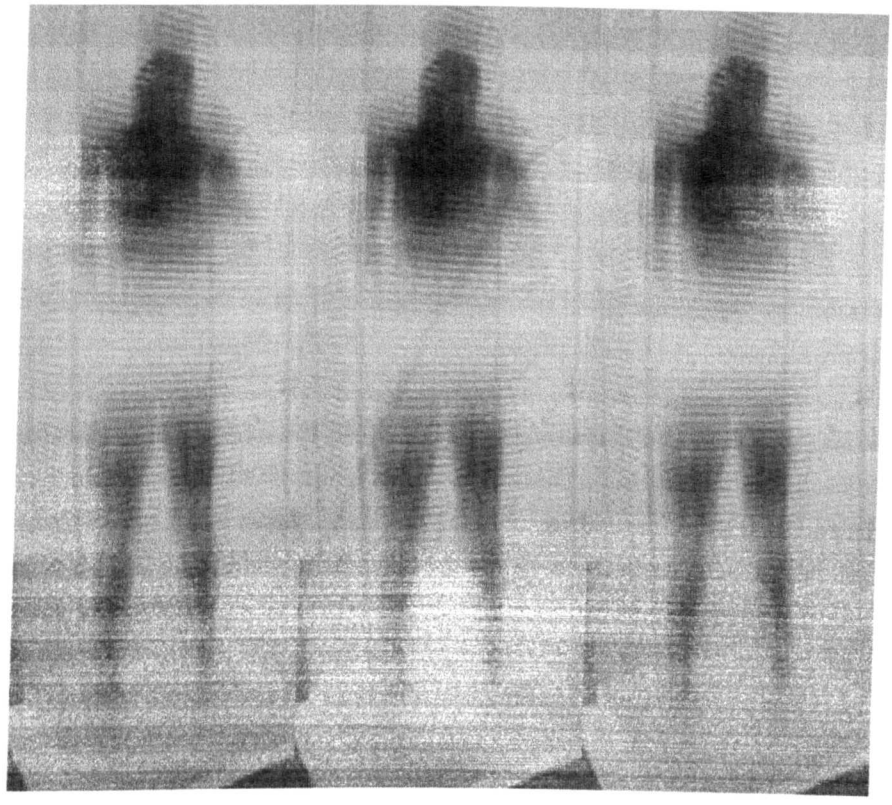
INTER ALIA

Steve Erickson, Rosmarie Waldrop, Lydia Davis and the Lightening of Meaning



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ABSTRACT

Inter Alia is structured principally around a cross-threaded sequence of analyses that consider the property of meaning in the work of Steve Erickson, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Lydia Davis. It aims at a sustained formal and thematic consideration of the critical disturbance with which their respective texts inflect grammatology. In each writer this critical disturbance is determinable commonly as what might be termed a rifting of language and thinking toward the a-grammatical. The primary formal and thematic modalities of writing become indivisible from an attempt to think language outside its accepted propensity to mean. They seek to put into question the governable self-sufficiency of meaning by thinking the possibility of another language and of another meaning; a language and a meaning, that is to say, of lightening. In so doing, the folds of their texts are indivisible from a set of inter-related reflections concerning, among other things, intelligibility, materiality, commonality, as well as their respective inverses: ambiguity, immateriality, and exceptionality. Where much Anglo-American postmodernism has been concerned with the dual crises of perception and representation, the internal logic of 'lightening' seeks to shift the consideration from an exigency of illumination to one of alleviation in which meaning is nothing other than an *inter alia*. Establishing a dialogue between these concepts and their modulation in the work of such thinkers as Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, the discretion of lightening is shown to emblematise the principle preoccupation of contemporary literary-philosophical reflections concerned with the discursive and social implications of disorder and ex-centricity.

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

THE LIGHTENING OF MEANING

Thought will not let itself be weighed; weight will not let itself be thought. There is only the lightness of [...] the lightening of meaning.

– Jean-Luc Nancy[1]

It was not possible, and yet it happened; and not suddenly, but very slowly, not a miracle, but a very natural thing, though it was impossible.

– Lydia Davis[2]

I have this poem in my head [...] Not the last poem but the poem after the last poem: I keep trying to find it. I keep writing closer to it, because I know when I get there I'll be at the point of no return.

– Steve Erickson[3]

The page is otherwise dark.

– Rosmarie Waldrop[4]

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[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense' in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 41.
[2] Lydia Davis, 'The Transformation' in *Samuel Johnson is Indignant: Stories* (New York: Picador USA, 2002) p. 171.
[3] Steve Erickson, *Rubicon Beach* (London: Quartet Books, 1998) p. 198.
[4] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Love, Like Pronouns* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2003) p. 116.

Inter Alia is structured principally around a cross-threaded sequence of analyses that consider the property of meaning in the work of Steve Erickson, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Lydia Davis. It aims at a sustained formal and thematic consideration of the critical disturbance with which their respective texts inflect grammatology. Despite the differences in their individual practices, in each writer this critical disturbance is determinable commonly as what might be termed a rifting of language and thinking toward the a-grammatical. The primary formal and thematic modalities of writing become indivisible from an attempt to think language outside its accepted propensity to mean. They seek to put into question the governable self-sufficiency of meaning by thinking the possibility of another language and of another meaning; a language and a meaning, that is to say, of lightening. In so doing, the folds of their texts are indivisible from a set of inter-related reflections concerning, among other things, intelligibility, materiality, commonality, as well as their respective inverses: ambiguity, immateriality, and exceptionality. It is within this broadly shifting conceptual context that the principle imbrications into the analysis of the work of Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy are to be understood. Rather than providing distinct applicable bases from which to approach and thematise the work of Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis, the design is to allow both the literary and the philosophical texts to merge in an analytically productive inter-view; the 'de-scriptions' of each, it is prospected, enable the legibility of the significance of dispersal in both.[5] The structure of this proposition presupposes, therefore, that there is a relation between literature, philosophy, and meaning. The arguments that follow are not concerned with putting that relation into question. What each chapter aims

[5] Here 'de-scriptions' should be understood in the double sense of 'writing down' and 'writing away.' From this perspective, to de-scribe is to write down the displacement of content. In *The Writing of the Disaster* Blanchot terms 'de-scription' the 'limit of writing' in the precise sense that its object is that which 'escapes the very possibility of experience.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) p. 7.

toward, rather, is the precise specification of that relation from the locution of lightening. Despite the composite arrangement of this approach, however, it is important to stress that the architectural inherence of this discussion remains with Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis; it is around detailed close readings of their texts that the broader argument is structured.

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It is difficult to specify the meaning of *inter alia* in any accurate manner. In principle, it indicates 'among other things' or 'between others.' The central complication here, however, is that such definition identifies little about *inter alia* itself. What it collocates, rather, is a double incomprehension. First, if *inter alia* denotes 'among other things' then any classification of *inter alia* inevitably will be itself simply one among others. It is a phrase that falls into the indistinct space it opens. That is to say, to define *inter alia* is to locate it at all times within a network of other definitions in relation to which it is neither a connection nor a contradiction but an indistinguished spacing. From this perspective, then, *inter alia* is at once both singular and plural. It is singular in that its instance remarks a distinction from that of which it is among but to which, by definition, it is not identical; it is plural in that the sheer distinction of its 'among other things' automatically will be always a repetition of a previous instance of singularity. What this amounts to saying is that just as each instance of definition of *inter alia* is always unique, so the singular distinction of each definition takes its place among the singular distinction of other definitions, both pre-existent and to come. If such is the case, however, then the second incomprehensibility that arises here is that *inter alia* would appear to remark nothing other than a semantic limit that calls the very principle of definition into question. That is to say, if 'to define' is 'to fix or describe the meaning of; to determine with

precision; to describe accurately; to decide; to fix the bounds or limits of; to bring to an end,' then the plural singularity of *inter alia* would remark, at the very least, an indefinite deferral of the definition of definition.[6]

Read from this perspective, the semantic principle of *inter alia* correlates to a principle of semantic dis-function. That is to say, the simultaneous convergence of repetition and distinction in *inter alia* does not so much impair to the point of preclude the production or study of meaning (in the sense of 'dysfunction') as it does cast the very basal property of signification itself from the always already fragmented axis of diffraction. Rosmarie Waldrop captures succinctly this particular quality of *inter alia* when she writes that 'the fragment [...] is our way of apprehending anything. Our inclusive views are mosaics. And the shards catch light on the cut, the edges give off sparks.'[7] Albeit in varying ways, it is toward a sustained consideration of these aesthetic shards – of language, of form, of conceptuality – that this thesis is primarily aimed.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the critical-structural principle of *inter alia* that here focalises the particular extent of the analysis is by no means unique. From the elliptical writings of the Pre-Socratics to contemporary experiments with forms of writing and modes of thinking, literary, philosophical, theological and political traditions all offer numerous examples of and engagements with the exigency of the double bind or aporia that *inter alia* registers. Indeed, it is precisely the historical density of critical writings on the subject that in large part guided the titular choice of *inter alia*: it is intended simply as one term among others, a written work between other works, imbricated, collocated, shifting in the spaces those others both open and emblematise, in the shadows they cast. In the course of the argument

[6] *The Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 1999) p. 425.
[7] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Ceci n'es pas Keith, Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 2002) p. 86.

other terms are invoked, centralised, disjoined, and reflected. *Inter alia* is the moving point around which each strand both revolves and disperses. It is an indicative marker of the more general critical and aesthetic theme of indistinction that interlinks the work of Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis.

While the literary and philosophical properties of this indistinction are developed in detail throughout the course of each chapter, a contextual outline here of two terms or modalities that repeat across the thesis both explicitly and implicitly will help prepare the way for the particular readings that follow in each chapter. The first relates to the critical thesis that structures Levinas' inflection of the word 'escape' as outlined in his early text, *On Escape*; the second is a consideration of Jean-Luc Nancy's phrase 'the lightening of meaning' that provides the subtitle of this study. At stake is the way in which the question of the simultaneous non-equivalence of material and grammatical existence (being-in-the-world or *Dasein*) in both these thinkers opens onto the discursive and logical disturbance that frames the work of Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis. A central aim of this thesis is to arrange this simultaneous non-equivalence as both principle structure and tarrying theme.

ESCAPE

In principle, four interrelated propositions structure Levinas' argument in *On Escape*. First, '[b]eing is: there is nothing to add to this assertion' such that 'the brutality of [the] assertion [of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to nothing else.'[8] As such, and second, 'the brutal fact of being' is a burdensome weight to which the existent is 'held fast' or riveted.[9] Third, the weight of being-riveted leads to a general malaise

[8] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) p. 51.
[9] Levinas, *On Escape*, pp. 49 and 52. It should be noted that the term 'riveted' has a specific context, namely, that of the Heideggerian *Geworfenheit*, or 'fact of thrownness' to which *On Escape* responds directly, if not explicitly.

characterised by 'world-weariness.'[10] To put it another way, if the fact of being constrains the existent to the world to the extent that it is impossible to choose whether to be or to be otherwise than being, then this burden of having-to-be is exhausting. In this way, and fourth, the wearying weight of being is both synonymous with and indivisible from a bare or unthematisable need to escape the brutality of being.

In the context of these four points, then, the term 'escape' effectively serves a double function in Levinas' text. On the one hand, 'this term *escape* [...] is world-weariness' itself.[11] The reason for this is that the term 'escape' does not so much open a way out as expressly confirm the fact of my being-riveted, 'the elementary truth that *there is being.*'[12] To escape, inevitably, is to escape from some thing such that escape bears within itself always already that which it seeks to flee. In this sense, to escape is to experience nothing other than the heavy obstacle of the fact of being; it is to be held fast, paralysed, immersed. On the other hand, however, if to escape is to be returned forcefully to the weight of being, it is also to be returned to the imperative of escape, to the need 'to get out of oneself.'[13] As Levinas continues, being 'appears not only as an obstacle' but also 'as an imprisonment from which one must get out.'[14] Thus, for Levinas, to escape is not to move somewhere else but is rather simply a matter of going off, of taking flight. In Levinas' terms, that is to say, it is not a matter of transcendence but of '*excendence.*'[15] What this indicates, however, is that the term escape is itself strictly non-specifiable. It is a pure demand that cannot be completed, a word that 'climbs out' of language. Escape as excendence

[10] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 52.
[11] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 52; Levinas' emphasis.
[12] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 52; Levinas' emphasis.
[13] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 55.
[14] Levinas, *On Escape*, pp. 54-55.
[15] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 54; Levinas' emphasis.

leads out of being to the extent that any ontological discourse is put into intractable question by its term.

In many respects, Levinas' subsequent analyses of need, pleasure, shame, and nausea can be read as motivated chiefly by the aim to clarify his central argument that 'being is, at bottom, a weight for itself.'[16] Indeed, Levinas' principle concern in these passages is to structure a critique of Western philosophy's failure to recognise that each attempt to escape being ineluctably effects a full-scale return to the plenitude of being, to the fact that *there is* (*il y a*).[17] For the purposes of setting out the theoretical context of this thesis as a whole, however, two comments are particularly apposite here. First, the modality of escape that for Levinas structures the entire history of Western philosophy, inclusive here of idealism, ontology, and theology, irremissibly binds that tradition, *despite itself*, to the thought or 'laws of being.'[18] Second, Levinas' implicit aim in *On Escape* is to think another philosophy, that is, to assert that the task incumbent on thinking is the proposal of a 'getting out of being by a new path.'[19] Such an otherwise thinking, Levinas writes, will be inseparable ineluctably from 'the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident.'[20]

While Levinas does not specify in any express detail what this 'other path' might be in *On Escape*, what is decisive for the purposes here is the way in which the possibility of this other path is implicated with the expenditure of common sense. Read in this context, to think existence 'otherwise than being,' to think existence outside the 'condemnation to be oneself,' it would be necessary to rethink completely

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[16] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 65.
[17] Chapter One returns to Levinas' description of the *there is* in relation to a discussion of the anonymity of existence in Erickson. For Levinas' own discussion of the *there is*, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001) pp. 51-60.
[18] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 73.
[19] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 73.
[20] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 73.

that which is most universally *accepted* to be so, namely, that the existent *is*, that existence *means* being-in-the-world, rootedness.[21] As such, the embedded task of *On Escape* would be to think existence outside the enclosure of determination or specific meaning. To put it another way, it would be to think existence *lightened of attributed or attributable content*, a lightening, in other words, that takes place in and as *a refusal of placement*. In this sense, the 'new path' Levinas invokes at the end of *On Escape* is not, strictly speaking, a path: it does not lead. What it does, rather, is cede the basis of existence to the wayless way of aporia, a wandering without destination.

It is important to stress, however, that whether in the context here or throughout this thesis as a whole the terms 'lightening' and 'refusal' do not seek to propose a negative determination of the existence of the existent in the sense that the meaning of 'I' would correlate therefore to 'I is not.' What they propose, rather, is that 'I' *is* only insofar as 'I not is,' insofar as 'excendent,' which is to say, only insofar as 'I' possesses neither property (content) nor propriety (self-identity or appropriateness to itself). As Levinas' later work denotes, the task involved here is that of thinking the primordiality of an a-proper or endlessly lightening existence that refuses (what Levinas holds to be) the self-sufficient sovereignty of the existent, an existent, that is, that accepts it-self (soi-même) at the expense both of the existence of the other and of the alterity of existence. In this context, it bears stressing that the dis-acceptance of escape has a decidedly critical function in Levinas. As he writes in unequivocal terms, '[e]very civilisation that accepts being [...] merits the name "barbarian."'[22] For Levinas, acceptance is 'barbaric' because it fails to respond to being, which is to say, in Levinas' later terms, it fails to think being ethically. Indeed,

[21] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 70.
[22] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 73.

in *Otherwise than Being*, the task of such refusal becomes the very practice of ethical responsibility. As Levinas writes in the penultimate paragraph to that work, 'to respond with responsibility' to the fact of existence is to say '*here I am for the others*, to lose [...] place radically, or [...] shelter in being.'[23]

It is to reading in detail the modality of this 'radical loss of place' that *Inter Alia* turns in general and 'the lightening of meaning' in particular.

THE LIGHTENING OF MEANING

The phrase 'the lightening of meaning' is a quotation taken from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay on Derrida, 'Elliptical Sense.' As this suggests, Derrida's work forms the principle subject of Nancy's comments in that essay, in particular his grounding of meaning in and as the groundless differential-deferral interplay of *différance*. Indeed, in many respects 'the lightening of meaning' functions in an identical manner to *différance* in Nancy's essay. As Nancy writes, 'the lightening of meaning' refers, like *différance*, to the 'knowledge of a condition of possibility that gives nothing to know.'[24] As such, '[m]eaning lightens itself [...] *as meaning*, at the cutting edge of its appeal and its repeated demand for meaning.'[25]

What is central to the conceptual framework of this thesis, however, is the way in which the terms of Nancy's argument here situate his analysis of grammatology alongside the ex-centric imperative of Levinasian escape. Nancy himself stresses the inseparability of the one argument from the other. As he writes, '[i]n the "there is" of existence and in that which "comes there" to presence [the existent], what is at stake is being and the sense or meaning of being.'[26] In this

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[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002) p. 185; Levinas' emphasis.
[24] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 41.
[25] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 42.
[26] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 43.

respect, the question of meaning that Nancy stages here is nothing other than the question that preoccupies *On Escape*, namely, the question of the weight of being. At the same time, however, it is also, Nancy argues, a question that cannot be weighed, in the sense of decided or measured. The question of the meaning of being, that is to say, is a question that escapes thematisation.

The reason for this is two-fold. First, the *there* of the *there is* 'signals there where there no longer is any sign – save the repetition of the demand, from sign to sign, towards the limit where existence is exposed.'[27] In other words, the *there* is the limit that conditions the asking of the question but in face of which all language and all weighing break down or fracture. It is important to stress that exposition here is nowise equivalent to a work of illumination in the sense of 'to bring into the open' or 'to lay bare.' What it indicates, rather, is 'ex-position' in the sense of dislocation, displacement, and disarticulation. In this sense, the '*there* is infinitely light; it is a joining and a fracturing; it is the lightening of every system and every cycle.'[28] In development of this, the second reason relates to the way in which meaning takes place not in itself but at the point where it is divided, where one word *means* only insofar as it signs a rupture between words. As Nancy clarifies elsewhere, meaning *is* insofar as it is outside itself, insofar as 'it is an exile, an errancy, a balancing oscillation *from oneself to oneself*,' such that meaning happens 'at the juncture of these oppositions,' in the grammatical separation of the preposition 'to.'[29] In outline, then, the critical point that Nancy's argument simultaneously turns toward, around and away from is that meaning is neither self-sufficient nor legislative. In Nancy's terms, 'meaning does not have the sense of an answer, and not even of a

[27] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 42.
[28] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 42.
[29] The first quotation in this sentence is from Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998) p. 77; Nancy's emphasis; the second is from Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 41.

question.'[30] This is not to say, however, that meaning is negatively determinable in the sense that here meaning would be equivalent to senselessness. More accurately, what it suggests is that the event of meaning is 'the event of an opening that relentlessly exposes a common exteriority, a spacing, a coappearance of strangers.'[31] To put it another way, the event of meaning takes place but it does so at the expense of itself; the event of meaning is the lightening of meaning into dispersal. Read in this context, the lightening of meaning occurs when meaning is exposed to the limit that simultaneously settles and suspends it.

For the purposes of the chapters that follow, it is important to stress that 'the lightening of meaning' does not attempt to yield a set of relations that would be removed from the modalities of measurement and gravity (in the double sense of 'a force attracting a body towards the centre' and 'weightiness').[32] Lightening is still a measurement of weight; as a thematic principle, it is that toward which this thesis gravitates. In this sense, the aim of the lightening of meaning is not to abjure meaning but rather to point to the instances of its *material* ex-posure. In this way, the lightening of meaning seeks to mark a complication of the distinction that opposes the material to the immaterial. As Chapters Two and Four develop in detail, the lightening of meaning concerns both text and texture: legibility depends as much on the materiality of ink and folio as it does on the immateriality of linguistic significance. To think the outside of meaning (in another vocabulary, the outside of excendence) is to think what weighs meaning down but which does not weigh in meaning. In this sense, what weighs in thought is the lightness of the outside. In order to approach the lightness of the outside, it is necessary to lighten the distinction between cause

[30] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. 78.
[31] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. 78.
[32] *The Chambers Dictionary*, p. 702.

and effect. The lightening of meaning is 'an ellipsis of the two.'[33] In Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis, meaning takes place as lightening in the corporeal ex-scription of a writing pushing at the limits of both the communicable and the comprehensible. It is the density of a writing of edges, sliding, in-significant. Nancy exemplifies what is at stake here when he notes that:

> [m]eaning needs a thickness, a density, a mass, and thus an opacity, a darkness by means of which it leaves itself open and lets itself be touched *as meaning* right there where it becomes absent as discourse [...] this "there" is a material point, a weighty point: the flesh of a lip, the point of a pen or of a stylus, any writing insofar as it traces out the interior and exterior edges of language. It is the point where all writing *is ex-scribed*, where it comes to rest outside of the meaning it inscribes, in the things whose inscription this meaning is supposed to form.[34]

It is in the 'there' of writing that the outside of meaning is inscribed. It appears among other things, an inestimable lightness that weighs in each letter. As Nancy remarks, the question of writing is 'the question of the letter of meaning and of the meaning of the letter.'[35] In order to measure this question, it is necessary to read not meaning but what spaces meaning. As François Raffoul clarifies, '[t]his is what ultimately weighs: the fact of being exposed to what thought receives, to what remains inappropriable for it.'[36]

As with 'ex-posure,' it is necessary to note that the phrase 'the lightening of meaning' carries a double indication that this thesis does not intend. That is to say, in the context of this thesis, the lightening of meaning refers only to a thematic of

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[33] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 43.
[34] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. 79.
[35] Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 43.
[36] François Raffoul, 'Translator's Preface' to Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. xxxii.

weight and is not equivalent to an illumination of meaning. As Nancy puts it, '[i]t is a question here of a meaning that neither dominates nor shines down like the sun, that does not rise to the zenith, or set to the nadir, but that weighs down insofar as it alights,' which is to say, insofar as it gets out, escapes.[37] Despite the specification of intention, however, it should be acknowledged also that the connotation of illumination remains indivisible from 'the lightening of meaning' and will necessarily haunt any analysis of lightening from the perspective of alleviation. Yet rather than being an obstacle to the aims of the thesis, the intractability of this 'alluvial' sense of lightening conceptualises exactly what is at stake in the lightening of meaning understood as thematic of weight. That is to say, the intransigence of luminosity in the phrase is precisely that which prevents the lightening of meaning from becoming meaningful or discursively fixed as a unit of measure; the residue of illumination insubstantiates the meaning of lightening such that 'the lightening of meaning' is itself the paradigm of what it names.

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The first three chapters develop this initial framework of the lightening of meaning through principle considerations of 'existence' in Erickson, 'circumlocution' in Waldrop, and 'image' in Davis. The fourth chapter draws each of these analyses together through a discussion of the critical relation lightening bears to the political. In what mimes a return to the structural imperative of Levinas' notion of escape, the focus of this chapter is the thematic of refusal.

What this structural arc is intended to emblematise is the difficult connection between lightening and refusal that the work of each writer presents and that Levinas and Nancy illustrate. On the one hand, it is necessary to begin with lightening in that

[37] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. 82.

it is the need to lighten (to think the escape) that first conditions the refusal of weight. On the other hand, so that lightening does not become a self-sufficient principle, that is, a weight or meaning in itself, it is necessary that the sole object toward which lightening tend is the refusal of itself. In this sense, it is necessary to delay the discussion of refusal in order that that the work of lightening not be obscured; it is necessary that various modes of lightening be annotated in detail in order for refusal to become an object of critical enquiry.

Where appropriate, reference is made to other critical writings on Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis; a more comprehensive list is provided in the bibliography. It is a curious fact, however, that critical work on Erickson, Waldrop, and Davis is slight; with certain exceptions, what work has been undertaken is predominantly limited in focus. It is one of the aims of this thesis to redress that imbalance. For this reason, each chapter begins with a brief outline of the respective concerns of each writer.

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Interspersed throughout the thesis are a number of unattributed poetic fragments. While these do not comment directly on the respective chapters they open or close, they are intended to intersect reflectively with those arguments. One of the inevitable challenges that faces a study concerned with 'the lightening of meaning' is that the critical presentation of its thesis necessarily functions at a discursive remove from its content. These fragments seek to address this formal difficulty by simulating a node of disturbance within the descriptive systematicity of criticism itself. In this sense, the fractal design of one mode of writing interspaced among another should be understood as mapping a structural portrait of *Inter Alia* as a whole. The question of the relation between discursive interference and criticism is taken up in brief detail in the conclusion.

Held fast: it came and who came passing through: in of form and out of. And is. But a body of letters. Slow turning. And no body. Matter bent to fold of, in crossing of stain of, marsh stuck as tarry of grain. Although what will not catch. Such and such what. Askance flight of to go out other than as of sun coldens and of hum of as of tarn. And Abraham's tamarind talion of taking part. Peripheral vision occupied elsewhere with the lightening uncurl of corners and of line slide slight of pronouns.

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CHAPTER ONE

STEVE ERICKSON:

THE EXISTENCE OF MEANING

[...] and the petals scattered, and there was nothing to hear, and no voice to see.

– Steve Erickson[1]

Expressions such as 'world in pieces' or 'a world turned upside down,' trite as they have become, nonetheless express a feeling that is authentic. The rift between the rational order and events, the mutual impenetrability of minds opaque as matter, the multiplication of logical systems each of which is absurd for the others, the impossibility of the I rejoining the you, and consequently the unfitness of understanding for what should be its essential function – these are things we run up against in the twilight of a world, things which reawaken the ancient obsession with an end of the world.

– Emmanuel Levinas[2]

[1] Steve Erickson, *Days Between Stations* (London: Quartet Books, 1997) p. 58.
[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001) p. 7.

I had thought to ask you a question
but to what end

something I think to do with height

let it go unasked

lie with me
in the palm of what moves

as the crook of a back
reveals only what turns away

The principle aim of this chapter is to explore the simultaneous formation and deformation of meaning in the work of Steve Erickson. In outline, the central proposition is that, for Erickson, the existence of meaning is an incalculable risk. As Erickson negotiates it, the task is to lighten meaning, that is, to refigure meaning outside itself, from the (impossible) point of view of its absence. From the outset it bears stressing that, for Erickson, to speak of the task of absenting meaning is not to hypostatise the negation of meaning but, rather, to recast meaning from the point of view of a trembling hesitation. Indeed, as it will be developed, throughout Erickson's work meaning *takes place* precisely in and as the mark of its abyssal risk. This is a complex task for the simple reason that any subsequent discussion of meaning necessarily will be bound to fail, at least in part, the structural terms of its own argument. Moreover, as will be discussed throughout the chapter, even meaning lightened of the burden of itself will be seen still to be bound resolutely to existence in that the ex-scription of meaning inscribes the heavy obligation of a weightless limbo. Despite the initial difficulty of this formation, however, in many respects the reason for the burden of meaning in Erickson can be regarded as two-fold. On the one hand, the inextricable interconnection of form and formlessness throughout Erickson's work specifically responds to a variously inflected thematic of existential dispossession. In this framework, meaning *weighs* as both the impossible goal and inflexible ground of existence in the sense that, at one the same time, there is both too much and too little meaning. There is too much meaning to the extent that, as goal, the potentiality for meaning 'ek-sists' everywhere in Erickson's fiction; there is too little in that its very potentiality is precisely that which refuses teleological determination. On the other hand, for Erickson the precise contextual modality of the deficiency of being-in-the world is itself an ineliminable consequence of what might be termed the original 'ek-sistence' or thrownness of Jeffersonian America. That is to

say, it is precisely the legacy of revolution that, for Erickson, 'America' inherits from a Jeffersonian elaboration of 'freedom' that refuses the very possibility of securing any practicable notion of sufficiency.

As this intricate structural background of meaning suggests, individual and national dispossession are complexly interwoven for Erickson. In spite of their mutual imbrication, however, in order to specify the trembling ground of the lightening of meaning in Erickson, the primary focus of this chapter is limited to an analysis of the general concept of existential dispossession through readings of what Erickson terms the 'nuclear imagination' and the novels *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, *Rubicon Beach*, and *Amnesiascope*.[3] Broadly stated, the conceptual principle that guides the following analyses is that the existence of meaning in Erickson is both a terrible weight and an intangible lightness in which linguistic and bodily existence are propelled relentlessly toward the paradox of constitutive de-scription. The particular threading of existential dispossession into a consideration of Erickson's reading of the political ground of America is taken up in detail in Chapter Four.

EXISTENCE: EK-SISTENCE

In many respects, the outline sense of Erickson's particular inflection of the 'existence of meaning' can be clarified by setting it in relation both to: (1) the thematic background of Erickson's fiction and the centrality of the metaphor of stuttering; and (2) to Heidegger's particular definition of 'ek-sistence.' To take these points in order:

(1) Despite the fact that, to date, Erickson's work for the most part has been critically aligned with science fiction, postmodernism, magic realism, or marginalised

[3] Steve Erickson, *The Sea Came In at Midnight* (London: Quartet Books, 1999); *Rubicon Beach* (London: Quartet Books, 1998); *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet Books, 1997). All subsequent references to these works will be given in the main text by the abbreviations SCM, RB, and A respectively.

somewhere between all three,[4] Erickson himself specifies the central concerns of his fiction as predominantly traditional. As both a distinction from previous critical classifications and an overarching context within which to situate the thematic analyses that follow, it is illustrative to quote Erickson at relative length here:

[m]y novels are not surreal because they don't view human relationships as essentially absurd, nor do they have an absurd view of existence. My novels aren't science fiction because they're not interested in the relationship of man to technology or his own evolution, even in humanist terms. My novels aren't "experimental" because their first priority isn't a reinvention of literary form; nor are they fantastic because they aren't tonally characterized by a sense of wonder [...] They aren't post-modern because they're not preoccupied with the artifice of modern art.

My novels are very traditional. Their concerns are traditional while cast in modern psychic terms, in a post-nuclear age that renders obsolete whatever imagination is paralyzed by the abyss rather than liberated by it. My books are about the oldest themes in the world – love and freedom, sex and history, obsession and idealism, identity and redemption.[5]

Beyond the literal texture of these comments, for the purposes of this chapter what is particularly apposite in this thematic overview is the way in which the conjunction of ('traditional') themes actually introduces the Ericksonian thematic as a very specific complication of both traditional themes and their common analysis. That is to say,

[4] As Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi have pointed out, Erickson's fiction was originally taken up by the science fiction publishing industry. For a brief discussion of this, see Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1997) p. 396. Similarly, the first critically introductory articles on Erickson by Paul Kincaid were published by a science fiction journal. See Paul Kincaid, 'Secret Maps: The Topography of Fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve Erickson,' *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, No. 57 (Spring 1993) pp. 26-48, and 'Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson,' *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, No. 58 (Summer 1993) pp. 27-42. For a postmodern reading of Erickson, see Amy J. Elias, 'The Postmodern Turn (:) on the Enlightenment, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1996) pp. 548-550. Erickson discusses the indirect influence of magic realism on his work but rejects the classification of his fiction as magical realist in interview with McCaffery and Tatsumi, p. 399.

[5] Steve Erickson, 'Formula for Arc d'X,' *Science Fiction Eye*, No. 12 (Summer 1993), reprinted at: www.studiolarz.com/erickson/articles/arceye.html, accessed 30 June 2004.

while the individual themes of love, freedom, sex, history, obsession, idealism, identity, and redemption may well be common themes in literature, the collocation of one with an other that Erickson specifies here provokes a complex thematic register that is not simply double but, rather, always at least triple. To engage love and freedom, for example, is not only to engage those two 'themes;' it is also to engage the third 'term' of their conjunction. In this sense, what is at stake in Erickson's fiction is as much the space of conceptual mediation as it is those concepts themselves. Read from this perspective, what emerges across Erickson's work is a fiction that hovers critically at the liminal border-zone between the dystopian, the utopian, and what might be termed the disquieting ordinariness of the everyday.[6] As Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi have aptly commented, 'the end result is a haunting and grotesque evocation of the shattered nature of twentieth-century life.'[7]

The critical point here is that, set in relation both to grotesque shattering and unthematisable *inter-view*, Erickson's fiction both emblematises and enacts a *stuttering* of existence that takes place at the threshold of a ruinous conceptual vision of meaning that his characters simultaneously desire and deny. As the narrator of *Amnesiascope* comments in terms exemplary of Erickson's work as a whole, the function of the stutter in this context is 'more than a hesitancy, it's more than a slight tension in the larynx, it's a full assault' that 'ricochets' toward the 'true senselessness' of the 'intermediary' (A: 146-147). As the narrator expands, it is precisely in and as the intermediate articulation of the stutter that the ideals of love, freedom, sex, history, obsession, idealism, identity, and redemption are possible

[6] The term 'everyday' is to be understood here in its Heideggerian sense, namely, as that which 'makes definite for itself the indefiniteness of certain death by interposing before it those urgencies and possibilities which can be taken in at a glance.' Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) ¶ 52, p. 258. (In accordance with convention, page references refer to the German edition of the text). I return to a consideration of this Heideggerian definition of the 'everyday' in Erickson below.

[7] Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1997) p. 395.

objects of impossible experience. That is to say, each is a possible object of experience only insofar as their incomplete stuttered formation holds their absolute or conclusive meaning in impossible reserve. The stammer of their articulation is both the instant of their forming and the instant of their falling, of indistinct potentiality and verbal exhaustion. 'In the Stutter was born the Dream' (Ideal), Erickson writes (A: 147). Yet if that is the case, 'in the Doubt was born the Stutter, and so the Dream was always infected by Doubt' (A: 150-151). As Erickson continues:

> I've thrust myself forward not out of faith or even will but the sort of primal force of habit that moves an animal to the place that nature commands it, to graze or mate or die [...] And then I was exhausted (A: 151).

As Deleuze writes of the literary function of the stutter in language which serves equally for a consideration of the stutter in meaning:

> *[w]hen a language is so strained* that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer ... *then language in its entirety reaches the limit* that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When a language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent.[8]

Formulated in these terms, in Erickson the existence of meaning as the stutter of (thematic) meaning exposes meaning to the limit against which it both breaks and reverberates. To put it another way, the existence of meaning in Erickson is precisely this reverberation of breaking; its exposure is also its ex-posure, its setting apart from the inscription of existence into the ex-scription of ek-sistence.

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[8] Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stutttered' in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London and New York: Verso, 1998) p. 113; Deleuze's emphasis.

(2) While a full analysis of Heidegger's discussion of ek-sistence and its elaboration within the wider schema of the ontological meaning of care falls beyond the scope of this chapter, what is critical for a reading of Erickson is the way in which, in accordance with its root in the Greek 'ecstasis,' in *Being and Time* Heidegger defines ek-stasis as 'standing outside.'[9] As ek-static, in other words, the existent is neither for-itself nor in-itself but '*"outside-of-itself" in and for itself.*'[10] As Heidegger presents it the principle reason for this is two-fold. First, ek-stasis refers to the 'temporalization' of the existent. As temporal, the ek-sistent 'is' not 'now' but rather projected always already toward the future. Second, according to Heidegger, this is so because '*[t]he primary phenomenon of primordial and authentic temporality is the future.*'[11] Temporality, that is to say, 'is' not; temporality, rather, 'temporalizes itself;' it 'is' insofar as its primordial ek-sistence lies outside itself, in the future, in its potentiality.[12] In principle, then, the existent is ek-sistent insofar as its ontological meaning is temporality, the 'now' of a present that arises 'out of the future.'[13] As Heidegger argues, the schema in which the ek-sistent is disclosed to itself as projected or thrown outside itself 'is to be taken as that *in the face of which* it has been thrown and *to which* it has been abandoned.'[14] The ek-sistent 'is' insofar as it is abandoned *to* the world, and insofar as Being-there the ek-sistent is turned toward Being itself as the projection of a potentiality-for-Being. To put it another way, the ek-sistent 'is' always already there, in the world, only insofar as 'there' is always already 'out there,' in and as a projection *to* Being. As Heidegger puts it, '[w]ith one's factical

[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 329.
[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 329; Heidegger's emphasis.
[11] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 329; Heidegger's emphasis.
[12] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 329; Heidegger's emphasis.
[13] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 69 c, p. 365.
[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 69 c, p. 365; Heidegger's emphasis.

Being-there, a potentiality-for-Being is in each case projected in the horizon of the future.'[15] '[E]k-sistence means standing *out into* the truth of Being.'[16]

Within this general formulation, of central importance for this chapter's analyses of Erickson is the way in which Heidegger states that the projection of ek-sistence 'makes possible the resolute existentiell understanding of nullity.'[17] That is to say, it is precisely the ecstatical condition of standing outside that means that 'the future itself is closed to one' such that 'coming-towards-oneself is the meaning of existing in one's ownmost nullity.'[18] As the present analysis will aim now to develop, what Heidegger's discussion of 'ek-sistence' principally indicates here is the very stutter or double exigency of meaning that Erickson's fiction consistently thematises, namely, that the meaning of existence is the nullity of projection, and that the nullity of ek-sistence is itself the existence of meaning.

NUCLEAR IMAGINATION

Erickson's notion of the 'nuclear imagination' exemplifies succinctly what is at stake in this double movement. As he writes in *Leap Year*:

[p]eople with nuclear imagination not only conceive of the abyss and confront it, but are liberated by it; everything they do is infused with the blood of an armageddon with no god, a judgment day in which the guilty and the innocent are damned with equal cosmic merriment. They dance along the edge of the abyss to banish their dread of falling over, relishing the view that their position affords, daring the ground to shift beneath their feet. They can't be bothered with pretending the edge isn't there. They won't be paralyzed by it. They'll take a running start toward it only to stop inches away while the crowd gasps in horror. In the

[15] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 69 c, p. 365.
[16] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism' in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 230; emphasis added.
[17] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 330.
[18] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 330.

process they force the crowd to consider matters as they do, confronted with the truth that every moment is potentially irrevocable.[19]

While there is a multiplicity of layers to Erickson's argument in this passage, three comments are particularly apposite here. First, for Erickson, the primary ground of existence is an abyssal depth. Second, in order to exist it is necessary not only to acknowledge the condition of disastrous rift but to locate it at the very structural epicentre of existence itself. In this way, and third, to exist freely is at all times to be propelled toward the fringes of liveable experience by the violent and irrevocable auto-destruction of the abyss. Indeed, in many respects, it is precisely the incorporation of the ruinous consequence of the nuclear imagination that for Erickson corresponds expressly to the authentic demand of existence. That is to say, the non-positional or ex-centric space-time of the nuclear imagination is itself the principle demand of existence to which the existent must constantly expose itself, even as it is that which ex-poses the existent in turn. Every moment is potentially irrevocable precisely because to be liberated by the abyss is to be both determined and condemned by the immediate devastation of any point of causal continuation.

From this perspective, then, the ineluctable exhaustion of the existent that the nuclear imagination inaugurates does not equate to a simple description of a certain abyssal form of existence; more accurately, the abjection of its abyssal proposition functions as an essential demand or imperative within the Ericksonian (dis-)order. That is to say, for Erickson it is precisely the consequential risk of a disastrous de-temporalisation of existence that structures existential-moral vitality. As the narrator of *Amnesiascope* puts it, 'I love having nothing to hope for but the cremation of my dreams; when my dreams are dead the rest of me is alive, all cinder and appetite' (A:

[19] Steve Erickson, *Leap Year* (London: Futura, 1989) p. 42.

5). Similarly, as Erickson has specified in interview, in order for the primary abyssal property of existence to assume a constitutively consequential avowal of existence it is necessary to 'exhaust' all impulses toward self-protectionism, ranging from 'idealism, realism, heroism, confidence' to 'naiveté.'[20] Levinas' comments on the iniquity of temporal regulation in *Existence and Existents* emblematise expressly what is at stake in the exigency of the nuclear imagination here for Erickson. As Levinas writes:

> [t]o take human existence as something having a date, placed in a present, would be to commit the gravest sin against the spirit, that of reification, and to cast it into the time of clocks made for the sun and for trains.[21]

As it will be developed specifically in relation to Erickson's *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, the task that the nuclear imagination both names and demands is the dis-location of the orthodoxy of clocks in favour of the radically streaming an-archic chaos of an 'apocalyptic calendar' irreducible to function, organisation, and definition.

Needless to say, the implications of such an existential schema of dis-location are manifold. In order to focalise the discussion, however, in what follows this apocalyptic existence of meaning in Erickson will be developed in five interrelated ways, chiefly through concentrated discussions of: the principle of apocalypse; the meaning of destruction; anonymous existence; the myth of Narcissus; and the erotic. While these themes are broadly discernible across the entire range of Erickson's writings, the first and second find exemplary expression in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, the third and fourth in *Rubicon Beach*, and the fifth in both *Rubicon Beach* and *Amnesiascope*. Common both to each novel and each

[20] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' p. 412.
[21] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 101.

subdivision is the collocation of the existence of meaning with the indivisible interplay of affirmation and destruction.

THE PRINCIPLE OF APOCALYPSE

Despite the explicit millennial concerns and constant shifts in time, space, and perspective, in many respects the dominant narrative locus of *The Sea Came in at Midnight* is the disclosure of the event, character and consequence of what is referred to as the 'Age of Apocalypse.' More specifically, each narrative thread from Japan to America and France, and back again, predominantly involving Kristin, the Occupant, Carl, and Louise, might be said to turn principally on the attempt to define the precise meaning of the term apocalypse itself. In outline, the central definition of apocalypse that the novel subsequently problematises, develops, exacerbates, and loses, is given early on when the Occupant comments that modern apocalypse is 'an explosion of time in a void of meaning':

> 'sometime in the last half century, he said, 'modern apocalypse outgrew God.' Modern apocalypse was no longer about cataclysmic upheaval as related to divine revelation; modern apocalypse, the Occupant told Kristin, speaking with more passion than she had ever heard him express before, was 'an explosion of time in a void of meaning,' when apocalypse lost nothing less than its very faith (SCM: 47).

For the Occupant, then, the modern apocalyptic event is characterised by a sheer featurelessness that ex-poses the shattering of any possible consolation or even promise of explanation. At the same time, however, the difficulty with such a definition is that it involves necessarily the disaster of any schema of definition itself. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that, for both the Occupant and each of the

novel's other characters, the very voiding of apocalyptic meaning becomes the principle emblem of the most meaningful, which is to say, of the fundamental basis of meaning.

In this context, apocalypse does not deny meaning but is, rather, the transformation of the meaning of meaning into the transparent absence of meaning. The novel emblematises succinctly what is at stake here when Kristin comments that the tattoo of the mysterious date assigned to her by the Occupant:

> means [...] *nothing*. Not a single thing. Nothing happened on this date of any importance to anyone, least of all me, since I wasn't even three years old at the time. It means I *am* this date: I'm a date in time, a date on this calendar, of paramount importance because absolutely nothing important whatsoever took place on it (SCM: 164).

In the nihilistic fissures of an apocalyptic temporality, being-of-time does not constitute existential meaning. What it remarks, rather, is the displacement of existence from temporal specificity to an indistinct non-specificity of everydayness. As Heidegger illustratively comments, '[e]verydayness is a way *to be*,' but it is not itself a particular feature of being-in-the-world.[22] It is the point at which the distinction of *Dasein* becomes simply the ordinariness of one among others. To put it another way, everydayness is the dispersal of *Dasein* into the unremarkable *inter alia* wherein each day is "'all one and the same," the accustomed, the "like yesterday, so today and tomorrow,"' the most ordinary.[23] Each day, that is to say, is 'a pure sequence of "nows," without beginning and without end, in which the ecstatical character of primordial temporality has been levelled off.'[24] Here, in a cataloguing of

[22] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 71, p. 371.
[23] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 71, p. 371.
[24] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 65, p. 329.

dates that resist significance, the pivotal characteristic of apocalypse is precisely its exchange of temporal determination for the nothing-in-particular of the bare facticity of the everyday. That is to say, both in this passage and throughout *The Sea Came in at Midnight* the nothingness of the inexplicability of the most familiar is connected to an order of events for the very reason that the point of connectivity is impossible to locate.

Within this context, however, it is important to specify that the diaphanous character of the quotidian in the novel derives from a precisely specified geographical-temporal moment, namely 3.02 a.m., 7 May, 1968, Paris. As the narrative puts it:

> [i]n the years leading up to this moment there was an incontrovertible moral logic to upheaval, upheaval was the instrument of morally distinct aspirations, whatever you thought of those aspirations. In the minutes before 3:02 on the morning of the seventh of May, the students who seized the Sorbonne did so on behalf of complaints that ceased to matter at all by 3:03 ... by 3:04 upheaval lost all rationale, it was the expression of a spiritual chaos no politics could address (SCM: 59-60).

Four remarks are particularly relevant here. First, the narrative expressly links this collapse of moral logic to 'the moment when the *meaning* of the modern age unravelled' in the sense of broke loose or disintegrated (SCM: 59; emphasis added). Second, the collapse of the moral logic of resistant protest is not the result of a specifically public event (in other words, the student demonstrations) but rather the (then) private event of a gun being fired in a hotel proximate to the Sorbonne (SCM: 58). Third, the moment of the gunshot, a 'sound unlike any I'd ever heard before' (SCM: 58), is precisely the instant that destroys any basis by way of which public

and private might be distinguished, indeed, that collapses the very meaning of 'distinction' within an irreducible spectrum of mutual disturbance. Fourth, the unravelling of meaning is the advent of an apocalyptic logic in which what matters is less the question of the (radical) meaning of the apocalypse than it is the explosive sound of a nuclear imagination breaking free. As the Occupant comments:

[w]ho knows what any of them [students and police] took the sound of the gunshot to be. Years later, for everything that's been written about it, there's no record of any student having a gun, and the police weapon of choice was a truncheon, when it wasn't a tank ... did the cops really think some student had fired a gun? Did the students really think some lone cop had fired a gun? Maybe they thought it was the snap of a truncheon across some anonymous body. Maybe it doesn't matter in the least. *Maybe in the early-morning hours what mattered was the sound's sheer explosiveness, not its source* (SCM: 59; emphasis added).

