

Communication as a limit experience

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ABSTRACT

Georges Bataille provides a context for thinking the presumptions of communication at the edge of metaphysical frameworks and concepts. His radical idea of communication, which he calls “inner experience,” is developed in tandem with his long-time friend and interlocutor, Maurice Blanchot. Neither of them professional philosophers, Bataille and Blanchot interrogate the metaphysical tradition to locate the resources for rethinking being human as essentially a relationship with another rather than a relationship of the self. Bataille performs that reconfiguration in his work *Inner Experience* through his dialogue with Blanchot. From this minimal community of two interlocutors, which is transposed in *Inner Experience* to the minimal, necessary and strange community of reader and writer, Bataille rejects both positivist and nihilistic visions of community. What is opened by this reconfiguration of community is the basis for future communication that occurs through a bond based on difference rather than unity or commonality. The paper outlines the significance of Bataille’s reworking of G.W.F. Hegel’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s decisive contributions to contemporary thought to effect this reconfiguration of the self and the communication that it entails.

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. (Nietzsche, 1977: para 125)

It is from a feeling of community binding me to Nietzsche that the desire to communicate arises in me, not from an isolated originality. (Bataille, 1988b: 27)

Georges Bataille (1897–1962) has a profoundly disquieting way of speaking about communication. It is not a positive or substantive phenomenon, and it is as far removed from the functionalism of the various sender-message-receiver models as could be conceived. His notion of communication dissipates meaning to such a point that it becomes difficult to recognise how it bears any resemblance to the exchange of semantic content that interlocutors rely upon. Jean-Luc Nancy (1993: 319–320) describes Bataille’s idea of communication, and the negative community that gathers around it as “the ruin of theories of communication” such that it must be understood as quite apart from the “chatter that attempts to promote reasonable exchange” (1993: 320). This paper is an attempt to situate that account, examine the relation that arises between communication and community as these terms are shared between Bataille and Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), and to argue for its importance to the broader cultural contexts in which the possibilities for communication circulate.

Writing from outside the academy as a medievalist librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, an editor of literary critical journals, and as a member of various intellectual circles during the politically volatile years before and during wartime France, Bataille is arguably the pivotal figure of influence on the subsequent generation of “May 68” whose philosophical concerns had moved away from the focus on “Man” and the Sartrean existentialism that dominated the philosophical climate, towards the critical concerns that textuality raises for the nature of meaning and existence. Though little recognised during much of his lifetime beyond a small but significant circle of thinkers that included Blanchot, Roger Callois, Pierre Klossowski, and Michel Leiris, Bataille’s nine volumes of writings span disciplines as diverse as lectures, pamphlets, essays, journal entries and novels, all of which test their reader’s fortitude for their variously incomplete syntax, distracting anecdotes, paradoxical terminology, scandalous juxtapositions of theology and pornography, and shifting registers of address. Bataille is as much the heir of Nietzsche’s demanding style as any among his successors. And like Nietzsche, his texts perform the slippery relation between truth and myth in the enunciation of his position. In Bataille’s communication there is no semantic content exchanged, but what his “theory” foregrounds is the nakedness of writing and existence, and of the relation of each to the other that opens to a radical ethics not founded on a universal law; an ethics that does not prescribe right action based on the Good or the goods held in common. Rather, his is an ethics that resituates the relationship to the unity that these terms presume by affirming the fact of being as existing with others and otherness as the point from which all communication is possible.

For the ‘68 generation, Bataille’s writings came to be understood as providing an extraordinary anti-humanist perspective on the primary intellectual question for both generations: how to respond to the exigency of the moment when there is “no great machine in whose name to speak” (Besnier, 1990: 170). We might also name this “machine” a “totality” or a “metanarrative” whether philosophical, political or spiritual, and we can equally argue for the primacy of the question today. For the generation of the 1930s, witnessing the revolution that resulted in the totalising evils of Stalinism as well as the spread of Nazism, Bataille’s nearly four-decades long response to the exigencies of history’s moments forged a perspective that took its point of departure from two decisive “events” in philosophical modernity: the “end of history” announced by Hegel, and the “death of God” heralded by Nietzsche. This double, German heritage coalesces for Bataille to reorientate our understanding of the human being at the limits of existence, and it establishes the critical context that refines the contemporary understanding of the conditions for being human, along with our expression of that understanding in the humanities.

