the artificial image is inscribed within a larger narrative, that of the incarnation, and thus the

relatively un-worked economy that exists between perceiver, icon, and the ineffable is subsumed back into the highly operative machine of messianism.

As a writer, Karasu's paradigm is stripped of divinity (and also mystery), but it has a similar arrangement in that words are posited to have some sort of connection (and at times a connection of non-connection) to the material world, thus making of them "artificial images." This gap between realms is the premise of all literary theory from the moment we left Eden. For the romantics, the symbol bridged the gap in a brilliant momentary totality. For Blanchot, Derrida, and others the beauty of literature and poetry is that they fail to close the gap, and instead they intensify the gap. The questions posed by iconicity, that is to say, questions surrounding similitude, semblance, representation, signification, and meaning are the very same questions posed by literature itself. While the iconoclastic crisis exposes the political ramifications of such questions because it was overtly motivated by a contest for power between church and empire, anything less than "crisis" (i.e. mere writing, or "normal books") seem to fall outside the political. So to claim that Karasu breaks up theological iconicity in order to prevent totalization is not to imply he takes up some sort of ecclesiastical cause against divine plurality. Rather, he attempts to un-work iconicity in order to make larger claims about the general nature of meaning and its relationship to temporal power. For the theological economy of the icon, Christ (as the marriage of Word and flesh) acts as the main operator. Yet, the removal of Christ from the economy does not make the inverse: a noneconomic conception of

theological iconicity. Rather, it makes an inoperative economy of iconicity, or in Karasu's case, of representation.

In an inoperative or un-worked economy of representation, the fallen world of language does not hope to be redeemed through transcendence, nor does it pretend to gain absolute immanence through fallen-ness. In Mondzain, "economy" implies the site between the visible (the artificial) and the invisible (the natural image) where negotiation takes place. In the Christological economy, this negotiation is very operative insofar as artificial images (icons) are redeemed within the larger plan of the incarnation because of their iconic *homoiôsis*, or "the formal resemblance that cannot be reduced to...facsimile...material copy" (Mondzain 85). In Karasu's inoperative economy of representation the problematic of visibility is reconfigured (the artificial images [language] are the invisible, and the material world is the visible), but stripped of all mystery and grace, this economy deals neither with *homoiôsis* nor facsimile. *Evening* demands a thought of writing that shows language as neither a copy of the material world, nor as a formal resemblance.¹⁰⁰ An inoperative representational economy implies a notion of language that relies on something other than mimicry or immediacy. For Karasu, this "something other" belongs to the order of the performative. The context of *Evening*, the iconoclastic crisis, is precisely the tension between constative and performative images. While

¹⁰⁰ In *The End of the Poem*, Giorgio Agamben writes "The experience of the poet...affirms that...poetry and life...become absolutely indistinct at the point of their reciprocal desubjectivization. And--at that point--they are united not immediately but in a medium. This medium is language" (93).

language necessarily consists of both constative and performative dimensions, Karasu's writing reveals the fragility of the constative when faced with the power of the performative, that is to say, the power to bring new realities into existence.

Mondzain shows that *oikonomia* names an act or event that is transfigurative, and Karasu recuperates this transfigurative capacity through a demonstration of the performative power of signs in the inoperative economy of stories that make up *Evening*. *Evening* is properly an *oikonomia* in part due to its serially structured narratives. The serial nature, that is, repetition with variation, is furthermore reinforced by particular grammatical and syntactical decisions on Karasu's part. I mentioned early that Karasu's use of *öz Türkçe* dictates that he must avoid the Turkish word "ve" (and) because of its Arab and Persian origins (*wa*), and he therefore has to find other ways of conjoining clauses and sentences. This lack of "and" has greater theoretical implications too with regard to *oikonomia*. The words "*wa*" and "*fa*" ("then") are the defining words of *The Arabian Nights*. Not only do they appear frequently,¹⁰¹ they actually bolster the framed structure of the embedded narratives. The premise and structure of the framing and framed narratives is modeled on and unending "and then, and then, and then," with each story remaining autonomous yet

¹⁰¹ Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* presents a slightly more complex look at the uses of *wa* and *fa* as "and" and "then" respectively. He writes that "...it is conventional to translate *wa* as 'and' and *fa* as 'then', but these two conjunctions are regularly made to do far more work than their supposed English equivalents. In certain contexts the correct translation of *wa* will be not 'and', but 'therefore', or 'while', or 'yet', or 'now', or 'many a', or even an emphatic 'by'-- as in 'by the beard of the Prophet!'. Additionally, in the absence of European-style punctuation, *wa* and *fa* can do the work of full stops and commas in breaking slabs of prose" (12). Even with this consideration of the polysemy of *wa*, it is still safe to say that *The Arabian Nights* is written under the sign of "and then."

connected to the others through the power of the frame narrative. Suspicious of such totalizing movements,¹⁰² Karasu has no choice but to move to an economy of stories and he does so through seriality, the nature of which is further elaborated through his use of "*gibi*" (the English equivalent of "like/as") and ellipses.

5.4 Seriality and Simile

The structure of the stories and the nature of the link between them is a hot topic in every book review, critical essay or article about *Evening*. In general, the tendency is to lump together "Island" and "Hill" due to the common characters and themes shared between them, and then to read "Mulberry Trees" as an allegory not only of the Andronikos/loakim cycle, but as an allegory of Karasu's life as well. From a structural standpoint, "Island" and "Hill" hold much interest because the duration of each is the unit of a day, which the characters experience as a duration of a walk. This sort of "cohesiveness" seems to be longed for by readers due to the "mean" nature of the rest of the book, which is to say, due to the interrupted narrative that arrives in flashes of memory and usually further eroded by ellipsis. One commentator on *Evening*, Münevver Kırşallıoba, even attempts to determine what sorts of commonalities override the disparities of the text. Kırşallıoba's thorough yet bizarre

¹⁰² Outside of the literary device of framing, mathematics too suggests totalization by defining frame as "A set of linearly independent vectors taken in a definite order and placed at a common origin. Any three non-parallel vectors not lying in one plane can serve as a frame for the vectors in space." www.encyclopediaofmath.org/Frame

dissertation¹⁰³ pursues an in-depth exploration of the structure of each story by analyzing temporality, common themes and narrative shifts. The various temporalities experienced by Andronikos, Ioakim and Bilge are broken down by Kırşallıoba, and then they are pieced out and read against one another in order to prove that each story possesses an integrity of its own, and yet is interwoven in a larger unity through the "attitude of an individual under oppression" (iv). If the impulse to sleuth out causal connections between narratives, and to suture together what was intentionally delivered as fissured, is this strong it is surely because Karasu has succeeded in producing a narrative that is disorienting and thus very uncomfortable for his readership. Kırşallıoba goes on to map one story upon another through memory, point of view narration, verb tense and even location. There are, apparently, six temporalities that Andronikos experiences, seven for Ioakim, and eight for Bilge. They reflect on their pasts in the monastery, and even "escape" becomes a mode of time. The issue, however, is that Karasu layers time in this way in order to escape the river of chronology that Kırşallıoba basically reinstalls by making discontinuous actions and thought continuous. The establishing of continuity between disparate parts could even be overlooked since comparison (as Karasu shows) is born of difference and contrast, but Kırşallıoba takes the unforgivable step of proposing a telos that, like flowing tributaries to the river of time, culminates in a study of the "attitude of an individual under oppression." Essentially, Kırşallıoba makes of *Evening* another *Arabian Nights* wherein each story is confined within a larger

¹⁰³ Kırşallıoba, Münevver . *Uzun sürmüş bir günün akşamı'nda olay örgüsü*. Bilkent Üniversitesi Ekonomi ve Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Ankara. 2004.

framing apparatus. Unbeknownst to Kırşallıoba, the tireless mapping of temporal, spatial and narratological coincidence actually better serves my study because moments of correlation or unity between the narratives are guided by seriality, not enframing, and this is Karasu's ultimate technique of un-working.

The serial structure of the narratives (that is to say, the structure of repetition with variation), provides Karasu with an economy of stories that, unlike the unending "and then, and then, and then" of *The Arabian Nights*, gives endlessness. Endlessness emerges primarily through simile (signaled by the Turkish word *gibi*), which mobilizes memory for the purpose of its erasure, but it is also reinforced by ellipsis, which provides asemantic and syntactical suspensions of reference, temporality and meaning. Crucially, seriality prevents the stories from being read as fragments, or as parts of a missing whole, and instead opens a space of performativity where meaning is always relational (economic), or contingent. In this way, the serial nature of *Evening* is the performative *oikonomia* that makes constatives possible but frail. The performative power of signs (especially when it is mobilized by political forces) is at the heart of Karasu's retelling of the iconographic crisis precisely because it is what is at the heart of his experience of modern day Turkey. And the force of *Evening* comes both from its narrative content (the crisis itself), and the experience of reading as a mode of crisis. Karasu reveals the crisis of iconography as the crisis that arises when the constative is overwhelmed by the performative, and he then enacts this crisis through seriality and simile.

The theme of the fragile constative is reinforced at several points by Karasu largely because he is so invested not only in the power of the performative, but the very revelation of the power of signs. Consider for a moment that "Mulberry Trees" was written and published in 1971 on the heels of the coup that is generally accepted as the successor of the 1960 coup because both involved the violent repression of democratic rights (like protest, and free speech) in order to preserve democracy. The 1971 coup (known as the "coup by memorandum") was a military intervention that overthrew the democratically elected government of Süleyman Demirel through a memo. Essentially the memo says the government is culpable for "anarchy, fratricidal strife, and social and economic unrest"¹⁰⁴ and the military was intervening to demand "the formation, within the context of democratic principles, of a strong and credible government, which will neutralise the current anarchical situation and which, inspired by Atatürk's views, will implement the reformist laws envisaged by the constitution."¹⁰⁵ If the coup could be (and was) accomplished by simply slipping the ruling powers a memo, then why roll out tanks and seize TV stations? Because in truth the memo (in its purely constative determination) is nothing without the retinue of performative signs that accompany it. For Karasu, moments like this encapsulate the fundamental problematic posed to us by the iconoclastic crisis. Take, for example, this passage from *Evening* where Andronikos suddenly understands something about the decree forbidding icons:

¹⁰⁴ Zürcher, Erik Jan. *Turkey: A Modern History*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004. p. 258.

¹⁰⁵ Feroz, Ahmad. *The Making of Modern Turkey*. New York: Routledge, 1993. p. 148.

I'm not against icons, Andreas had added, but it frightens me to think that people could invest icons with so much sacred value, that they're capable of murder for the sake of their icons....

Andronikos suddenly connects these words to the content of the Emperor's decree. The decree didn't prohibit all painted images, only sacred ones. He's angry with himself. How could he not have thought of this distinction before? (38)

Andronikos's recollection of the conversation with Andreas rouses him to anger because the distinction between the constative and performative had, up to this moment, eluded him. Furthermore, the difference between the sacred image (performative) and the run-of-the-mill image (constative) appears to him now as a completely artificial distinction created by people who themselves "invest icons with...value," or who, in other words, claim to know the truth of the image. The icon never materially changes, only its enunciation, shifts between the constative and performative poles.

A constative utterance delivers a statement that is literal in meaning and can be either true or false. The nature of the performative is somewhat more complex. In *For Derrida*, Joseph Hillis Miller helps us out by explaining that "if constative statements are at least in principle verifiable, this is not the case with performative utterances, like 'I promise' or 'I bet.' Such statements are neither true nor false. They are, rather, either felicitous or infelicitous. They either succeed in making something happen or they do not succeed" (24). If we consider Miller's remarks in the context of

the monastic life of Ioakim and Andronikos, something like taking the vow of monkhood presents the constative/performative tension. A particularly dense passage in *Evening* draws out the stakes of the performativity:

Just as you prepare for a holy feast day, just as all of life's labor, its worries are validated, justified with the arrival of the holy feast day.

[...]

Yet, if an entire life is spent in preparation for the holy feast day that doesn't arrive.... How often in his life did he find himself saying, 'It's here'? How often did the holy feast day actually arrive, with it

Even now. Can he be certain that the holy feast ever arrived?

He is dwelling on an image

But as soon as he calls it an image, as soon as his mind calls it forth, the idea that it represents takes the form of a vow. This vow. This vow--whether or not he has succeeded in keeping it--has it not given direction to his life? Has this vow not guided his entire life? (83)

Ioakim points out that he often utters the constative "It's here" but lacking all performativity the holy feast day never arrived. The feast day cannot arrive on its own, it must be enacted, performed. One cannot bring about the feast day by "dwelling on an image." The word "image" draws into a peculiar constellation "the idea that it represents" and "the form of a vow." Here the image and vow are drawn

together insofar as they are both involved in the pull between constative and performative. An image like a vow pertains to an empty idea that must have some performative element in order "to arrive." At stake Ioakim's musing on the relationship between vows and images is that he can now see in Andronikos's renunciation of the vow, a renunciation of the absolute and totalizing Idea (constative). It was not enough, however, to let his escape to the island silently declare "I renounce this vow," it is only through his death that the renunciation gained the force of the performative. Ioakim thinks to himself about how he "ought to be able to renounce the vow, too" because "here, that vow has to have no meaning, no value, beyond the one it once held, when it used to guide his life" (83). Yet he is trapped by the constative, by proper referential (and eternal) meaning or "the snug fit between sign and referent"¹⁰⁶ that gives way to authority, legitimacy and fixity. Slowly though, he comes to understand, as Andronikos has, that because of the performative "every vow bears a distinct reality, a distinct value, in a given place, a given time" (83). Essentially, Ioakim recognizes in Andronikos the power of the performative that can effect social change, and he bemoans his own lack of such performativity. Karasu extends this ethical dilemma to the text of *Evening* as a material object, but he makes performativity unavoidable. It is impossible to find pieces of *Evening* that could be identified as strictly constative or locutionary (referential, informative). The readership that assembles around *Evening* bears

¹⁰⁶ Nornes, Abé Mark. Ed. Margulies, Ivone. *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*. Durham: Duke U Press, 2002. p. 157.

witness, through Karasu's figurative language (simile, metaphor, allegory, and so on), to the power, if not the necessity too, of performativity.

In a seemingly unrestricted flow, the Turkish word *gibi* (the English equivalent of "like/as") appears two hundred and seventy-seven times in *Evening*, thus making simile a prominent and albeit remarkably conspicuous literary device. Simile un-works iconicity (both the iconophile and -clast position) because a) it endlessly defers the "truth" of the image through the inoperative operation of "likeness"; and b) its performative nature gives way to an economy of representation which challenges non-economic modalities of representation that (in their reliance on constative meaning) imply mimetic equivalency between signs and phenomena. Because simile is founded on the notion of "likeness" (which involves a relationship of resemblance) it rejects operations of pure similitude like the identity or shared substance between the Eucharist and God, the complete merging of the sign and the referent, or Oneness. Moreover, likeness is generated by words, not by the quality of things themselves and it therefore draws attention to the fact that simile (like all figures of speech) exists only in language, not in nature.

Simile gains its force, unlike metaphor, not through a striking resemblance of elements, but through their remoteness from one another. So where the words "similar" or "alike" might at first suggest a relation based on commonality, simile acts first and foremost through difference. The reliance on difference is what marks simile as a device of relationality (unlike pure similitude), or simply, of economy. Simile supposes that things are "like" other things, unlike pure similitude that suggests that

things "are" other things. This is basically the crux of the iconoclastic crisis, and Ioakim bears this crux out to the end of his days. He struggles to read his life in the terms set by simile on one hand, and similitude on the other:

If his head or eyes were to slant to the left, ever so slightly, he would abruptly look away from the view. Back in those days, this joy of postponement--ever greater as he resisted looking--this joy, this sense of awe, he would have released like a ball, like a dove, like a shot released from his hands, from his ribcage, from the sling of his eyes, flung it forth, toward the mouths caught in a centuries-long yawn.

[...]

There, at the woods' edge, he will be the ball, the dove, the shot once again.

He will **be the kit fox**.

In the ripe air, in the ripe light of evening--that tastes like a ripe fruit...he will **be like the kit fox** (84, my emphasis)

This passage begins with an assemblage of images (balls, doves, shots, the fox) that are transmitted via simile. The "joy of postponement" is what is like balls, doves, shots, the fox, but it is also Ioakim himself since he "will be the ball, the dove, the shot...the kit fox." The succession of similes signaled by "like...like...like" moves to a succession of similitudes signaled by "be...be...be." But in the final moment, the ontology gives way to simile in a definitive "like": "he will be like the kit fox" (84).

The story of the kit fox produces a tension within the narrative of "Hill"

because it is at once merely a memory to Ioakim, but when it is invoked through various kinds of lexical or cognitive cues, it becomes a memory invoked only for the purpose of its erasure. The phrase "to be like the kit fox" opens a multiplicity beyond the constative. The tension is further enhanced because Ioakim recognizes the economic and performative potential of the story. He recalls a terrible moment in his past when, overcome with anger and also beset by grief and tiredness, he drowned the sickly kit fox he once so lovingly tended. This strangling haunts him not only for the ghastly deed that it is, but also for the possible "link" that it has to his mismanagement of Andronikos's final hours on earth:

But what did the old man and the little fox have in common? What do they have in common at this present moment? (79)

[...]

But how were the two linked (80)

[...]

He can't understand how he mustered the courage to ask--even if while feeling shame, even if he's only asking himself--about the nature of the link between them. (85)

[...]

The link. He has been looking for this link. He recognizes it now. (124)

The economic structure of simile prevents it from operating through assertion like constative statements and so Ioakim struggles to determine the "nature of link"

between various people, places, and images. In fact, it is as if the lack of assertive constatives leads both Karasu's reader and Ioakim obsession with linkage. To declare something like "[I] will be the kit fox" enters the realm of the constative where this statement can be judged against criteria like truth and falsity. However, to meditate on the question of simile (born only through figurative language), is to draw in the performative, which multiplies meaning and thus hold fixed meaning and closure at bay. The serial structure, which relies on repetitive images, circumstances, themes, geographies, etc., draws the reader to search for links between occurrences of these things, yet because seriality, like simile, is modeled on "likeness," and therefore ultimately on difference and variation, particular connections become exchanged for multiple ones.

