"The Rest Should Be Silence": Blanchot, the Impossibility of Silence, and Prosopopeial Form

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Summary

In this paper, I explore the idea of prosopopeial form in fiction writing by drawing on Maurice Blanchot's thought on the literary text's relation to the absolute otherness of the *il y a*, a relation which means that while the text is *in* the world, it is not *of* the world. I argue that some fictional texts evince a strong awareness of their foundation in the *il y a* and that this awareness invests them with prosopopeial form, that is, a form which foregrounds the failure of presence and thereby enables the literary text to respond to that which is other than literary form. I examine Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ([1902]1974) as a novel which is prosopopeial in its performance of its coming into being.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel ondersoek ek die idee van prosopopiële vorm in fiksionele tekste deur gebruik te maak van Maurice Blanchot se idee oor die literêre teks se verband met die absolute andersheid van die *il y a*, 'n verband wat beteken dat terwyl die teks *in* die wêreld is, is dit nie *van* die wêreld nie. Ek voer aan dat sommige fiksionele tekste 'n sterk bewustheid van hulle grondslag in die *il y a* openbaar en dat hierdie bewustheid hulle met prosopopiële vorm investeer, dit is, 'n vorm wat die mislukking van teenwoordigheid op die voorgrond plaas en daardeur die literêre teks in staat stel om te reageer op dit wat anders is as literêre vorm. Ek ondersoek Joseph Conrad se *Heart of Darkness* ([1902]1974) as 'n roman wat prosopopieel is in sy uitvoering van tot bestaan kom.

In this paper, I explain the importance of the notion of the *il y a* to Maurice Blanchot's thought on literature's radical exteriority to power and subjective possibility. I do this by briefly tracing the genealogy of the *il y a* to Emmanuel Levinas's critique of the ontological tradition. Thereafter, I maintain that Blanchot's contentions on literature's relation to the *il y a*, and the ability to interrupt Being which literature derives from this relation, are exemplified by texts that possess a prosopopeial form. In this regard, I consider the case of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Levinas contends that the human subject seeks to realise its free will, and thereby affirm itself, by annulling all that resists its powers, even when that resistance is merely a function of the existent's obscurity (Levinas [1947]1987: 49). Differently put, the subject attains and assures its freedom by ensuring that otherness does not stand in its way. Knowledge is the principal means by which it achieves this end: it can only gain complete autonomy through a full comprehension of the world (p. 49). Now, Levinas implicates the entire history of Western philosophy in this reduction of alterity to the activity of an autonomous subject. "Every philosophy", he asserts, is "an egology" (p. 50) in its reverence for and unquestioning acceptance of autonomy:

> Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other – the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us – it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life.
> (Levinas [1947]1987: 49)

The implicit argument, here, is that the Western philosophical tradition has been an ontological tradition. Since, in Levinas's understanding, ontology is the movement of comprehension that possesses entities through the activity of labour (1991: 158-159), this is to say that Western philosophy has been dominated by the attempt to comprehend the Being of beings and, in the process, to suppress otherness.

Through the notion of the *il y a*, Levinas poses the question of that which is otherwise than Being ([1947]1978). The *il y a* is thus an attempt at opening up Being to exteriority, to that which cannot be reduced through comprehension to the knowing subject. It is an attempt to challenge the notion that "Being already invokes subjectivity" ([1947]1987: 52), that Being is an attribute that is incarnated by the self who acts.

In the context of Levinas's critique of ontology, his description of the *il y a* as the unnameable, preconceptual, impersonal singularity of being in its sheer generality and neutrality makes sense. It is "the event of Being, Being in general, detached from beings which dominate it" ([1947]1978: 18). In other words, the concept suggests a moment of being *prior* to the subject and its labour of negation. It designates a state that is detached from the world of action in which subjectivity, consciousness, and freedom are *possible*.