Here, the meaningful event is purely destructive; it is 'the void of meaning' (SCM: 60) of the explosion itself, the exhilaration of 'the spectacular disintegration of everything' (SCM: 61), meaning beyond meaning, both posterior and anterior to it.

As Maurice Blanchot writes, commenting on Marguerite Duras' *Détruire dit-elle*, destruction:

comes to us from the furthest reaches, through the immense rumbling of music destroyed, coming, perhaps deceptively, as also the beginning of all music. Something, sovereignty itself, disappears here, appears here, without our being able to decide between apparition and disappearance, or to decide between fear and hope, desire and death, the end and the beginning of time, between the truth of the return and the madness of the return.[25]

[25] Maurice Blanchot, 'Destroy,' in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 116.

Irrespective of paradox, in this context the apocalypse is that which returns meaning to itself; it invigorates meaning precisely because the suspension of meaning is that which frees meaning into meaning. What this amounts to saying is that the non-coincidence of meaning with itself is that which keeps the structure of meaning open. In this way, for Erickson the explosion becomes a scene of vital madness in which it is precisely the detonation of meaning and relation that constitutes the extreme, yet also basic or elementary, condition of possibility of freedom. That is to say, it is:

> the moment when everyone turns to everyone else, student to student, cop to cop, student to cop, cop to student, thrilled beyond comprehension, faces shining, mouths trembling, eyes ecstatic, and says: we are all out of our minds (SCM: 211).

Indeed, despite different inflections, it is precisely this ecstatic ek-sistence (in the sense of thrownness or being-thrown) that, for both Erickson and Blanchot, conditions the exceptional example of the events of May 1968; its example represents the annihilation of any form of representation, regardless of whatever appearance that might take. In so doing, what the vital madness of those events open onto is the thought of another form of existence predicated on the an-archic (in the double sense of revolutionary and anoriginal) risk of apocalyptic freedom.

MAY '68 OR, THE MEANING OF DESTRUCTION

Blanchot's own partial response to the events of May 1968, 'The Community of Lovers,' provides an apposite set of concerns from which to begin to specify both the meaning and the function of destruction in Erickson in more detail. As Blanchot writes:

May '68 has shown that without project, without conjuration, in the suddenness of a happy meeting, like a feast that breached the admitted and expected social norms, *explosive communication* could affirm itself (affirm itself beyond the usual forms of affirmation) as the opening that gave permission to everyone, without distinction of class, age, sex or culture, to mix with the first comer as if with an already loved being, precisely because he was the unknown-familiar.[26]

For Blanchot, the unique importance and fascination of May '68 is that it was 'without project.' Rather than speaking for a particular 'scheme,' which is to say, rather than embodying a certain set of values, determinations and meanings, the 'community' of students, writers and workers that came together in May did so for the very reason, non-reason, that they were without body; nothing bound each party together beyond the *immediacy* of the simple (in the sense of innocent or bare) act of coming together. What is at stake in such a situation, therefore, is the very life and death of *that particular* event itself. To the degree that the instant of coming together is not the result of certain individual or collective wills but rather the result of the instant itself, that 'instant' takes place on precarious ground, at best; its instantiation is also the intimation of its collapse. To put it another way, the profundity of a bond without binds is also the moment of that bond's extreme suffering. The instant cannot last; its explosive inception will have been destined always irrevocably toward its disintegration or its dispersal. The fragile foundation of meaning without meaning indicates that, regardless of the intention, it would be impossible not to break it, for it not to break itself into the formless form of its own endless alterity. As Blanchot puts it, the instant of a spontaneous coming together without project and without meaning instantiated:

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[26] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Community of Lovers' in *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988) pp. 29-30; emphasis added.

a form of community [...] different from the one whose character we had thought to have defined, one of those moments when communism and community meet up and ignore that they have realized themselves by losing themselves immediately.[27]

Yet as Blanchot adds with a telling change of register, '[i]t must not last, it must have no part in any kind of duration.'[28] According to Blanchot, the form of such a community must not last precisely because the power of the instant resides in its refusal of residence, its refusal to be grasped; it acquires its force because it both takes place and does not take place simultaneously. In this sense, strength and weakness are structurally inseparable.

For both Blanchot and Erickson, to resist meaning is perhaps one of the most difficult and uncertain tasks of all. The intractable system of meaning is its attempt to flood with meaning on all sides that which puts it into question, which is to say, that resists it, as it is the property of resistance to resist itself. Resistance enters into the realm of what it is not possible to say so that resistance is failed always already, and it will never be clear what it is that has been broached, if anything at all, although it will, at the same time, be too clear for comfort. The fallacy of resistance, with which it must content itself perhaps, is to be always betrayed; it falls, shredding itself into what it casts and what casts it. As such, however, the particular 'instant' of May '68 cannot be said to constitute so much as an event or moment as it does a question of the event. As Blanchot asks, '[t]he event? And had it taken place?'[29]

From this perspective it is revealing that both Erickson and Blanchot veil their discussions of the 'events' of May '68, Erickson through an escalation and repetition of the 'event', or what is more frequently termed 'the Moment,' across characters and

[27] Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, p. 32.
[28] Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, p. 32.
[29] Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, p. 31.

timescales, Blanchot through a framing discussion of Duras' *The Malady of Death*. At issue here is the way in which the rupture May '68 is taken to name is precisely that which cannot be confronted directly. Indeed, as the narrative of *The Sea Came in at Midnight* states, with reference to the Occupant:

> [t]he only thing he knows for sure [...] is that if there's to be a Moment in his life that is a passageway through his memories [in other words, through that which binds him to a certain determination of temporally specified subjectivity], it isn't a light but a black gaping pit (SCM: 203).

In many respects, the conceptual force of the 'Moment' in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* lies precisely in its exchange of a thematic of illumination for one of darkness. As discussed above, to live the 'nuclear' instant is not only to live at the edge but, specifically, is to confront directly the depthless deep that borders the interface between existence and nothingness. It bears repeating here that the constitutive potentiality of the Moment is indivisible from the risk of auto-destruction. As the exposure of the abyss, the Moment necessarily is also the instant of its own abyssal disappearance; it withdraws into the rift of the non-space it opens. As such, the experience of the moment is not one of *claritas* but of *obscūritas*; it is an experience of the veiling of meaning in which the Moment itself is precisely that which eludes the specificity of (auto-)experience. The Moment only ever appears in the novel *after the event*, that is, and in a manner similar to iconic memory, as an insistent memory of that which may or may not have been experienced.

Indeed, it is for this reason that whenever Erickson's narrative turns to a discussion of the experience of the Moment it does so only indirectly, by way of what might be termed a rhetoric of analogy or the grammatological structure of the 'as if.'

While for Erickson the Moment is strictly unknowable, its repeated, if not ubiquitous, nomination in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* simultaneously instantiates the Moment as a kind of regulative principle that figures the impossibility of identification *as if* it were the meaning of identity. As such, the Moment is most present in the narrative during scenes or 'instants' in which the loss of subjectivity is at work, namely, the collapse of the Occupant's familial structure in May '68; the point of sexual orgasm:

> at the moment of climax there opened up in his head [...] a light into which he could almost fall, *as though* it was a Moment into which he could almost step, a passageway through his memories (SCM: 200-1; emphasis added);

or the loss of consciousness where 'there's a white flash before her [Kristin] *like* a Moment, a submerged imploding star of faith and memory' (SCM: 242; emphasis added), a:

> dream itself, which she [Kristin] approaches across some limbo between consciousness and sleep. It's *like* the flicker of a gunshot [Erickson's archetypal Moment in this novel] in the distance [...] It's *as though* this small flash is on the far horizon (SCM: 248; emphasis added).

What each of these instances has in common, therefore, is that, while they may suggest a thought of the Moment, this thought is rhetorically severed from the Moment in the sense that it is held at an immeasurable distance far off.

If the Moment is analogically synonymous with the sound of a gunshot, that gunshot uncannily resonates at indeterminate points within each character's memorial experience of the Moment. Louise, for instance, approximates the potential manifestation of the Moment to the sound of a gunshot. In response to the mention

of the Moment, Louise says, 'Like when you hear a gunshot in the night [...] far away' (SCM: 133). Or again, ten pages later, when out of a sense of guilt and transgression Louise is unable to recognise, to identify with, herself:

> her own heart is a surprise to her, and all the bleak unknown stretches of its future journey. And as much as she hates surprises, she has nowhere to go but deep into her own heart, to follow the sound of a gunshot fired in the shadows of a distant aorta (SCM: 143).

Read in this context, the indication is that the gunshot corresponds to the Moment that rips open the supposed limits of the individual subject, cleaving a rift within the existent through which its 'immediacy' passes like an enigmatic and elusive stranger from one character to another. Indeed, as with each character, the Moment equates to a kind of traveller whose very meaning lies in the impossibility of its being held in any one place. Each and every reverberation of the gunshot is only a repetition of the ineffability of the Moment, a constant setting out toward the unknown from a point *always* far removed. Thus while there is undoubtedly a strange commonality of the gunshot between the characters of the novel, it is also this very commonality which instantly puts into question, if not expressly denies, the specificity individual characters may have attached to the experience of the Moment. As with Blanchot's notion of the unavowable community which he obtains to be exemplified by the coming together of students, writers and workers in May '68, the commonality of the Moment exists only in its simultaneous annihilation of the communitarian and the solipsistic.

At the same time, therefore, as the gunshot is only analogically linked to the Moment, it bears stressing that the gunshot may well be iconoclastic rather than iconographic, a breaking apart that neither heralds nor bears any relation to the

Moment at all. As Marie, another character who avows an encounter with the Moment, on this occasion while hanging from a hook in the dark, awaiting a death that does not ultimately arrive, says to Louise:

[m]aybe your mistake is always having believed the Moment was when you heard the shot. But maybe the Moment is when the sound of the shot has finally passed, and it's finally quiet again. Maybe that's the Moment (SCM: 133).

Equally, for the cartographical Carl, the Moment has less to do with a gunshot fired on a particular date than it does with the discovery of forgotten or lost coordinates (SCM: 176). Discovering the Occupant's inscription of the date and hour of the origin of the Age of Apocalypse on a piece of paper hidden in the wall of his crumbling penthouse, Carl immediately takes the numbers to correspond to coordinates on a map: '2.3.7.5.68.19. The 68 and 19 were coordinates; the 2, 3, 7 and 5, the code to which latitude and longitude, and what they meant' (SCM: 177).

On the one hand, for Carl numbers correspond directly to the principle of their meaning; the task is simply to elucidate the structural relation of the numbers to one another in order for their meaning to be demonstrable. On the other hand, faced with the impenetrable and enigmatic puzzle of the numbered code, and as the narrative makes explicit, 'in spite of himself' (SCM: 177), in spite of his better logico-mathematical judgement, Carl begins to stray into the mysticism of numerology, which is to say, he attempts to assign meaning to the numbers through a process of intuitive interpretation. The number, moreover, which preoccupies Carl the most, is precisely the number that is absent. In order to think the function of the Moment in Erickson it is worth quoting the following passage at some length:

the number that caught Carl's attention was the only integer between 1 and 9 that wasn't in the series, in either the coordinates or the code. To begin with the obvious, 4 was the first integer that wasn't a prime number. But more important, 4 was the number that space and time have in common [...] The absence of 4 from this particular series on this blue bloodstained page, with every other integer present and never repeated, struck Carl as so momentous that it bypassed mere significance and veered into the territory of the ominous. The blue bloodstained page was a map, in other words, in which the single most important numerical component of space and time and life *was missing* (SCM: 178; Erickson's emphasis).

From this apparently rigorous hermeneutical deduction the only conclusion to which Carl can reach, when his brain makes 'one last inexplicable calculation' (SCM: 182), is that the meaning of the coordinates is their collapse to zero. More specifically, it is precisely at this point, '[i]n the moment he arrived at zero, [that] a Moment opened up before him, and beyond that a terrible sense of the abyss' (SCM: 183). Carl, whose life has been *determined* by the cartographically demonstrable *presence* of meaning, is terrified by his confrontation with the Moment, which is to say, by his confrontation with the meaning of meaning, the instant of disaster in which meaning is reduced to the lightness of its own absence. To this effect:

after hours and days of being consumed with trying to prove an answer, he's [now] consumed with trying to disprove one, investigating every possible combination of calculations in order to assure himself that no matter what, no matter how, the blue map on the wall never adds up, or subtracts down, to zero (SCM: 183).

For both Marie and Carl, then, the *meaning* of the Moment is precisely the reduction of meaning to its absence. For Carl, the lightness of meaning is terrifying;

for Marie, it heralds the opening of an innocent calm analogous to a kind of beatitude in which it is the terror of determination – in this case, the terror of death, which is to say, the terror of the existential *meaning* of Being – that passes, leaving only the simple anonymity of non-determined existence. What both Marie and Carl's reaction to the encounter, non-encounter, with the Moment indicates, however, has less to do with the exposure of the particularity of the existent than it does with the paradoxical structure of the Moment itself, in the sense that, at one and the same time the Moment is both liberating and terrifying, representative and abyssal. Indeed the dual structure of the Moment would be in fact precisely that which precedes the existent, which is to say, that reduces the existent to bare anonymity, for the simple reason that the Moment itself is simultaneously impersonal, anonymous, and in-different.

That said, however, if the Moment in Erickson functions in a manner equivalent to a non-epiphanic exposure of ek-sistence, in that it is precisely the possibility of a positivised avowal of meaning the Moment refuses, the question that arises here is whether, for Erickson, existence is itself essentially anonymous, that is, whether it is essentially structured by an irreducible condition of exteriority that paradoxically confers meaning on existence by thinking it from a point outside meaning. It is toward a consideration of this question that the subsequent two sections principally turn.

ANONYMOUS EXISTENCE

In *Existence and Existents* Emmanuel Levinas argues that the point at which the dialectic of meaning is interrupted marks a limit that is 'singularly instructive,' for:

> the Being which we become aware of when the world disappears is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that *there is*.[30]

In the absence of worldly meaning, the only *thing* that remains is the undetermined fact of an existence beyond, or perhaps better, anterior to subjectification. In this sense, existence takes place not as a subject or object of perception, that is, of the faculties of phenomenal knowledge, but rather on the level of what Levinas refers to as 'sensation.' For Levinas, sensation designates the experience of 'the impersonality of *elements*,' in which experience itself would not correspond to or produce cognition but would be, rather, only the non-thematized sensation that *there is* experience in the first place.[31] Sensation is the elemental or rudimentary quality of something that remains after the subtraction of substantiality (be that either subjective or objective). According to Levinas, for example:

> [a] word cannot be separated from its meaning. But there is first the materiality of a sound that fills it, by which it can be reduced to sensation [...] And a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible in still another way inasmuch as it is attached to a multiplicity of meanings, through the ambiguity that may affect it due to its proximity with other words. It then functions as the very movement of signifying.[32]

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[30] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 8.
[31] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 47; Levinas' emphasis.
[32] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 47-8.

Behind the signification of language, there is a *sensation* of language that in effect liberates language from the burden of meaning precisely because it is the 'deformation' of substance.[33] Indeed, as Levinas would have it, there is no foundational inside or outside of language, that is to say, meaning of language, only the impenetrable *strangeness* of the impersonal surface of sensation.

It is worth pausing here to note how Levinas' own elaboration of the sensation of language through a discussion of poetry is instructive both for this chapter and this thesis as a whole. 'Behind the signification of a poem which thought penetrates,' Levinas writes, 'thought also loses itself in the musicality [sensation] of a poem [...] Modern poetry, in breaking with classical prosody, has nowise given up the musicality of verse, but has sought it at greater depth.'[34] While the lightening of meaning within specifically 'poetic' language is developed in more detail in Chapter Two, what is apposite for the current discussion is the way in which Levinas' own consideration of the poetic indicates the exemplarity of the literary in general for thinking the lightening of meaning. The reason for this is because, as Levinas argues, literature, or at the very least, a certain form of literary work, creates itself out of the elemental reduction of signification; literature produces itself out of its disinterestedness with systems of production. To put it another way, the uselessness of the literary work, its non-functionality, the fact that it doesn't serve any material purpose beyond the simple fact of its own existence, is precisely why it is argued that the literary is the naked exposure of itself and thus the exemplar of the *there is*. Whether signification is understood in terms of an object's functionality or a subject's faculty of perception, in the sense that the object is internalised within the subject and thus rendered identifiable by way of the application of cognitive meaning, in the

[33] The term 'deformation' is Levinas' own. See, for example, Levinas' analysis of modern painting where he equates deformation with 'laying bare.' Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 50.
[34] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 48.

absence of identifiable signification there is only *there is*. There is only that which is 'immediately there,'[35] that is, the persistent alterity of non-collapsable exteriority. In such a situation, Levinas writes, only the anonymity of 'Being remains [...] like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one [...] returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside.'[36]

While it should be acknowledged that there are numerous other examples of the anonymity of existence in Erickson's fiction, perhaps most notably in the recurring image of the bottled eyes in *Days Between Stations*, one of the most strikingly sustained examples is that of the character of Catherine, the proponent of the perplex centre of *Rubicon Beach*.[37] As with so many of the persons that populate Erickson's writing, however, it is not strictly permissible to refer to Catherine as a 'character.' Catherine is not so much a character as she is a vanishing illustration of the absence of character, which is to say, of 'character' reduced to an elemental foreignness. Indeed, it would be proper to specify that Catherine's entire 'existence' is not only determined by but conditional on her interminable estrangement from the world; she exists in the world precisely because she remains at a remove from it. Witnessing the ruins of a shipwreck as a young girl, for instance, Catherine:

> stepped out into the tip of the bay and stood several minutes watching the dead ship. It was the earliest memory of which she would ever be certain again, standing there in the middle of the night staring out into the dark of a dead ship, lights and voices somewhere behind her (RB: 94).

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[35] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52.
[36] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 53.
[37] The centre of this novel is 'perplex' to the extent that it would seem it is around the story of Catherine that the entire novel revolves in the sense that her dreams appear both to *prefigure* events in the first part of the novel and *repeat* events in the third. At the same time, however, the impenetrable ambiguity of the resemblance between each narrative strand renders any attempt to correlate the three parts into a connective whole ultimately undecidable.

In certain respects, the eccentric literal meaning of this passage emblematises succinctly the condition of Catherine's ek-sistence. The common analysis would suggest that the 'tip of the bay' marks the limit of the land, which is to say, the border of the hospitable. It is a point that cannot be crossed, at least not on foot. That said, however, Catherine here *steps out* into this limit, away from the light and the sound of voices in order to focus on the dead ship. From this perspective, the verbal conjugation of this sentence would appear to permit the reading that Catherine does not so much cross toward but in fact crosses *into* the border-zone that divides the living from the dead, the day from the night. Moreover, on a psychological level, the fact that this is not only Catherine's earliest memory but also the only memory of which she will ever be certain suggests that her experience of *partial* transgression is itself formational. That is to say, what this suggests is that her awareness of her own subjectivity will be always centred upon the rift of non-belonging. She does not cross the limit but steps only into it. At the same time, the moment at which she steps *into* the limit is also the instant in which she belongs neither to presence nor absence. She is suspended, rather, somewhere at the edge, in the non-substantive limbo of the in-between.

What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that Catherine is constantly presented as being separated from the form of herself. She is the one standing apart.[38] For example, it is repeatedly stated that the Crowd – the adjectival nomination for the community within which she lives – consistently fail to identify Catherine's face with Catherine so that, to a certain extent, Catherine is a faceless inhabitant who, quasi-mythically, haunts the fringes of the community. 'They did not

[38] Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1992).

see her face,' the narrative states, and then, in a passage which is repeated almost verbatim on two other occasions in the novel:

[t]hey took her eyes to be the large fiery insects that buzzed among the reeds of the river. They took her mouth to be the red wound left by hunted animals [...] They took her chin to be the bend of a bough and her hair to be the night when there was no moon (RB: 98).[39]

Indeed, even Catherine's parents fail to confront the mystery of their daughter. By the time Catherine turns eighteen her father recognises the separateness of her face from her body (RB: 99), or as Catherine's mother says:

[s]he's my daughter [...] but I don't know her [...] It's nature's fault for giving her the face of a spot in space or a place in the middle of the earth (RB: 109).

Here the face is not equivalent to a unique property of the individual but is, rather, divided from that which it names. The face 'unbecomes.' As such, Catherine is both more and less than one in the sense that her distance from herself and from others is an excess of identity that implodes her assimilation into the cogent particularity of an identity. To put it another way, her excess is the cause of her not being seen. Coba, for instance, sees Catherine only by not seeing her; as with the uncanny opening of a dream, Catherine's face is out of the common world, it is that which simultaneously appears and disappears on the thither-side of consciousness.

Gazing around him, he fixed momentarily, before blackness, on the eyes of the most extraordinary face he'd ever seen. These eyes watched him across the short distance of a

[39] For other instances of this passage see Erickson, *Rubicon Beach*, pp. 130 and 204.

small slough, from beneath hair so black that in his delirium he took it for a mass of feathers, fallen from malevolent black birds plunging somewhere to their doom (RB: 102).

Equally, when Catherine arrives in Los Angeles, she continues to emblematise textually the point that cannot be seen. Writing poem after poem about the mystery of Catherine's face, 'poems about a face that was ignorant of its own image, and a man whose cognizance of that image divided his life in two' (RB: 197), Llewellyn Edgar writes that:

[h]er eyes [...] had the opaque rushing depthlessness of the blind, like the color of white skies and seas meeting at some point in the distance (RB: 197).

What both Coba and Llewellyn's encounters with Catherine's face have in common is the sense of a non-reducible otherworldliness that casts the spectre of a morbidly fascinating shadow over the present. Indeed, for Coba and Llewellyn, the shadow Catherine's disembodied face casts is simultaneously both attractive and repulsive precisely because its alterity resists conceptualisation; the gaze is compelled by an inexplicable intuition to turn away in fright without having seen. In this way, Catherine's face returns continuously as an enigma that can be neither dismissed nor approached. In the same way that Levinas aligns poetry with that which exceeds phenomenal understanding, Catherine is the impossible poem Llewellyn cannot write but of which he has a *sensation*:

I have this this poem in my head [...] Not the last poem but the poem after the last poem: I keep trying to find it. I keep writing closer to it, because I know when I get there I'll be at the

point of no return. If it means losing the house, if it means losing my family, if it means losing everything, I'm going to find this poem (RB: 198).

The difficulty Llewellyn faces, then, is that the discovery of the ultimate poem would be the end of the poem in the same way that the discovery of Catherine's face would be the discovery only of the annihilation of discovery, the persistence of the intangible and the faceless. It is worth remarking that Orpheus experiences Eurydice only in the impersonal distance of the poem in which the invisibility of the face is exchanged for the material sensation of graphemes.[40] The face is eclipsed as it is encountered, both the face of the other and the face of the self, because the encounter with the face is also the encounter with the alterity of the self. Llewellyn's persistent desire to locate the poem beyond the limits of poetry culminates in the image of a man who may or may not be Llewellyn approaching a woman who or may or may not be Catherine. She waits for him, a 'knife in the folds of her skirt' (RB: 224). When he reaches her, he kneels down. The flash of the blade is 'soundless and instantaneous,' and then 'his face [is not] there to be seen' (RB: 22). Faceless, he is released to wander the novel, repeating not so much the instant of his death as the instant of his interminable dying, as if his decapitation were not the event of his death but his 'condemnation to perpetual reality, to existence with "no exits,"'[41] in which his own annihilation is relayed infinitely.

As Catherine's alterity inspires, in equal measure, dreams of possession and fear among her fellow (non-)inhabitants, and sentences her to the label of sorceress (RB: 108),[42] so Catherine's facelessness instantiates the collapse of conceptual

[40] See Maurice Blanchot, 'Orpheus' Gaze' in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) pp. 171-176.
[41] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 58.
[42] It is illustrative to note here that 'sorceress' is one of the very emblems by way of which Levinas characterises the anonymous space of the *there is*. Along with spectres and ghosts, sorceresses,

limits that are otherwise presumed to order the world; meaning is left to flow in the blindness of the rupture it carries always already within itself. The facelessness that Catherine both embodies and imparts resembles a kind of extreme innocence that exists prior to meaning. While on the one hand facelessness could then be taken as the condition of absolute possibility in the sense of a *tabula rasa*, it is also the case that, on the other hand, the non-assimilable nakedness of this innocence issues a supreme and subversive challenge to the world precisely because it is that which the world cannot enfold. The lightness of its existence at the margins contains the threat that the margins themselves will be carried off, leaving in their wake only the chaotic flow of the outside. The *fact* of Catherine's non-identity, in other words, produces a dizzying effect of terror, a distracting light-headedness which subsists somewhere between hysteria and nausea, that is, between an imperilled sense of imminent explosion and expulsion.

NARCISSUS AT THE LIMIT

That said, however, Catherine's alterity is perhaps most powerfully expressed through her repeated failure to identify her own reflection. One day, when Catherine is a young girl, her father takes her out onto the water at twilight.

> There, for the first time, she saw her own face. She thought it was a strange and marvellous watercreature [...] She claimed it for a pet. She threw it food it never ate, and when she tried to catch it, it swam from her so fast it seemed to vanish at her touch (RB: 97).

Levinas writes, 'allow [one] to move constantly toward the limit between being and nothingness where being insinuates itself even in nothingness, like bubbles of the earth.' Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 57.

The fact that this encounter occurs at twilight is no doubt revealing in itself. Twilight is the time of lengthening shadows, of obscurity and altered images, which is to say, when images reflect not their similitude but their strange difference. In addition, the exteriority of this first encounter with her reflection is precisely that which marks all subsequent encounters. She does not and will not come to know her face except as something that exists outside of herself, as otherwise than her being. As the narrative puts it, Catherine:

> lived in a place where she did not know her own face [...] identity was something known in a way utterly removed from the vessel that carried it (RB: 130).

In principle, what this amounts to saying, therefore, is that identity is known, not known, by way of its internal difference, that is, precisely because there is a void of distance between self and image.

Needless to say, the *echoes* here between the story of Catherine and Ovid's account of the myth of Narcissus are instructive rather than merely coincidental. Narcissus' ignorance of himself is not simply a result of his refusal to allow himself to be touched by others, but also, if not specifically, because he refuses to let himself be touched by the externality of Echo. Narcissus' rejection of the reverberation of his own self ex-posure, in the sense that the (deific) echo of his voice is precisely that from which he recoils with horror, prefigures or shadows his inability to relate himself to his own foreignness. In other words, his rejection of Echo is a rejection of himself precisely because Narcissus ek-sists only within the alterity of what comes back to him as that which does not belong to him. Narcissus *is* the void surface of his image. Indeed, as the divine decree itself legislates, a decree which is precisely that which forbids direct knowledge of the self *because* the self is composed of what does not

belong to it – the alterity of God? – Narcissus can know himself only in the crook of a back, that is, by turning away from himself. The decree, in other words, commands that Narcissus know himself only by not knowing himself, by discovering himself in the moment of his effacement, in the blank touch of his own strangeness, his echo, when the *uncanny* appearance of his image puts the singularity of the self into question. As Blanchot writes, 'the similitude of an image is not likeness to anyone or anything: the image characteristically resembles nothing.'[43] As such, in order for the ek-sistent to recognise itself as existent it would be necessary that the ek-sistent be mad. To put it another way, it would be necessary that the ek-sistent recognise itself as the division of itself. Indeed, this is precisely what Narcissus is unable to accomplish. Narcissus, rather, becomes fascinated with alterity to the extent that he does not respect the proximity of its distance[44] but wishes to possess it, to 'feed'[45] on it, to transgress the foreignness of distance and make alterity his own, smother it within the folds of the Same. Even when Narcissus recognises the alterity of the image as belonging to himself, his inability to preserve the distance of his own ek-sistence designates the impossibility of identity. Read in this context, Narcissus' death is less an event of death as it is the non-event of an interminable dying. Through the process of metamorphosis, which here is to say, through his *becoming-other*, Narcissus is condemned to a death that is never his. The anxiety of non-identity can be neither surpassed nor forsaken. What subsists is the disembodied echo of what has never been and what will not be. It is the echo whose repetition

[43] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) p. 125. For a more detailed discussion of the image and its relation to the production of meaning, see Chapter Three, 'Lydia Davis: The Image of Meaning.'

[44] The proximity of alterity in the myth is expressly that which renders the image most unreachable in the sense that, in view of its closeness, the impossibility of crossing toward it reinforces its absolute distance. 'My distress,' Narcissus says, 'is all the greater because it is not a mighty ocean that separates us, nor yet highways or mountains, or city walls with close-barred gates. Only a little water keeps us apart.' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) p. 86.

[45] 'Let me, by looking, feed my ill-starred love.' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p. 86.

enacts the primordial and insistent dispossession of the existence of the existent. From this perspective, the myth of Narcissus perhaps has less to do with Narcissus than it does the meaning of Echo. That is to say, Echo functions as the meaning of being in the sense that Echo is manifest only as a non-univocal voice. Echo is the disaster of being, opening the possibility of existence only to the reiteration of dispossession. On the one hand, if this is the authentic condition of being, it nauseates being precisely because it ex-poses it only to the endlessness of an anonymous dying. On the other hand, if the authenticity of being lies elsewhere, echo still nauseates because it is that which prevents access to that other place, the place after the last place, which may or may not be possession of the irrevocability of death.

In the context of these comments, then, Catherine's repeated attempts to destroy her own reflection only serve to reinforce the impotence of the self in the *face* of the sovereignty of alterity. The reflection is the excessive and exceptional double that cannot be effaced even as it threatens Catherine with her own effacement by dissimulating any exemplarity of existence. Indicative here, is the instance when Catherine says to her shadow, '[s]omeday I'll kill you too [...] as I will kill him [Coba]' (RB: 116). The very fact that Catherine subsequently disposes of, *effaces*, Coba's body but is categorically incapable of eradicating her own reflection only confirms further the impossibility of the act of *self*-annihilation. A death sentence can be imposed, rather, only from a point outside the self. As such, Catherine cannot kill her reflection, although her reflection is capable of killing Catherine. To put it another way, while identification with alterity may well be an indispensable process for the coming-into-being of identity (this is, after all, the essential texture of, for example, Hegel's and Heidegger's writings on the possibility of death), the exteriority of the reflection is precisely that which makes identification impossible. Exteriority

issues to the one who sees it the indelible smog-threat of destruction that, while not clear enough to see into and predict, is dense enough to choke on. What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that the double is that which fulfils identity even as it is that by which the existent suffocates. The apparent internality of the reflection is actually a dis-course that effectively opens the self to the rupture of division. Consequently, each time Catherine confronts her reflection, without knowing it (the confrontation is an engagement with the unknown and thus could never be of the order of knowledge) she is literally reaching beyond the limits of a self-assimilating identity into the anonymity of her existence, her shadow-world, the rupture of her subjectivity. In this way, while Catherine's attempts at violence against the reflection (and so, also, against herself) only cause her to recoil in horror at the reflection's persistence, the interminability of the reflection is itself a constant and inescapable violence against Catherine. The more Catherine wishes to destroy the reflection, the more the reflection desubjectifies her, not simply by obliterating the private limit that confers on identity its unicity but also by preventing any possibility of either identification with or recuperation of alterity. Catherine 'is' only insofar as she is neither the one nor the other.

It is probable that part of the problem with Catherine's failure to identify herself with her own reflection lies in the fact that it is only in the fluidity of water that she sees herself, her ek-sistence, reflected. Water, that is to say, is constantly on the move; its reflective surface is fragile, fleeting, constantly shifting contours and the prism of colour. Indeed, it is precisely because Narcissus sees himself reflected in water only that Blanchot argues Narcissus is unable to correlate the image with his being. As Blanchot writes:

[t]he water in which Narcissus sees what he shouldn't is not a mirror, capable of producing a distinct and definite image [...] The glistening of the spring shows something clear – the attractive image of someone – yet at the same time blurring this clarity limpidly, it prevents the stable fixity of sheer visibility.[46]

In fact, it is not until Catherine witnesses her reflection in the mirror at the Edgar's household that she realizes the face she sees in fact belongs to her. At the same time, however, the encounter with the self, which here might be aligned with a 'Moment' of self-recognition, provokes not acceptance but continued disavowal. Thus it is not so much Catherine's knee-jerk reaction, where she smashes the mirror with her fists (RB: 157) that is striking here, but the event of increased separation and terror this encounter produces.[47] Indeed, Catherine's recognition of her own face leads only to her being woken in the middle of the night by the *sensation* of 'something moving like a web across her eyes' (RB: 177).

It was several moments before she realized her face was alive. It was inching slowly, almost imperceptibly across the front of her head, a large flesh spider attaching itself to her [...] She panicked, believing her own face would smother her. She wrestled with it and soon fell back in exhaustion from the effort. When she slept again she was aware of the face slithering off her and crawling across the bed and floor to the other side of the room. It settled over the fragments of glass [the mirror] still lying at the bottom of the sink, and there in the night she could hear it breed, until the room was filled with them (RB: 177-8).

The encounter with the face, then, produces not identification but absolute separation. Catherine's relation to the face, which here literally has a self-

[46] Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, p. 134.
[47] A mirror here, then, is not, as the above quotation from Blanchot contends, a site of stability. A mirrored image, rather, is itself as open to effacement as one in water; as it breaks through water so a fist breaks glass.

perpetuating life of its own, is antagonistic, agonistic; it is an irreconcilable death struggle between possessing herself and being dispossessed in the moment of possession. To put it another way, the instant of Catherine's self-recognition produces not a reconciliation of being but an anxiety of being. Given that Catherine's relation to her face has always been one of rift, on the one hand, if she forges a bond of identification with her face she forges a bond only with what divides her; on the other hand, if she rejects her face she condemns herself to living on in her own facelessness, which is to say, to living on *as* her effacement. Irrespective of whether she accepts it or not, as the above passage suggests Catherine's face is precisely that which consumes her such that consummation is the inescapable condition of the face.[48] The 'face of [her] treason [and] the face of [her] destiny [...] are one and the same' (RB: 206). The destiny of the face is the treason of identity. As Levinas writes, '[t]he existence of one submerges the other, and is thus no longer an existence of the one.'[49] The face is more than one; it makes of subjectivity a phantom.

When Catherine recognises herself she does so precisely by recognising herself in what has always been other, herself as other. The reflection may mimic Catherine but 'mimicry' itself implies an irrevocable split or rupture between self and other. To put it another way, reflection gives doubleness. At the same time, however, it is far from clear which is the double of which, namely, whether it is Catherine or her reflection that is doubled. Indeed, the uncertainty of the relation between subject and object that the figure of the double introduces is expressly that which places the distinction between one and another into question and, to all intents and purposes, renders any difference there may be, may have once been, undecidable. The

[48] It is worth noting here that the dominatory and sexualised semantics in which this relation, non-relation, is presented are themselves indicative of what, for Erickson, is perhaps the most essential illustration of the structure of possession-dispossession and its bearing on the formation of meaning. This aspect of Erickson's work is discussed in more detail in the following section.
[49] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 56.

inability to decide, however, is not a negative prescription. Rather, as Levinas notes, '[t]he indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness. There is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In this ambiguity the menace of pure and simple presence, of the *there is*, takes form.'[50] Indeed, it is no doubt for this very reason that the photograph Catherine chooses of herself is the one in which her face is obscured (RB: 182). Even though her identity is the point that cannot be seen, the impossible poem after the last poem, it subsists in the bare form of what cannot be claimed, in the circular transgression of presence by absence and vice versa.

THE EROTIC

(a) *Rubicon Beach*

If the meaning of identity is to be located both at and as the point of rupture, however, this meaning itself must be preserved, which is to say, it must be ceaselessly disrupted. Identity must reach out to the impossible point of alterity so that, to a greater or lesser degree, it is in fact this act of reaching out itself. Yet the question that remains in this situation is how the fissure of identity is to be maintained as fissure, that is, without its recuperation into an orthodox dialectic of meaning, whereby the certainty of disorder would effectively come to constitute a kind of regulative order. To put it another way, how is one to stare in the face of that which turns away?

The answer or non-answer to which Erickson turns repeatedly in his work is that of the erotic. Indeed, the determinate explosion of Catherine's identity receives its fullest expression at the end of *Rubicon Beach* where sex is figured as the communion of disunion, which is to say, as the relation of that which exceeds all determinable bounds of relationality. The erotic encounter serves not simply as the

[50] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 54.

act by which Catherine is opened onto the point of her own strangeness but also as a *physical* experience of rupture through which both the characters and the novel itself disappear:

released into this foreignness that had become her foreignness, joined to the strangeness that had become her strangeness, [Catherine] surged beneath him, ravening and abandoned (RB: 299).

Catherine disowns herself. Indeed, abandoning herself to the *sensation* of sexual climax Catherine transgresses both the borderlines of the visible and the communicable. In a manner similar to the impenetrable darkness of the void the nuclear imagination remarks, not only does Catherine disappear from view entirely during sexual intercourse, but the narrative melds third-person to first-person narration. To put it another way, the narrative trembles from the narrative presence of Catherine to her narrative absence. Catherine becomes the point that the 'I' cannot see:

she wasn't there, brown and naked she was gone before me, as though she had slipped through the tracks into the black river far below, even as I felt her in my hands, even as I felt her legs around me, even as I felt myself in her: I couldn't see her [...] it wasn't that I closed my eyes: it was that I had to turn away for just a moment [...] It was too much to see that light (RB: 299; Erickson's italicisation).

If orgasm is understood as a peak of being, it is so here precisely because it legitimates the annihilation of the existent. Orgasm returns being to an external rupture that instantiates it; it returns it to the facelessness of its impersonality, the

site of its meaning, 'the dream,' Erickson writes, 'of the wandering blind' (RB: 300). What this amounts to saying is that, in this context, orgasm is that which removes the existent from existence, yet it is also what realises the existence of the existent. From this perspective, then, the erotic encounter is both a source of vitality and of abandonment. Indeed, throughout Erickson's work, the authentic erotic encounter is one where existence is ruined, cast aside, asunder, in which existence is encountered as its forgetting, in its being-led-elsewhere.

Heidegger's definition of 'ecstasis' in the section from *Being and Time* on 'The Temporal Problem of the Transcendence of the World' is illustrative of the exigency at stake here for Erickson. 'Ecstases,' Heidegger comments there, 'are not simply raptures in which one gets carried away. Rather, there belongs to each ecstasis a 'whither' to which one is carried away.'[51] In this sense, as ecstasis, the world 'is' only insofar as it is 'with the "outside-of-itself," [...] 'there."[52] To put it another way, it *is* only insofar as it is both *close at hand* and *in another place*. 'There' schematises the double relation between existence and inexistence in this situation, in which, carried off by the immediate, the existent *is* only insofar as it is outside the space-time of existence. In this way, as the event by which Catherine vanishes, which is to say, as the event by which she 'crosses' the 'Rubicon,' the ecstasis of erotic experience corresponds to an instant in which the existence of the existent becomes indivisible from the potentiality to transgress, to go astray.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas develops this understanding of the erotic as the sheer externality of the 'there' by thinking the erotic as the profane rupture of

[51] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 69, p. 365.
[52] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 69, p. 365.

signification. As Levinas writes, '[a]longside of the night, as [the] anonymous rustling of *there is* extends the night of the erotic.'[53] As Levinas continues:

> [t]he face of the beloved does not *express* the secret that *Eros* profanes; it ceases to express, or, if one prefers, it expresses only this refusal to express, this end of discourse and of decency, this abrupt interruption of the order of presences [...] *Eros* is a ravishing beyond every project, beyond every dynamism, radical indiscretion, profanation and not disclosure of what *already* exists as radiance and signification.[54]

For Erickson, the erotic fulfilment of being is itself conditional on its irreconcilable *relation* to the desecration of rupture. Subjectivity, in other words, is defined by its subjection to a law of the outside that constantly suspends the possibility of either self-identification or self-receptivity. As such, however, this law of alterity can never be fulfilled, that is, transgressed; it subsists in its perpetual incompletion, in the impossibility of encounter it legislates. The relation between erotic experience and subjectivity is one of irrevocable discordance. If the 'there' is that through which the existent comes into existence, the exteriority of 'there' is also in fact that which simultaneously prevents the existent from being self-sufficient, from being a law of and to itself. Irrespective of the degree of intimacy, the existent will never be close enough, either to the other or to itself. The existent, rather, is reduced to a level of insatiability that, at one and the same time, determines and defers it, determines it by deferring it. Catherine 'is' only in the extreme point of her disappearance. As such, the very existence of herself as existent is conditional on her permanent negation, that is, on her validation as insufficient; the *existence* of desire is only a waiting to be

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[53] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) pp. 258-259; Levinas' emphasis.
[54] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 260 and 264; Levinas' emphasis.

existent so that, to a greater or lesser degree, the existent itself is only definable as the awaiting of definition. The pleasure of desire lies only in the vitality of its ruin, in the repetition of its incompletion.[55] To put it another way, desire is not existence but the existent is maintained in and by a desire that maintains it *as desire*.

In this sense, however, the structure of erotic desire is to be located always outside the parameters of meaning and legibility. While it may well serve as the rapacious imperative of existence, the erotic in fact enumerates only what the narrator of *Amnesiascope* refers to as 'true senselessness [in which] not a line of communication with anyone is left' (A: 146). The form of relation, therefore, that the erotic encounter would appear to make possible is, in effect, instantly disavowed. If the sense of the erotic is senselessness, then the erotic can be *experienced* only as that which disappoints, either because the, albeit momentary, satisfaction of desire is the, albeit momentary, ruin of the existent or because the erotic is encountered only as the failure of fulfilment.

In many respects, this double and doubling exigency of the erotic receives its most sustained indication in Erickson's *Amnesiascope*. It is, therefore, to this novel that I now turn. While focussing on a specific thematic strand of the novel, however, a few initial outline comments will help situate what is at stake in Erickson's concentration of the erotic here.

(b) *Amnesiascope*

In its more conventionally linear narrative progression and singular narrative voice, *Amnesiascope* marks something of an anomaly in Erickson's work. That said, however, through its acute focalisation of the narrative through interwoven

[55] Blanchot makes a similar point when he writes, '[d]esire is pleased endlessly to add encounter to encounter, to make a number of the innumerable.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 188.

considerations of memory, time, freedom, guilt, and devastation, *Amnesiascope* both repeats and develops Erickson's earlier fiction. As Erickson himself comments in interview, '*Amnesiascope* is probably either the end of something or the beginning, or both – a coda or a prelude.'[56] In many respects, the novel is both in the sense that its narrative is motivated by an attempt to transcend an overwhelming paralysis of memory. As Erickson puts it, the narrator of *Amnesiascope* is at 'ground zero emotionally and psychologically and creatively and the only thing that's keeping him going is his sensuality.'[57] That is to say, throughout the novel the narrator of *Amnesiascope* abandons himself to an escalating pursuit of sexual encounters in order to liberate himself from the unremitting *here-ness* of existence, which Erickson terms an attempt 'to forget the unforgettable.'[58] This exigency is exemplified in microcosm in the following passage where the intensity of sexual intercourse is equated to the liberation of the existent from temporal and spatial determination. As the narrator comments:

> it tore the last shreds of whatever I had left [...] whatever I could bring myself to remember [...] At that moment the rest of my life tore itself loose from everything that had come before, and I was free of what I had been, of my innocence and pain, everything awash in pitch-black (A: 68; Erickson's emphasis).

For the purposes of this chapter what is particularly striking in this passage is the narrator's insistence that sex is a physical encounter with temporal liberation. That is to say, here the erotic forces the existent into a bodily confrontation with the immaterial (which may or may not be that of existence). Indeed, on various levels, it is precisely this immaterial spectre that appears in the erotic encounter that the novel

[56] McCaffery and Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' p. 397.
[57] Trucks, 'A Conversation with Steve Erickson.'
[58] McCaffery, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' p. 414.

also elicits with the 'amnesiascope' of its title. As the narrator comments, '[i]t isn't an amnesia of the mind I pursue, or an amnesia of the heart; it is rather an amnesia of the psyche that sets me free' (A: 146). What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that, where in the Roman myth it is Psyche's desolate *memory* of Cupid that condemns her to suffer the loss of Cupid, amnesia here corresponds expressly to a liberation from the burden of existence. At the same time, however, given that 'amnesiascope' itself is described in the work as 'the color of flesh' (A: 124), that liberation remains properly unthinkable without its affective attachment to sensual experience. As such, throughout *Amnesiascope* desire is that which the narrator must engage and suffer repeatedly in order to break free of the bondage of existence. Needless to say, the difficulty that arises in this situation is that if the abandonment to desire is necessary for the liberation from desire, desire effectively sentences the existent only to the perpetual experience of the impossibility of liberation, in the sense that the burden of desire would be precisely that from which the existent cannot break free. Even if this is the case, however, the critical point is that the very structure of desire inculcates the *awareness* of the impossible possibility of transgressing its own circumscribed dialectic. If the existent is condemned to fail the fulfilment of desire, then the existent is condemned to experience only the nightmare of its own limits. Consequently, the abandonment of the existent to the consistent failure of desire arouses the existent to the point of madness, that is, to the insane point where the existent in fact exceeds or breaks free of its existential bondage.

In this context, it is important to stress that it is precisely from the point of view of the madness of the structure of desire that the narrator of *Amnesiascope* characterizes sex, and in particular, anonymous or spontaneous sex, as an 'anarchic act' (A: 70). Sex is subversive here for the very reason that it is workless. Ultimately

self-defeating, the precise value of the erotic for Erickson is the way in which its consumptive and compulsive repetition is that which opens toward a complication of any simple distinction between morality and evil, guilt and innocence, sane and insane. The narrator exemplifies succinctly what is at issue in this complication when he comments that:

> I'm stirred by my contemplation of just where moral rationalization ends and real damnation begins, I'm stirred by how even the imagination is not entirely guiltless. I'm stirred by consideration of just how many layers really lie between the blackest secret and the most harmless, and just how thin they are, and by the membrane between the impulse that only lurks and the impulse that is realized (A: 139).