His work also provides a significant starting point for reorienting our understanding of the possibilities of communication in a global environment where difference and division among peoples, rather than what is held in common by a people, is what brings and holds communities together. This is an argument for Bataille’s importance to what is singular within communication rather than what is universal to it, where the latter is what programs and calculates an authorising relationship to what is; to what is known, to what is meant, and to what is communicated. To argue for communication that pays attention to the singular rather than the universal is demanding and time-consuming in listening to the Other’s singularity, and to what cannot be reconciled or assimilated into a totality of knowledge and meaning.

History has ended

Hegel claimed that history had resolved the dialectic between objective truth and the knowing self into an immediate unity or identity requiring no further action to transform nature and the natural within the human being. In that regard, “Man” is the completed, sovereign being who is in the world with nothing to do except play. The corollary of this human being is that philosophy, understanding itself as the master discourse, has been left with nothing to do as well. With Hegel, the discourse of reason has achieved all it needs to say with the Sage.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the power and the work of understanding is the absolute power of the Subject to overcome something that stands over it as an object in-itself by transforming that object into something for-itself (Hegel, 1977). This movement is the active dynamic of the experience [*Erfahrung*] of the concept working dialectically to produce the new object for consciousness through the labour of negation. Hegel calls this movement of negation “death,” which he describes as the greatest of all strengths (Hegel, 1977: 19). The Subject produces itself, and indeed everything, through a relation with death, which is the motor of the historical process of becoming. It is also the limit by which history is accomplished as Absolute Knowledge: the sum of all humans’ actions from which all opposition and alienation have been overcome. What this view of history means for humans is that we are able to realise our projects because since Napoleon’s march on Jena (which occurred while Hegel penned the closing paragraphs of the *Phenomenology*), there is nothing more to be done in the way of achieving human freedom or mastery. Freedom has become empty; it is ours to realise what no longer requires work to achieve.

Bataille was among the inaugural generation of French scholars to receive and modify Hegel’s philosophy through Alexandre Kojève’s 1930s seminars that gave an anthropological reading of the *Phenomenology* in focusing on the all-too-human drama of the master/slave dialectic as emblematic of the entire work’s progression. Bataille adapts Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s philosophy along with Hegel’s conclusion that history has ended, but questions what this conclusion might actually mean for human beings. In particular, he questions the political consequences of a philosophy that would see humanity idle in the face of the totalitarianism of both the Right and the Left. Bataille asks of Kojève:

If action (“doing”) is – as Hegel says – negativity, the question then becomes one of knowing if the negativity of someone who has “nothing more to do” disappears or subsists in a state of “unemployable negativity”: personally, I can settle this question in one way only, being myself exactly this “unemployable negativity” (I could not define myself more precisely). (cited in Gregg, 1994: 202)

If negation is the motor of what is possible in the world, of what has the power to be actualised through human beings’ transformation of being, then what is to be said of those human beings themselves, of the fact of their being, when everything has supposedly been done? His question implies that something subsists or remains after the end has come, and it is not a mere addendum, but inherent to the system that has closed and ended. The unemployed negativity that the end of history has imposed on human existence confers both an end and something other than an end, which is what Blanchot (1993: 208–209) calls “something like a new origin” that is not determined by a possibility (to be) but by impossibility (to be). Impossibility here is not the negative of possibility, but a further dimension beyond the opposition that echoes and advances the radical interrogation of the modern subject by Martin Heidegger. His conception of selfhood, roughly approximating *Dasein*, is that category of being definable by its possibility of non-being accomplished by death such that the non-possibility of death authorises all other of *Dasein*’s possibilities. Bataille and Blanchot alike do not refute Heidegger’s analyses, but take them further to articulate another dimension to death other than its possibility, which is to say the approach of death expressed as a relation to indeterminacy that Bataille calls inner experience, and Blanchot calls the neuter, the Outside and the limit-experience. In this space of indeterminacy, incomprehension and ungraspability, the mystery of communication occurs.