The *il y a* is therefore what must be negated in order for possibility to be constituted (pp. 82-83). It is the necessary condition of impossibility that enables possibility. Thus conceptualised, the *il y a* is the moment of ontological foundation. Of course, the notion of Being in the absence of beings that

dominate can only be conceived in a world in which action *is* a possibility. The very conceptualisation of the *il y a*, then, presupposes the existence of beings that dominate Being. So, while the *il y a* is implied by possibility and hence points to possibility's derivative status, its own status is secondary. It should consequently not be understood as a self-present origin that anchors the world of action. Indeed, this originary impossibility is perhaps best understood as a trace of originality which is beyond presence and only ever detectable as the excess of all positionality. It exceeds action and, in the process, affirms its precedence over action. If action is defined in Hegelian terms as negation, the *il y a* is precisely that which exceeds the closure of the dialectic. It is the excess that remains after negation and, accordingly, the impossibility of nothingness (pp. 63-64). For this reason, Levinas, in describing the *il y a*, states that in the absence of all existents, when nothing else is, *there is* (pp. 52-67), and goes on to refer to the "plenitude of the void" and the "murmur of silence" (pp. 63-64).

It follows that the *il y a* is a profoundly ambiguous moment of ontological foundation. Although it allows negation to take place, it is also the excess of negation, and therefore that which points to the frailty of negation. In preceding the constitution of the world and exceeding action in the world, its radical exteriority poses a challenge to the autonomy, totality and stability of that world. What it founds, then, is the impossibility of founding the world of action. The *il y a* thus both enables and disables a world of possibility. Apart from opening up Being to exteriority, it establishes the *necessary* imbrication of Being and otherness.[1]

Herein lies the importance of the *il y a* not only to Levinas's critique of ontology, but also to Blanchot's thought on literature. Indeed, Blanchot maintains that the origin of the desire that governs writing is the experience of the *il y a*. The writer is concerned with the presence of things before consciousness, the subject, and the act of writing exist, that is, with "what things and beings would be if there were no world" (Blanchot 1995a: 333). In attempting to satisfy this impossible desire, the writer must place him-/herself under the jurisdiction of the "law" of the artwork: that is, she/he must make use of the conventional forms of writing. What is required of him/her is "fidelity to the norms of clarity, for the sake of what is without form and without law" (Blanchot quoted by Critchley 1997: 39). Through these "norms of clarity", the writer must attempt to reveal that which precedes revelation but which revelation destroys. Accordingly, she/he has to ask him-/herself the following question: "How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*?" (Blanchot 1995a: 327).

Blanchot elaborates on this impasse in which the writer finds him-/herself in writing in his/her reading of the myth of Orpheus. Orpheus, an artist-figure, desires Eurydice, who is the "point at which the heart of darkness is perceived as the *other* dark" ([1955]1982a: 177). The "*other* dark", that is, the *il y a*, is

here designated as "other" because it does not stand in a dialectical relation with the human systems of order that constitute the "day". Orpheus's "work" is not only to encounter Eurydice in the "*other* dark", but also to possess this absolute exteriority by bringing it, in its nocturnal aspect, to the light of day. He must render substantial what is insubstantial, bring it "to the light and, in the light, [give] it form and reality" (p. 177). When Eurydice stands revealed in the daylight, Orpheus's work will have been accomplished.

Through averting his gaze, Orpheus is able to approach the heart of darkness and to complete his task. In Blanchot's reading, this concession by the gods of the underworld stands for the "law" of the artwork and the necessity of obedience to its logic of manifestation (pp. 177, 180). By extension, Orpheus's gaze, the moment when he looks at the heart of darkness in the heart of darkness, signifies a desire that always exceeds the law. Orpheus gazes upon Eurydice because his actual desire is *not* to make the invisible visible, but to see the invisible as invisible (p. 178). Moreover, this excessive desire also *precedes* the law. As Blanchot avers, Orpheus has already gazed upon Eurydice before he takes his first step toward the underworld (p. 178). The implication, here, is that that which destroys the artwork, namely Orpheus's desire for the *il y a*, also inspires it.

The *il y a* is therefore both the origin and ruination of the artwork – which is to say that the possibility of literature is conditioned by the impossibility of completing the work. In being sacrificed (p. 180), that is, in being bestowed as a gift, without recompense, to its origin in "worklessness" ([1955]1982b: 46), or the *il y a*, the artwork is left incomplete.

