Introduction: marks of experience

A text can be illegible because its language is too complex, too foreign, or too obscure to be read, but these obstacles can to some degree be overcome with time and patience. But a text can also be illegible because it cannot be read in any summative way, and in a text like this what is in play is structurally unreachable, that is, it cannot be read because doing so would require more (in whatever way this 'more' might be measured: time, effort, thought, etc.) than is possible. How is it possible to write a text like this, and what would be the effects of reading it? A text that is somehow beyond comprehension offers itself to thought in other ways, which not only indicates a different sense of writing and reading but also a different way of relating language and thought, and thus a different way of language existing within the world. A text like this could perhaps be termed infinite, in that it exceeds the capacities of the finite, but the very notion of an infinite text is problematic. In some ways, all texts can substantiate a potentially endless reading, but the infinite text is one that is structured as such, which is to say that even beginning to approach it requires a negotiation with its lack of finitude. But a text and a language, as well as its apparent author, are not ordinarily considered to lack finitude but rather to be socially, materially, and historically grounded and limited. An infinite text thus appears in a very different form, and with very different consequences, for insofar as it is not limited then there is no border to approach, no limit that separates it from the world or the reader. It is this lack of boundary that needs to be considered, and that informs the problematic of its reading, since if reading cannot begin, on the basis that there is no place that would form a natural starting point, then how can it proceed? Therefore, what has to be addressed is not just the difficulty of beginning but the nature of the challenge that its language poses to thought.

Conversely, this puts into question the nature of what we call philosophical language, especially when it becomes apparent that the language of thought bears no intrinsic relation to the language in which we approach thinking, for in what way is thought able to bring to expression the path by which it proceeds?

What happens to thinking when it seeks to come to terms with itself (as it is said)? When thinking is brought up against the dissipation of its own language, when it is forced to put it and itself into question, what happens to it? The manner in which these questions surface around a set of issues concerning language and thought, finitude and infinitude, and the nature of experience leads to the realization that the problematic of illegibility lies at the heart of a certain response to Hegel, in particular to the response by Blanchot who understood that philosophy, in concerning itself with its own language, was concerning itself with the limits of finitude, with death and the infinite, which is the experience that occurs when thought attempts to think its relation to language and is necessarily brought out not by philosophy alone, but through literature. It is to this discussion that the following work will attend.

I The life and death struggle

Let us consider a scenario: A subject is called to a challenge, at which they fail and are killed, nevertheless they have risked their life in facing this challenge. At the moment of death everything is at stake in an instant of suspense and freedom. Both life and death are held in abeyance at this point of extreme possibility, the possibility of possibility. A place opens up between life and death that is also the point at which they come to meet, one comes to touch against the other and in that moment both are suspended or neutralized. There is no assimilation or conversion of one to the other, no mixture or overcoming, but a double negation by that which lies outside both life and death and is neither one nor the other.

In more detail, a young man is asked to complete a linguistic test over which he has struggled. After much hard work he tries again, fails, and is killed. But the moment (of death) becomes immortalized, frozen at the point where there is neither life nor death, at which we too hold our breath. The dice have not yet landed, the cards have not been turned over, the trigger has not been pulled, the acrobat soars from one trapeze to the other, there is a moment of absolute tension, which is itself paradoxical. We say that the moment of death has become immortalized, but does that mean that death has become endless or that it has been defused, denatured, neutered? And, if the tension is absolute, then it is not only at the most extreme point but also without relation, but how can there be tension without relation? It is no surprise that time seems to stop and we hold our breath, for as witnesses we are also drawn into this impossible moment. But

the man has been killed, defeated by the challenge, he has faced death and been found wanting. The scenario is of course oppressive; he has been forced into this situation, but is such a challenge ever just, or avoidable? In its dimensions it thereby becomes a primal scene of endeavour.

For Hegel, the primal scene is also a life and death struggle, but in this case it is a struggle for recognition in which the stakes are raised to such a degree that it becomes a question of who is willing to risk everything, to give up all reservation or restraint in order to gain this recognition, whether it is your life or mine. One side blinks, retreats, folds, the challenge was not one for which they were willing to put everything at risk, and in doing so they show their comparative weakness, which leads to subservience. This is a rather one-dimensional encounter, as all means of recognition are subordinated to that of force and coercion, which has the result of leaving the relation of master and slave empty of all but their mutual dependence through the reiteration of this force.[1] The master controls the slave through the threat of force and the willingness to raise the stakes to their ultimate degree, and thereby wins freedom since he is now able to get the other to work for him, but this leads to a contradictory tension of complacency and responsibility, which can undermine his freedom. The slave has discovered their own limits in being forced into obedience, but this also grants them the strange freedom of irresponsibility, and the illusory escape of internal emigration that leads to stoicism or *ressentiment*. Thus, the mutual dependence is unstable and shallow because it derives only from the threat of force, but is this risk ever absent? At some point, all challenges that are worth anything become escalated to the point of becoming critical, where it is necessary to risk everything, and so it is the presence of the shadow of death that is to be considered. For Hegel, one side of the agon claims this shadow while the other shrinks from it, but can death become the *mode d'emploi* as well as the *raison d'être* of life? Is the life and death struggle only to be solved by seizing it?