Seriality occurs in both macro and micro scales in *Evening*. On the macro side, the narratives rely on a certain fixity of characters, themes, or situations that indicate the serial structure. The shared thematic content of the separate narratives gives them the appearance of being episodic. Contained within this episodic structure, that is to say, on the level of language itself, Karasu plants certain words or images (an aggregate of words) that take on a serial nature through their repetition. Often, but not always, ellipsis plays a role in serializing. Ellipsis unchains and remixes clusters of signification and thus it presents itself as a mechanism through which time, narrative, syntax and meaning become reorganized. And because ellipsis draws the reader in by forcing her to furnish missing information or firmly connect with moments of hesitation, it has the added effect of lending performativity to statements

that would otherwise lean more strictly toward the constative. I would even go so far as to say that seriality, ellipsis and simile therefore can be considered as the "work-arounds" that Karasu uses to push *öz Türkçe* beyond its boundaries. Consider, for example, how this passage uses ellipsis to bring the past into the present, to imply "likeness" and to suggest performativity asemantically where semantically, only constatives remain:

His hands are free. For a very long time, his hands haven't felt as free,
as liberated....

When he wasn't holding the cross, he was holding the icons,
the censer or the hands of the blind, the cripples, the children, their
mouth, their lips, candles, bibles, rosaries....The oars, sleepless,
invincible oars. (21)

Time condenses in the image of liberated hands, and "the cross," "the icons," "the oars" and all the rest become analogs, but only in the flash where the ellipsis organizes a continuity between items previously held by the hands. At first, the ellipsis seems to create a caesura that divides the cross, the icons and the cripples from the oars. But rather than ellipses as interruption, though, it seems that here they function to dislocate all items from their respective times and instead layer them one on the other. Ellipses make possible a palimpsest or series of objects held by hands and this lends to "the sleepless, invincible oars" an indeterminate overabundance of meaning rather than a paucity of meaning that would result from an engagement with that sentence's constative dimension.

Oftentimes in *Evening*, serial images converge in such a way where the likeness that inspired the convergence gives way to an unsettling difference that appears in the moment of convergence. One of the richest examples of such convergent/divergent disturbance occurs while Andronikos rests under a tree letting his mind wander. In this passage, not only do certain images become serialized or stacked through the mechanism of daydreaming, but Andronikos's present moment becomes split and shared out between these images:

Scattered among the blackened, dried-out pinecones are green ones, inexplicably fallen--incipient lives, interrupted dreams....As long as it's the harsh wind or the sun rather than anything else that has caused their fall. As long as no hand has plucked them from the branches....

He considers tearing off another piece of the bread, but decides to wait. (28)

Dişleri dökülmüş, kararmış kozalaklarla nedense kopmuş, yerde yatan yeşil kozalaklar, kozalak başlangıçları, kozalak düşleri, yan yana. Yeter ki yelden, güneşten başka bir şey düşürmesin bu kozalakları. Yeter ki bir el uzanmasın onları **koparmak** için...

Bir lokma daha **koparacak** oluyor cebindeki somundan, vaz geçiyor. (18)

The fallen green pinecones are not just pinecones, they are also "lives" and "dreams" that have been figuratively removed from their branches before reaching a fullness.

And in the very moment Andronikos hopes the pinecones met their fate due to natural causes and not some hand plucking them, he plucks a piece of bread (this is better indicated in the Turkish which makes use of *kopar-* in both instances). The image of a hand plucking pinecones is married to Andronikos's hand plucking bread, and it makes the reader take an Ioakim tack and ask "what is the nature of the link between them?" The reader is not meant to furnish a reason why the two instances of plucking are similar, rather, we are meant to appreciate the multiplicity of signifieds for the signifier "plucking." Consider, first, the sentence about the bread without the one about pinecones. In this case, it is merely an assertion: "He considers tearing off another piece of bread, but decides to wait." When drawn into the fold of the pinecone sequence by means of serialization, however, the performative aspect is heightened.

Seriality un-works language as a system of meaning by mobilizing words in a way that exposes them as multiple and indeterminate. Simile, for its part, produces a similar effect insofar as to suggest "likeness" is also to suggest difference and variation. In *Evening*, however, seriality and simile go into hyperdrive and likeness saturates the text to a maddening extent. This oversaturation of likeness occurs (through Ioakim's consciousness) in particular around the images of the kit fox and Andronikos, and even more specifically around images of strangulation and mouths. For example, images of the kit fox nibbling on "moistened pieces of bread mixed with scraps" (96) are recalled, dislocated, and transformed by recollected images of Andronikos: "[the kit fox] was able to love the hand that brought it food, it accepted

his friendship... Ioakim would watch silently. As he would later silently watch Andronikos stuff his mouth with morsel after morsel of food" (126). Or, as Ioakim reflects on how he "plunged the fox" into a tub to strangle, drown and choke the life out of it, the narration cuts to the Byzantine Emperor who knows he will "sooner or later strangle" the Byzantine Church (123). The image of strangling the Church is imbricated on images of Ioakim strangling the fox when Ioakim thinks to himself about how he "has done everything he could in order to save the thing he struggled to save, realizes at the end of his life that his own hands have been chiefly responsible for strangling it" (123); it is unclear but also irrelevant if "the thing he struggled to save" was the Church or the fox or, by extension, Andronikos too, because the one is like the other is like the other.

Ioakim was forced to witness Andronikos carry out his punishment of talking himself to death, and the images of mouths that litter the text reinforce the notion that seriality and likeness, far from making a connection explicit, only further elaborate the indeterminacy of any particular connection. Karasu crafts such an open constellation around images of mouths, some which gape, some which eat, some which close with silence. Ioakim, walking in the shadow of Aventinus, notices "ancient walls, the immense mouths that have been yawning for centuries," and he concludes that they "will be swimming in light," but then the narration abruptly shifts to seemingly unrelated thoughts: "What Andronikos did, was it heroic?" (90). After a few more pages, these mouths, "the hollow interiors of these mouths"(95) "held open for centuries" (94) are compared to "a corpse" (95) and "a realization, sudden, that

certain words, idioms, assumed to have lost their meaning after so much repetition, had, at least some time in the past, actually carried discrete meanings" (95). The "words, idioms" to which Ioakim refers are later clarified when he recalls the evening that Andronikos appeared to renounce the vow:

He has not forgotten. There is nothing to remember, except for a particular darkness that has long preoccupied his mind. When he recalls that day, he is surrounded by the same darkness: It's after the evening mass, following the cadence of certain grandiose, hallowed, reverbant, meaningless words across the dim light of the candle flames; Andronikos is standing alone at the center, his gaze fixed on the smooth curtain

that for the past few months has covered the niches that contained the icons

his steady voice declaring, 'I have come to renounce the oath'

(105)

The constatives spoken in evening mass are nothing compared to the performative "I have come to renounce the oath." In fact, this is the reason why Ioakim can declare that "words still carry meaning, significance. Those--words, their meanings--do not die as easily. Like the kit fox." (94). Andronikos's renunciation marks for Ioakim that place where "all sentences end, must end" (105), and where "all of the sentences, all of the days, the years, the walks, the seas, beliefs, deaths, escapes, perhaps all of these end, must end, here" (106) because "to speak from now on would be/inexhaustible

words uttered to the point of exhaustion" (106). But Ioakim is not the hero, Andronikos is. And the reader of *Evening*, exhausted and overwhelmed by the performative power of signification, is placed in the position of Andronikos who, forced to talk himself to death, coiled around his neck "an inexhaustible rope he had woven out of words" (106).

The inexhaustibility of words that Andronikos revealed when he performed his renunciation is recuperated in the final story of *Evening*, "Mulberry Trees," through the endlessness of songs of resistance, and the people who sing. "Mulberry Trees," written just after the 1971 *coup d'état*, takes place directly in the aftermath of the 1960 *coup d'état*. Karasu elaborates this 1960 coup as a struggle for democracy that had to, paradoxically, strangle democratic freedoms (like the right to speech, publishing and protest) in the name of democracy. Serially invoking the figure of Andronikos who had been exhausted to death by inexhaustible speech, the narrator of "Mulberry Trees" remembers a day when soldiers were posted outside the post office, under the trees, in case "people singing in the square a mile off came up this way" (162). Yet, as the narrator recalls a separate protest that occurred "near the end of April," he notes that the soldiers "had opened fire in Ankara, then Istanbul, one day apart." He reflects on this but still cannot understand the violent opposition to the people singing because they were merely "marching arm in arm, not breaking or damaging anything." And now, in "this June 1960," while "shooting would be just as unthinkable, now, as it would be hideous...the songs, the beatings, the scatterings,

chasing, shouts, all stopped a half mile away" (162). Yet the power of the resistance could not die as easily as the bodies that transmitted it.

The central image of this story is a row of mulberry trees near the post office that have miraculously leafed not once in a year, but twice in one month. Every time the tree blooms "the caterpillars gnawed at their leaves, hanging full and plump on the strands of good they dropped," and "not one leaf would remain in the whole grove of trees" (157), but the trees resist and unexpectedly bloom again that very same month: "feeling that the caterpillars have all been destroyed, they are sprouting, in the reek of fuel oil, once again" (157). Just as "with a month's interval, the trees are leafing again a second time" (157), the protests were violently subdued twice in one month. Likewise, as Giulia recounts her story for the Karasu family she mentions that in 1930s fascist Rome, 'twice in one month they chased us through the streets with clubs'" (157). The endless rejuvenation of the mulberry leaves in the face of violent repression comes of course to stand in for the people marching and singing and "the people who published by the grapevine the whole news of the day, the people the cops were chasing, working over, arresting, taking away" (166). Yet while these "stories took shape...there were certain men turning blinder by the hour." And it is the performativity of the songs, the songs that "will bring back memories" that "gave an answer to the others, which had thought a giant river could halt, that the Danube might cease to flow" (166). In a final performative utterance of his own, Karasu writes that it must be believed that the leaves can come twice in a month despite the

caterpillars who threaten them because "there they are, holding the sun away. And OF COURSE the Danube flows" (167).

Chapter Six

Vastness and Arability: The Blood of Writing in Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison*

"Agha Shahid Ali

Kashmiri-American Poet

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means: Listen, Listen:

It means 'the beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic"

-Inscription on the Memorial Stone for Agha Shahid Ali. Massachusetts, USA

"The truth of literature might be in the error of the infinite...The error, the fact of being on the go without ever being able to stop, changes the finite into infinity. And to it these singular changes are added: from the finite, which is still closed, one can always hope to escape, while the *infinite vastness is a prison*, being without an exit--just as any place absolutely without exit becomes infinite."

-Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come* (94, my emphasis)

*"So vast the prison crushing me,
Release where will you come from?"*

-Berber Song

6.1 "Algeria---blood"

Assia Djebar's 1995 novel *So Vast the Prison* proposes, through the tropes of arability, vastness, encirclement and heterophony, a therapeutic mode of witnessing that relies on the alignment of women with the act of writing. Considered to be her most autobiographical text, *So Vast* perhaps suggests their shared context in a rather elliptical line that simply reads: "Algeria---blood" (355). This of course calls to mind the struggle of "French Algeria" which lasted from 1830 until the end of the Algerian

War of Independence in 1962: "Tanks at night. Insurrection. Blood in the streets..." (328). Yet, Djébar's novel is more about multiple devastations, some of which are bloody, and some of which remain hidden in shadows, devastations of silence and erasure. So in one movement, "Algeria---blood" refers to the unfertile sands that have been laid waste by "the blood of men today," "the blood of History" (347), and "the blood of Guelma, Tébessa, Sétif"¹⁰⁷ (357). But in a second movement, "Algeria---blood" will come to signal a blood of fecundity, the blood of the "arable women" and the restorative "Blood of Writing," for which Part Four of *So Vast* is named.

Djébar prefaces Part Four "The Blood of Writing" ("*Le sang de l'écriture*") with an epigraph by Hafiz¹⁰⁸ that reads:

They say that after a long wait,
the stone lying beneath the earth
turns into a ruby.

¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere Djébar writes: "*Or nous vivions en pays colonisé. Sétif, Tébessa, Guelma, vill d'orages--les milliers de morts puis emprisonnés du 8 mai 1945, c'était deux ou trois ans auparavant*" (283) ("Now we were living in a colonised country. Sétif, Tébessa, Guelma, the town of storms--the thousands dead and imprisoned after 8 May 1945, just two or three years earlier"). May 8 1945, the official end of WWII, marks "Victory in Europe Day" but it marks something quite different in North Africa, especially the towns Sétif, Tébessa and Guelma. Demonstrators gathered in these towns both to celebrate the victory and to demand independence from French colonial rule. Due to police and vigilante interference, these protests escalated into violent riots and both *pièdes noirs* (French Settlers) and the marchers were massacred. Exact figures are disputed, but in his book *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II*, Andrew Buchanan notes that "more than 100 colonists and as many as 30,000 Arabs had been killed" (107).

¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that this is perhaps a tip of the hat from Djébar to Ralph Waldo Emerson who famously furnished a translation of this Hafiz poem: "They say, through patience, chalk/Becomes a ruby stone;/Ah, yes! but by the true heart's blood/The chalk is crimson grown." Emerson, Edward Waldo. *The complete works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 9. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904.

Yes, I believe it--but it does so
with the blood of its heart.

In order to complicate the image of blood in *So Vast*, Djébar is calling forth not only Hafiz but the weight of the Persian poetic tradition as well. This motif of blood as nourishment persists in the poetry of Hafiz and others of the golden age of the *ghazal*. The blood of the nightingale will often nourish the rose just as the words of the poet, which pour from the heart like blood, nourish the audience. The blood Hafiz presents here is not a fluid that desperately pours forth from a wound, rather it is a productive blood that turns stone into ruby, and this generative quality maintains itself in Djébar's blood of writing.

Of this blood of writing, the narrator will ask a question that points to both the problem and condition of this writing: "How can one inscribe with blood that flows or has just finished flowing?" (357). Blood, with "its flow, its paste, its spurt, its scab that is not yet dry" (358) produces a writing rooted in flight, a writing that cannot dry, harden, or become legible. The writing of blood stands in stark contrast to the "silence of writing" introduced in the preface of the same name. The narrator of "The Silence of Writing" (*Le silence de l'écriture*), Isma, discloses that she once thought of writing as inscription in the deadening sense of the word, "a burst of laughter--frozen. The beginnings of a sob--turned to stone" ("*L'éclat de rire -- gelé. Le début de sanglot -- pétrifié.*") (11/11). Writing here is associated with decay, stricture, and a destructive or violent kind of silence. In fact, the "silence of writing" is outright likened to the desert wind "turning its inexorable millstone" ("*vent du désert qui*

tourne sa meule inexorable") which gives the sense of milling or grinding, reflecting the vast prison of the Berber song that "crushes":

So vast the prison crushing me,

Release where will you come from?

The pages of *So Vast* suggest a trajectory that takes writing from silence to blood through a journey of polyphonic voices, and the heterophonic music of the Algerian *nuba*. This does not simply suggest a motif of sound in opposition to silence. Rather, and through some deft literary moves that will be discussed, Djébar proposes a figure that holds the arability of women and the processual blood of writing as a way to contend with the silence of writing, to recover the "deep song strangled in the throat of [her] people..." (206).

For Djébar, both a writer and a filmmaker, the recovery of this "deep song" begins not only "with images" but "with the murmur beneath images" (206). In this case, the greater context of the sentence suggests that "image" most likely refers to the visual effects captured and produced in filmic representations. But "the murmur beneath images" signals something else entirely. Part Three of *So Vast* narrates the journey of a young filmmaker, Isma, who, on set at a peasant's house "70 kilometers from Algiers," films her first shots, and it is within this literary transmission of filmic sequences that Djébar writes of the "murmur beneath images." Isma uses the "artificial gaze" of the camera to capture the life of women who, behind veils, are "shut up 'inside,' confined. Incarcerated" (180). This "community of women shut away yesterday and today" compel Isma's "hunt for images," a hunt which merges her

gaze with theirs and from "behind the camera" it is no longer just Isma who gazes, but rather it is the subject of her film that "is the one devouring the world through a hole left in the concealment of face." The title of the film is never given, but the shots described match those of Djébar's 1977 film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*. Furthermore, the vignettes that detail the film are sequenced so as to resemble a *nuba*, a musical form found in the Maghreb. What we are left with then, is a series of images, of representations, that are at once literary, musical, filmic and poetic. The sheer multiplicity of imaging that Djébar writes through the pages of *So Vast* points beyond the images themselves to the "murmuring beneath," or, as Maurice Blanchot suggests, to a space of vacancy (or, of vastness if you will) that is the very condition of writing itself. And in the same way that the blood of Hafiz and of Djébar's "blood writing" signals generation, vacancy and waste point to arability and not decay.

6.2 On Murmuring and De-vast-ation

The motif of "murmuring" emerges in the early pages of *So Vast* as the narrator, Isma, details her knotty relationship with French and Arabic, the former she associates with the deadening "silence of writing" and the latter with the unnerving language of the women in the *hammam*. In addition to the qualities of rot and decay, the silence of writing is also tinged with a paternal aggression. Like the desert wind with its unruly and violent movement, this father tongue "surely undoes the wrapping cloths from a dead love," and in that moment of exposure "voices spatter" and Isma hears the "faint murmur of ancestors" and the "ululations of lament from veiled

shadows" (12). The patrimonial tongue, it should be noted, is rooted equally in inscription and destruction insofar as it is associated with "the hand" that "races on" as well as "desert wind" and "crumbling dunes." Against the masculine hand that inscribes is the motif of sound and sounding, specifically, indistinct murmuring. Rather than Word, or Language or even Voice, a feminine sound-assemblage of "gossip," "hubbub," "murmuring," and "ululation" (12, 13, 206, 210, 218 325) emerges, and these sounds are indistinguishable, multiple, audible and unintelligible. And yet these feminine resonances are not a "mother tongue" pitted against the father tongue. We learn from the narrator that the mother tongue is in fact Arabic, and it provides no more comfort than that of the violent father tongue, the hand that bears the silence of writing.

