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“Distrust of Poetry”: Levinas, Blanchot, Celan



Leslie Hill

I

“Aller Anfang ist schwer.” All beginnings are difficult. The beginning, as far as this paper is concerned, perhaps like all beginnings, was an unexpected encounter, an event, a chance moment when the author of these lines (not for the first time, but as though it were the first time) came across a brief sixteen-word fragment from Maurice Blanchot’s *Le Pas au-delà* [*The Step Not Beyond*], a fragment that, in all senses of the word, appealed to him—and to me. That fragment is as follows:

◆ *A hand outstretched, refused, which, in whatever manner, we would not be able to grasp.*

[◆ *Une main qui se tend, qui se refuse, que de toute manière nous ne pourrions saisir.*]¹

This dense yet incisive text, as I have sought to argue elsewhere, points in many different directions: towards philosophy (Heraclitus, Hegel, Heidegger, Bataille), towards politics (the events of May 1968 in Paris), and towards that writing that, perhaps ironically, but with enduring persistence, Blanchot continued till the end to address as literature or poetry.² Under this last rubric, I want to suggest that what Blanchot’s fragment also evokes, among others—discreetly, cryptically, ungraspably—is the writing of Paul Celan, that poet of undecidable nationality (Romanian by birth, German by language, French by adoption) whose outstretched hand, refusing itself or refused, at any

event not grasped, was extended for one last time perhaps on the evening of April 19, 1970, shortly before the poet's death by drowning—by his own hand—some three and a half years before the publication of *Le Pas au-delà*.³

Celan's death, as convention demands, was an occasion both for mourning and for celebration alike. As such, it brought together in 1972, within the pages of a memorial issue of *La Revue de Belles-Lettres*, two lifelong friends, joined in their many differences and separated in their constant accord: Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, each of whom contributed an essay on Celan to the journal. "De l'être à l'autre [From Being to the Other]," Levinas titled his piece; "Le Dernier à parler [The Last To Speak]," Blanchot wrote alongside.⁴

These titles say much. They show that, in remembering Celan, both Blanchot and Levinas were endeavouring to respond, each in his own idiom, to an event—event without event, perhaps—affecting not only the possibility and impossibility of a singular existence, what Celan at one point calls "a unique, mortal existence, who with both voice and silence seeks a path,"⁵ but also the possibility and impossibility of poetry itself, in other words: its future. Not as revelation, destiny, or truth, but as an encounter, announced, affirmed, and underwritten in the words of another.

As we shall see, everything turns on this question of translation and citation.

II

Let me first hand over to Levinas, the elder by nearly two years.

Levinas begins his tribute to Celan with a well-known quotation, taken from a letter to Hans Bender in May 1960, in which the poet explains his reasons for *not* contributing an essay on his own poems to the anthology Bender was preparing. "Once the poem is really *there* [*wirklich da*]," Celan argued, "the poet is released from his original involvement in it."⁶ Commentary, then, is not the prerogative of the poet. But in refusing to participate in Bender's project, Celan was not appealing to established assumptions about aesthetic autonomy. What his gesture betokened instead was more a kind of radical generosity. Poems, Celan explains later in the same letter, are also gifts, "gifts to whoever is paying attention [*Geschenke an die Aufmerksamsten*]." "I see no essential difference," he famously added, "between a handshake and a poem [*zwischen Händedruck und Gedicht*]."⁷

Citing these famous words, in French, at the beginning of his essay, Levinas goes on to offer the following commentary:

With one stroke of the pen, the poem, the height of language, is reduced to the level of an interjection, a form of expression as inarticulate as a wink [*un clin d'œil*], a sign to one's neighbour! A sign of what? Of life [*de vie*]? Kindness [*de bienveillance*]? Or complicity? Or a sign of nothing, or of complicity for nothing [*pour rien*]: a saying without a said [*dire sans dit*]. Or a sign that is its own signified: the subject gives a sign of the giving of sign [*donne signe de cette donation de signe*] to the point of becoming a sign through and through. Elementary communication without revelation, stammering infancy of discourse, the clumsiest of intrusions into the proverbial "*language that speaks*," the notorious "*die Sprache spricht*:" like a beggar's entrance into "*the house of being*."⁸

Celan is of course not alone here in being called to account. For Levinas's reading is also in the form of a sustained polemic against Heidegger, with whom, as Levinas indicates in passing, Celan had a fraught, but enduring relationship,⁹ in some respects not unlike Levinas himself (at least at an earlier stage in his thinking). At any event, Levinas continues as follows:

The fact is, for Celan the poem is situated precisely at this pre-syntactic and pre-logical level (as we have all grown to expect these days!), but also a level that is pre-disclosing [*pré-dévoilent*]: at that moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing [*au moment du pur toucher, du pur contact, du saisissement, du serrement*]—which is, perhaps, a way of giving, up to and including the hand that gives. Language of proximity for proximity, older than that of "*the truth of being*"—which probably it carries and sustains—the first of all languages, the response preceding the question, responsibility for one's neighbour, enabling, by its *for the other*, the whole wonder of giving.¹⁰

On Levinas's part, these are remarkable words, for it is well known that from the outset Levinas was deeply suspicious of poetry, all too often associated by him with mystification, pagan magic, and sorcery. "We distrust theatre [*Nous nous méfions du théâtre*]," he famously remarks in 1950, speaking on behalf of his largely Jewish readers, in a stern rebuke addressed to the Catholic poet and dramatist Paul Claudel for his imperialist appropriation of the Jewish Old Testament. "We distrust theatre," Levinas went on, "the turning of our faces to stone [*de la pétrification de nos visages*], and the form adopted by our person [*de la figure que notre personne épouse*]. We distrust poetry, whose rhythms already mark out our gestures and bewitch our every movement [*qui déjà scande et ensorcelle nos gestes*]; we distrust everything

that, in our lucid lives, is played out against our will [*se joue malgré nous*].”¹¹

Levinas’s message, then, is familiar enough: in the words of Exodus 20, “Thou shalt not make graven images.” But the argument extends well beyond religious or confessional boundaries. It provides the whole of Levinas’s early philosophical thinking with one of its most crucial and distinctive emphases. “Magic,” he complains, in a famous essay of 1948, “universally acknowledged as the devil’s work [*la part du diable*], is tolerated in poetry to an incomprehensible degree.”¹² Poetry should be rejected, then, on moral, perhaps even moralistic grounds. In art, he says, “rather than confronting the task of constructing the world [and it should be remembered these lines were written shortly after the end of World War II and the sombre legacy it left behind], we are faced instead with the essential perfection of a mere shadow [*Le monde à achever est remplacé par l’achèvement essentiel de son ombre*].” “This,” he comments, “is not the disinterestedness of contemplation, but of irresponsibility. The poet banishes himself from the city.”¹³