Blanchot seems to explore a number of primal scenes, which should be distinguished from his occasional autobiographical notes: aside from the passage in *L'Écriture du désastre*, there is the account in the introduction to *Faux pas*, the descriptions of solitude and night in *L'Espace littéraire* (which is in part an extended meditation on this encounter), and some of the episodes in *Thomas l'Obscur*. There is also the narrative related in *L'Instant de ma mort*, which provides a third version of the challenge that is in question here. During a wartime skirmish a young man is brought before a firing squad by enemy soldiers, and at the last moment he escapes:

> There remained however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to
> come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from
> life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the
> absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know; I imagine that this
> unanalysable feeling changed what remained of existence for him. As if
> henceforth the death outside him could only collide with the death in him. 'I am
> alive. No, you are dead'.[2]

The moment cannot be crossed, it is not crossable, there is no beyond, no other
side that can be reached. There is only the rift without borders that it exposes,
which is thus without moment or place. At the point of death there is neither
awareness nor experience, only suspense, without any further determination.

As is made clear, this is as much a struggle about language as anything else,
about the possibility of narration and recollection, of *histoire*, given the absence
from experience. And so the only words that can be found that may approximate
what happened are all evasive of the terms of experience: beatitude, ecstasy,
lightness, elation, as is its strange relation, which is described in the loosest of
ways as a friendship, 'he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship', a
relation of death with death, in which any subject-relation (with time, language,
self) is unravelled. Thus the primal scene is in no way a pre-existing origin or
primordial source, it is no *Urszene* in any psychoanalytical sense but absolute
negativity, in which 'everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations'
by 'the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all
nothing beyond' [PG: 114/117; EDB: 117/72]. In being put to the test in facing
this challenge it is not only existence that is at stake but the ability to master it, to
make its possibilities one's own, to have the ability to be as well as to be as such.
This is the extent to which existence becomes one's own existence in being the
existence of a self with an identifiable position. Without language this ability is
compromised in advance, but with language there is the risk of its complete
collapse, of its touching upon what is not, as this challenge is inherent in every
sentence.

To make a connection or relation within syntax is to essay its possibility, to be
caught up in that which it is attempting to circumscribe. A sentence is always
potentially a death sentence, since it is in its articulation that we can be called to
defend ourselves, to give an account of ourselves, which in its failure can lead to
disaster. But equally, the sentence can skirt this collapse by holding itself to the
moment of its dissolution, the moment where there is neither this nor that. Prose
is the language of the slave, Hegel is said to have written, the language of mere

external relations, which is perpetually forced to confront a challenge to its own existence, as it does not enjoy the freedom of rhythmic limits but has to endure the lack of any intrinsic structure, to be pervaded by non-existence as intimately as by existence.[3] The example of the young man faced by a linguistic test comes from Raymond Roussel's novel, *Impressions d'Afrique*, where the man is a Spartan helot called Saridakis, and not only is he killed for failing in this challenge but the moment of death is also recorded in a bizarre statue [IA: 34–36/7–8, 292–95/259–61]. While Hegel's version of the struggle occurs between two individuals as they seek recognition, Roussel finds a more complicated interaction, since the challenge is set to the slave by his master, and then repeated in the construction of the statue itself, which is also issued as a challenge to a prisoner on pain of death. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next chapter, this collision between the construction of the statue and the story that it memorializes is itself an attempt to solve another linguistic challenge [CJE: 14–15/7]. The implication that seems to arise is that the triangulation of the struggle through language and art leads to its reflexive proliferation, which removes it from the one-dimensionality of Hegel's model.

The death of Saridakis is an explicitly colonial rupture, a manifestation of the gap that arises when it is found that the subaltern cannot be made to speak, but it would be too much to assert a political dimension to Roussel's writings, instead, the challenge for him is unavoidably existential, which means that it is only to be grasped under conditions of extreme risk; as Hegel's discussion made clear, the challenge is always escalated to the point of death. It is not the case that the refiguring of this struggle by Roussel and Blanchot sublimates its terms but rather that it finds its ineradicable linguistic supplement, the very articulation through which the struggle persists. And in its failure, it does not simply give on to its impossibly contingent grounds but exposes the point of its illegibility, whose experience gives rise to an entirely different form of relation. Hence this is a kind of syncope of language, a form in which the sentence marks the experience of its own illegibility, its opening on to that which cannot simply be read. An experience in language of that which is perhaps 'beyond' language, leading to 'a writing, the riskiest there is, subtracting something from the order of language that it, in turn, yields to with a very gentle and inflexible rigour' [PA: 26/15].