Isma is enjoying the company of her mother-in-law at a *hammam* at "the ancient heart of a small Algerian city at the foot of the Atlas Mountains" when they encounter a friend of her mother-in-law. This friend parts company with Isma and the mother-in-law by declaring that she is "fettered" and cannot possibly stay any longer because "the enemy is at home" (13), by which she means not only her husband, but all husbands. Isma narrates that this word "enemy" delivered in Arabic, *l'e'dou*, has the qualities of being both "resonant in Arabic" and yet it "had sounded a dissonate note" ("*Ce mot dans sa sonorité arabe, l'e'dou, avait écorché l'atmosphère environnante*") (13/13). The French word *écorché* goes beyond the English "dissonance" and implies flaying, skinning--a violently laid bare atmosphere that leaves only the muscles and vessels exposed. Here, in the space opened by *l'e'dou*,

word and flesh engage with one another both violently but passionately as well. The narrator, using quasi-erotic imagery, remarks that "The word *enemy*, uttered in that moist warmth, entered me, strange missile, like an arrow of silence piercing the depths of my then too tender heart...bitter in its Arab flesh, bored endlessly into the depths of my soul, and thus into the source of my writing" (12). And so the narrator leaves the *hammam* that afternoon feeling "speechless," "stripped bare." Orphaned by both father and mother tongue, only the feminine murmuring¹⁰⁹ emerges for Isma as that which bears witness and gives voice to the absent or shadowy figures that haunt her. Djébar's project attempts to propose a thought of writing based on this murmuring, a writing that answers the dual exigency of witnessing and community. Murmuring, as that which is before and beneath language, begs the question of how one would practice a mode of writing (of all things!) faithful to it.

It must first be understood that writing as *écriture*, and especially as "the blood of writing," accedes to a different status than what we normally conceive of as "writing." And for this reason I will employ *écriture* to not only refer to Djébar's theory of the blood of writing, but to also imply the hint of Blanchot I detect in her project, namely the impropriety and disastrousness of writing.¹¹⁰ Secondly, what Djébar is proposing in *So Vast* is not that writing (not even *écriture*) somehow

¹⁰⁹ Julia Kristeva works through this in terms of "chora" which concerns the prelinguistic psychic world of the infant. The chora is the space between mother and child where communication and bond is established through murmuring and other nonsymbolic (i.e. musical) uses of vocal soundings.

¹¹⁰ This refers to the notion of *écriture* that Blanchot builds throughout his oeuvre, and especially in his 1980 text *L'écriture du désastre*. Writing, as disaster, gestures toward the fact of mediation between human and world--language and writing are separate from experience, and writing only ever points to its own impossibility.

recovers speech and restores voice or sound to women, but specifically that *écriture*, in emerging from the vast space where voice is not, allows women writers to become the very cry itself. *Écriture* as the force of voicing is reminiscent of the kind of movement vocalization produces, and especially in terms of the Koran. Early Koranic manuscripts lack vocalizations, and this makes the text unclear (for example, certain verbs are active or passive depending on the vocalization). The addition of vocalization (*tashkil* or sometimes *tashkeel*) that began in the eighth century sparked disputes over the authenticity of manuscripts bearing such marks. The unspoken crux of this dispute is precisely that it is the feminine vowels that give life to the desiccated male consonants, they are the force of voicing.

Voicing and *écriture* are important for Djébar because it is only through them that an act of witnessing can occur because witnessing does not happen "in some language or some alphabet." But to further complicate matters we read that "the encircling vibratos of the *tzarlrît*" (357) are also inadequate to the task. The *tzarlrît* are the cries of women that accompany a fantasia and they denote either joy or sorrow. In dismissing both language and that which is outside of language (crying/*tzarlrît*) as modes of witnessing we are left with seemingly little. We are therefore directed back to that which "murmurs beneath" language. Neither contained within language, nor beyond language, *écriture* gestures toward its permanent condition as one of fugitivity: "how can one inscribe with blood that flows or has just finished flowing?" (357). This blood of writing does not mark, inscribe or dry, "it simply evaporates" (358). The narrator has nightmares that she takes a knife and cuts

out her pharynx and glottis, and from this gaping wound blood comes, but not to flow, only to "evaporate inside [her] body instead" (349). And from this "muscular effort of giving birth through the mouth" her "open mouth expels, continuously, the suffering of others, the suffering of the shrouded women who came before [her] and she proclaims "I do not cry, I am the cry, stretched out into resonant blind flight" (350). In having become the cry itself, one no longer witnesses, one is witness. In this sense, "cry" operates beyond all of its usual determinations (voice, murmur) and becoming-cry is rendered as becoming-witness. In a final move on the last page of the book, all of Djébar's modes of witnessing (film, gaze, poetry, song, etc.) flow together and we read: "I write...I cry, voice, hand, eye" (358). The nightmarish knife to the throat produces a wound, a site of devastation, a site that becomes the place where something was, but more significantly a place where something can be, a giving birth. In this way, the "vaste" of *Vaste est la prison* refers not to extension and expanse, but to devastation and the processes that wrought ruin.

Etymologically, the word "vast" comes to us from the Latin *vastus* which means "extensive, immense" but also "desolate, empty." Add to this the medieval French variation, *guaster*, as in "Terre Guaste" (waste land) from Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*, and "vast" takes on shades of "waste, spoil, ruination." Djébar is undoubtedly playing with notions of devastation and arability in *So Vast*, but more to the point, in her concept of bloody writing she is mobilizing fugitivity, absence and generation in such a way that vastness bears a striking resemblance to "trace" found in the writings of Derrida and "abeyance" found in the works of

Blanchot. Having taken the theme of *gauster* from *Perceval*, let us pursue the other main theme of *Perceval*, namely the *roi méhaigné*, the maimed or wounded king, in order to elaborate on Djébar's recuperations of trace and absence.

In Chrétien's story, the young Perceval who has been lovingly cloaked in ignorance by his mother encounters knights in a forest. Due to their glittering armor he initially mistakes them for angels, and after they correct him and he learns about the world of knights he decides to find King Arthur and prove his worthiness so that he too can become knighted. Through a series of escapades he does get knighted and eventually he decides to return home to his mother. This return, however, is delayed by even more adventures, the greatest of which involves him running into the Fisher King who invites him to his castle, which turns out to be the castle where the grail is kept. There are several crucial points to note here, the first being that the castle and its surrounding lands maintain the enchanted quality of impermanence, which is to say they disappear and reappear at will, anyone who seeks it will not find it and it is only when Perceval throws in the towel that it actually materialized for him. Next, the Fisher King, who is confined to a litter sports a grievous wound in the generative region, namely the groin (occasionally the thigh or haunches depending on the version of the story). This lack of vitality and fertility is mirrored in the lands that surround the castle. What is supposed to be a lush forested area is in fact a vast wasteland. This leads to the crux of the story: It is within Perceval's power to heal both king and land by asking questions about certain things he witnesses, but alas, the man who knighted Perceval, Gornemant, has also trained him to avoid gossip and

chatter, so Perceval silently observes without posing the appropriate questions. Crucially, the reader of the Perceval text observes Perceval observing not a wound, but a lance that bleeds. Perceval, and thus the reader, detect no wound, they detect the absence of a wound, the trace of a wound. This becomes even more clear when later Perceval is berated for not asking the right question by the Loathly Lady. The hag, who also speaks not of the wound so much as the lance itself, replicates the same error of Perceval:

'Chiez le Roi Pescheor entras,
Si veïs la lance qui saine,
Et si te fu si tres grant paine
D'ovrir ta bouche et de parler
Que tu ne poïs demander
Por coi cele goutte de sanc
Saut par la pointe del fer blanc;
Ne del graal que tu veïs
Ne demandas ne n'enqueïs
Quel preudome l'en en servoit.' (vv. 4652-61)

'You entered the house of the Fisher King and saw the *lance that bleeds*, but it was so much trouble to you to open your mouth and speak that you couldn't ask why that drop of blood sprang from the tip

of the white head, nor did you ask what worthy man was served from the grail you saw.' (50, my emphasis)

There is neither simply an absence of a wound in *Perceval*, nor is there a marking of the absence of the wound suggested by the phrase "the lance that bleeds." Rather, it is quite impossible for the wound to be absent because it is not phenomenal. This non-phenomenal wound which is not apprehensible by the senses can therefore only be grasped by the language of interrogation and the subsequent process of testimony (both of which *Perceval* fails to provide). The wound, as neither absence nor presence is suggestive of "trace" in the sense Derrida uses the word. In fact, both the wound and the wasteland, which are coupled together figuratively and magically, become the spaces on which traces are made. And it is through this notion of the wasteland (the land of de-vast-ation) upon which traces are made, that Djébar situates her title *So Vast the Prison*.

6.3 *So Vast the Prison*

Vastness is itself the prison, the site of the ceaseless movement of difference. To better conceptualize "vastness" as a site of trace, let us suggest the addition of a more familiar spatial apparatus: the desert. This is not to suggest an equivalence between vastitude and desert, rather, the use of desert as a locus of trace renders the whole thing less ineffable. Also, the use of desert invites a curious web of associations between Blanchot, Derrida and Djébar that may prove fruitful or at least interesting in what follows. We understand vast to mean desolate and ruined. Having

worked our way through Perceval as a figure of shoddy witnessing, we also see the potential for reading the wasteland/wound as the site where a certain play between presence and absence opens onto a larger conversation of structures of signification and meaning, essentially, of writing.

For Derrida, trace appears in a certain word-constellation that is suggestive of ruin: remains, cinders, remainders, spectres. Then, from the anagram *écart*, trace acquires the dual-character of mark and gap. Gap itself gives way to a linguistic patina of digression, divergence, split, opening, effraction and so on. This does several things for us. First, if we recall that the logic of remains and cinders follows Derrida's project of escaping metaphysical binaries like presence/absence, same/different etc., then "trace" becomes situated in such a way that we can understand it has erasure and displacement as part of its structure. In fact, in *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes that "The trace, in which the relationship to the other is marked, articulates its possibility on the entire field of being that metaphysics has determined on the basis of the occulted movement of the trace. The trace must be thought before the entity [*étant*]. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted; it produces itself as the occultation of itself" (47). What we read here is that difference cannot be thought without trace, and suddenly the *écart* anagram (trace as mark/gap) draws our attention to trace as that which relies on "betweenness," on the movement of *différance*. This thought of the movement of *différance* lends trace the further quality of a maddening endlessness insofar as "the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it

properly has no site (*n'a pas lieu*)."¹¹¹ Trace therefore inaugurates a movement that has no beginning and no end, it is to wander the desert infinitely, to be imprisoned in the infinite, to wander infinity, to wander vastness. Trace, as that which properly has no site, suggests then vastness (desert) not as site or ground, but as a condition for tracing, for *différance*, and for writing.

In his essay "Literary Infinity: The Aleph," Blanchot takes as his point of departure Borges' ideas of infinity and labyrinth. Blanchot suggests that not only did Borges acquire "the infinite from literature" but that "the truth of literature might be in the error of the infinite." The word "error" here refers as much to flaw or mistake as it does to wander, like Perceval, our knight-errant.

The error, the fact of being on the go without ever being able to stop, changes the finite into infinity. And to it these singular changes are added: from the finite, which is still closed, one can always hope to escape, while the *infinite vastness is a prison*, being without an exit-- just as any place absolutely without exit becomes infinite. The place of wandering knows no straight line; one never goes from one point to another in it; one does not leave here to go there, there is no point of departure and no beginning to the walk. (*Book to Come* 93-94; my emphasis)

¹¹¹ See Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, p. 156. This phrase *n'a pas lieu* indicates the lack of topos, or, in other words, there is no 'hap.' Hap, as opposed to "happening" which signals eventfulness, registers only spatial and temporal dimensions.

And why is it that we wander, that we write? Derrida, in speaking of the Pharisees, whose very name indicates their condition as the "separated ones,"¹¹² suggests that "writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation" (6). Having been given the boot from Eden, and from the presence and voice of God, we are condemned to wander the desert--our "fall" is both into the desert and into language. And yet, from this exilic event that determines the human condition as one of interminable mediacy (mediacy "without exit") comes writing, for "we must take words upon ourselves." The "error" of which Blanchot speaks is precisely trace which, without origin and without end pursues a relentless referral to that which is other than itself, trace opens infinity.

Writing, born of displacement, takes displacement as its condition and as its possibility, which is also to say as its very force. Blanchot will call this a ceaseless referral to the Outside (*le dehors*) where the trace always already is in reference an other, a multiple. What trace makes clear is that writing is an opening to a being-in-relation that relies on displacement, spacing, difference, or alterity. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida relates the trace to *différance* in these terms:

Without...a trace retaining the other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the

¹¹² In this particular piece Derrida is in conversation with Edmond Jabès, a French/Egyptian/Jewish writer whose work takes up the thematics of writing, desert, and sparsile stars.

content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is différance.* (62)

This "pure movement" of *différance* makes of trace an originless-origin (non-origin) insofar as it has only movement as (an insufficient) ground. The vast desert expanse that becomes prison through the infinite play of trace, has been rendered inadequate as a proper "place," "site" or "ground" because as far as trace is concerned "its force of production stands in necessary relation to the energy of its erasure" (*Dissemination* 31) which means that "the very deferral and promise of presence is the site for the operation of the trace" (*Margins of Philosophy* 65). The groundlessness of writing moves it not toward truth, nor unity, nor presence, but only infinity. And this "infinite vastness is a prison," a place from which there is no exit, a desert plain of mediacy where the pure movement of difference renders all relations as non-relations, or as relations with the Outside. This condition or state of fugitivity as one of perpetuity is made necessary by the very logic of the trace. And though fugitivity remains necessarily inescapable, Djébar proposes a mode of "being fugitive and knowing it" that makes of the wasteland an arable humus upon which traces can be made. "Being fugitive and knowing it" means a fugitive does not run toward an impossible freedom, a freedom that can only be attained if the infinite vastness were rendered finite. Rather, the harnessing of fugitivity becomes an act of freedom, and writing becomes an ethical practice. Djébar pursues this kind of fugitive writing through the thoughts of infinity and difference, which find their place in *So Vast* as the motifs of encirclement and endlessness.

6.4 Writing in Circles

The movement of *différance* that underwrites trace points to a central idea of *So Vast* that concerns the erasure of all origins and departures. Djébar unworks quests for origin and telos through various formulations including orphanhood, encirclement, multiplicity, and the movement of *nachträglichkeit*. At stake for her is a kind of trace-*écriture* that in being sensitive to the exigency of difference becomes an enactment of freedom. This trace-*écriture*, also known as the blood of writing, is always flowing, in flux, and in evaporating (as opposed to drying), trace-*écriture* erases origins and departures. And indeed because we have access to the blood of writing only by way of "its smell" or "its phlegm" or even "the fear that is its halo" (358), we can see how trace is its movement, its structure, its logic. Infinite vastness may be a prison but it also makes possible enactments of freedom, namely, acts of *écriture*.

When I say that Djébar makes use of the trope of "orphanhood" I also mean to say that she hints at a sort of rootlessness with regard to language, heritage, history and essentially all origins. In *So Vast* there are several plot lines that deal with literal orphanages or orphanings (a mother losing her son to prison, a mother losing her daughter to death, a mother adopting a child etc.), but there is also a sense of rootlessness and abandonment that pervades the idea of language. As mentioned earlier, Isma feels abandoned by both father tongue (French) and mother tongue (Arabic), so in a sense she picks up the mantle of the orphan. Through the figure of Isma (who has been read as an autobiographical commentary on Djébar herself)

Djebar touches upon the question of the impact of French monolingualism in colonial Algeria. On one hand, for the character Isma, French provided safe haven and access to a political and cultural space that remained beyond reach for her veiled and marginalized kinswomen. Yet, *So Vast* carries within it the tension that Isma feels over when to use which language and with whom. French, which was made to be the language of politics, education and culture in Algeria diminished the presence and force of not only Arabic, but Berber as well. Echoing precisely this in a public talk, Djebar says:

At the time of the French Empire, North Africa--like the rest of Africa on behalf of colonial England, Portugal or Belgium – suffered for a century and a half the dispossession of its natural resources, the breakdown of its social foundations, and for Algeria, the exclusion within education of its two national languages: age-old Berber and the Arabic language –with its poetic quality, which for me cannot be perceived outside the Quranic verses that I hold dear (...) In this sense, the French monolingualism established in colonial Algeria managed to devalue our mother tongues, driving us even further in the quest for origins.¹¹³

And yet even the plural designation of mother "tongues" does not designate the Berber and Arabic languages as a proper origin. As Djebar explains, "The Arabic

¹¹³ Assia Djebar, June 22, 2006. *Discours de réception*. Prononcé dans la séance publique. Paris, Palais de l'Institut.

language then was also a vehicle of scientific knowledge (medicine, astronomy, mathematics etc...) Thus, it is again, in the language of the Other (the Bedouis of Arabia islamicized the Berbers to conquer Spain with them) that my African ancestors wrote and invented." With every layer that Djébar peels back, no origin emerges unless you consider, in the mode of trace, rootlessness itself as origin. The character Isma is constantly having to negotiate this burden of abandonment, and though she flirts with an originary/telos type of dynamic with her dealings with the Beloved, she ultimately gives herself over to the blood of writing in order to, as her name suggests, become a witness for those absent, dead and invisible people who must write through her.

The name Isma itself means both "name" (اسم) and also "safe-guarding" (عصمة/عصم), and so with "name" as her name, Isma is textured by shades of indeterminacy, she taps into both the realm of the proper noun, and yet skirts it by way of the universal. The *tekhnē* of naming does not triumph over the *physis* of the woman named Isma. And, if we follow Derrida and see the name as an announcement of "a death to come" (*d'une mort à venir*) because the name will outlive the she who bears it, the name "name" draws attention to the act of naming as that which always generalizes and eschews the singular. Built into Isma then is this tension between the individual and the community. For Isma, she is always already bereft of a heritage and of a secure self, she bears a name like any other name. And yet she is also charged with the task of safe-guarding, for within her name are all names across all generations, languages and borders. Isma is both depletion and multiplication, safe-

guard and exception. Throughout *So Vast* Isma is followed by ghosts or spectres, an indistinct collectivity that demands to write and be written through her. In a similar way, Djébar maintains a kind of intertextuality that opens her text to a spectral literary community. By reading Djébar's work intertextually, as dictated by her paratextual epigraphs, I hope to approach what Derrida gets to in *Dissemination* where he refers to intertextuality as the "infinite referral from trace to trace" (43). He suggests that in the same way that text and pre-text have an opposition that is easily displaced by the shifting boundary-relations of the text and its outside, "an epigraph...will never make a beginning" (ibid). In this way, the device of the epigraph already suggests the intertextual scene as one of dispersion, fracture, most importantly, "infinite referral from trace to trace."