So Plato was right. And it was not the fault of philosophers, but poets themselves. But Levinas is not everywhere allergic to poetry. Even were this to be the case, even were Levinas to maintain an absolute distrust of aesthetic mystification, this would already indicate that more was at stake here than a mere position of iconoclastic doctrinal principle. For allergy itself, Levinas tells us elsewhere, is already an acute form of sensitivity. Welcoming the other, for Levinas, as Derrida observes, has no opposite. Hostility is already a kind of hospitality.¹⁴ Indeed, not all poets are banished by Levinas. There are exceptions—so that what might be thought to be at issue here is not poetry itself, assuming there to be such a thing, nor even the work of this poet rather than that, but a particular—philosophical—determination of the artwork: poetry, that is, construed as an act of ontological foundation, as a self-coincident semiosis of the Same, and as a witness to the historical truth of Being, without otherness and without transcendence—the appropriation of art, in other, more famous words, as the putting (in)to work of truth, “das Ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit.”¹⁵

But is it here, one might ask, that may be said to take place—yet precisely without taking *place*—the crucial intervention into Levinas’s thinking of his friend Maurice Blanchot, that friend who, on his own admission, owed Levinas so much? For what Blanchot had attempted in *L’Espace littéraire* [*The Space of Literature*], as Levinas was among the

first to realise, was to divorce the discourse on art—literary criticism, as it is otherwise known—from any philosophy of truth or Being, which is also to say: from all philosophy as such. “For Blanchot,” Levinas writes, “the vocation of art is without equal [*hors pair*]. But most importantly, writing does not lead to the truth of being. It might even be said it leads to the error of being [*à l’erreur de l’être*—to being as a place of errancy [*à l’être comme lieu d’errance*] and that which cannot be inhabited [*à l’inhabitable*]. So it might equally be argued that literature fails to lead anywhere at all, because any such place is impossible to reach. The error of being: *further outside than truth* [*plus extérieure que la vérité*].”¹⁶

Is this relationship between literature and the outside what, in *The Meridian*, his famous speech in Darmstadt on receiving the Georg-Büchner-Preis in October 1960, Celan was to address as the encounter between poetry—*Gedicht*, or *Dichtung*, at any event not *Kunst*, as he takes care to insist—and another: *ein Anderes*? And is this the reason that, in the encounter with Celan, among others, Levinas’s distrust of poetry interrupts itself, and is suspended?¹⁷

If so, it is only on condition.

These conditions, it seems, are around three in number.

The first has to do with what Levinas understands as the face, *le visage*. As all his readers are aware, the face in Levinas is not a phenomenological entity as such, but rather the reverse; it is what, prior to manifestation, opens the possibility of relation to the other. Levinas’s face, in this sense, as the philosopher readily concedes in an interview, is equally a hand—“a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, one that needs something. It is about to ask you for something.”¹⁸ This is perhaps why, in reading Celan, Levinas begins by taking the poet’s hand, by grasping Celan’s outstretched hand: because that hand is a Levinasian face. In which case, says Levinas, the language of *The Meridian* is not Heideggerian, as critics sometimes allege, but belongs more properly to Martin Buber. Which is to say that for Levinas the interval, the in-between, the *Zwischen*, which Celan’s poems seek to inhabit—or *not* inhabit—is not epochal, but interhuman.¹⁹ And if so, the shadow that is the artwork, on Levinas’s own admission, would be anything *but* closed upon itself, in a state of “essential perfection.”

Curiously, though, in this text in which Levinas pays homage to Celan the poet, the only works cited by Levinas, with the solitary exception of an epigraph, are prose ones: the letter to Hans Bender, *The Meridian*, the prose sketch called *Gespräch im Gebirg* [*Conversation*

in the Mountains], thought by many to stage a failed encounter between Celan the poet and Adorno the thinker. Is this preference for Celan's prose writing merely philosophical prejudice on Levinas's part, and confirmation of his abiding distrust of poetry? Or is there evidence here of a more intricate and oblique relationship with poetry? For Levinas is quick to note the singular rhythmic structure of not only Celan's poems but of his prose writing too. "What an elliptical, allusive text," he writes, referring to *The Meridian*, "ceaselessly interrupting itself in order to allow into these gaps its other voice [*son autre voix*], as though two or more discourses were superimposed the one upon the other, with a strange coherence which is not that of dialogue, but woven [*ourdie*] in a counterpoint which, notwithstanding their immediate melodic unity, constitutes the fabric of his poems."²⁰

If Levinas's distrust of poetry interrupts itself in response to Celan, then, it is perhaps because Celan is already the poet of interruption.²¹ The absolute poem, says Celan, does not, cannot exist. "But there is," he insists, "with every real poem, with the most unassuming poem, there is this ineludable question, this unprecedented demand." "The ineludable [*L'inéludable*]," comments Levinas, specifying what is arguably the second condition for poetry's future: "the interruption of the ludic order of the beautiful and the play of concepts and the *play of the world*; the questioning of the Other, the search for the Other."²²

Yet only once in the essay does Levinas draw on an actual poem by Celan. This he does in his epigraph, where he reproduces in the original German the closing three lines of the poem "Cello-Einsatz [*Entry of the Cello*]" from *Atemwende*, which are as follows: "alles ist weniger, als / es ist, / alles ist mehr [everything is less than / it is, / everything is more]."²³ These are important words for Levinas. For they resonate with perhaps the most consistent motif in all of Levinas's thinking: what, in the 1963 essay, "La Trace de l'autre [The Trace of the Other]," for instance, he calls "the wonder of the infinite in the finite [*la merveille de l'infini dans le fini*]," and which elsewhere he addresses, with an inflection all his own, by recourse to the concept of transcendence.²⁴ And transcendence too, Levinas contends, announcing his third condition, is a key concern of Celan's poetics. "That there is, in Celan's essay on the poem, an attempt to think transcendence," he says, "is plain to see [*est évident*]."²⁵ Here, distrust suddenly gives way to something more akin to peremptory confidence; and sure enough, the assertion prompts on the author's part a lengthy, anxious, philosophical footnote on the legacy of

Kantian schematicism, as though Levinas himself were suddenly distrusting of his own intuition. “Transcendence through poetry,” he asks, “can this be serious?”²⁶

Serious enough, one might reply, for Levinas to bind the poetics of Celan to transcendence: transcendence understood no doubt in an innovative manner, as a stepping beyond the bipolar solidarity of immanence and transcendence, as an inscribing within the poem of the poem’s separation from itself, thereby giving rise to the possibility of an encounter with the outside.²⁷ The move is one that may seem surprising on the part of a thinker who, some time before, was looking askance at the shadowy perfection and troubling immanence of the artwork. But it is an interpretation Levinas is able to support by appealing to another quotation from *The Meridian*, which on this occasion he supplies in a translation by André Du Bouchet, and runs as follows: “La poésie—: conversion en infini de la mortalité pure et la lettre morte [*Poetry—: a conversion into the infinite of pure mortality and the dead letter*].” Or, as Celan’s original German has it: “Die Dichtung, meine Damen und Herren—: diese Unendlichsprechung von lauter Sterblichkeit und Umsonst!”²⁸

But let me at this point interrupt my own presentation and suspend these words of Celan as they reach out towards us, like an outstretched hand, groping perhaps towards what Celan in Bremen, in 1960, amidst so many other grievous losses, thought still reachable: the language of the poem.²⁹ Which still stands before us.