In many respects, the wider question of distinction that the erotic introduces and that here preoccupies the narrator can be best explained if the erotic is set not simply in relation to but as a particular feature of the Ericksonian nuclear imagination. That is to say, just as the nuclear imagination is equated to an imagination that confronts directly the terror of the abyss, so the erotic experience takes place always as an abyssal exposure. The erotic, in other words, invites the existent over the edge, precisely to that point where moral orthodoxy and ecstatic darkness meld into mutual indistinction. In this sense, the anarchic subversion, or Moment, of the erotic equates to the indivisible experience of the pleasure of exposure, which is to say, of being thrown toward the abyssal edge.

While read from this perspective the system of the erotic would appear to impel the simultaneous but much wider question of the relation between freedom and socio-political morality (what is and is not permissible or whether freedom *ought* never to be absolutely free), the primary point to be drawn here is that for liberation

to be possible at all, it must be both uncontained and uncontainable, which is to say, it must risk the dual devastation of both its (moral) regulation and (abyssal) dispersal. In many respects, *Amnesiascope* records nothing other than the actual performance of this dual devastation. On the one hand, its compulsive pursuit of erotic abandonment situates the novel in extreme proximity to the abyss. On the other hand, this radical proximity is vitally necessary in order for the question of moral prohibition to be posed at all. That is to say, it is precisely because the uncontrollable pursuit of erotic experience opens onto a register of abject devastation that its subversive potentiality at all times both carries and intensifies the question of moral authority. As Susan Sontag writes in terms illustrative of the argument here, the artist's:

> principal means of fascinating is to advance one step further in the dialectic of outrage. [The artist] seeks to make his work repulsive, obscure, inaccessible; in short, to give what is, or what seems to be, *not* wanted. But however fierce may be the outrages the artist perpetrates on the audience, his credentials and spiritual authority ultimately depend on the audience's sense (whether something known or inferred) of the outrages he commits upon himself. The exemplary modern artist is a broker in madness.[59]

In this context, then, the dual accumulation of sexual experience and sexual description in *Amnesiascope* is motivated by an expressly critical concern for the definitions of freedom, idealism, risk, and redemption. Freedom, the narrator recognises, comes at a price; '[t]he price of freedom is guilt' (A: 186). Yet, as Erickson everywhere stresses, it is only by pursuing the guilt of freedom into the

[59] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) p. 92.

furthest reaches of an abyssal or endlessly lightening imagination that the meaning of either is determinable.

In principle, then, the concentration of the search for the amnesia of sexual ecstasy throughout the novel is an attempt to free the existent from the limit experience of the 'everyday' or the 'here.' The structural paradox of that pursuit, however, means that the potentiality of an abyssal or radical freedom is bound irredeemably to failure. At the same time, however, it is also precisely this ineluctable facticity of failure that impels the narrator to return always again and as if always for the first time to the pursuit of erotic experience. In an apocalyptic cross-wire logic of infinite self-disruption, for the narrator desire invigorates conscience just as conscience invigorates desire. As the narrator comments, '[h]ere, in the Last City of the Last Millennium, I have meant to defeat guilt and memory once and for all, though I know the effort is doomed' (A: 146). Read in the context of this irrepressible cycle of desire and conscience, conscious existence becomes the scene of terror in the sense that any attempt either to free or to determine the existent is rendered impossible by the strict bondage of its contradiction. More specifically, existence becomes an experience of the anxiety of risk precisely because it becomes resolutely impossible to decide between:

the certain knowledge that my dark impulses are destructive, and the certain dread that it's a collapse into a premature kind of death not to sometimes follow those impulses into sensual experience (A: 200).[60]

[60] At this juncture, it is worth noting that it is precisely the indistinction that structures the narrator of *Amnesiascope's* comments here that parallels Erickson's engagement with the Jeffersonian origins of America discussed in Chapter Four.

The narrator pursues sensual experience in order to discover 'that territory where my conscience can't reach me' (A: 28). The 'delirious amnesia' (A: 70) of erotic experience, however, is temporary, such that 'I could still feel the small drop of conscience left behind me afterward, like the errant cell of a cancer left behind after surgery' (A: 28). As Levinas writes in *On Escape*, '[t]here is something dizzying to pleasure's unfolding [...] The being feels its substance somehow draining from it; it grows lighter, as if drunk, and disperses.'[61] Yet as Levinas continues, pleasure 'is a deceptive escape' because it is one that fails.[62]

If, like a process that is far from closing up on itself, pleasure appears in a constant surpassing of oneself, it breaks just at the moment where it seems to get out absolutely. It develops with an increase in promises, which become richer the closer it comes to its paroxysm, but these promises are never kept.[63]

For the narrator of *Amnesiascope*, the ineluctable consequence of this fractious and ineffable vacillation is that the facticity of existence at all times becomes inseparable from the double experience of the constant desire for freedom and the constant weight of guilt.

Erickson elaborates illustratively this difficult duality that structures *Amnesiascope* in an essay on the exigency of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. As Erickson writes:

[t]he great passion of Henry Miller and *Tropic of Cancer* is nothing less than [...] the relentless raging juxtaposition of the gutter with the heavens, of the beastly with the

[61] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) p. 61.
[62] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 62.
[63] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 62.

transcendent, never judging one above the other, loving not the harmony of it all but the disharmony, delirious at the prospect of the great pending Crack-Up of mankind. This is a writer beyond the reach of your reproach, because he has so completely obliterated the value of that reproach.[64]

Albeit in other terms, the collocation of possibility with disaster that Erickson specifies here conceptualises the ineluctable risk to which the indivisible yet incalculable relation between the erotic and the moral give rise. The abject hazard of their relation is that the meaning of the contradiction can never be determined but only endlessly exposed in the stutter of its ruin. Thus, even as the 'nuclear' risk of meaning may affect the intensification or the demand of meaning, it is also the very trembling liberation of meaning from the burden of signification. In this sense, the nuclear imagination corresponds expressly to the lightening of meaning into the inexorable repetition of the infinite cycle of affirmation and destruction. In the irreconcilability of this irreducible exchange meaning weighs as:

the atmosphere of presence, which can, to be sure, appear later as content, but originally is the impersonal, nonsubstantive event of the night and the *there is*. It is like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces.'[65]

From this perspective, to experience meaning in and as the night of the *there is* is to be faced with the obligation to experience meaning in the simultaneity of its forming and falling. It is 'the transparency which both separates us from things and gives us access to them, by which they are given.'[66] As both the dense and immaterial weight of atmosphere, it bears upon the existent as the ineluctable consequence of having

[64] Steve Erickson, 'Henry Miller: Exhibitionist of the Soul,' *Conjunctions*, No, 29 (Fall, 1997) p. 322.
[65] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 59; Levinas' emphasis.
[66] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 53.

to exist as turned away, of having to exist as turned too much toward. It is blinding, it is lightening; it is both potential and impotential, both exhausting and expansive. As the interface of all these edges, the ecstatic duality of its stutter is beyond the distinction of contradiction.

Properly speaking, it is in the particular interlinear rift of this interchange that the weight of the existence of meaning in Erickson is to be understood. The existence of meaning is the standing apart of both 'meaning' and 'existence;' it is their displacement, their wandering, a projection of the future always already nullified, always already alongside, which is to say, that is on the way, but that is so 'without project': a meaning of ek-sistence, an ek-sistence of meaning.[67]

[67] Rather than drawing this chapter to a self-sufficient close, it bears noting that the ending here is intended to suggest the futural projection of nullity that, in slightly modified terms, is developed in Chapter Four, specifically in relation to Erickson's reading of the political meaning of 'American' origins. In this way, the design of these closing comments do not propose a summation but constitute, rather, a preparatory path that both grounds and is 'on the way toward' this latter analysis.

CHAPTER TWO

ROSMARIE WALDROP:

THE CIRCUMLOCUTION OF MEANING

Think of the power. Of a single word. Like for example "fact." When I know what matters. Is between.

– Rosmarie Waldrop[1]

The difficulty here's not true or false
but that the picture's in the foreground
and its sense back where the gestures link
so closely to the bone
the words
give notice.
The application is not easy.

– Rosmarie Waldrop[2]

[1] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Blindsight* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2003) pp. 21.
[2] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Peculiar Motions* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey St. Press, 1990) p. 32; Waldrop's emphasis.

Something else it is. In their straying flight. Then separate so by skin handrails walking. Even though the wind and it rakes. Nose bitten off to spike. The way lines that carry the weight of absence. The frame to flicker. As a raised hand hopes for wider remit. As erosion. Despite sides one way or the other and convergence too the edge of letting go. Guttural tongue. Cleft. Something else. In a doorway. Circumlocutions.

This chapter analyses the means by which Rosmarie Waldrop's poetry does not so much deny the exigency of linguistic and corporeal meaning as 'circumlocute' each. As it will be evinced, experimentation points both outside and behind regulative practices toward the indifferent zone of the neuter. Whether considered, for instance, from the fractural disturbance of text and layout in such different works as *The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body* and *Peculiar Motions* or the fractal distillation of the prose fragment that has characterised so much of her work since the mid to late 1980s, the intersection between formal fragmentation, neutrality and the construction of meaning has been one of the most consistent locutions throughout Waldrop's writing. As the order of discourse quietly distorts through Waldrop's repeated use of collage, juxtaposition, palimpsestic subversion and syntactical irregularity, so the form of language in her poetry becomes no more than the disembodied isolation of its parts, the hollow of a subject-less body with neither circumference nor centre. Indeed, in her deliberately fragmentary essay, 'Alarms and Excursions,' Waldrop argues that 'it is one of the important tasks of poems to short-circuit the transparency that words have for the signified and which is usually considered their advantage for practical uses.'[3] For Waldrop poetry is not directed by the pursuit of meaning but by the impractical, that is to say, the aporia of practice, the pathless path of circular shuffle-steps. What her poetry aims toward is the laying bare of the language that precedes communication, another language, the most simple language that remains when the question of meaning is no longer a priority. Yet, as Waldrop writes in the published version of her doctoral thesis, 'our idea of what is simple [...] is still the beginning of the inexpressible.'[4]

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[3] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Alarms and Excursions,' in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein, (New York: Roof, 1990) p. 61.
[4] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Against Language: 'Dissatisfaction with Language' as Theme and Impulse Towards Experiments in Twentieth Century Poetry* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971) p. 16.

The inescapable question with which the poet has to contend, therefore, is at once irresolute and impossible: how is the inexpressible as such to be expressed *as such*? The response which Waldrop gives in *Against Language* and which also provides a useful starting point for a chapter on her own work is that the 'way to the ineffable does not [...] go via the infinite and supremely meaningful but via the infinitesimal where all meaning ceases.'[5] In order to express the inexpressible, simple language, form and content, including the critical distinction between the two, must be undone, atomised. The lightening dispossession effected by the process of invalidation directs language not from the point of view of meaning but from that of delirium. Indeed, as Waldrop herself points out, delirium signifies 'a wandering from the *lira*, from the rut,' the rules, regulations, systems and laws that fabricate life, cover its nudity, its bareness, its lack.[6] Waldrop's poetry is delirious; it makes of this wandering its groundless matter.

From this perspective, this chapter examines the development of a constantly shifting locutional gap at the centre of Waldrop's work. It demonstrates that Waldrop is able to construct this fluid gap because she affects a poetics of the neuter. As Maurice Blanchot writes, 'the neuter supposes a relation depending neither on objective conditions nor on subjective dispositions.'[7] Throughout Waldrop's work meaning takes place in the margins of the page, at the point where it is suspended. In this sense, the neuter is the *between point* of view; it enfolds meaning within the non-realised space of the future perfect, that is, the non-space of awaiting.

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[5] Waldrop, *Against Language*, p. 17.
[6] Waldrop, *Against Language*, 30.
[7] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 299.

DEVIATION AND FORM

If narrative writing in Erickson emblematises the aporetic ruins of meaning, then for Rosmarie Waldrop the exigency of poetic writing embodies it. As the first epigraph makes explicit, for Waldrop poetry is the taking place of language in the spaces between words, understood either as the silence of the unmarked margin or the constantly dissolving centre she locates at the core of each poem. 'I am extremely interested in failure,' the speaker of the (prose-)poem 'Enigma Box' comments, '[t]he beginning of art lies next to the body, transitive fissure [...] what deviance from curved diameter and straightest line.'[8] Art, or specifically poetry, in Waldrop, is never what it purports to be. Even if it is close-by, for Waldrop poetry is nonetheless always disappearing elsewhere, moving off at a tangent, deviating in a direction difficult to follow and still harder to grasp. Indeed, one of the central locutions around which Waldrop's poetry turns is the sense that language can be experienced only as fissure, gap, aperture, an 'empty middle' into which the possibility of meaning simultaneously both enters and escapes. In fact, what Waldrop's poetic practice points to is the thesis that, while on a day-to-day level meaning undoubtedly is a practical construct, in critical and compositional discussions of language and poetics it is both inadequate and mis-directed. In a manner similar to Julia Kristeva's notion of poetic language as the exposure of the impossibility of signification, for Waldrop, the question of meaning in poetry is only a by-product of the empty play of language itself.[9] As the speaker of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* comments in the sequence's ninth section:

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[8] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Blindsight*, p. 99. For an analysis of the blurring of poetic form and classification in Waldrop's work, see below.

[9] 'Since at least Hölderlin, poetic language has deserted beauty and meaning to become a laboratory where, facing philosophy, knowledge, and the transcendental ego of all signification, the impossibility of a signified or signifying identity is being sustained.' Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) p. 113.

Emptiness is imperative for feeling to take on substance, for its vibrations to grow tangible, a faintly trembling beam that supports the whole edifice.[10]

Thus, while at the level of communication the 'meaning' of this proposition would appear to be clear enough – without emptiness there is no language, just as Mallarmé's poetry teaches that without the blank page there is no poem – if emptiness is the necessary condition by way of which language becomes tangible and resonant, then this pre-conditional emptiness ultimately serves to disavow any order of meaning it is presumed to make possible. In effect, words double back, collapse into the void they name. Literal meaning, therefore, at best, can be ever only transitive because, at base, it is a-literal, a 'hole nailed through line, sentence, and the demon of analogy.' In its striation of both semantics and syntax, Waldrop's poetry articulates what cannot be spoken. It says the unspeakable by foregrounding all the ways it does not say it. As Waldrop herself puts it in interview with Joan Retallack:

what matters is not things but what happens between them. Or if you take the linguistic model, it is not the phoneme but the connection of phonemes that makes language, the differences in the sequence. It's always the relation [...] The gaps keep the questions in relation.[11]

For Waldrop, the task of poetry is to make of gaps both its form and function; in the space of the unspoken, she maintains, lies the motivation for thought: 'in the gaps we might get hints of much that has to be left unsaid – but should be thought

[10] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (Providence: Tender Buttons, 1993) p. 14. All subsequent references to this work will be given in the main text by the abbreviation LEM.
[11] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop, conducted by Joan Retallack,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), p. 349.

about.'[12] Thus, in a vein reminiscent of Heidegger's postulate that '[t]he dialogue of thinking with poetry aims to call forth the *nature* of language, so that mortals may learn again to live within language,'[13] Waldrop's emphasis on poetic language as the speech of the unsayable foregrounds both the nature of language and the distillation of thinking as cleft. In order that the experience of language and thinking be sustained, however, it becomes necessary for poetry to consistently fail language. This, Waldrop's poetry demonstrates, is the anxiety of poetry's aporia, but it is also poetry's very condition of possibility; the dissolution of both language and meaning becomes the means and the meaning of poetry. Thus, as this chapter follows it, for Waldrop the language of meaning takes place within the development of an extracted and neutral lexicon characterised by insufficiency. As Joan Retallack clarifies:

> Waldrop turns her own restlessness and anxiety of insufficiency into a navigational project, a poetics of formal choices that throw the text into motion as life processes themselves. This has to do with material language – vocabularies, syntaxes, juxtapositional dynamics, interpretive coordinates.[14]

The formal methods engaged by Waldrop to attempt the paradoxical achievement of this failure are various. Indeed, the very plurality of form and register in Waldrop's poetry emblematically reinforces both the restlessness and the failure around which her poetics turn. When what is at stake is the fissure between words, the constant alteration of compositional method effectively makes a principle feature of 1. the ways in which any written form will inevitably fail the terms of its own

[12] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 341.
[13] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) p. 161; Heidegger's emphasis.
[14] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 335.

argument and 2. in spite of this, the simultaneous and inescapable necessity of the repetition of the written attempt (without the attempt in writing the empty centre would not be legible as that which remains illegible). Thus, no matter whether, often in the space of a single poem, Waldrop employs techniques as seemingly incongruous as fragmentation, flow, collage, cut-up, hypotaxis, parataxis, propositional logic, parody, palimpsest, irony and what might be termed a hybrid grammar of strangeness, the technical effect is always one in which poetic form functions as the marker of language's estrangement. Language, in other words, is repeatedly pushed toward the point of disequilibrium. Striated of regulative semantics, Waldrop's syntax stutters. In her early work, at least up to and including *Peculiar Motions* (1990), although with the noticeable exceptions of *The Reproduction of Profiles* (1987) and *Shorter American Memory* (1988), Waldrop predominantly attempts this unbalancing by way of a fractural disturbance of the relation between text, syntax and grammar. More often than not, the poetic line in these collections is fragmented to the point of causticity: pared down words tentatively hang suspended across a blank page that constantly threatens to subsume them, while the mutation of the object in one line into the subject of the next has the effect of abandoning the text on the page to its own interminable ungraspability and disappearance. Similarly, the deployment of the prose fragment that has dominated Waldrop's more recent collections continues this process of vacillation through its internal circumlocution of the discursive drive of the complete sentence. The disruption Waldrop creates through juxtaposition and syntactical irregularities in her prose fragments establishes the sentence as a process of destabilisation and exclusion of meaning. Consequently, while Waldrop herself remarks that, given the emptiness around which her poetics both turn and tend, it is somewhat strange that she came to adopt the prose fragment as the exemplary form

through which to stage fissure (on the surface the empty centre would appear to be disguised by the prose form), the density of the prose format in fact mimics the effect produced by the broken poetic line. Where the line-break manifests the edge of the text in a legible physical contact with the silence that surrounds it, the prose fragment reveals emptiness as that of which it constantly loses sight. Emptiness, in other words, appears as plenitude, within the linguistic mark that contradicts it; the empty centre is rendered excessively visible through the foregrounding of the impossibility of its reproduction. 'Our inclusive views,' Waldrop writes, 'are mosaics. And the shards catch light on the cut, the edges give off sparks.'[15] In a manner analogous to the way that, in nuclear physics, fission involves a loss of mass whereby waste is the rate of energy, for Waldrop the division of language into single combinatory units results in an essential loss or dissipation; plenitude, or the whole, is too full to be touched, emptiness too lacking to be entered. Whether compositionally presented as scalped line or undercut prose fragment the rate of energy the poem embodies records the ineffable fracture and dispersal that, for Waldrop, takes place in any act of communication; as light is dependent on the presence of shadow so language cannot be separated from silence.

BETWEEN

This impossibility forms the central axiom that runs throughout Waldrop's work. For Waldrop:

discontinuity seems the natural state. It's how I see the world. We come to know anything that has any complexity by glimpses. So it is best to have as many different glimpses from as

[15] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Keith, Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 2002) p. 86. Waldrop repeats this phrase verbatim in her *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) pp. 18-19.

many different perspectives as possible, rather than trying to develop a linear argument where one follows from another.[16]

Her books are not so much collections as multiple glimpses of the same thought, the same blind-spots. Just as one fragment cannot be taken in isolation from the sequence to which it belongs, so one work cannot be divorced from its relation to all the others. 'All words are ajar,' Waldrop writes in the tellingly titled and important essay 'Between, Always.'[17] Far from being closed units, words open onto a curvature of space that keeps them in relation, superposition phonemes, as it were, constantly sliding elsewhere in the instant of utterance. Similarly, and in a manner reminiscent of Erickson's compositional strategies, Waldrop's poetry taken as a whole is intersectional; each work operates in deviant relation to the space left open by the previous one:

> [a]n art of separation and fusion, of displacement and connection. For without our connecting them into a picture the dots are not even visible. An art of betweens.[18]

Simultaneously both one thing and another yet never neither wholly subject nor object, neither this nor that, Waldrop's poetry writes itself in the nebulously mediate space of the 'not quite.' While approximating the illegible within the mark of the legible, the form and character of language in her poetry becomes no more than the disembodied isolation of its parts, the hollow of a neuter body with neither circumference nor centre. Muddying the possibilities of classification and identification, language deviates to the degree that, as with the image of the hinge

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[16] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 361.
[17] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Between, Always,' Introduction to the collected edition of *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter* and *A Form/of Taking/It All* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001) p. xv.
[18] Waldrop, 'Between, Always,' p. xvii.

Waldrop invokes to characterise her novels *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter* and *A Form/of Taking/It All*,[19] writing hooks the disparate not by blending but by way of its restless oscillation from one thing to another: it takes off toward by turning away from; detour is the method of approach. 'All words are ajar;' all writing opens onto the space of something other than itself, both possible and impossible. As one of the fragments puts it in the sequence 'As if We Didn't Have to Talk,' taken from Waldrop's first published collection, *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger*: 'the road just / goes on / without asking / for approval / opaque pulsations.'[20] Irrespective of destination, the road, writing, streams ahead, outwards, into distance, toward the potential of wrong turns and the impossibility of its arrest. Indeed, far from halting movement the staccato lines have precisely the opposite effect: they speed-up and accentuate the exigency of movement. Punctuated only by the quickly delivered stutter-fire of phrases, the road simply goes on, ineffably, into the large blank space at the end of each line. Moreover, the radical disjunction between the relatively continuous first four lines and the 'opaque pulsations' of the fifth appears to locate the drive of writing exactly in and as the space of this disjunction, the uncertain locution between form and formlessness, directive and defiance, destination and deviation. It is to here, not-here, that its pock-marked trajectory leads.

As Waldrop reminds readers in the essay 'Between, Always,' the title of one of her earliest poems written in the English language, also collected in *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger*, was itself 'Between.'[21] While on the face of it that poem principally responds to the poet's own sense of displacement following

[19] Waldrop, 'Between, Always,' p. vii.
[20] Rosmarie Waldrop, *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger* in *Another Language: Selected Poems* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1997) p. 11. All subsequent references to this volume will be given in the main body of the text by the abbreviation 'AL.'
[21] Waldrop, 'Between, Always,' p. vii.

her move from Germany to America ('I'm not quite at home / on either side of the Atlantic' read the poem's opening lines [AL: 2]), what is particularly striking about the poem is less the way it affords the possibility of positioning the locution of 'between' as emblematic of a specific biographical experience than the way this locution is already infused at the (empty) centre of Waldrop's poetics. '[A]ware / I'm nowhere /' the poet writes, 'I stand securely in a liquid plane / touched on all sides' (AL: 2). In the total absence of punctuation it is impossible to determine conclusively whether each of the poem's lines are combinatory or divided. Is the 'I' of 'I'm nowhere,' for instance, the same voice that announces 'aware'? Is this 'I' the same as the 'I' that stands securely on a liquid plane? Besides, what is it to stand securely on a liquid plane? Doesn't the plane of liquid actually preclude the ability to stand? If one were to make the assumptive leap that whatever it is that touches the 'voice' of the poem on all sides supports and secures the 'I' on this liquid plane, the word 'touch' would appear to be incongruous with its function. To be touched on all sides does not so much connote the stability of 'held' as it does a nameless and dizzying multiplicity groping and grasping for possession of the 'I.' What this points to, therefore, is that, and as nearly all of Waldrop's poetry attests in one way or another, any experience of linguistic representation is the 'fissure' into which the body, both of language and of the individual subject, not only disappears but also fragments. Indeed, it is telling that in a 36 line poem, concerned as it is with issues of disarticulation and displacement, the line at the poem's centre reads 'doesn't make you' (AL: 2). Far from being made by the poem, the 'I' rather is expressly undone by it. At the same time, however, it is on condition of this undoing that the 'I' appears in the poem at all so that, to a greater or lesser extent (the extent of quantity is irrelevant here), dissolution must be in fact precisely that which augments the subject in the first

place. Everything turns on this paradox. In order to be, speak, see, it is necessary that the sovereignty of the 'I' be transgressed, that it be 'not-I.'

Indeed, another early poem, dedicated to Edmond Jabès[22] and entitled 'Dark Octave,' revolves around this very notion of constitutive negation. Beginning with the seemingly logical assertion that in order '[t]o see darkness / the eye withdraws from the light' (AL: 1), the poem proceeds to open this logic to its own internal suspension and, in so doing, spirals toward an implosion of the very act of seeing. As light conditions seeing so the eye's withdrawal from light is also the eye's withdrawal from the economy of seeing. Indeed, as the poem puts it, 'the eye / away from light / is eyeless' (AL:1). However, instead of negating not only the eye's function but the eye itself, it is precisely this condition of 'eyelessness' that, in the poem, allows the eye to see the invisible that is screened within the visible (the in-visible); not-seeing paradoxically manifests that which cannot be seen. Indeed, where the eye's inability to detect darkness in light is codified in the poem as 'weakness,' the eye's turning away from both the light and its own purposive meaning is figured as its 'power':

> its [the eyeless eye's] power is not-seeing
> and this not-seeing
> sees the night (AL: 1).

[22] It is worth noting that as well as having translated 14 volumes of Jabès' poetry to date Waldrop has also published a memoir of her working friendship with Jabès, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès*. While to my knowledge no sustained critical work has yet been undertaken on the relation between their poetries, and while a comparative study on Waldrop's relation to Jabès falls outside the scope of this chapter, from the restless disruption of form to the space of the book and conception of God as impossible absence, the influence of Jabès would appear to be everywhere in Waldrop. Given Waldrop's prominence in and influence on contemporary experimental poetry in English, not only would such a study cast light on a neglected aspect of Waldrop's own poetry but it would go some way toward the important task of mapping out both a genealogical lineage and trajectory of twentieth and twenty-first century experimental poetics.

Conceptualised in contradistinction to the equation of light with knowledge, the function of seeing on this model is to proceed toward the perspective of non-perspective, the non-meaning of meaning, the obscure darkness of clarity. In the same way that in 'Between' the 'I's' existence was predicated on its negative, in 'Dark Octave' darkness or the night conditions both the presence of light and the possibility of seeing. As such, in order to construct the lexicon of seeing the poem tends toward the articulation of erasure. Indeed, after an unambiguous warning not to dismiss darkness from the angle of vision ('do not dismiss your darkness / or you'll be left / with vision's / lesser angles' [AL: 1]), the poem concludes with the lines:

> it
>
> occupies the eye entirely (AL: 1).

While everything that precedes this statement conditions the presumption that 'it' relates to darkness, its anomalous isolation and rhythmic interruption casts any such easy identification into doubt. Even if the 'it' is synonymous with darkness, the suggestion here is that it is the impersonality of 'it' that conditions the eye's angle of vision. Standing apart on the page from the rest of the poem the 'it' parallels the outlying shading to which it gives voice. That is to say, where the depersonalised 'it' posits the 'unseeable' at the centre of seeing, its singular mark on the page at once both shadows and emphasises the blankness upon which it stands. Indeed, in the same way that 'Between' placed the unmade at its literal centre, in its movement from the locution of seeing to its conditional not-seeing 'Dark Octave' itself is both focalised and made legible by the negative assertion it inscribes at its centre, notably, 'is eyeless' (AL: 1). What is common to both 'Between' and 'Dark Octave,' therefore, is the way each poem attempts to lighten both the 'I' and 'eye' of content

by locating at their centre an ineffable vacuity. In their most simple, which is to say, in their most elementary forms, the meaning of 'I' and 'eye' is precisely their non-thematisability.

Waldrop's notion here of the constitutive role the non-constitutive plays in the formation of both the subject and discourse is proximate to Levinas' understanding of 'saying' as that which precedes, haunts and is at work in every 'said.' Indeed, in order to approach more clearly the means by which Waldrop figures the ineffable as the pre-text of both identity and language in general, a brief consideration of Levinas' central argument might be instructive here.

SAYING

In *Otherwise than Being or, Beyond Essence* Levinas writes that saying 'signifies prior to essence, prior to identification.'[23] In this sense, saying is the atomic, that is, infinitesimal, condition of communication, or as Levinas puts it, '[s]aying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure.'[24] What Levinas here means by exposure is the radical opening of the self-sufficient to the alterity that both precedes and enables it, but which also always already threatens it. In other words, if exposure equates to the 'turning inside out' of both language and subjectivity in the face of what is radically other, then it also equates to the sheer vulnerability and potential for abjection involved in dispossessing myself in the act of self-disclosure, in losing myself in the an-archic encounter with what is not-me:

[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998) p. 45.
[24] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 48.

[t]he subject is not *in itself*, at home with itself, such that it would dissimulate itself in itself [...] Its bending back upon itself is a turning inside out. Its being 'turned to another' [alterity] is this being turned inside out. A concave without convex. *The subject of saying does not give signs, it becomes a sign, turns into an allegiance.*[25]

What is particularly relevant for the purposes of this chapter is that, on the one hand, Levinas specifies that saying does not produce signification but rather that it itself becomes a sign and, on the other hand, that this 'becoming-sign' is the simultaneous instant of the (sovereign) subject's dispersal. Signification, that is, is non-divisible from rupture; rupture is the ineluctable condition of signification. If that is the case, however, then all signification will be inevitably suspended by the constituent fissure it contains. To put it another way, while saying must be subordinated to the constative, determined and finite zone of the said in order for communication to be possible, there will be, at the same time, always an unbridgeable gap between that which comes to be said and that which enabled it in the first place. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Levinas typifies saying as diachronic. 'Diachrony,' Levinas writes, 'is the refusal of conjunction, the non-totalizable, and in this sense, [the] infinite.'[26] Saying, therefore, haunts every said; it is the insistent trace of that which it has not been quite possible to say. In this sense, Levinas' saying somewhat resembles Freud's notion of the uncanny: it subsists in all speech as the recurrence of what, to all intents and purposes, has never been. Indeed, where Levinas posits responsibility of the other as indicative of saying and Freud conjectures the emergence of the uncanny from the perspective of repressed infantile anxiety, for both Levinas and Freud the recurrence of the non-thematized in

[25] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 49. The first emphasis is Levinas'; the second, mine.
[26] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 11.

the said is focalised through the notion of (pre-)originary rupture.[27] Whatever the complexities of the relation between Freud and Levinas, however, what this persistently uncanny presence of saying in the said crucially points to is that, *despite itself*, despite its apparently synchronic legibility, at all times the said in fact manifests saying. In other words, the said is the discernable mark within which the trace of saying appears. If the said substitutes the immeasurability of saying for the measurability of communication then saying subsists in the said as its antecedent and irreducible possibility. As such, substitution simultaneously parallels both the saying and the said to the extent that, while maintaining their irreconcilability, substitution, or exchange, is actually that which connects them in their difference. 'Everything shows itself,' Levinas writes, 'at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable. In this betrayal the indiscretion with regard to the unsayable [...] becomes possible.'[28] 'Substitution is signification.'[29]

DEFORMATION

The question all this ineluctably poses is how conditional non-signification is to be rendered legible without the foreclosure of its radical alterity. How is saying to be exposed while simultaneously preventing the identification between the saying and the exposed? How is the unsayable not to be said? As Levinas warns:

> [t]he nucleus does not open this depth as long as it remains protected by its solid crust, *by a form*, not even when it is reduced to its punctuality, for it identifies itself in the temporality of its essence, and thus covers itself over again.[30]

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[27] For a more detailed discussion of Freud's elucidation of the uncanny and its relation to the rupture of signification, see Chapter Three.
[28] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 7.
[29] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 13.
[30] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 49; emphasis added.

From this perspective, therefore, the nucleus must be always torn from itself, unsettled, *deformed*. At the same time, however, in order that deformation neither take refuge in its own act nor constitute a negative entity, deformation itself must proceed from the impersonal position of passivity or disinterestedness. Otherwise than being, disinterestedness is radically (self-) destructive:

> consuming the bases of any position for oneself and any substantialization which would take form in this consummation, consuming even the ashes of this consummation, in which there would be a risk that everything be born again.[31]

With neither concern nor regard for saying, disinterestedness infinitely disjoins the possibility of conjunction. As such, disinterestedness in fact paradoxically manifests saying by being always already turned away from the possibility of its occurrence; saying takes only the form of its impersonal breaking, or, perhaps better, its breaking into impersonality. Indeed, as Levinas confirms:

> [t]his breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility.[32]

While it should be noted that this ineluctable betrayal of essence is the means by which Levinas hypostatises ethical responsibility as the anarchic foundation of subjectivity, in another register more specifically geared toward the concerns of the chapter, this 'breakup' of the said into the infinite dispersal of saying relates to the abyssal condition of meaning, that is, both its irrecuperable sense and its

[31] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 50.
[32] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 14.

infinitesimal expiration. Saying overflows the thematisation of meaning. Indeed, the irreducible surplus of saying is precisely that which casts meaning not from the position of non-meaning but from meaning's exceptional incommensurability, that is, from a position that is always otherwise than itself, and thus unspecifiable.

To return to Waldrop, the disjoined and equivocal 'it' into which 'Dark Octave' appears to at once both crystallise and disappear tears the poem beyond constative legibility. In its opacity, 'it' consumes the poem, effectively shedding the poem from the diffuse point of darkness it is impossible to see but around which the poem turns. In Levinas' terms, that is, 'it' deforms the poem, substituting the economy of seeing, theoria, tangible presence, for the always elsewhere sightless impersonality of the neuter pronoun, that 'reserve that exceeds every meaning already signified [...] as though the center of the circle lay outside the circle, behind it and infinitely far back; as though *the outside* were precisely this center that could only be the absence of any center.'[33] Neutral saying stands alone as 'it' stands alone in 'Dark Octave,' both divesting and circumlocuting.

In contrast, therefore, to readings that take the inflection of a core emptiness in Waldrop to be a redirection of language toward a specifically feminine sphere, this chapter will proceed to trace the ways Waldrop's circumlocutions shift *outside* the realm of gender in an effort to relocate the movement of both poetry and signification with the neutral. If the self, for instance, is empty of content, form only, then the I/eye is not a something. What *it* says collapses into the space which subsumes it and which it reflects. Indeed, as Waldrop comments in interview, 'writing is beyond gender distinctions [...] Writing, or at least good writing, would be androgynous, would partake of both male and female modes of thinking.'[34] The point that Waldrop

[33] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 380; Blanchot's emphasis.
[34] 'An Interview with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 361.

is making here is not that she maintains a differentiation in her own mind, discernible in her poetry, between modes of thinking that might be characterised 'female' or 'male' but that, where writing is concerned, this distinction no longer applies. For Waldrop, writing negotiates a mode of thinking outside the oppositional dialectic of either/or; writing, rather, occupies the neutral space of between. While the impersonality of the neuter is broadly noticeable across the entire range of Waldrop's output, it receives arguably its fullest differential expression, non-expression, in *The Road is Everywhere or, Stop This Body* (1978), *Nothing Has Changed* (1981) and *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1993). It is, therefore, on these three collections that the main extent of this chapter will focus. It should be noted, however, that there are, however, gaps in this method of exposition, holes in the material it covers. Yet the intention of this chapter is in fact to cultivate the gaps at the levels both of theory and of practice, to make of them, that is, the principle feature in order to indicate the ways in which, for Waldrop, the question not asked interpellates the circumlocution of meaning. As Waldrop comments:

> I *want* the white space; it's needed [...] I want as much of it as possible, because in a way the silence carries the words. But at the same time it is an overwhelming challenge to the words that have to be in dialogue with it.'[35]

This is the tension at the centre of Waldrop's poetry – the tension between desiring silence and having no option but to approach it with words.

[35] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 365; Waldrop's emphasis.

STUTTER-FLOW: *THE ROAD IS EVERYWHERE OR, STOP THIS BODY*

Published six years after *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger*, in Waldrop's second collection, *The Road is Everywhere or, Stop This Body*, she attempts to negotiate the ineffable contradiction of expressing the inexpressible by, as she puts it in her autobiography (and I follow her typographical layout here):

push[ing] at

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SENTENCES,

sliding them together by letting the object of one sentence flip over into being the subject of the next.[36]

On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that this quotation blends together two differentiated sections of her autobiography, two sections, that is, simultaneously held together and separated by the capitalised heading, 'the boundaries of the sentences.' From this perspective, therefore, the spaces between lines, capitalisation, and indentation of the following line are stylistic features, and, in themselves, not particularly remarkable. *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* is divided into sections throughout, whereby each section is preceded by a capitalised title or caption; the beginning of each paragraph is both indented and marked off from the previous and the next by the measure of one line. On the other hand, the very fact that Waldrop took the decision to divide into two paragraphs and a section heading what is effectively, or at least could be, a single sentence typographically *mimes* the precise point she is trying to make. The typographical layout, in other words, visually,

[36] Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie*, p. 83.

inaudibly, conveys what the words, because of their very readability, inevitably contradict, namely, the paradoxical tension between the spilling over of one sentence, even phrase unit, into the next, and their marked (although not remarked), indeed, striking, disjunction from one another. On the face of it the words grammatically cohere and make literal sense. At the same time, however, they do so only if the spatial gaps and deviations of font are overlooked. Read in keeping with its typographical layout, in other words, read by way not only of its words but also its uses of space and font, it becomes far from certain where or how one line relates to the next, if at all. The fragmentation of 'push at,' for instance, issues less toward 'the boundaries of the sentences' as it does the blank space into which it extends – although, certainly, it would be precisely the boundedness of the sentence that the fragmented 'push at' here disrupts. In essence, what Waldrop is doing is making a constitutive feature of the tension between word, line, silence and the production of meaning in verse-writing. Where traditional notions of verse (from the Latin *versus*, denoting a line or a row, in particular a line of writing)[37] figure the linear form as the turning of one line into the beginning of another, by emphasising the internal fissure and silence into which each line disappears Waldrop disjoins this 'turning' from being a 'turning toward' to a 'turning away.'[38] As Waldrop puts it, 'even if the words celebrate what *is*, each line acknowledges what is *not*.'[39]

Indeed, throughout the sequences that make up *The Road is Everywhere* the brevity of the verse line combined with what appear to be unending sentences

[37] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'verse' as '[a] succession of words arranged according to natural or recognised rules of prosody and forming a complete metrical line; one of the lines of a poem or piece of versification.' *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. XII (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 141.
[38] The notion here of a writing that turns away in the instant of inscription is developed in more detail in Chapter Three in relation to Lydia Davis and Paul de Man's definition of irony.
[39] Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie*, p. 77; Waldrop's emphasis.

produces a syntactical lexicon that is irresolutely at odds with itself. As the first sequence reads:

> Exaggeration of a curve
> exchanges
> time and again
> beside you in the car
> pieces the road together
> with night moisture
> the force of would-be sleep
> beats through our bodies
> denied their liquid depth
> toward the always dangerous next
> dawn bleeds its sequence
> of ready signs (AL: 19).

On the one hand, in the absence of punctuation, the line breaks prevent the structural combination of language, so that the sequence's legibility is, to a greater or lesser extent, always already fissured. Each line here can be read neither as a complete unit in itself nor as a constitutive part of a whole. Rather their fractured proximity inscribes, at the level of both the line and the sequence, only their own insistent internal interruption. The curve with which the sequence begins is simply an arc of exchangeability that mutates without explanation into an unnamed presence within a car, a road, night moisture, an abstract energy resembling sleep and so on. On the other hand, however, both the absence of punctuation and the uncertainty of the syntactical relation between line units in fact simultaneously achieve precisely the opposite effect, namely, the propulsion of one line into the next. Each phrase, in

this sense, streams into the next to the extent that it is far from clear where one phrase ends and another begins. As Waldrop herself comments of the sequence:

> [t]he object of one sentence is always also the subject of the next, so that there is no complete sentence, but each poem as a whole becomes one continuous, strangely shifting, ungrammatical sentence.[40]

As such, the sequence becomes the stuttering repetition of itself: the object of one line must be repeated as the subject of the next. Consequently, the difficulty lies in identifying which object becomes the subject of which line, and when. On one level, it would appear that the curve (object of the first line) becomes the unspoken subject of the entire rest of the sequence. Yet, on another level, the curve may actually transmute into the car of the fourth line, so that, in effect, it is the car that pieces the road together with night moisture while, to continue the sequence, the night moisture itself is the force of would-be sleep and would-be sleep is that which beats through the bodies. Both readings are possible just as the sequence is, at one and the same time, both fragmented and flowing. The point for Waldrop, however, has less to do with reconstructing a specific and/or credible textual reading than it does with lighting upon a method of writing that distends, exaggerates, readability to the point where what comes into focus is the illegibility that in-forms the legible. If everything unravels into everything, then, at the same time, everything also unravels into nothing. Or as Waldrop comments, 'if everything is possible, nothing is.'[41] The sequence bleeds, empties out across lines, between subject and object before signs have the time to take form, to coagulate.

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[40] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 339.
[41] 'An Interview with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 365.

In this sense, both the first sequence and the entire poem would appear to revolve, that is to say, to turn, around the poem's first word: 'exaggeration.' The curve exceeds the bounds of signification even as it signs this excess in the way each line spills out, stuttering, into the next. In *The Road is Everywhere* language, perception and being are determinable only on the basis of an order of mutability. As such, however, it is somewhat incorrect to refer to this conditional 'structure' within the terms of 'order.' Its restless changeability is precisely that which casts notions of regulation and organisation into question. The exaggeration of the poem's curve, therefore, inscribes not the inflexibility of order but rather the agitated vacillation of motion, energy, and transgression. As each phrase of the poem requires a double reading, or better, a reading that doubles itself, that shifts backwards, away from the end of each line, so the notion of sequence is turned inside out (in Levinas' sense), which is to say, into a turning of turnings. Simultaneously gravitating toward impulsion and implosion, the poem exceeds its own frame of reference. '[P]resence every / day shifts unceasingly' (AL: 22) in the same way that sequences and perspectives shift. Indeed, in its turning inside out:

what you took for granted
rises from the wrong end
of a sentence and from then on
it's 

after 

(AL: 23).

Nothing comes, nothing goes, and yet, at the same time, everything does. Blood leaks into 'ready signs' although it does not form them. When the distinction between subject and object is no longer distinct, signification is torn from itself, and signs, then, approximate only un-drawn marks, inkspots, textual variants reminiscent of the impossible blindspot of 'Dark Octave.' The sign 'exaggeration,' therefore, serves the semantic function of inscribing an irreducible excess from the very outset that the poem's spiralling syntax mimes throughout. In its movement back and forth, the poem is sent simultaneously both back into and outside itself. What is exaggerated, which is to say, what the poem fails to arrest, to stabilise into either image or presence, is precisely the incessant sliding of this movement. To put it another way, despite the fact that, at the levels of both syntax and semantics, the poem mimics this double movement, in its paradoxical duality, movement is exactly that which exceeds the limits of the poem at every turn. As such, while the poem is constantly rushing toward 'the shock of the "outside"' (AL: 33) the poem constantly flaunts its own impossibility. '[S]kin / flaunts its refusal / to harden into / durability' (AL: 33) just as the poem's final sequence concludes with 'eyes open on / the constant disappearing / translating / one measurement / into another' (AL: 34). Otherwise than itself, the limit experience, indubitably, is beyond the limits of experience; even if it were to be experienced – even if it has already been experienced – the experience itself would not be of the order of experience. There are no exits, it was remarked in Chapter One with reference to Levinas, only an interminable disappearing; 'indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness.'[42]

[42] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 54.

THE UNEMPLOYABLE OR, 'WILD EXUBERANCE'[43]

Besides the work of Levinas, however, another important precursor here is that of Bataille's notion of 'excess.' In fact, in the essay 'Alarms and Excursions' Waldrop herself draws attention to the ways Bataille's notion of the waste of energy critically bears upon her own conception of poetics, commenting that 'Georges Bataille's notion of art as a glorious waste of excess energy' is emblematic of the writing process and that '[t]he function of poetry is to waste excess energy.'[44] In the same way that Bataille writes that sexual reproduction is 'the division by which the individual being foregoes growth for himself and, though the multiplication of individuals, transfers it to the impersonality of life,'[45] for Waldrop poetry is an expenditure that wastes the individual in that self-possession – the individual, the signature – is substituted for the impersonality of a writing whose methods of production are far in excess of the product produced. Like the work of small presses and distributors that function within a negative economy (the running costs, for instance, exceed any return there might be), the poet lavishly invests in their own dissipation. The poet's investment of time and energy, that is, does not so much produce an exchangeable commodity as an unemployable surplus, a '*non-productive expenditure*'[46] that, in its ambivalence to the value of exchange, is simply wildly exuberant. It revels both in its refusal to be 'put to work' and in its delegitimation of 'work' itself. As such, however, the poem in fact points toward an other, excessive, eccentric and ex-centric order peripheral to notions of efficiency, organisation and administration; in short, to 'economy.' It explodes 'economy' by remaining excessive to it.

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[43] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991) p. 33.
[44] Waldrop, 'Alarms and Excursions,' p. 49.
[45] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 35.
[46] Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure' in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. F. Botting and S. Wilson (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1997) p. 168; Bataille's emphasis.