Djébar's intertextual scene situates her practice of writing within a curious and almost disorienting literary milieu. In addition to quotes from well-known authors like Hölderlin, Virginia Woolf, Hermann Broch, and the fourteenth century Persian poet Hafiz, Djébar also references obscure writers like French poet CH. Dobzynski and a marginal French theorist/writer, Jeanna Hyvrard. Bearing the double status of embedded yet autonomous, how do these epigraphs function in relation to *So Vast* itself? To what end are they divested of their own context and to what end are they woven into the discursive web of Djébar's narrative? As shards, as threshold markers, as traces of the outside, epigraphs seem to echo the main themes of *So Vast*, namely spectrality, endlessness and infinity. By pursuing several lines of flight opened by the epigraphs, I show that not only do motifs like encirclement and multiplicity serve as

subjects for Djébar's writing, but through the very practice of writing, she actually enacts or performs encirclement and multiplicity.

The first section of *So Vast*, "What is Erased in the Heart," is prefaced by two epigraphs, the first of which is a French translation (*En bleu adorable*) of Hölderlin's *In lieblicher Bläue*. It reads:

Mais

De moi, maintenant, qu'advient-il, que je songe à toi ?

Comme des ruisseaux m'emporte la fin de quelque chose, là,

Et qui se déploie telle l'Asie.

But what is becoming of me now

that makes me dream of you?

As streams bear me along,

there--the end of something,

something unfolding like Asia.¹¹⁴

Located beneath this epigraph is a quote from Virginia Woolf's 1921 short story *A*

Haunted House:

Oh, is this your buried treasure?

The light in the heart.

¹¹⁴ English translation provided by Betsy Wing. The original German which is never cited by Djébar, I provide here for continuity:
Wie ist mir's aber, gedenk' ich deiner jetzt?
Wie Bäche reißt des Ende von Etwas mich dahin,
welches sich wie Asien ausdehnet.

The narration begins with Isma waking from a long sleep, a *sieste*, which in ways takes on qualities more akin to a *qailulah*, the midday nap of the Islamic tradition. Upon waking, she feels "an amazing and abrupt revitalization within" (21), and this *sieste* functions less as a threshold state but rather as a caesura with a clear distinction between before-*sieste* and after-*sieste*. For readers of Woolf, Isma seems to be the very body of the sleeper in Woolf's *A Haunted House*. The story is simply about a ghostly couple who return to their home in search of a treasure they have left behind. The line of one of the ghosts, "Here we left it," is repeated in the final paragraph as "Here we left our treasure" and the sleeper, wakened because "their light lifts the lids upon [her] eyes," says "Oh, is *this* your buried treasure? The light in the heart." In this moment, the body of the wakened sleeper *becomes* the "here" to which the ghost twice refers, and her eyes and heart contain and bear forth the treasure in the present moment of waking. Not only is there a confluence of temporalities within Woolf's story (the time of the couple, the time of the sleeper wakened, and the eternal time of the house itself), but the wakened sleeper embodies the temporality of "now" as a pulsing heart through Woolf's prose which beats through her use of pulsating present participles: "sleeping... reading... laughing... rolling... stooping."¹¹⁵ In this way, Djebbar's readers see Isma, refracted through Woolf, as the body, the wakened sleeper,

¹¹⁵ "'Safe, safe, safe,' the heart of the house beats proudly. 'Long years--' he sighs. 'Again you found me.' 'Here,' she murmurs, 'sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure--' Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes. 'Safe! safe! safe!' the pulse of the house beats wildly. Waking, I cry 'Oh, is *this* your buried treasure? The light in the heart.'

the "here" and the "now." This reading, furnished by the Woolf context, of Isma as "here/now" dramatically enriches and complicates the figure of Isma.

I would like to read this question of the "here-and-now" alongside a few quotes from Derrida on the temporality of *différance*. In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida writes that "In the incoercible *différance* the here-now [*l'ici-maintenant*] unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely [*justement*], and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant..." At stake here is the attempt to think the here-now without presence (*l'ici maintenant sans présence*). In Simon. *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary*, Simon Critchley helpfully translates this for us as "the absolute singularity of justice happening now without presence." And he further suggests that we should hear in the here-now "both the classical and theological *hic et nunc* and the semantic richness of the *maintenant*, understood both as the now, but also as the 'maintaining', that is the act of *maintenance* or maintaining/sustaining/bearing, where the present participle connotes an *act* of presencing irreducible to the present (*Gegenwart*)" (153). Buried even deeper in this "semantic richness" of *maintenant* is *main*, or hand in French, which traces back to the Latin *mancipium*, which under Roman Law is the formal taking possession of goods, namely slaves. Taken together, *maintenant* is a mode of injustice, a way of being held in someone's hand unjustly. To *e-mancipate* is to free oneself from this condition of injustice, or in other words to arrive a point where you have a different deixis than the one in which you were inscribed. The *hic et nunc* we

read in Djébar is precisely this hereness and nowness that indicates "thisness" and thus absolute singularity. Where *l'ici-maintenant* might give way to an ipseity that never advents, never comes, and is locked in *main-tenant*, Djébar and Derrida see the other possibility that relates to what Duns Scotus calls haecceity, and what Deleuze and Simondon will use to elaborate a theory of individuation, a theory that relies on becoming. Critchley goes on to say that the "experience of justice as the maintaining-now of the relation to an absolute singularity is the *à venir* of democracy, the temporality of democracy is *advent*, it is arrival happening now" (154). Against the accusation that Derrida's notion of democracy-to-come (*à venir*) means that democracy will be fully realized in some future time, Critchley shows the confluence of the *à venir* and the *maintenant*. In this way, the "now" part of here-and-now is a bloated now, a now of becoming rather than a fixed or frozen moment. In Deleuze's conception of haecceity, he pits the molecular time of *Aeon* against the molar time of *Chronos*, which renders the temporality of haecceity as the temporality of the infinitive. But it is here we must part ways with Critchley and turn back to Derrida. Derrida wraps up the above-quoted train of thought with a punchy conclusion: "No *différance* without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now" (37), to which I would add another of his lines from *Of Grammatology*: "difference cannot be thought without trace" (57). We have written ourselves into a circle here with difference, singularity, trace and the here-now. To understand what model of singularity is implied by this convergence let us recall that Isma is determined as the wakened sleeper through the very motif of the beating heart. The

pulse, the heart, gestures toward singularity, the *hic et nunc* of the body. Consider that Deleuze describes haecceities as "consist[ing] entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected" (261). We sense then, in the figure of Isma, an opening of *chronos*, a fissure in historical time, that allows for the emergence of relationality, movement and affect.¹¹⁶ We have thus pursued the thought of trace as the abeyance of presence, of meaning, of immediacy and of intelligibility that is the very condition of writing. In doing so, we have additionally encountered the temporality of the here-now through the figure of Isma that challenges traditional modes of historical witnessing. This temporality takes on the additional valence of musicality through the play of "tempo" which is the "secret throb of excitement, freed from convention...a beat that lingered stubbornly inside" (24). I would suggest here that this temporality corresponds with a temporality suggested by Baudelaire (and recapitulated by Benjamin) through the figure of the fugitive (*le fugitif*), which Djébar explicitly recuperates. From the Woolf story, we get a sense of "here-and-now" which was then qualified by a Derridean and Deleuzian reading of "nowness" in order to suggest that "now" is not a frozen space between past and future, but rather that "now" is an opening, even a space of becomings. This maps onto not only the mode of trace-écriture, which I suggest Djébar practices, it

¹¹⁶ I may be reading into this Simondon connection too much, but why stop now? Anne Sauvagnargues, in paraphrasing and quoting Simondon writes that the Simondonian *ecceity* "theorizes the appearance of a singularity at any level it is defined: human thought, molecular encounter, distinct atmosphere, or 'five o'clock in the evening.'" It is interesting then that Isma emerges from her nap to the narration of "awake and happy at five in the evening" (21).

also speaks directly to a major theme of *So Vast*, fugitivity, and it invokes (through twists and turns) the Hölderlin epigraph quoted above.

In 1865, Mallarmé writes to his friend Henri Cazalis of the troubles he is facing in creating his poem 'Hérodiade', namely the trouble of fugitive impressions:

And my poetry hurts sometimes and hurts like an iron rod! Besides, I have found an intimate and singular way of painting and noting fugitive impressions. Add to this, by way of even greater terror, that these *impressions* follow on from each other like in a symphony, and that I often spend entire days asking myself if this one can accompany that one, what is their relationship and their effect...¹¹⁷

What the "fugitive" impressions do is signaled by the other qualifier Mallarmé uses: "symphonic." Impressions, as used in musical composition, develop a system of signs through patterns and substitutions of signifiers that are immanent to the work itself. The musician, or reader in this case, learns the code of the work, the play between shifting denotative and connotative designations, and yet this polysemy remains strictly bounded by the text. A letter written to Cazalis a year earlier in October 1864 gives more insight into this "terror" that he mentions: "I have at last begun *Hérodiade*. In terror, because I am inventing a language which must necessarily burst forth from a very new poetics that could be defined in a couple of

¹¹⁷ Et mon vers, il fait mal par instants et blesse comme du fer! J'ai, du reste, là, trouvé une façon intime et singulière de peindre et de noter des impressions très fugitives. Ajoute, pour plus de terreur, que ces *impressions* se suivent comme dans une symphonie, et que je suis souvent des journées entières à me demander si celle-ci peut accompagner celle-là, quelle est leur parenté et leur effet..."

words: *Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces*" (CC 206). This fugitive writing has, like trace, effacement and abeyance of world and of meaning built into its very structure. Fugitive because they emerge from an utterance already under erasure, these fleeting impressions in their non-materiality and their non-mimetic qualities still produce material affect--fugitive writing, a fleeting presence that is never fully present, constitutes us. And yet, at once (dis)placed, fugitive impressions are also necessarily divorced from history. Mallarmé says this much when, in 1865, he writes to Lefébure "I want to make of her [Hérodiade] a being purely of dream and utterly independent of history" (CC 226). And of course one cannot help but to read in Mallarmé's fugitivity a reference to Baudelaire's famous description of modernity as "the transient, the fugitive, the contingent..." This description comes about when Baudelaire suggests that the aim for the modern artist is "to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory. [...] Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable." In what ways is Djébar's notion of fugitivity recuperating this idea? Walter Benjamin, who turns to Baudelaire to inform his own writings on modernity, establishes two modes of experience, that of *Erfahrung* and that of *Erlebnis*. *Erlebnis* is time as the experience of the moment, or, as Benjamin phrases it, the time of adulthood "always-the-sameness." It is a disconnected experience, and one strictly the property of the individual. *Erfahrung*, on the other hand, refers to an accumulation of knowledge across generations and bodies, it is a tertiary memory in which the individual past joins the collective past.

On the subject of fleeting or fugitive impressions, Benjamin develops a theory of shock or trauma in order to show how Baudelaire's practice of writing safeguards what would otherwise be lost to experience. And so it is in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that Benjamin writes:

The greater shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident's contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Without reflection, there would be nothing but the sudden start, occasionally pleasant but usually distasteful, which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense.¹¹⁸

Baudelaire, and his practice of fugitive writing, becomes so important for Benjamin precisely because it provides access to a world that would otherwise be lost.

Similarly, Isma, elaborating a theory of her filmmaking, thinks "This gaze, I claim it as mine. I see it as 'ours'...giving pause to the rhythm of things, slowing its pace"

¹¹⁸ In *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. p. 319.

(179). In a way that is analogous to anamorphosis in the visual arts, Baudelaire and Djébar (unlike the simple spectators) are not unjustly held in the hand of the now (*maintenant*), but rather have a special vantage point from which they can grasp the world. Outside of the time of ipseity and of *Erlebnis*, Baudelaire and Djébar, the fugitive writers, thus emerges as the emancipated.

Hölderlin's poetics often concern rivers and waterways as time and space, both duration and dwelling. And indeed, in Hölderlin's hymn *Der Ister*, he writes "For rivers make arable/The land." The arable nature of the land implies plowing, which implies sojourn, the cessation of nomadic wanderings. In terms of temporality, once the river departs the origins, it is engaged in a constant becoming, and, much like Isma the figure of the here-now, not held to the succession of moments common to linear time, of centuries and years--but rather to alternatives to time like seasons, before and after, generations. And yet, the epigraph that Djébar supplies for "Part One: What is Erased in the Heart" references not Hölderlin's river hymns, but rather the sky: "In lovely blue" (*En bleu adorable*). Hölderlin's *In lieblicher Bläue* was of course very influential for Heidegger who developed his 1951 lecture/essay "Poetically Man Dwells" based on this poem. In this essay, to dwell poetically emerges for Heidegger as a different form of access to the world that denies the will to calculation, and poetic language emerges as a kind of ethics. Heidegger considers the relationship between the human and the world as one of constant flux ("as streams bear me along"), the response to which is the human need to measure, frame, calculate and otherwise determine the indeterminate. The main image of Hölderlin's

poem is in fact a man descending from a bell tower enframed by a window, silhouetted against a blue sky. This image is recuperated by Djébar in *So Vast* when, upon awakening, Isma notes that "[a]zure space envelopes me, the air still," all the while "space gapes open around me...my body intact and serene"(21). Against the motif of the window frame that would outline or silhouette the figure of Isma there is instead the motif of openness, space gaping, emptiness. And yet this boundlessness, though it escapes Hölderlin's frame, introduces an element of wrapping, of endlessness. Isma in fact senses "finally with certainty, something both new and vulnerable, a beginning of something. I don't know what, something...and this 'something' is inside me and at the same time envelops me" (20). Elsewhere we read that Isma "full of emptiness," so perhaps this emptiness, which is associated with her being "available and tranquil" (22), is the "something" that saturates her, surrounds and wraps her? The repetition of *quelque chose* (something) recalls the Hölderlin epigraph and the "beginning of something" mirrors precisely his "end of something." At stake in Djébar's recuperation of Hölderlin's poem is at least two things. Firstly, she transforms the methods by which the position and figure of the human is determined from those of enframement, measurement and silhouette to wrapping, veiling--this move troubles the "gaze" that, peering up from earth to the sky, seizes the silhouetted image of the man descending from the bell tower. Additionally, unlike the static image, the screen-grab, of the man enframed, the wrapping is endless, an action without accomplishment. Secondly, the *quelque chose* that *déploie telle l'Asie*,

the something that unfolds like Asia, is for the speaker of Hölderlin's poem the end of something, but for Djébar, it is "a beginning of something" (20).

6.5 Stelae and "something unfolding like Asia"

In a circuitous manner, and for three chapters, Isma recounts the months and seasons of her obsession with the Beloved that preceded her *siesta*. In the fourth chapter, "The Dance," she recounts the beginnings of her obsession and she locates its inception on one particular night during which a young man morphed into the figure of the Beloved. The beginning of the chapter simply reads, "There is one scene, or maybe there are two that emerge...perhaps my memory...is attempting to raise some stele like a mark for 'the first time'" (48). And a few pages later in a rare moment of self-reflexivity on the part of the narrator we read "definitely I have returned now to the 'first scene'...something so blindly experienced" (54). Within these two lines there is not just a play on the "stele" and a Freudian primal or first scene, but also a reflection on the relationship between experience, memory and modes of inscription. Stelae, stone or wooden slabs, are usually inscribed and used to mark borders and territory, yet in this instance the narrator is erecting a stele to mark time, the first time.

The figure of the stele attains a fullness as it reappears in later chapters of *So Vast* as a meditation on the power of inscription to both preserve and efface. And in fact the section of the novel that bears the story of the stele found on the Algerian-Tunisian border is entitled, seemingly paradoxically, "Erased in Stone"

("L'effacement sur la pierre"). Djébar's telling of the history, circumstances and characters surrounding the stele found in the Dougga ruins is too elaborate to suitably recount here, but the upshot of the story is that the mysterious inscriptions on the stele were in fact the "lost" *tifinagh* alphabet, the written version of the Berber dialect of the Tuareg tribe. Of this alphabet Isma muses "what if this archaic alphabet preceded the Phoenician culture and survived long after it?" (147). Echoed by this question is Hölderlin's line "...something unfolding like Asia." If we take seriously Hölderlin's designation of Asia the east bank of the Bosphorus where Greek is not spoken we see that this "something unfolding" is *tifinagh* like a wrench in the Phoenician machine and the other dominant narratives implied by it. Anterior, posterior, but namely anterior to the Phoenician alphabet and its derivative modern alphabets, *tifinagh*, like Isma, is "fugitive without even knowing it" (176).

Divided by a figurative Bosphorus the men speak "by turn Punic with Carthage, Latin with the Romans and the romanized until Augustine's time, and Greek, then Arab for thirteen centuries" while the language of Tin Hinan, the fugitive princess, was "kept alive for engogamic use (mainly with their mothers, their wives and their daughters)" (147). This not-so-lost language of Tin Hinan is for Djébar *une écriture des femmes* not only because its transmission and protection through centuries was tended to by women¹¹⁹, but because the story of the script mimics to some extent the sociality women: that of being hidden in plain sight. Despite the

¹¹⁹ Isma's mother is herself a keeper of language: "...she had written down the poetry of the noubas of Andalusia. She knew the couplets by heart, and could read and write them in Arabic, so she could not be classified as illiterate, through otherwise she might have been so in our circle" (175).

many masculine, dominant and institutional gazes that eagerly brushed the stele, the script remained inscrutable and thus classified as dead or lost, and yet with the slightest adjustment of gaze and gazer, the secret of *tifinagh* was revealed and the language of the Hoggar Mountains was exposed as alive and well. This is no allegory on Djébar's part, but a philological approach that treats not ruins and inscriptions (those "victims of erosion" (145)), but living bodies and Djébar therefore really puts the corpus in her corpus *s.v.v.*

So what is at stake with Isma's "first scene" being raised like a stele *in her mind*? Rather than looking at Freud and his use of the first scene, it is perhaps better to turn to Blanchot who recuperates this primal scene in his 1980 text *The Writing of Disaster (L'écriture du désastre)*. Where Freud's theories on perception and preservation (or reservation) in the unconscious concern the adolescent observation of parental intercourse as shown in his case study "The Wolf Man," Blanchot's "(A primal scene?)" takes up the question of experience as a question of language and of inscription. Freud's scene hinges on the fact that the child is a witness to parental coitus but, crucially, while witness the act has not been understood. Intriguingly, Isma notes twice in "The Dance" that she is a "witness" (49) and a "spectator" (50). In time, in a second scene for instance, glimpses of the first scene will be recalled sharply into the present moment resulting in disorientation, mania, obsession--for it is only in reappearing that the first scene appears at all, or, in other words, it is only in recollection that the first scene is made available to consciousness. For Blanchot, this operation is reformulated into a reflection not just on experience, and the subject who

experiences, but also on experience that escapes representation. In "(A primal scene?)" Blanchot is attentive to the space between sensory perceptions, particularly sight,¹²⁰ and the faculties that subsume those perceptions in a single movement that preserves and destroys. In the same way that the stele at Dougga is a site of inscription that indicates both effacement and preservation, the "stele" of the first scene that Isma attempts to raise in her mind is meant to become this sort of Blanchotian space "between" perception and representation. Writing, or *écriture*, for Blanchot and Djébar is tasked with, if not maintaining the betweenness, pointing to the double nature of language. This is why Isma can ask: "But why would something so blindly experienced be revealed today with no detours, no sidestepping, no desire for a labyrinth?" (54). *Écriture* for both Isma the narrator and Djébar the creator of Isma, is precisely detour, the fulfillment of the desire for a labyrinth, a pure revelation that sidesteps the idea of concealment or forgetting--it is a way to cross borders. The stela, figurative or not, in *So Vast* become contested sites where writing, language, memory, legibility and intelligibility converge.