III

Like that of Levinas, Blanchot’s homage to Celan also begins with a quotation. In fact, with two quotations: the first from the closing lines of Celan’s poem “Aschenglorie [Ash-aureole],” the second from Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*.³⁰ Blanchot writes as follows:

Plato: *For of death, no-one has knowledge*, and Paul Celan: *No-one bears witness for the witness*. And yet, always, we choose for ourselves a companion: not for our own sake, but for the sake of something within us, without us, that requires us to be absent from ourselves [*que nous manquions à nous-mêmes*] for us to cross the line we will not reach. A companion lost [*perdu*] from the outset, whose loss [*perte*] henceforth takes our place.

Where to seek the witness [*le témoin*] for whom there is no witness [*pour lequel il n’est pas de témoin*]?³¹

Some twelve pages later, Blanchot concludes his reading with another quotation, also from Celan, the longest in his text, which comprises many such quotations, from the poem “Sprich auch du [Speak You Too],” which Blanchot reproduces *in extenso*, together with his own parallel French translation, the opening lines of which supply the critic with the title—both entitlement and heading—for this obituary essay. The lines cited read as follows: “Speak you too / speak as the last / say out your say. [*Sprich auch du, / sprich als letzter, / sag deinen Spruch*],” which Blanchot translates, with an unmistakably Levinasian inflection, thus: “Parle, toi aussi, / parle le dernier à parler, / dis ton dire.”³²

But how to speak as last? How to read a poem, for instance—and the passage is a line from Celan’s “Lob der Ferne [In Praise of Distance]” quoted by Levinas and Blanchot both, by the first as an epigraph for the chapter from *Autrement qu’être* [*Otherwise Than Being*] entitled “La Substitution [Substitution],” and by the second as a marginal gloss in *Le Dernier à parler*—how to read a poem that affirms as follows: “Ich bin du, wenn ich bin [I am you if—or whenever—I am I].”³³

The question, then, changes. Not: *how* to speak as last, as though there were some protocol or programme or recipe that might supply an answer. Rather: *who* speaks as last?

To all who seek to mourn or commemorate, the question is unavoidable, ineluctable, ineludable. Impossible, too. For there can be only one answer, an answer that is no answer at all. For the last to speak is both everyone and no-one. It might be any one of us. But none of us would be last, even if all that greeted our dying words were deafening silence. But if therefore it were no-one, it would still be one of us or, better, as Blanchot intimates, something within-without each of us. It might be me, who am writing here, or speaking; it might be me—yet it would not be me, insofar as I could be anyone. Let us say, then, it could be anyone, anyone insofar as anyone might be me, me as other than me, myself as an unnamed, nameless substitute for myself, me as another, not as host but as hostage.³⁴

Is this what Levinas means by substitution, the-one-for-the-other, responsibility? If so, it is a dilemma that Blanchot confronts, no doubt like each one of us, by reading: by facing a shadow.

Blanchot begins, then, by citing Celan. But Celan also necessarily cites and incites Blanchot. Infiltrating Blanchot’s own saying, Celan’s poem speaks eerily from beyond the grave, in Blanchot’s words, but also with, within, or in-between them. In this context it is not

surprising, then, that, remembering or anticipating this encounter with its reader, the poem itself, “Sprich auch du [Speak you too],” turns on the shadowy figure of the shadow, populating with its spectral presence or absence the uncertain time between noontime and midnight, and seeming to offer the reader meaning while at the same time withdrawing it. For this is how Celan’s poem continues: “Speak— / But don’t split off No from Yes. / Give your say this meaning too: / give it the shadow. // Give it shadow enough, / give it as much / as you see spread round you from / midnight to midday and midnight [*Sprich— / Doch scheid das Nein nicht vom Ja. / Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn: / gib ihm den Schatten. // Gib ihm Schatten genug / gib ihm so viel, / als du um dich verteilt weisst zwischen / Mitternacht und Mittag und Mitternacht*].” Which Blanchot faithfully-unfaithfully transposes into his own words: “Parle— / Cependant ne sépare pas du Oui le Non. / Donne à ta parole aussi le sens: / lui donnant l’ombre. // Donne-lui assez d’ombre, / donne-lui autant d’ombre / qu’autour de toi tu en sais répandue entre / Minuit Midi Minuit.”³⁵

Shadows, then, are anything but finished or complete. This is why they return. And there is added poignancy here to this evocation of poetic spectrality. For even as Celan’s poem, impossibly, bears witness to Blanchot as future reader, who in his turn is called upon, impossibly, to bear witness to the poem, so it is apparent in retrospect that the poem also somehow bears witness to the forever impending instant—“cet instant toujours en instance”—of Celan’s still future death from drowning. For “Sprich auch du” concludes with an uncannily prophetic, eschatological reference to a star, no doubt an image of the poem and the redemption it seems to promise, seeing its own reflection shimmering in the water, floating, says the poem, referring also to its own last dying words, “in der Dünung / wandernder Worte,” “dans le mouvement de houle / des mots qui toujours vont,” translates Blanchot: “in the swell / of wandering words.”

The main thread, so to speak, of Blanchot’s account of Celan turns upon this possible-impossible relation with the outside, and informs Blanchot’s entire reading. But if the critic studiously explores the motif of vision, the eye, or look in Celan’s poems, of which he supplies no fewer than fourteen separate instances (which come for the most part from the collections *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952), *Von Schwelle to Schwelle* (1955), *Sprachgitter* (1959), and *Die Niemandrose* (1963)), it is not at all—like some latter-day phenomenologist aiming to describe the material consciousness of the poet’s experience—in order to thereby ground Celan’s work within the realm of the visible.

It is to insist instead on the errant movement of Celan's writing, its turning towards the outside as a reaching beyond the immediacy of the natural, visible world, and to underline in Celan the complex motif—motif without motif—of the withdrawal, absence, or invisibility of world: "Eyes, world-blind, in the fissure of dying [*Augen, weltblind, im Sterbegeklüft*]," cites Blanchot (from the poem "Schnee-bett"), attentively translating Celan's words into his own late idiom: "Yeux, aveugles au monde, dans la suite des fissures du mourir."³⁶ The outside, then, is not something fixed or known, a mere exteriorisation of a poetic project constantly striving to rediscover itself within the same perceptual parameters.³⁷ It is more the promise of an encounter: both with things—words as well as objects—in their elemental, preworldly materiality (Blanchot cites recurrent references to stone, chalk, lime, gravel, crystal), and with others in their silent strangeness ("the *I* is not alone," says Blanchot, quoting again from "Schnee-bett," "it turns into *we*, and this falling of the one with the other joins together what is falling, even into the present tense"³⁸). "*Wir sind Fremde.*" "We are foreigners," reads Blanchot, returning again to the poem "Sprachgitter [*Speech-Grille*]," citing these words in the original German within his own text, as well as pointing towards them on the facing page where they are to be found amidst numerous other quotations from Celan; and he comments as follows: "foreigners, yes, but both of us foreigners, having still to bear in common this distraction of distance [*cet égarement de la distance*] which holds us absolutely apart [*nous tient absolument à l'écart*]. *We are foreigners.* Just as, if there is silence, two silences fill our mouths: *zwei / Mundvoll Schweigen.* / Let us remember this, if we can: *a double mouthful of silence.*"³⁹