Importantly, Orpheus's sacrifice of the work to worklessness also indicates that work and worklessness, world and worldlessness, do not function as dialectical contraries in writing. Since the law of the work not only derives from but is also disabled by the worklessness of the *il y a*, it is always the latter that prevails in its endless rivalry with the former. Nonetheless, there is no point of dialectical synthesis between the two. Instead, what is asserted by the gift of the artwork to the other is their fundamental dissymmetry (cf Hill 1997: 120).

This tension between work and worklessness inscribes the text with the sign of its radical difference from itself. Because the tension is irresolvable, the literary text portrays the excess of an involvement with an alterity beyond totalisation. The text responds simultaneously and dissymmetrically to the limit of the law and to the limitlessness implied by that limit (cf Hill 1997: 93-94). In other words, the failure of a synthesis between work and worklessness, and the concomitant incompletion of the work, enables a response in a literary form to that which is infinitely other than literary form. It enables the text's relation with its own limits to become an "unrelating relation" (Levinas [1961]1991: 295) to that which is outside text, world, and history.

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Furthermore, the incompletion of the artwork suggests that, while writing may begin as an action in the world, it ceases to be one. For Blanchot, this is the strangeness of literature: it is in the world but not of the world. In writing, the writer becomes involved with what lies behind the dimension of action, with what cannot be transformed by action, but which transforms action into indecision. For Levinas, this is precisely the experience of the *il y a*:

> The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior – if one insists on this term – remains uncorrelated with an interior. It is no longer given. It is no longer a world. What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalised, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously.
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> (Levinas [1947]1978: 58)

To experience the *il y a* is therefore to be divested of a controlling subjectivity and, according to Blanchot, this is what happens in writing. The I that the writer is transforms into the anonymity of a she/he (Blanchot [1955]1982c: 26-28). His/her comportment is no longer an action and his/her work no longer an accomplishment ([1955]1982d: 231-232).

If it leads to a forfeiture of controlling subjectivity, writing is analogous to death. In fact, Blanchot's use of the Orpheus myth as an analogue for writing suggests that the space of writing is akin to the space of death. It is a space in which possibility becomes impossible. While Martin Heidegger conceives of death as Dasein's utmost and absolutely proper possibility, Blanchot argues that it is also an extreme impossibility. Although it is true that nobody can take my death away from me, that death is something that I must take upon myself, it is equally true that I cannot experience my own death. Death is beyond the self's jurisdiction. It is not an action in the world, a work or activity that may be accomplished, and is therefore beyond all possibility (Blanchot [1955] 1982e: 240-241). Blanchot thus claims that "there can no longer be any question of a personal death, where I would die in the affirmation of my own reality and my unique existence" and refers to "the death which is not mine, the death of no one, the dying which truly evolves from death, where I am not called upon to die, which is not an event – an event that would be proper to me, which would happen to me alone – but the unreality and absence where nothing happens, where neither love nor meaning nor distress accompanies me, but the pure abandon of all that" ([1955]1982f: 149).

So, for Blanchot, the experience toward which literature approaches is the experience of death. In establishing this nexus between death and writing, Blanchot seeks to emphasise literature's divorce from action, work and world. He asserts the sheer uselessness of literature in the terms of the world of action.

Understandably, then, Blanchot concurs with Hegel's view that art, in the modern age, has retreated from truth, lost its "necessity in reality" and become a "thing of the past", merely an object of literary, critical, and aesthetic interest (Hegel [1835]1979: 11). In this regard, he may be compared to Heidegger who, in "The Origin of the Work of Art", responds to Hegel's claim by attempting to renegotiate the relation between art and world, art and truth. After wondering whether or not art is "still an essential and necessary way in which the truth occurs that is decisive for our historical existence", Heidegger replaces the traditional notion of truth as correspondence with truth as *aletheia*, that is, the "unconcealedness of beings" (Heidegger [s.a.]1971: 51). For him, the action of art is an unconcealing of truth. It removes the concealing layers that have covered over Being as presence and, in the process, reveals that which is "familiar, reliable, ordinary" to be "extra-ordinary, uncanny" (p. 54). This it does by disinterestedly allowing the object of its insight a total, autonomous being, rather than *using* it in the manner typical of interested knowledge. Art *lets-be* and thereby "opens up in its own way the Being of beings" (p. 37). Instead of simply representing the world, it opens up the world as world. And, in affording an unmediated view of Being's presence, it provides Being with a dwelling.