From Sage to Zarathustra

For Nietzsche, too, Hegel’s closure of history commences a new history: that of interpretation. The history that should have ended all action including the transformative work of interpretation is Nietzsche’s way of neither rejecting nor accepting the Hegelian closure of history and philosophy. Rather, it is a way of opening a new kind of philosophy as critique through the language of fiction. To speak in fictional language is still to speak metaphysically, but Nietzsche explains that in the

beginning of philosophy as metaphysics Heraclitus's suppressed claim that being is an empty fiction means that the apparent world is the only world; the true world is merely added by a lie. In "How the 'Real World' At Last Became a Fable," Nietzsche says:

The true world – we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one. (Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIIT ZARATHUSTRA.) (Nietzsche, 1990: 51)

Nietzsche calls fiction the lie that is truth, and questions the metaphysical division between appearance and reality, and the entire system of oppositions that it engenders, and upon which the architecture of Hegel's system was so breathtakingly built. What might have remained merely anti-Platonic by opposing appearance to reality, where appearance is nothing other than a product of reality, is instead a thinking of fiction without recourse to the opposition. The discourse of truth, *logos*, is exposed through interpretation to be nothing other than *muthos*, the very thing against which it has always claimed to constitute itself. Nietzsche's poetic critique of metaphysics leaves the discourse of history, reason and truth by thinking and speaking the truth of the world as fable. For Nietzsche, what is said about the world and what is thought about it are expressed in a way that differences such as that between appearance and reality cannot be upheld.

Bataille sees himself as very close in thought and perspective to the German philologist, and deploys his deconstructive gesture toward the closure of history and philosophy in his own analyses. Nietzsche's claim, "God is dead, and we have killed him" is a statement that cannot be thought by rational, scientific discourse that accepts as true only what can be seen and verified. In an essay celebrating Bataille's contribution to the interpretation of this claim, Michel Foucault asks what it means to kill God who never existed, other than that neither God nor God's death can be a spectacle for thought's representation. "God" and "God's death," he says, are thoughts that either live or die, but in either case, are unavailable to the possibilities of rational thought (Foucault, 1977: 32). God's death is not just the event that discourse cannot represent, it stretches the limits of thought from possibility to impossibility because the boundary between existence and non-existence is transgressed by that very speech "event". As Foucault remarks, Bataille was fully aware of the possibilities for thought that God's death could release, and also of the impossibilities that are entwined within it precisely because it marks a mythical speech event that never ceases to have its effects on discourse. Whether as language or representation more broadly, the "event" of God's death neither annihilates God nor ends God's reign in discourse. Rather, as an "event," it returns language to the cut it rents between existence and discourse.

Inner experience as communication with the unknown

The theme of communication occurs throughout Bataille's work, though he develops it more fully in *Inner Experience* (1943) and *Guilty* (1944), each of which adopt the part-treatise, part-journal style of abstraction and confessional reflection that are extraordinary expressions of "the experience of what's lost in communicating" (Hollier in Bataille, 1988a: xi). Bataille distinguishes between two forms of communicating. The first is familiar: it connects two beings such as the "laughter of a child to its mother, tickling, etc" (Bataille, 1988a: 139). The second is outside the familiar:

Communication, through death, with our beyond (essentially in sacrifice) – not with nothingness [*le néant*], still less with a supernatural being, but with an indefinite reality (which I sometimes call *the impossible*, that is with what can't be grasped (*begreift*) in anyway, what we can't reach without dissolving ourselves, what's slavishly called God ... (Bataille, 1988a: 139)

The second kind of communication described here, while not connecting two beings, entails a relationship with otherness that is outside the ego of a self, an "I", or "what's slavishly called God". It is the kind of communication his analyses privilege in that it speaks of thought's mystery, of what is

radically unknown, not just accidentally unknown, because it is outside the self-identity of subjective being.

Bataille claims he does not like the word “mystical” to describe the communication of inner experience, yet one of its closest approximations can be found in the accounts given of mystical experience by the medieval monks and saints – Meister Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Angèle de Foligno, and Saint Theresa of Avila. In *Inner Experience* he outlines how their accounts fall short of the experience he prizes.