This insistence on poetry's own exteriority to itself, its withdrawal both of and from art, literature, and any other self-identical concept of aesthetic functioning, confirms Blanchot's affirmation of the outside, *le dehors*, and his corresponding rejection of any aestheticising or self-reflexive closure. But it also explains Blanchot's reluctance to subscribe to the privilege that Levinas's reading of Celan confers on pure touch, contact, and the grasping of the other in a relation of unadulterated proximity.⁴⁰ It is true, of course, that for Levinas too the trace of the other transcends the world. "The trace," he puts it, "is the presence of what has properly speaking never been there [*n'a jamais été là*], and has always past [*a toujours passé*]."⁴¹ But perhaps even this scrupulous qualification does not satisfy Blanchot, who, acknowledging the singularity of the Levinasian concept of

transcendence, nevertheless hesitates, and turns aside. “The word ‘transcendence,’” he murmurs in a late essay addressing his friend, “is either too powerful, and immediately reduces us to silence, or on the contrary holds itself and holds us within the very limits that it ought to shatter.”⁴² In which case, for Blanchot, the only thinkable alternative with regard to the encounter with the other—but is it even thinkable at all, he wonders—is to conceive of “the immediate [*l’immédiat*],” that which resists all mediation, as only ever “in the past [*au passé*].” “This,” he continues, “makes the paradox almost unbearable [*insoutenable*]. It is in these terms we might speak of disaster [*désastre*]. We can no more think of the immediate than we can think of an absolutely passive past, but our patience when faced with a long forgotten affliction might be thought to be its mark [*la marque*], its unconscious continuation.”⁴³

If the poem is relation with the outside or with the other in this way, as Celan provocatively puts it, echoing Blanchot’s own account of the exteriority of writing to culture, powerfully reaffirmed by the writer in response to May 1968, it is because poetry [*Dichtung*] is not art [*Kunst*].⁴⁴ It is not a thing to be subjected to critical evaluation according to established norms, conventions, rules, or parameters, and therefore not a thing to be trusted or distrusted. Neither the one nor the other. It is rather a turning and a turning point, a caesura, a disjunction, an interruption; what Celan, untranslatably, describes as “eine Atemwende,” a change of breathing, a rhythmic turn, a reversal or change of identity, which inscribes another way of being-in-relation, perhaps, one that is thinkable only in terms of infinite finitude, the limitlessness of the limit: mortality, freedom, the abyss below and above.⁴⁵

Condensing these many thoughts into one, perhaps, Celan, on October 22, 1960, put before his audience in Darmstadt a dense, elliptical, and enigmatic formula that, like the fateful last words of Büchner’s Lucile in *Dantons Tod* [*Danton’s Death*], asks to be seen as Celan’s own poetic counterword and legacy. We have already encountered it once before. For this is what it says: “Die Dichtung, meine Damen und Herren—: diese Unendlichsprechung von lauter Sterblichkeit und Umsonst!”⁴⁶

IV

Numerous attempts have been made to translate these words, into both English and French. The difficulties are considerable.

These derive not only from Celan's choice of words, but also the syntax, tone, rhythm of the sentence, if indeed it may be called a sentence at all. Is the explicit address to the audience with which the phrase begins modestly ironic or ironically modest? Is it designed to mock the poet, mock poetry, or mock the audience, or all three? And if it is intended to provoke, who or what is being provoked? Is the compound noun *Unendlichsprechung* to be interpreted adverbally, as a speaking for an infinite period, as some translators have concluded, or performatively, as others maintain, as a speaking that infinites its object, turning it into a kind of never-ending manner of speaking, released from mortality and pointlessness? Or are both meanings simultaneously (not) at work? Does the reference to infinity imply boundlessness or endlessness, the infinite or the indefinite? Is it to be taken positively, or negatively, or as both and neither? Similarly, is *lauter* to be understood adverbally (meaning: merely, nothing but . . .), with dismissive connotations, as an implicit appeal to transcendence, or adjectivally (meaning: pure or honest), with overtones of literal simplicity, and therefore as a strict reminder of the absence of all transcendence? Finally, what is to be made of the substantivised adverb, *Umsonst*, which also can be read positively (meaning: free of charge) or negatively (meaning: in vain, to no avail)?

How then to respond, how to translate the untranslatable?

Some proof of the sheer difficulty of translating Celan's words adequately (but according to what received norms or conventions?) is that there exist in print at least eight different attempts to render the phrase into French or English. First among these, accrediting a perhaps problematic notion of poetic transcendence, and no doubt for that reason quietly preferred by Levinas, as we have seen, is that of André Du Bouchet (a celebrated poet in his own right, and one Celan himself translated into German), who offers the following: "La poésie—: conversion en infini de la mortalité pure et la lettre morte [Poetry—: a conversion into the infinite of pure mortality and the dead letter]." Next, more prosaically, but perhaps more accurately, Jean Launay, eminent translator too, settles for the following: "La poésie, Mesdames et Messieurs—: ces paroles à l'infini où il n'est question que du mortel et de l'inutile [Poetry, ladies and gentlemen—: these words extending into the infinite and dealing with the mortal and the useless]."⁴⁷ To which Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who lists most of these versions, adds, with some trepidation, a version of his own: "La poésie, Mesdames et Messieurs—: ce parler à l'infini de la mortalité

pure et de l'en vain [Poetry, ladies and gentlemen—: this speaking infinitely of pure mortality and the in vain].”⁴⁸

The efforts of Celan’s English translators are no less diverse. Rosemarie Waldrop for instance proposes: “Poetry, ladies and gentlemen: what an eternalization of nothing but mortality, and in vain,” while John Felstiner opts for the more sober rendering: “Poetry, ladies and gentlemen—: this speaking endlessly of mere mortality and uselessness.”⁴⁹ Other possibilities exist; let me, for my part—*substitution oblige*—propose: “Poetry, ladies and gentlemen, this speaking indefinitely of pure finitude for no purpose!” (*De te fabula narratur*, I hear a voice whisper inaudibly in my ear.)

There is, however, one further, French translation of Celan’s gnomic dictum that I have so far left to one side. It is Blanchot’s own. It is arguably the simplest, but also the most daring of all. Blanchot writes: “La poésie, Mesdames et Messieurs: cette parole d’infini, parole de la mort vaine et du seul Rien.” (Which Ann Smock, in her English version of *L’Écriture du désastre* [*The Writing of the Disaster*] where the quotation, ever so slightly modified, reappears, translates in turn, adding another twist to the spiral, as follows: “Poetry, ladies and gentlemen: an expression of infinitude, an expression of vain death and of mere Nothing.”⁵⁰)

Blanchot’s translation from Celan, differing radically as it does from that preferred by Levinas, invites, I think, three remarks.