Unlike Heidegger, Blanchot welcomes the proposition that art is frail, useless and frivolous and makes no attempt at reinvesting it with truth, importance and seriousness. Any such attempt would merely locate it in the domain of worldly possibility and power and thereby deny its origin in impossibility. Thus, he maintains that art cannot engage the world of action in terms of action. It "acts poorly and little" (Blanchot [1955]1982g: 213), and is "useless to the world where only effectiveness counts" (p. 215). If art is to have a chance, it lies precisely in its sheer exteriority to world, work and truth. It is in this context that Blanchot contends that literature says nothing (1995a: 324). As I have already indicated, when nothing else is, *there is*. After all has been said and, to borrow the words of J.M. Coetzee's writer-figure in *Age of Iron* (1990: 149), the "rest should be silence", the *reste*, that is, the excess of what has been said, continues to speak ceaselessly. In its dissymmetrical relation to the interminable chatter of the *il y a*, the "murmur of silence", the literary work is always the locus of its own ineliminable excess and so points to the failure of negation. In the process, it challenges Being's conception of itself as a dimension of possibility.

In posing this question to Being, the literary work contests the possibility of power and sense. Importantly, though, the relation to alterity that enables the work to challenge authority is a relation of nonrelation and not one of correlation. The corollary, here, is that the alterity in question maintains its difference to the world of action and cannot be put to strategic use. It is by virtue of excess's sheer uselessness and lack of power, then, that the literary text questions, in a profoundly ateleological way, the very possibility of

foundation. By extension, it challenges *all* foundational enterprises, including its own.

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Since Blanchot maintains that all literature tends toward the *il y a*, it should be easy enough to find a literary text that exemplifies this tendency. However, as Blanchot points out, the tension between work and worklessness in writing renders literature radically ambiguous. The fiction writer who attempts "to express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean" (Blanchot[1949]1995a: 332), that is, to bring "things" into the "light of the world" (p. 329), finds that his/her prose treacherously evokes the insubstantiality of the "night". Conversely, the writer who is concerned with "what things and beings would be if there were no world" (p. 333), that is, with things "prior to the day" (p. 329), finds that the attempt to reveal that which exists prior to revelation always betrays the ineffable.

Given this ambiguity, some texts dissimulate their relation to the *il y a* while others foreground it. The latter category of text, of course, best exemplifies Blanchot's theory on the relation to alterity that is established in writing. In the rest of this paper, I shall examine the strange awareness in such texts of their origins in impossibility, an awareness that, Blanchot intimates, is strongly evident in the literature of the twentieth century.

Since the self-reflexive awareness that is here at issue is a consciousness of the excess of closure, it follows that the form of such texts is prosopopeial in nature. Prosopopeia, according to J. Hillis Miller, is the ascription of "a name, a face or a voice" to that which no longer has one or never had one, that is, to "the absent, the inanimate, or the dead" (Hillis Miller [1985]1991: 245). It tries to raise the dead (p. 210). By implication, prosopopeia may be seen as an Orphic attempt at performing the impossible. Hillis Miller hints at exactly such a tension between possibility and impossibility in the action of prosopopeia when he says that it "always buries what it invokes" (p. 210), and that the making of the "face" is "at the same time an act of effacement or defacement" (p. 210). Similarly, Simon Critchley likens prosopopeia to a death mask "behind which nothing stands" (Critchley 1997: 26), and goes on to describe it as a "form which *indicates* the failure of presence" (p. 73; my italics). He thus implies that this form *self-consciously* enacts a tension between possibility and impossibility in its representational endeavour.[2]

I use the term prosopopeia to signify not individual instances of personification within a given novel, but the way in which the form of the text as a whole may serve as a mask that self-consciously indicates that nothing stands behind it. That is, a death mask of sorts. Prosopopeial texts foreground the impossibility of that which they deem possible, of what their very existence suggests is a possibility. They are invariably obsessed with the instability of the name and therefore with that which is other than their form.