6.6 Arable Women and Heterophonic Witnessing

It is not by chance that the ruins of Dougga, which rest in a limestone basin on the side of the Teboursouk mountains, function as the keystone of Djébar's narrative.

¹²⁰ Blanchot's "(A primal scene?)" makes use of a child who "standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through the pane, looking. What he sees:...Though he sees...". See Trans. Smock, Ann. *The Writing of the Disaster*. University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 72.

There are three major topographies that emerge in Djébar's writings: the seaside¹²¹, the desert, and the mountains. Of these three, the mountain is that which has history inscribed within it. The canyons, the ridges, the valleys, the ruins, and even that which lays in the shadow all function as strata that contain different moments of history. The mountain punctuates the stories in *So Vast* in every possible register, from the political indications, to linguistic, economic, cultural etc. The narrator notes that during the Algerian War for Independence to say that someone had "gone up" implied "to the mountain" and, in short, that they had joined the resistance. And indeed, for figures like Tin Hinan, and the language of the Dougga stelae, the mountain becomes tied to fugitivity but also to arability. And indeed, it is to the women of the mountain, who remain fugitive without knowing it, to whom Djébar will apply the title of "Arable Women."

Born in the mountains by pure chance, the narrator Isma is greeted by a blessing delivered in Berber: "Hail to thee daughter of the mountain...you will be a traveler, a nomad whose journey started at this mountain to go far, and then farther still!" (247). And if we read *So Vast* as autobiographical to some extent, Djébar herself emerges as a daughter of the mountain first with her 1977 film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont-Chenoua*, and then yet again as this film appears in *So Vast*. In the filmic version, the women and children who live in Mount Chenoua are the

¹²¹ The seaside is the space of dreamlike memories from the time of Isma's obsession with the Beloved as they walked near the sea, or of childhood days spent along the beach that was "reserved for the deeply religious, little girls, and beggars" (357). The seaside is not an empty place, it is neither devastated nor fertile--it is a non-place of dreams, of marginal figures, and essentially a place outside of history.

characters, but they are not quite the content. Rather, the space itself of that region is the content. This is repeated in *So Vast* to some extent when Isma finds this "everyday space" and refers to it as "this freedom" (225). Always "in flight" because she cannot take rest in dominant social and political structures like gender, nation, affiliation, religion, etc., the everyday space provides freedom--not liberation, but freedom. Liberation would be the complete destruction of such boundaries, but freedom is the ability to self-determine how one lives within these structures. And just as Isma's blessing suggests with the phrase "far, and then farther still," there is no return involved, not even to the mountain on which she was born, there is only pure flight. As Isma attempts to capture these women on celluloid, Djébar explores the impossibility of such capture through the pages of *So Vast*. In what will be Djébar's most Blanchotian moment, the reader comes to understand that what is captured on film or in narrative is only the absence of these shadowy figures, not their presence. Isma films a woman she names the "Madonna of the shadows" who with a smile seems to tell Isma "*I, elusive, invisible, if I decided suddenly to appear, your moving pictures would reveal their bloodless, embryonic nature*" (228). The refrain "*if I decided*" appears three more times on the next page giving the sense of self-determination that coincides with fugitivity, with pure flight. Djébar, like Isma, far from seeking "freedom" seeks only these moments of exposure where one glimpses the passage of "what takes flight beneath matter" (206). Where Djébar will depart from Blanchot takes place in her *trace-écriture*, or the blood of writing. While both authors assume some idea of vacancy as the basis and condition for writing, Blanchot

will pursue this too much toward absence and impossibility. The crisis for Blanchot is that experience is always outside of language, thus placing a particular burden on writing as witnessing. Djébar, however, pursues a figure of *trace-écriture* that provides her with a way of being sensitive to, or intuiting, the murmur that comes before and beneath language and images. This attentiveness suggests that where Blanchot sees writing as disaster, Djébar sees a *trace-écriture* that therapeutically tends toward arability. This is why Djébar bonds together her arable women with the music of the *nuba*, and the poetic blood of writing in the final pages of *So Vast*. By doing so, she attempts to depart from prose, depart from narrative, and depart from language, through language, by accessing non-symbolic forms like the music of the *nuba*.

The *nuba* is a musical form derived from Andalusian music and now found in the Maghreb. In Algeria, the *nuba* is played by seven musicians and comprises many pieces, each of which reflects seven different rhythms. Florence Martin notes that the *nuba* is a suite or concert program with several musical pieces that are performed one after the other, hence its literal meaning: "your nuba= your turn" and crucially, the *nuba* "seems to not give precedence to any particular moment of the performance, but gives a voice to each loosely connected piece 'in turn'...the nuba presents...not a whole having achieved its final stage of construction, but some world caught in its own fluid polyphonic, serial becoming."¹²² The *nuba* is divided into parts (*mizan*) and each *mizan* begins with an instrumental prelude. This mirrors precisely Djébar's textual

¹²² Martin, Florence. *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema*. Indiana University Press, 2011. pg. 50.

structure where each movement begins with an "Arable Women" prelude. What Martin is referencing with "polyphonic serial becoming" is the relationship between each *mizan* and its prelude. Because each vocal movement follows an instrumental prelude, the *nuba* has a modally unified structure where the instruments and choral parts give way to heterophony or polyphonic stratification. Just as the mountains provide strata of history and memory, the *nuba*, the music of the mountains, provides strata of variations on a melody. This fullness (but not wholeness) of arable heterophony stands in stark contrast to the blank and vast wasteland of the desert.

The *nuba* rhythmically builds toward its concluding *mizan* called the *khlas*, which is performed in a 6/8 time signature. This correlates to Djébar's closing pages of *So Vast*, which dynamically break away from strict prose into a pulsing poetic meditation on fugitivity: witnessing and writing. Isma's narrative, or even her melody, combines with the other variations, the other histories, the other collectivities, and writing emerges as the way to "encircle the relentless pursuit" (359). This is similar to what Derrida, in quoting the poet Edmond Jabès, writes, "*At noon he found himself once more facing infinity, the white page. Every trace of footsteps had disappeared. Buried*" (*Writing and Difference* 69). It is precisely this pursuit, the act of *écriture*, "the circle that each step opens closes up again" (359), that becomes for Djébar a mode of witnessing. Outside of traditional modes of signifying and signification, Djébar pursues a witnessing that gives way not to redemptive narratives that will make the unseen visible, but rather she pursues a witnessing based in soundings and imagings that intimates an irrecoverable silencing and erasure.

Chapter Seven

Franz Rosenzweig's figure of "the We"

"What then, brothers (*adelphoi*)? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for the building up (*oikodome*)."

-Paul, I Corinthians 14:26

7.1 Introductory Remarks

Earlier in this dissertation (p. 59-101) I discussed the "Community Debates" that flourished in France during the 1980s among intellectuals such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben and others. These thinkers, each in his own way, attempt to unravel Western conceptions of community that are founded on totalizing myths of unity, continuity, and closure. In so doing, they address issues of identity, multiplicity, and universality in order to suggest a new thinking of community that does not rely, much like the dominant Western political formation, on "the common" or the sovereign subject, both of which fall back into identity politics. This radical thought of community emerges from a sustained engagement with antecedents from many different disciplines that span decades. Notably, their work appears almost as a conversation held between other thinkers such as Benedict Anderson, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Lévinas, Lévi-Strauss, G.W.F Hegel, Georges Bataille, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jean Paul Sartre, Friedrich Schelling, Thomas Aquinas, and Karl Marx to name but a few. I propose

here that an over-looked precursor is to be found in the German-Jewish intellectual, Franz Rosenzweig.

In his magnum opus, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*), Rosenzweig creates a figure he terms "the We," and this figure preempts the concerns addressed by the "Community Debates." Why then has he gone unmentioned in the pages of Nancy and others on this topic of community?¹²³ Why has there been no engagement with this figure of "the We" that so explicitly invokes the same political and philosophical discourses with which Nancy is in conversation, namely, individualism, rationalism, secularism, liberalism, and communism? In what follows, I will not only elaborate Rosenzweig's We in terms of the role it inhabits within his philosophical system and his work at the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, but I will also put it into this long-deferred conversation with Nancy. I do so not merely as an exposition on Rosenzweig's work, but also as a way to speculate about what in Rosenzweig's project is apparently so radical, challenging, or distasteful that it has been relegated to the archives.

7.2 *Star of Redemption*

Franz Rosenzweig intended for his *Star of Redemption* to be an all-encompassing "system of philosophy," and specifically, a system that stands in stark opposition to the systems presented by German Idealism. In fact, *Star* is overtly

¹²³ Derrida and Nancy are aware of Rosenzweig and his work. In part, Rosenzweig's intellectual proximity to Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin granted him a certain amount of celebrity that he otherwise would not have had.

oriented against Kant and Hegel (as well as Buber and Cohen and probably a few other people as well). As a "system of philosophy" the purpose of *Star* is to articulate the "knowledge of the All"--the whole of all that is. For Rosenzweig, Idealism premises itself on a refusal or denial of "everything that distinguishes the singular from the All..." (4). Thus, unlike previous systems of philosophy (what Rosenzweig refers to as "old thinking"), his "new thinking" does not seek knowledge of the All in terms of the Absolute. Rather, Rosenzweig is more interested in the All in its identity and difference, which is to say as both a single unity but also as a multiplicity of diverse particulars that make up that unity.¹²⁴

In order to launch an adequate critique against German Idealism, Rosenzweig decides to reformulate a cornerstone of this philosophical system, namely, the way in which nothingness and death operate within Idealism. The way he manages to assert his new thinking against the old thinking is articulated in the very first sentence of *Star* which reads, "All knowing of the All begins in death, the fear of death" (3). The first part of this sentence actually just repeats a tenet of German Idealism insofar as it reduces death to a positive side because all human activities and knowledges arise

¹²⁴ Crucially, Rosenzweig focuses on "unity" rather than "totality." Hegel is the thinker who presupposed the totality of the All, therefore tending toward a thought of the Absolute where included in the totality were the stages leading to its completion. In terms of unity we must first consider Jewish liturgy and the *Shema* ("Confession of Unity") that is recited daily in the morning and evening services. Rosenzweig says that the *Shema* is meant to "acknowledge God's unity--the Jew calls it uniting God. For this unity is, in that it becomes; it is a Becoming Unity. And this Becoming is laid on the soul of man and in his hands" (*CPS*: 61, Rosenzweig 1954: Book III, 192f). This indicates Rosenzweig's use of "unity" (*Einheit*) as an open, unworked, ever-renewing assemblage, against a closed and absolute totality.

from it; it is the second half of the sentence, which mentions the "fear of death," that irrevocably shifts the entire system.

Rosenzweig composed *Star* on military postcards that he sent home to his mother from the Balkan Front during World War I. I mention this historical aside because it adds another dimension to Rosenzweig's motivation to cultivate a "new thinking." The "old thinking" remained far too abstract and removed from the everyday life of people, and from the perspective of someone in a trench in World War I, a system based on an abstraction such as "nothingness" was almost insulting. Rosenzweig was not left to contemplate nothingness, he was left to contemplate death and specifically "the fear of death"--for him, these are very different things. That said, the "fear of death" allows the human to experience a certain "tornness from the whole world," or in other words, to experience not only the division between self and world, but especially that the "I" is not absolute. Ultimately, the fear of death furnishes the human with an experience of nothingness far different from the one expressed by German Idealism. "Nothingness" in Rosenzweig's system is not experienced as a universal or absolute because the "fear of death" makes us each experience *my own* nothingness, the threat death addresses to *me* and *me* alone. In this way, "nothingness" serves as a regulatory idea meant to preserve ontology, but Rosenzweig breaks ontology by showing that it preserves itself at the cost of shedding psychology, the abode of the individual. So where systems of Idealism propose a universal nothing out of which particulars emerge and back to which particulars tend, Rosenzweig insists that every particular kind of being emerges from its own particular experience

of nothing and in this way, he is able to refuse the mode of common unity proposed by Idealism. This notion of the "private experience"¹²⁵ of the one nothing is critical insofar as it invokes experience and its gut-wrenching materiality, thus effectively fracturing Idealism.

Emerging each out of their particular nothingness, Rosenzweig proposes three elements of the universe: God, World, Man. A discussion of these elements forms Part I of his book, which bears the title "The Elements or The Ever-Enduring Proto-Cosmos." The title alone indicates the gist of Part I: Rosenzweig decides these elements (God, World, Man) are part of the "Proto-Cosmos" precisely because they remain isolated from each other, and the Proto-Cosmos is "ever-enduring" because it stands outside of time--in their isolation, the elements are outside of relation and thus outside of history and of time. Rosenzweig will propose a way to set these elements into relation with one another in Part II, which he calls "The Course, or the Always-renewed Cosmos." The idea of "the course" gives us a sense of relationality, pathways, network, circuitry. It pulls the three elements (God, World, Man) out of their isolation and puts them in relation through the three specific operations or "courses" (*Bahnen*)¹²⁶ of creation, revelation and redemption. The effect of

¹²⁵ For Rosenzweig, unlike Heidegger, the experience of nothingness is *not* constitutive of the individual. Rather, the private experience fractures nothingness in such a way that it cannot be experienced as either Whole or All, a direct move Rosenzweig pits against Schopenhauer.

¹²⁶ What the use of "*Bahnen*" invokes is the mathematical terminology of "vectors." In this way, Rosenzweig's "courses" can be understood as lines made up of infinite discrete points. This lends a certain consistency here between motion and his thoughts on messianic temporality insofar as motion becomes an infinite number of states at an infinite number of moments.

assembling the once-isolated elements into a configuration by way of "the course" leads to this idea of the always-renewed Cosmos. Simply put, we go from the proto-cosmos, which stood outside of time and had isolated elements to "our" universe, the always-renewed Cosmos, a universe with its past present and future. Our cosmos is the cosmos of history, and this is brought about through revelation.

7.3 The Revelation of Divine Love

While Rosenzweig's notion of revelation is built on "the Call" of Genesis 22:1 to Abraham, it far exceeds this passage alone. Part of the work that Rosenzweig performs in *Star* concerns producing midrashic readings of biblical scenes in order to establish a theory of language and of temporality that is bound up in his overarching theory of the universe. Before reaching the call from God to Abraham, Rosenzweig reads Genesis from a particular vantage point that asserts the language of creation as one that posits the elements as a created world that is disparate and in an essential pastness marked by death.¹²⁷ Human thought and language grasps (*begreifen*) the created world as already past. He argues, conversely, that the language of revelation focuses on a "*lebendige Gegenwart*," or a living present. Revelation is always-becoming rather than something that "happens." In other words, the relation between god and his creations, the revealer and the revealed to, or the lover and the beloved, happens only in the present moment, and a continuous present at that.

¹²⁷ Rosenzweig engages in some word-play in the German where he posits the creatures of creation as "*Gewesen*" which is the past participle of the verb "to be" and "*Wesen*" which is creature.

The mode of love as ever-renewing counters the principle of insufficiency that suggests God creates out of need, or is somehow insufficient in his self, or seeks completion. The movement of divine love while universal in the sense that God's love is universally applicable, is also beholden to particularity in that he can only love one particular creature in that particular creature's present moment. Revelation while rooted in the pastness of the created world takes place, or is a taking-place,¹²⁸ in the present. The love of the lover is modeled on a potlatch gift economy in that the love is given in an ever-renewed moving present moment, leaving the beloved's love for the lover as transcendent of chronological time and thus eternal. The only recourse available to the beloved is then to turn toward another and, in bestowing love upon the new beloved, transform into the lover. Generally this love is assumed to move to whoever is in the closest proximity to the former beloved, i.e. the love moves to the neighbor. We arrive here at the famous injunction from Leviticus 19:18 to love your neighbor (*próximo*), and the question refigured in the Book of Luke as 'who is my neighbor'?

The discourse of neighborly love as presented in Levinas, Agamben, Paul etc. inscribes the sign of the singular on the plural of things everywhere as it traverses creation. Yet, while the beloved, the other, the neighbor, the whateverbeing¹²⁹ is

¹²⁸ The phrase Rosenzweig uses (*es gibt*) is literally "he/it gives" (+accusative). It is the combination of the impersonal pronoun *es* with the verb *geben*, "to give." By writing of Revelation under the sign "*es gibt*," Rosenzweig thus emphasizes the impersonal and "given" nature of it.

¹²⁹ This refers to Agamben's book *The Coming Community* in which he designates the being to come as Whatever (*qualunque*)—neither particular nor general, neither individual nor generic.

singular, it is not particular but indeterminate. This frustrates the transaction supposed in Leviticus and reformulated in Paul's Epistle to the Romans that states, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The original Greek of Romans 13:8 reads "τον ετερον" which, in the Latin Vulgate, is rendered "*proximum*" and eventually as "neighbor" in English. In 13:9, Paul uses "πλησίον" which, again, in the Latin Vulgate is rendered as "*proximum*" and then "neighbor." What is at stake here is the nature of this other/proximate neighbor as it relates to debt and law, the topic of Romans 13.