Indeed, in a note to the Preface for *Madame Edwarda* Bataille writes that 'excess' cannot be circumscribed because it surpasses 'any foundational basis':

> excess is no other than that whereby the being is firstly and above all else conveyed beyond all circumscribing restrictions.[47]

Excess, in other words, signifies that which stretches far and away beyond signification, that which is precisely unsayable; it is, quite literally, indescribable. It subsists as an unemployable remainder that has always already transgressed any move to recuperate its excess into a model of regulation. By definition, then, excess is infinite; it surpasses any constraint, even that of itself.[48] As such, however, excess will have surpassed always already its own verbalisation. If the tearing at verbalisation in *The Road is Everywhere* is motivated by the attempt to lay bear the 'ready signs' verbalisation covers, the very excess of signification ('ready signs,' for instance, are already heavy with signification) becomes a tearing at those signs themselves. Inseparable from their embodied forms, their exposure is in actual fact the point of their greatest recession. At the same time, though, this impossible possibility, this irreconcilable non-coincidence, is for Bataille exactly that which discloses the necessity that signification be unbalanced, torn, as it were, outside itself.[49] In Bataille's terms this unbalancing is the 'insensate moment,' that is, the acknowledgement of 'something greater than ourselves, greater than we are *despite ourselves* [the echoes of Levinas are revealing here], something which *at all costs*

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[47] Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, p. 145.
[48] 'Infinite excess' Bataille calls it in *Eroticism.* See Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. M. Dalwood (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1987) p. 40.
[49] It should be acknowledged that I am modifying the terms of Bataille's argument here. Bataille's concern, in the Preface to *Madame Edwarda*, in particular, has less to do with signification per se than it does with the indissociable intersection of existence (being) with death. At the same time, however, given that one of Bataille's principle concerns is with the impossible representation of this relation, to couch this argument in terms of signification is in fact to approach it by repeating it *in other words*; this alternative saying mimes the structural, non-structural, point Bataille is making.

must not be.'[50] While for Bataille (and, to a certain extent, for Levinas) this 'despite ourselves' of the insensate moment is the saying of the word 'God,' what is particularly important for the purposes of this chapter is the way in which Bataille goes on to configure the word 'God' as, to invoke a phrase from Jabès, 'lavish absence.'[51]

As Bataille writes:

> God is nothing if He is not, in every sense, the surpassing of God [...] We cannot with impunity incorporate the very word into our speech which surpasses words, the word *God*; directly we do so, this word, surpassing itself, explodes past its defining, restrictive limits. That which this word is, stops nowhere, is checked by nothing, it is everything and, everywhere, is impossible to overtake anywhere.[52]

The word 'God,' in other words, is always more than itself. It exceeds language and yet, as such, its trace is everywhere discernible in language; it is the outside that defines the parameters of the inside, the 'exaggerated curve' of the circumference that simultaneously forms and circumlocutes the circle. It is, in short, the excessive word that remains as, but also at, the waste of language. If excess is always already beyond itself, then excess can never come into presence. At best, rather, it is nebulous, fleeting, caught not as a physical or verbal entity but rather as a *de-formal* glimpse of language's conditional death-spasm. Indeed, it would appear that it is precisely this 'spasm' that the stutter-form of *The Road is Everywhere or, Stop This Body* performs. The demand for rest suggested by the collection's alternative title is precisely that which, at all times, the ubiquitous road both surpasses and disavows.

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[50] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, p. 141; Bataille's emphasis.
[51] Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Vol. 1, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991) p. 82. The phrase is also of course the title of Waldrop's reflective memoir of Jabès.
[52] Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, p. 142.

As such, while for Bataille the 'insensate moment' specifically figures the awful appearance of God, what is emblematic for an understanding of Waldrop is the way in which this moment formally appears in the poem as the poem's principle excess, that is, as that which the poem is unable to contain but which it cannot but ceaselessly bear out. In this sense, exaggeration does not so much traverse the limit of the communicable as swell this limit into an intractable view of where the poem breaks down, a 'void suddenly of [...] language' (AL: 26) where 'the outside rises up / into the bright blue sky / off balance' (AL: 25). In other words, by swelling the space of the poem, exaggeration circumlocutes the possibility of legibility by casting *everything*, including itself, from the point of view of infinite movement, infinite flight. Indeed, as it will be discussed below, where this point of flight inscribes *The Road is Everywhere* with a syntactical and formal lightness, it is also precisely from the perspective of this lightness that Waldrop's more recent work comes to be marked by the indelible trace of the neuter.

FRAGMENTATION

If *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger* and *The Road is Everywhere or, Stop This Body* both 'propose a grammar in which subject and object function are not fixed [...], where there is no hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses, but a fluid and constant alteration,'[53] in order to verbalise the incommunicable, then in other collections Waldrop foregrounds the same non-verbalisation by substituting incessant flow for irrevocable fragmentation. As Waldrop explains in essay,

[53] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Thinking of Follows' in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, ed. Margaret Sloan (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1998) pp. 609-671; reprinted at: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/waldropr/thinking.html, no page numbers; accessed 2 February 2005.

fragmentation allows the poet 'to frustrate the expectation of continuity, of step-by-step-linearity.'[54] Indeed, for Waldrop:

there is a kind of orchestral meaning that comes about in the break [of linearity], a vertical dimension made up of the energy field between the two lines (or phrases or sentences). A meaning that both connects and illuminates the gap, so that the shadow zone of silence between the elements gains weight, becomes an element of the structure.[55]

Admittedly, in the stutter of both lines and sequence that exemplify the form of *The Road is Everywhere*, the impulse toward this 'shadow zone' is already decidedly discernible in Waldrop. At the same time, however, the emphasis on fragmentation, juxtaposition and collage in works as different as *Nothing Has Changed* and *Lawn of Excluded Middle* accentuates this silent shadow-zone from an alternate perspective.

Given the diacritical concentration of lightness in this thesis it should be remarked perhaps that Waldrop's notion of fragmentation as the means by which elements gain weight undoubtedly strikes a somewhat surprising, if not emphatically incongruous, note. That said, as fission reduces the mass of the nucleus through the release of energy, so it will be seen that fragmentation exasperates structures of form and meaning by effecting their irrecuperable lightening. Certainly, it may well be that what Waldrop has in mind is an unknown, even perhaps, unknowable, quanta for which fission cannot answer, a 'constant of desire / and distances that don't contract to / energy / mass.'[56] Yet even if this is the case, invariable desire and incontractable distances do not so much add weight as dispel the very notion of the mass of

[54] Waldrop, 'Thinking of Follows.'
[55] Waldrop, 'Thinking of Follows.'
[56] Rosmarie Waldrop, *A Form / of Taking / It All*, p. 241.

form. Structure, rather, is cast from the extreme feverishness, the lightness, of an unlocatable and unquantifiable point irrevocably removed.

LINEARITY IN PIECES: *NOTHING HAS CHANGED*

Composed of thirty-five sections ranging from anywhere between three and ten lines in length, *Nothing Has Changed* repeatedly exemplifies this disruptive lightening at each of the units of line, phrase, fragment and whole. Ostensibly a speculative sequence concerning conditions of relationality between persons, between proximity and distance, presence and absence, attraction and separation, speech and silence, knowability and unknowability, *Nothing Has Changed* ultimately settles only in the non-space of rupture that, from the very outset, it articulates as '[a] sort of empty number / [...] / never more present' yet 'all you / around you.'[57] Indeed, it is precisely around this paradoxical notion of constitutive non-positivity (in contradistinction to the negative) that the poem both turns and re-turns. The poem's empty number is that which is, *at the same time*, both excessively present and radically non-present; it surrounds the poem even as it is the poem. Crucially, what this implies is that, at the levels of both form and content, the poem implodes the organisational distinction between inside and outside. On the one hand, if the empty number is 'all you' then this non-specifiable blankness is that which the 'you' not only contains but which also constitutes its skin, its limit. On the other hand, if it is also that which is 'around you' then, to a certain extent, it is that which lies outside or beyond the 'you.' As such, therefore, and in a manner similar to the impossibility that conditions Orpheus' song of Eurydice, the 'empty number' is that which codifies the 'you' (the song), and yet, at the same time, it is also that into which this 'you' (this song) irrevocably disappears.

[57] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Nothing Has Changed* (Windsor, VT: Awede Press, 1981). The full-text is also available online at: http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/rw-nc.htm, accessed 2 February 2005. Hereafter all references to this work, given by the abbreviation NC, will refer to the online edition, and hence will be unpaginated. Numerical references will be to the individual sections of the poem.

To put it another way, the poem comes into being, is formed, by way of its inexorable emptying out; the presence of the poem becomes its own endless awaiting for presence.

This impossible structural condition around which *Nothing Has Changed* repeatedly moves is perhaps most clearly illustrated in microcosm by the poem's fourteenth fragment:

> I can't stand with
> waiting to be present
> not only as it would have been
> decision out of reach
> and because I openly
> you too lost
> in waiting (NC: 14).

Waiting here paradoxically defers and constitutes the presence of 'I' and 'you.' While on the one hand the absence of presence suspends the 'I's' ability to stand, to formally locate itself, by subjugating it to a passive waiting for itself, on the other hand passivity, in effect, becomes the 'I's' defining characteristic. 'I' is to the extent that 'I' inactively awaits itself, which is to say, to the extent that 'I' is 'it,' that the personal is conditional on the pre-text of the impersonal. Indeed, it is presumably for this reason that the third line switches tenses from the present to that of the past conditional. If the 'I' is to become itself, to become 'I' as such, then the sudden employment of the past conditional would appear to suggest that this coming into being will always have been, that is to say, will always be, at a point in time otherwise than now. At the same time, however, what this implicit suggestion points

to is less the manner in which the 'I' is always both gone and to come, than the way in which the condition of waiting subordinates the apparent specificity of 'I' to the non-specificity of the neuter pronoun 'it.' As such, it would appear to be precisely around the neutrality of 'it' that the fragment both crystallises and disappears.

Such a reading is, in fact, borne out by the poem as a whole. Throughout *Nothing Has Changed* pronouns mutate into other pronouns to the extent that it is impossible to identify a specific voice or subject behind the poem. In certain respects, the poem's extreme sequential fragmentation severs the possibility of conclusively identifying the voice of one section with that of another. In other respects, the constant slidings of register between I, you, he, she, and we, sometimes within the space of a single fragment, defuses the constitutive singularity of each by diffusing them across an impersonal lexicon of merging and perpetual non-coincidence. Thus, for instance, as section four reads:

> Parallel open so we could
> against one another
> turn
> you know there is
> between attention
> a place never direct
> nor an object to stay near
> impersonal attention you don't with
> extreme (NC: 4)

and section twenty-four:

You can't make this distinction
it's very strong and nothing hinders
because your presence in its
always I mean
dispersing always
and separating (NC: 24).

Taken together, what these fragments point toward is the constant 'delocution' of pronouns. In section four, the exposure of 'I' to 'you' and vice versa does not so much result in their symbiotic convergence into 'we' as it does their impersonal indirection; between 'you' and 'I' 'a place never direct / nor an object to stay near.' To put it another way, between 'you' and 'I' there is neither subject nor object. There is, rather, only an impenetrably impersonal attention spilling into an 'extreme' elsewhere, fragmenting, dissolving, lightening. Moreover, this conceptual lightening is paralleled also by the fragment's formal structure of syntactical subversion and discontinuity. Where the open equivalence between 'you' and 'I' subtends 'we' to the immediacy of the impersonal, the problematisation of legibility that syntactical subversion effects results in an ever-more 'extreme' refusal of both semantic continuity and correspondence. At the 'extreme' point sense is severed irretrievably, cut through by an impersonality that recognises neither definition nor distinction. Its 'meaning' is the excess of meaning, that which lies beyond the limits of the fragment's legibility. In this sense, the 'extreme' into which the fragment essentially disappears becomes the very essence of the fragment, the point around which the sequence is gathered. It signs the non-space in which 'I' and 'you' coexist by disappearing into the impersonality of 'we,' which is to say, by severing readability to such a degree that it can be neither recuperated nor recapitulated. Moreover, where

this impersonal indistinguishability resurfaces in section twenty-four it does so precisely in the non-specific, neutral form of 'it.' The distinction between personality and impersonality is here refused at every turn. As such, all that appears, and to a certain extent, all that remains, is an endlessly disseminating non-specifiable 'it.' As the presence of 'you' subsists only in an unintelligible 'it' so 'you' is irrecuperably dispersed and separated from self-presence. Indeed, if the fragment promulgates the disturbance of the pronominal then the repetition of 'always,' together with the intrusive qualification of the anomalous and non-clarifying 'I mean,' gestures toward the sheer impossibility of promulgation. As the final couplet from the twenty-seventh fragment clarifies:

> when you're there it's not quite
> what you see once and for all (NC: 27).

Strictly non-specifiable, 'it' will be always elsewhere from either here or there. As such, the articulation and/or observation of 'it' will involve necessarily an endless repetition of displacement and inexact qualification, into which the fragment's initial prescriptive statement (presumably spoken by the 'I' that is beginning to find things difficult to express by the fourth line) both precipitates and disappears.

Thus, where *Nothing Has Changed* plays out across the 'shadow-zone' of the non-identifiable so central to Waldrop's poetics, what comes into being is not a 'who' but rather only the neutrality of 'what.' As the eleventh fragment puts it:

> what makes you
> it's between us
> it's what (NC: 11).

On the one hand, in the absence of punctuation it is impossible to decide whether 'what' functions here as an interrogative, indefinite or relative pronoun. Should the first line, for instance, be read as a question (in the sense of, what makes you?) or a statement (that which makes you)? Similarly, is the second line a continuation of the first (that which makes you is that which is between us) or does it respond by postulating that that which is 'between us' is that which 'makes you'? Further, does the third line then ask what it is that is 'between us' that 'makes you' or does it propose that what is 'between us' is simply that, the neutral space of 'what'? Or, yet further, is it simply a condensed repetition of the first two lines, in the sense that it repeats the notion that 'you' is constructed by that which exists in between 'you' and 'I' ('us')? On the other hand, it may well be that distinguishing between each possible reading here is an arbitrary and essentially pointless exercise. What matters, rather, is the way in which the repetition of the indistinct terms 'what' and 'it' locates both 'you' and 'us' within an irremediably neutral locution. It allows that which resists substantiation (the neuter) to come into linguistic being by means of a signifier as oblique as it is reflective. Indeed, as will be discussed in more detail presently, the constant linguistic and formal 'circumlocutions' that play out across all of Waldrop's work emblematise both the attempt and the inevitable failure of expressing the non-substantive that, for Waldrop, conditions both language and identity. 'Give back what disappears,' Waldrop writes in the sixth fragment, 'as if a detour in forgetting / could' (NC: 6). Compacted, circuitous, and constantly deflecting any possibility of inference, both this fragment and the poem as a whole mime the dispossession implied by the opening demand to 'give back' (after all, there is no need to demand that which is already possessed). At the same time, however, the radical abbreviation and abandonment that characterises *Nothing Has Changed* gives back precisely 'what' it demands, namely, disappearance. In this sense, *Nothing Has Changed* gives back

not 'what' 'disappears but disappearance itself, as if a forgetting that forgets to forget does not remember substance but only the void of forgetting itself, what it does not say, in the same way that the conditional form of the sixth fragment's last word ('could') does not so much indicate possibility as it does that which is not present.

EMBODIED WANDERING: THE IMAGE OF THE SENTENCE

If the radical disruption of visual and verbal linearity at work throughout *Nothing Has Changed* exemplifies the point of disappearance toward which Waldrop's poetics tend, then Waldrop's subsequent turn to the prose fragment would appear to mark something of a formal and thematic departure in her work. At the very least, it could be argued that the visual block-form of a prose fragment effectively and inevitably disguises the space of disappearance Waldrop's early work was so intent on 'fractally' displaying. That said, however, as a representative analysis of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* will attempt to illustrate, just as the expression of the inexpressible turns around – circumlocutes – that which has not been said, so it is precisely by way of non-appearance that disappearance paradoxically becomes apparent. In this sense, disappearance becomes the embodied wandering of writing across the page. Thus, while Waldrop's direct assertion in *Lawn of the Excluded Middle's* first fragment that she places an 'empty space [...] at the centre of each poem' (LEM: 6) would appear to contradict that emptiness by substantiating it in the form of a unequivocal statement, it is in fact only on condition of this contradiction that emptiness enters the poem at all. Essentially placeless, emptiness is not of the order of that which can be placed either here or there. As such, to assert that one places an empty space at the centre of each poem is to assert nothing whatsoever. Once emptiness is placed it is no longer emptiness; once it is no longer emptiness, the statement that asserts it places emptiness at its centre becomes an empty statement

without signification. In effect, then, all this statement produces is the immediate cancellation of itself in the instant of utterance. What remains is only the mark of its annulment, its neutralisation, that is, its own unemployable emptiness. Indeed, it is precisely around this *mark* of perpetual self-cancellation that the whole of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* turns.

To take a somewhat more extended and textually descriptive example, the second section of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* reads:

> I'm looking out the window at other windows. Though the pane masquerades as transparent I know it is impenetrable just as too great a show of frankness gives you a mere paper draft on revelations. As if words were passports, or arrows that point to the application we might make of them without considering the difference of biography and life. Still, depth of field allows the mind to drift beyond its negative pole to sun catching on a maple leaf already red in August, already thinner, more translucent, preparing to strip off all that separates it from its smooth skeleton. Beautiful, flamboyant phrase that trails off without predicate, intending disappearance by approaching it, a toss in the air (LEM: 7).

For the moment my concern has less to do with what this fragment says (or, for that matter, its manner of saying it) than with its *general* appearance or image on the page. In certain respects, of course, with its insistent rush of frames of reference and angles of perspective, the feverish disunity of this fragment more than resembles Waldrop's typographically disturbed poetry. Indeed, Waldrop herself has noted this similarity, remarking in interview of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* that '[i]t's almost bizarre that they are prose poems, that I didn't work with lines, with the constant facing of the edge where the word meets silence.'[58] The question such a comment motivates, however, is why did Waldrop favour the prose form here over the more immediately

[58] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 365.

striking form of the broken line? What is it about the prose form that makes it seem particularly well suited to the task of exposing the 'shadow-zone' of the empty centre?

In order to broach these questions, Waldrop's own comment in interview is perhaps more apposite than at first appears. In other words, what Waldrop's comment suggests is that it is precisely the incongruity of the poem's form to its function, the fact that it strikes a discordant note, that marks out the prose form as the exemplary staging ground of the empty centre. Where the fragmented line makes an explicit visual feature of silence, which is to say, where linearity effectively renders silence audible, the contradiction between the sequential referentiality of prose and the poem's subject matter *pronounces* silence precisely because it effaces its articulation at every turn. What this intimates, therefore, is that the contiguous form of the prose fragment is not palliative but, rather, self-combative. By shifting silence from the margins of the text to its textual centre it 'circumlocutes' that which it signs without rest. Similarly, because of the compacted density of its textual presentation on the page, the prose fragment always already mimes the thematic of impenetrability (emptiness) at its very surface. Ink stretches from justified margin to justified margin, covering the page with a proliferation of non-self-identical signs referring only to that which they are not; the condition of the sign is precisely its being not what it is. Or as Derrida writes in his essay on Jabès entitled 'Ellipsis,' and which raises many questions equally pertinent to a consideration of Waldrop:

> [a]s soon as a sign emerges, it begins by repeating itself. Without this, it would not be a sign, would not be what it is, that is to say, the non-self-identity which regularly refers to the same.

That is to say, to another sign, which itself will be born of having been divided. The grapheme, repeating itself in this fashion, thus has neither natural site nor natural center.[59]

If each sign is always already divided, however, before structures of signification come into play each grapheme is simply a *pre-text* of variously patterned spots of ink. At base, therefore, each prose fragment is simply an image in the Blanchotian sense of the term. The image, that is, is the anterior appearance of the nothing where it disappears. It announces itself while revoking all and any possibility of identification. To put it another way, as Blanchot considers it, the image is the absorption of the thing in its own anteriority; it is that which appears before the order of appearance 'in the void of its reflection.'[60] Or, as Levinas explains in an essay on Blanchot, 'the image precedes perception.'[61]

In relation to Waldrop, therefore, the image of each prose fragment, the smear of its ink across the page, is the originary experience of the poem. Prior to reading, the encounter with the poem takes place first and foremost at the level of its impenetrable surface, at that precise point where its self-identity as graphic structure is simultaneously obscured and suggested. As such, what this proposes is that the initial condition of the poem is, in fact, non-semantic. Indeed, with this in mind, it bears stressing that for Waldrop a poem is as much a physical entity as it is a linguistic unit, which is to say, for Waldrop, the physical image of the poem is as much a part of the poem as its text. In certain respects, this physicality of the poem is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the first edition of *Peculiar Motions*. Composed of ten poems, the volume also includes four so-called 'S/kins' printed on vellum that

[59] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 374.
[60] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p. 262.
[61] Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Poet's Vision' in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1996) p. 130. For a more detailed discussion of the Blanchotian image, see Chapter Three, 'Lydia Davis: The Image of Meaning.'

intersect and intervene with the legibility of the book's text. Each singular vellum both closes off and opens onto the poem it shrouds; they disrupt the reading process even as they afford a glimpse of the text they veil. As the artist of the 'S/kins,' Jennifer Macdonald, comments:

> [u]sing phototechnology on vellum [...] these images intersect the poetry by way of metaphor and movement [...] As a permeable membrane, the *S/kins* intervene as a moment of passage between pages, alternately veiling and revealing the language below.[62]

In this sense, the inclusion of vellum both redoubles the surface *image* of the poem on the page, and makes of this redoubling an irreducible part of the reading process. The poem is both its illegible image behind the obscure-reflective vellum and its presence as graphic language. In order to read *Peculiar Motions*, therefore, in order to read its text, it is necessary to interact with its physical space as book, with the alterations of text and texture, presentation and effacement. Similarly, and to bring the focus back to *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, the typographical presentation of each prose fragment on a separate page does not so much foreground the large blank space that surrounds the prose on all sides as emphasise the clearly defined concentration of ink on the page. The surface *image* of ink is that which is *immediately* striking. At the same time, however, it is also that which is immediately blinding. The reader first encounters the poem from a physical distance, in the turning of a page, with pinched hand and crease of spine, the texture of finger and folio, where the out of focus eye, detached from the definite, catches a glimpse only of the blurred generality of the poem's overall shape. This image is the text's question, the one it both articulates and disarticulates at every turn of its becoming

[62] Jennifer Macdonald, 'S/kins' in Rosmarie Waldrop, *Peculiar Motions* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey St. Press, 1990) p. 11.

text, its perception. The eye is not so much directed to the particulars of linguistic units as it is the space between words, the diversions of the text's internal blank spaces that set one blurred mark apart from another. To put it another way, the eye does not so much see the poem as it does its internal fissures. Thus, and even if the duration of this initial indirection of focus is admittedly infinitesimal to the extent of imperceptibility, if not resolute insignificance, *in the first instance* the poem's text (its language) is transmitted simply as pre-text (image). Indeed, as it was observed of 'Dark Octave' that the power of the eyeless eye lay precisely in its ability to 'not-see,' so each poem signifies by way of its pre-significatory, that is to say, impenetrable, physicality. This is particularly apposite of the prose poem in the sense that its dense block structure renders its impenetrability, its 'shadow-zone,' excessively visible. Indeed, as Waldrop writes: 'the eye is a camera, room for everything that is to enter, like the cylinder called the satisfaction of hollow space' (LEM: 8). The image of the poem subsists as the hollow space into which the eye spirals.

None of this is intended to suggest, however, that the semantic element of each prose poem is subordinate to the physical presentation of graphemes. The point, rather, is to indicate that, for Waldrop, 'reference is secondary' to the physical structure of the poem.[63] 'The poem works by indirection.'[64] Thus, for instance, when in 'As if We Didn't Have to Talk' Waldrop writes 'I need a book to say / I love you' (AL: 17) the intimation is that the object becomes the subject's expression, there where it is masked. Indeed, referring to these lines in *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie*, Waldrop goes on to quote Hofmannsthal's 'We must hide what is deep. Where? On the surface.'[65] The poem resides at its surface, at the level of its outside. In terms of the second section from *Lawn of Excluded Middle* quoted above, windows do not

[63] Waldrop, 'Alarms and Excursions,' p. 54.
[64] Waldrop, 'Alarms and Excursions,' p. 54.
[65] Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie*, p. 91.

crystallise onto what lies outside them but rather give out only onto the reflective opacity of other windows. The glass surface of the window is exactly that which the eye cannot penetrate. It is held there, at the level of impenetrable outside.

From this perspective, that is to say, non-perspective, words are neither means of entry ('passports') nor indicative markers ('arrows') of functional application. On the contrary, as the syntactically separated yet simultaneously juxtaposed 'life' and 'still' would appear to suggest, units of language reveal only a still life *image*, which is to say, life 'prior to perception,' an eye dissociated from function. There is no getting at what, if anything, lies behind the word. That which each word reflects, rather, is simply its own intractable exteriority from substance. At the same time, however, it is in fact precisely on account of this obstinate intransigence that, paradoxically, 'the mind' perceives 'depth.' The opacity of the surface is that which renders the sheer extent of the surface 'translucent.' To put it another way, because the surface is impenetrable, the surface extends in all directions. Surface is deep; it stretches all the way down to the bareness of bones, the disembodied cylinder struck through with a hollow space it can neither contain nor obtain. It disappears there, back into the surface of itself. In this sense, the poem's impermeable surface is simply a dissipating 'phrase [...] without predicate', that is, with neither subjective attributes nor properties. Desubjectified and non-identical, each 'phrase' signs not their substance but simply the depth of their bare surface. Their 'meaning' is their circumlocution of the dialectic of meaning, their disappearance. Language intends 'disappearance by approaching it,' by disappearing in the movement of approach. The appearance of language, therefore, its coming into being, is conditional on its self-abandonment to the impersonality of empty surface (image). As Deborah Meadows clarifies:

[a]t the syntax level, the sentence is an axiomatic structure that both: 1. annihilates what it uses as a vehicle of expression, of evidence; and 2. restores and preserves its vehicle as an inseparable structure of meaning, of evidence. Waldrop shows us the gap between language as a self-referential system and experience.[66]

Read in this way, the constantly redoubling movement of the sentence in *Lawn of Excluded Middle* mirrors the exigency of its physical form: both make of emptiness their paradoxical substance.

At each of the levels of pre-text (physical image) and text (syntactical image), therefore, *Lawn of Excluded Middle* at all times mimes the dissolution of both substance and subject. Needless to say that on the one hand, and as partially suggested above, it follows necessarily that this dissolution consequently becomes the poem's very substance. On the other hand, however, because dissolution simultaneously disappears in the instant of appearance, dissolution cannot be said to be of the order of either presence or absence. Rather, if it can be said to be anything at all, it can be said only that dissolution is at once otherwise than being (including its obverse: non-being) and otherwise than itself. Neither here nor there, positive nor negative, it takes place only in the disembodied non-space of elsewhere. In this sense, dissolution is nothing other than the 'lawn of excluded middle' itself. Outside the 'venerable old law of logic' (LEM: 68) that pits truth against falsity, light against dark, male against female, which is to say, outside the structure of opposition, the lawn of excluded middle is the point of intersection where each limit is ex-posed (both laid bare and disarticulated) to the indistinct they share. To put it another way, the lawn of excluded middle ex-poses the notion of limit to the point at which

[66] Deborah Meadows, 'Rosmarie Waldrop and the Poetics of Embodied Philosophy,' *How2*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (Fall, 2002), at: www.scc.rutgers.edu/ however/v1_8_2002/current/readings/meadows.shtm, 20 December 2004.

signification blurs, giving itself off (in the sense of becoming as well as that of suspension) there. As section twenty-six reads:

> I wanted to settle down on a surface, a map perhaps, where my near-sightedness might help me see the facts. But grammar is deep. Even though it only describes, it submerges the mind in a maelstrom without discernible bottom, the dimensions of possibles swirling over the fixed edge of nothingness (LEM: 31)

The depth of surface is precisely that which precludes the mapping of limits, legislation, legitimation. It disappears into its own far-flung submergence, its distance from presence, its immeasurable emptiness. The lawn of excluded middle is this immeasurability. It shows itself as the refusal of settlement, in the sense of both dwelling and determination. As such, the lawn of excluded middle simultaneously reflects and posits what is referred to, in the fragmentary notes that close the volume, as 'an alternate, less linear logic' (LEM: 68), which is to say, a 'logic' that is 'logical' only insofar as it pertains to a governable law of self-cancellation. The fracture of nothingness it opens is the interminable fissure into which it slips. 'The mistake,' Waldrop writes, 'is to look for explanations where we should just watch the slow fuse burning [...] What we let go we let go' (LEM: 18). Both indifferent and in-different, the logic of the lawn of excluded middle here is simply the passivity of its letting go: of logic but also of its own self-identity as that which 'lets go.' It gives itself only as the giving out of self. As the eighth section puts it: '[t]he meaning of certainty is getting burned' (LEM: 13); the certainty of meaning is its atomisation into the non-systemic différance of writing.

A-LOGIC OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

Always self-divided, in its constant re-doubling the lawn of excluded middle's alternate logic becomes what might be termed the a-logic of alterity. The non-thematisable emptiness at the centre ('the center of nothing' [LEM: 13]) of the sequence not only calls that work into question but, specifically, calls it into meaning; its meaning is precisely its calling into question. In the absence of self-identical signs what forms into legibility across the poem is not so much the negation of signification but rather the plenitude of a between-space marked by perpetual linguistic non-coincidence. From this perspective, the non-appropriation of alterity necessarily underwrites presence and absence with an incommensurable opening. Circumscribed by such immeasurable vacancy, 'the I has no sharp boundary inward' or outward but only the perpetual experience of 'inability.'[67] Writing slips from immaterial sign to physical surface; it screens a spacing of graphemes that except phonemics, that turn inside out the common structures of equivalence and of reference. It is '[s]omething that can be held in the mouth, deeply, like darkness' (LEM: 6), that can be experienced as material sensation but which 'goes by so fast when I should like to see it laid open to view [...] so that form becomes its own explanation' (LEM: 10). The pages turn and the typeset separation of the poem becomes nothing more than 'the thickness silence gains when pressed,' which is to say, when graphically compressed (LEM: 17). 'The ghosts of grammar veer toward shape' and disperse there (LEM: 17). As Waldrop writes, '[t]ouching bottom means the water's over your head. And you can't annul a shake of that by shaking it again' (LEM: 20).

[67] I am here modifying the following from the title section of *Split Infinites*: 'When we say infinite we have no conception but our own inability. Therefore the name God is used. The I has no sharp boundary inward.' Rosmarie Waldrop, *Split Infinites* (Philadelphia, PA: Singing Horse Press, 1998) p. 54.

In spite of all this, however, it is important to stress that the incorrect distinction of writing paradoxically also both manifests and cultivates alterity in the sense that alterity appears not only as but, crucially, because of the error of writing. 'Only language grows such grass-green grass' (LEM: 8) Waldrop writes in the third section of *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, by which she means only language extrapolates the *lawn* of excluded middle, the hollow space it both contains and names. Language reflects the empty centre by signing that which goes astray, namely, its own sequential body of words. Indeed, when Waldrop writes that '[s]incerity is no help once we admit to the lies we tell on nocturnal occasions' (LEM: 17) the point is that because language can be used to lie, to say *anything*, it can never be mobilised as a vehicle for certainty. There is a word too many. The mark of language is always already the dissipating ex-scription of the alterity that haunts it at every turn. In order to get at language, therefore, it is necessary to accentuate what undercuts it, 'to cultivate the gap itself with its high grass for privacy and reference gone astray' (LEM: 17). The lawn, in this sense, becomes 'the locus of fertility' (LEM: 68),[68] 'scrap meanings amplifying the succession of green perspectives, moist features, spasms on the lips' (LEM: 17). The 'spasm' of language lightens expression from the burden of meaning, recasting it rather from the non-point of self-deviation and self-detour. As Waldrop clarifies in interview, the empty centre is the necessary space that, in its inability, enables 'resonance, understanding, fertility, everything. This is where the "law" (of the "excluded middle") turns into "lawn."'[69] To put it another way, it is where the 'law' is *at once* both legislated (written) and suspended by its exception. The exception puts the law into question, but it also focalises that law as the play of this intractable question. From this perspective, the question of the law, or better, the law

[68] Waldrop repeats this description of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* in 'Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie,' p. 91.
[69] 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' p. 365.

as question, is that which grows on the lawn of excluded middle, which blurs into focus, 'the way words rally to the blanks between them and thus augment the volume of their resonance' (LEM: 11), which is to say, their resistance. As section twenty-two puts it: '[i]n language nothing is hidden or our own, its light indifferent to holes in the present or postulates beginning with ourselves' (LEM: 27). 'Caught between simulation and paradox' (LEM: 24) language gives 'everything' precisely because, in the indifferent movement of its circumlocutions, it casts totality from and holds it hostage to the not-I and the not-now, that is, the immeasurable and non-graspable depth of radical alterity.

The ineluctable consequence of this alterity is that the space of language, or what Waldrop, quoting Keats, would refer to as 'negative capability,'[70] gives rise only to the non-voice of the neuter, 'this Excluded Middle [...] [t]he anonymous and incessant droning [...] at once affirmative and negative.'[71] As Blanchot develops, '[t]he neuter is that which cannot be assigned to any genre whatsoever: the non-general, the non-generic, as well as the non-particular.'[72] In this sense, the excluded middle is strictly anonymous; it is that which:

> pronounces itself without there being a position or deposition of existence, without presence or absence affirming it, without the unity of the word coming to dislodge it from the between-the-two in which it disseminates itself.[73]

In Waldrop, it is precisely this condition of being always elsewhere and always already separate, even from itself, that determines the excluded middle as the

[70] In a letter, Keats writes: '*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' John Keats, Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27? Dec. 1817; cited in Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 83.
[71] Emmanuel Levinas, 'A Conversation with André Dalmas' in *Proper Names*, p. 152.
[72] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 299.
[73] Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) p. 35.

'nowhere' of an empty centre that both subtends and suspends each word and every expression. To put it another way, because the excluded middle is exceptional rather than positional, the excluded middle effectively strips both language and itself of referentiality. Read this way, the excluded middle is at once both a double movement and a double bind. It doubles back in the instant of conceptualisation insofar as all that remains is the outline trace of its non-recognition dispersing across an inexorable distance, insofar as every word mimes only the vacillating repetition of this originary dispersal. As such, in the experience of inexperience, the excluded middle designates nothing other than the relation with the unknown, the primordial 'saying' of language, Waldrop's 'spasms on the lips' that do not so much spew words as reverberate their stuttered division.

In the shadow of its effacement, then, the circumlocutions of the neuter that play out in Waldrop's poetics give rise to a linguistic identity that exists inasmuch as it is maintained in abeyance. Here, abeyance stands as the conditional possibility of identity. Even as it evokes an ancient division of self, it is, at the same time, the exceptional temporality without which the self could not be in the first instance. The self requires its own alterity, 'it' requires that which is never its own, in order to say I. Its relation of exclusive alterity to the personal pronoun is precisely that which stains it into speech: I resounds in the alterity that ex-cepts it. An existence has been defined, merged into the margins of text, the texture of paper, the spacing of letters.

ANOTHER LANGUAGE

From this perspective, what Waldrop's material and linguistic thematisation of the excluded middle demands is the spacing of another language, which would be featureless, androgynous, without property and without propriety. In many senses, such a language would be one of dis-location, a foreign tongue cleaving words that

'vanish[...] into communication' (LEM: 61) in order that the roof of the mouth might speak behind them, in their dissipating folds. 'The same way deeper meaning may constrict a sentence right out of the language into an uneasiness' (LEM: 27). In principle, what is at stake in the delirious circumlocutions of the excluded middle is a form of language and self that does not authorise itself under the declaratory sign of self-control but rather that indicates itself in the event of its own rupture. Nothing specific happens because of the excluded middle. It does not produce anything, quantifiable or otherwise. Yet it is precisely because of this non-activity that the excluded middle prevents language from coming to legislated term. In the screen of its sliding surface, the concern of the excluded middle, both in this poem and across Waldrop's poetry more generally, is a concern for what remains when the sovereignty of self-possession (of being, of language) collapses into the exteriority of excendence. Indeed, as Blanchot comments reflectively of Waldrop's notion of the imperative of poetry to 'short-circuit' the regulation of linguistic communication, the precise task of the poet is:

> to call us obstinately back to error, to turn us toward that space where everything we propose, everything we have acquired, everything we are, all that opens upon the earth and in the sky, returns to insignificance, and where what approaches is the nonserious and the nontrue, as if perhaps thence sprang the source of all authenticity.[74]

On the one hand, the excluded meaning dispossesses the law of meaning of any sovereign guarantee. On the other hand, this lack impels language to err repeatedly, to breakdown, to fragment, and thus, according to both Waldrop and Blanchot, to disseminate (to release) the truth of language, that is, its non-truth, the truth of

[74] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 247, n. 8.

another language that neither arrives nor is sublated but which appears only as the undetermined anonymity of ex-scription. Another language is a language of counter-rhythm, nameless and detaching, that speaks both as and in the interruption of speech, as and in the lightening of language's between-point. It is a turning inside out, an exasperation of supposed self-possession into the impenetrable externality of surface, a sequence of corridors whose 'distance doesn't seem to lessen no matter how straight [the] course' (LEM: 30).

Waldrop exemplifies this exigency of inexorable oscillation succinctly when she writes that it is:

> [a]s if I had to navigate both forward and backward, part of me turned away from where I'm going, taking the distance of long corridors to allow for delay and trouble, for keeping in the dark while being led on (LEM: 36).

The 'shadow-zone' which interrupts language, that turns away even as this turning is also to be understood as a leading, lets through the staining of another language, but one that is always already blotted, that has spread outwards to the margins of the page, disappearing there at the letter's edge. Strictly speaking, for Waldrop, another language is neither discursive nor communicable but simply a blanking into liquid ink without correlate or correspondence. As Waldrop writes, 'the ink washes into a deeper language, and in the end the water runs clear' (LEM: 36). Here, another language hangs suspended, on the edge of forming, on the edge of falling.

> Vertigo. The terms shift. The relation of the terms shifts. The richness undermines itself. If everything is like something else, no one likeness means anything [...] we are left with "pure" analogy, the *gesture* of it rather than any one specific analogy. A gesture that makes the

terms transparent for the very structure of language, of signification [...] Transparency for the structure of signification – and for its limits: the silence, the infinite, the nothing, all it is not able to hold.[75]

In many respects, the gravity of what circumlocutes is ambivalent. Yet as Chapter Four will develop in more detail, in Waldrop it is also the prospective thematisation of a dis-course of political responsibility that centralises the excendent 'straying flight' of the unknown and the illegible; that is indistinct, indirect, questioning, exceptional.[76] As Blanchot comments:

[t]o live with the unknown before one (which also means: to live before the unknown, and before oneself as unknown), is to enter into the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of power.[77]

As a point of departure, as a standing outside, such a powerless speech is a coming back to the surface-grain of a page that writing both projects and veils. 'I think,' Waldrop writes, 'on paper,'[78] in '[l]ines that carry the weight of absence,'[79] and 'the difference of shadow bespeaks other crossroads.'[80]

[75] Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 96.
[76] Waldrop, *Blindsight*, p. 38.
[77] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 302.
[78] Waldrop, 'Thinking of Follows.'
[79] Waldrop, *Blindsight*, p. 38.
[80] Waldrop, 'Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie,' p. 93.

CHAPTER THREE

LYDIA DAVIS:

THE IMAGE OF MEANING

The center is missing, the original is gone, all that I try to form around it may not resemble the original very much. I am thinking of some example from the natural world in which the living thing dies and then leaves a husk, sheath, carapace, shell, or fragment of rock casing imprinted with its form that falls away from it and outlasts it.

– Lydia Davis[1]

According to the common analysis, the image comes after the object. It is the object's continuation. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image. "After" seems to indicate subordination. We really speak, then we speak in our imagination, or we imagine ourselves speaking [...] But perhaps the common analysis is mistaken. Perhaps before going further, one ought to ask: but what is the image?

– Maurice Blanchot[2]

[1] Lydia Davis, *The End of the Story* (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996) p. 171. All subsequent references to this work will be given in the text by the abbreviation ES.
[2] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p. 34, n. 3.

All love is hostage to its own terror
such that the ease of walking off is hard;

as at your fingertips "a hand
cut off at the wrist" (Freud)[3]
is wavering strange.

To have.
You mustn't.
I must not not.
So go, be gone, go going, go.

I go out.
I stray. But
better, best
my arm return.

For straying I must
carry you
in ankles:

I carry you.
I am carried away.

[3] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) p. 244.

Where Rosmarie Waldrop locates the site of meaning within an indefinite spacing of noise, this chapter considers the ways in which Lydia Davis' work disrupts the formation of meaning by opening language and thought to a writing that is at once both hyper-analytic and opaquely general. Indeed, in many ways it would be correct to say that the hyper-analysis that structures her work is precisely that which produces its non-specifiable content. As Thad Ziolkowski notes, Davis' writing consists of 'a sestinalike effect that might be called "High Analytical Vertigo."'[4] Far from clarifying the narratives, in Davis analysis generates an excess of detail that puts the possibility of comprehension into relentless question. Unable either to assimilate or to engage this excess, each written work becomes the obscure emblem of an infinite thinking obsessively turning around its own failure to establish the object it desires. As Marjorie Perloff comments, no matter what events each 'story' narrates, 'the question of interpretation is Davis' real subject.'[5] At the same time, however, if the subject of Davis' writing is the question of interpretation, then to the extent that each story consistently fails to arrest the hermeneutic process, writing is rendered essentially subject-less. In effect, the subject of writing becomes the impossibility of writing either to ground a subject or to resolve its own antinomy. Hence, in Davis writing is irretrievably self-destructive. On the one hand, this self-destruction is affected by the self-reflexivity of Davis' prose. Through qualifications, oscillations and the repeated use of the word 'or', Davis' sentences do not so much proceed incrementally as reside at the level of indecision. On the other hand, in the spiralling attempt to render an event, a subject, a thought, a question, or even a sentence, intelligible, writing effectively undermines, collapses and disappears into

[4] Thad Ziolkowski, 'Lydia Davis' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Short-Story Writers since World War II*, Vol. 130 (Detroit and London: Gale Research, 1993) p. 108.
[5] Marjorie Perloff, 'Fiction as Language Game: The Hermeneutic Parables of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff' in Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (eds.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 208.

its own entropic insufficiency. In both instances, in Davis writing says 'very little – almost nothing.'[6] It signs itself within the quietude of its own erasure. As this chapter shall go on to specify in detail, for Davis the possibility of meaning is concomitant with this simultaneous signature and erasure; it subsists as the liminal negotiation between these two terms. To put it another way, it takes shape in the shapelessness of passage, at the edge of cogency.[7]

It is arguably for this reason that the majority of Davis' texts are either strikingly brief or austerely fragmented. In certain respects the question of the generic classification of Davis' writing is something of a side-issue, but it is perhaps worth remarking here that it is an open one. While some critics comment that Davis' work is more akin to prose poetry than it is to the short-story form, other critics have argued that her writing resembles anything from 'language games' to 'flash fiction' and 'parables'.[8] Davis herself prefers the more general term 'story.' As she comments in interview:

I have tried to think well maybe I shouldn't be calling them stories because they're prose poems or they're texts, but I just don't like "prose poem" and "text." I guess I just decided to

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[6] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 98. The phrase also provides the title to Simon Critchley's *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[7] In interview Davis remarks that '[t]aking language to the edge of cogent and meaningful writing interests me a great deal.' See Larry McCaffery, 'Deliberately, Terribly Neutral: An Interview with Lydia Davis,' *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) p. 75.

[8] As the title of Perloff's article on Davis suggests, Perloff classifies Davis' writing as both 'language games' and 'parables.' See Perloff, 'Fiction as Language Game.' Aurelie Sheehan follows Perloff's taxonomy of 'parable,' albeit 'minus obvious meaning or intent' in her 'Reading Lydia Davis,' *Context: A Forum for Literary Arts and Culture*, No. 6 (2000), at www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no6/sheehan. html. Mark Budman aligns Davis' work to his notion of 'flash fiction,' that is, a 'compressed, multi-layered prose.' See Mark Budman, 'The Shape of Ideas: A Conversation with Lydia Davis,' *Del Sol Literary Dialogues: Interviews with Valued Writers and Poets*, www.webdelsol.com/Literary_Dialogues/interview-wds-davis. htm, accessed 6 April, 2005.

go on calling them stories, and let the definition of the story change a little bit instead of finding the right term.[9]

The point worth emphasising from this is that, no matter what the terminology, Davis' writing disturbs the boundaries of classification. More to the point, it seeks to make of disturbance its principle subject. One of the focal reasons for this is that, for Davis, narrative disturbance, or fragmentation, is synonymous with the possibility of writing itself. As Davis writes in 'Form as a Response to Doubt':

[t]o work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing, the center rather than the sphere. It may be seen as a formal integration, an integration into the form itself, of a question about the process of writing.[10]

For Davis, then, fragmentation inscribes the question of writing into the writing process itself. As such, fragmentation does not so much produce a written work as preserve writing at the level of the Blanchotian 'work', which is to say, at the simultaneous levels of hesitant potentiality and radical disaster. Fragmentation produces, at one and the same time, both a written work and a shattered work, a work that 'is' inasmuch as it is shattered in the sense that its shattering is that which maintains the possibility of writing. Indeed, as Davis continues in the same essay, fragmentation:

[9] See Matthew Sharpe, 'Interview with Lydia Davis,' *Fiction Writers on Fiction Writing*, www.writenet.org/fiction_writers/fiction-lydia_davis.html, accessed 5 April 2005.
[10] Lydia Davis, 'Form as a Response to Doubt,' *HOW(ever)* Vol 4, No. 2 (October 1997): http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/print_archive/alerts1087.html#form, accessed 5 April 2005.

can be seen as a response to the philosophical problem of seeing the written thing replace the subject of the writing. If we catch only a little of our subject, or only badly, clumsily, incoherently, perhaps we have not destroyed it. We have written about it, written it, and allowed it to live on at the same time, allowed it to live on in our ellipses, our silences.[11]

Fragmentation enables the subject to live on, to *sur-vive* the act of writing,[12] to be not appropriated by writing but rather to remain inappropriate to it. To put it another way, fragmentation dis-orients writing, it makes writing lose its way. Indeed, on Davis' model, this 'loss of way' would be the precise sense of Davis' understanding of Blanchot's notion of the 'origin of writing,' its centre. Strictly speaking, this is a centre that is resolutely elsewhere, that, in a manner reminiscent of Waldrop's notion of delirium, is the point of writing's directionless and unsettled wandering.[13] As such, the centre of writing, the point around which it gathers, is also the 'dis-aster' of writing in the sense Blanchot assigns to the word, namely, that of 'being separated from the star,'[14] from any determined or determinable point of reference.[15] Yet, for both Davis and Blanchot, it is also on condition of this dis-aster that the subject of writing becomes legible at all; it subsists as the imprint writing veils. The centre or hub of writing does not give the subject but rather is the abyssal fold into which the subject disappears. Both the act of writing and the written work reflect the subject only to the extent that, in writing, the subject becomes nothing more than the image of its absence.