Language becomes the arena in which this escalation to mortal extremes takes place, as if the slogan 'Liberty or Death!' were not only to become its own death sentence but would be emblematic of the status of language as such. Death runs through language not just in the sense of the tragic or traumatic inexpressible

that impossibly grounds its possibility but as that which permeates through every word as the ubiquitous border of its utterance. This border is not before or after or, in some spatialized sense, outside language, but is the very ridge across which language exists in its occurrence, its appearance as language. In the sentences at the end of Blanchot's account, the appearance of death is intrinsic: 'I know; I imagine that this unanalysable feeling changed what remained of existence for him. As if henceforth the death outside him could only collide [*se heurter*] with the death in him. "I am alive. No, you are dead". However, the status of this account is unclear, especially in its conclusion, for although the last two sentences appear to be a paraphrase of the preceding thought, they offer a different formulation, and primarily because they are recorded as a quotation. They thereby appear as narrative, a narrated and recalled phrase, which is to that extent literary, a quotation that removes it from the context while appearing to offer itself as an exemplary condensation of it. Its status is thus one of self-contestation, making it impossible to know exactly what it refers to or what its truth status might be.

If we place these doubts aside for the moment and consider that the statement about the collision between the death outside and that within is in some way restated in the quotation that follows, then we are immediately placed in further uncertainty, as the collision between the two deaths is now rendered as that between life and death. Moreover, the quotation asserts this repositioning by way of two different voices, so that there appears to be a coincidence between the perspective of the first person and that of being alive, and, conversely, that of the second person and that of being dead: *Je suis vivant. Non, tu es mort.* 'I am living. No, you are dead.' From where does this second voice arise? As part of the same quotation it cannot arise from a different place or subject position, so it is perhaps a form of reflective reconsideration, or epanorthosis, a retrospective correction. Thus, there would be two moments at issue, that of the living, and that of its realization as becoming dead, as if the transition were literally taking place within this quotation, with language becoming the means of realizing this fact. And, in becoming dead, the first person has disappeared, even as language still maintains the possibility of its being said. Hence the collision of two deaths is that of language and within language; that which occurs in language as such and that which takes place through its occurrence: the first arising in the voice that claims to say, 'I am living', and the second that phrases this as its discovery of being dead. These sentences are not speculative in Hegel's sense, in that they would actualize a higher truth about identity by demonstrating its unstable and

contradictory nature; rather, the ontological predicates of these sentences are rendered singularly concrete. This is not a formula about being as such, about the abstract status of the subject in general, but about the relation between language and death, about the language of life death as Derrida might say, that evacuates its ontological universality in favour of its actual experience, which can neither be translated nor analysed.[4]

Blanchot's lines here do not make exactly the same point as that which Derrida made in his reading of Husserl, where he had spoken about the structural necessity of my death for pronouncing the I: 'The statement "I am living" is accompanied by my being-dead [*être-mort*] and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead – and conversely' [VP: 108/82–3]. Blanchot has doubled the statement and thereby complicated its temporality, which is why it is not simply epanothortic, for not only has the subject position changed from one sentence to the next but there is also no reason to assume that the second statement eradicates the first, despite the negative around which it pivots. Indeed, the negative indicates precisely that the relation between life and death is not established once and for all but remains subject to its negativity. Hence in saying, 'I am living. No, you are dead', Blanchot is moving beyond the quasi-transcendental grounding that Derrida is discussing into the narrative distortions that are granted to this linguistic thanatology by way of literature, which gives us a world of which it is its immanent border. Literary language provides the short circuit that Blanchot referred to in saying that, from now on, the death outside could only collide with the death within. The death inherent in the subject position is brought up against the death made sensible in the experience of language as that which constitutes its reality and unreality, its separation from things and the signification of things in the 'luminous opacity' of its appearance, as Blanchot describes the reality of words: 'To the extent that their meaning is less guaranteed, less determined, that the unreality of fiction holds them apart from things, and places them at the edge of a world forever separated, words can no longer be content with their pure value as signs [...] and at the same time take on importance like verbal paraphernalia [*attirail*] and make sensible, materialising what they signify' [PF: 81/76]. Such a language, in its relation to the world, is both alive and dead and yet, in itself, is neither; it is the image of that which neither lives nor dies but bears its own living death.