We should note here the significance of “experience” to Bataille’s analysis: traditionally, “experience” denotes the point where knowledge begins. For the empiricists Roger and Francis Bacon, the German Idealists such as Hegel, and for the phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, “experience” names the method and object of knowledge as presence to consciousness. Etymologically, however, the term has a distinction that philosophy has sought to overcome (as in the case of Hegel) or suppress. Deriving from both the Latin, *expiriri* (to test, to try, to prove) and the Greek, *peirō*, *pera* and *peraō* (respectively: crossing, passage, beyond; to pass through), the German language conveys the dual senses of experience as, on the one hand, *Erfahrung*, connoting trial and danger, and *Erlebnis*, connoting an experience that is “lived” – the ordering of sense data through concepts present to consciousness. The concept “experience,” then, is at variance with itself, and Bataille exploits the sense of experience as *Erfahrung* to express his concept of experience that endangers itself: not only does his analyses in *Inner Experience* and *Guilty* refer to thought that does not present itself to consciousness, “inner experience” does not convey an experience of an inner being: a psyche or soul that is available to observation.

With their ascetic method towards an outside and beyond being, Bataille claims that even when the mystics state “God is Nothingness” (Bataille, 1988b: 4), without form or mode, their method is nonetheless a movement toward salvation – “the most odious of evasions” (Bataille, 1988b: 12) – and as such, a goal or project of uniting with divinity. The communication of inner experience, then, is not to be thought of as equivalent to mystical experience. Similarly, recounting his own youthful, mystical experience while studying at a monastery, Bataille says he “knew a sudden rapture” wherein “everything in me rushe[d] forth” (Bataille, 1988b: 59). “I imagined myself within the walls of the cloister, removed from agitation, for an instant imagining myself a monk and saved from jagged, discursive life ...” (Bataille, 1988b: 58). Inner experience bears a resemblance to mystical experience except in this crucial distinction: it is not a safe passage; not a solitary escape from the noise of the world and one’s relations with others and things through silent contemplation of the infinite. There is no safety or salvation in inner experience; it equally evokes terror and joy in the fact that it is existence itself that is called into question.

Early into *Inner Experience* we learn that the risk of inner experience is the peril of “putting everything into question” (Bataille, 1988b: 3), meaning human existence, which echoes Descartes’ radical questioning that founded the rationalist project and installed the notion of the *cogito*, “I think therefore I am”. For Bataille, the *cogito* is “essentially what is dying in me” (Bataille, 1988b: 105). The rationalist project has destroyed its ultimate object; all that remains is non-knowledge expressed in the final affirmation: “I only know one thing: that a man will never know anything” (Bataille, 1988b: 106).

It would seem that inner experience is the same as the silence of the mystics, of which this paradoxical, tautological formulation is its philosophical equivalent. However, Bataille’s analysis in *Inner Experience* takes something of a detour from a critique of the philosophical and theological projects of the experience of the infinite to that of his own project: “I carry within me the concern for writing this book like a burden. In reality, I am *acted upon*” (Bataille, 1988b: 60). From a consideration of the active project of rationalism that founds the discursive, Cartesian subject, Bataille shifts his focus to the dissolution of the discursive subject that he himself is in being “*acted upon*” by language in the writing of his book:

Almost every time, if I tried to write a book, fatigue would come before the end. I slowly became a stranger to the project which I had formulated ... I escape from myself and my book escapes from me; it becomes almost completely like a forgotten name. (Bataille, 1988b: 57)

What is the meaning and the status of this shift in *Inner Experience*, and how does it give us a clue to the significance of Bataille's extraordinary account of communication? To address these questions we need to cover some more ground about the method that Bataille employs in distinguishing his notion of communication from that of the silence of the mystics that also rescues it from the immobilising paradox and tautology that the ultimate affirmation of an exhausted rationalist project proclaims.