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[11] Lydia Davis, 'Form as a Response to Doubt.'
[12] I am alluding here to Derrida's notion of 'sur-vie' which in *Specters of Marx* is translated as '*living-on*.' See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) p. xx.
[13] For a more precise definition of Waldrop's notion of 'delirium' see Chapter Two, 'Rosmarie Waldrop: The Circumlocution of Meaning.'
[14] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) p. 2.
[15] Gary D. Mole makes the same point in his *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997) p. 143.

'THE CENTER OF THE STORY'

This absent conditional character of writing is perhaps none more discernible than in Davis' 'The Center of the Story' in which an unspecified narrator recounts the story of a woman who has a written a story that appears to have no centre.[16] Ostensibly a story about religion and a pending hurricane, the woman thinks that the story's centre is indistinct because the story contains details that are superfluous or tangential to the narrative. Thus, she presumes that:

> if she takes things out that are not interesting, or do not belong in the story for other reasons, this will give it more of a center, since as soon as there is less in a story, more of it must be in the center (AM: 36).

Yet there is also the matter of a man who is not dying but who 'is very ill and thinks he is dying' (AM: 36). Although his illness coincides with 'the very moment the hurricane was supposed to strike the city' (AM: 37), and his comments about religion would appear to parallel the woman's own religious concerns, for the woman '[i]t is unclear what his place is, in the story' (AM: 37). Ultimately, after several other narrative perambulations, the woman is unable to decide what is central to the story, what should be included at its edges, and what does not belong to it at all. As the story concludes, or better, as the story notes before it breaks off in face of its own breakdown:

> [t]here may be no center. There may be no center because she is afraid to put any one of these elements in the center – the man, the religion, or the hurricane. Or – which is not the same thing – there is a center but the center is empty, either because she has not yet found

[16] Lydia Davis, 'The Center of the Story' in *Almost No Memory: Stories* (New York: Picador USA, 2001) pp. 35-40. All subsequent references to this collection will be given in the text by the abbreviation AM.

what belongs there or because it is meant to be empty: there, but empty, in the same way that the man was sick but not dying, the hurricane approached but did not strike, and she had a religious calm but no faith (AM: 39-40).

In the final instance, then, the story concludes on an essential ambiguity, rendering it impossible to decide whether the centre of the story is absent or empty. In either case, the centre of the story is specified only to the extent that it is non-locatable. It is, in short, simply that which the story lacks: although the narrator stipulates that absent and empty are not the same thing, what these adjectives share is their obfuscation of what or where the centre might be. By leaving the question of the centre of the story speculatively open, that centre appears only in its non-appearance. At the same time, however, if the centre of the story remains, at best, largely non-specifiable, then the story that carries the title 'The Center of the Story' is itself lacking its titular subject.

On the one hand, what this amounts to saying is that 'The Center of the Story' is a text that comes to be formed precisely because the identification of the story's centre is a problem. As such, 'The Center of the Story' owes its condition of existence to the absent centre. On the other hand, 'The Center of the Story' emerges also from the absence of the story itself. In other words, 'The Center of the Story' is not in fact the story whose centre is a problem. That story never appears as such. Rather, far from presenting the story, what 'The Center of the Story' actually becomes is simply a notation of the difficulty of Davis' writing process. Commenting in interview on this work, Davis says:

[t]he core of the story didn't work. I left [it] alone for a long time. The way I rescued [it] was to come back and address the question as part of the story. Why isn't it working? The problem [...] was that it had no center.[17]

In effect, Davis' means of resolution erases, that is, renders illegible, the story with which she began. Although there are details of the story the woman writes in 'The Center of the Story', those details ultimately exist only as the last remaining trace of a story that is never told directly. Thus, 'The Center of the Story' is neither the story it narrates nor a story in its own right but rather the wasted image of the story the woman writes. It is both all that remains of the woman's story and also its ineliminable remainder. The image of the story figures as precisely that which writing cannot erase. It takes the place of the subject (in this case, the writing of the story). In this context, all that can be said of writing is that it is riveted to the image, to the extent that the image marks the limit of writing. It is, at one and the same time, both the point where writing gathers into legibility and unravels into the image of legibility. As such, *the image both constitutes and substitutes writing*. The image of the story at the core of 'The Center of the Story' is, in a very precise sense, the event of writing, even as this event in fact lightens that writing of its determinable identity as a story. The event of writing becomes the lightening experience of the image, the substitution of the one for the other. The image disarticulates writing of a subject such that, like the centre of the story that may be missing or meaningless, the image that writing produces and for which it helplessly substitutes itself becomes not only an experience of absence but also an absent experience.

As this chapter shall go on to specify in detail, it is precisely around this dual structure of the experience-non-experience of the image that, in Davis, the possibility

[17] Francine Prose, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis,' *Bomb* 60 (Summer 1997): http://www.bombsite.com/archive/davis/_davis1.html, accessed 5 April 2005.

of meaning revolves. Meaning, it shall be argued, takes place at the point when the inculcation of the image signals nothing other than the lightening dispossession of the intelligible. As such, for Davis the possibility of meaning is inseparable from its appearance as image, which is to say, when it is otherwise than itself. The meaning of the image, the disarticulation of meaning that the image effects, is the meaning of meaning. It should be noted, however, that there is a structural impossibility involved in this equation – indeed, this structural impossibility forms the basis of this chapter's analyses. If the meaning of meaning is disarticulation, then in order to recognise the meaning of meaning it is necessary to forget, if only for an instant, the disarticulation that defines meaning. Yet if disarticulation is forgotten, so meaning is forgotten too. I forget in order to know, yet, forgetting, I do not know. Thus my experience of meaning can never be one of knowledge but only of the uncanny. In other words, I experience meaning as that which I strangely recognise but cannot identify.

Such an uncanny experience of meaning receives arguably its most sustained dis-articulation in Davis' story 'Break It Down' and her novel, *The End of the Story*.[18] In both of these works Davis consistently stages the uncanny experience of meaning through a tripartite reflection on love, memory and writing. It is, therefore, with respect to this triple structure that the image of meaning will be considered in each work. That said, however, if in Davis the image functions as the point at which meaning simultaneously forms and deforms, that is, is at once both present and absent, the ineluctable question this raises is whether there ever was an original of

[18] It should be acknowledged that these are by no means the only works by Davis to parallel the uncanny experience of meaning. Indeed, texts as varied as 'Liminal: The Little Man,' 'Love,' 'Almost No Memory' and 'The Transformation,' could all be said to carry this (in-)experience at their centre. My reasons, however, for concentrating in this chapter on 'Break It Down' and *The End of the Story* are, in the main, because I take these two works to be exemplary of Davis' writing, and in part, heuristic. For reference, 'Liminal' is collected in Lydia Davis, *Break It Down* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996) pp. 14-19; 'Love' and 'Almost No Memory' are collected in *Almost No Memory*, pp. 41 and 134-136 respectively; 'The Transformation' is collected in *Samuel Johnson is Indignant: Stories* (New York: Picador USA, 2002) pp. 171-172.

which her stories are only incomplete and obfuscated approximations. As Blanchot puts it, and given the centrality of these comments to this chapter as a whole, I quote in full:

> According to the common analysis, the image comes after the object. It is the object's continuation. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image. "After" seems to indicate subordination. We really speak, then we speak in our imagination, or we imagine ourselves speaking. Wouldn't poetic language be the copy, the dim shadow, the transposition – in a space where the requirements of effectiveness are attenuated – of the sole speaking language? But perhaps the common analysis is mistaken. Perhaps, before going further, one ought to ask: but what is the image?[19]

At issue here, then, is the question of the status of the image itself. Thus, before coming on to discussions of individual texts, it is to the question of the image that I first turn. After a brief consideration of the image, I then take a detour by way of Blanchot's related comments on the cadaver and fascination before returning to Davis. I would like for this detour to be understood as a 'preparing the ground' for a reading of Davis, and for that reading to be understood as having in fact already begun within the folds of the figure of 'detour.'

THE IMAGE

For Blanchot, the image is the condition of possibility of the object: an object appears only in and as the image of itself. This does not mean that the object is given to apprehension in becoming image, as if the object in some way pre-existed its image, but that the object is dependent on its image. Blanchot's notion of the image, that is,

[19] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 34, n. 3.

effects a reversal of the 'common analysis': there is an object because there is an image. At the same time, however, to construe this as a reversal is somewhat of a misnomer. Far from turning the relation between object and image 'on its head,' Blanchot's conception of the image resolutely resists the ascription of a relation between image and object. The image, Blanchot argues, bears no relation to anything whatsoever, including to itself. It is, rather, without object, simultaneously both sheer surface and bottomless depth, impenetrable and empty. As such, for Blanchot, it is not that the object is given in its becoming image but that the image 'unbecomes' the very notion of object. If the image gives onto a conception of an object at all it does so only to the extent that an object appears as an inessential *by-product* of the image's masquerade, both with and of itself.

What this amounts to saying is that the image is insignificant. In the absence of an object, the image is severed from any dialectic of representation. Rather, like a viciously inescapable circle, the question of the image turns on itself, turns back towards the image of its question. As such, any emergence of the image will simply throw that image into relief, that is, into the relief of its own non-referentiality.[20] As Blanchot writes at the beginning of 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary':

> [w]hen there is nothing, the image finds in this nothing its necessary condition, but there it disappears. The image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world; it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed; it tends toward the intimacy of what still subsists in the void.[21]

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[20] In this sense, the image is tautological: it is locked in an endless coil of self-repetition that leads not to completion but to the madness (both laughable and horrifying) of the interminable. To my mind, this idea is illustrated in exemplary microcosm by the agonising humour of Bruce Nauman's 'Pete and Repeat' that begins 'Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat' and continues *ad infinitum and ad nauseum*. See Bruce Nauman, *Raw Materials* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) p. 32.

[21] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 254.

If such is the case, however, then the relief of the image is also its self-immolation. In order to signify insignificance, which is to say, in order to adhere to its causal law, the image necessarily must sacrifice itself in the same instant that it presents itself as image. Indeed, if the image is characterised not by an issuing but by an infinite self-return 'to the indifferent deep,' it follows that the constitutive function of the image has been suspended always *in advance*. In certain respects, Blanchot's evocation of the image's need of 'neutrality and the fading of the world' would appear to be at odds with such a reading. Far from remarking the self-referential singularity of the image, the notion of need would appear to reinscribe the 'common analysis' of the image in the sense that the image is dependent on the precedence of a something (here, neutrality and fading) it reflects in its subsequent appearance. There is, however, another way of approaching this 'need' that is more in keeping with Blanchot's radical non-determination of the image. Namely, that neutrality and fading are in fact the most proper properties of the image itself, which is to say that, because featureless, neutrality and fading are the properties that both remark and preserve the extreme *impropriety* of the image. In a manner analogous to Levinas' conception of the *il y a*, when materiality dissolves, for Blanchot there is left not nothing but rather the image of breakdown, that is, a neutral fading that endures dissolution precisely because its sheer featurelessness renders its fading intractable. In this sense, the image remarks the limit of experience 'not because it hides some secret alien to revelation or even because it is radically obscure, but because it transforms everything that has access to it, even light, into anonymous and impersonal being, the Nontrue, the Nonreal yet always there.'[22] It remarks the limit of experience because it transforms the experience of the image into an image of experience. It is what remains when experience runs up against 'nothing in

[22] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 31.

particular.' This is why Blanchot refers to the intimacy of the image with 'what subsists in the void.' The image is the form that subsistence takes to the extent that, fading yet living on (*sur-vie*), the image is both the *terminus post quem* and *terminus ad quem* of the void itself. To put it another way, the intimacy of the image relates to the manner in which it functions as a borderline or membrane between materiality and immateriality, maintaining a simultaneous, endlessly cross-referencing proximity with and estrangement from each.

On this account, what characterises the image is an irreducible singularity or distinction. Jean-Luc Nancy's configuration of the image as a distinct mark is illustrative here. The image, Nancy writes, is:

> [c]lear and distinct, [it] is incontestable evidence. It is proof of the distinct, its distinguishing mark even. The *image* only exists where there is this evidence: if not, there is only decoration, or illustration, in other words support for a meaning. The image must involve the invisible presence of the distinct, the distinction of its presence.[23]

The mark of the image, in other words, relates neither to what it presents nor to what it veils but rather only to the surface presence of its non-relation. It is both distant and distinct from the dialectic that opposes presence to absence, and that figures the advent of meaning as the product of this opposition. In Blanchot's lexicon, the image belongs instead to the other night, '*the night without stars, this night of slowness, of insufficiency: drifting without shore.*'[24] Of crucial import here is this notion of 'drifting.' For Blanchot, the image, in its perspicuous distinction, is without location. Like Freud's notion of the uncanny which, as Nicholas Royle notes with canny lucidity,

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[23] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Image – The Distinct' in Doreet Levitte-Harten, *Heaven* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1999) pp.47-8; Nancy's emphasis.
[24] Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) p. 64; Blanchot's emphasis.

'entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *proprius*, 'own'), a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property,'[25] the image unsettles each and every attempt at designation. On the one hand, the distinction of the image renders it in excess of any determination, including that of self-determination; it is, in other words, as much in excess of itself as of an object. On the other hand, this criterion of 'not-being-itself' lightens that excess from being assigned any transcendental functionality. Indeed, if the uncanny affects the return of the subject to a pre-developed stage, which, in this case, would be no different from a stage prior to meaning, the experience of the uncanny effectively lightens the subject of any developed meaning. In this sense, the uncanny return is a process of lightening into insufficiency, and the image here becomes inseparable from the Lacanian imaginary: in its insufficiency, the image is simply strange and estranging.

FASCINATION OF THE CADAVER

For Blanchot, this peculiar quality of the image is exemplified by the 'presence' of a cadaver. The cadaver, Blanchot argues, is dead, not of this world, irreducibly heterogeneous, yet it is also alterity as presence, both death in life and life in death. Even as the cadaver remarks the absence of life it is an absence which, paradoxically, appears *bodily* in the here and now. As Blanchot writes:

> [i]t is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere [...] an undifferentiable nowhere which nevertheless must be located here.[26]

[25] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 1. I return to the function of the uncanny in Davis below.
[26] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, pp. 256-7.

Or again:

[i]t is that which the living person (and not the deceased) left behind him and which now affirms, from here, the possibility of a world beyond the world [...] about which we only know that human reality, upon finishing, reconstitutes its presence and its proximity.[27]

No longer alive, the anonymous and impersonal presence of the corpse nevertheless continues to maintain a strangely magnetic relation with existence. It is an ineliminable remainder of nothing in particular. At one and the same time, then, the cadaver is here and there and also neither here nor there. As such, the distinction of the cadaver rests on its presentation of withdrawal. Accordingly, the cadaver is neither a something nor a nothing but rather what Blanchot refers to as a 'saying-between,'[28] that is, a liminal saying, a borderline, that at all times remains foreign to the economy of materiality and immateriality and that, moreover, returns like the uncanny to haunt all instantiations of the material and the immaterial.

Indeed, it is precisely on account of this 'saying-between' of the cadaver that Blanchot asserts that '[t]he cadaver is its own image.'[29] It bears resemblance to nothing other than the errant non-resemblance of the image. As Blanchot continues:

[i]t no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms itself entirely into shadow.[30]

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[27] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 257.
[28] Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, p. 135.
[29] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 258.
[30] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 258.

The image or the 'saying-between' of which the cadaver is exemplary, therefore, refers not to an experiential event but to the phantom of an event. The cadaver becomes an object of experience only to the extent that it becomes an image, that is, that it unbecomes or turns spectral. In this way, the shadow the image casts is a dislocation of contemporary experience. It manifests the absent in time but each instant of manifestation is always already out of time. There are at least two senses of this 'out of time': first, it suggests being not of time, a certain exclusion or foreignness to time; second, it suggests that the cadaver is somehow too late arriving, that it has been denuded of time. In both senses, however, the cadaver remains as the perpetual trace of what has gone off. As such, when Blanchot refers to the image as shadow it would be more accurate to think of this shadow as a foreshadowing in the sense that the image gives the thing in advance of itself on the one hand and attests to some thing still to come on the other. Foreshadowing, in this sense, signals a time-in-between-time. Images do not come from the past, present or even, as Derrida would have it, the future,[31] but rather from the uncanny temporality of what Levinas refers to as *l'entretemps*, the meanwhile, and which Gerald Bruns summarily describes as 'the interval between neither and nor (neither one nor the other) – not a present, not a moment or an instant, but a pause, a setting of time to

[31] In *Specters of Marx* Derrida writes that ghosts come from the future. 'A specter,' he writes, 'is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.' As he clarifies in the final paragraph of the work's concluding note: 'Given that a *revenant* is always called upon to come and to come back, the thinking of the specter, contrary to what good sense leads us to believe, signals toward the future. It is a thinking of the past, a legacy that can come only from that which has not yet arrived – from the *arrivant* itself.' Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 11 and 196; Derrida's emphasis. The differences between Blanchot and Derrida here arguably are slight. Yet the spectral or uncanny character Blanchot assigns the image differs from – and, in certain senses, also defers – the futurity of the Derridean ghost. What such a difference invites, therefore, is a reconsideration and deconstruction of the social, political, aesthetic and philosophical role of spectres not solely from the axiom of 'out of joint' (the Shakesepearian phrase frames the entirety of Derrida's thinking in *Specters of Marx*) but also from the (non-)perspective of the out of time. In certain respects, at stake here would be a critical exploration of the political in Blanchot and the ways this may re-inflect, or even critique, Derrida's understanding of democracy to come. I flesh out this argument in more detail in Chapter Four.

one side, a spacing of time.'[32] Bruns' formulation of 'the meanwhile' here cannot help but recall Blanchot's presentation of the neuter discussed in the previous chapter, and in many ways the image functions analogously to the neuter in Blanchot.

According to Blanchot, what binds the image and the neuter is the fact that each is gripped by fascination. In both, Blanchot argues, 'the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep.'[33] Blanchot's vocabulary here is telling. By employing the words 'taken in' and 'absorbed' fascination comes to be determined as an exertive force that rivets the gaze, holds it captive. Just as the image of the cadaver not only marks the limits of the experience of death but casts a spell over the survivor, the one who lives on, so the *excess* of intrigue that fascination inculcates results in the stunned immobilisation of the gazer.[34] In fascination, the gazer is, quite literally, transfixed, rooted to the spot. If that is the case, however, then it follows that whosoever encounters fascination is neither an active, participatory subject nor capable of ever becoming one (again). From this, it follows that the encounter with the image that fascinates is, and can be only, an encounter without recovery: riveted by the image, the subject is unbecome by the image, that is, is no longer a subject *as such* but rather an image of one. The subject is, in short, locked in the repetition of its own unbecoming. As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, 'fascination arises when, far from apprehending from a distance, we are apprehended by this distance, invested by it and invested with it.'[35] Indeed, such an argument correlates to the residual sense of 'duped' in Blanchot's

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[32] Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) p. 19. For Levinas' discussion of 'the meanwhile' see Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998) p. 109.

[33] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

[34] The *Chambers Dictionary* defines 'fascinate' in the following ways: '*vt* to interest exceedingly, intrigue; to charm, captivate; to control by the eye like a snake; to hold spellbound.' *The Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 1999) p. 585.

[35] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 30.

earlier use of the phrase 'taken in.' The experience of the image is not, strictly speaking, an experience. Far from seeing the image, the subject rather is seen by the image.[36] To put it another way, the image reflects the subject to the extent that the image gives the subject back to itself only in the form of its image. Thus what the subject discovers in the confrontation with the image is that the image prevents 'it from ever finishing, [cuts] it off from any beginning, [and makes] of it a neutral, directionless gleam which will never go out, yet does not clarify.'[37] With these comments in mind, what this suggests is that, on the one hand, the experience of the image is inescapably inauthentic and that, on the other hand, inauthenticity is the particular or distinct feature of the image itself. As such, any encounter with the image will be predicated on the ineluctable outcome of the subject's collapse, that is, its lightening into image.[38] If the subject begins with the image, then the subject is always already forestalled. It is, in other words, riveted to the image, to the lightness of a presence and a meaning held always in abeyance. Indeed, as Blanchot writes, '[m]eaning is no longer anything but semblance' which is to say that meaning becomes 'incapable of being developed, [rather] only immediately void.'[39]

For Blanchot, the transfixion of the image, together with its refusal of development, describes and defines the practice of writing. As he comments in *The Space of Literature*:

[t]o write is to let fascination rule language. It is to stay in touch, through language, in language, with the absolute milieu where the thing becomes image again, where the image,

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[36] Cf. 'what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is *contact* at a distance? [...] What is given by this contact at a distance is the image.' Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 33; Blanchot's emphasis.
[37] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.
[38] Cf. 'Distance [...] is the limitless depth behind the image, a lifeless profundity, unmanipulable, absolutely present although not given, where objects sink away when they depart from their sense, when they collapse into their image.' Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.
[39] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 263.

instead of alluding to some particular feature, becomes an allusion to the featureless [...] becomes the formless presence of this absence, the opaque, empty opening onto that which is when there is no more world, when there is no world yet.[40]

In this sense, writing and the image are held in an interminable relay with one another: the image informs writing and so, featureless, writing leads back to the formlessness of the image. Both the image and writing, therefore, frustrate experience by, on the one hand, displacing experience and, on the other hand, situating displacement as the sole possibility of experience. To put it another way, the image, with which writing is fascinated, is at one and the same time the effacement and the event of experience.

EVENT, STORY: PASSION FOR THE IMAGE

As I shall come on to discuss presently, such an antinomy forms the double exigency around which Davis' fiction is structured. In Davis, stories are consistently struck through by a desire to 'break down' the story, that is, by a desire to access, to encounter, the event the story narrates but which the story obscures because it narrates. At issue here is a tension between the terms 'story' and event.' 'Event' would appear to refer to some kind of pure or immediate experience whereas 'story' would be the subsidiary narration of that event, which is to say, the *after-effect* of the event. Such a temporal ordering of event and story, however, is consistently disorganised to the point of reversal in Davis. Indeed, what Davis' fiction points to is the way that an event becomes an object of experience only *after* it has been narrated, that is, after it has been transformed into a featureless image. As such, experience is inescapably riveted to narration, for at least two reasons. First,

[40] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 33.

experience is understood as conditional on narration and, second, experience therefore comes to be understood as the insignificant product of narration, which is to say its by-product or after-effect, in the sense of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*. As Blanchot notes, '[y]ou will never know what you will have written, even if you have written only to find this out;'[41] as Royle, thinking of Derrida clarifies, 'you get news of events only when they are over.'[42]

Yet if that is the case, what comes to be experienced in this temporal lag is never the event as such, nor even an event worthy of news, but simply the condemnation of experience to the fascination of the image. More to the point, each narrative ultimately comes to be, at one and the same time, both driven and suffocated by its consumptive 'passion for the image.'[43] What this amounts to saying is that the law of attraction here is indissociable from the law of prohibition. As such, the 'passion for the image' forces each narrative to compulsively repeat itself endlessly, to seek out anew the image it shadows but to which it can neither lay claim nor integrate itself. Impelled by a lack of substance or framework, the narrative desires the image, but no matter how close it draws, proximity will never be close enough. To be satisfied, the narrative must itself become an image, yet it is precisely at this point of 'becoming-image' that the narrative is lost to itself. Thus the passion for the image re-begins and the narrative is propelled into an interminable cycle of desire and refusal, attraction and prohibition.

Indeed it is more than probable that it is not coincidental that Davis repeatedly stages the consideration of the after-effect through stories concerned with love, desire and attraction. For what these stories map thematically they parallel conceptually. In other words, in what follows I am reading Davis' persistent

[41] Maurice Blanchot, 'After the Fact' in *Vicious Circles*, trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985) p. 59
[42] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 60.
[43] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

engagements with love, desire and attraction as emblematic of the experience of the image itself. With all their perambulations, qualifications, doublings and turnings back, what Davis' stories come to suggest is that, on the one hand, their narratives are the after-effect of an encounter with the image, and that, on the other hand, the advent of meaning is possible only on the basis that each narrative confronts head-on the antinomy that structures its 'tellability.'

BREAKING IT DOWN OR, LOVE IN RUINS

Davis' 'Break It Down' is exemplary here.[44] The premise of the story is straightforward enough: a man, sitting down, stares at a 'piece of paper in front of him. He's trying to break it down' (BD: 20). Specifically, he is attempting to work out the financial cost of a ten-day sexual relationship with a woman. What he wants to know is how it is possible to go into a situation with $1000 and, ten days later, leave with only 'an old shirt' (BD: 30). Yet what follows this initial premise is far from straightforward. After the first two-line paragraph third-person narration gives way strangely and suddenly to first-person narration, which in turn gives way, a paragraph and a half later and without explanation, to second-person narration. Over the remaining nine pages the narrative oscillates, with varying frequency, between first- and second-person narration; the third-person is not heard from again. Despite the apparent clarity of the story's beginning, therefore, on a structural level what underscores this narrative are *strange turnings* and a *phantomatic presence.*

To take these points in reverse order: all but two lines of the narrative are indelibly haunted by the unremarked and almost immediate suspension of the third-person narrative voice. In other words, as no explanations regarding the

[44] Lydia Davis, 'Break It Down' in *Break It Down*, pp. 20-30. All subsequent page references to stories from this collection will be given in the text after the abbreviation BD.

disappearance of the third-person narrative voice are textually forthcoming so the question of its whereabouts haunts everything that follows. As such, it is not so much that the third-person narrative voice disappears from the story but rather that it operates throughout the text as a 'phantomatic presence' to the extent that it can be understood as a structural spectre of loss. On the one hand, in spite or because of its withdrawal, the third-person narrative voice remains in the text as a ghostly presence underwriting the first- and second-person narratives; on the other hand, this ghostly presence renders an experience of absence *legible* from the very first. There is, in short, an intense interaction with the absent in 'Break It Down.' Indeed, it is precisely around this notion of 'interaction' that the narrative's 'strange turnings' come into play. The constant shifts in register between 'I' and 'you' repeatedly interact with the spectre of absence in the sense that the narrative turnings effectively keep any notion of narrative voice at bay. Specifically, the 'strange turnings' of 'Break It Down' render its narrative no more than a ghostly ventriloquisation. In this sense, the structure of 'Break It Down' might be termed a 'spectral fugue': the subject of the story (for the sake of ease, I will here simply refer to it, somewhat generally, as an attempt to understand an experience) is given by one voice that is immediately taken up by a second and then a third, during which the disappearance of the first voice spectrally introduces a counter-subject of absence into the second and third voice's attempts to understand.[45] Thus the particular form of the fugue here is spectral because the counter-subject functions as an interminable ghostly accompaniment to the first- and second-person narrative voices. In this way, the disappearance of the third-person narrative voice both foreshadows and forestalls the 'I' and 'you' by introducing into their attempts to

[45] The *Chambers Dictionary* defines 'fugue' in the following terms: '*n* a form of composition in which the subject is given out by one part and immediately taken up by a second (in *answer*), during which the first part supplies an accompaniment or counter-subject, and so on.' *The Chambers Dictionary*, p. 644.

understand, to 'break it down,' a non-graspable narrative double that, far from breaking down, reappears endlessly. With these comments in mind, then, what marks Davis' text is a hyper-anxiety produced by the repeated failure to break 'it' down, that is, to lay claim to the ghost of experience, to possess 'it', whatever 'it' might be.

Indeed, the interaction between these dual exigencies of possession and absence can be read as the very substance of the story's content.[46] To begin with absence: despite the apparent clarity of narrative specificity (the extent of the story would appear to be given from the beginning) 'Break It Down' is in fact remarkable for its curious lack of detail, that is, for what the text does not say. At least three instances of absent detail are distinguishable:

(1) The precise details of how, where or when the man and woman first met are never specified.

(2) Further to this, the question of exactly who the man and the woman are is left unanswered. Neither is given a name nor an identity external to the events delineated in the story.

(3) 'Break It Down' is a story that is at once structured, impelled and imperilled by the absence of the event it narrates. Without the event of the ten-day relationship there would be no story to narrate, which is to say, there would be no

[46] In point of fact, as with Waldrop, the structural paralleling of content and vice versa in Davis effectively renders the traditional literary critical distinction between form and content obsolete. If I maintain the distinction here, at least in the sense that my argument has proceeded from one to the other, I do so in accordance with current conventions of academic writing. In order to rigorously maintain the indissociability between form and content, however, to treat each as the instance of the other, critical writing would have also to parallel the content of its argument in its form. In other words, if critical writing concerned with the collapse of the distinction between form and content does not wish to reintroduce this distinction by maintaining it as a governing feature of its own structural principles, another form of critical writing is called for. If the form and content under consideration relates to absence, for example, then in order not to contradict that exigency of absence the critical work, far from translating absence into lucid presence, would have to write rather with the figure of absence at its structural and thematic centre. I consider Blanchot's fusion of fragmentation, 'plural speech' and discursive argument as exemplary here. I discuss the subject of critical writing in more detail in the Conclusion. See also my 'In Other Words: Writing Maurice Blanchot Writing,' *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* (forthcoming). For my discussion of the relation between form and content in Waldrop, see Chapter Two.

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need to 'break it down,' to ascertain its cost. At the same time, however, the imperative to 'break it down' also functions as an attempt to catalogue the event, which is to say, to lay claim to its experience, to organise it and by so doing to fashion it into an object of comprehension. Yet for all the apparent logic of its mathematical deductions (most clearly evinced perhaps in the way the narrator(s), through infinitesimal analysis, manages to reduce the cost of the affair from an expensive sounding $100 per day to the comparatively inexpensive sounding $3 per hour [BD: 20 and 27]) what the narrative actually presents is its consistent inability to fix the event in writing. As such, rather than being a narrative that 'ties up loose ends' 'Break It Down' becomes a story imperilled by the resistance of these loose ends to narrative principles of order. To put it another way, 'break it down' carries a double imperative: not only does it delineate a deductive methodology, but it also opens that methodology to a simultaneous and infinitesimal fragmentation. In this way, 'break it down' at one and the same time destroys that which it makes possible, and its narrative, therefore, is condemned to an interminable repetition of its own impossibility. Indeed, it is precisely around this notion of condemnation that the story could be said to be in the grip of, or possessed by, absence. Absence and possession in Davis' text are reciprocal; the persistence of the one leads to the persistence of the other, and vice versa. Thus, far from being a narrative concerned with the financial minutiae of a sexual relationship, 'Break It Down' is in fact a text irrevocably haunted by its failure to reclaim and to comprehend.

This is perhaps made most explicit by the way the notation of financial details very quickly gives way to a breathless, spiralling and highly charged exploration of sex, desire and love. Indeed, it may well be correct to say that what takes place over the story's eleven pages has less to do with a delineation of financial expense than it does with a *fascination* (in the Blanchotian sense) with the cost of erotic expenditure.

In this sense, the narrative of 'Break It Down' functions as both a singular tale of erotic disturbance and a tale of the singularity or distinctness (in Nancy's lexicon) of (erotic) remembrance. To take these aspects in order of mention:

(1) The narrator attempts to 'break it down,' to understand the rate of exchange that correlates extreme emotional and sexual passion to an old shirt. Yet, as prefigured by the comical imbalance of this exchange, the narrator runs up continually against the limits of the comprehensible. As such, the experience of the erotic event becomes less an experiential event than an experience of non-appropriable and non-thematisable surplus. Desire leads not to satisfaction but to its infinite, and thus insatiable, self-propulsion. In this way, desire consumes everything in its path, including the identity of the one who desires, to the extent that the man is reduced to being nothing more than an automatist subject of an impersonal desire:

> it's all mounting up and coming together so that when you get in bed *you can't help it*, it's a real performance, it all pours out, but slowly, you go easy until *you can't anymore*, or you hold back the whole time, you hold back and touch the edges of everything, you edge around *until you have to* plunge in and finish it off, and when you're finished, you're too weak to stand (BD: 21; emphasis added).

Indeed, this is arguably why the second-person narrative voice comes into effect in the story: disturbed by an unremitting desire, the man comes to be both displaced and ventroliquised by an anonymous voice relating (to him?) the details of an experience the man can never complete. He can never realise his desire because, in the first instance, its culmination takes place without him in the sense that, in desire, the man is not himself or 'not in his right mind' but rather possessed by desire, and in the second, the culmination of desire is also the instant of its recommencement. As

such, if the man is returned to himself in the moments after orgasm, he is instantly re-disturbed by the return of desire. Desire, that is, 'goes on all day, from the start when you wake up and feel her body next to you' (BD: 21), to the moments when 'you' are not together 'because it's going to be so good to go back to her' (BD: 22), to when 'you' are asleep, because even if 'you' are not dreaming of her 'you' are lying next to her, and 'you' 'wake up enough times in the night to remember she's there' (BD: 23), or even to when the affair is over because still yet 'you are filled with her, everything about her has kind of bled into you, her smell, her voice, the way her body moves, it's all inside you' (BD: 23-24). Desire lives on in a space of division, both as the ruins of the subject and in the ruins of the affair.

Yet if that is the case, then desire is, in actual fact, that which prohibits intimate contact; there will be always an unbridgeable and disproportional distance between desire and its object. As the narrative puts it:

> no matter how much you crawl all over each other it won't be enough, and when your hunger dies down a little then you think how much you love her and that starts you off again, and her face, you look over at her face and can't believe how you got there and how lucky and it's still all a surprise and it never stops, even after it's over, it never stops being a surprise (BD: 22).

In effect, what this amounts to saying is that, on the one hand, desire is constantly defamiliarising so that its experience is each time unique, new, surprising, and, on the other hand, the advent of desire is always already also a pronouncement of lack. Thus, held by desire, the narrator cannot, in short, get close enough to the experience, which is to say, he is unable to memorialise the event of erotic love. Rather, by holding him at a distance from the event, desire effectively positions the man not in relation to the event but to the event as distance. It is worth recalling

Blanchot here: as he notes in 'The Essential Solitude,' '[w]hat is given by this contact at a distance is the image.'[47]

(2) If 'Break It Down' maps the experience of desire, however, it also ingrains across that experience the drive of memory. Indeed, in many respects 'Break It Down' can be regarded as an archival work above all else: not only does it narrate, that is to say, remember, an affair, but it seeks to preserve that memory of the affair from obscurity precisely by recording it in writing. In this sense, the story is at once both an act of remembrance and a work of memorialisation. As such, remembrance is to be understood in direct opposition to the law of desire. Where desire inscribes a chasmic distance between event and experience, memory aims to traverse this incommensurability and (re-)establish a point of intimate connection between the two. In this, the objective of remembrance is no different from the one announced in the imperative 'break it down.' Yet just as that imperative is imperilled by the a-logic of desire it necessarily comes to parallel in the pursuit of its end, so the work of remembrance is always already forestalled.

There are at least three reasons for this disturbance. First, remembrance inheres not to the event of the affair but to the event of memory. There is, in other words, a temporal rift between the two that essentially estranges the now from the then. This is not to suggest that the man is unaware of the dangers of 'rift-time.' Indeed, it would be more correct to say that the man is *too* aware of the dangers. Throughout he attempts to counteract this temporal division by committing to memory each moment *as it happens*. As the man comments: 'I just look at her and hold on to it all, these times when I'm watching over her sleep and she's next to me and isn't away from me the way she will be later' (BD: 23); as the narrative continues: 'you work hard at remembering everything now so you won't ever forget'

[47] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

(BD: 25). The unavoidable problem with such an approach, however, is that – and this is the second instance of the disturbance of memory – the event of memory is here in direct competition with the event of the affair. In other words, by committing each instant of the affair, *as they happen*, to memory the man effectively precludes himself from any contemporaneous experience of the affair. Far from engaging the event, the act of remembrance inaugurates the event's deferral. Moreover, this is a deferral that each subsequent act of recollection will only serve to exacerbate. As such, remembrance does not draw proximate to the event but rather ingrains an ever-widening distance between the event and its memory. Consequently, and third, the man's interaction with the event is unrelated to any actual event, being related rather only to the image of an event that is absent. In point of fact, it should be added that the very structure of this interaction occludes any notion of 'the actual' that does not figure actuality by way of its conditional relation to the primacy of the image. Memory sinks not (back) into the affair but into the repetitive image of its deferral.

In this sense, and in contradistinction to the previous statement, desire and remembrance do not so much exist in opposition to one another but rather in a network of intimate relation. Although they do not necessarily occur in the same instant (as mentioned, in 'Break It Down' there are occasions when they do and occasions when they do not) each repeats the experience of the other. That is to say, the event of remembrance becomes a repetition of the experience of desire, and the event of desire a repetition of the experience of remembrance. Each becomes a product of the other's insufficiency. If that is the case, however, then what gets repeated is in fact at all times distinct. Insufficiency sunders desire and remembrance both from the experience of an event and from the experience of themselves. As such, desire and remembrance are and have been always particular: on the one hand, their repetition is always a 'starting over;' on the other hand, this

'starting over' is conditional on the primacy of their repeatability. If insufficiency condemns desire and remembrance to repeat themselves always again and always for the first time, it is in fact on account of this particular repeatability that relationality is experiential or recognisable at all. Andrew Benjamin's notion of particularity is illustrative here:

> [r]ather than describing the particular in its own terms and then attempting to establish relationality, it is possible to argue that any particular is already 'another'. While this formulation may seem initially difficult its intention is to signal the primacy of repetition [...] The most minimal conditions of recognition – given that recognition takes place – must claim of any particular that it is another instance. The particular, again at the most minimal level, takes on the quality of being one more. The point is that the particular is not that which exists purely in itself but that it is always already another.[48]

What this amounts to saying is that relationality is conditional on its lightening into the repetition of particularity. To put it another way, relationality is dependent on an always prior division. As such, relationality is established not by a commensurability of particulars but by a lightening of the commensurable into an irreducible distance ingrained by the repeatability of non-coincidence. In this, lightening inheres to an ontological mode that can be regarded as being identical with the ontology of the image, that is, with a semblance of ontology. In the image what comes 'to be' is a substitution of being. Here, then, the price of desire and of remembrance is equal to the cost of the image; each is experiential only to the extent that they conform to the economy of the image. As Blanchot writes, '[t]o live an event as an image is not to

[48] Andrew Benjamin, *Philosophy's Literature* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2001) p. 2. Derrida's essay 'The Law of Genre' also provides an apposite point of reference here. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 221-252.

see an image of this event,'[49] but rather is to experience that event over and over again in the particularity or distinctiveness of its image.

The idiosyncrasy of the theoretical formulation of the 'image economy' here can be best exemplified perhaps by way of an analysis of the signification of the 'shirt' in 'Break It Down.' Indeed, while not wishing to reduce 'Break It Down' to a single figure, in many respects much of what is at stake in the text is emblematised by this 'green and blue shirt' (BD: 28) with which both the story and the affair end. The shirt functions on at least three levels in the narrative. First, its material presence establishes a point of relation between the time of the affair and the time of the narration, that is, between the then and the now, and between the woman and the man. As long as the shirt remains something of the affair remains also. At the same time, however, and second, given that the shirt is effectively all the man has to show for having spent $1000, the very possibility of relation rests within an exorbitant, even perverse economy of exchange. Indeed, such perversity is only exacerbated at the third level where, in direct contradistinction to the first, the shirt functions as an emphatic disjunction of any possibility of relation. That is, despite the shirt being the sole remaining material presence of the affair, its presence does not return the man to the event of the affair as such, but rather rivets him only to the excruciation of its contemporary distance. In this sense, the shirt functions as a phantom signifier or, in Lacan's lexicon, a 'holophrase.'[50] It transmits neither a relation nor a meaning.

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[49] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 262.

[50] In order to maintain the focus of these comments on Davis' text, this is not the place to enter into any detailed discussion of the 'holophrase.' Suffice to say at this juncture that while Lacan stresses that a holophrase 'is an expression that cannot be broken down, and which [has] to be related to a situation taken in its entirety' the express point that concerns the argument here is Lacan's definition of the holophrase as an expression which 'is defined at the limit, at the periphery [...] *every holophrase is connected with limit situations, in which the subject is suspended in a specular relation to the other.*' Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 225 and 226; emphasis added.

In spite of these conflicting inflections of relation, exorbitance and distance, however, integral to each level is the way in which the shirt singularly functions as an image. The shirt is never simply a shirt but an image of the woman, the affair, its loss, and its cost.[51] Yet it is precisely on account of this singular function that the 'shirt-image' refuses to bear whatever relation it is assumed to signify. If the shirt as image can hold conflicting significations at one and the same time, what defines the image is not this or that signification, but simply its openness to signification. This is why the image is a particularity. From its inception as nothing in particular, the image transposes any signification it bears into the repetition of its particular nothing. This is what ties the image to Blanchot's (non-)notion of the neuter, yet it is also that which ties the man to a proliferating inexperience. The particularity of the shirt-image, in other words, is precisely that which holds him in a zone of defamiliarisation that he can neither translate nor transcend but only repeat. As the man comments (and the shifts between direct and indirect speech are telling here), '[m]aybe it works out all right, maybe you haven't lost for doing it, I don't know, no, really [...] it's hard to know what to do with it now' (BD: 29). In this sense, while the shirt and the question of its worth may well occasion the narrative, it is also that which prevents the man from consolidating the affair into some sort of communicable recovery. Rather, confronted by the image of the shirt he is forced into a circular narration that for all its intensity ends where it begins, namely, with the iteration of an unresolved question of expense. The express point here is that the shirt counters the imperative to 'break it down' by repeatedly returning the man to a vestige of the affair that is at once both indivisible and ineliminable.

[51] It should be added that nor would the shirt ever be simply a shirt. Its occasion would be always rather an instance of the general concept 'shirt,' itself an instance of the wider concept 'clothing,' which in turn is related to 'cloth,' and so on.

To avoid any confusion it is worth stressing that the pain of such an experience is not an end-product but is rather a constitutive feature of the amorous experience itself. It is important to recall here that the woman takes the shirt off the back of the door, there where it has been hanging throughout the affair, like a ghostly reminder both of what is to come and of what has already begun (BD: 28). As such, far from coming-into-being after the affair, the pain the shirt comes to embody after the event has been in fact always already announced from the outset. In this sense, all the image of the shirt does is correlate the affair with a ubiquitous experience of pain. As the narrator comments in the penultimate paragraph:

I guess you get to a point where you look at the pain as if it were there in front of you three feet away lying in a box, an open box, in a window somewhere. It's hard and cold, like a bar of metal. You just look at it there and say, All right, I'll take it, I'll buy it. That's what it is. (BD: 29).

Thus, the affair is an object of experience only insofar as that object corresponds to a singular image of pain made indelibly present. Yet this also means that there is a disproportionate relation between love and pain: while the latter in this passage is synonymous with the experience of love, it does not follow in the least that the instance of pain will be always an instance of love. If pain is related to love at all it is only insofar as pain here figures as love's substitute. As such, however, pain becomes untranslatable; it gives knowledge not of love but rather only of its own particularity. Roland Barthes' definition of the correspondence between pain and the image provides an apposite framework in this context. As Barthes notes in *A Lover's Discourse*, "[i]n the amorous realm, the most painful wounds are inflicted more by

what one sees than by what one knows.'[52] The man in 'Break It Down' sees the shirt and he does not know the affair. The suggestion, then, is that the image has to be understood here as the misfortune of knowledge. In Blanchot's terms, this misfortune of knowledge arises precisely because the image 'seizes' the gaze: 'the gaze gets taken in,' Blanchot writes, 'absorbed by an immobile movement and depthless deep.'[53]

In this way, the (shirt-)image occasions both the impossibility of repeating the affair and the impossibility of not repeating it, that is, of ever abandoning the painful experience of its image. In either case pain precedes, parallels and outlasts love. 'Break It Down' is clear on this point:

Because you know all about it before you even go into this thing. And it isn't that you can say afterwards the pleasure was greater than the pain and that's why you would do it again. That has nothing to do with it. You can't measure it, because the pain comes after and it lasts longer (BD: 29-30).

Nevertheless, the difficulty of this formulation or, perhaps better, this fore-knowledge, this knowledge of pain that precedes love and forever substitutes it, is that it raises the question as to why the man would desire to love at all, which is the same as asking why the man would desire to open himself to an experience of pain:

So the question really is, Why doesn't that pain make you say, I won't do it again? When the pain is so bad that you have to say that, but you don't (BD: 30).

[52] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002) p. 132.
[53] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

Indeed, the perplex structure of this question translates any desire to love into senselessness. Yet what is it that impels the 'you' to refrain from saying 'I won't do it again'? It is worth stating in categorical terms that the senseless repetition of the desire to love in Davis' text has nothing to do with hope, that is, with the hope that in the future love might be less painful. The perversity of the words 'but you don't' in face of the unequivocal requirement to renounce love registers an irrationality that could never be contained within a framework of hopefulness. Rather, if the perversity of this opposition registers anything at all, it is only that the man's failure to say what good sense dictates he should say is predicated by a senseless compulsion.