Coming to enounce this language in a statement about oneself is thus to meet the point of this short circuit as that which remains, as Blanchot had emphasized. It does not extinguish or dissolve itself but persists as the experience without

experience of this 'without' (*sans*), the neutrality of that which is neither this nor that. And the strange status of this experience can then only be formulated tentatively as that which is (a) step/not beyond, a form of (infinite) liberation from life that is neither really beyond nor liberated. It is thus that the nature of the finite and infinite becomes rethought, just as the borders of life and death are complicated. For 'every writer who grapples with the experience of death as transcendence can only fall into the ordeal of the symbol, an ordeal he can neither overcome nor remove'. The symbol becomes significant for Blanchot as it is the key to the strange status of literary language as both contingent and general. While being made of many ordinary details, symbolic language (in which all literary language, and so all language of narration, participates) renounces these particularities in favour of the emptiness that it puts in their place, for, as a symbol, it is that which presents what is in its absence, and also undercuts this appearance by presenting itself as the immensity of the possibility of negation as such. The symbolic nature of literary language is thus an experience of nothingness as the search for a negative absolute that does not and cannot succeed: 'A writer who accepts to express himself in the symbol, whatever the theme of his meditations, can finally only express the demand of the symbol and measure himself by the misfortune of a contradictory negation, seeking to surpass all particular negation and to assert itself as universal negation, and not as an abstract universal but as a concrete emptiness, a realised universal emptiness' [PF: 86/81]. Such a close reformulation of Hegelian thought (especially in regards to the symbolic emptiness of prose as that which bears only inadequately developed relations, and the symbolic nature of the thought of finitude itself) requires considerable investigation, which is what this book will seek to deliver, but it can be seen how complex this will become when the experience of literature and of death are so intimately imbricated.[5]

And not only for the writer: if we are to read Blanchot's narrative then it is to the degree that the neutrality of its step, which is neither beyond nor not beyond (whether it be of experience, life, thought, or language), can be read, which is also inherent in the ordeal of the symbol. To read this narrative is to realize its singular logic in all the contradictory demands that it puts into play. Part of this challenge is implied in the final part of the extract from *L'Instant de ma mort* in its step beyond the text, which perhaps becomes the sentence in which it realizes its response to the challenge of the text as a whole: not to narrate or to recall so as to memorialize but to expose the point at which the death within and that without are brought together (without relation) in language.

The life and death struggle develops out of the failure of mutual recognition, and it is worth rehearsing the details of Hegel's thought here in order to understand how Blanchot takes it up, since it will prove to be a critical focus for his examination of the experience of literature as one in which its dialectics is ruptured by death. Optimally, the encounter with the other leads to mutual recognition, for each party not only recognizes the other but also sees themselves recognized by the other. Rather than finding that the subjectivity of self-consciousness is simply reflected in the gaze of the other, which in its one-dimensionality diminishes both the other and the self, the position of subjectivity is developed as a mutual interplay of recognition. Much as the speculative sentence undermines the simple predication of subject and object (as will be discussed in the next chapter), recognition operates across both self-consciousnesses as a movement of shared and reciprocally structured subjectivity:

> The middle is self-consciousness, which disintegrates into the extremes; and each extreme is this exchange of its own determinacy and an absolute transition into the opposite. However, as consciousness, it does indeed come *outside of itself*; but in its being-outside-of-itself it is at the same time kept back within itself, *for itself*, and its self-externality is *for it*. It is for it that it immediately *is* and *is not* another consciousness; and likewise this other is only for itself as it sublates itself as being-for-itself, and it is for itself only in the being-for-itself of the other. Each is the middle for the other, through which each mediates and integrates itself with itself, and each is for itself and for the other an essence immediately existing for itself, which at the same time is for itself in this way only through this mediation. They *recognise* themselves as *mutually recognising each other*.
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> PG: 110/112

Part of this recognition comes from the awareness and demonstration of freedom, since a self must show that it is a self by demonstrating its freedom from dependence on others. While this is a starting point for the development of mutual recognition it does not become so peacefully, for in the demonstration of freedom the self shows its independence by also proving that the other is not independent. It is as such that there arises a fight to the death, as each self seeks to show that it alone has the freedom and independence of being its own self. Recognition thus depends on the willingness to risk everything in order to show that one is not tied to anything, not even to life, whether this is one's own or another's. And, by showing that its freedom is not dependent, the self compels the other not only to recognize itself but also its own concomitant lack of freedom.

Thus the life and death struggle leads to the master and bondsman relation, in which the master continues to exist as the freedom of pure negation while the bondsman mediates this existence because, in his failure to demonstrate the freedom of complete independence he is forced to negotiate his dependence on things through his labour or work. However, the bondsman retains a latent awareness of the negativity that the master enjoys, for he has experienced the fear of death, of becoming nothingness, of being dead, that has shaken him to the core. Although he has not been able to realize this negativity, it remains within him by way of this fear and is explicated in his working through of the negative. To this extent the bondsman is granted a greater awareness of the role of negativity in self-consciousness than the master, who remains dependent on the bondsman for his enjoyment.[6] The encounter with the (literary or philosophical) work condenses this challenge for the writer or reader, who is presented with that which, finally, has no concerns or relations other than with its own negativity, and towards which the labour of mediation becomes a way of negotiating the fear of death that it comprises. This struggle is thus less for mutual recognition than it is an encounter with a form of language that brings negativity as such to a critical point.