Bataille's crucial distinction from the mystics, demonstrated most dramatically in the textual form of the book itself, is by means of the concept of "contestation". The term is repeatedly referred to in *Inner Experience*, and is shared between both Bataille and Blanchot, and indeed attributed to Blanchot by him, but which does not clearly belong to one or the other. Denoting a method, "contestation" also suggests the more conventional idea of political opposition, the domain in which both Bataille and Blanchot had each been active until the outbreak of war. Bataille had been engaged in some short-lived efforts of direct political action and experimental formations of groups such as Contre-Attaque that he founded with surrealist, André Breton in 1935. Moving away from direct action Bataille formed two related groups: Acéphale and the College of Sociology. Acéphale was the name given to the secret society and the publicly available magazine. Its theoretical counterpart, the College, held regular lectures between 1937 and 1939 that were given and attended by leading intellectual figures including Bataille. Its focus was to consider the social community beyond individualism and totalitarianism. Both of these groups were abandoned by the start of the war. When Bataille and Blanchot met for the first time in 1940, it was in the context of having retreated from the political realm – unlike Bataille, for Blanchot it was from the Right – with a common political method that would enable them to reposition themselves as writers under the German Occupation that had effectively destroyed the French state. The idea of contestation moves between the two Frenchmen, and also moves from the political to the theoretical realm in order to consider the possibilities of communication within a state where rational discourse has collapsed.

Seeking to avoid the ascetic method of the mystics, "I must link contestation," says Bataille, "to the liberation of the power of words which is mastery" (Bataille, 1988b: 15). Contestation of the power of words is achieved through dramatisation, of which *Inner Experience* is the concept's exemplar. He says:

I come to the most important point: it is necessary to reject external means. The dramatic is not being in these or those conditions, all of which are positive conditions ... it is simply to be. To perceive this, without anything else, to contest with enough persistence the evasions by which we usually escape. It is no longer a question of salvation: this is the most odious of evasions. The difficulty – that contestation must be done in the name of its authority is resolved thus: I contest in the name of contestation what experience itself is (the will to proceed to the end of the possible). Experience, its authority, its method, do not distinguish themselves from the contestation. (Bataille, 1988b: 12)

Contestation is both the method toward inner experience and the experience itself, and is closely related to authority – that which authorises the limit or defining point of knowledge. When it comes to the authority of *Inner Experience*, Bataille contests his own as author by attributing the solution to the problem of method to his frequent interlocutor in the text, Maurice Blanchot. He notes:

I asked the question of several friends ... one of them [Maurice Blanchot] stated simply this principle, that experience itself is authority (but that authority expiates itself) ... From that moment, this answer calmed me ... it had the galilean effect of a reversal in the exercise of thought ... for philosophies as well as for the tradition of the Churches. (Bataille, 1988b: 7–8)

Bataille deflects or defers his authority as author of the work to his friend Blanchot who remains in the work throughout: "conversations with Blanchot. I say to him ..." "Blanchot reminds me ..."

“Blanchot asked me ...” (Bataille, 1988b: 53 and 61). Bataille’s exposition has detoured from the active contestation of the Cartesian rationalist project to the contestation of language, a detour that marks God’s replacement by language. The power that had been vested in God to found the “I” and its discursive selfhood within the project of rationalism has been substituted by language, but the discourse that would give mastery or authority to the author of the work is deflected to another, to Blanchot. In this deflection, Bataille dramatises the progression of his project of contesting not just the rational subject of the Cartesian project, the thinking subject founded through Descartes’ contesting spirit, but also through contesting the power of words and the authority that his own authorship would reinstate.

We need to remember Hegel’s theory of language that Bataille is drawing on here in this unfolding drama of the “spirit of contestation” that leads to the affirmation of non-knowledge. Hegel says that naming was the first act by which Adam established lordship over the animals, and in that naming, he “nullified them [the animals] as beings on their own account, and made them into ideal [entities]” (Hegel, 1979: 221–222). When a being is named, it comes to belong to a general category and, thereby, loses its absolute singularity. Language annihilates immediate or continuous existence to inaugurate, say, “this dog” as an idea as well as a being. Consistent with Hegel, Bataille claims that the human being comes into being through language, and thereby does so as a being, losing the community of existence outside of language. Isolated being seeks to experience the community of existence outside of discourse. Bataille is distinguishing between two kinds of language, not only two kinds of communication. The first is the language that has the power to found a subject’s identity through being able to say, “I think”. However, once the foundation is removed that had underwritten the “I think” subject by God’s death, the subject becomes founded by language, inaugurated as an “I speak” subject. In Bataille’s lexicon, this dimension of language is discourse.