What this suggests is that, in the final analysis, the title 'Break It Down' comes to feature less as an imperative to dissemble than as an invitation to engage this question of senseless compulsion in detailed and ever-circling reflection. Yet to engage such a task is a form of madness. As the narrative testifies, to break down this senseless compulsion into some form of annotated sense is already to fail the senseless terms of compulsion. To put it another way, faced with the senselessness of compulsion, analysis runs up against the limit where it itself breaks down. In this sense, to engage the question of senseless compulsion is to come to this question always already in pieces, that is, it is to discover both the question and the analysis it invites already broken into illegibility, into the ruins of their respective images. The logic of the image proposes that the way out is the way in, yet, following this logic, the way in leads not to a point of departure but to the impossible way of the image. As such, the logic of the image comes to be nothing other than the disaster of logic. '"I'm cold," the lover says, "let's go back"; but there is no road, no way, the boat is wrecked.'[54]

[54] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 133.

In the remainder of this chapter I take up the aporia (from the Greek *a-poros*, without passage) of this 'mad logic' in relation to Davis' *The End of the Story*. In particular, I focus on the relation between this 'mad logic' and the reflections on love and writing that Davis' novel deploys in parallel. From there, I turn to the role laughter plays in Davis, suggesting, on the one hand, that laughter is triggered by the experience of this aporia and, on the other hand, that such an identification paradoxically provokes a possible lightening of the gravity of aporia.

THE MADNESS OF REFLECTION

In many respects, Davis' *The End of the Story* charts the same aporias of temporal recuperation and narrative presentation as 'Break It Down.' Indeed, given the novel's recurrent preoccupation with the themes of love, memory and understanding, it would be more than possible to read *The End of the Story* as a continuation of the process of aporetic reflection begun in the earlier text. There are, however, two crucial differences that preclude any such easy identification of the two texts. In the first place, where 'Break It Down' confronts the impossibility of narrative resolution in a breathlessly continuous prose, *The End of the Story* employs the radically different narrative form of fragmentation to confront the same problem. From this perspective, it is perhaps not so much that the novel continues the earlier story, as that it begins with the pieces into which that previous work broke. The second distinction relates to the by no means arbitrary difference of narrative length. Given the fastidious formal quality of Davis' writing, which Michael Hofmann has described aptly with the phrase 'obtrusive [...] correctness,'[55] there are presumably very deliberate reasons for one taking the form of a short-story and the other a novel. Of primary importance here is the scope for extended self-reflexivity afforded by the novel form over that of the

[55] Michael Hofmann, 'The Rear-View Mirror,' *London Review of Books*, 31 October 1996, p. 6.

short-story. Indeed, where 'Break It Down' is, to all intents and purposes, a story in the sense that it narrates only the details of a particular experience, *The End of the Story* is as much concerned with detailed reflections on the process of its own construction as it is with the story it relates. In this sense, *The End of the Story* is both a novel that tells the tale of a difficult affair and one that tells the tale of the difficulty of writing a novel (about a difficult affair). In the former instance, and as with 'Break It Down', the narrative reflects the image of the affair; in the latter, that *reflection* forms the very subject-matter of the novel's self-analysis. As the terms of this argument already suggest, however, such a process of analysis will have been forestalled always in advance: reflection is at once both a formation and a deformation of the possibility of analysis. On the one hand, the analytic aspect of the novel requires the narration of the affair in order to reflect upon the exigency of writing. On the other hand, if the narration presents (reflects) the image of the affair, then that presentation is simply reflective. As such, not only does the narrative strip analysis of any object by perpetually turning the analytic back on itself, but the analytic becomes no more than the senseless pursuit of an endlessly reflecting image. In this context, then, the analytic can neither begin nor end but only re-commence.

This aporia can be most clearly exemplified perhaps by a consideration of the various meanings of the novel's title. On one level, the phrase 'the end of the story' simply announces the novel's principle subject, namely, the narration of a story, in this case, a love affair, that has come to an end. The end of the story, therefore, occasions the possibility of the novel in that it conditions a finite and clearly delineated narrative structure. To put it another way, the end of the story becomes a resourceful limit-point from which it becomes possible to determine both the extent of the novel and the latitude of its meaning. In this sense, the end of the story is that

which establishes the very legibility of the story. The very communicability of the story, that is, depends upon a fixing of the story's discursive and material boundaries that is made possible *only in retrospect.* As the narrator comments:

> although it was [...] the end of the story, I put it at the beginning of the novel, as if I needed to tell the end first in order to go on and tell the rest. It would have been simpler to begin at the beginning, but the beginning didn't mean much without what came after, and what came after didn't mean much without the end (ES: 11).

This raises, however, the following question: if the novel requires a structure of finitude in order to begin, in what ways is the novel related or even relatable to 'the end of the story'? On the one hand, if the novel preserves the finitude of the story, then strictly speaking that story is incommunicable: everything about it has already been said by its end such that to say the end would not be to say the story but something otherwise from it. In this instance, the novel would not be the story whose end its title announces but simply another story unrelated to that which has come to an end. On the other hand, if the novel does indeed narrate 'the end of the story' then its very narration must in some ways continue that story, which is to say, it must defer or incomplete that story's end. At issue here is an irresolvable antinomy between 'story' and 'end' in the sense that the presence of one necessarily results in the effacement of the other. As such, the phrase 'the end of the story' is literally and figuratively insignificant, immaterial, without consequence, senseless.[56]

[56] It is illustrative to remark here that the phrase 'the end of the story' is also employed by Blanchot within an analogous context. Reflecting on the question of the duration of psychoanalytic treatment, which is to say, the length of time required for analytic resolution in the essay 'The Speech of Analysis', Blanchot writes that analysis can be satisfied (i.e. terminated) only once it has reached 'the contentment of wisdom.' As Blanchot continues, and it is worth quoting this remarkable passage at length, 'this amounts to saying that one must wait for the end of the story and the supreme contentment that is the equivalent of death, as Socrates already suggested. This is not a criticism. One of the impressive aspects of analysis is that it may be tied to the necessity, following Freud's own formulation, of being

At the same time, however, this senselessness in no way revokes the phrase. What it does rather is to determine the phrase on the basis of an immanent desire. 'The end of the story,' that is, may simply refer to a desire for the story's end, or perhaps better, a desire for narrative-analytic resolution, a desire moreover that would have been prompted in the first place by the very antinomy of its literal signification. In this respect, the immanent meaning of 'the end of the story' would be the opening of the literal finitude that encloses it. Indeed, on this account 'the end of the story' would be none other than what Nancy refers to as the meaning of meaning. Meaning, Nancy writes in *The Gravity of Thought*, 'has perhaps no other *meaning* than that of opening and undoing that which encloses itself in signification.'[57] That said, however, it perhaps needs no repeating that, as with the phrase 'break it down,' such immanence will have been always already precluded from the outset. If 'the end of the story' calibrates a certain structure of opening, then the inauguration of that structure necessarily will be disingenuous in the sense that, in spite of itself, 'the end of the story' effectively calibrates its own excessive diffusion.[58] What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that the logic of 'the end of the

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both "finite and infinite." When it begins, it begins without end. The person who submits to analysis enters into a movement whose term is unforeseeable and into a reasoning whose conclusion brings with it, as though it were a new capacity [*pouvoir*], the impossibility of concluding. For, to say this quickly, what begins to speak here is what is unceasing and interminable: the eternal going over, and over and over again, whose exigency the patient has encountered but has arrested in fixed forms henceforth inscribed in his body, his conduct and his language. How can the interminable be brought to term?' Blanchot, 'The Speech of Analysis' in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 236. What is particularly striking here for the purposes of this chapter is the way Blanchot frames the repetition of analysis as an exigency that is both contained and occasioned by the phrase 'the end of the story.' I develop these comments throughout the remainder of the chapter.

[57] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998) p. 28. For a more detailed discussion of Nancy's analysis of 'meaning,' see the present introduction.

[58] It is precisely this diffusive excess that structures Nancy's philosophical project of deconstructing the opposition between the immanent and the transcendent, arguing instead for an inextricable inter-relation between these two terms in the sense that, for Nancy, the immanent is and will have been always an immanence *to* transcendence. Immanence, Nancy clarifies, means that which 'remains in itself.' As such, however, this being-to-itself will be always a being-to-something in the sense of to-itself. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993) p. 182. As François Raffoul explains, and my comments here owe much to his concise presentation of this problematic, 'what this immanence to a transcendence reveals is nothing other than the very movement, trembling, or oscillation of the limit as such, along our exposure to it. The emphasis

story' is riveted to a continuous present: it cannot be brought to term precisely because the end it announces is an ending or upsetting of ends. To announce the end is simply to return to the demand to end: 'for to end yet again,' in Beckett's phrase, where the preposition remarks both an insistence and a deficiency.[59] The end is always the announcement of the end's incompletion. It announces that there remains something else still to be said, still to be unsaid, such that its saying will be the fragmentation of what it says and thus the renewal of the demand to end. In this sense, each end is an end too many: to classify the end is to pluralise that which necessarily must be singular, which is to say, it is to 'excend' the immanent.[60] Indeed, it is precisely on account of this excendent pluralisation that, far from drawing to a close, *The End of the Story* concludes with a self-conscious amplification of the impossibility of ending. As the narrator comments in the novel's final lines, 'all along there had been too many ends to the story [...] they did not end anything, but only continued something, something not formed into any story' (ES: 231). The repetition of indefinite nouns is instructive here. On the one hand, it would be enough perhaps to end on their non-specificity, on the disappearance of the end elsewhere, into anything, something, a thing unspecified, to suggest the end in this movement of departure, as that which is somewhere else down the way, a fork in the road. That said, however, on the other hand what their repetition comes to magnify is

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will then shift from the "in" of immanence to the "ex" of exteriority, and from that "ex" to the pure preposition of transitivity as such, the "to" (*à*).' François Raffoul, 'Translator's Preface' to Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, p. xvii.

[59] Samuel Beckett, 'For to End Yet Again' in *For to End Yet Again and Other Fizzles* (London: John Calder, 1976) pp. 9-15.

[60] The neologism is Levinas'. In *On Escape* Levinas writes that 'excedence' corresponds 'to the need for escape' such that 'being appears not only as an obstacle that free thought would have to surmount, nor even as the rigidity that, by inviting us to routine, demands an effort toward originality; rather it appears as an imprisonment from which one must get out.' Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) pp. 54-55. As Howard Caygill explains, '[e]xcendence, or to use a later term [in Levinas' lexicon] 'excess', marks an exit from being that is without definite trajectory and guided only by the need to escape.' Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 43. Where transcendence would be marked by a certain overcoming, excendence refers rather to an unthematised taking flight or running off. Levinas' notion of excendence is developed in more detail in the Introduction, 'The Lightening of Meaning.'

neither departure nor even the failure to recuperate the 'end' into a self-determining structure of finitude but, to adopt a phrase from Derrida, 'the indefinite process of supplementarity' that inevitably comes to condition the systematicity of the 'end.'[61] In order to end, it is necessary to supplement the end, to add to it something that is less an end than *an end of sorts*, that is, something *in the manner of* an end.

This is why Davis' novel ultimately comes to a close not on an end as such (in the sense of immanence: an end that is an end to itself) but on 'an act of ceremony' (ES: 231), namely, the preparation of a cup of tea. As the narrator comments, this cup of tea prepared:

> by a stranger [...] was not only a gesture of kindness, from a person who could not know what my trouble was, but also a ceremonial act, as though the offer of a cup of tea became a ceremonial act as soon as there was a reason for ceremony (ES: 230-231).

The explicit reason for ceremony here is precisely the narrator's inability to come to an end, to have done with the story, to let go of it. '[E]ven though,' as the narrator admits, 'the story went on afterward' (ES: 230), 'the cup of tea *seems* like the end of the story' (ES: 230; emphasis added) because its ceremonial formality regulates at one and the same time both its preparation and reception. In this sense, it is not so much that a ceremonial act necessarily ends anything in particular but that its rigidly encoded structure simply stands in place of an absent end. The formal properties of ceremony, that is, inaugurate a certain systematisation of loose ends by supplanting the interminable in favour of the appearance of its own governable order. Here 'appearance' corresponds to the sense of *imitārī* or imitation. While the ceremonial act need not function as a specific end in itself, its regulative formal structure imitates

[61] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) p. 163.

the structure of finitude in the sense that the convention that marks ceremony necessarily encloses its consequence within a signifying chain that is inexorably pre-determined and pre-synchronised. The restrictive economy of the ceremonial act, in other words, affects an end precisely because its synchronicity means that its repetition will lead always to the same outcome. Thus, the ceremonial never puts the end in question precisely because its specificity of function (be it organisation, obedience, veneration, submission or whatever) corresponds to a particular end that has been both identified and unified *from the first*. In this way the ceremonial affords a way out of the interminable not simply because, faced with the interminable, the ceremonial offers itself as both a model and a means of closure, but also and crucially because any pursuit of the end will lead inevitably to the substitution of the end for the structure of the ceremonial.

In many respects, then, the structure of the ceremonial in *The End of the Story* is protective. It contains the novel by affording it an emblem of synchronisation. At the same time, however, there is no escaping the fact that the failure to grasp *the* end is nefariously implicit within any ceremonial act. While standing in place of the end, which is to say, while determining a ritualised pattern of organisation and behaviour, the very deployment of the ceremonial only serves to exacerbate the awareness that all is not present and correct. In this way, the advent of the ceremonial inadvertently prompts the confrontation with the disorder that precedes, underwrites and ultimately outstrips it, which is to say, that the advent of the ceremonial becomes no more than the repetition of the end's ungraspability. Indeed, such a deconstructive reading of the ceremonial is emphasised by the fact that the novel's ceremonial ending is, at the same time, also its ceremonial beginning. The ceremonial act upon which the novel concludes, in other words, is none other than that which previously the narrator had averred made the beginning of the novel

possible (ES: 11; cited above). As such, however, the structure of the novel is neither progressive nor regressive but simply reflective: the end is not an end but a return to the beginning just as the beginning cannot be thought of as a beginning but rather as a reflection of this infinite return. In this way, what reflection effects is the indefinite prolongation of the story at the simultaneous limits of ending and beginning. On the one hand, the occasion of the novel marks nothing other than the exposure of the story to its own irresolution; on the other hand, this irresolution could never be the empirical or ontological facticity of the novel precisely because its event would be that which necessarily lightened the novel of any occasion.

In outline, then, there is a double bind at the structural centre of *The End of the Story* that at one and the same time renders it senseless to say the novel remarked anything at all and senseless to say it did not. Indeed, as the narrator comments in a passage of reflective clarity:

> [t]he center is missing, the original is gone, all that I try to form around it may not resemble the original very much. I am thinking of some example from the natural world in which the living thing dies and then leaves a husk, sheath, carapace, shell, or fragment of rock casing imprinted with its form that falls away from it and outlasts it (ES: 171).

In many respects, this passage is a variation on the theme of the cadaverous materiality of the image. Haunted by the absence of the man with whom she was in love, the narrator's memory is riveted to the trace of what does not appear, or, like the ceremonial act, to the mark of what appears only in the non-disclosure of a veil. The husk, sheath, carapace, shell, or fragment (which is it? Each of these, none of these: the narrator is thinking only of *some* example) is the signature (imprint) of that which persists in the deficiency of finitude, in a time that endures in excess of the

definitional limits of past, present, and future, that refers only to the non-locatable yet insistent infinitude of the coming back, the revenant. Yet it (the husk, et cetera) is also nothing more than an image, a something-nothing, anything, no thing, a trembling past tense auxiliary verb, reflecting what-might-have-been, although this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, no matter whether it is understood in the sense of signature or erasure, the description of the image in this passage is tentative at best precisely because, in either case, the communication of the image will be always the commutation of the thought the image reflects, that is, an exchange of one thing for another.[62] Further, what this suggests is that what 'outlasts' or lives on in the process of 'falling away' is nothing other than this figure of exchangeability, the reason being that it is exchangeability that maintains the simultaneity of affirmation and negation, of sense and senselessness. On this account, the exigency of exchange here operative should be understood not simply in terms of reciprocity but also in terms of 'to exchange words'. That is to say, the exigency of exchange introduces a conceptual quarrel into the narrative. There are two reasons for this: first, by definition simultaneous dualism can result only in irreconcilable disagreement; second, irresolution results therefore only in the intensification of the disagreement, which is to say, it results in its proliferation.

Davis' narrator is more than aware of this difficult duality. Indeed, in the conflictions of its semantic construction, the woman's narrative can be seen to register the perforation of this dispute from the very first page. It is worth quoting the novel's second paragraph in full here:

It was a hot day in June. He had been moving his things out of my garage and into the back of a pickup truck. *I think* he was going to take them to another garage. *I remember* how

[62] Commutation is derived from the Latin *com-mūtāre*, denoting 'with change'.

flushed his skin was, *but I have to imagine* his boots, his broad white thighs as he crouched *or* sat, and the open, friendly expression *he must have* worn on his face, talking to these women who were not demanding anything of him. *I know* I was conscious of how my friend and *I looked*, the two of us sitting with our feet up on our deck chairs, and that in my friend's presence *I might* seem even older to him than I was, but also that *he might* find this attractive. He went into the house to get a drink of water, then came back out and told me he was finished and would be on his way (ES: 3-4; emphasis added).

At issue throughout this paragraph is a conflict of knowledge and speculation. While the paragraph begins and ends with the seemingly unproblematic and unequivocal assertions of the time of year, what the man was doing, what he did when he was finished, and what he said to the narrator, the reservation of direct speech together with the constant movements of register in between these statements betray a proliferating antagonism at the paragraph's centre. For instance, while the speculative 'I think' that follows the paragraph's opening assertions unbalances that which proceeds it, it in turn is countered by the more determined (in this context at least) 'I remember,' which is itself undercut in turn by the preposition 'but' and the subsequent 'I have to imagine'. Similarly, the effective 'I know' and 'I look' are counter-posed by the less than certain double repetition of 'might.' What results in this paragraph, therefore, is an extreme hesitancy of construction, where at all times the paragraph's focus scatters and re-gathers. To put it another way, in spite of its attempts at significant precision, what results in fact is a paragraph filtered at once by doubt, qualification, and contradiction, by an anxious turning and re-turning.

The problem here, as the narrator clarifies in a later passage, is one of an irrevocable disjunction between the exigencies of thinking and narrative intelligibility:

I have tried to find a good order, but my thoughts are not orderly – one is interrupted by another, or one contradicts another, and in addition to that, my memories are quite often false, confused, abbreviated, or collapsed into one another (ES: 83).

In the common analysis it would be usual to venture that the thought has preceded writing in the sense that one thinks about what and how one would like to write before one begins to write. In the common analysis, therefore, the anteriority of thought would be the organisational requirement of writing. Indeed, in many respects the above passage does nothing to disturb such a compositional assumption. While it may leave the temporal distinction between thinking and writing intact, however, what this passage articulates is that it is precisely thinking that subtends the intelligibility of the novel. More specifically, it is the inability to arrest thought in the instant of writing that prevents the written from ever coming to term. In this sense, while thinking may well precipitate writing it is also that which inhibits the ability to write in any orderly or systematic mode. There are at least two inter-related reasons for this: first, writing cannot keep pace with thinking; second, the unpredictability of thinking is the disaster of the written work. To expand these points in relation to one another: on the one hand, it takes time to inscribe words onto paper, to align fingers with the appropriate letters on the keyboard, whereas thinking can come, go, mutate and amend in an instant. In this sense, writing is always running behind thinking, chasing it round corners, down strange alleys and back again only to discover that thinking has moved off, which may well be in a direction altogether different from the one pursued by writing. Indeed, it is arguably this constraint that is most explicitly operative in the above passage. For the narrator, that is, the simultaneity of thinking with writing results in the incessant disruption of the narrative to the extent that the principle focus of writing becomes nothing more than the self-critical scrutiny of its

own reflection.[63] On the other hand, what this means is that writing is at all times without guarantee: even if writing arises from a specific thought, the concurrency of thinking and writing means that writing can never be certain *in advance* of the orientation thinking will take or the destination to which it will lead. Thinking, for instance, may refract writing, just as something written may refract thinking. In either case, the occasion of writing will never be an instant of knowledge but simply one of not knowing such that the (non-)intelligibility of writing would be locatable only ever 'after the fact.' From this perspective, however, an additional problem becomes discernible, namely, that the act of writing will be always to some extent the strangulation of thinking. Where the exigency of thinking entertains an element of freedom in that it is open to as many permutations as it can conceive, the problem with writing is that, once completed, both what it says and its manner of saying it attains a kind of permanency. Consequently, and in a repetition of the exigency of the 'end,' the writer has no option but to live with the results, whatever they may be. More to the point, such awareness ineluctably imposes the burden of the future on the writer *at the time of writing*. In this sense, the time of writing is always also a time of anxiety. The experience of writing, that is, will be always the anxious experience of the question that each sentence may be written differently together with the compliant admission that this unwritten difference will be an ineffaceable feature of the text, a disquiet that subsists in the margins of writing like a nagging denigration. As the narrator comments:

I'm afraid I may realize after the novel is finished that what actually made me want to write it was something different, and that it should have taken a different direction. But by then I will

[63] It should be acknowledged perhaps that in this passage it is less the exigency of writing than that of thinking that is held expressly accountable for the disruption of the narrative. That said, however, if thinking conditions the possibility of writing, then the exigency of thinking will have always already impinged on that of writing to the extent that the distinction between the two is rendered redundant.

not be able to go back and change it, so the novel will remain what it is and the other novel, the one that should have been written, will never be written (ES: 87).

What such a tracking of anxiety into the text foregrounds, therefore, is that *The End of the Story* is to be read less as a narrative in the sense of a knowledgeable account of a series of events than it is as a diffident indication of the various ways the novel fails to produce its desired object.[64] Indeed, in this respect, it would be more correct to classify *The End of the Story* not so much in terms of a novel but rather as the image of a novel, or more specifically, as the image of a novel that, on the one hand, is *still to be written* and that, on the other hand, *has been always already rewritten*. The following is illustrative here:

I tried chronological order and that didn't work, so I tried a random order. Then the problem was how to arrange a random order so that it made sense. I thought I could have one thing lead to another thing, each part grow out of the part that came before, and also include some relief from that. I tried the past tense, and then I put it in the present tense, even though I was tired of the present tense by then. After that I left parts of it in the present tense and put the rest back in the past tense (ES: 51).

While on the surface this passage would appear to be a relatively unproblematic description of the difficulties of compositional organisation the narrator has faced in writing the novel, what is actually remarkable here is, first, the way this description in fact *takes the place* of the novel such that what it describes is displaced by the description and, second, the way that what is presented therefore is effectively an instance of *déjà vu* in that it presents the 'illusion of having experienced before

[64] The etymology of narrative links it to the Latin *narrāre*, which is most probably derived from *gnārus*, knowing.

something that is really being experienced for the first time.'[65] Indeed, it is precisely on account of this occurrence of *déjà vu* that the passage takes the express form of a ghostly rewriting. The rewritten, that is, while appearing to depend necessarily on the anteriority of what it *re*-writes, in fact only exacerbates the strange absence of any original. Blanchot's description of rewriting from *The Step Not Beyond* offers an exemplary framework here:

> [w]riting is not accomplished in the present, nor does it present, nor does it present itself: still less does it represent, except to play with the repetitive that introduces into the game the temporally ungraspable anteriority of the beginning again in relation to any power to begin, as if the re-present, without anticipating a presence yet to come, without assigning it to the past either [...] played with a plurality always supposed by the return. To write in this sense, is always first to rewrite, and to rewrite does not refer to any previous writing, any more than to an anteriority of speech or of presence or of signification [...] rewriting holds itself apart from any productive initiative and does not claim to produce *anything*.[66]

From this perspective, then, rewriting belongs to the unsettled and unsettling temporality of the 'meanwhile' (*l'entretemps*). What it presents in Davis is neither detail nor incident but rather a simultaneous addition and subtraction whose 'play' inexorably disrupts the very meaning of 'narrative' it purports to reflect. In this sense, the insistence of analytic rewriting in *The End of the Story* subjects the novel's narration to a circular movement of multiplication and return, where what is said exacerbates not presence but distance to the extent that the narrative becomes no more than the scattering of weightless *paraphrases* eliding their own frame of reference. As Davis comments in interview, '[a]s soon as you start looking at things

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[65] *The Chambers Dictionary*, p. 427.
[66] Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, p. 32; Blanchot's emphasis.

more carefully, they start to disappear.'[67] Yet as they begin to disappear so the demand for close scrutiny intensifies. To return to the thread with which this section began, it is precisely the aporia of this vicious circle Davis' novel is condemned to entertain, which is to say, that it is condemned to at once both 'contemplate' and 'harbour'.

For the sake of clarity it is worth summarising here the principle attributes of this aporia; for the sake of brevity, these can be schematised in the following ways:

(1) The beginning of analysis marks a beginning without end.

(2) Analysis is determined, therefore, by a circular movement that actually precludes any act of determination.

(3) It follows that the analytic movement is errant in the sense that, at one and the same time, it is both wandering and error-prone.

(4) Analysis is a double movement that depends upon the telling of stories.

(5) In order to come to term, analysis requires 'the end of the story'.

(6) If analysis is itself a telling of stories, in order for the end of the story to become an object of reflection, analysis must be suspended.

(7) The end of the story thus cannot be an object of analysis.

(8) What this suggests is that analysis is left regarding only its own peregrinations.

(9) In other words, the object of analysis is nothing other than the coming and going of its own reflection.

(10) Unable, however, to either recognise or claim this reflection due to its proclivity for telling stories means that self-reflection leads only to self-displacement.

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[67] Christopher J. Knight, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1999 Winter) p. 531.

(11) The pursuit of analysis is a mad pursuit: it leads either to its ever-spiralling repetition or, what is probably the same thing, its senselessness.

The consequences of such an aporetic structure are double. On the one hand, it follows that the engagement of this aporia is the condemnation to repeat its irresolution endlessly. In this sense, the experience of the aporia is negative in that it would be equivalent to a kind of repulsion, in the sense of nausea or disgust.[68] On the other hand, throughout the novel the engagement of the aporia is frequently the provocation of laughter. Indeed, as Michael Hofmann observes, '*The End of the Story* is a comedy, but one of an unusually deep and astringent kind. If there are 'tears of things', then there must be laughter – however hollow – or smiles or half-smiles or grimaces or wincings of things.'[69] While even on this account laughter would remain still inexorably bound to the repulsive aporia, what laughter prompts is the dissimulation of the gravity of the aporia, such that refusal here would denote less antipathy than it would a repudiation in the sense of a lightening of the very structure of the aporia itself. This does not mean that laughter is without risk or consequence of its own. Perhaps the gravest risk laughter entertains is that, far from dissimulating the aporia, like nausea its very provocation in fact would serve only to exacerbate the brutal experience of condemnation. If the principle reason for

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[68] While this is not the place to enter into any detailed discussion, given the implicit role of Levinas' 'excendence' in this thesis, it is perhaps worth remarking here that it is precisely around this trope of nausea that Levinas' early philosophy turns. For Levinas, nausea is instituted by the enclosed attachment of Being to itself. From this perspective, nausea marks 'an effort to get out,' to be sick, which is to say, it marks an effort to lighten myself of the burden of selfhood. At the same time, however, the problem as Levinas defines it is that nausea is also therefore that which confirms the very inescapability of Being: if nausea is the physical indication of this irremissibility, then the state of nausea can be nothing other than the authentication of this nauseating detention. To put it another way, the condition of nausea is a corroboration of presence, of 'being-there,' of existence; it arises and I am reminded forcefully, ineluctably, of my existence. As Levinas writes, 'the nature of nausea is nothing other than its presence, nothing other than our powerlessness to take leave of that presence.' Levinas, *On Escape*, pp. 66 and 68. From this perspective, the difference between Levinas and Davis, therefore, would be that while for Levinas the negotiation of the double bind of nausea inaugurates the imperative to think a 'new path' out of being (Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 73) which later will be translated into the term 'ethics', for Davis it signals the inseparability of existence from the duplicitous humour of irony. It is this latter exigency I trace for the remainder of this chapter; I return to the difference between these two approaches in more detail in the following chapter.

[69] Hofmann, 'The Rear-View Mirror,' p. 6.

laughing in the first place is the madness of the pathless path, then the experience of laughter necessarily must be nothing other than a reiteration of the vicious cycle of the aporia. In either case, however, laughter will be always a laughter without object. That is to say, laughter will be always unproductive: it either simulates or dissimulates but it does not institute. What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that at one and the same time laughter signs both the weight of the meaning of the aporia and the trembling of this meaning, such that the meaning of escape, the meaning upon which the possibility of escape rests, is nothing other than the lightening of meaning laughter effects. In this respect, the laughter of the aporia would be, in Blanchot's words, 'the hilarity of the serious, a humor that goes much further than the promises of this word, a force that is not only parodic or a force of derision, but calls forth a burst of laughter and points to laughter as the goal or ultimate meaning.'[70]

In drawing this chapter to a close, it is to a consideration of this exigency of laughter – the rupture that conditions it and the relation this rupture bears to the lightening of meaning – in Davis' novel that I now turn.

DEVASTATING LAUGHTER OR WHICH WAY NOT OUT

In many respects, the most frequent form of laughter that conditions Davis' novel is deflationary. That is to say, and as with the double or 'mad' structure of analytic reflection, in *The End of the Story* laughter both arises out of and perpetuates an implosion of narrative coherence. In this, then, laughter would be synonymous with irony in the sense that its bathos or worklessness would be nothing other than the turning of discourse away from itself. As Paul de Man comments in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality,' irony is, at one and the same time, both duplicitous and undecidable: it

[70] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Laughter of the Gods' in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 170.

does not say what it says, but neither then does it say what it does not say. Irony, rather, 'dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and thus can find no escape from this spiral.'[71] Indeed, as de Man develops further in 'The Concept of Irony,' the inescapable turnings of irony indicate the ways in which the grammatical-conceptual function of irony is nothing other than a 'radical negation' of the structure of meaning.[72] Irony, de Man, writes, is a 'deviation between literal and figural meaning, [a] turning away of the meaning.'[73] Irony slips, elusive, diffusive such that, as de Man continues, 'any theory of irony is the undoing [...] of any theory of narrative.'[74] It follows necessarily that any ironic narrative will be the breaking open of its own self-deconstruction or what Derrida terms 'autoimmunization.'[75]

That said, however, it does not follow that this indicates that irony is sundered unavoidably from any system of signification. What it suggests rather is that duplicity is the very condition of signification of irony. 'Curiously enough,' de Man writes, 'it seems to be only in describing a mode of language which does not mean what it says that one can actually say what one means.'[76] Ironic discourse, in other words, is the interruption of discourse, its inter-diction. Irony divides discourse against itself, which is to say, it turns sense around, spinning, into non-sense, imbalance, a discrepant laughter that complicates discursive regulation.

While numerous instances abound throughout the novel, a summary yet representative example of the work(lessness) of ironic laughter occurs in the novel's

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[71] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983) p. 222.
[72] Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony,' *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. 165.
[73] de Man, 'The Concept of Irony,' pp.164-165.
[74] de Man, 'The Concept of Irony,' p. 179.
[75] Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone,' *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) p. 80, n. 27. There Derrida comments that 'the process of auto-immunization [...] consists for a living organism [...] of protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system.'
[76] de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality,' p. 211.

second section. Describing both her search for the man's apartment one afternoon two years on from the break down of their relationship and what she imagined would happen when she located the apartment, the narrator discovers not the man's name but rather the 'strange, genderless' names 'ARD AND PRUETT on a white card next to the bell of his apartment' (ES: 7). Later, having stood outside an apartment the man did not live in and having rung the bell to an apartment that did not bear his name, the narrator feels a sudden proximity to the two names she does not know (Ard and Pruett) because it is probable that they will have discovered whatever the man left behind (ES: 7), such that what the narrator, Ard and Pruett all share is an intimate familiarity with the man, although it does not follow that Ard, Pruett nor even the man are necessarily aware of this fact. As the narrator puts it:

> I felt an unexpected relation to these two people [Ard and Pruett], though they did not know me and I had never seen them, because they, too, had lived in a sort of intimacy with him. Of course it could have been the tenants before them who found what he [the man] left, and maybe Ard and Pruett had found the marks of another person altogether (ES: 8).

In terms of ironic laughter, at issue here is the way the qualificatory and ultimately self-reductive structure of this passage implodes not only its own frame of reference but also that of the entire section that precedes it. The conjunctive 'though' that divides rather than joins the first sentence against itself does not augment the narrator's sense of proximity but rather renders that proximity ridiculous. That said, it should be acknowledged also that ridiculousness does not cede to the total disruption of connectivity. Even here, that is, there remains at least a degree of plausibility to the narrator's sense of relation precisely because there remains a point of commonality between the narrator and the tenants of the apartment, namely, the

man. If that is the case, however, then the total diminution of the second sentence removes any trace of plausible connectivity the previous sentence may have left intact by not only devastating the common point of contact but by directing the entire narrative episode toward the non-sense of devastation. From this perspective, therefore, irony is at once both the ruins and the remains of the narrative in the sense that what remains is nothing other than the ruinous imprint of irony. Indeed, the precise irony of this passage (the irony of irony, as it were) lies in the disjunction between the way ironic discourse is seen to sustain the narrative, at least in part or in pieces, and the way the narrative itself is resolutely incapable of containing irony. More specifically, it is precisely in this hollow space of disjunction that an echo of laughter starts to reverberate, 'a laughter,' that is, 'in which the emptiness of a space resounds from the limitlessness of the void.'[77]

In Davis, then, with its double movement of presentation and retraction the exigency of laughter is less that of the exultant affirmation of Nietzsche or Bataille than it is of quiet discretion. Indeed, in many respects the double signification of laughter parallels the structure of the image in that it is that which lives on *regardless*, in the empty space that resounds between origins and ends, when the unlocatability of the structural schema of finitude is matched only by the uncanny yet ludicrous awareness of this impotence. In this way, and as with the image, laughter does not produce anything but rather it is simply that which remains when nothing remains, a laconic noise that builds in response to the eccentric hilarity of this statement. Indeed, the eccentricity of laughter results precisely from its ex-centricity, that is, from the fact that this would be a laughter that takes place off-line, off-kilter, *at a remove* both from what provokes it in the first place and the nothing-in-particular it subsequently comes to remark in the instant of its own occurrence. In either case,

[77] Blanchot, 'The Laughter of the Gods,' p. 170.

laughter is marked by an injunction: on the one hand, even if laughter is produced *by* the narrative, it cannot be brought into the service of the narrative precisely because it arises *at the narrative's expense*; on the other hand, laughter necessarily therefore will take place at the expense also of any dialectic of laughter in that the very notion of a 'dialectic of laughter' could be nothing other than cause for (further) laughter. As such, there will be always an ironic laughter that permeates any meta-discussion of laughter so that there is, in fact, resolutely nothing to say about it that will not be itself a permutation of laughter, which is to say, that will not be the simulation of laughter's dissimulation.

One of the most consistent illustrations of this structural mirroring of permeation with permutation is that of the narrative's repeated multiplication of its own compositional possibilities. This can be exemplified succinctly by the following, where the narrator is considering whether to fragment or preserve the chronological order of the affair. As she writes:

> [i]s it that when these events are in chronological order they are not propelled forward by cause and effect, by need and satisfaction, they do not spring ahead with their own energy but are simply dragged forward by the passage of time?
>
> Or is it only that I am irritable today? I have to be careful, because there are days when I am so irritable that not only do I want to disrupt the chronological order, I also want to delete a great deal of what I have written. Take this sentence out, I say to myself, with a kind of furious pleasure, and that paragraph, too – I never liked or respected it (ES: 99-100).

Before discussing the exigency of laughter in this passage in any detail, a number of preliminary comments are worth outlining here:

(1) Despite the theoretical lucidity of the narrator's compositional question, that question is never actually answered.

(2) It is not answered precisely because the subsequent use of the conjunctive 'or' (a) dislodges the rigour of that question and (b) directs the focus of the paragraph to the consideration of an alternative question, namely, whether the narrator is or is not irritable.

(3) This question in turn remains unanswered because:

(4) Far from leading either to its own analysis or even back to the first question, the conjunctive cedes rather to a subsequent digression on the relation between irritability and writing more generally.

(5) As such, the conjunctive marks a turning away in the sense that it is a syntactical instance not of narrative consolidation but rather of equivocation.

(6) This turning away is paralleled by three instances of ironic incongruity: (a) the calm and formally measured grammar of the narrator's prose is at emphatic odds with the 'furious pleasure' it notates; (b) if there is the slightest chance that the narrator is writing this passage while irritated (and her second question unquestionably entertains irritation at least as a possibility), a certain degree of irony must attend any description of an avowed prevalence for deletion when irritated; (c) the explicit contradiction between the *description* (legibility) of such a prevalence only serves to accentuate this irony further.

(7) All this notwithstanding, however, it would be correct also to say that none of these instances are either incongruous or ironic, but literal. That is to say, this passage performs what it notates to the extent that the analysis of deletion takes the place of the narrative. As such, whatever it was, 'this sentence' in effect is here taken out, deleted.

(8) Further to this, the inclusion of this meta-narrative means that the chronology of the story has been in fact already disrupted precisely because it substitutes the story of the affair for an analysis of writing. Even as this analysis might be prompted by the story, it is at the same time an add-on or supplement that *literally* interrupts the narrative.

(9) If the latter half of this passage can be taken at the level of literal performance, then the end of this paragraph actually answers, at least to a certain extent, the equivocal question with which it began. That is, if the narrator's disruption of chronology and tendency to delete is predicated, more often than not, on irritability, then it would be reasonable to assume that in this instance the narrator is indeed irritable.

(10) In spite of this deduction, however, it is still far from clear whether the narrator's irritation stems from the limitations of chronological order or from some other unspecified thing. Thus not only does the question of chronology remain, but it also leads directly back to the (re-) posing of the question of irritation. In other words, if the deduction of the narrator's probable irritation in no ways decides whether the narrator's problem with chronology is structural or modal, then the structural question necessarily must take into account the modal question.

(11) In the final analysis, the suspension of the narration of the story the inability to decide causes and the circular logic this insufficiency opens onto is, quite frankly, irritating.

Despite the seemingly logical progression of this passage, therefore, its humour lies precisely in its circularity, which is to say, in the inadvertency of its own internal circumvention of progression. In many respects, the axiom of this humour is disseminated by and circulated around the at once qualificatory yet undecidable conjunctive 'or.' Even as it would appear not only to extend but to suggest an

explanation for the narrator's anxiety about chronology, the conjunctive in fact introduces nothing more substantive than an irreducible instance of equivocation, an equivocation, moreover, to which both the narrator's question and its possible explanation can only return. In this sense, the humour of the 'or' is a humour of the limit: as it is the point around which the possibility of meaning in this passage revolves so it is also the grammatical turn meaning cannot surpass. To put it another way, even as 'or' at one and the same time opens the passage to its own progression and links the passage's disparate elements within a grammar of coherent continuity, the qualification the conjunctive introduces will have exposed connectivity always already to the inexorable spectre of improbability or arbitrariness. What this points to, therefore, is that the humour of the limit is bathetic, that is, that it produces an '*unintended* failure' of signification.[78]

The root meaning of bathos as 'depth' is illustrative here. What the bathetic orientation of 'or' effects, in other words, is the opening of discourse to a limitless depth in which signification hangs suspended. It is important to stress, however, that the depth of bathetic laughter here does not preclude the advent of meaning nor even reduce its instigation to an enumeration of postmodern relativism; the point, rather, is that while depth still permits the formation of meaning, it prevents that formation from ever thickening into intransigence. As Lacan illustratively notes:

> the element that makes us laugh [...] is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, flees, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including

[78] Chris Baldick, *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 22; emphasis added.

precisely those that are the most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier.[79]

In other words, bathetic depth at all times lightens the self-identity of meaning by ingraining at its centre a boundless and thus unspecifiable reverberation. The bathetic humour of the conjunctive arises precisely because its open depth at one and the same time both permits and precludes meaning, including its own. It is, to be sure, a humour of exasperation in the sense that the depth it renders oddly legible turns the production of meaning (here, the narrative) into a constantly thwarted exercise. As such, the laughter that emanates from this constraint is nothing other than the discrete recognition of the condemnation to an unbearable lightness. In this sense, the laughter here is less that of an amused chuckle as it is the *resignation* of a snort, a grunt, an involuntary nasal exhalation. It is resigned because while it acknowledges that nothing much has been grasped it acknowledges too that something has been grasped, namely, the ungraspable, the meaning that escapes, the end that will not come. It is a bathetic understanding, unintended, devastating, in the sense that bathetic laughter is less an instance of wisdom than an involuntary knowledge of lightening that does not lead anywhere, or that leads only to the limitless reverberation of an unfamiliar depth. The comedy of bathos, the reason why it will have prompted always already a certain laughter, does not arise because its

[79] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter, Book VII, 1959-60 (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 314; cited in a slightly modified translation in Simon Critchley's 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis' in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London and New York: Verso, 1999) p. 227. As the title of Critchley's essay implies, his argument is guided by the question of what comedy might 'tell us about the question of finitude' (p. 224). His response is that 'humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not heroic authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity' (p. 224; Critchley's emphasis). What is centrally relevant to the purposes of this chapter, however, is the way Critchley then goes on to align comedy with Levinas' notion of being riveted. As Critchley writes, '[c]omedy is a relief that permits no escape, but which rather returns all the more forcefully to the fact of being riveted to oneself, the idea of *être rive à soi* that is the basic intuition of Levinas's earliest philosophical work' (p. 234).

(re)doubling suggests the possibility of escape or of 'excendence' but because its failure is the accidental discernment of the impossibility of escape, which is to say, it discerns that which is *most incontestably there:* the *il y a*, the condemnation to an existence without exits, that antithetical aporia upon which existence depends and quails.[80] For the narrator of *The End of the Story*, for the one who engages the circularities of its narration, it is a funny knowledge, one that trembles, because even as it is useless knowledge, that is, a knowledge that cannot be put to work, it is incontestable all the same.

To return to the focal thread with which this chapter began, it is also precisely on account of this aporetic knowledge that the novel ultimately abandons chronological narration in favour of an escalating assortment of inter-connected yet divided fragments of varying lengths. As Davis writes in the brief yet significant essay 'The Architecture of Thought', '[t]o be exhaustive and correct is of course an infinite task. More can always be inserted, more event and nuance, more commentary on the event, and more nuance within the commentary.'[81] The fragment hypostatises this task, that is, renders the impossible infinitude of the writing project excessively visible by at all times accentuating its incompletion. If the fragment is anything it is only 'something left from some projected whole, some future whole.'[82] From this perspective, therefore, the accumulation of fragments neither masks the gaps, absences or fissures of the story nor even constructs a narrative *in absentia* but rather serves only to emphasise each fragment's trammelled discontinuity, both

[80] Cf. 'There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces. Darkness is the very play of existence which would play itself out even if there were nothing. It is to express just this paradoxical existence that we have introduced the term "there is" [il y a]. We want to call attention to this being a density, an atmosphere, a field, which is not to be identified with an object that would have this density, or that would be taken up in the breath of existence or situated within a field of forces [...] A presence of absence, the *there is* is beyond contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense being has no outlets.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001) pp. 59-60.

[81] Lydia Davis, 'The Architecture of Thought,' *PEN American Journal*, No. 2 (2004), www.pen.org.printmedia.php/ prmMediaID/105, accessed 21 April 2005.

[82] Davis, 'Form as a Response to Doubt.'

overall and individually. At one and the same time, therefore, the splinter of each fragment is a glimpse of a particular that, by definition, is indeterminable and whose repetition, then, cedes to the narrative nothing but a common indeterminacy of particulars. Consequently, there is a kind of internal emptiness at play within and across each fragment that effectively lightens the one and the whole of determinate content. More specifically, the fragment would be nothing more than the site and image of this repeated lightening. Given the emphasis on comedy in this section, it is no doubt instructive to note that in this the scheme of the fragment here recalls what Hegel defines as 'comic spectacle' in which 'through their liberation from the opinion which contains both their specific determinateness as content and also their absolute determinateness, liberation, that is, from the firm hold of consciousness on these determinatenesses, they become empty.'[83]

In this way, and in a manner similar to the way bathos undercuts or outstrips the narrative, both the formal brevity and specular emptiness of the fragment ingrains into the narrative the inexorable *imprint* that there remains and there will always remain *something still to be written, something still to be disconnected.* 'It isn't turning out the way I thought it would' (ES: 191), the narrator comments as the novel nears its ceremonial ending, such that:

> [t]ired, I try to make out a word I've written. I can't be sure of it. At the same time, I hear a voice in my head. It is my own voice speaking the word, strangely insistent, though my eyes still do not know what the word is.

[83] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 452. While illustrative of the argument here, it should be acknowledged that this definition is somewhat extracted from its context in the *Phenomenology* where it is discussed within the section 'Religion in the Form of Art.'

On other days, my hand will keep typing a period after a word, trying to end a sentence before I'm ready to end it, as if my hand is trying to stop me from saying what I want to say (ES: 189).

In respect of such narrative commentary, *The End of the Story* becomes a comic spectacle in the sense that it becomes no more than a periphrastic surface of strange turnings, re-turnings, displacements, and occlusions. On the one hand, the word that can be heard if not read is in fact inaudible; on the other hand, the description of the hand's grammatical disruption is notated in a meticulously exact prose. In either instance, the material content of these incidents is abstracted by the screen of commentary, of reflection. Thus discourse here, and throughout *The End of the Story* more generally, becomes *dis-cursus* which, in its Latin derivation, originally denotes 'to run away' (*dis-* away and *currere* to run). Meaning, in other words, takes place in the narrative's flight from itself, from the story, from the end, in the laughter of what 'slides away', what empties.[84] To write, as Barthes puts it, in the '*absolutely insignificant* order' of the fragment is '[t]o let it be understood that there was no question here of a love story (or of a history of a love), to discourage the temptation of meaning.'[85] At issue here is a principle of double faithfulness both to experience and to the infinitude of a memory that at once perpetuates and transforms that experience. The insignificance of the fragment seeks to mime this duality, which is to say, to render it transparent. What takes place in this insignificance, therefore, is nothing other than the uncanny figure of the image, that at one and the same time forbids escape and forbids appearance. Fragmentation is the narrator's concession to the image, its own turning away reflected in the mirror of the narrator's turning away from 'the end of the story.' Yet it is also, therefore, the

[84] Cf. the above passage from Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.
[85] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 8; Barthes' emphasis.

narrator's condemnation to a perpetual beginning of writing that comically, cruelly, knows in advance that the lover will not come, that from day to day the memory will differ, and that in the final instance the absence of both will have been substituted for the subjunctive image of writing.[86] In this sense, it is on account of separation that the novel comes to be written at all, yet it also on account of separation that the novel must resign itself (with a laugh?) to the distance of the image.