II The ground of Cratylism

This understanding of literature by way of the life and death struggle is a key part of Blanchot's thought and it is useful to offset it with the reading developed by Foucault – in this case, in regards to Roussel – in order to see the important differences that are brought about by the Hegelian model. Foucault's approach to Roussel begins from the point of view of the enigma, so everything that follows has to do with the relation between a secret and its key, between what is inside and what is outside, what is hidden and what is revealed, and also with the nature of the threshold or transition that divides and unites the two aspects. Furthermore, the notion of the enigma gives rise to a suspicion about the revelation itself, about what is not revealed, or, indeed, whether the enigma of the enigma is that it bears no secret. So, insofar as the enigma is perhaps only an enigma, that is, one that bears no hidden meaning but is merely structurally enigmatic, then language only conveys 'itself' in the proliferation of its (non-)secret. Such an approach resembles Heidegger's thought of unconcealment, but without Dasein, as if the essence of language could be uncovered in itself as the simple structure of

revelation without sense. Literature then becomes a formal exercise that has neither goal nor limits, much like an infinite puzzle, and whose experience is radically desubjectifying. The death of the subject is thus revealed as its displacement in and by language, which is, however, only to re-essentialize it in linguistic terms. As will be seen, Roussel's works may lend themselves to such an approach but this should not suggest that Foucault's formalism is the only way to approach them, as it is based on two unconsidered assumptions: that Roussel's writings are structured as enigmas and that these enigmas have no secret; that all they contain or reveal is their own enigma. Hence there is a further assumption that, in conveying nothing but its own structure as an enigma, language thereby reveals 'itself' as the mere structural possibility of sense, without purpose or reason, as if there could be such a 'self', which would have some formal identity, some ideal or transcendental form or structure. As Foucault makes clear, there is a kind of Cratylist image at the root of his reading:

> The labyrinth of words, constructed according to an inaccessible architecture and referring only to its own play is at the same time a positive language [. . .] it is the neutral discourse of objects themselves, stripped of complicity and of every sentimental kinship, as if entirely absorbed by the exterior. Spread over a world of possible forms that hollow out a void in it, this language is more than any other proximate to the being of things. And it is just there that one approaches what is really "secret" in Roussel's language: that it is so open when its construction is so closed, that it has so much ontological weight when its morphology is so aleatory, that it looks out over a detailed and discursive space when, with decided purpose, it is enclosed within a narrow fortress.[7]

Such an illusion of reality, of 'objects themselves', needs to be examined carefully. The contingencies of Roussel's writing procedure do not allow us to say that his language opens itself to objects, and even less to their being. Indeed, the very formation of such an opening is to be reconsidered, deriving as it does from the nature of the enigma. The associations in Roussel's writings are formed from word to word, and sentence to sentence, but there is no necessity or essentiality to these associations, which can just as easily disappear or never arise.

The Cratylist thought, that of the natural, original, or given relation between names and things, is as hard to refute as it is to demonstrate. Certainly, there is no way of showing that names derive in some onomatopoeic or mimetic manner from things, in that they somehow resemble them, but this illusion is equally hard to dismiss. There is a strong investment in this belief, which persists despite its untenability, as it counters the all-too obviously arbitrary nature of names,

which seems too difficult to accept. It is as if there is a fear that names themselves would become untenable if their lack of grounding were to be acknowledged and that the whole structure of language would then unravel as a result. But the notion that names need to have a material grounding belies their inherent abstraction, so Cratylism works against the general movement of language as such, while also suggesting that the abstract nature of language development is insufficient. So, although the Cratylist belief is wrong in substance it reflects a more profound uncertainty about the nature of names, about what we might mean by the arbitrary and abstract form of language, and how such a thought is sustained. The division that Socrates attempts to arbitrate in the *Cratylus*, between the idea that the meanings of names are conventional or that they are natural, is clearly too crude and only leads to an aporia, which has not only remained but also distorted the approach to language by obscuring the more important point about abstraction. As Foucault shows, the interest in exploring the apparent material topography of language arises from the notion that language, in its grounding, needs to be immanent to the world of things, with all the Borgesian paradoxes that then emerge about the nature of such correspondence. However, the problem of abstraction, which is taken up in Blanchot's understanding of the negativity of language, indicates a concern with the non-relation with the world; not the range and necessity of connection but its distance and deviation, its removal from things, which becomes a question of its experience. For if there is no given or necessary relation between names and things then to what are names referring, not just in their meanings but also in their likeness?