Accordingly, they are profoundly ontogenetic in nature and, in some cases, even perform their struggle to come into being.

In the reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1902]1974 which follows, I provide an instance of how a prosopopeial text's performance of its onto-genesis exemplifies Blanchot's contentions on the literary text's relation to the *il y a*. Indeed, I argue that this novel's prosopopeial form *derives* from its discovery of the source, which is also the ruin, of narrative. I suggest, that is, that prosopopeial form is an effect of the text's relation to the *il y a*.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad makes use of a frame narrative that tells the story of Marlow telling the story of his voyage to the Congo. One of the outcomes of this narrative device is the novel's self-conscious obsession with its origin. Conrad's writer-surrogate, Marlow, dwells obsessively on his motivation for telling his story, that is, his desire to represent Kurtz and, more specifically, Kurtz's death. For instance, he refers to his encounter with Kurtz as the "farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me" (Conrad [1902]1974: 51). Later, he maintains that his narrative is an attempt "to account to myself for – for – Mr Kurtz – for the shade of Mr Kurtz" (p. 117). By implication, it is an attempt at investing this "initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere" (p. 117), this "atrocious phantom" (p. 133), this "shadow darker than the shadow of the night" (p. 155), with form and substance.

Marlow's work thus seems to be informed by the logic of manifestation that holds out the promise of *aletheia*. It is premised on a world in which naming and writing are possibilities. *Heart of Darkness* is a profoundly ambiguous novel, though. Even as it asserts possibility, it systematically undermines it. In order to perform his work, Marlow must heed the law of the work by using language and narrative. Interestingly, it is precisely the ability of these "norms of clarity" to evoke the "shade" or "shadow" of Kurtz, its "impenetrable darkness" (p. 149), that Marlow questions by constantly interrupting his story with expostulations on the impossibility of "trying to tell" (p. 114):

> He was just a word to me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? .... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning .... It is impossible. (Conrad [1902]1974: 82)

> ....

> I've been telling you what we said – repeating the phrases we pronounced – but what's the good? They were common everyday words – the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life .... They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. (Conrad [1902]1974: 144)

In returning the reader to the frame, where the frame-narrator describes Marlow's struggle with naming, such interruptions *perform* the storyteller's encounter with the impossibility of his endeavour. Conrad, through the device of Marlow telling his story, thus enacts the writer's encounter with the aporia of an act that is required to achieve what it cannot.

The text's preoccupation with its writer-figure's confrontation with this aporia leads to a shift in emphasis from narrative event to the event of narration. Even when one finally reads the scene of revelation toward which the entire narrative tends, one finds that it is a non-event which foregrounds not narrative, which is, after all, premised on events, but the process of narration. Indeed, the description of Kurtz's death is the point at which the text finally subverts the logic of manifestation that it initially postulates. In this regard, consider the language of apocalypse with which Marlow describes his encounter with Kurtz's death, with that "inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible" (p. 151):

> It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – "The horror! The horror!".
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> (Conrad [1902]1974: 149)

Far from being a thanatophany, though, this passage is a self-conscious acknowledgement of the impossibility of death. What Marlow shows in the passage is not death but Kurtz's name for it. The word "death", as J. Hillis Miller points out, "is another name for what Kurtz names 'the horror'" ([1985]1991b: 189). However, despite the apocalyptic overtones in Marlow's use of them, Kurtz does not name death with these words. Like the word "death", the words "The horror! The horror!" are only ever an *attempt* to name the unnameable. They are the self's attempt at grasping, comprehending, de-limiting and thereby controlling death. Moreover, as the passage implies in its confusion of death and dying, this attempt has always already failed: when he articulates these words, Kurtz is still alive and has hence not *experienced* death. The words consequently reveal only their inadequate relation to that which they attempt to reveal. In fact, they point to Kurtz's inability to establish a relation of correlation to death in language. The implication is that death is beyond representation and, as such, cannot be related or returned to the self.