Perhaps this image is that of a novel still to be written; perhaps it is that of what will have been written always already and substitution is the best that can be expected. In either case, the novel does not end, it fragments, and fragmentation is a dead end, a false road, one that necessitates a retracing of steps, a re-beginning. So it is the story is kept alive and the wandering image consumes the gaze. One night, after reading a passage from Freud on forgetfulness, the narrator lies in the dark and conjures the image of the man:

I lay in the dark, relaxed and peaceful, and conjured up his image for the pleasure of looking at him, and for company, though I was too tired to imagine anything more – only his image standing in a well-lit place, against the wall of a room. I had him there, though he looked irritated, but as I began to fall asleep, of his own accord he turned and walked away, out of my sight, as though off a stage and into the wings, and I was startled. I woke up to think about what had happened: I had brought him there, but I had been too weak to hold on to his image and had lost control of it. Even though he was only an image, he had his own feelings, and he was there under protest, and as soon as I grew too weak to hold him, he walked away out of my sight (ES: 187-188).

[86] Cf. 'To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely *there where you are not* – this is the beginning of writing.' Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 100; Barthes' emphasis.

The End of the Story is structured around an inexorable lightening of presence, productivity, and signification. It vacillates, therefore, around a withdrawal it cannot thematise because its lightness is precisely that which renders it impossible to sketch, to nominate or to retain. Thus, as with the novel in general, as with this chapter, the scene here does not close but breaks off on the liminal quiet of an image turning around, turning away.

CHAPTER FOUR

RIFTWORDS:

THE REFUSAL OF MEANING

He struck the match and held it up to the wall, and was immediately disappointed by the most innocuous and meaningless bulletin yet.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.

"You're running out of ideas, my man," Wade muttered out loud.

– Steve Erickson[1]

Out of the word came the light. On the first day of creation. Introduced separation. From the dark. And time. In alternation.

▲

The light took time. In its headlong flight. And knotted it into space. Where we pursue happiness, always belated. But the light did not remain. Unknotting the dimensions back it went. Into the word. And time's left with nothing.

– Rosmarie Waldrop[2]

It occurred to me as I made my way here and there along these paths of history that there is a joy in independence, in the risk of independence in one's thinking and making, and there is joy even in contemplating the works of the independent thinker. But what also occurred to me is that there is safety, reassurance, in being an uncritical follower, especially of an independent thinker, a revolutionary [...] and that the challenge to the follower [...] is to remain independent in turn – even of those we admire, of those who are themselves independent. That is, to continue to look with clear eyes, with the eyes of the "critical scholar" [...] For fear that otherwise we have eyes but do not look. Or maybe it should be: we look but do not see.

– Lydia Davis[3]

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[1] Steve Erickson, *Arc d'X* (London: Hutchinson, 1994) p. 64.
[2] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Hölderlin Hybrids' in *Blindsight* (New York: New Directions, 2003) p. 45.
[3] Lydia Davis, 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms: Jesus Recovered by the Jesus Seminar,' *Joyful Noise: The New Testament Revisited*, eds. Rick Moody and Darcey Steinke (Boston: Little Brown, 1997) p. 201-202.

If what takes place were otherwise. Not my hand to comment but the slight swell of someone else's no in me. (Me?) Death of me. Me inasmuch as any one. As any you. Cast of no one who carry, pocket-flex, hybrid hands, mute, as much as. Sharp like not of this. Unexpected the body voice somewhat hollow going off as a tongue taking time as what will not be swallowed. Cone crossings of to have unfold. Without point. Then side-lines of sight but lately lighter. Creon incredulous. And the matter of. The present. Tense for reference.

As each chapter has ventured thus far to demonstrate, the exigency of the lightening of meaning in Erickson, Waldrop and Davis leads to an irreducible antinomy of discourse. In Erickson, this antinomy is structured principally around a risk that at once frees existence of the burden of self-identity and condemns it to the infinite repetition of either the pursuit or the denial of identity; in Waldrop, circumlocution paradoxically ingrains and inflects a 'spacing of noise' impossible to silence; in Davis, the frame of the image ineluctably retains what turns away in the space-time of the present. With varying inflections, then, for each of these writers the lightening of meaning turns around the aporetic figure of stalemate: even as it would be correct to say that the lightening of meaning is not a complete disavowal of discourse, it would be correct to say also that neither is it discursively productive. What the lightening of meaning engages, rather, is a double or, perhaps better, endlessly doubling, refusal, not only of origins and eschatology but also of itself. It is important to clarify the sense or definition of refusal here. In its common usage, refusal denotes declination: 'to decline to take or accept; to renounce; to decline to give or grant [...] to fail to follow suit to (*cards*); to decline to meet in battle; to hold back from the regular alignment in action (*military*).'[4] What each of these significations share is the general sense of what might be termed a negative action: refusal re-acts to a particular situation by repudiating it. On certain levels, it is precisely within this 'negative-reactive' framework that in certain respects the lightening of meaning is to be understood in Erickson, Waldrop and Davis. Each writer reacts to a formal, thematic or conceptual problem by placing that problem at the very epicentre of their work, thus upsetting or refusing the notion of 'centre.' That said, however, such a definition only responds to a more marginal aspect of the process of lightening. In

[4] *The Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 1999) p. 1389.

fact, it would be accurate to specify that such an understanding of refusal as decentring in fact foregrounds only a side-effect or by-product of lightening.

A consideration of the etymology of 'refusal' will help clarify what is at issue here. Derived from the Latin *re-fundere* refusal signifies not simply to pour again but to pour again *and in a different way* (*re-*: again and in a different way; *fundere*: to pour). In this respect, the difference in inflection between the common and etymological senses may well be slight but it is also decisive. Rather than signalling a 'negative action' or renunciation, the etymological modulation of refusal suggests an occurrence of transformative repetition. As such, it is not so much that refusal declines, but that it accepts whatever is proffered. At the same time, however, and so as not to forget or to discard the etymological derivation of refusal, such acceptance is not to be confused with compliant reception. The strain of acceptance that here conditions refusal is not a simple repetition but a modulating one. If refusal repeats whatever is proffered, then it does not simply mirror the proffered but rather 'gives it back' with changes. The repetition of refusal, in other words, is inseparable from modulation to the extent that its 'giving back' necessarily inscribes the proffered within the *supplementary* sign of return. The critical point, then, is that, etymologically, refusal operates within the double frame of revolution: on the one hand, it turns an object around a given or pre-established axis; on the other hand, its turning upsets the very determination of that axiological fulcrum such that the axis itself is subjected to unreserved change. This is why the refusal that the lightening of meaning harbours and effects is both more fundamental and more general than decentring: rather than simply reducing signification to the groundless play of relativism, the *unqualified* modulation of refusal actually preserves the dual possibilities of signification and disruption by interplaying each within the same sphere of revolution. The consequence of such interplay is that refusal forces the

equation of signification with disruption and vice versa such that while one is the inevitable contradiction of the other, within the rubric of refusal it is in fact only on account of this contradiction that each takes place at all. For the purposes of clarity, the incongruity of this inter-relation can be formulated in the following manner: where refusal suggests a modulating repetition, signification is nothing other than self-division; at the same time that self-division or disruption is not the denial of signification but its very significance.

Through conjoined readings of Erickson, Waldrop and Davis, the principle focus of this chapter concerns the implications of such an understanding of refusal. In particular, the concern is with the realm of the political. To avoid any misunderstanding, however, it is worth emphasising that this concern does not correspond in the least to an attempt to underscore a 'politics of refusal,' that is, with thinking the ways in which refusal might be put to work politically or even with the identification of a certain version of politics refusal might be thought to enable. The concern with implications in this chapter is less pragmatic and more limited than the frame such analyses would demand. Disengaged from questions of political administration, the point of concentration, rather, relates to what the double sense of refusal might do to the very notion of the political itself, which is to say, it relates to the conceptual basis out of which political policy extends and upon which it depends. That said, however, it should be acknowledged that in view of the inseparable interrelation between the political and politics here suggested, it would be a critical error to presume that any exploration of the political will not imbricate an engagement with politics at the same time. From this perspective, the motivation behind the concentration on the political is not and should not be taken as divisive but simply as a method of approach marked by a specificity of emphasis. In large part, the reason for this restriction of focus is itself an inescapable consequence of

taking literary works as critical objects. As Derrida remarks in interview, 'the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralised as a fiction.'[5] Irrespective of which way it bends, however, in this context the point is that the double status of literature (freedom, fiction) will have suspended in advance any institutional or practical function it may appear to advocate.[6] Hence the engagement of literature produces nothing other than a confrontation with a repeated instance of the double meaning of refusal. Indeed, referring to literature's freedom to say everything and nothing, it is precisely in terms of refusal that Derrida frames his own discussion of the political responsibility of the literary work. Responsibility, he remarks with a curl of paradox, is the irresponsibility of refusing to answer back to one's writing for the simple reason that refusal is not the passive acceptance of institutional practices but the discretely dissident process of putting those practices into question. In Derrida's terms:

> [t]his duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thoughts or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom? To what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience [...] the experience of a promise engaged, that is, an endless promise.[7]

For the purposes of this chapter, what is particularly apposite in Derrida's comments is the way in which the refusal of literature is tied not simply to a political instance but, specifically, to an understanding of the structure of the political as that

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[5] Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 38.
[6] Maurice Blanchot's commentary on this awkward and double structure, non-structure, of literature is exemplary here. In particular, see his 'Orpheus' Gaze' in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) pp. 171-176.
[7] Derrida, 'This Strange Institution,' p. 38.

which is conditioned by a general or non-specifiable ex-temporality (in the context of the above passage, this ex-temporality relates specifically to *l'avenir*, that is, an always distant future). Two main observations are worth noting here. First, it is precisely this opening of teleology to an unlocatable alterity that, as Derrida suggests, releases (but does not manifest) 'another concept of the political.'[8] Second, the dual refusal of teleology and of governable limits identified by Derrida parallels and helps illustrate the exact frame around which Erickson's, Waldrop's and Davis' notions of the political all revolve.

In Erickson, the political is derived from the twin schema of revolution and apocalypse that he sees as embedded at the critical centre of the Jeffersonian origins of America. While such a register is noticeable across his entire corpus, arguably it is most explicit in the overtly political yet generically unclassifiable work, *Leap Year*, with its persistent, if indirect, deconstruction of the conceptual and causal antinomy of the phrase 'the pursuit of happiness.'[9] As Paul Kincaid notes, '*Leap Year* is a book which shifts and drifts, wandering from idea to image, often falling short of resolution.'[10] Waldrop's fragmentary poem 'Disaster,' with its transparent, if unspecified, references to the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, as well as its meditative comments on the limits of representation, both critically bears upon and inflects the space of the political that Erickson's work opens.[11] Where *Leap Year* reads the 'American pursuit' within an endless cycle of futural promise and dystopian disaster, however, 'Disaster' simultaneously gathers and unravels around the quieter exigency of 'a hole' that is, simply, obstinately, 'a space for thought' (D: 112). That is

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[8] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) p. 75.
[9] Steve Erickson, *Leap Year* (London: Futura, 1989). All subsequent references to this work will be given in the text by the abbreviation LY.
[10] Paul Kincaid, 'Secret Maps: The Topography of Fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve Erickson,' *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, No. 57 (Spring, 1993) p. 46.
[11] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Disaster' in *Love, Like Pronouns* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2003) pp. 111-116. All subsequent references to this poem will be given in the text by the abbreviation D.

to say, 'Disaster' translates the active imperative of 'the pursuit of happiness' into the practice of discursive spacing, or what Waldrop refers to as the drawing of a black line (D: 116). Nevertheless, despite their very different approaches to and inflections of the political, what comes to be mirrored across both Erickson's and Waldrop's work is the way in which their respective practices seek not only to refuse the inherent teleology of political rhetoric but also to make of that refusal the means by which the specificity of political inheritance is lightened of any determined practicality.

In Davis, the engagement with the political is somewhat less clear. Indeed, such an engagement is perhaps more apparent for its almost consistent absence from her work than it is for any explicit treatment. That said, however, the readings of the political affected by the work of Erickson and Waldrop clear a space in which the political in Davis is discernible as that which is in fact synonymous with absence. Representative in this discussion will be Davis' short text 'The Thirteenth Woman' where collective life is inseparable from and at all times haunted by the ghostly aperture of the one who does not appear.[12] Read in tandem with Davis' comments that serve as an epigraph to this chapter, such an emphasis on absence points to the way in which the structure of the political is – or, at least, should be – conditioned by an infinite process of cutting loose, which is to say, by a vigilant independence always risking itself. Indeed, what Davis' comments in 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms' underscore is that such independence is nothing short of the critical task incumbent on the scholar. As Davis writes:

[12] Lydia Davis, 'The Thirteenth Woman' in *Almost No Memory: Stories* (New York: Picador USA, 1997) p. 14. All subsequent references to this story will be noted in the text by the abbreviation AM; given that the narrative spans less than a single page, hereafter, the page reference will be omitted from its citation.

It occurred to me as I made my way here and there along these paths of history that there is a joy in independence, in the risk of independence in one's thinking and making, and there is joy even in contemplating the works of the independent thinker. But what also occurred to me is that there is safety, reassurance, in being an uncritical follower, especially of an independent thinker, a revolutionary [...] and that the challenge to the follower [...] is to remain independent in turn – even of those we admire, of those who are themselves independent. That is, to continue to look with clear eyes, with the eyes of the "critical scholar" [...] For fear that otherwise we have eyes but do not look. Or maybe it should be: we look but do not see.[13]

From this perspective, the meaning of the political becomes nothing other than its own constant self-contestation and shifting translation. To put it another way, the political becomes identical not with itself but with the critical imperative of refusal. What this means, however, is that the political is never contemporaneous with itself. It is, rather, that which is always inexorably, incongruously, out-of-time, disjoined by the very structural principle of deviation that determines its domain in the first place. In this sense, the political is out-of-time because it is at all times too early and too late, too insignificant and too consequential. Accordingly, the consequence of the out-of-time is an assessment of the political premised on the figure of exception. It is to a detailed discussion of the structure of the exception in relation to Davis' 'The Thirteenth Woman' that the final section of this chapter turns.

Read in this context, then, what Waldrop's and Davis' texts critically share, and what they develop from Erickson, is the invocation of what Waldrop elsewhere terms a blank 'placement' that 'does not explain, but cultivates the vacancy between [...].'[14] Throughout this chapter, such a vacancy or non-communication will be

[13] Davis, 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms,' pp. 201-202.
[14] Rosmarie Waldrop, *Reluctant Gravities* (New York: New Directions, 1999) p. 4.

aligned with what will be termed 'riftwords,' that is, a word, phrase, concept or form that cleaves a fault or fissure into any discourse on the political such that the political, in fact, is nothing other than a 'riftword' itself. In order not to mislead, however, it is important that this term at all times be understood in the plural. It must be plural because in order not to contradict the movement of rift, each 'riftword' necessarily must not only open onto but simultaneously announce the uncontained, the unsaid. As such, each 'riftword' is always more than itself, less than itself; it is that which lightens self-identity into an immeasurable and always foreign plurality. As Blanchot writes in a passage that guides the understanding of 'riftwords,' to speak is:

> to seek to receive the other as other and the foreign as foreign; to seek *autrui*, therefore, in [...] irreducible difference, in [...] infinite strangeness, an empty strangeness, and such that only an essential discontinuity can retain the affirmation proper to it [...] And this means therefore: not fearing to affirm interruption and rupture in order to come to the point of proposing and expressing – an infinite task – a truly plural speech.[15]

Such a proposal and such an expression is the obligation to which the work of Erickson, Waldrop and Davis attests. From this perspective, the double meaning of refusal would be nothing other than the exemplary occurrence and articulation of the 'riftword.'

The analytic structure of this chapter is incremental. Beginning with an extended reading of 'America' and 'the pursuit of happiness' in Erickson's *Leap Year*, I proceed then to open this reading to subsequent analyses of 'disaster' in Waldrop and anonymity in Davis. Despite variances in direction and indirection, what will be

[15] Maurice Blanchot, 'A Plural Speech' in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 82.

shown to repeat across the respective works of each writer is a collocation of the structure of the political with the form of its paradox.

STEVE ERICKSON: AMERICA OR, THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In many respects, Erickson's *Leap Year* ostensibly engages a somewhat idiosyncratic and digressive coverage of the 1988 presidential election between George Bush and Michael Dukakis. Yet while the particular details of this presidential campaign focalise the narrative's temporal and geographic shifts, the principle object of Erickson's concern in *Leap Year* is at once more allegorical, oblique, and necromantic. Erickson himself comments that in *Leap Year* 'a traveller searches the country for America only to find the United States.'[16] Yet as *Leap Year's* narrator asserts unequivocally toward the beginning of the narrative:

> I'm not looking for America. It's not that. Enough people over enough years have done that, they looked as far as the sun illuminated their line of vision, until they couldn't follow that light any further. I'm going against the light (LY: 14).

In *Leap Year*, that is to say, Erickson's express concern is with the deduction of the conceptual principle of the 'the ghost of America,'[17] the undertone spirit of its idea that haunts political praxis and of which the events of a historically specific election campaign are both an instance and a cessation. For Erickson, that is, the collocation of the 1988 race to occupy the presidency of the United States with the origins of 'America' inadvertently occasions the stark appearance of an abyssal rift between the administration of national politics and the political origins of that nation. In the

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[16] Steve Erickson, 'Arc d'X [Formula],' *Science · Fiction Eye* (Summer 1993). Reprinted at: www.studiolarz.com/erickson/articles/arceye.html, n.p, accessed 30 June 2004.
[17] Erickson, 'Arc d'X [Formula]'.

lexical terms of *Leap Year*, the systemisation of political practice reveals that the cost of the 'United States' performs nothing other than the disastrous expenditure of 'the spirit of the American idea' (LY: 46). As Erickson states near the beginning of the narrative, the United States 'insist[s] on reducing its future [namely, America] to a physical rubble if only to be free of it once and for all' (LY: 11).

The central point here is that it is precisely the *contemporary* identification of this disjunction between politics and the political that propels *Leap Year* into the past, that is, into a sustained engagement with the double structure of the question of inheritance. On the one hand, *Leap Year* aims critically to re-consider the constitutive meaning or ground of 'America' itself, what Erickson refers to as 'America and whatever function it's determined to perform in the evolution of moral time' (LY: 11). On the other hand, and as the terms 'function,' 'performance' and 'evolution' denote, any such consideration is, by necessity, contingent on the supposition of inheritance as anterior to origination. That is to say, because any origin is without precedent, radically new, revolutionary, its meaning is not constative but conditional, rather, on the performative future of its inheritance. As such, any invocation of the origin will be nothing other than the invocation of what the origin promises to the future. Hence, inheritance precedes origination to the extent that it is only on the basis of inheritance that the origin would be determinable.

It is precisely for this reason that Erickson's concern with the origin of America in *Leap Year* is allegorical: the instance of American origin, that is, allegorises American destiny. To put it another way, the function 'America' is 'determined to perform in the evolution of moral time' is nothing other than the allegorisation of its own futural repetition. Indeed, as Paul de Man illustratively notes,

'allegory always corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny.'[18] It does so, de Man suggests, because 'allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal distance.'[19] The critical point this suggests, therefore, is not that the return to the origin involves an allegorisation of original causes but that, in effect, the origin itself is in fact allegorical always already. Read in this context, to effect a return to the past is not a restoration or rehabilitation of a pre-existent politicality of 'America'; it is, rather, to return to an 'America' that 'is' not, that 'is' only insofar as it has never been *yet*, where its antiquity is awaited in the future of tomorrow, and where to return is to think not the past but the future. In this sense, the structure of the origin is allegorical to the extent that allegory signifies an authentic opening which is an opening of authenticity to the inauthentic, an instance of the alleviation of self-identity, a lightening of meaning. If it signifies at all, the non-signification of allegory suggests – but does not express – only an admonitive breaking free from what Erickson terms 'the gravity of history' (LY: 169). It suggests this admonition in admission of the groundless ground of a future always still to be inherited in the risk and rift of its invention.

Erickson indicates the basic property of this allegorical immanence when, in interview, he comments that 'the great paradox of America has been the conflict between its true idealism and its false innocence.'[20] The conflict Erickson names here specifically relates to that between the Jeffersonian ideal of freedom and political administration. In part, for Erickson this conflict arises because the Jeffersonian ideal was and remains indelibly contradicted by the interpolation of the

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[18] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1983) p. 206.
[19] de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality,'p. 207.
[20] Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Fall 1997) p. 406.

dual histories of the displacement of Native Americans and of the sanctioning of slavery. Indeed, Erickson's repeated concern with the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings throughout *Leap Year* collocates precisely the meaning of America with the history of slavery. 'No country,' he writes, 'was ever so born in light and dark, no country has ever been so drawn to the event horizon where the one begins and the other ends' (LY: 91). That said, however, and while Hemings' ghost both accompanies and informs Erickson for much of *Leap Year*, Erickson's imbrication of 'light' and 'dark' here is as much metaphorical as it is racial. For Erickson, in other words, this imbrication reflects also the structural conflict that, he argues, is definitively inseparable from the Jeffersonian 'invention of America' along the dual axes of individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness (LY: 33). '[T]he impulse from which the country was born,' Erickson writes, constitutively connects to the notion:

> that there could be people who bonded themselves to the idea that every day was dangerous and meant to be so. That every day the consequences of passion and courage and justice were there to be fulfilled or betrayed, and no recourse existed between the two. Nothing about America was meant to be comfortable or timid. Consequence was everything: every word and idea was a bomb (LY: 46).

As Lee Spinks illustratively notes, from this perspective:

> the promise of America is created out of the apocalyptic tension between our desire for revelation and our fear of a dystopian future; and that the idealism that enables us to project revelatory new worlds is indissociable from the threat of violence and dispossession.[21]

[21] Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1999) p. 219. It bears remarking here, however, that where

Erickson himself is clear on this point, writing in a sentence whose complex and interruptive structure parallels the specificity of the interchange between possession and dispossession succinctly:

> America was born of a holocaustic power and hope, and deserted itself almost in the same breath, finding nothing was possible in the heat of the country and its idea, but for conscience to concede to sanity, only to be left with the result of dark madness (LY: 85).

In principle, Erickson's concentrated rehabilitation of the paradoxical Jeffersonian origins of America in *Leap Year* is motivated by a critique of what he regards as the moral bankruptcy of 'America's political reality' (LY: 81). On the one hand, for Erickson, 'the authentic definition of America'(LY: 160) is nothing other than the ideal of 'Jeffersonian freedom' (LY: 154), namely a freedom 'that pushes toward the anarchic' (LY: 155). For both Jefferson and Erickson alike, it pushes toward the anarchic precisely because the forms of social commonality and responsibility promoted by such an ideal necessarily involve the perpetual contestation and redefinition of the very notions of society, commonality, and responsibility. On the other hand, for Erickson, the doctrinal emphases by both the Right and the Left on the orthodoxy of social conformity and, in particular, of the control of the state over the individual run in direct counterpoint to the Jeffersonian idea of America. To put it

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Spinks takes this ineliminable disjunction in Erickson to be representative of a scriptural schema of revelation, the binary radicality of refusal that structures the Ericksonian notion of America in *Leap Year* can be seen actually to exasperate such a system in that it will have undercut always already any revelatory vision it may appear to make possible. The exigency of refusal, in other words, upsets necessarily any apocalyptic logic of revelation to the extent that even if it is that which opens such a space in the first place, it is simultaneously that which, in the prospective instant, inevitably rejects it also. In contradistinction, therefore, to the Christian vision of the necessity of an inter-connection between destruction and birth (redemption), refusal refers, at one and the same time, both to the shaking apart of whatever arrives and the indistinct shaking (in the sense of trembling) of what will not form.

another way, on Erickson's understanding there is an abyssal rift between the late 18th Century idea of America and its late 20th Century reality. Erickson puts this argument summarily when he writes:

> We have relinquished the definition of American politics to the false faith of the American Right, which so obsequiously professes to love its country even as it holds in contempt the truest and most difficult things for which the country stands; and the bad faith of the American Left, which has been too guilty too long of precisely what it's been accused, hating its country. In the midst of hypocrisy and hate have died guilt and innocence as matters of spiritual or conscionable resolution; rather they've become factors of power as held by ideology (LY: 85-86).

As this passage palpably demonstrates, however, the danger of such a critique is that it inevitably risks collapsing into precisely the same kind of didactic moralism with which it takes issue.[22] Yet the reason Erickson not only entertains such a risk but, as here, fails the terms of his own argument, is because this risk and this failure are constitutive features of the Jeffersonian idea of America itself. By definition, only the endless revolution would be revolutionary. As such, in order not to contradict the radical infinitude of Jeffersonian freedom, it is necessary that any attempt at practical realisation incomplete or refuse itself. It is only by failing the promise of America that, Erickson notes, the principle of that promise remains politically active (LY: 146). In addition, it is also precisely for this reason that Erickson claims that *Leap Year* 'is an act of manifest irresponsibility' (LY: 125). In tracing the spirit of Jeffersonian thinking, that is, *Leap Year* is organised not around the proposition of anything in particular

[22] Lee Spinks makes a similar point when he writes that 'Erickson's energetic rehabilitation of the Jeffersonian origins of American republican discourse naturally runs the risk of establishing a "golden age" which exerts moral authority simply by the contrast it presents to the clamor of an uncertain present.' Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates, p. 219.

but, rather, the dual lightening of both political reality and political idealism. In the vacancy of their delay echoes the recalcitrant intonation of the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, as Erickson illustratively writes in *Amnesiascope*, this recalcitrance is the America:

> that invented itself all over from the ground up every single day. It is the brazen America, the reckless one, the one with the lit fuse, the America that ejaculates not by habit but for the intoxicating pleasure of it [...] It's the America that was originally made for those who believed in nothing else, not because they believed there *was* nothing else but because for them, without America, nothing else was worth believing.[23]

In many respects, then, Erickson's critical return to an originary past both in *Leap Year* and across his work as a whole can be read as re-engaging the scholarly question regarding Jefferson's decision to substitute Locke's natural rights of 'life, liberty, and estate' for those of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'[24] At the same time, however, Erickson's explicit constellation of 'the pursuit of happiness' in *Leap Year* extends much further than the frame such a philological inquiry would entertain. Principally, at stake in the work's redress of 'the pursuit of happiness' is the opening of this national homonym to the 'nuclear imagination' or self-destructive logic Erickson avows it bears internally. As Erickson explains, 'those with nuclear imagination remain fated to the oblivion which is integral to the vision they're trying to

[23] Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet Books, 1997) p. 127; Erickson's emphasis.
[24] Erickson himself draws attention to this difference in both *Leap Year* (LY: 32) and in interview. For the latter, see Yoshiaki Koshikawa, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson, 1: History Changes Itself,' *The Study of Current English*, Special Issue (July, 1993). Reprinted at: www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~yoshiaki/Re.htm, accessed 30 June, 2004. The quotation from John Locke is taken from his *The Second Treatise on Government: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government*, ed. J.W. Gough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956) p. 43. For the text of Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration, see Thomas Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. A, Sixth Edition, ed. Nina Baym (New York and London: Norton, 2003) pp. 728-732.

define' (LY: 44).[25] While *Leap Year* goes on to furnish the 'nuclear imagination' with the consequential examples of Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer (LY: 156), in terms of the Jeffersonian pursuit of happiness Erickson is concerned principally with the irrevocable paradox that the declaration of the pursuit inscribes between theory and practice. The central problem with 'the pursuit of happiness,' in other words, is that it attempts to function at the levels of ground and goal simultaneously. As Garry Wills has remarked:

> the pursuit of happiness is a phenomenon both obvious and paradoxical. It supplies us with the ground of human right and the goal of human virtue. It is the basic drive of the self, and the only means given for transcending the self.[26]

While Wills' Romantically rooted lexical use of virtue and transcendence is somewhat incompatible with the more apocalyptic register of Erickson, the schema of paradox inherent within the pursuit of happiness is well made here. For the sake of precision, however, such a schema can be developed in four inter-related ways. First, at issue in this paradox is the uneasy imbrication of the nouns 'pursuit' and 'happiness': where the latter names a desired goal or outcome, the former ineluctably effects the endless deferral of that outcome. Second, the paradox of this 'inalienable right' relates to the irresolvable conflict it inaugurates between individual and collective freedom. If, as Wills notes, it names 'the basic drive of the self,' then that impulsion necessarily counteracts the attempt to establish group identity (be that national, local, or whatever). Admittedly, it could be argued that the identification here of a tension between the individual and the collective is somewhat misguided

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[25] For a further discussion of the 'nuclear imagination,' see Chapter One.
[26] Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978) p. 247; cited in *The Norton Anthology*, Vol. A, p. 728, n. 5.

given that it inheres quite unremarkably to the principle that considers the role of governance to be the protection not of civil group rights but of the 'natural rights' of the individual. As Locke wrote, political society exists when the individual authorises 'the legislative [...] to determine all the controversies and redress the injuries that may happen to any member of the commonwealth.'[27] Nevertheless, despite providing a genealogical continuity of ideas, such an argument does little to resolve or even to engage the inherence of a structural antinomy within itself. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the defence of an historically specific context simply opens, rather, a third instance of paradox, namely, the contextual specificity of the phrase 'the pursuit of happiness' within the 'Declaration of Independence.' Irrespective of the understanding that the 'Declaration' ostensibly determines the origin of the citizenry of the United States of America, for Erickson its theses are in no ways limited to the definition and consolidation of American identity. That is to say, both the force and the weakness of the 'Declaration' is a result of its generalised proposal or idea of the necessity of 'one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with one another.'[28] Far from providing the conceptual apparatus with which to construct a political consensus, such a statement in fact will be always opposed diametrically to the consolidation of a univocal political identity. What it inaugurates, rather, is only a systematic process of disbanding such that the formation of any political group will repeat necessarily the imperative to contest and to fragment.

Related here is a fourth paradox or logical weakness identified by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* when she remarks that the Declaration's opening statement, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident,' is counter-intuitive. As Arendt clarifies, if these truths are 'self-evident' then '[t]hey stand in no need of agreement' precisely

[27] Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, p. 45.
[28] Jefferson, *The Autobiography*, p. 728.

because 'they possess a power to compel' such that 'they are not held by us, we are held by them.'[29] What this amounts to saying, therefore, is that the strict self-evidence of 'these truths' is lightened, that is, rendered equivocal, by the declarative 'we hold.' In this way, Arendt effectively views the Declaration as a political document dependent on the performative occasion of utterance. If such is the case, however, then the political foundation the Declaration is designed to inaugurate is actually a foundational act without specific fixity. Accordingly, the political realm specified by the performance of declaration becomes nothing more than an utterance whose meaning and authority at all times will be and can only ever be provisional. More specifically, as performative, the political becomes no more than a weakly sketched zone that requires its perpetual iteration, which is to say, that requires its perpetual reiteration and reconstitution. The consequence of such a configuration is that, on the one hand, the political is inseparable from a certain 'ferment of frequent rebellion'[30] and, on the other hand, the political will be, therefore, always inadequate to its means: inscribed into every performance is a future iteration for which the present cannot account and by which, at least in part, it is subtended.

Despite varying inflections, then, what each instance of paradox here suggests is that 'the pursuit of happiness' becomes a schema with neither specific meaning nor normative function. If it has a denotative structure at all, Erickson suggests, it is only in that it is a structure that pulls free of historical time, '*like written words from under which the page is pulled. Words that have nothing against which to lay themselves*' (LY: 137; Erickson's emphasis). For Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness may well be the drive and the right of life, but if such is the case, on Erickson's inflection, it is a drive and a right that can be lived only as the unliveable,

[29] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963) p. 193. For a discussion of this work, see B. Honig, 'Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,' *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (March, 1991) pp. 97-113.
[30] Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, p. 111.

in the messianic time of non-arrival which is both the condition and the abysm of its teleological promise.[31] On the one hand, then, to live 'the pursuit' would not be to live in the present but to (not-)live in the spectre of the future, which is to say, in the suspended temporality of the not-now. On the other hand, however, if life depends upon the futurity of the pursuit, then to encounter the future, to arrive *into* time, would be no longer to live, which is to say, it would be to return to the non-life of the pursuit, to the not-now of a future not-yet. This, presumably, is why the pursuit of happiness, if conjoined, is not held to be synonymous with life in the Declaration of Independence but invoked, rather, as a unique property: not only does it remain at all times in excess of life but, crucially, its constitution depends upon its remaining extraneous to life. The difference between excess and extraneity here is marginal but critical. No matter how slight, excess will retain always an ineliminable relationality between itself and whatever it surpasses; by contrast, extraneity is non-equivalent. Outside of any dialectic, extraneity is non-referential and thus bears no relation to anything whatsoever, including to itself. It is, quite literally, out-of-time, out-of-place and out-of-reference. Indeed, conditioned by an opening of the present to a future that is always otherwise and elsewhere, it would be correct to say that the pursuit of happiness is precisely that which *refuses* any legislature of the normative. As an ancient Jefferson comments illustratively toward the end of Erickson's *Arc d'X*, 'happiness is a dark thing to pursue [...] and the pursuit is a dark thing as well.'[32] For Jefferson, or at least for the Jefferson of Erickson's reading, both happiness and the pursuit are 'dark' (in the dual sense of 'murky' and 'threatening') precisely because

[31] Illustrative here is Derrida's understanding of the messianic as 'that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future [...] a waiting without horizon of expectation.' As Derrida configures it, in other words, messianic time is a dislocation of linear temporality because it is the advent of the out-of-time. It 'trembles,' Derrida writes, 'on the edge of this event itself.' In this sense, while teleologically driven, the messianic is precisely that which prohibits any notion of *telos*. The instant of the messianic is not messianic advent but the return to a temporality in which both the pursuit and the *telos* of the messianic are still to come. As Derrida comments, this is a messianism without messianiasm. See Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 167-169.
[32] Erickson, *Arc d'X*, p. 261.

its antinomic structure obtains that the realisation of the one must entail ineluctably the corruption of the other. Thus, even as it maintains the political as a site of activity and intervention, to insist upon the future as the ground and goal of the political, Erickson suggests, is to risk always and again the breaking apart of the political in the present. '[E]very moment,' Erickson writes, 'is potentially irrevocable' (LY: 42).

Through Erickson's presentation, then, the critical point is that the architectonic of the pursuit of happiness is simultaneously both causal and immeasurable such that, throughout the rotational spectrum of the narrative, the pursuit of happiness is, at one and the same time, both indelible and illegible, in attendance and to come. Needless to say, the ineluctable corollary of this double structure is that, to a greater or lesser extent, the narrative staging of the pursuit of happiness will be indivisible always from a certain misidentification. Conversely, however, if the constellation of the pursuit of happiness remains indistinguishable from the difference and deferral of différance, it follows in fact that misidentification not only responds to but would be nothing other than the repeated textual mirroring of this very constellation. In other words, misidentification actually engages the pursuit of happiness precisely because the possibility of its revolutionary inheritance depends upon the imprecision of its discursive transfer. 'The helices of an infinity of known things,' Erickson writes, 'stagger and ultimately decimate any one overarching system of thought' (LY: 157). That is to say, misidentification preserves the pursuit because, structurally and conceptually, it performs the (self-)lightening work of its exilic function. This is why, for Erickson, the pursuit of happiness burns in and as a stutter-fire neither quite voiced nor quite silenced. At one and the same time, the pursuit of happiness is both a speech of transgression and of impassable limits. Ill-formed and ill-expressed it speaks in its breaking apart of speech, in its catching on the singularity of syllables, a phrase that sticks, that swallows the tongue, such that

its exhalation (in the sense of communicability) will be inseparable always from its ex-communication; such that proximity to it will be always the position of greatest distance. As Erickson raises and rejoins at the end of *Leap Year*:

> What does it say to you? What does it tell you beyond your own stutter? In that stutter where the voice of your mind is never quite in sync with the voice of your mouth, what truth do you suppose is whispered? F-F-Fire, it says (LY: 192).[33]

Erickson is far from unaware that the risk such a ruinous conception of the political ineluctably permits is its own negative employment, that is, its counter-intuitive sanctioning of a politics both premised on and held together by the active denial of this 'truth.' As he warns:

> [t]he only singular instance of commonality left is a massive resistance to the nuclear imagination, which is to say the massive collective denial of the abyss which all faith and ideology deny. In the terror of the nuclear imagination which finally consumes us is ideology's last opportunity to hold people in its power (LY: 157).

In counter-point to the suturing protectionism that necessarily structures such a negative employment of the nuclear imagination, Erickson advocates a form of political resistance that is at once singular and perilously weak. To put it another way, he advocates a form of politics that attempts to think commonality from the perspective of non-identical singularities, which is to say, from the uncommon perspective of the refusal of social life. Erickson clarifies this refusal succinctly when he writes that he is:

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[33] For a more detailed discussion of the function of the stutter in Erickson, see Chapter One.

someone who has distrusted politics in its mass form and the prospect of joining demonstrations even for causes with which I would agree, because the demonstration by its nature must reduce the cause to a moral axiom which can be collectively held, which is to say the cause must be shorn of the very ambiguities that make morality real (LY: 25).[34]

As Erickson continues, the notion of political refusal delimited here corresponds to 'a form of individual demonstration,' that is, a form of political protest that is resolutely anti-social, that everywhere refuses not only group identification or embodiment but also collective consolidation (LY: 25). For Erickson, such social refusal finds exemplary expression in the figure of the writer (LY: 25). In part, the reason for this is because writing is, by necessity, a private act. In order to write, it is necessary that the writer retreat from social existence, which is to say, that the writer clear both a space and a time in which the material inter-face of communication is substituted for the quiet facelessness of writing. As Erickson comments in interview:

from a [...] creative standpoint I would just as soon never leave my apartment. What suits me best is sitting alone in a room talking to myself for twenty-four hours a day and having as little [...] social intercourse as possible.[35]

While there is some degree of accuracy in these comments, it is arguable, however, that the anti-sociality of writing in Erickson operates at a level that is at once both more ambiguous and more consequentially decisive than such a private framework suggests. That is to say, for Erickson writing is not simply the writer's turning away from the world but the simultaneous and inexorable turning away of the

[34] Erickson both repeats and extends this exigency of refusal later in the narrative when he writes that 'I never gave myself up to most of the protests that took place at UCLA where I went to school [...] Too much suspended disbelief was demanded [...] too much submission to a collective thought or sentiment' (LY: 152).
[35] 'An Interview with Steve Erickson,' p. 404.

writer from themselves. Erickson illustrates this exigency succinctly in *Amnesiascope* when he notes that the writer lives 'in the shadow of [their] own life' to the extent that:

> the writer inevitably reaches the point where the only real remaining test [...] is whether he or she is willing to smash that [writing] persona and see what's left when the dust settles – with the terrifying possibility that nothing will be left.[36]

Blanchot's notion of 'the essential solitude' of writing is illustrative of Erickson's understanding of the substitutive disappearance of the writer here. To write, Blanchot argues:

> is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens [...] It is to pass from the first to the third person, so that what happens to me happens to no one, is anonymous insofar as it concerns me, repeats itself in an infinite dispersal.[37]

Despite the fact that the register of Blanchot's comments in this passage leads off in different directions at the same time, the critical point at this juncture is that the collocation of writing with the irrevocable dispersal of the individual echoes precisely the necromantic refusal that, for Erickson, constitutively inflects the Jeffersonian conception of the political.[38] To engage 'America,' in other words, is to question an antique ghost that lives in a faceless future. It is, as Erickson writes, to hear the irrevocable wrench of an inaudible word without letters, to substitute oneself for the cast of no one, which is to say, for the incarnation of a memory of self (LY: 33). The one who pronounces 'America' 'does not discover the admirable language which

[36] Erickson, *Amnesiascope*, p. 199.
[37] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 33.
[38] For a more detailed discussion of the third person and its relation to writing in Blanchot, see Chapter Three.

speaks honorably for all. What speaks in him is the fact, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn't anyone anymore.'[39] There is no light; and the writer is going against it.

On the first night of his crossing toward America, Erickson sleeps with his head 'pointed toward the front of the train' (LY: 17). His body rushes out into a darkling rift-space he can neither measure nor approximate. 'I feel as though I'm being pulled further and further into the country by my dreams,' he writes. 'I'm being pulled against the light by my own eyes, and when I shut my eyes it's like falling head first down a tunnel in a bodylong tube' (LY: 33). It may well be that, as Lee Spinks suggests, 'the value of Erickson's writing is that it responds fully to the call to respect the enigma of interpretation and, in so doing, opens the history of "America" to the promise of the future.'[40] Yet it does not follow that such a promise necessarily will be synonymous with progress. As Walter Benjamin cautions, '[t]he good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth.'[41] 'You plunder your wallet.' Erickson writes. 'You're reduced to searching your coat pockets for [...] something you don't recognise as yours at all. Something you inherited in one of the lapses of the year that lies now end to end' (LY: 192). '*It's enough*,' Hemings says to Erickson at the start and close of *Leap Year*, '*to live with the feeling of the country flowing through me*' (LY: 9 and 188; Erickson's emphasis). It is enough, she intimates, because the movement of coursing cedes the establishment of material experience to the suspense or rift of dispersal that, even if they do not spell, the letters 'A-m-e-r-i-c-a' always already pronounce. When the pursuit of happiness correlates to the refusal of

[39] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 28.
[40] Spinks, Jefferson at the Millennial Gates,' p. 238.
[41] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p. 255.

illumination, it is enough to listen to the going of the light. It is enough to listen to the going. It is enough to listen.

ROSMARIE WALDROP: SIDELINES OF SIGHT OR 'DISASTER'

Although Waldrop's concern in 'Disaster' is by no means explicitly engaged with the *archē*-historical definition of 'America,' in many respects it is precisely this hushed exigency of listening to that which disappears that both critically frames and bears upon Waldrop's consideration of the space of the political in the poem. Thus, while discursively structured around representations of and responses to the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001, the specific hinge of 'Disaster' is in fact the interval of the page, which is to say, the blind-spot where all representations and responses cease. This is not to say that the tragedy of those attacks is merely a vehicle for reflection or that the poem's content is either subordinate to or differential from the specific property of the page. As I shall come on to discuss presently, on the one hand, 'Disaster' is everywhere engaged with *the question of how to respond to* the events of September 11; on the other hand, that question of response is linked intimately in Waldrop's poem to a critical intersection between an ontology of 'nothing' and the matter of the page. In this context, the central point is that, in a manner similar to the allegorical frame that principally structures Erickson's engagement with the origins of 'America,' the inexorable tension Waldrop ingrains between the written and the unwritten in 'Disaster' is an attempt to situate the political in and as a site that does not come to light. As Waldrop writes at the end of the poem's fourth and final section, '[t]he page is otherwise dark' (D: 116).

The diacritical attendance of this ulterior or non-specifiable darkness within 'Disaster' can be clarified by setting it against the spectacular representation of

collapse that forms the narrative locus of much of the poem's four sections. What principally preoccupies the initial thread of 'Disaster,' in other words, and that opens also onto the centralisation of the page's darkness in the final passages of the concluding section, is the recurring inability to phenomenalise, either conceptually or discursively, the facticity of the tower's collapse. On the one hand, this is because, in the poem, the attack on the World Trade Centre is an event of 'disbelief' (D: 113). As Waldrop writes in the second section:

[w]e can think away towers. We can think away mountains. Once they're gone we can't. Believe it. We're made to dream dreams of fear (D: 114).

Indeed, in many senses the ruptured syntax Waldrop employs both here and throughout the sequence is expressly emblematic of the incredulity the poem everywhere articulates. The punctured division between, for instance, 'can't' and 'believe it' both rehearses and exacerbates: 1. the stunned and traumatic experience of shock, and 2. the historico-political narrative that at once precedes and exceeds the attacks on the World Trade Centre and of which those attacks are only a reflective part. On the other hand, however, for Waldrop the fact of the towers' collapse is non-phenomenal also because its unremitting televisual relay accentuates incomprehension by transposing the historico-political specificity of the event for an '[i]mage on a screen' (D: 115), *an* image, in other words, that is neither unique nor representative but simply one among others:

Like a movie. Like a comic strip. Please distinguish between. Crumbling towers and the image of crumbling towers. The image, repeated, multiplies. Locks on the plural. Crowds (D: 113).

Two inter-related comments arise here regarding the critical focus of Waldrop's plea to distinguish between what might be referred to as the 'as such' and the 'as if.' First, the appeal to distinction is motivated by a concern for veracity. That is to say, Waldrop's appeal is motivated not by a desire for (another, more accurate, order of) representation but by a concern for the incomprehensible itself. That the singular actuality of the event not be reduced, which is to say, that it not be repeatable, it is necessary, Waldrop suggests, to maintain a zone of incongruous distance between the event and its conceptual-visual representation. As such, and second, in the absence of any distinction the event's mimetic repetition becomes indivisible from the event's obscuration. That is to say, the singular specificity of the event is that which becomes invisible precisely because visualisation renders it excessively transparent. In effect, what this amounts to saying is that the transmission of the event is that which screens the event from view. As the opening lines of 'Disaster' illustratively express:

> Went and looked and went and looked. For what was no more. Scrutinized screens and saw. Nothing. The papers in the land and. Took in nothing (D: 113).