Foucault's reading does not quite follow this Cratylist thought for, as he has emphasized, there is a double deviation from sense and things, which takes place through the rupture of immanence by death. In Roussel's language there is only an artificial isomorphism between language and the world: between words that have become emptied of meaning, which can thereby approach things that have become dead or merely potential, as if in a parallelogram of images, extraneous from both language and the world:

> As if language thus ritualised could only accede to things already dead and
> disburdened of their time; as if it could not at all reach the being of things, but
> only their vain repetition and that double in which they might faithfully be
> recovered without ever recovering the freshness of their being. The narrative
> hollowed out from the interior by the communicative process with things
> hollowed out from the exterior by their own death, and so separated from

themselves: on the one hand, with the apparatus of their repetition pitilessly described, and on the other hand, with their existence definitively inaccessible. There is thus at the level of the 'signified' a symmetrical splitting of what separates the description of things and the secret architecture of words in the 'signifier'.[8]

Despite its distance from any asymptotic immanence there remains a symmetrical architecture of estrangement here that is still bound to its unequivocal meaninglessness, as if the specular nature of language and thought were now reflecting (on) itself to infinity, which would be no more than empty repetition, a multifarious figuration without sense or purpose or bearing. This would be a charade of Cratylism, merely gesturing towards but not connecting to the world, except in an illusory relation as a fantastic simulacrum of things.

The problem with Foucault's reading of Roussel, although it is largely accurate on this point, is that there is no place for finitude in it. Language operates like a Möbius strip, in that it is infinite and one-dimensional, and yet able to draw out the displacement of its aspects by way of its infinite distortion. But this is not language in any human sense, let alone that of any form of literary narrative, and it is as such that it is so elusive; it looks readable and yet in its infinite form it cannot fully be read. Foucault is thus correct to draw our attention to the morphological changes that occur as a result of the tropological transformations in the text, for Roussel works with the structure of linguistic tropes to expose a form of textuality that is not simply literary.[9] In doing so, however, his writings are removed from any sphere of human resonance, which is not fully taken up by Foucault. It no longer makes sense to speak of language here as that which draws out the being of things, or that of language itself (if such a thought has meaning), for whatever language has become in this textual form it is not certain that it bears any essence or ontological weight. Instead, Roussel's writing is like the virtual language of mathematics, which is only potentially legible, as it is based on the meaningless epiphenomena of rhyme, which in turn leads to nothing more than the empty rhapsody of the bad infinite (*das Schlecht-Unendliche*). And this becomes the importance of Roussel's works, for they demonstrate what the form of an infinite literature would entail, and what it leaves out. The play of death that Foucault focuses on is not, in the last instance, that of finitude and mortality but that of a phase transition: a displacement or translation of the subject by the text. Insofar as it is understood in terms of the enigma, death does not take place in any more substantial sense than as a change of state, which is why there is no real difference between the performances of the artists in *Impressions d'Afrique* and

those of the living-dead machines in *Locus Solus*; death is no more of a challenge to art than it is an end to life. Death is merely an aspect of the enigma, in the same way that the Möbius strip bears its own alternating aspects.

The death that Foucault discusses is to be understood as an aspect of the relation between language and the world: it is an effect of what he calls the poverty of language, the fact that there are fewer words than things, and that there is thus a form of anxiety inherent to language as it cannot achieve immanence with the world. This finitude comes to override what occurs in the limitation of existence, so although death appears to be central to his reading of Roussel it is not death as such, as it were, but only an aspect of the finitude of sense. It is perhaps as a result of this structural deficiency that Roussel moves to make his own world in the form of a fantastic Cratylism in which language is constantly expanding rather than being limited, but this means that death has again become displaced and defused, and so removed from the absolute negativity that shakes consciousness to its roots, which is Hegel's understanding of death. For Foucault, Roussel's procedure is designed to obscure finitude and mask death and to convert this fact into a resource for the replication of images, and this is made clear by the way that he begins his study with the coincidence of Roussel's own death and the appearance of his last text, and by considering this coincidence as a rebus, a puzzle that both yields and conceals.

However, the reaching beyond the world that is the conceptual or abstract movement of language is not simply for the discovery and invention of fantastic resemblances, for through this movement consciousness is driven beyond the limits of natural life and, in Hegel's words, 'this uprooting entails its death'. The experience of consciousness is one in which it goes beyond itself by doing violence to itself, since what consciousness learns occurs by way of the negation that arises through the concept, a negation of what is that is not simply nothing but is the nothingness of that from which it results, a determinate nothingness [PG: 57/51].[10] This ongoing negation shows that language is not only engaged in the abstraction of new relations but also the negation of previous ones, a negation that is more than their erasure or occlusion as it involves the anxiety of real suffering. And so, because the life and death struggle of recognition is ongoing within the structure of consciousness, in the movement of the understanding, the fear of death that troubles the slave is one that can never be shaken off but remains part of their experience. Hence the understanding, as the determinate and determining form of experience, becomes that which endures death and maintains itself in it, as the labour of its negativity cannot ever be relinquished

or completed. Language, in conveying consciousness beyond its natural state, thereby bears this experience of death, which compromises its movement beyond and prevents the possibility of its full or successful transition to abstraction. It should then be recalled that the fear of death is that of absolute negativity, which is to say that it is not in relation to anything, and perhaps cannot be so at all, and as a result it cannot be assimilated or reduced to any thought or form of consciousness.