The first concerns the relationship between speaking and the infinite evoked (in elliptical fashion) by the compound noun *Unendlichsprechung*, which is the source of much of the difficulty.⁵¹ What is most striking about Blanchot’s rendition is the extent to which, unlike virtually all other versions cited, it refuses to decide as to the exact nature of that relationship. True, Blanchot’s phrase *parole d’infini* does indicate relationship, but it does so in the weakest manner possible, with the result that the relationship is left largely undetermined. It is even hard to say which of the two terms governs the other: is it a case of speaking having priority over the infinite, or the reverse? It is also impossible to tell whether the infinite, in this case, should be seen as something positive or negative, as what Hegel cheerfully describes as “good” or “bad” infinity; and much the same kind of ambiguity is visible in the decision to translate *lauter Sterblichkeit* as *la mort vaine*. Here, too, mortality is marked neither positively or negatively. Is death a limit to be welcomed, or to be lamented? Why is death in vain anyway? Because death makes a mockery of all human endeavour? Or because death itself is a mockery? Is it because death

is the only ultimate possibility, or because death itself is ultimately impossible? Readers of Blanchot will know this is no mere aporetic crux. For its part, Blanchot's translation refuses to decide, which is to say that these two versions of death, as so often in Blanchot, while remaining irreducible to one another, are also inseparable. Which is to imply in turn, on Blanchot's part, shared with Celan, a deep suspicion not only of transcendent values and transcendence in general, since death conquers all, but of the transcendence of death in particular, since death, failing to provide access even to itself, is thus emptied of any identity, propriety or impropriety, and positive or negative meaning.

The third step (*Schritt, pas*) in Blanchot's translation is less easily defensible; there is little warrant for his translation of *Umsonst* as "(parole) du seul Rien [(expression) of mere Nothing]," either for the transposition of vanity into nothingness or for the capitalisation of Nothing. True, with the expression *la mort vaine*, Blanchot has already collapsed into one the idea of mortality (contained in *Sterblichkeit*) and of pointlessness or lack of purpose (implied by *Umsonst*), with the result that for this final element in Celan's three-step definition, which Blanchot wants to retain for rhetorical or rhythmic reasons, the critic has little option but to paraphrase what has gone before, which he does by reiterating and reaffirming the radical lack of transcendence implied in *la mort vaine*. Blanchot's syntax is crucial, too. For his use of the expression *cette parole d'infini* (*une parole d'infini* as the later version prefers, making the original syntax even more indeterminate) which forces him to repeat the word *parole*, in the phrase: *parole de la mort vaine*, in apposition with the first, implies that "vain death" and "mere Nothing," being placed on the same syntactic plane as the "infinite," are synonymous with it. And the converse is also true: it is the infinite or indefinite of *parole d'infini* that serves to explicate death's vanity and the mere Nothing.

Blanchot's translation, no doubt, like each and every other version of Celan's phrase, is already an interpretation. As such, it embodies or enacts a decision. Remarkably, what it decides is to refuse to decide, it decides *not* to decide. It reserves judgement. Incisively. Not for later, perhaps, but forever. In rewording or rephrasing Celan it seems Blanchot's overriding concern as translator is at the very least to maintain, even perhaps to accentuate the shadowy indeterminacy of Celan's words. Indeed, one of the salient features of Blanchot's version is the extent to which it eschews the connotations of negativity associated with such themes as endlessness, mortality, and lack of

purpose, in order to emphasise the reciprocity of the finite and the infinite and affirm, as the groundless ground of all poetry, the infinite finitude of language itself. Poetry knows no bounds other than those of language itself, to which it is bound without being bound. It does not transform silence into language or language into silence. It does neither. It does not appeal to any dialectic of negativity. It disappoints all transcendence. It does not occur according to any logic of presentation, completion, or monumentality. It inscribes itself instead as wandering motion, as a stepping out, a step (not) beyond, perhaps, that inscribes as it effaces, effaces as it inscribes—which is why, in reading and translating Celan’s poetic counterword, what Blanchot seeks to show is how far it is already a modest example of what it professes, a self-effacing trace, that is, whose possibility as an assertion of what poetry “is” is inseparable from its own semantic and syntactic indecision. That to which Blanchot’s translation proves most responsive, then, unlike that of André Du Bouchet, which gambles, so to speak, on transcendence, is the extent to which Celan’s formula, in affirming poetry, also withdraws it, and in withdrawing it, affirms it. It displays its trust in poetry, in other words, only in so far as it radically accentuates its distrust of all poetry.

V

But how to name the outside? Is there a name for it at all?

These are grave, unanswerable questions, on which the work of both Blanchot and Levinas may be said to turn. And where the differences in idiom between them are at their most acute. “Ach, die Kunst!” says Celan, quoting Büchner.⁵² Art, for Celan, is a name that inspires little confidence. It cannot be trusted. But only because there is also *Dichtung*: which is perhaps something other, which survives, as a trace or token of the exteriority of language to itself.

But how to tell the difference: between the one and the other?

For Levinas, we know—for this is how he concludes his essay on the fiction of Roger Laporte, Blanchot’s friend and admirer—that “Language [*le langage*] is the fact that a single word word always is proffered [*un seul mot toujours se profere*]: God.”⁵³

To invoke the word God, then, for Levinas, is to sum up, in a single gesture, the infinity of language. Blanchot, on the other hand, has no such confidence. For Blanchot, the name God is only a word, given to multiple and diverse translations. If it embodies all language, it is

because what it names is simultaneously the sickness and health of all language(s):

God: language speaks only as the sickness of language [*comme maladie du langage*], in so far as it is split down the middle [*fissuré*], broken apart [*éclaté*], and put at a distance [*écarté*], a failing [*défaillance*] that language immediately recuperates [*recupère*: recoups] as its own strength [*validité*], its power and its health, in a recuperation [*recupération*] that is its most intimate sickness, of which God, this always irrecuperable [*irrecupérable*] name, always yet to be named and naming nothing, seeks to cure [*guérir*] us, a cure [*guérison*] for which itself has no cure [*incurable*].⁵⁴

Language, in other words, is where the divide between the immanent and the transcendent is decided; but by that very token it is also where the divide is itself always already suspended, together with all the concepts to which it gives rise, including that of transcendence itself, which finds itself unable in the end to deliver what it holds dear. Language, then, is always at odds with itself, both healthy and sick, sick and healthy, without it ever being possible to identify which of these it is, for it is both and neither. Not transcendent (transcendence, Levinas conceded in 1956, is not a word Blanchot holds dear⁵⁵), but *neutre*, neuter or neutral.