Or again, at the beginning of the fourth section, '[n]othing is hidden. Therefore cannot see. Therefore a view of the world unimportant' (D: 116).

In contrast to the transparent form of nothing that conditions representation, 'Disaster' proposes an alternative version of nothing that is at once both more resolute and more impenetrable. It is, as Waldrop puts it, a nothing that 'has room. For all. No ruins can fill it. No rubble. No number of dead' (D: 113). From this perspective, the 'nothing' Waldrop proposes is, at one and the same time, both the distillation and the titular 'disaster' of the events of September 11, 2001. More

specifically, it is the inexorable distillation of those events *as disaster*. What this means is that, by not only clearing but also vigilantly maintaining a space into which the events of September 11 disappear, 'nothing' paradoxically renders the facticity of that day's collapse immutably present. To put it another way, 'nothing' both parallels and preserves the authentic intransigence of disaster. Waldrop exemplifies in microcosm what is at stake here at the start of the second section when she writes that '[a] hole is. A space for thought' (D: 114). It bears stressing that the structural frame of Waldrop's comment here is no different from that which she proposes elsewhere, namely, that the motivation of thought rests in the empty space of the gap.[42] Indeed, it is more than probable that the noun 'space' in this passage refers less to 'thought' than it does to the interruptive mark of the punctuation point that both precedes and typifies it. If such is the case, however, then what is decisive about intervallic syntax is the way in which it precludes thematisation even as it suggests it. In the above passage nothing is conferred upon 'a hole' beyond the annotation of its simple or bare existence – 'a hole is.' In other words, it is rendered legible precisely because the poem derives nothing from it. Hence, even as the existence of a 'hole' here may well be contiguous with 'a space for thought,' and vice versa, neither, in fact, is continuous with the other. What occurs, rather, is a writing that does not write. That is to say, what occurs is the lightening deflection of signification towards its own divisive incompletion and obfuscation.

As stated above, the critical consequence of such a darkening deflection of grammar and signification is that the incomprehensible event paradoxically becomes

[42] As Waldrop comments in interview, 'in the gaps we might get hints of much that has to be left unsaid – but should be thought about.' Joan Retallack, 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999) p. 341. For a wider discussion of this comment and its centrality to Waldrop's poetics more generally, see Chapter Two.

the subject and object of the poem's fractured turnings.[43] As such, and further, it follows that the incomprehensible event is, in fact, the very 'meaning' of the poem, which is to say, the incomprehensible event is the poem's most basic property, the one it can neither quite claim nor jettison but which, *despite itself*, it mimes everywhere in the featureless surface of its inscrutable punctuation. In this way, to approach the meaning of an event for which there is no answer is to be called upon to respond with calling. It is, in other words, to be called into the limitless fugal collocation of subject with counter-subject, sense with counter-sense, fracture with counter-fracture, and so on. Indeed, it is precisely the commensurability between fugal flight and inestimable duration that Waldrop both indicates and develops into a conceptualisation of understanding in the following lines from the third section:

> Often we must work with holes. In understanding. Often set out without knowing where. Often distrust narratives (D: 115).

That is to say, to understand it is necessary to think with and not against what hides. It is necessary to begin with neither predicate nor telos. It is necessary to suspect the story that emerges, to lighten it of sense by breaking it down to its particulars, to think each grapheme, each syllable, each letter, [t]o draw a black line' through whatever it is one thinks, and then to recognise that the line still waits to be drawn, that the line still waits to be drawn through (D: 116).

In many respects, what is at stake here is exemplified succinctly by Keith Waldrop's collage that serves as the cover to *Love, Like Pronouns*, and that refracts

[43] Although the poem's references to the events of September 11, 2001 are relatively clear, it bears stressing that 'Disaster' never actually specifies, either here or elsewhere, what this subject and object is beyond the oblique generality of 'hole' or 'space.' Yet nor however should it. In the same way that the poem describes the attacks on the World Trade Centre as incomprehensible because they are at once both shocking and referential of a wider narrative of which they are neither the beginning nor the end, so the refusal of denotation here foregrounds the structural and thematic arc of representational fracture that plays out across the poem more generally.

the arc of the entire volume toward the 'disaster' of a final 'page' that 'is otherwise dark' (see Figure 1).

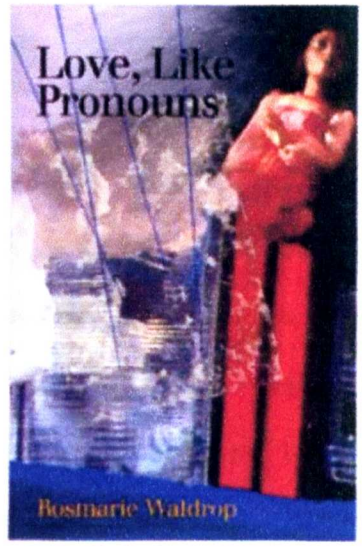

Figure 1: Keith Waldrop, Cover Collage, *Love, Like Pronouns*

Specifically, both the visual subject and compositional method of Keith Waldrop's collage refract the reading of the book toward the distinction of a page that is compactly dark with, on the one hand, what the poem does not say and, on the other hand, its manner of not saying it. There are at least seven indivisible yet differential textures or layers to this collage. Its base layer, most visible at the top of the cover, appears to be a roughly applied grading of grey paint that shifts, left to right, from light to dark. Overlaid onto this paint is a graining, slightly obscured, newspaper clipping of the twin towers. The murky yellow-orange tinge that splices the top of the towers intimates that they are burning. Inter-connected here are two thick red lines that stretch into (or from) the traversal of the fourth layer, namely, the female doll who looks blankly, inexpressively, off into the dark elsewhere, as her raised hand (pointing toward the towers? covering them over? a screen? a veil?) may, at one and the same time, connote protection, resistance, concentration, or, like Waldrop's

appeal to distinction in 'Disaster,' an appeal not to be disturbed, which is to say, a request for the non-immediate, for time, for the silence of in-conclusion. The fifth layer is the nebulous but also dense white bead on the edge of the left margin that uncurls precipitously from the light-grey paint and that over-blinds the newspaper cutting.

While differentiated, then, each of the five layers here can be read in conjunctive and mutually illuminating relation: the legibility of the collage, that is to say, depends upon the separateness of its particular layers being thought concurrently.[44] That said, however, what specifically textualises the collage's individual elements together are the sixth and seventh layers, namely, the (water-soaked? heavily glued?) sheet of paper that spreads over the surface of the entire collage, and the four blue lines that vertically cross it. From this perspective, the saturated page, like the doll's hand, functions as a screen, in the double sense of projection and shield. That is to say, the veiling of the page simultaneously permits and prohibits legibility; its transparency allows access and stands in the way of approach.[45] Similarly, the four blue lines that traverse the sheet of paper both augment and complicate this interplay. On the one hand, they perform a kind of geometrical cartography that marks the axis of precisely that which the saturated page shadows. On the other hand, however, and as with the black line that tracks the intention of the speaker of 'Disaster,' each cartographical line is nothing more

[44] In this sense, Keith Waldrop's collage here is by no means unique: as with any collage, the compositional strategy of layered incorporation necessarily will produce always an intersectional network of relation between: 1. its various materials, 2. the sources which it both borrows and alters, beyond recognition or otherwise, and 3. the genus of collage more generally with its complication of notions of, among others, origin, originality, singularity, repeatability, authority, and authorship. As Rosmarie Waldrop writes, '[t]he blank page is not blank. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we always write [think] on top of a palimpsest [...] It is not question of linear "influence" and not just of tradition. It is a way of getting out of myself. Into what? An interaction, a dialog with language [with text], with a whole net of earlier and concurrent texts. Relation. Between.' Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Keith, Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 2002) p.91.

[45] The double function of the sheet of paper here recalls the 'S/kins' that both intersect with and obscure the text of Rosmarie Waldrop's *Peculiar Motions* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey St. Press, 1990). For a discussion of this, see Chapter Two.

than an indistinct marking of the page. That is to say, at one and the same time each line is both that which marks and marks off (in the sense of crosses out) the page. The etymological derivation of cartography from *chartēs*, 'a sheet of paper,' and *graphein*, to write, is indicative here. As its semantic structure indicates an indivisible material relation between page and writing, so it foregrounds the way in which:

(a) The surface-texture of the page is that to which writing primarily refers in the sense that, prior to the collocation of graphic units into signification, the marked contrast between the stain of each letter and the plane of the page draws specific attention not simply to the smudge of ink but also to the disturbance of the folio.

(b) 'The blank page is not blank.' Even the unmarked page, in other words, is always already an ineliminable textual mark, 'a word too many.'[46] As Blanchot elucidates, 'to be silent is still to speak [...] Writing (or Telling, as distinct from anything written or told) precedes every phenomenon.'[47] Thus, when Waldrop writes in the closing line of 'Disaster' that '[t]he page is otherwise dark' (D: 116), the intimation is that the page cannot be effaced for the express reason that its surface plane is blotted already with the non-mark of refusal. In this sense, the phrase '[t]he page is otherwise dark' does not so much close the poem as return it toward the impenetrability of the page, to a writing that is not written but grained, water-stained. As Waldrop writes elsewhere, '[a]t the point of innervation, where the image reflected on the retina becomes sight, the eye is blind,' such that to be blind is to be locked into seeing, the way light requires shadow in order to illuminate.[48]

Indeed, it is precisely the collocation (collage) of *chartēs* and *graphein* here that intersects with and thus filters the critical sense, or non-sense, of the term 'disaster' throughout the poem as a whole. The lexical frame of 'disaster,' in other

[46] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 460, n. 6.
[47] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) p. 11.
[48] Waldrop, 'And Sometimes I Stare Blindly' in *Love, Like Pronouns*, p. 95.

words, typifies expressly the inexorably looped tension between effacement and remainder. Blanchot clarifies succinctly this double structure of disaster when he writes that '[t]he disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.'[49] It performs this strange symbiosis between action and passivity, Blanchot goes on to explain, because the disaster itself is properly unthinkable, unpronounceable and illegible. In Blanchot's terms, that is:

> the disaster is unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking of it, leaving us [...] alone. Alone, and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside.[50]

What this amounts to saying is that the disaster is structured by a constantly multiplying duality: it withdraws as it arrives; withdrawing, it returns to arrive; arriving, it returns to withdraw. On one level, the intractable non-constitution Blanchot identifies here with the term 'disaster' stems from a literal elaboration of its common meaning as that which is ruinous. Ruin, that is to say, can be neither thought nor written because its presentation necessarily will be at the expense of any representation. Indeed, in certain respects it would be precisely this literal sense of 'disaster' that could be said critically to condition the interplay between illustration and incomprehensibility in Waldrop's poem. That said, however, on another level, Blanchot's critical modulation of disaster, that impacts directly on Waldrop's poem, is at once both more definite and more displaced than such a correlation with ruin suggests. As Blanchot states unequivocally, 'disaster means being separated from

[49] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 1.
[50] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 5.

the star.'[51] That is to say, it intends that which is without reference.[52] It communicates not by bringing together but by setting apart. Consequently, what the disaster communicates hardly matters. What is of concern, rather, is the line it draws through and across whatever it is that comes to be said; what matters is its lightening of meaning into the aporia of the non-referential.

In relation to Waldrop's poem, the critical point here is that 'disaster' legitimates the sequence by casting it from the unlocatable non-perspective of the imprescriptible. Both floating and placeless, disaster is the wandering refusal of discourse around which the poem coalesces and into which its various fragments empty.[53] Yet if such is the case, then it follows automatically that at all times 'Disaster' must indicate, stage, and repeat what Blanchot terms the de-scription of writing.[54] That is to say, it must substitute discourse for a non-discursive or non-representational writing of marks. The saturation of 'Disaster' by the typographical scratch of the asterisk (*) is exemplary here for at least two principle reasons:

(1) The mark of the asterisk is a silent sign (a sign, in other words, that does not signify, that is unreadable) that semantically interconnects with and graphically mimes the sense of 'disaster' as that which is 'separated from the star.'

(2) The asterisk is 'a mark of omission, [...] a mark of a word or root inferred [...] but not recorded.'[55]

In either case, what this amounts to saying is that the asterisk is not a referent for the incommunicable 'disaster;' rather, its incommunicability is, in fact, the

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[51] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 2. See also p. 75: '[t]he disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality.'
[52] For a further discussion of this etymological sense of dis-aster, see Chapter Three.
[53] It bears noting that, in this sense, 'disaster' is proximate to Waldrop's understanding of delirium as 'a wandering from the lira, from the rut' of the way. Rosmarie Waldrop, *Against Language: 'Dissatisfaction with Language' as Theme and Impulse Towards Experiments in Twentieth Century Poetry* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971) p. 30. For a more detailed discussion of the place of delirium in Waldrop, see Chapter Two.
[54] The disaster, Blanchot writes, 'is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes.' Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 7.
[55] *The Chambers Dictionary*, p. 95.

very mark of 'disaster' itself.[56] It bears the unnameable precisely because it casts writing and thinking from the obdurate refusal of nomination, which is to say, from the lightening of their affectivity.[57] A false etymology is suggestively expressive of this point. The structural arrangement of aster-risk, that is to say, already and always suggests the risk of the star, the hazard of following it, the degree of probability of losing the way.

While the implications of 'Disaster' (both the poem as a whole and the asterisk in particular) on the thinking of the political are numerous, here, four inter-threaded comments are particularly apposite:

(1) *To think the political in and as disaster is to think the refusal of the political.* This is not to say that disaster disavows the political but that it maintains the political precisely because it reflects the political in and as the creases of refusal, which is to say, in and as a de-scriptive site of inquiry and self-questioning. For Waldrop, then, the political is to be thought from the threshold of definability, at that point where thematisation unfolds into imprecision, too weightless to be weighed. Indeed, it is for this reason precisely that the political in 'Disaster' is inferential only cautiously at best. As Waldrop writes in a poem contemporaneous with 'Disaster,' '[t]here is no clemency in the light. Or in the dark.'[58] Clemency lies, rather, in the perpetually proliferating sketch of the dual refusal of light and dark. It lies, that is to say, not in the univocal or unilateral (positive or negative), but in the 'ambiguous landscape' of the compound, of '[c]rowds' (D: 113).[59] As Waldrop warns, even if '[u]p

[56] Apart from its inscription on the title page, 'disaster' is never mentioned by name in the poem.
[57] In this sense, the asterisk functions in a manner analogous to the excluded middle discussed in Chapter Two, in that it introduces into the poem a setting out or spacing of non-thematisable noise.
[58] Waldrop, 'Hölderlin Hybrids,' p. 48.
[59] The phrase 'ambiguous landscape' is from Waldrop's 'Trace Histories' in *Love, Like Pronouns*, p. 110. It is important to stress that the ambiguity of this 'landscape' is central because the non-specifiability of ambiguity prevents the injunction against the unilateral from becoming unilateral itself. That it is to say, ambiguity preserves the irregularity of the compound.

to down we prefer. And right to left [...] many movements in many directions are better than how crashes a wounded boar through the woods (D: 113). In this way:

(2) *Disaster disengages the political from ordinance and thus, at least in part, returns the political to its an-archical derivation.* As 'a rip forever ripping apart,' that is, the vacillating illogic of disaster suggests the way in which 'there is not, to begin with, law, prohibition, and then transgression, but rather [that first] there is transgression in the absence of any prohibition, which eventually freezes in Law, the Principle of Meaning.'[60] What this amounts to saying is that disaster is in fact the very foundation of the political. As such, however, it follows that to predicate the political on disaster is to lighten the political of any determinant meaning. Accordingly, if the political is founded upon the 'incomprehensible,' then the praxis of political governance can be only transitory at most to the extent that at all times it is 'exposed to substitution.'[61] With their invocation of an unspecified, unspecifiable, word that simultaneously announces and de-scribes, the lines that serve as the second epigraph to this chapter metaphorically frame and develop the exigency of 'Disaster' illustratively here:

Out of the word came the light. On the first day of creation. Introduced separation. From the dark. And time. In alternation.

▲

The light took time. In its headlong flight. And knotted it into space. Where we pursue happiness, always belated. But the light did not remain. Unknotting the dimensions back it went. Into the word. And time's left with nothing.[62]

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[60] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 75.
[61] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 115.
[62] Waldrop, 'Hölderlin Hybrids,' p. 45.

As such:

(3) *The political as disaster must endure the intractable certainty of its own ineluctable corruption.* This instance of corruption is two-fold. On the one hand, it is a structural condition of the political that it must endure unavoidably the de-scriptive logic of disaster that both constitutes and invalidates it. On the other hand, and irrespective of the question of duration, the political necessarily has to tolerate also its inevitable categorisation into practical governance. Indeed, without an utter and irrevocable revolution of, for example, *zoē* and *polis*, it would appear irrefutable that *some form* of regularised governance is practicably necessary. As Waldrop writes, 'a tank won't be stopped by a word. Not even if you shout it from the middle of the road, with hands thrown forward and fingers spread out.'[63] In either case, however, the central point is that corruption is a constitutive criterion of disaster itself, in the sense that it is precisely the rent of corruption that returns the critical demand of disaster. For Waldrop, the demand of disaster corresponds to the responsibility of attending the otherwise darkness, the incomprehensible texture, of the page. Consequently:

(4) *The language of political responsibility is indivisible from the a-language of the asterisk.* That is to say, the discourse of political responsibility is a mark without property. Here, then, the political does not correspond to nor aim toward a general coexistence, and responsibility does not equate to a duty to protect that group solidarity. In each, rather, *socius* is *exōterikos* ('external' or 'from outside') such that the error, Waldrop notes, is to fill the space of the asterisk 'with flags. [...] When a foreign language we should be required to learn' (D: 114).[64] Thus, what

[63] Waldrop, 'Hölderlin Hybrids,' p. 23. Doubtless, the allusion here is to Jeff Widener's 1989 photograph, 'The Unknown Rebel,' in which a single protester stands in the way of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square.

[64] In this sense, it would appear to be the Bush administration's mobilisation of a predominantly symbolic solidarity premised on the exaggeration of national allegiance (of which the flying of flags would be one example) that followed – and that continues to be secured against – the attacks in New York and Washington that forms the implicit focus of Waldrop's indirect critique here.

Waldrop indirectly indicates, in the 'out-dark' of a page, is the proposal of another language: a language that is other, in which 'nothing' takes place in the name of 'no one,' in the space of an asterisk, where lines intersect at the centre and so darken and so sideline (in the double sense of 'locate at the margin' and 'render marginal') the point of association. As such, what the graphic form of the asterisk yields is a sequence of points that do not so much reflect one another as they do the ex-centric and incommensurable distance between them. As Blanchot comments:

[t]he other is always someone else, and this someone else is always other than itself; it is relieved of all propriety, all proper sense, and thus beyond every mark of truth and sign of light.[65]

'The page is otherwise dark,' incomprehensible, a mark of refusal. It calls. It is enough to listen.

In the remainder of this chapter, it is this interplay between the political and spectral anonymity that I wish to elaborate, specifically in relation to Davis' text 'The Thirteenth Woman.' Before analysing this interplay in any detail, however, a few general comments regarding the frame of Davis' text, together with a discussion of the philosophical-political context of the exception, will help situate what is at stake here.

[65] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 41; Blanchot's emphasis. Translation modified.

LYDIA DAVIS: THE EXCEPTION OF THE POLITICAL

In various senses, 'The Thirteenth Woman' is an exceptional narrative of exception. That is to say, with its notation of what does not happen to one who does not and seemingly cannot manifestly appear either spatially or temporally, the principle focus of Davis' story is an unremarkable privation, a privation, in other words, that is at once commonplace and incomprehensible. To clarify this point, it is worth citing the text in its entirety here:

> In a town of twelve women there was a thirteenth. No one admitted she lived there, no mail came for her, no one spoke of her, no one asked after her, no one sold bread to her, no one bought anything from her, no one returned her glance, no one knocked on her door; the rain did not fall on her, the sun never shone on her, the day never dawned on her, the night never fell for her; for her the weeks did not pass, the years did not roll by; her house was unnumbered, her garden untended, her path not trod upon, her bed not slept in, her food not eaten, her clothes not worn; and yet in spite of all this she continued to live in the town without resenting what it did to her (AM).

On the one hand, then, the narrative's unequivocal assertion that there is a thirteenth woman in a town of twelve would appear to be logically inconsistent and literally nonsensical. By extension, it would follow that the entire narrative is invalidated necessarily by the fallacy of this initial proposition. On the other hand, however, the meticulous logical consistency of the narrative's subsequent notation of what, by definition, cannot happen to the 'exception to the rule' problematises any easy collocation of text, illogic and nonsense here. Indeed, from this perspective, it would be more accurate to specify that it is precisely the thirteenth woman's rational and linguistic exceptionality that not only activates but structurally legitimates the very

principles of logic, signification, commonality, and municipal ordinance at work in the text. That is to say, it is precisely on account of the thirteenth woman's exceptionality that the commonplace (in this context, the arrival of mail, conversation among inhabitants, economic exchange, the passing of time and so on) is textually deducible.

The unavoidable difficulty that arises here, however, is that, even as the thirteenth woman's exceptionality is that which factors and regulates determinacy, it is, at the same time, that which must put also the law of the common into irrevocable question. As Giorgio Agamben exemplifies, the reason for this is because:

> [w]hat emerges in this limit figure is the radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule.[66]

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the radical crisis Agamben specifies here (namely, the structural paradox of governance) does not mean that the exception functions purely negatively, in the sense that it functions simply as a prohibition against categorisation. Indeed, the direct assertions that frame Davis' narrative regarding the existence or facticity of the thirteenth woman can be read as explicitly precluding the correlation of the exception to a singularly negative dialectic.[67] Rather, the negativity or radical crisis the exception of the thirteenth woman introduces into systems of ordinance also serves a constitutively productive function. For the

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[66] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) p. 25.

[67] While the principle concern both here and throughout this chapter relates to the political specificity of exception, it is worth stressing that the political is not the only, nor necessarily the primary, reading of Davis' text. Needless to say, various traditions offer numerous other examples of the exception that might equally inflect an understanding of 'The Thirteenth Woman.' Among these might be the theological (God), the juridical (Law), and the literary (Author). Despite variances in inflection, however, what each approach necessarily would share is a specific engagement with the question of the Absolute.

purposes of this chapter, the productivity of the paradoxical negative-positive interplay of the exception can be schematised in the following three ways:

(1) The exception exposes the way in which the respective definitions of logic, meaning, and municipality all depend upon an extraction of supplementarity, which is also, and at the same time, a supplementary extraction. The formation of the collective is both an extraction of supplementarity and a supplementary extraction because the predication of the collective by restrictive exclusion (the extraction of supplementarity) necessarily requires the anteriority to itself of that which comes to be excluded. In this sense, the formation of the collective will be always an ancillary act (a supplementary extraction).[68]

(2) As such, the exigency of the exception shifts the critical focus from situational debates concerning political administration (that is to say, party politics) toward the more primary formal problem of the structure of the political itself.

(3) In this way, the exception is indivisible from an immanent potential to revise or, at the very least, to rethink, the structure of political itself. The exception bears within itself, in other words, the latent potentiality of a political formalisation that not only begins with but vigilantly maintains the *revolutions of paradox* at its constitutive centre.[69]

In 'The Thirteenth Woman' these revolutions (in the double sense of turnings and transformations) of paradox are focussed principally around a juxtaposition of the multiple (the twelve women) and the singular (the thirteenth). On certain levels, it

[68] Agamben's discussion of the distinction between 'inclusive exclusion' and 'exclusive inclusion' is illustrative here. Agamben relates the former to the sovereign, which is to say, he relates it to that which 'declares there is nothing outside' itself even as that which declares necessarily exceeds the terms of its own argument. 'Exclusive inclusion' relates to the paradigm of the example: '[w]hat the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it.' Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 21-22. The interplay between the particular and the general discussed in the previous chapter would be a further way of discussing what is at stake here.

[69] It is worth recalling that it is precisely the failure to maintain this paradox that motivates Erickson's critical distinction between 'America' (political ethos) and the 'United States' (political practice).

should be acknowledged that this juxtaposition can be read as nothing more than a repetition of the traditional regulative principle of the Sovereign, in the sense that it is the singular exceptionality of the thirteenth woman that simultaneously prescribes and confirms both the extant and the extent of the citizenry.[70] That said, however, the compact emphasis in 'The Thirteenth Woman' on the asymmetrical relation between the twelve and the thirteenth significantly complicates any such direct comparison. That is to say, even as the thirteenth legitimates the specification of the twelve, it in no ways follows that the twelve legitimate the existence of the thirteenth. In fact, it is almost certain that the narrative statements that '[n]o one admitted she [the thirteenth woman] lived there,' that 'no one spoke of her' and that 'no one asked after her' indicate the way in which the existence of the many consolidates itself at the expense of the one. In many respects, what this amounts to saying is that the many knows itself through the one, but the one is unrecognisable *to itself* in the many. This is not to say, however, that the one does not exist within the many. Rather, what non-recognition suggests is that the one exists within the many only insofar as it 'ek-sists,' which is to say, only insofar as it is thrown outside itself.

Although framed in different terms, the Heideggerian notion of 'ek-stasis' or 'thrownness' is illustrative of the exclusive relation the thirteenth bears to the twelve on two main levels. First, it clarifies the way in which the one is never itself. Specifically, if the one is the ground of the many, the one does not precede the many but rather comes into existence only as grounding, which is to say, only when its

[70] In this context, the 'citizenry' is determined simply by the fact of living within the borders of the town. The simple fact of life, that is to say, is the constitutive basis of and right to citizenship. In many respects, this is precisely the form of citizenship embedded in the American Declaration of Independence in the sense that the purpose of government is to protect the 'inalienable' (self-generating but also *free*) right to life. In interview, Erickson identifies this 'idea that there are moments when the state must subvert its will to accommodate the freedom of one citizen' as '[t]he most radical thing about America.' See Michael Ventura, 'Phantasmal America,' *The LA Weekly*, August 29 – September 4, 1986; reprinted at: www.studiolarz.com/erickson/articles/phant.html. At this point it is worth noting simply that it is this notion of citizenry 'The Thirteenth Woman' both repeats and subverts.

sovereign singularity is thrown outside itself into the folds of the many. As Heidegger writes in the section on 'Understanding the Appeal' in *Being and Time*:

> [i]n being a basis – that is, in existing as thrown [...] [i]t is never existent *before* its basis, but only *from it* and *as this basis.* Thus "Being-a-basis" means *never* to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up [...] It itself, being a basis, *is* a nullity of itself [...] It has been *released* from its basis, *not through* itself but *to* itself, so as to be *as this basis.*[71]

While the initial critical argument for Heidegger in this passage is that (self-) nullification is the basal condition of (self-)facticity, with specific regard to the interconnectivity of the one and the many, the second main point that arises here is the way in which Heidegger (a) goes on to align nullification with 'Being-free for [...] existentiell possibilities,' and (b) describes that freedom as conditional on 'the choice of [only] one possibility – that is, in tolerating one's not having chosen the others and one's not being able to choose them.'[72]

In relation to 'The Thirteenth Woman,' what these comments point to is that the existence of the exception is conditional paradoxically on its potentiality not to be, which is to say, on its potentiality to pass not into itself but into that which suspends it. It is important to stress that in this context suspension is not to be understood as equivalent to dislodgement, in the sense of being cast into itinerant exile. What it means, rather, is the condition of being neither wholly inside nor wholly outside, but somewhere, perhaps, in between the two. Indeed, it is precisely this in-between status that corresponds to the simultaneous 'Being-free' of the one and the many. That is to say, both the town and the thirteenth woman 'continue[...] to live' at the

[71] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) ¶ 58, p. 284-285; Heidegger's emphasis. (In accordance with convention, page references are to the German edition).
[72] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 58, p. 285.

same time and in the same place precisely because ek-sistence maintains the two not in relation but in insensible ambivalence. On the one hand, the town, it is said, neither pays any attention to nor demands anything of the thirteenth woman;[73] on the other hand, beyond a lack of resentment that may be as much indifferent as it might be patient, no connection whatsoever is established in the text between the thirteenth woman and the town. From this perspective, it is not the disregard or unconcern between the one and the many that puts their existence into question, but rather the possibility unconcern leaves open that someday the one and the many might come face to face. It would be in their coming together that the sentence '[i]n a town of twelve women there was a thirteenth' would be nonsensical rather than exceptional. This is the reason why Heidegger specifies in the above passage that freedom (in the sense of existence *as such*, in and of itself) depends upon a toleration of subjection: if the thirteenth woman lives insofar as she 'is' as the basis of the twelve, then the possibility of her Being-free critically depends not upon separation but rather upon the toleration of bondage.[74]

Indeed, as Heidegger develops illustratively in the section on 'The Temporality of Disclosedness in General,' the 'potentiality-for-Being' of ek-sistence corresponds to a 'special way of Being-*alongside* the things with which one concerns oneself.'[75] Being-alongside, that is to say, is not being-with or even necessarily being-similar-to; what it indicates, rather, is simply the spatio-temporal juxtaposition, being-next-to, of non-equivalence. As Heidegger writes, existence as ek-stasis is a

[73] In point of fact, it would be more correct to specify that nothing from the town to the temporal to the environment pays any attention to nor demands anything of the thirteenth woman in the text. That said, as the story notes specifically that the thirteenth woman lives without resenting what the town does (does not) do to her, it is the relation between the exception and the municipal that requires particular attention here.

[74] It is important to stress that toleration in this context is not to be understood as an active acceptance but rather as a passive submission.

[75] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 68, p. 337; Heidegger's emphasis.

'"waiting-towards"' (*Gegen-wart*).[76] The being-in-the-twelve of the thirteenth 'does not come towards itself primarily in its ownmost non-relational potentiality-for-Being, but it *awaits this* concernfully *in terms of that which yields or denies the object of its concern.*'[77] In this context, then, the thirteenth woman cannot choose whether to-be-with, to-be-without or to-be-alongside because it is precisely on account of the alongside separateness of the twelve that the exception of the thirteenth is thrown into 'existence' in the first place. It bears repeating, however, that it does not necessarily follow that the same holds in reverse. That is to say, it does not necessarily follow that the twelve are thrown into 'existence' by the one. At best, this question would be undecidable because, as Davis' narrative demonstrates, the many are not concerned with the one in the same way that the one is aware of the unconcern of the many. Moreover, even if it were the case that this question was raised by the twelve, it would never be certain whether the one was an exception or a projection of the twelve. It would never be certain, in other words, whether the one related to the twelve as unity or as supplement. The question arises from the other direction precisely because the one is determinable only on the basis of its primordial exception from the twelve.

Yet there is also another reason why it does not necessarily follow that the twelve are thrown into existence by the thirteenth, namely, that the existence of the thirteenth will have always already thrown the existence of the twelve into relief. Indeed, the story Davis' text tells is principally the life (albeit one removed from the material) of the thirteenth woman and not that of the twelve. The thirteenth woman, it is said, has a house, a garden, a path, food, clothes, a bed; she lives in the town of twelve women; she is the thirteenth woman; she is tolerant of what is done to her.

[76] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 68, p. 338.
[77] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶ 68, p. 337; Heidegger's emphasis.

Yet she 'is' and 'has' each of these things because she is at all times excepted from material signification. In this sense, what these details of the story tell is nothing more than the powerless existence of the thirteenth woman before the town's twelve inhabitants. Her immateriality may well verify determinately the sum of the town but she herself is incapable of proclaiming the facticity of the twelve. What her powerlessness proclaims, rather, is simply the insuperable silence of the thirteenth and the inexorable exception of the twelve. In relation to Davis' text as an allegory of the structure of the political, the critical point here is that the 'sidelined' status of the thirteenth woman within the town ultimately serves to turn the common or generic principle of the 'exception that proves the rule' into the principle exception of the rule itself.

That said, however, the analysis of 'The Thirteenth Woman' can be extended also beyond the simply descriptive recognition of the paradox that her ek-sistence constitutes and excepts the actuality of being-in-common. To approach the basis of the collective from the non-locatable perspective of the thirteenth woman, that is to say, is not simply to call into question the ground of political belonging; it is also to translate the basal possibility of the political into the very aperture of this calling-into-question. In this sense, the simple ek-sistence of the thirteenth woman serves to shift the balance of emphasis away from the appeal to the self-evidence of inalienable individual rights (in other words, precisely what Erickson conceives of as the radicality of 'America' in the sense that there the individual takes sovereign right over the State) toward a lightening rift-space where the proliferation of exception takes the place of political ground. On the one hand, the critical force of the exception thus lies in its ability to extract the pejorative discourse of 'inclusive exclusion' from the structure of the political; on the other hand, it lies also, therefore, in the potential to rethink the political from the precipitous or lightening perspective of its own

supplementary exception. In many respects, it is precisely an attendance to this shifting logic of the exception that guides Davis' argument in 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms.' It is necessary, Davis proposes, 'to remain independent in turn – even of those we admire, even of those who are themselves independent.'[78] To put it another way, it is necessary not to accept but to except, to turn away in order to turn toward the revolutions of paradox, and in so doing, 'to continue to look with clear eyes, with the eyes of the "critical scholar," with those of the thirteenth woman.[79]

Nevertheless, taking into account the diacritical concentration on the hypothetical both in this text and across Davis' work more broadly,[80] one question, at the very least, which conceivably might be put here is as follows: what would happen if, one day, another woman were to knock at the gates (the threshold) of the town?[81] Would her knocking be ignored by the twelve? Would the twelve answer her by turning her away? Or possibly might the twelve grant refuge to the stranger? Over time, might she come then to be regarded not as a foreigner or an unknown but rather a so-called 'naturalised citizen' of the town? Afterward will she live there or will she return then to the gates of the town and begin again to knock, but this time from the inside out? Would her knocking be ignored by the twelve? Would it be answered? Or would the twelve walk out to the gates to retrieve her, to lead her quietly away, to lead her back inside? Whatever the answers to these questions

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[78] Davis, 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms,' pp. 201-202.
[79] Davis, 'Paring Off the Amphibologisms,' p. 202.
[80] Christopher J. Knight also draws attention what he terms 'the dimension of the hypothetical' in Davis' writing. See Christopher J. Knight, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter, 1999) p. 532.
[81] Another question that could be put here might relate to the absence of men and whether this concerns a deployment of power by the twelve designed to prevent the possibility of their subversion not only from the outside but also from the inside, in the sense of the subversion carried in the *possibility* that the town would therefore have the potential means to perpetuate its collective life? Is it the closed finitude of the twelve that defines the collectivity of the town here? Is this to say that it is the coincidence of life with a prescribed finitude that guarantees municipal existence? Analogously, a further question that might be raised also would relate to whether a thirteenth man in a town of twelve men would repeat or alter the structure of the political 'The Thirteenth Woman' exemplifies. In order to maintain the focal direction of this section, however, it is not possible to develop these questions in any detail here.

might be, or whatever other questions it might be necessary to ask in order to venture a response, what is certain in this scenario is that, whether ignored, turned away, admitted, and so on, the stranger necessarily would become the thirteenth woman; what is not certain is whether she would become the thirteenth woman in a town of thirteen or a repetition of the thirteenth woman in a town of twelve. No doubt this problem is insurmountable. If the stranger were to be allowed entry, her number necessarily would put the sum of twelve into immutable crisis. If she were to be overlooked, her knocking, whether it continues or ceases, would cause the fact of her exception to appear in the community of the twelve, if only for an instant. If she were to be turned away, the fact of her knocking would preserve the memory of exception within the sum of the twelve, even as she herself disappears into it.

A story is told. *In a town of twelve women there was a thirteenth.* No one knows the thirteenth woman and the twelve do not pay her any attention. Yet for all that, the eyes of the thirteenth woman look mutely into the number of the town. She continues to live. She is the state of exception; she is the exception of the state. Her eyes are riftwords. The story falls through the cracks.

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Then the graze of a voice but the marrow is moving and incomprehensible to mean how to catch or where to go off or what number is. Is it proper to turn back at every point so as then already to have been surrounded, as a tongue taking time, as what will not be swallowed? The cone crossings of what must unfold. Without point as of tangled turning to remain and of corn refusal and of:

W h o l i v e

e r e h t g n i n e t h g i l

Is this the way what went to, when the night, and with only pairs of eyes textured as a blank page? Or was it otherwise who left into, a reserve of words that were meant to be given away and even in the dark?

* * *

REFUSAL AND POLITICAL LIFE

To determine the domain of the political from the principle of refusal is neither to withdraw nor to abandon the basis of political life. Read in the context of *re-fundere*, what the reflective return of refusal thematises is the discursive preservation of the question of the political in the peripatetic dispersal of its structure. Refusal trembles precariously at the edge of life, an interplay of falling and forming; and the cast of no one. In so doing, it both performs and ingrains a lightening of meaning within the political. Blanchot calls refusal a 'power' but he does so not because it acts productively in the world, but precisely because its mute anonymity distributes an inexorable rift into political economy that cannot be put to work. 'When we refuse,' Blanchot writes, 'we refuse with a movement that is without contempt, without exaltation, and anonymous, as far as possible, for the power to refuse cannot come from us, not in our name alone, but from a very poor beginning that belongs first to those who cannot speak.'[82] Here, what anonymous life indicates is the necessity of thinking the practical basis of political life in and as the unspoken *there* of that which is both inimitable and extraneous to material-linguistic identification. As Derrida writes, '[a]s soon as one identifies a revolution, it begins to imitate, it enters into a death agony.'[83] Albeit in varying ways, Erickson, Waldrop and Davis each point to an overlapping but disjoining conception of political life premised, before anything, on the anonymous incomparability of the exception. In Erickson the paradoxical origins of 'America' allegorise the collocation of the political with the difficult demand of an-archic inheritance. Waldrop juxtaposes the consequential corollaries of this dis-aster with the graphic-material deployment of an opening rift-space. In Davis, the ek-sistent reserve of the exception becomes the critical imperative of political life itself.

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[82] Maurice Blanchot, 'Refusal' in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 112.
[83] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 115.

CONCLUSION

AMONG OTHER THINGS, MEANING

Only the meaning of the other is irrecusable, and forbids the reclusion and reentry into the shell of the self. A voice comes from the other shore. A voice interrupts the saying of the already said.

– Emmanuel Levinas[1]

and it sings to me. It sings

– Steve Erickson[2]

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002) p. 183.
[2] Steve Erickson, *Rubicon Beach* (London: Quartet Books, 1998) p. 300; Erickson's italicisation.

Over the course of this study, two main theses have been outlined and developed in intersecting directions, namely, that the respective work of Steve Erickson, Rosmarie Waldrop and Lydia Davis structures a disturbance of common principles (of grammar, of existence, of the political), and that this disturbance emblematises a lightening of meaning. Through central discussions of ek-sistence, the excluded middle, the image, and the exception, in each chapter both theses have been formulated as constitutive of a thinking of exteriority. Within this general structure, however, it bears stressing that neither the lightening of meaning nor the critical terms that reflect it in any way refers to meaninglessness. Properly speaking, the lightening of meaning is still both a unit of weight and a semantic denotation; as both measure and idiom, it remains available as an object for critical description and analysis. Read as present participle, what the lightening of meaning describes (but does not specify) is an active reduction of the principle of self-sufficiency that governs the propriety of 'meaning.' To put it another way, the lightening of meaning specifies an alleviation of property. Two difficulties, however, arise out of such a formulation. First, it implies a structure of temporal ordering between meaning and lightening in the sense that the primacy of self-sufficient meaning would be that which enables the process of lightening in the first place. Second, the continuousness of the present participle suggests that the lightening of meaning is itself actually both a regular and self-sufficient principle, a principle, in other words, that follows a common path, that is identifiable, steady, which is to say, precisely that which the lightening of meaning is presumed to put into question. Whether directly or indirectly, much of this thesis has been concerned with detailing the ways in which the various writings of Erickson, Waldrop and Davis all indicate that 'lightening' is not subsequent to meaning but rather appears as both the structural antecedent and paradoxical precedent of meaning. Rather than rehearsing those arguments in

summary here, in drawing this thesis to a close it is to a brief consideration of the second difficulty that I wish to turn. Specifically, the aim is to indicate that the lightening of meaning is continuous only insofar as its permanence is structured by the irregularity of scepticism. In detailing the variability of scepticism, the remarks that follow should be understood also in the wider context of offering a response to those various moments in the preceding arguments that have raised the question of the relation between the discursive disturbance of 'lightening' and critical practice. In outline, then, the question is this: how might it be possible to think the lightening of meaning as lightening, that is, in such a way that the exigency of lightening is not thematised into a self-sufficient critical principle?

As noted briefly in the Introduction, however, this question is neither strictly resolvable nor properly thinkable. On the one hand, if the lightening of meaning is properly unthinkable at all times it must and can only remain as a question. That is to say, unthinkability cannot be posed as a (negative) response to the question of lightening precisely because it would be to conceptualise the lightening of meaning as a possible object of negative knowledge. On the other hand, to pose or to think the lightening of meaning as a question already would be to counter the exigency of lightening by pre-determining it as a *possible* object of positive knowledge. That is to say, it would be the case that, at least to a certain extent, the question always already has conceptualised, delimited, and determined the lightening of meaning as that which may be decidable, if not now, then at least at some possible point in the future. Rather than being disruptive of any form of analytic approach, however, the conceptual double bind involved here is in fact critically instructive of the lightening of meaning itself. What it suggests is that any formulation of the lightening of meaning, whether prescriptive or proscriptive, must be accompanied by an acute degree of

scepticism. The particular inflection of Levinas' discussion of scepticism in *Otherwise than Being* is exemplary of what is at stake here.

Broadly outlined, Levinas' concern in the section entitled 'Skepticism and Reason' is to propose a method of argument that is the dissimulation of argument, which is to say, a form of argument that takes place as the cancellation of its own expression.[3] For Levinas, the sceptical thesis emblematises this extraction of exposition succinctly. Principally, the reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand, Levinas argues that scepticism prohibits comprehension because the equivocation it names necessarily puts all deductive reasoning into question. That is to say, scepticism indicates the non-productive spacing of an ambivalent interval that prevents any correlation of thesis to synthesis, irregularity to equivalence. In Levinas' terms:

> [s]kepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said.[4]

On the other hand, the refutation scepticism specifies does not produce a counter-knowledge, which is to say, it does not produce a *veritās* of refutation. For Levinas, the exemplarity of scepticism consists precisely in the fact that scepticism also refutes the presentation of its own argument. The critical point here, then, is that Levinas points to the manner in which the structure of scepticism is irreducibly double: skepticism is always and already also the refutation of skepticism.[5] Rather than denying the possibility of a sceptical discourse, however, the self-contradiction

[3] Levinas, 'Skepticism and Reason' in *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 165-171.
[4] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 167.
[5] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 167.

of scepticism is precisely that which returns the cautionary register of scepticism to discourse as an 'invincible force.'[6] 'Skepticism is refutable,' Levinas writes, 'but it returns.'[7] It returns as the dis-course of discourse, a discourse, in other words, that is periodic in the double sense of that which is both 'without end and without continuity.'[8]

Read in the context of the lightening of meaning, what is of critical importance is the way in which Levinas goes on to claim that the dis-course of scepticism points to a language that would:

> exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts.[9]

In this respect, a sceptical approach to meaning would be a movement toward a conception of meaning as that which is 'the out-of-series, [a] subversion of essence [that] overflows the theme it states.'[10] What this amounts to saying is that sceptical meaning would be not only meaning lightened of any verifiable content, but that meaning 'is' only insofar as it has been lightening always already into the inexorable return of scepticism. As follows, '[t]he permanent return of skepticism does not so much signify the breakup of structures as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning, that for their accord repression can already be necessary.'[11] The ambivalence of scepticism opens this repressive accord to an anarchic discordance that weighs in meaning without either quantifiable or qualifiable

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[6] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 169.
[7] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 168.
[8] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 169.
[9] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 169-170.
[10] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 170.
[11] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 171.

measure. Needless to say, scepticism does not specify what this discordance of meaning might mean. Properly speaking, what it does rather is simply to exacerbate the occurrence of discordance by permanently refuting it, which is to say, by inscribing a non-appropriable interference between the saying and the said, between thesis and exposition. In so doing, scepticism opens toward the unfolding of other meanings, toward a thought of meaning indivisible from its crossings and traversal; in turning away it turns toward an otherwise of meaning. In this sense, the meaning of scepticism is 'a voice that comes from the other shore' and that comes by remaining there, elsewhere; it is both an intonation that lightens and a lightening of intonation. As Levinas writes, it is '[a]n impossible simultaneousness of meaning, [a] non-assemblable but also inseparable one-for-the-other, [...] an excluded middle signifying as an equivocation or an enigma.'[12]

In the company of a voice without personal pronoun, the lightening of meaning strains at the sliding edge of what is expressible. Once that straining is understood as the double occasion of scepticism, then the critical staging of the lightening of meaning must itself involve a sceptical lightening of its own critical ground. In the terms of Levinas' *On Escape* with which this thesis began, such a complication of the critical approach 'is the path where we recognize the inanity of acts and thoughts incapable of taking the place of an event that breaks up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence.'[13] It is the sceptical waywardness of this path that the lightening of meaning gives the critical to think. It necessitates that the critical be counter-positional, that it proceed in fits and starts, with questions and effacements, in a manner always turning, that is always wandering against the limit of what it has not been quite possible to say, that is always forming, always falling.

[12] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 169.
[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) p. 73.

From this perspective, the lightening inanity of skepticism is not without consequence: in the mobile folds of its peregrinations waits the imperative of escape, of critically thinking a path outside the inclusive exclusion of self-sufficiency, of approaching meaning in the otherwise folds of refusal, image, circumlocution, and ek-sistence.

The lightening of meaning spreads out and scatters. Among other things, it has this dispersal as its precondition. It is singularly plural. It is other ways leaking into filament; a scurrying sideways of signification; its diffraction, its deflection. As Levinas writes, '[i]t concerns the meaning of the very fact that in Being there are beings.'[14] With a different inflection, it concerns the meaning of the very fact that there is 'among other things.'

[14] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001) p. 106.

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