If Roussel's writings give the appearance of mimetic affinity as a fantastic simulacrum of immanence, then they are still of considerable significance in that they indicate how language proceeds by way of this affinity, whether real or assumed. In doing so they expose the obverse case, the distance that is opened by negativity, and in particular the removal and estrangement of abstraction, which is in no way merely conceptual or innocuous but bears, as Hegel made clear, a demanding and disturbing upheaval. Roussel's work is thus useful as an example of how language might be perceived to relate to the world in its Cratylist illusions, which is then ruptured by the eccentricity of abstraction, and leads to its own experience that recapitulates the false appearance of immanence as absolute negativity. In the following chapters I will explore the consequences of these modes of language, first through Roussel (where the sense of affinity will be found to be materially speculative rather than simply mimetic) and then Lautréamont, who will show the extremes to which the estrangement of metaphorical language can be taken and its effects on experience, which are not only metaphorical, before going on to examine the implications of these issues as they are exposed in Derrida's and Blanchot's readings of Hegel. Although this book is primarily a study of the ways in which Blanchot has taken up Hegel's thinking, particularly in reference to the relation of the finite and the infinite, I have started with these examples of the experience of literary language in order to situate the subsequent analysis. As such, this book picks up from my earlier readings of Blanchot's relation to Hegel in *Aesthetics of Negativity* and *Without End*, which are here extended to his later work in *Le Pas au-delà* especially, but in doing so I also take account of the parallel reading of Hegel that occurs in Derrida's early writings, which would prove critical for Blanchot's later thinking.[11] Integral to this reading will be an analysis of the development of the terms *différance* and *aufheben*, for by way of these terms both Derrida and Hegel are seeking to think through the transformation of thought in language.

In short, this investigation is seeking to approach that which Blanchot spoke about when he wrote that Roussel's work – through its series of intervals in

which descriptions, explanations, and narratives perpetually open onto each
other – represents 'the infinite navigation from one kind of language to another'.
In this crossing there is a transformation in which the language of philosophy is
exposed to change, which is drawn out in the fact that it cannot address its
movements except by way of another language, thereby revealing a constitutive
lack or void that keeps it in excess of itself, since its attempts to circumscribe this
lack only call forth a further excess. As he concludes, in a tacit criticism of
Foucault's reading, this does not lead to an endless reversal or mirroring effect,
but rather to the play of displacement without place, reiteration without
repetition, infinite passage [EI: 496–7/338]. What is being addressed here is a
problematic that Blanchot also touches on in his 1968 article on Althusser's
reading of Marx, which is that the challenge of language as such is brought out
by the conflict of discourses that characterizes philosophy (which is partly
historical, partly scientific, and partly speculative), a conflict that is not sublated
or defused in thinking but rather estranges thought. Blanchot's most considered
discussion of this topic comes in an essay on Merleau-Ponty from 1971, where it
becomes a question of what takes place when philosophy finds that its own
language is that which prevents it from achieving its aims, when it finds that in
speaking of being, for example, it does so without right since it only changes that
which it speaks of in speaking of it. Thus, what is encountered in this problem is
the movement of language contesting itself as it seeks to evade its own categories
and formations while yet pursuing its aims. In the ongoing (self-)interrogation
to which philosophy then commits itself, its language changes, but to such a
degree that it now risks becoming estranged from thought or, indeed, estranges
thought itself. This risk is made tangible in the fact that the form of this language
has itself become anomalous, for, as philosophical language, it is still attempting
to develop an account of being, as well as trying to avoid this position in being
part of being.

It is thus that Blanchot approaches the language of Merleau-Ponty's late
works, in which this problematic becomes central and that led to his search for
an 'indirect language', which would be able to respond to and express what he
called wild being (*être sauvage*) – that is, being as it is outside or before the forms
of reflection and signification – a language in which being would be able to
speak in all its vibrant indeterminacy. But such a language, if it were possible,
thereby raises the question of the very status of philosophical discourse:

> It seems to me that we should ask the question even more simply: there is
> perhaps no philosophy, just as we can doubt the validity of the word literature,

but, speaking, not speaking, writing, not writing, there is, in our modern societies, even under the modest appearance of the most modest professor of philosophy, someone who speaks in the name of philosophy that perhaps does not exist, and keeps empty, in order to disappear there, the empty place of a speech always other than that which he pronounces. It is thus, whatever he says, that the philosopher teaches, in obscurity or in renown, this philosopher, who has no right to his title, is always the man of a double speech: there is that which he says and is important, interesting, new and proper for extending interminable discourse, but, behind what he says, there is something that withdraws his speech from him, this *dis-course* precisely without right, without signs, illegitimate, unseemly, ominous and, for this reason, obscene, always deceptive or rupturing and, at the same time, passing beyond all prohibitions, the most transgressive, the closest to the untransgressible Outside – in this sense linked to that brute or wild (or lost) something to which Merleau-Ponty referred. The philosopher must in a certain way respond to this other speech, speech of the Other, which he cannot however understand directly: responding to it, he knows, not knowing it, that it is not only itself unjustified, without guarantees and without attachments and in some way struck by inexistence, but always in relation with what is *prohibited* in society where it has its "function", since he himself only speaks in speaking again over this insolent, inert, dissident non-discourse that, as Hegel suggested for another use, is, in broad daylight, the decision of "evening" and, in broad daylight, nightfall, like the collapse of language in appropriate, suitable, and cultivated language.[12]