To rehash a familiar linguistic constellation, let us recall that the Latin for 'neighbor' is *proximum*. There is this same sense of proximity found within other languages, *próximo*, *der Nachbar*, *prochain*, even "the nighest." The neighbor, then, seems to be, that which is near to me. But does nearness suggest spatial proximity or perhaps abstract proclivities? Does my neighbor live in my neighborhood? Do we share a religion? A gender? A nationality? A bowling league? Crucially, nearness, and proximity imply spacing, distance between objects. So against unity, it is actually this fissure, this bit of disunity that allows communication and relation to take place. If things are unified, there is no space between them, and for Rosenzweig, this means there is no "relation" and this is not our cosmos. In our cosmos, we are gathered into unity through disunity. Disunity, the spacing between, becomes the very condition and law of this gathering. Whether this spacing or proximity concerns spatial qualities (neighborhood) or a certain proclivity, it certainly concerns asymmetry. The relation to the "ετερον" neighbor of Romans 13:8 is not one between two equal beings. Were

this the case, one's responsibility to love would be subsumed under the presumption of reciprocity, commerce or exchange. While the love of the πλησίον as expressed in Romans 13:9 may very well be the summation of all other laws, the agape figured in terms of ετερον is the fulfillment of the law that will never come, the debt that can never be paid.

In creation we saw that the proto-cosmos was made up of the isolated elements Man, World, God. In revelation, they were provided with a course that drew them into relation, one with the others. Rosenzweig reads this occurrence in terms of the Call from God to Abraham in Genesis 22:1, in which Abraham responds, "Here I am" (Heb. *Hineni*). At this juncture we realize that the language of revelation is dependent on pronouns and proper names, or at least the first person singular. In response to God's call the human becomes a pronoun that can respond, "Here *I* am" and thus the revelation of love is grounded in a creation. Rosenzweig writes, "If language is more than an analogy, if it is truly analogue (Gleichnis)--and therefore more than analogue--then that which we hear as a living word in our I and which livingly resounds..."(*Star* 198). For Rosenzweig, in the act of revelation, or rather in the fact of love, the creature moves from the inaudible third person he/she to the audible, lived, language of I/You. He uses Song of Songs as the central book of revelation in order to demonstrate how the love act turns the closed elemental being (metaethical man) first toward God and then towards others.

The metaethical being in his pure immanence, in his tautological self-sameness, in his ipseity, in his primordial autonomy of man as subject, and finally in

his B=B has no relation to A (as the universal or as God, both of which function the same way in *Star*). As unrelated, metaethical man is also unreal--he exists only in art as the silent Attic tragic hero. Actually existing humans confront one another in a web of complex relations and the task for Rosenzweig is to avoid the pitfalls of universalism and relativism while still trying to think a plurality, a "We," and he does this through revelation. The experience of divine love opens the immanent being to an exterior and functions much the same way as the figure of the neighbor in recent scholarship and "love" "freedom" and sometimes "community" in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Love pulls the human out of its pure immanence, its tautological self-sameness, its ipseity, and renders it opened, fissured and networked. And yet this assemblage of individuals is not yet Rosenzweig's We because, belonging to the operation of revelation, they also belong to the book Song of Songs (the focal book of revelation) and thus they belong also to the language of I and Thou.

For Rosenzweig, the act of revelation moves the human from inaudible third person (he/she) to the audible, lived language of I and You, or in other words, to the language expressed via Song of Songs. In this way, he is able to write that "language is more than only an analogy...it is truly analogue--and therefore more than analogue" (198). From the perspective granted here of language as "more than analogue," divine revelation can be seen not merely as an expression (in language) of love, but the very experience of love. Crucially, this experience of divine love occurs in Song of Songs "in the street...in the eyes of the multitude 'who would grant'" and not "in the dusk of intimate duo-solitude" (203). While the Beloved longs for eternal love, the "in the

street" nature of love, i.e. the ground of its occurrence, is the lived moment, or as Rosenzweig writes:

This longing cannot be fulfilled in love, for love is directly present in experience and manifests itself only in experience. The sobs of the beloved penetrate beyond love, to a future beyond its present revelation. They yearn for a love eternal such as can never spring from the everlasting presentness of sensation. (204)

And thus the "stupor of unquenchable longing" (ibid) haunts the I/Thou relationship, and Rosenzweig is quick to point out that even matrimony will not fulfill this, because it is merely an external demonstration of the unfulfillable longing. So the soul "aspires beyond this love to the realm of brotherliness" and "this realm can no longer be founded for her by the love of the lover" (ibid).

God and Man assume the roles of Lover and Beloved, but because Man cannot love God reciprocally, he is burst open by the love he receives and has no other recourse than to love his neighbor: "As he loves you, so shall you love" (ibid). And while there may have been hints of Levinas or Buber in the I/You formulation, Rosenzweig pushes the ethics of the I/You instead to the exigency of the "We." This "We" is written under the sign of redemption (not of revelation), which uses the language of psalms, a choral chanting where "We" is predicated on a collection of "Anyones" who are indefinite, as opposed to the pronoun used in Abraham's "Here I am." Each of the anyones have independent voices that sing the words to the melody of its soul; yet all these melodies adapt themselves to the same rhythm. They are

gathered into unity through their disunity. Crucially, and perhaps perilously, this condition undermines traditional conceptions of Jewish and Judaic community formation, namely, Rosenzweig's "We" does not emerge through a shared book (Torah), through a shared law (*mitzvot*), through a shared God, nor a shared space (*Eretz Yisrael*).

In revelation, Man goes from being an enclosed kernel-being, to a being who is disclosed. He goes from being an Individual, to a "dividual" if you will. In this way, the human is not defined in Rosenzweig as the Individual, but rather as a community, as a collection of "dividuals"--humans fissured and networked by the revelation of divine love. Notably, the dividuals exist only as part of the community, they come into existence by way of the community, not prior to the community. This notion of "the We" radically unworks traditional configurations of community insofar as it emerges without the co-existence of a "they." Those who are assembled as a We share nothing other than the fact that they share nothing. Or, in other words, they are not tethered together based on some commonality, some common denominator, or some shared predicate. As Rosenzweig phrases it, the one who is designated "neighbor" bears the title only because he is nearest at the moment of love, and:

Thus the neighbor is only a representative. He is not loved for his own sake, nor for his beautiful eyes, but only because he happens to be standing there, because he happens to be nighest to me. Another could stand in his place [...] Thus the neighbor, is as statedm only *locum tenens*. (218)

In this passage, Rosenzweig articulates the neighbor not only as the highest, but also as a singularity who, in its bareness and predicate-lessness, is infinitely interchangeable. In this way, not only does love reverberate through Anyones, but it also "goes out to everything, to the world" (218). This love that "goes out to the world" is not the same as a love that goes out to an eternal Kingdom of God. Rosenzweig ends *Star* by stating the the "wings of the gate open...INTO LIFE" (424) precisely because that is the path to redemption. Rosenzweig's insistence on the figure of the neighbor as bare singularity along with the idea that neighborly love is directed at the twin poles of neighbor and world are as much part of his theoretical exposition of his ontology, as they are the defining elements of his *Lehrhaus* project. I would go so far as to say that the *Lehrhaus* enacts or performs much of the system Rosenzweig puts forth in the pages of *Star*.

7.4 The We of the *Lehrhaus*

The We that emerges in the pages of *Star* is also assembled by the *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt. Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus* is often seen as an institution not just for knowledge, but for compassion gained through the pursuit of knowledge. And while this is true, it barely scratches the surface of the theoretical implications of Rosenzweig's (un)working that unfurls there. The problem for Rosenzweig, and his readers as well, comes from the tension in his writings that emerges when he tries to promote both the notion of the "Anyone" as well as "the Jew." Are these not mutually exclusive? Can one preserve "Jewishness" or any other predicate while still

participating in the We? How does Rosenzweig upset or reinforce the theme of Jewish election? This line of questioning is accounted for in part by Rosenzweig as he distinguishes between the "we" and the "We" in a section of *Star* provocatively entitled "The Goal."

In "The Goal"¹³⁰ (Part Two/ Book Three of *Star*), Rosenzweig writes "the 'we' always means 'all of us,' or at any rate 'all those of us assembled here.' In fact the word 'we' can consequently be understood only when accompanied by a gesture...But if someone says We, I don't know whom he means even if I see him..." (231). To draw out what remains implicit in this statement, he then finishes by writing, "The We per se embraces the widest conceivable circle; it takes an expressive gesture or an addition--we Germans, we philologists--to limit this maximum circle to a smaller segment as the case may be. 'We' is no plural" (236). The We, therefore, as a totality can only be narrowed down and not expanded. Anytime we give ourselves over to predicates and identity, we slip into the "we," which is to say we limit the circle. Rosenzweig exerts the force of this claim on Psalm 115, and specifically, he shows how the "I" of each individual psalmist melts into the "we." This "we" is the community that realizes their goal, which is to say, they realize the kingdom rather than remain in anticipation of that realization. Unlike the "we," the "We" cannot

¹³⁰ The German "*Ziel*" is rendered in W.W.H.'s translation as "purpose" within the text but as "goal" for the section subtitle. This is a bit misleading since Rosenzweig's highly codified vocabulary and structure intend for the reader to make certain links that perhaps get obscured due to this word play. Hallo's translation maintains goal systematically. Either way, both lack the Hegelian flavor of completion or fulfillment, which are two qualifications that really impact my reading of these passages from Rosenzweig.

culminate in Psalm 115, they cannot be given glory "yet" because they are not the "we-all," for they must always say "Ye" to God. And Rosenzweig proposes against the model where the individual psalmists blend together, a model of gathering "in the uniform choral tempo of the multivoiced finale." In an ultimate expression of a multiplicity that is attentive to difference, Rosenzweig writes that through this modality of choral chanting "All voices have become independent here, each singing the words to the melody of its own soul; yet, all these melodies adapt themselves to the same rhythm and unite in the single harmony" (237). Having developed out of the model of neighborly love that emerges from revelation, the We exists already as a totality, as an open-totality that held in judgment by the Ye can never complete nor fulfill itself.

The figure of the We becomes even more provocative when read against the *Lehrhaus* project because it throws into sharp relief Rosenzweig's perspective on corporeal communities. It seems really unjust to speak of Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus* in a comparative way against the historical backdrop of either *Volkshochschule* or *beth midrash*, while completely ignoring the implications for community building that can be garnered from careful reading of *Star*. Implications, I might add, that contribute to and disturb a) current debates surrounding issues of community, and b) the vocabulary used to discuss Rosenzweig in recent scholarship. In order to better elaborate on this, what follows is a survey of Rosenzweig's musings on education, life, and ultimately, on community.

Rosenzweig's *It is Time*, an epistle on Jewish learning and education addressed to Hermann Cohen, not only criticizes Jewish scholarship and religious instruction, it also outlines an Academy for the Science of Judaism. His Academy, however, would have very little in common with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* of Heine, Zunz and Gans, which embodied *Haskalah* values. While the new Academy produced many of the greatest works known to modern Jewish scholarship (on Spinoza, Maimonides and Mendelsohn), Rosenzweig remained dissatisfied. In 1920 he addressed to his friend Eduard Strauss an essay entitled "Toward a Renaissance of Jewish Learning" in which he expresses the need for a more profound Jewish life that could only come about with the creation of a "new Jewish human"¹³¹ rather than new books. In the same year he assumed the leadership of the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt. On the term "new Jewish human" he says, "this term should not be taken in its (ostensibly loose) meaning, which is actually a very narrow one—it should not be taken in what I would call the petty-Jewish sense that has been assigned to it by exclusively political or even exclusively cultural Zionism." In a short pamphlet entitled "Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning," Rosenzweig goes on to write

¹³¹ More broadly, and following Badiou who describes the "new man" as the focal point of the whole twentieth century, "the new man is a real creation, something which has never existed before, because it emerges from the destruction of historical antagonisms... This conception of the new man—anti-predicative, negative and universal—traverses the century" (*The Century* 66). The prevalence of this "new man" trope among twentieth century thinkers signals the admission that WWI was such a catastrophe for Western civilization and thought that it could not simply be "patched over." Granted, it could be argued that the trajectory set by the call for a "new man" led to WWII, the Atomic Bomb, the Holocaust, the gulag, the Cultural Revolution, Kamputchea, one-dimensional man, to name but a few.

that, “It is necessary for him [the Jew seeking wholeness] to free himself from those stupid claims that would impose Juda-‘ism’ on him as a canon of definite, circumscribed “Jewish duties” (vulgar orthodoxy), or “Jewish tasks” (vulgar Zionism), or – God forbid--- “Jewish ideas” (vulgar liberalism).” He goes on to suggest instead a dynamic experience of life wherein “all you need are empty vessels in which something can happen...time and space...to speak in.” This of course conjures up the Lurianic "breaking of the vessels" (*shevirat ha-kelim*) and the consequent necessity for *Tiqqun*, or repair. And indeed, the *Lehrhaus* project finds itself somewhere between *Tiqqun* and a reimagined messianism, which is to say an unworking or inoperative messianism without the messiah, i.e. the operator. Already in this statement there are echoes of Jean-Luc Nancy's *Inoperative Community*, but in order to establish the stakes of this alliance (and to make good on this inoperative messianism claim), it is worthwhile to consider Rosenzweig's perspective on knowledge and experience, learning and life.

The *Lehrhaus* allows Rosenzweig to cultivate a new kind of *lernen* based on the dialogical principles expressed in his texts, letters and essays. For Rosenzweig, who on one occasion designated *lernen* as a sacrament,¹³² lectures, seminars and other traditional forms of “study” are inadequate to the task of the education of the new man not just because of their content, but because of the experience of these situations both on behalf of the student and the teacher. The traditional forms of

¹³² In a letter to his cousin he refers to *lernen* in this way. Rosenzweig, R. & Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, E. (Eds.) (1979) *Briefe und Tagebücher*. 2. Band. 1918-1929 (Franz Rosenzweig. Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften I), in collaboration with Bernhard Casper, Haag: Martinus Mijhoff, p. 728.

academic discourse mentioned above rely on delivery of knowledge as a one-way transmission where the discourse haughtily addresses itself equally to no one in particular and everyone in general, Rosenzweig therefore seeks to eradicate the figure of the 'professional' or the 'scholar' and instead promotes a mode of address he terms *Sprachdenken* which is both a personal address (an address to the person within the scholar) and indicator of the dialogic nature of language. This decentering of knowledge allowed for many people from all different professions (and even religions) to assemble at the *Lehrhaus* and to share knowledge in a meaningful way. In much the same way that *Star* is not a Jewish book although it is about Judaism, the *Lehrhaus* is not a Jewish institution so much as it was about creating a "New Thinking" centered around Judaic thought and scholarship with an eye toward closing the gap between knowledge and life. The aim of the *Lehrhaus* is to bring a new vitality to Jewish scholarship but to "life" as well. Following a Bergsonian *Lebensphilosophie* approach, Rosenzweig posits life as something of value and seeks, through his philosophical writings and teachings, to address man's embodied relation to the world—the fact that he is "INS LEBEN" (*Star* 1). Furthermore, the *Lehrhaus* is not strictly for Jews just as *Star* is held to be an important text for humanity, for humans in their human-ness.

Rosenzweig is famous for saying "Nulla dies sine linea hebraica" (not a day without a line of Hebrew). In *Gertrud Kolmar: A Literary Life*, which came out in 2013, Dieter Kühn muses, "And why does he [Rosenzweig] say this?" The conclusion Kühn reaches is simply that "He says it because, without Hebrew, there would be no

Jewish knowledge, and without Jewish knowledge, no Judaism" (171). Perhaps this is too simple of a conclusion. In the first place, the fact that it is written by Rosenzweig not in German but in Latin is always swept under the rug, or at least the phrase is naturalized in the transition to English language texts.¹³³ The reason to nitpick translation choices here is because the fact that it is written by Rosenzweig in Latin should be a flag. It's clearly an allusion to and spoof off of Apelles' proverb "*Nulla dies sine linea*." As Pliny the Elder explains to us, "It was a custom with Apelles, to which he most tenaciously adhered, never to let any day pass, however busy he might be, without exercising himself by tracing some outline or other; a practice which has now passed into a proverb."¹³⁴ So by adding "Hebrew" onto the end, not only does Rosenzweig move the proverb from one realm of representation to another (art to language), he signals some sort of intervention in the motif of the dualism of Athens and Jerusalem through his summoning of Apelles.

Giorgio Agamben, in *The Time that Remains* (2005), recounts the story of Apelles and Protogenes that he finds in Pliny by writing "The contest is about a line. Protogenes draws such a fine line that it seems not to have been drawn by the paintbrush or any human being. But Apelles, using his brush divides his rival's line in two with an even finer line, cutting it lengthwise in half" (50). The reason I bring

¹³³ Dieter Kühn, for example, renders it in English in *Gertrud Kolmar: A Literary Life* (2013). Alan T. Levenson and Roger C. Klein do the same in *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers* (2006). Steven Gimbel follows suit in *Einstein's Jewish Science* (2012). My hat goes off to Cahnman who concludes his 1937 pamphlet "Why Learn Hebrew" with this quote from Rosenzweig, in the Latin. Likewise, Michael Brenner in *Jüdische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik* (2000) notes that the phrase is in Latin when Rosenzweig deploys it.

¹³⁴ Pliny (the Elder). *The Natural History of Pliny*, vol. 6. p. 258.

Agamben up is that he captures so wonderfully what is at stake in the story of Apelles' Cut (through a gloss on Paul), and therefore what is at stake in Rosenzweig's allusion to it: namely, the division of divisions "forces us to think about the question of the universal and the particular in a completely new way, not only in logic, but also in ontology and politics" (51). Crucially, and this is rendered more clear in the German words for line (*Zeile*) and accomplishment (*Ziel*), Apelles' motto can be rendered both as "No day without a line" and "No day without an accomplishment." This can be understood conceptually as practicing accomplishment, either the fulfillment of a task or work of art. Linguistically, the Latin word for "line" (*linea*) also calls forth "thread," as in the many threads woven together to accomplish linen. This closed totality, the accomplishment of a work or linen, is instead cut, fissured and held open by Rosenzweig's simple addition of "Hebrew" to the end.