Radical homeopathy, suggests Blanchot. And this perhaps is where, each in his own way, irreducibly and incommensurably, Levinas, Blanchot, and Celan, are somehow in accord: each with the other, each in spite of the other, both differing from the other, and deferring to the other. Language, poetry, then, in other words, is what we must trust, because we have no alternative; but it is also what we must distrust, because we have no alternative.⁵⁶

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NOTES

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 146; *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 106; translation modified. Nelson's less idiomatic rendering runs as follows: "A hand that extends itself, that refuses itself, that we cannot take hold of in any way." Let me also thank here, for prompting and encouraging this paper, Kevin Hart and Alain Toumayan, to whom I am deeply indebted in more ways than one.
- 2 For a reading of this fragment, see Leslie Hill, "An Outstretched Hand . . .": From Fragment to Fragmentary," *Colloquy*, November 2005, <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/others/colloquy/issue10/hill.pdf>
- 3 There are other places too in *Le Pas au-delà* where Blanchot reaches out towards Celan, perhaps most notably in his use of such phrases as "forgetting and memory

[*oubli et mémoire*]” or “from threshold to threshold [*de seuil en seuil*]” which, though recognisably part of the writer’s own idiom, also discreetly memorialise the titles of two books of poems by Celan, *Mohn und Gedächtnis* [literally: *Poppy and Memory*] (1952) and *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* [*From Threshold to Threshold*] (1955). See for instance *Le Pas au-delà* 107; *The Step Not Beyond* 76–77, where one snatch of dialogue runs as follows: “We are here together like forgetting and memory [*comme oubli et mémoire*]; you remember, I forget; I remember, you forget.’ He paused for a moment: ‘It’s as though they were here, on the threshold [*là sur le seuil*], going from threshold to threshold [*allant de seuil en seuil*]. One day, they will come in, they will know that we know.’ The time comes when the time will come.” On Blanchot’s personal reaction of the news of Celan’s death, see Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1998) 502.

- 4 See Emmanuel Levinas, “De l’être à l’autre,” *La Revue de Belles-Lettres*, 96e année, 2–3, 1972, 193–99; and Maurice Blanchot, “Le Dernier à parler,” *ibid.*, 171–83. Other contributors to the volume included Yves Bonnefoy, Jean Starobinski, Henri Michaux, Jean Daive, Jacques Dupin, David Rokeah, Iliassa Sequin, André Du Bouchet, John E. Jackson, Franz Wurm, Johannes Poethen, Vladimir Holan, Ilse Aichinger, Günther Eich, Bernard Böschenstein, and Celan’s widow, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. Both essays by Levinas and Blanchot have been reprinted since. Levinas’s text, under the same title, is given in his *Noms propres* (Paris: Le Livre de poche [1976] 1987) 49–56; *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1996) 40–46. For its part, Blanchot’s essay has been reprinted three times: first, in 1984 in a single volume by éditions Fata morgana, on the basis of the 1972 *Revue de Belles-Lettres* text but incorporating a number of typographical and other errors in the quotations from Celan; second, in 1986, again by Fata morgana, in a corrected version (*édition définitive, corrigée*) checked for accuracy against Celan’s 1983 *Gesammelte Werke* (but incorporating a number of new errors!); and finally in the collection entitled *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, folio, 2002) 71–107, this most recent version being unfortunately based on the somewhat inaccurate 1984 text. From one version to the other, however, Blanchot’s own essay is unaltered; what does change is the accuracy and layout of the passages taken from Celan. In what follows, for convenience, reference will be made to the 2002 Gallimard text. Blanchot’s essay appears in an English translation by Joseph Simas as “The Last One to Speak” in *ACTS: A Journal of New Writing*, 8/9 (1988): 228–39; a new translation by Charlotte Mandell is forthcoming from SUNY Press. One of the few critics to have explored in any detail the relationship between Levinas, Blanchot, and Celan is Gerald L. Bruns in his *Maurice Blanchot: the Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).
- 5 See Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert in collaboration with Rudolf Bücher, 7 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, [1983] 2000) III, 177; translation mine. “Handwerk,” writes Celan, describing the poem, “—das ist Sache der Hände. Und diese Hände wiederum gehören nur einem Menschen, d.h. einem einmaligen und sterblichen Seelenwesen, das mit seiner Stimme und seiner Stummheit einen Weg sucht.”
- 6 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 177; translation mine.
- 7 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 177–78; translation mine. A similar remark appears in the draft material for Celan’s 1960 address in receipt of the Georg-Büchner Preis, “Der Meridian,” where Celan writes: “Writing poetry as a mode of existence ultimately leads to the realisation there is no essential difference between a handshake and a poem [*Dichten als Daseinsweise führt letzten Endes dazu, zwischen Gedicht und Händedruck keinen prinzipiellen Unterschied zu erblicken*].” See Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien*, ed. Bernhard

- Böschstein and Heino Schmult, in collaboration with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkopp (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999) 134; translation mine.
- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 49; *Proper Names* 40; translation modified.
 - 9 On the relationship between Celan and Heidegger, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, [1986] 1997); and *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1994). The historical background to relations between the two has recently been documented in detail by Hadrien France-Lanord in his informative, but dispiritingly one-sided, exclusively pro-Heideggerian account, *Paul Celan et Martin Heidegger: le sens d'un dialogue* (Paris: Fayard, 2004). Citing as sole authority the original (supposedly more profound) draft version of Celan's remark to Bender, France-Lanord dismisses Levinas's reading in the following terms: "A slightly more serious examination of the poet's whole work [i.e. more serious than that proposed by Levinas in "De l'être à l'autre"] indicates, on the contrary, that it is precisely because Celan's poetry positions itself within the horizon of the thinking of *Dasein* that it can identify itself with a handshake" (85, n. 1; translation mine). Everything hinges once more on a question of translation: how far, if at all, does Celan's use of the term *Daseinsweise*—which he subsequently erases—authorise a purely Heideggerian interpretation of the poet's gesture?
 - 10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 49; *Proper Names* 41; translation modified.
 - 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, third revised edition [1963] 1976) 173–74; *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1990) 121; translation modified.
 - 12 Emmanuel Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre," in *Les Imprévus de l'histoire* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1994) 125; Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 12; translation modified.
 - 13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Les Imprévus de l'histoire* 125; *Collected Philosophical Papers* 12; translation modified.
 - 14 See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997) 94: "But neither is hospitality a part of ethics, nor even, as we shall see, a name for a problem in law or politics: it is ethicity itself, the whole and very principle of ethics. And if hospitality can neither be circumscribed nor derived, if it traverses in ordinary fashion the whole of intentional experience, in that case it has no opposite: all instances of allergy, rejection, xenophobia, even war, are still manifestations of what Levinas attunes or explicitly allies to hospitality"; translation mine.
 - 15 See Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950) 1–72. "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks," from which these words are taken, dates from 1935–36, but remained unpublished until 1950. Levinas is therefore unlikely to have been referring to it, even indirectly, when writing about art in such disparaging terms as he does in "La Réalité et son ombre" in 1948. The fact remains, however, that long before the publication of *Holzwege*, Heidegger's approach to the ontology of the artwork was already well documented, notably in the essays on Hölderlin published in the late 1930s and early to mid-1940s. Levinas was of course famously present at the public dispute between Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer in Davos in 1929.
 - 16 Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata morgana, 1975) 19; *Proper Names* 134; translation modified. Levinas's review was first published in 1956.