I have cited this passage at length to show how Blanchot negotiates this point, and because this important essay remains untranslated. It is apparent that the language that Blanchot is referring to is related to the crepuscular, to the twilight moment, when philosophy begins to take flight in Hegel's words, but in which it is irretrievably after the fact and coloured by its inextricable ambiguity. In becoming a thought *of* change the genitive provides an ambivalence that cannot be resolved, as the thought of change cannot coincide with the thought that change itself brings about, and yet they are linked, almost as the *Abschattungen* of the moment, its protential and retentional tendencies, which reverberate around its null point.

Therefore we should understand that, in stating that philosophy only takes flight with the falling of dusk (*beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug*), both the negative and positive aspects of flight are being marked, alongside the conditional necessity of ambiguity.[13] As Blanchot points out, this moment can occur in broad daylight, at any moment in which language endures

its own collapse, and it is thus that he concludes his article: 'Philosophical discourse always loses itself in a certain moment: it is even perhaps no more than an inexorable manner of losing and losing itself'. The double tension of the moment makes itself apparent in the movement of philosophical language that necessarily leads to one losing oneself and itself, just as it loses its way and itself, which only partially resembles a dialectic insofar as a dis-course is revealed in any discourse. This emergence is marked idiomatically in Blanchot's article by the phrase 'ça suit son cours', which indicates that which is ongoing or running its course, a work in progress, and shows that discourse, especially philosophical discourse (in that it seeks to interrogate the right of its own language), is always undermined by the permanently inconclusive and evasive (dis)coursing that marks its language. For, as he has emphasized, and despite the verb in this phrase, the course of language is only ever a dis-course, 'always broken and not followed', and so there is no mediation to its putative dialectical transformations, only rupture and deviation without the possibility of summation. This inconclusiveness is not merely provisional or accidental but arises from the fact that language, as language, can never be abstract enough to rid itself of ambiguities and uncertainties, or of the fact that its speech is without justification or reason, and so it always appears unseemly and illegitimate, fundamentally out of place, as if it were somehow barbaric to the very concepts of form and order, forbidding and untranslatable, and seemingly foreign to any system of thought. The 'disgusting murmur', as Blanchot terms it, that the ancient Greeks heard in the language of foreigners, which led to them being called barbarians, is the mark of the alterity and exteriority of this form of language, which barely even qualifies to be called language.[14] It is thus that it can only be registered as a dis-course and be treated as an affront in principle, as insolent and obscene to the very notions of philosophical discourse, just as death irrupts as a raw and offensive violation to the order of things. This is not to refer to the way that the language of philosophy is diverted by poetry or literature, or occasionally punctured by the contingent and everyday, but to a much stranger and more elusive violation that occurs when language, of its own accord, as it runs its course, exposes and is exposed to a mode that is foreign to its very order, as if it were to become suddenly unintelligible.

Philosophy, for Blanchot, is then the interrogation and experience of this transformation, its task being no more than that of losing itself and enduring how and where it goes. This is a significant change in tone, for rather than suggesting that there is the language of philosophy and also that which exceeds it, whether by way of madness or poetry (as he may have sometimes intimated),

Blanchot is saying that there is only one discourse and that it is perhaps philosophy that is most sensitive to its deviations. It seems likely that this change in emphasis is a result of Derrida's criticisms of Blanchot's language, although the notion of there being only one language was already evident in Blanchot's early writings, for example, in 'La littérature et le droit à la mort'. Furthermore, it is apparent that in saying as much Blanchot is also responding to Foucault's comments in his inaugural lecture, which had urged a change in direction away from the study of writing and signification and towards that of discourses as regular and distinct series of events. Blanchot's reservations in relation to the notion of the event are marked by his preference for the notion of disaster but, as with his earlier criticisms of *Les Mots et les choses*, he is also drawing attention to the strangeness of a language that does not entirely depart from the sphere of the human in being referred to its structures and displacements [EI: 373–4/250].[15] Instead, there is the arrival of something more peculiar and disruptive, which cannot be extricated from its experience and thought, and it is philosophy, as Blanchot rather surprisingly suggests in a formulation that is at once very close and yet also very far from Hegel, that is most thoroughly engaged in these transformations, even to the extent of losing itself.