At the centre of *Heart of Darkness*, one therefore finds a passage that attempts to represent death by describing the naming of death, but which only succeeds in suggesting the impossibility of death and the impossibility of naming. Conrad's text thus points to the impossibility of Marlow's narrative: it cannot be about that about which it attempts to be. It does not represent

death; it merely repeats a failure to name death. By extension, what it attempts to be about, never happens. In this way, *Heart of Darkness*, which largely consists of Marlow's narrative, reveals its grounding in a non-event that resists being reduced to an event in a narrative. The corollary, here, is that the non-event with which the novel is concerned necessarily subverts the boundaries of narrative, disabling the narrative and questioning its possibility. At this point in the text, narrative loses control as it struggles with the impossibility of naming that constructs it as narrative. The text becomes the locus of its own irredeemable excess.

What is foregrounded in *Heart of Darkness*, then, is the fact that the novel can neither begin nor end or, more precisely, that it opens without opening and closes without closing. This radical incompletion is further apparent in the curious fact that, despite his protestations that he cannot tell the story, Marlow carries on talking. Although the rest should be silence, this writer-figure continues to speak about that about which he cannot speak and, as one comes to realise, he does so because he cannot *not* speak about it. He is acted upon by an excessive desire for that which, although rendering impossible what he tries to say, imposes itself upon him as the very condition, indeed necessity, of his speaking. In its staging of the event of writing by means of its framing device, *Heart of Darkness* figures writing as a workless passivity. It is not an accomplishment, the action of an I that is able.

This performance of the impossibility of silence suggests that the tension in the novel between the impossibility of speaking and the possibility of speaking is never resolved. Although the text's initial promise of *aletheia* is not realised, it continues to coexist with the text's performance of its impossibility. The device of the frame thus *simultaneously* implies the possibility and impossibility of presenting truth in language. It implies that Marlow continues to speak because the impossibility of speaking is the condition of possibility for speaking.

In fact, the frame's insistence on possibility *and* impossibility indicates that Marlow's return to Europe completes not a movement of comprehension but an incomplete movement, without return, from the self to the other – that is, a movement in which the self fails to accommodate the other within its epistemological paradigms. Unlike the average coloniser-figure in colonialist literature, Marlow does not, indeed cannot, relate the unknown to the known and thereby install Europe as the site of ultimate meaning. Hillis Miller is therefore quite right in comparing Marlow with Orpheus ([1985]1991b: 189). Like Orpheus returning from the Underworld, Marlow returns from Africa with nothing. Nevertheless, it would be more precise to say that Marlow returns with a *story* that expresses nothing. So, despite returning home with nothing to speak of, Marlow speaks. Once again, the implication is that he does so *because* the impossibility of speaking not only disables but also *enables* speaking. It enables him to tell a story which expresses nothing but his desire for the *il y a*, a desire that, in its excessive nature, may be likened

to Orpheus's desire for Eurydice which goes "beyond the limits prescribed by the song" (Blanchot [1955]1982a: 178). A story, that is, which indicates that when there is nothing, *there is*. In other words, the nothing that the story expresses speaks incessantly of what exceeds negation and the world of action.

An obvious objection to this argument on the staging of the impossibility of silence in *Heart of Darkness* is that this novel *does*, of course, end. In fact, its penultimate paragraph reads as follows: "Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent" (Conrad [1902]1974: 162). The cessation of the writer-figure's speech does not, however, signify a resumption of authorial control. Although Marlow ceases and a few words later the writer too ceases, the rest is not silence. The *reste* speaks ceaselessly of that which has not been said, cannot be said, and yet *must* be said.