The second dimension of language is that which is outside a speaking subject and object of knowledge, and to which discourse leads. It is the dimension that he calls language, of which poetry – as distinct from literature – gives expression. Unlike discourse, where words function as instruments of useful acts, in poetry, those same words are sacrificed or contested. Single words like “silence” illustrate language’s capacity to slip from discourse because as a word it names, and in that naming, is heard as the abolition of sound: it is a “token of its own death” (Bataille, 1988b: 16). Silence names, that is, brings to presence what is not – the absence of sound – and thereby takes speech to another realm of significance where its meaning cannot be incorporated or assimilated into the pre-determined schemas that the “machines” of discourse establish. Like the single word “silence” poetry can lead beyond the instrumentalism of words to introduce the unknown and unknowable. As Bataille notes, the farm boy and girl have the instrumentalism of the words “butter” and “horse,” but it is only poetry that can introduce the unknowable and impossible idea of the “butter horse” (Bataille, 1988b: 136), an idea which can only be heard in language, not seen.

In attributing the solution to the problem of method to Blanchot, in deflecting his authority to the other, Bataille does not simply grant to Blanchot a sovereignty over his own discourse, which is made clear in a passage where he rejects another of Blanchot’s positions: “Blanchot asked me: why not pursue my inner experience as if I were the *last man*?” (Bataille, 1988b: 61). On the one hand, says Bataille, the anguish of the experience is felt as if he were already the last man, but on the other hand, to concede to that position would be an even greater anguish and it would destroy the justification of the experience which is an orientation toward the other: “inner experience is conquest and as such *for others!*” (1988b: 61). To be the last man would mean that no other remained; not only an anguish greater than existence as such, but annihilating the justification of the experience that affirms that existence. Furthermore, the other of *Inner Experience* is not Blanchot because in the experience of the text, any text, the subject is dissolved by language acting upon her/him and exposed to the other who is not simply another Cartesian subject acting upon a dissolved self.

Indeed, the drama of the contesting spirit in the exposition goes further, beyond the other who is and is not Blanchot: “The *third*, the companion, the reader who acts upon me is discourse. Or yet still: the reader is discourse – it is he who speaks in me ...” (Bataille, 1988b: 60). No longer a speaking subject, Bataille’s discourse is spoken through an other who is and is not Blanchot, both self and other are lost to discourse and brought into a mode of communication that can only be expressed in the relation of author and reader: two subjects of language who only exist in the “yawning gap” of non-presence to each other. Contestation of the power of words is the movement of discourse slipping to a dimension of language that is dramatised by the book through the relation of non-presence between a writing self and a reading other of which the prized communication of inner experience is the exemplary instance. Contesting the power of words, the mastery that words have, can only occur through the form of contestation that is taken to the extremes that writing dramatises and which is exemplary of the experience that Bataille calls “inner experience” and Blanchot a “limit experience”. Of course, we should not forget that discourse “remains at bottom the master” (Bataille, 1988b: 114). Outside of discursive language, what Blanchot calls the “plural speech” of infinite conversation can be found, and it is from Bataille’s profound meditations on communication that we can locate that conversation.

For Blanchot, the plural speech of language outside sovereign subjectivity is demonstrated by the writer’s encounter with the hither side of language and also in the testing of their role as a writer understood as a limit-experience. Of the first of these encounters, Blanchot says in “Death as Possibility,” that the writer’s work draws them into it in such a way that the work and the writer withstand their own impossibility, and in this sense of being tested, or contested, is experience (Blanchot, 1982). He adds: “‘experience’ here means contact with being, renewal of oneself in this contact – an experiment, but one that remains undetermined” (Blanchot, 1982: 87). Such an experience echoes the struggle for self-identity of Kojève’s interpretation of the master-slave dialectic of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, and refers to the act of composition itself, whether that be named “literature,” “writing,” or “language,” terms which Blanchot came to use interchangeably in his *oeuvre*. The writer is tested in his or her ability to master the composition through intentional activity, but is instead drawn into a suspension or loss of consciousness such that the work overtakes the writer.