What Agamben draws out for us through his reading of a Pauline cut via Apelles is a biopolitics born in such Pauline statements as "neither male nor female, slave nor free" (Gal 3:28) or "Jew according to flesh or according to Spirit" (Rom 2:28). Rosenzweig picks up this Pauline mantle insofar as his projects attempt to grapple with the remnant, which is to say the central problematic that "the people is neither all nor the part, neither the majority nor the minority. Instead, it is that which can never coincide with itself." Rosenzweig's interpretation of Jewishness, Jewish life, and thus also Jewish learning, follows this thought of the remnant more than a thought that asserts a facile understanding of Jewishness or Judaism. The Apelles' cut produces a remnant that indicates above all else that the remnant cannot be reduced to

either Jew or non-Jew. Rather, after the cut "all that is left is a remnant and the impossibility of the Jew or the Greek to coincide with himself" (52-53).

So to once more return to Rosenzweig's dictum "*Nulla dies sine linea*" ("not a day without a line of Hebrew"), we have established several layers of significance. First, let us understand "line" to mean both a line painted by Apelles and a line of text written in Hebrew. For Rosenzweig who wrote that "the life of the eternal language [i.e., Hebrew] unfolds like that of the people [i.e., Jews]--in constant renewal,"¹³⁵ it seems like the dictum encourages both a practicing of a craft (learning the grammatical structures of Hebrew, just as Apelles improved his techniques through constant practice), but also it encourages participation in something that is both eternal yet also instantiated within the present moment. Rosenzweig explains this by writing "one cannot read Klatzkin's Spinoza, or even a Hebrew newspaper, without deriving something that would help understand Ibn Ezra's commentaries, or Talmudic argumentations, or the original text of the Bible. To read Hebrew implies a readiness to assume the total heritage of the language."¹³⁶ I would like to emphasize here that it is "of the language" and not "of the people," a distinction not to be taken lightly. Second, let us understand "line" as division or as cut, while at the same time drawing into our reading the second rendering of the maxim as "not a day without something accomplished." While Apelles may have liked to practice a line each day in order to become more accomplished i.e. to accomplish a work, Rosenzweig's rendition of this maxim assumes an unworking. The injunction to not go a single day without a line of

¹³⁵ Rosenzweig, Franz. *His Life and Thought*. p. 264.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

Hebrew doesn't imply that this practice tends toward a culmination or conclusion, a perfection of an art, craft or work. Rather, if we take Rosenzweig's claim about the constant renewal of Hebrew quite seriously, the motto suggests a modality through which we are given over to inoperativity, indetermination, the contingency of each moment and thus also singularity.

The implications of Rosenzweig's motto reverberate through the *Lehrhaus*, and specifically through the kind of engagement he encouraged with regard to Judaic texts. In the nineteenth century the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, with its Enlightenment baggage, tended toward historicism and thus leads to a scientific study of Torah as an historical document that relegates Law to the category of ritual and thus fails to take revelation seriously. Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus*, on the other hand, leads its students back to Torah in a highly experiential way which is to say it concerns itself not so much with the content of revelation but with the fact and event of revelation. The *Lehrhaus* is meant to reinforce Rosenzweig's radical conception of revelation, a revelation which he felt was eclipsed by reason on one side and the Torah the other. The eclipse of revelation by reason is formulated most forcefully through Kant wherein the human being is determinable only "by laws he gives to himself through reason." This rationalist approach with its concept of God derived from a moral idea opposes revealed religion where the law comes from the outside, from a commanding voice. With human reason alone as the ground, moral concepts disclose only themselves while *mitzvot* disclose both the rule and the rule giver. Rosenzweig's conception of the *Lehrhaus* falls neither under the former autonomous

ethics nor under theonomous teachings--neither human being nor divine entity is posited as the source of ethical judgment.

Rosenzweig is short-circuiting ethics in order to sidestep both the Kantian project and a Pharisaic approach to the written law. This done, the focus shifts from a higher reference of principle (an imperative, maxim or divine law) to a concrete and material analysis of the right to be done in each particular instance. And this kind of ethics can only issue forth from the *We*, from the space they occupy and from the space which constitutes them, which in truth can never be a space, but only spacing. In the same way the *We* recognizes the heteronomy of itself, the fact of its being assembled by revelation, and the contingent ethical burden placed up it, so too does the institution of the *Lehrhaus*. In speaking of the project of the *Lehrhaus*, Rosenzweig says, "there is no one today who is not alienated, or does not contain within himself some small fraction of alienation". He therefore welcomes Jew and non-Jew alike to assemble at the *Lehrhaus*, to share knowledge, and to go from "the periphery back to the center, from the outside, in." Crucially, this is not the welcoming of *everyone* but rather the welcoming of a collection¹³⁷ of Anyones (the "Anyones" found in psalms).

For Rosenzweig, one must look at every moment of life as one that entails judgment but not through a logical process where one reaches for the law, a maxim,

¹³⁷ A "collection" is not a multitude, collective, commune etc. And the notion of the "Anyone" dovetails nicely with Giorgio Agamben's *whateverbeing* from *The Coming Community*. In this moment, both Agamben and Rosenzweig arrive at the necessity for thought to produce some way to reckon with the stale, used-up and dried out figure of the Individual or the Self.

or an imperative, but rather toward the irruption of revelation and the messianic dimension. Necessarily bound to his conception of revelation and messianism is the fractal immanence mentioned above that serves as an infraethical modality through which the I is born to itself but only as “the We,” as *qohelet* or “one among the gathering.” The condition of perpetual debt as expressed through Paul manifests itself in the Christian *ecclesia* as congregation of individuals assembled for common labor, a common work against this debt. Contrarily, *qohelet* (one among the gathering) or “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” presents a different perspective that again signals Nancy’s notion of inoperativity or unworking. Ecclesiastes 1:2 reads:

הָבֵל הַפֶּל הַבָּלִים הָבֵל, קִהְלֵת אָמַר הַבָּלִים הָבֵל

Usually translated as "Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth; vanity of vanities, all is vanity" or "Meaningless! Meaningless! said the teacher, all is meaningless" this passage makes use of the Hebrew word "*hebel*" in ways that are easy for readers to Camus or Paul Bowles to understand. Beyond all that "vanity" or "meaninglessness" implies, *hebel* demands something closer to Meursault's experience of the world in Camus' *The Stranger*. Meursault, the paradigmatic figure for Camus' formulation of the Absurd, eventually realizes that there is an absence of ultimate meaning or causality for existence:

I'd passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I'd felt like it. I'd acted thus, and I hadn't acted otherwise...And what did that mean?...Nothing, nothing had the least importance...From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow,

persistent breeze had been blowing toward me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. (118)

But perhaps more to the point, *hebel* bespeaks something quite powerfully captured in Paul Bowles "He of the Assembly" (1978): *M'Hashish*, or the state or condition of being intoxicated by hashish. 'Qohelet displays a recognition of an existential condition and a consequent emphasis on the "here now" deictic. Bowles, in an essay written for an LP release of his audiobooks explains it like this:

Moroccan kif-smokers like to speak of the "two worlds," the one ruled by inexorable natural laws, and the other, the kif world, in which each person perceives "reality" according to the projections of his own essence, the state of consciousness in which the elements of the physical universe are automatically rearranged by cannabis to suit the requirements of the individual. These distorted variations in themselves generally are of scant interest to anyone but the subject at the time he is experiencing them. An intelligent smoker, nevertheless, can aid in directing the process of deformation in such a way that the results will have value to him in his daily life. If he has faith in the accuracy of his interpretations, he will accept them as decisive, and use them to determine a subsequent plan of action. Thus, for a dedicated smoker, the passage to the "other world" is often a

pilgrimage undertaken for the express purpose of oracular consultation.¹³⁸

What Bowles' kif smokers offer us is a way of life that validates existence as it is. *Qohelet*, therefore and much like Rosenzweig's metaethics, indicates the contingency of every moment of life through the irruption of time which lacks this appeal to a universal. For Rosenzweig, this contingency is revelation as an incursion of God into time and history as well as the horizon of the messianic.

The *Lehrhaus* Rosenzweig oversaw in Frankfurt operates as a practical institution through which the We carries out not *halakhah* for the Messiah, which would be a kind of operation or work, but a kind of un-working in the sense given to the word by Blanchot and Nancy. It is very easy to misunderstand this mode of inoperativity as well as other aspects of the *Lehrhaus* movement, and especially where Rosenzweig's involvement is concerned, if the movement is read independently of Rosenzweig's philosophical works. It is common to see the *Lehrhaus* project, as Michael Brenner sees it, as a distinctly Jewish project that desires to "preserve a cultural distinctiveness." Brenner goes on to explain further that the "Lebensphilosophie represented by the Lehrhaus was not that of a society in search of new values but that of a minority struggling for its cultural survival, while its distinctiveness was increasingly stressed by external forces."¹³⁹ My response to this quote is "yes and no." Yes, it is true that the forays into assimilation Rosenzweig

¹³⁸ Bowles, Paul. *A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard*. ed. Carson, Jon and Hanzsek, Chris. Dom America 2 CD Audiobook, 1999.

¹³⁹ Brenner, Michael. *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*. p. 78.

witnessed did not appeal to him because they often involved the complete eradication of knowledge of Judaism and Jewish cultural traditions and languages etc. But I am not convinced that the "search for new values" has to be held in opposition to a struggle for "cultural distinctiveness" either. In *On Jewish Learning*, Rosenzweig says of Jewishness that "It is only lived--and perhaps not even that. One *is* it. One is Jewish. Perhaps confusingly, he goes on to say that because Jewishness exists in itself, because it "already is here and was here before me and will remain when I am gone, therefore--but *only* therefore--it is also literature" (58). So to rephrase all of this, One is Jewish, but because Jewishness is also literature, One is also literary. For Rosenzweig the "secret of literature" is given away by the fact that Hebrew "knows no word for 'reading' that does not also mean 'learning'." This suggests to me that the *Lehrhaus* movement, contra to the opinion of Brenner and others, goes far beyond identity and cultural (in)distinctiveness and instead enters into dialogue with Nancy's descriptions of singularity, being-in-common and also literary communism (as discussed in Chapter Two).

7.5. Experiences of Community: the *oeuvre* (operativity) of *Acéphale* and the *désœuvrement* (inoperativity) of the *Lehrhaus*

Jean-Luc Nancy states in *The Inoperative Community* that "the only question" (for him? For us? For modernity?) is "what brought about...the exigency of a literary experience of community or communism" (8)? And while I explored the stakes of this question in Chapter 2 (p.59-101), I deferred until now an extended discussion on

Nancy's attention to Bataille. For Nancy, it becomes clear that the question of literary communism is tied to Bataille's experience of community and tied to the fact that Bataille's "thinking emerged out of a political exigency and uneasiness--or from an exigency and an uneasiness concerning the political that was itself guided by the thought of community" (16). Nancy's reading of Bataille, especially when placed alongside Rosenzweig, exposes certain pitfalls in Bataille's thinking and practice of community. In particular, Bataille struggles in *Visions of Excess* and elsewhere to articulate a "science of heterology" or else practices of radical heterogeneity, and yet at every turn he experiences failure. In what follows, I suggest that this failure is tied to Bataille's too willing eagerness to embrace (or produce) a socius and the contract always hidden behind this notion, and thus the idea of law a socius (or socii as the case may be) presupposes.¹⁴⁰ Rosenzweig instead provides through the *Lehrhaus* and *Star* models of heteronomy that avoid such Bataillian snags.

The motif of "community" runs parallel throughout Bataille's pre- and post-war writings with his reflections on totalitarianism, communism, and fascism. Bataille's influences are numerous, and among them are Durkheim, Nietzsche, Marx and the surrealists. From 1933 to 1939, Kojève was the leader of the seminar on Hegel at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes. While he is credited with introducing Hegel into French thought (along with Jean Hyppolite), his approach was highly

¹⁴⁰ This is the burden of Hegel on Bataille and on the whole College de Sociologie enterprise. Like Hegel, but very darkly, they can maintain a continuity, or unity, of nature and culture (or society) by holding on to a notion of 'law' that operates (!) in both realms. Rosenzweig however does not fall for this, rather he holds on to the notion of creation and avoids that of nature.

interpretive rather than strictly exegetical. In 1937 when Bataille founded his Collège de Sociologie, an informal discussion series, he invited Kojève to participate. Between these two intellectual venues, Kojève's audience came to include Lacan, Klossowski, Bloom (then a student of Leo Strauss, and sent there by Strauss himself) and others. Kojève, a reader of Marx, anthropologized the Hegelian negative and substituted the category of man for that of *Geist*. Where Marx had, in his own words, "stood Hegel on his head," Kojève felt he completed Hegel. Bataille, on the other hand, who felt "suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed ten times over"¹⁴¹ by Hegel, sought in his *Acéphale* period especially to expose a negativity beyond Hegel's conception, thus effectively decapitating Hegel rather than standing him on his head. For Bataille, only the violence of decapitation could respond adequately to the force of Hegel's thought.

Acéphale (from the Greek ἀκέφαλος *akephalos*, literally "headless") was both a public review printed between June 1936 and June 1939 and a secret society formed by Bataille and his close friends, all of whom were sworn to secrecy. *Acéphale*, both as esoteric society and public review, unfolded many of Bataille's obsessive notions like sacrifice, abandonment, and the inner experience. Disenchanted with politics and political groups surrounding him in the 1930s, Bataille instead begins to experiment with secret societies, fraternal groups, and other iterations of sociality or communality. Perhaps most importantly, *Acéphale* is, along with his Collège de

¹⁴¹ Roudinesco, Elisabeth. *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France 1925-85*. Trans. and Intro. Mehlman, Jeffrey. Free Association Books. London. 1990. p. 135.

Sociologie, both a thought and a practice of community. It is the exigency of community within Bataille's thought, as well as his lived or embodied practice of community and sacrifice that leaves him vulnerable to accusations of fascist tendencies on his part.

As suggested by the cover of the first issue of *Acéphale* (1936) which features a drawing (or perhaps emblem) by André Masson of a body without a head, Bataille's obsession with the privation of the head has to do with the "endless unfettering of the passions."¹⁴² He imagines the chiefless (leaderless, *führerlos*) crowd who, through sacrifice and abandonment, redefine their relationality and the trajectories of their social energies. The influence of French Sociology in general, and Marcel Mauss in particular, becomes quite clear as Bataille addresses circulation, and a certain "putting into play" that is commonly associated with the Situationist International. This circulation or effervescence, one should hesitate to use movement here, refers to energies, intensities, passions, symbolic articulations, the economy of the gift, and potlatch. The fascist tendencies that were born in Bataille's engagement with *Contre-Attaque* in 1935 reemerged with his post-war call for a return to communal values and unfettering of passions. *Contre-Attaque*, a political group of intellectuals which Bataille founded with André Breton was an alternative to the fascisms and communisms by which it was surrounded. Yet, as Bataille admits, the lack of an undergirding theory or doctrine along with the focus on agitation and violence of the masses led Breton and the surrealists to identify it as *sur-fasciste*. Not

¹⁴² Here I quote Blanchot in *The Unavowable Community* who, through an act of *détournement*, is referencing Charles Fourier.

wanting to risk fascism again, Acéphale's headlessness detracts from any sort of cult of the leader or head that would link it to fascisms borne by Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, el caudillo Franco, etc. Furthermore, the (non)relationship Acéphale holds with the Collège de Sociologie indicates a certain hesitancy on behalf of Acéphale to become accessible to the "public" and with it, the "political." As Allan Stoekl notes in his introduction to *Visions of Excess*, "The Collège de Sociologie was as public as the Acéphale group was private [...] the Collège was meant to study the tendencies of man that the Acéphale group hoped somehow to spark."¹⁴³ In its privateness, Acéphale sustains a political ambiguity that protects it from the accusation of being a fascist movement, or any movement at all. As a group who performs private rituals, there is inherent to it a political impotency--it will never be a mass movement or official party. Yet, as a group who attempts to tap into primitive communal passions and harness the orgiastic powers associated with the social values of expenditure, death, and sexuality, Acéphale achieves political clout, if it can even be called such, similar to that of the Situationist International. As Stoekl suggests between the Collège and Acéphale, and I would add certain *situations*, there is a tension surrounding the notions of the individual and individual experience, expenditure, and collective desires. While the start of the war put an end to the Collège late in 1939, reason unworked Acéphale from its foundational ideas regarding sacrifice, the individual, and the collective.

¹⁴³ *Georges Bataille Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. University of Minnesota Press. 1985. pp. xx.

As Michael Taussig says of Acéphale: "It was scary."¹⁴⁴ It is precisely this period of Acéphale that Nancy ties to his notions of mythic thought. Tapping into aspects of the chthonian mythology of the Aztecs, it is acknowledged that Acéphale held meetings at Place de la Concorde as well as near trees that had been struck by lightning. Not only is Place de la Concorde where Louis XVI lost his head, it was for Bataille a negative sacred site holding the obelisk from the Luxor Temple. Acéphalic, easily read as a-phallic, lends itself to the thought of symbolic (re)articulations with regard to this obelisk--Bataille had hoped to *détourner* this site and its inheritance and, in some respects, its nostalgic symbolic meanings. It is in a forest just outside of Paris that members of "the conspiracy" regarded human sacrifice as the way to unite the upper and lower powers, and thus found community. While actual sacrifice presented too many logical fallacies to carry out, namely that the sacrificer would have to die at the same instant as his victim, sacrifice as circulation continued to permeate Acéphale and Bataille's thinking on the foundations of community.

Sacrifice for Bataille is an expenditure without reserve, or an unproductive expenditure, a movement that will never reach its full dialectical resolution. Where Hegel reads death as a contradiction to be overcome by appropriating death, Bataille reads it as an irreducible aporia where one would necessarily need to die while living to complete the appropriation. Sacrifice becomes for Bataille a way to enact death as that which is collectively shared, yet impossibly so. Blanchot, however, does not hesitate to note that by giving themselves sacrificial death as *project* the group

¹⁴⁴ Taussig, Michael. *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. University of Chicago Press. 2006. Pg. 206.

endangers their stance that attempts to oppose the capitalist logic of putting all productive forces to work. In other words, the community that would pose death as a project, or make use of sacrifice, would resemble the very same Marxist bourgeois society that it attempts to thwart, because at root there is a refusal of expenditure without return. As Derrida notes of the structural logic of the gift and gifting, it interrupts the political economy of the capitalist superstructure. In much the same way that the gift ceases to be a gift the moment it is recognized as such, Acéphale was the shared experience of that which cannot be shared. Against the homogeneity demanded by the capitalist sphere, Bataille proposes socially rooted heterogeneous elements. But yet again, one reaches a logical conundrum in that elements designated as "remainders" are only such under a system of homogenization which would seek to produce waste. Rather, one must think radical alterities, rupture, and radical expenditure. While Bataille's inquiry and experience of community occurs across many registers from ontological, to historical, practical, theoretical, and epistemological, the same movement of thought addresses itself to themes that emerge and reemerge, even if under different guises, as inextricably immanent.