Through its self-conscious staging of the impossibility of silence, then, the novel foregrounds its own irredeemable excess. My contention is that it is precisely this performance of the tension between the possibility of speaking and the impossibility of speaking that invests *Heart of Darkness* with its prosopopeial form. The novel stages its intention to name and raise the dead, and thereafter indicates the impossibility of this endeavour. It indicates that the face that it gives to the dead is an effacement, that it buries what it purports to evoke. At the same time, though, the text suggests that it is enabled by this sheer impossibility. It not only indicates the failure of presence, but also, to use Jacques Derrida's words, that it is the absence of referent that "constructs the mark" (1977: 183).

Ultimately, it is the lack of a dialectical *Aufhebung* in the opposition within the text between possibility and impossibility that invests the text with the prosopopeial ability to point to the inadequacy of its representational measures, its "norms of clarity", to that which it attempts to represent. In Blanchot's terms, the tension between possibility and impossibility indicates the limits of the text's representational means and, in responding to its limits, the text dissymmetrically responds to the limitlessness which the limits imply but which also enables them. In the process, the text's engagement with its own finitude becomes an engagement with infinitude.

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My argument has been that the desire for the *il y a* which Blanchot sees as a characteristic of literary writing, is particularly evident in prosopopeial novels like *Heart of Darkness*. Implicit in this argument is the corollary that such texts question the idea of Being as an attribute of a speaking, acting subject. This is, of course, evident in the performance in *Heart of Darkness* of the writer-surrogate's inability to negate. However, the novel's form entails that this failure of negation involves not only the writing subject, but also the reading subject. In reading the novel, the reader encounters a form which,

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rather than privileging conceptuality, indicates what is radically different to form. By implication, she/he is placed at the limits of the text and, from this liminal position, she/he confronts what cannot be accommodated by his/her epistemological paradigms. The futural act of reading is therefore always destined to re-enact Marlow's encounter with the ineliminable excess of closure. Like Orpheus and Marlow, the reader meets that which cannot be brought to the light, which is inadequate to the possibility of phenomenality, and so returns from the novel with nothing. And, once again, when there is nothing, *there is*. To read such a text is thus to read more than can be read. It is to acknowledge what eludes naming.

Clearly, an experience of reading in which the relation between text and reading is characterised by infinite distance cannot be conceptualised as an action in the world. Being unable to recuperate the alterity which she/he encounters in reading, the reader is reduced to a passivity that stands not in dialectical opposition to action as negation, but which is correlative to a rapport with the other. The radically impersonal form of reading that is suggested here has been described by Blanchot as "passivity's reading" and likened to the "nocturnal vigil" ([1949]1995a: 101). In this anonymous way of reading, the reader confronts the "*other* dark" of the *il y a* in which "the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalised" (Levinas [1947]1978: 58). As Blanchot puts it, reading of this kind is "without pleasure, without joy; it escapes both comprehension and desire" ([1949]1995a: 101). To read a prosopopeial novel such as *Heart of Darkness* is consequently to experience the intrication of Being with otherness. It is to experience the incompletion of the world of action, the insufficiency of its closure.

So, in its figuration of the text as a space in which the writer and the reader encounter the excess of closure, *Heart of Darkness* perturbs the finitude of the world. It follows that it is simply reductive to see this novel as an attempt at affirming Europe by denigrating Africa (cf for example Achebe [1975]1988). In expressing nothing, and therefore speaking incessantly of that which exceeds negation and the world of action, Marlow's story challenges *both* European and African cultures. And since Marlow's story is Conrad's enactment of the relation to alterity that is established in writing, so does *Heart of Darkness*. This novel contests *all* cultures by affirming the excess of the closure of meaning. It is addressed to the other. Like Orpheus's work, it is a gift to death.

Notes

1. It should be clear from my discussion that Levinas's critique of ontology is, in fact, an argument for alterity, the idea of which, as I shall now proceed to show, is central not only to Levinas's thought on ethics, but also Blanchot's thought on literature.

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2. For a more thoroughgoing discussion of prosopopeia, see Johan Geertsema's discussion (1999).

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