As with Bataille, for Blanchot death fails to mediate fully and finally the relation of language to work, and as such, something stronger than death – dying – remains as a spectral quality of the work that pulls the writer, as it were, into it in a dizzying fascination for its origin toward the hither side of language. For Blanchot, the act of naming, by which language as discourse functions, kills existence but leaves us with being. Here, he is distinguishing between being and existence, where the latter is an ungrounded origin of being forming a doubled relation of shadow to being. Language carries the cadaver of existence into signification as the undead, or the death-in-life of representation that signification cannot properly or definitively kill off. Existence subsists in being in a spectral manner, and this forms the fascinating thrall of the work’s origin for the writer.

This movement of language between death and dying conveys one dimension of literature’s contestation for the writer. The other dimension of contests have to do with Blanchot taking up Hegel’s remark about the role of the writer for whom the demand of the task is that she be a writer, but cannot be deemed to be so until having already written. He parries with Hegel on this point in his essay, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1949) (Blanchot, 1995). Once having written, says Blanchot, the writer has no more of a sense of herself as a writer than before because she has no sense of the work’s completion. Each work is a new start, otherwise the work would be fully completed before pen touches paper, and this begs the question why bother to write at all if the work is already complete? Once the work has been written, however, and can be reduced to a single idea translated into a single sentence such as Blanchot attributes to Franz Kafka: “He was looking out the window” (Blanchot, 1995: 305), the single sentence can be read and given a meaning by others that the writer did not intend, which transforms the work into something alien to the writer. The sentence reflects the reader rather than the writer. Alternatively, a writer may concern

themselves with technique rather than ideas, but this type of writer says Blanchot is just as easily lost to the “whole of history” (Blanchot, 1995: 307) as the former, as their works are just as easily subject to others’ transformations of their writing. The writer is without control over the work but, says Blanchot, “his experiment has not been worthless: in writing he has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing” (Blanchot, 1995: 307).

These tests remind us that for Blanchot contesting is a condition of literature’s essence: in the moment when the work nullifies itself as an object of intention through these series of paradoxes and tensions, it subsists as a question, and the writer and writing are placed into a zone of the unknown where discourse ceases so that plural speech may come about (Blanchot, 1993). This zone is neither the positive domain of being nor the negative domain of nothingness that being presumes, and it grips the writer in a thrall before the scene of the image-becoming-word. Unlike the concept, the image does not make anything substantive available or visible to the writer; it is an experience of the supremacy of a presence that is not of the order of being or concept with which the writer struggles like the mythical Orpheus, whom Blanchot characterises as emblematic of this limit-experience. In the grip of the image, the writer is no longer a being-in-the-world, nor is the image an object, but rather a thing doubled, shadowed and followed by a semblance of its former self. In Blanchot’s gloss on the myth, Orpheus transgresses the gods’ injunction not to turn around to look at Eurydice in his desire for the distance that writing is and that inspires it. Orpheus loses Eurydice a second time because he fails to see her in her nocturnal world, in the flesh, so to speak. Instead, he sees her receding into her own image. At this very point of *ressemblance*, as Blanchot calls it, of the image as the pre-life of language as discourse, he locates the unstable point of the work’s origin, a tantalising site of emergence of the work.

Between Bataille’s and Blanchot’s radical notions of communication as an experience with the limits of language and being human, we might ask the value of it for those who do not encounter the intensity of experience evoked by the gap between discourse and language that is a writer’s lot in taking their craft to the extreme. First, that communication cannot confine itself to the exchange of semantic content; communication “excribes” meanings as well as inscribes signification (Nancy, 1993: 338). Second, reorienting communication’s origin to a site outside the vision of discourse forces us to hear the Other in the infinite conversation that murmurs there. Finally, that communication is as restless as it is mysterious: we can never cease to be done with its movements.

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