- 17 See Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 198: “Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu. / Jedes Ding, jeder Mensch ist dem Gedicht, das auf das Andere zuhält, eine Gestalt dieses Anderen.” [“The poem reaches out to an Other, it needs this Other, it needs a Counterpart. It seeks it out, speaks towards it. / Each thing, each person, to the poem that heads towards the Other, is a form of this Other” (*Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (London: W.W. Norton, 2001) 409; translation modified).] On the various exceptions to Levinas’s general condemnation of poetry, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1999) 132–54.
- 18 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” interview by Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) 168–80 (169); translation slightly modified. Elsewhere, however, the hand for Levinas is, as for Husserl, what grasps—as a thing or entity. See for instance Emmanuel Levinas, *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1995) 14.
- 19 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 31; *Proper Names* 24.
- 20 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 50–51; *Proper Names* 41; translation modified.
- 21 In *La Poésie comme expérience* (74), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe arrives at a similar conclusion: “The interruption of language,” he writes, “the suspense of language, the caesura (what Hölderlin called ‘anti-rhythmic suspension’): this is what poetry is, then, ‘a catching of breath and an interrupting of speech [*le souffle et la parole coupés*], the ‘turning’ of breath, ‘the turning of the end of inspiration.’ Poetry occurs [*advient*] where, against all expectations, language gives way”; translation mine.
- 22 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 199: “Aber es gibt wohl, mit jedem wirklichen Gedicht, es gibt, mit dem anspruchlosesten Gedicht, diese unabweisbare Frage, diesen unerhörten Anspruch”; see *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 410; translation modified; Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres*, 56; *Proper Names* 46; translation modified.
- 23 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* II, 76; translation mine; Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 49; *Proper Names* 40. Unfortunately, unlike the original version correctly given in *La Revue de Belles-Lettres*, the version supplied in *Noms propres* erroneously transforms Celan’s three lines into a couplet; it also seems to incorporate into Celan’s text Levinas’s own dedication to Paul Ricœur, even though the 1972 printing clearly shows this belongs to Levinas’s essay, not Celan’s poem.
- 24 Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982) 196; translation mine.
- 25 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 52; *Proper Names* 42.
- 26 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 151; *Proper Names* 175.
- 27 In claiming Celan for a poetics of transcendence, was Levinas unaware of Celan’s own scepticism with regard to traditional views of aesthetic transcendence, as voiced for instance in the poet’s response to a 1958 questionnaire sent out by the famous German-language bookshop in Paris, the Librairie Flinker? Referring to the language of poetry, Celan insisted: “It does not transfigure, does not ‘poeticise,’ but names and posits, and endeavours to measure out the domain of what is given and what is possible [*Sie verklärt nicht, »poetisiert« nicht, sie nennt und setzt, sie versucht den Bereich des Gegebenen und des Möglichen auszumessen*]” (Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 167; translation mine). It may be wondered how far

- these words are compatible with what Levinas calls the “attempt to think transcendence.” On the other hand, might it not be argued, more pertinently, that it was precisely Celan’s scepticism towards aesthetic transcendence (it is Levinas himself who suggests somewhere that “language itself is already scepticism”) that made it possible for Levinas to rearticulate his relationship with poetry on the basis (among others) of Celan’s poetry?
- 28 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 52; *Proper Names* 42. Du Bouchet’s French version of “Der Meridian” first appeared in Paul Celan, *Strette*, trans. John E. Jackson and André Du Bouchet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1971). For Celan’s original text, see Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 200.
- 29 See Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 185; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 395. Blanchot cites (and translates) this passage from Celan’s Bremen address in *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* 101.
- 30 The context of Socrates’ words, in the *Apology* 29b, is perhaps significant. For in his submission to the court, Socrates points out that what makes a life worth living is not the fear of death, but whether or not one does one’s duty. Socrates defends himself against the charge of corrupting Athenian youth by maintaining that his duty as a philosopher is to do right by philosophy whatever the consequences, and even though, in Socrates’ case, this may make his own death inevitable. Is this to imply that Celan, in going to his death, was somehow standing by his own poetry? It would seem so: in the obituary words of Henri Michaux in *Études germaniques*, 25, 3, July–September 1970, speaking of Celan: “Il s’en est allé. Choisir, il pouvait encore choisir . . . [He took his leave. He chose to, was still able to choose . . .]” (250). It is worth adding that when, finally, Blanchot’s essay on Celan was brought together with other later texts in the volume *Une voix venue d’ailleurs*, the collection also reprinted Blanchot’s much earlier 1953 essay on René Char, “La Bête de Lascaux [The Beast of Lascaux],” which similarly included various references to Socrates. And in that text Blanchot had concluded a discussion of the voice of poetry in Plato as follows: “Strange wisdom: too ancient for Socrates but also too new, from which, despite the uneasiness that made him spurn it, it must nevertheless be assumed Socrates was not excluded either, Socrates who accepted the only guarantee for speech was the living presence of a human being and yet went as far as to die in order to keep his word.” See *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* 67; “The Beast of Lascaux,” trans. Leslie Hill, *The Oxford Literary Review*, 22 (2000): 9–38 (38).
- 31 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* 71. Blanchot’s opening quotation is from the collection *Atemwende* (1967), and reads: “Niemand /zeugt für den /Zeugen.” See Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* II, 72; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 261. As readers will recall, Derrida also draws on this enigmatic and multivalent quotation in the course of his reading of Celan in *Schibboleth* (Paris, Galilée, 1986) 60–62, and glosses it further in “Poétique et politique du témoignage,” in *L’Hérne: Derrida*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Paris: Éditions de L’Hérne, 2004) 521–39; “A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text’: Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” trans. Rachel Bowlby, in *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Berkeley: U California P, 2000) 180–207.
- 32 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* 103; see Paul Celan *Gesammelte Werke* I, 135; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 77. An earlier French translation by Jean-Claude Schneider, published in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 168, December 1966 offers this clumsy alternative: “Énonce toi aussi /énonce, le dernier, /ton verdict” (1012–13). John Felstiner translates: “Speak you too /speak as the last /say out your say.” A reading of the text is found in Jerry Glenn, *Paul Celan* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973) 87–90. On the initial context to the poem, written, it

seems, in response to a hostile review essay of Celan's work by the influential critic Hans Egon Holthusen in the journal *Merkur*, see John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 78–81. "What happens here, with the fighting, drinking, and making of wreaths," wrote Holthusen apropos of Celan's early poem "Ein Lied in der Wüste [A Song in the Wilderness]," systematically overlooking the poem's Biblical references and allusions, "is not to be taken 'literally,' but as a metaphorical or, better, symbolic, ceremonial operation which is meant to represent certain basic impulses and emotions. We do have to say, however, in another sense, that these procedures are to be taken utterly and entirely 'literally:' as a pure play of language, concerned only with itself. When everything becomes metaphor, it no longer seems permissible to look for the 'meaning' [*Sinn*] of the poem, as it were, *behind* the metaphors." See Hans Egon Holthusen, "Fünf Junge Lyriker," in *Merkur*, 8.3 (March 1954): 284–94 and *Merkur*, 8.4 (April 1954): 378–90 (386–87); translation mine. What Celan no doubt wanted to challenge in this verdict was the somewhat simplistic assumption that meaning could be located in univocal manner somewhere behind the poem rather than within it and the charge that, if such meaning was not readily available to the reader, this could only be because the poem had nothing to say and was merely interested in its own quasi-musical verbal textures.