Rosenzweig finds himself on the other side of autonomy and is not held to the same logical necessities that Bataille's heterological assemblages impose upon themselves. The same free heteronymous subject that opens the path to the We is produced in Blanchot's literary communism (as the figure of the writer/reader) through the movement of its own effacement. For Blanchot this generative effacement comes through writing, and for Rosenzweig it comes first through love

and then through choral chanting, a praise of that divine revelation, and finally through the historical material institution of the Lehrhaus. "Institution" though it may be, the Lehrhaus is not to be considered a "fixtured" as Blanchot would consider the stars (*les fixes*). The Lehrhaus has quite a disaster-effect which involves the unworking of autonomous ipseity and sovereign identity, and it bears the mark of heteronomy, where heteronomy is not the Levinasian implication of "being held hostage," but rather the very condition of freedom itself. It seems then that the heteronomy of the Lehrhaus, *Star* and literary communism suggests between Blanchot and Rosenzweig "solidarity."

Coda

Writing and Reading Disaster

Now what starts with the letter C?
Cookie starts with C
Let's think of other things
That starts with C
Oh, who cares about the other things?
C is for cookie, that's good enough for me...
Hey you know what?
A round cookie with one bite out of it
Looks like a C
A round donut with one bite out of it
Also looks like a C
But it is not as good as a cookie
Oh and the moon sometimes looks like a C
But you can't eat that, so...

-Cookie Monster, *C is for Cookie*

"If the break with the star could be accomplished in the manner of an event---if we could (if only through the violence that operates in our bruised space), depart from the cosmic order (the world), where whatever the visible disorder, order always dominates---still, the thought of disaster, in its adjourned imminence, would lend itself to an experience of discovery whereby we could only be recuperated, not exposed to that which escapes in motionless flight, is separate from the living and from the dying and is not experience, but outside the realm of phenomena."

-Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

An art exhibit entitled *On Kawara--Silence* opened at the Guggenheim on February 6th, 2015. This exhibit, conceived by curator Jeffrey Weiss with Anne Wheeler, was organized with the cooperation of the Japanese-New Yorker artist, On Kawara, and it is the first to offer a comprehensive experience of his output (1964-2000s). The exhibit is housed in the rotunda of the Guggenheim and it flows up the seven spiraling ramps. As the viewer (who, in short, I will designate strictly as "the

reader") progress up each ramp the visual encounter with Kawara's paintings, telegrams, postcards, lists, and news clippings is accompanied by the echoing voices of two people reading from Kawara's *One Million Years*, which is essentially pages and pages of the dates of years written out, one million of them in our past, and one million more in our future. The combined effect of an audio-visual encounter with Kawara is one of disorientation. The affective impact of the Kawara exhibit is in fact so severe that the one who experiences it cannot properly be called a "viewer," because in truth the passive act of "viewing" could never lead to this kind of disorientation. This is why I propose not only are we all "readers" of Kawara, but also that Kawara gives us a paradigm for "disaster-reading" that maps onto Maurice Blanchot's disaster-writing, his *écriture*, as well as Franz Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus* project.

For Blanchot, *écriture* is ruinous to reason and disastrous to meaning. It destroys all "stars" (God, History, Community, Individual, and so on) which might provide bearings and guidance, and it exposes the gap between the material world and the abstract and arbitrary systems and technologies (like language, for example) that attempt to capture, master and rule bare bodies, singularities and other such "stuff" that makes up the world. Blanchot's figure of the writer, the one who practices *écriture*, is never alone, never autonomous, and never a sovereign subjectivity because the writer is only such because she partakes in what Blanchot calls at times "literary communism," and at other times, "the ideal community of literary communication." Fractured, opened and un-worked by the technology of language,

the writer has been ex-posed (posed in exteriority of a Self) and, by way of this exposition, networked with others who write. But must one "produce" writings to enter this community? In fact, Blanchot is very clear on this point: writing does not involve the production of a product to be consumed. Literary communism cannot be founded on the work used to produce great works. Rather, the inoperative non-labor of writing stalls any such productive labor. Furthermore, "community" in the sense that Blanchot uses the term, could not be "entered" and it could not entrance itself. Literary communism cannot recognize the criteria necessary to function in the way of other communities because it is above all else, a relation, and one that occurs between anonymous writers stripped bare of predicates, the trappings of the Individual. As a relation, it is an ephemeral, indeterminate flash of solidarity between writers that therefore does not rely on a mixture of predicates of individuals in order to determine who is in and who is out: As a relation brought on by the disaster, which is also to say, by writing, literary communism touches anyone.

What then of the reader of Kawara? Onto what kind of "communism," if any, does Kawara's art open? Much of Kawara's art speaks to similar themes as Blanchot: community, the experience of time and space vs. representations of this experience, the role of the faculty of "understanding" and the loss of significance in a modernity of catastrophe, and the nexus where our ordinary lives meet the continuum of history. With regard to community and literary communism, Kawara, who never attended his own shows or answered questions about his work, very much places the reception of his art as the very heart of it. The one who encounters and reads Kawara's art is in no

way arbitrary, and is, quite the opposite implicated in the art-experience itself. In this way, Kawara's "exhibit" is not properly a "public display" or worse yet an intransitive verb, it is a relation and what's more, a relation among readers. Yet this is only one small aspect of the kind of "literary communism" I read in Kawara's project. The Guggenheim exhibit divides Kawara's work into twelve "chapters," and of those twelve I will limit my comments to what I consider to be a core five in order to elaborate more fully the stakes of community for Kawara (as well as the other various themes mentioned above): The *Today* series, "Everyday Meditation," "Self-Observation: 12 Years," "Codes," and "Pure Consciousness."

At the heart of Kawara's pieces is failure, and failure in the sense Blanchot means it when he writes of *désœuvrement*, understood in English as passivity, inoperativity, and generally un-working. The *Today* series, "Everyday Meditation," and "Self-Observation: 12 Years" are quite instructive in this regard, and will be introduced here together:



Figure 3 "Location" by Kawara (1965)

Part of the *Today* series, "Location" consists of solid color paintings imprinted with GPS coordinates. The one pictured above happens to be the coordinates of the Sahara

Desert. Also part of the *Today* series are solid color paintings with the date in which the painting was painted imprinted on it (Kawara used the language of the place in which he painted each one).



Figure 4 a representative swath from Kawara's *Today* series

Taken together, "Location" and these dates obsessively attempt to capture not space and time, but the fact of representation's failure to capture these things. While the bearings of "Location" correspond to the Sahara Desert, in a very Blanchotian way Kawara is pointing to the disaster that prevents correspondence from ever becoming coincidence. The coordinates gesture to the desert, they suggest the desert, they even provide mathematical and geographic facts of the desert, but they do not deliver the sandy grit in your teeth, the searing heat, and the vast expanse of the desert. What the dates series shows us is even more slightly nuanced version of the separation between

representation and the material world. The incursion of local languages in an otherwise uniform serial pursuit of "capturing days" suggests a more textured relationship between world and painting where, because they are not identical, the day and the painting have an economic relationship.

The idea that an economy (relation) exists between art and world manifests also through "Everyday Meditation" and "Self-Observation: 12 Years." "Everyday Meditation" makes use once more of a Date painting but news clippings from that date accompany it (this series consists of 97 paintings and is the longest uninterrupted series).



Figure 5 Kawara's "Everyday Meditations" on display at the Guggenheim

Again, even the addition of headlines and world affairs demonstrates only the failure to capture the experience of a day. In order to show that this failure is not reducible to the fact that newspapers generally provide macro-narratives that perhaps efface experiences of ordinary life, Kawara produces more "personal" (though not in anyway intimate) accounts of his own life between 1968-1979. These accounts

(which the Guggenheim exhibit displays as the chapter "Self-Observation: 12 Years") focus on daily activities and again takes one day as the guiding unit of time. Within this chapter are several series: "I Got Up," "I Went," "I Met," and "I Read." The curators of these exhibits (Weiss and Wheeler) intensify the already obsessive nature of Kawara's serial adventures through their choice of exhibition. "I Got Up," for example, is a series of postcards (he would send out two per day to different recipients) that have stamped in ink a message that reads, "I got up at" and he would fill in the time of his waking.



Figure 6 Kawara's "I Got Up"

This body of postcards in itself gives off that frenetic energy of failing to capture something essential and important, and this is heightened through the display technique, which involves encasing the cards in glass panels.



Figure 7 Kawara's "I Got Up" on display at the Guggenheim

The other daily activities series ("I Went," "I Met," and "I Read") are gathered into thick, gray binders. The "I Went" series involves Kawara inking in red the paths he took in cities such as Casablanca, Honolulu, Lima, Quito, Stockholm and so on. "I Met" and "I Read" are hundreds of pages long listing who Kawara met with on a particular day or what he read. While not towering and sprawling like the postcards of "I Got Up," these binder-series give the impression that no matter how many thousands of words Kawara uses and no matter how he documents moments in his life, he cannot hold onto them. The failure of language to grasp experience comes in the visual of cold, lifeless, gray tomes filled with dead and deadening "information." Vital life-force is here reduced to raw data ("something given"):



Figure 8 Kawara's "I Met" series

And yet it is not simply the case that language is inadequate or secondary to experience. Rather, the proliferation of Kawara's art-texts suggests something more complex that disseminates both language and experience to the point of disaster.

In one way, Kawara's work can be read simply as reportage, a factual presentation of things that happened on any given day. But from a different perspective, he seems really invested in the experience of the failure (of disaster) of reportage to deliver anything essential, real, experiential. To claim that Kawara's non-oeuvre hinges on the gap between representation and experience is perhaps, thought, to unifying and too singular. Another path is proposed and played out dramatically in "Codes" (1965-2011) and "Pure Consciousness" where Kawara departs from meditations on the relationship between representation and daily life and instead turns toward the art-encounter of his readers--an encounter that troubles the notion of representation as much as the notion of experience.

"Codes" consists of several pieces where Kawara writes in a "language" that is unintelligible though not, I would argue, entirely illegible.

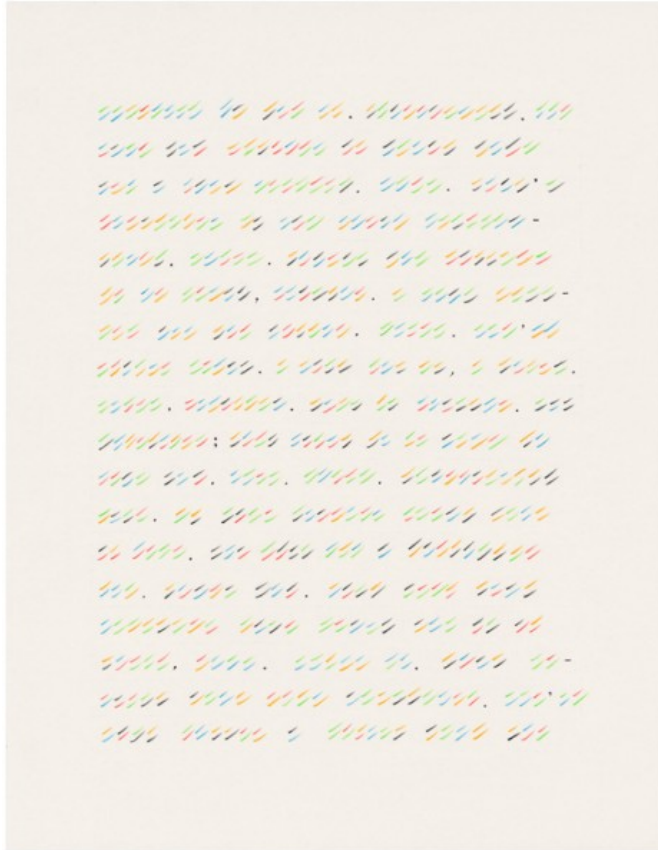


Figure 9 one sheet from Kawara's "Codes"

Kawara makes use of what seems to be a private system "understandable" only to the artist himself. However, upon a close-reading one notices sometimes certain color-clusters repeat in different places, and normative punctuation is still used. The kind of reading enacted on "Codes" relies on pattern recognition, rather than pattern cognition. So to enter into "Codes" means to leave behind the traditional language-code paradigms, which rely on the mediation between particular and universal systems of communication. The effect of this kind of pattern recognition (this mode of reading, in other words) that ruins communication-as-messaging is precisely the

disaster-effect¹⁴⁵ of Kawara's art. "Codes" is a system of signals, but it bears no message, unless of course you construe the bearing of no message as message. As an assault on meaning and significance, "Codes" cannot be subjected to normative methods of "reading" because there is no greater meaning to which it points (i.e. no greater meaning to be decoded), and it doesn't attempt to appeal to the faculty of understanding. As signal without message, "Codes" remains a form of communication, relation, and thus also a form of community and literary communism, that "ideal community of literary communication," as Blanchot says.

It is in "Pure Consciousness" that Kawara's project coalesces into an ethics and politics of disaster-reading that is perfectly aligned with Blanchot's disaster-writing. "Pure Consciousness" takes Date Paintings and places them in classrooms around the world (from Bhutan to Australia and beyond). In addition to the direct encounter the kids have with these paintings, teachers and other community members compose reports or narratives or other various writings inspired by the encounter. At stake in this project is the fact that there is no collective universal concept of the days that make up the week in which the paintings were displayed. Nor is there even a collective experience of this within the minor-collective of the classroom. But neither is there a private and individual experience of the days. The date paintings activate

¹⁴⁵ In the booklet that accompanies Kawara's "Pure Consciousness" project for the Bethlehem schoolhouse, Jonathan Watkins writes a thoughtful piece that meditates on the confluence of Hiroshima and Palestine. Watkins points out how Kawara himself was just a schoolboy during the Japanese holocaust. This catastrophe instilled in Kawara a "radical skepticism" that made him answer "I don't understand" to any and every question asked by his teachers. In a fundamental way I read Kawara's inability to "understand" as part of his disaster.

effervescent and spontaneous solidarity for the pursuit of paying attention to the passing of time. At the end of the seven-day duration, the paintings and the communism disband, what remains is the sharing out (*partage*) of the experience of Kawara.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence I have that Kawara's art is a mode of disaster-reading comes from a visitor of the exhibit who, after transforming into a proper reader through his encounter with Kawara's disaster, had his world turned upside-down. This visitor was none other than Cookie Monster:



Figure 10 "Cookie Monster at *On Kawara-Silence*" in the Guggenheim Museum (2015).
Photo Credit Jeffrey Weiss, curator of the exhibit

Cookie monster gazes pensively into the heart of the Guggenheim rotunda after reading Kawara's art. Why is he so glum? Why the look of consternation on his furry

face? Why so...blue? Mr. Monster is most well known for his song that teaches children that the letter "C" is for "Cookie," but after Kawara it seems he realizes "C" is not for anything anymore than a Date painting "is for" the experience of a day. So while "C" may no longer be "for cookie" it could still very well be for the failure of its not being for cookie, or in the case of Cookie Monster, "C"¹⁴⁶ gestures toward his experience of being "crestfallen" without actually "being for it." Where Blanchot proposes that the disaster breaks "with every Star" and "every form of totality," Cookie Monster now knows he must propose a break with the Cookie and with "the moon, which sometimes looks like a C." After Kawara, "C" can never simply be for "Cookie" because the gap between modalities of representation and the experience of the world can never, and should never, be entirely bridged. But perhaps even more to the point, Kawara proposes a question which reduces our furry friend, Cookie Monster, from happy-go-lucky to a state of despondence: How do we read (after) disaster? Kawara's post cards and the bound volumes, in their redundancy, disseminate both language and experience, so how then are we to read?

Reading, in the aftermath of disaster, is no longer an act of deciphering or interpreting marks that leads to comprehension and the arrival of meaning.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Tom McCarthy's novel *C* plays with a similar idea and the text leads the reader to believe that the titular "C" could stand for any number of things like "caul," "chute," "Carrefax," and "c-c-c-c-c" (the sound of static). McCarthy, who explicitly writes in the aftermath of Blanchot is playing with the arbitrary nature of language as well. To my knowledge, McCarthy and Cookie Monster have never met, but this would be an interesting conversation between them.

¹⁴⁷ Blanchot suggests a version of disaster-reading in *The Writing of the Disaster* when he suggests that, "one cannot 'read' Hegel" (here 'read' is used in its normative sense) because the modalities associated with normative 'reading', i.e. "to understand,

Franz Rosenzweig has already accounted for this question concerning what reading "means" in and to modernity when he writes, "INTO LIFE" (*Star* 1) and when he forms the *Lehrhaus*. Kawara, similar to Rosenzweig, does not present an abstract philosophical system. Rather, they promote an articulation of art and of community that happens in space and time, and essentially in life. In this way there is no universal truth or meaning for Kawara or Rosenzweig, only the affective impact of the encounter, the contingency of a reading. The impossibility of producing or agreeing upon one reading, i.e. "the contingency of a reading," is precisely the foundationless foundation of Rosenzweig's *Lehrhaus*, wherein the We assembles only through the multiplicity of readings,¹⁴⁸ rather than the fixidity of one central reading. The We that assembles before Kawara engages in a similar practice of reading that is not aimed at bringing about the redemptive arrival of delayed meaning. Taken together, Kawara and Rosenzweig point toward an ethical practice of disaster-reading that exchanges the modalities associated with normative practices of reading (interpretation, decryption, etc.) for practices that value contingency and communication outside of signification. How we will continue in modernity to cultivate practices of disaster-writing and disaster-reading is the question that remains. But to read and to write in the aftermath of Blanchot is always to obey the injunction issued in the pages of *Writing of the Disaster*:

to misunderstand, to reject," prepares us for "the death of reading, the death of writing---which leaves Hegel living: the living travesty of completed Meaning" (47).¹⁴⁸ There is a multiplicity of readings not only because the We is multiple, but also because there is a multiplicity within each of the purports of the We.

Keep watch over absent meaning.

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