- 33 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I, 33.
- 34 On the complex relationship between host and hostage, *l'hôte* and *l'otage*, in Levinas's thought, see Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*.
- 35 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* 102–03; Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I, 135; *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 77.
- 36 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* 97; Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I, 168; *Paul Celan: Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 107.
- 37 The point is one powerfully made by Peter Szondi in an important article on Celan that Blanchot (a member of the Editorial Committee of the journal where it first appeared) is almost certain to have read; see Peter Szondi, "Lecture de Strette: essai sur la poésie de Paul Celan," *Critique* 288 (May 1971): 387–420 (387–89 and 419).
- 38 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* 87; see Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I, 168; *Paul Celan: Poems* 107.
- 39 Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* 89–91; Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I, 167; and *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 107; translation modified. "Between silence and silence," says a later fragment of Blanchot's, "an exchange of words—an innocent murmur [*parole échangée—murmure innocent*]." See Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà* 93; *The Step Not Beyond* 66; translation modified.
- 40 In much the same way in "Connaissance de l'inconnu [Knowledge of the Unknown]" (*L'Entretien infini* 70–83; *The Infinite Conversation* 49–58), at the very moment he was affirming the essential importance of Levinas's renewal of "ethics" in *Totalité et infini* [*Totality and Infinity*], Blanchot was careful to query some of the implications of Levinas's phenomenological vocabulary.
- 41 Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* 201; translation mine.
- 42 Maurice Blanchot, "Notre compagne clandestine," in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. François Laruelle (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980) 79–87 (85); *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Ralph A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) 41–50.
- 43 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) 44–45; *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1986) 24–25; translation modified.

- 44 It may be wondered how far, in making this claim, Celan was himself familiar with Blanchot's writing. It is hard to believe that, living in Paris, as he did, from 1948 onwards, Celan had not encountered at least some of Blanchot's regular essays in *Critique* or the *Nouvelle Revue française*. At any event, Esther Cameron, who visited the poet in Paris in August 1969, reports that Celan recommended Blanchot's writings to her, as well as those of Michaux. See Esther Cameron, "Erinnerungen an Paul Celan," in *Paul Celan*, ed. Werner Hamacher and Winfried Menninghaus (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988) 339.
- 45 For more detailed discussion of the philosophical implications of Celan's poetics, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Poésie comme expérience*, and Christopher Fynsk, *Language and Relation: . . . that there is language* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 135–58.
- 46 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 200. The recently published drafts for "Der Meridian" reveal that an earlier version of the formula was first used by Celan in a letter to Hermann Kasack, dated 16 May 1960, in which Celan first indicated his formal acceptance of the Georg-Büchner-Preis. In the letter, Celan wrote: "Worte, zumal im Gedicht—sind das nicht werdende—und vergehende Namen? Sind Gedichte nicht dies: die ihrer Endlichkeit eingedenk bleibende Unendlichsprechung von Sterblichkeit und Umsonst? [Are not words, especially in a poem—names being born—and dying? Is this not what poems are: a kind of speaking infinitely of mortality and pointlessness, ever mindful of its own finitude?]" See Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull, in collaboration with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkopp (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999) 222; translation mine.
- 47 More recently, according to Hadrien France-Lanord in *Paul Celan et Martin Heidegger: le sens d'un dialogue*, Jean Launay seems to have devised another version of the phrase, now translated as "La poésie, Mesdames et Messieurs, ces paroles d'infini où il n'est question que de l'être-mortel et du pour rien" (47).
- 48 For a helpful list of these different versions of Celan's proposition see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Poésie comme expérience* 146. For the benefit of monolingual English readers I have, in parentheses, supplied a literal English translation of these different French versions. This is a necessarily problematic and dubious operation, the effect of which is precisely to obscure, if not totally to destroy the point about the difficulty of rendering Celan's sentence into French. They serve to illustrate perhaps the complex relationship between possibility and impossibility at stake in any act of translation.
- 49 For the version suggested by Rosemarie Waldrop, see Blanchot, "The Last One to Speak" in *ACTS: A Journal of New Writing*, 8/9 (1988): 238; for John Felstiner's, see *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* 411.
- 50 For this first occurrence of Blanchot's version of Celan's definition, see *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* 103. It may be noted that in "Le Dernier à parler" Blanchot adopts the policy of citing the original German text of all Celan's poems alongside his own French version; but where Celan's prose writing is concerned, as here, Blanchot gives only his own French text. Blanchot quotes the phrase for a second time in a brief contribution to a special issue of the journal *Givré*, devoted to the poet Bernard Noël, where it appears, slightly amended, as follows: "La poésie, Mesdames, Messieurs: une parole d'infini, parole de la mort vaine et du seul Rien." See Blanchot, "La poésie, mesdames, messieurs," in *Givré*, 2–3 (1977) 176–77; this later, corrected (?) version is the one reprised in *L'Écriture du désastre* 143–44; *The Writing of The Disaster* 90.
- 51 The indeterminacy of compound words is a recurrent feature of Celan's writing, as Peter Szondi observes in his "Lecture de Strette" (411): "[Celan's] compound

words,” he writes, “by the very fact that they are a result of syntagmatic condensation, do not require the question to be settled as to which of the (two or more) components of the word governs the other, and in what way;” translation mine.

- 52 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* III, 190.
- 53 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* 109; *Proper Names* 93; translation modified.
- 54 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* 70; *The Writing of the Disaster* 48; translation modified.
- 55 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* 13; *Proper Names* 130.
- 56 See Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* 170–71; *The Writing of the Disaster* 110–11. “To write,” Blanchot explains, “is to distrust writing absolutely by trusting in it absolutely. Whatever foundation is ascribed to this double movement, which is not as contradictory as this compressed formulation might suggest, it remains the rule of every writing practice: ‘giving withdrawing’ [*le « se donner se retirer »*] finds here, not its application or illustration, for these are inadequate terms, but that which, by means of dialectics and outside dialectics, justifies itself by letting itself be said, as soon as there is saying and by virtue of what there is saying [*se justifie en se laissant dire, dès qu’il y a dire et par quoi il y a dire*].”