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I. The Question of the Voice: Blanchot’s Essays on Beckett

Maurice Blanchot has written three essays on Beckett. In the famous 1953 essay, “Where Now? Who Now?” ("Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?"), Blanchot asks who is speaking in The Unnamable (L’Innommable, 1953). It is not the author, he says, but the necessity which metamorphoses the author into a nameless being stripped of personality, “a being without being, who can neither live nor die, neither begin nor leave off.” This being is also “the empty site in which an empty voice [une parole vide] is raised without effect, masked […] by a porous and agonizing ‘I’” (OB 144). In fact, the “narrator” of the novel is perpetually afflicted with the voice, from which he can never escape. Blanchot says:

[...] The Unnamable is precisely an experiment conducted, an experience lived under the threat of the impersonal, the approach of a neutral voice [une parole neutre] that is raised of its own accord, that penetrates the man who hears it, that is without intimacy, that excludes all intimacy, that cannot be made to stop, that is the incessant, the interminable. (OB 144)

This view of the voice in terms of impersonality or neutrality is so adequate that it has long been regarded as one of the most famous and basic interpretations of the novel or Beckett’s work in general. Blanchot also says, “Here the voice [la parole] does not speak, it is; in itself nothing begins, nothing is said, but it is always new and always beginning again” (OB 147). The neutral voice keeps on in a space where there is neither life nor death, neither beginning nor end.

“Words Must Travel Far” (“Les paroles doivent cheminer longtemps”), which is on How It Is (Comment c’est, 1961), was originally published as “Notre épopée” in 1961 and later republished in The Infinite Conversation (L’Entretien infini, 1969). This essay reflects in many ways an important shift in Blanchot’s thought in the 1960s which characterizes The Infinite Conversation as a whole. It seems, however, that Blanchot’s attention is still mainly drawn to the question of the voice which he explored in the essay on The Unnamable. He describes the voice [la voix] in How It Is similarly as “uninterrupted,” “anonymous,” “impersonal,” “errant,” or “continuous.” He also says, “Behind the words that are read, as before the words written, there is a voice [une voix] already inscribed, not heard, not speaking; and the author, close to this voice [cette voix], is on an equal footing with the reader — each nearly merged

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1 I am grateful to Mr. Andrew Gibson (Royal Holloway, University of London) for reading the draft of this essay and giving me suggestions.
with the other, seeking to recognize it” (IC 329). In terms of “a call to voice [la voix] and the desire to give oneself over to this speech [cette parole] of the outside that speaks everywhere,” Blanchot likens How It Is to the Iliad and calls it “our epic.” It seems evident, however, that he considers this voice, non-speaking and alien even to the author, as a continuation of the neutral voice that “does not speak” in The Unnamable. And his reference to the evocation in How It Is of “the interminable time without sleep” (IC 331) reminds us of that space of The Unnamable, where there is no beginning or end and time is virtually absent.

In 1990, one year after Beckett’s death, Blanchot published a short essay, “Oh All to End” (“Oh tout finir”). Even in this very late text, Blanchot does not seem to depart much from his former concern for the voice in Beckett. We could say that this essay is largely a succinct recapitulation of his earlier two essays on Beckett. For him, Beckett represents literature’s endless self-effacing, self-exhausting movement, which makes itself heard “as a ceaseless, interminable voice [parole].” As we will see later, this is a recollection of his view expressed in Le Livre d’venir (1959). In the final paragraph, he calls How It Is “epic” again, and fondly cites some passages, one of which was already cited in “Words Must Travel Far.” He also says:

[Beckett] had neither to accept nor refuse a prize that was for no particular work [...] but was simply an attempt to keep within the limits of literature that voice [la voix] or rumble or murmur which is always under threat of silence, ‘that undifferentiated speech, spaced without space, affirming beneath all affirmation, impossible to negate, too weak to be silenced, too docile to be constrained, not saying anything, only speaking, speaking without life, without voice [voix], in a voice [voix] fainter than any voice [voix]: living among the dead, dead among the living, calling to die, to be resurrected in order to die, calling without call’ (and I quote — to end — these lines from L’Attente l’Oubli because Beckett was willing to recognize himself in that text.) (BR 299, Trans. L. Hill.)

It is not known whether Beckett really recognized himself in L’Attente l’Oubli (1962), let alone whether he read it. But this passage from Blanchot’s text is undoubtedly Beckettian in that it refers to that same voice that never ceases in a space suspended between being and nothingness, between life and death.

Now it seems clear that for Blanchot the most appealing feature of Beckett has always been the strange, paradoxical voice which continues endlessly without saying anything, and in that sense seems almost indistinguishable from silence. In a sense it would not be surprising because in The Unnamable, How It Is, and many other works of Beckett, a narrator is forced to listen to an interminable voice from somewhere (although it might be his own), and this could be regarded as a prominent feature of those works. But in order to examine closely why and how Blanchot was attracted to this voice, it is necessary to understand Blanchot’s general theory of language and literature, in which the voice seems to be given a special place. In fact, Blanchot’s idea about the non-speaking voice had already been formed before he read Beckett’s The Unnamable. In a sense, we could say Blanchot found in Beckett one of the best examples to which his theory could be applied. In what way did this encounter take place?

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2 As is suggested by this passage where “this speech” refers to “voice,” Blanchot in discussing Beckett does not seem to make a significant distinction between “parole” and “voix.” Therefore I adopt the English translators’ choice of “voice” for “parole” without reservation.

3 I use the original title when a French book (in its entirety) has not been translated into English.
And ultimately, at what points did the paths of these two great authors converge and diverge?

II. Blanchot's Theory of Language and Literature

Blanchot's ideas about language and literature were first profoundly formulated in "Literature and the Right to Death," originally published in 1947 and 1948, and placed as the most important essay at the end of *The Work of Fire* (*La Part du feu*, 1949). Its latter half in particular contains many motifs which were to be developed or elaborated in later essays collected in *The Space of Literature* (*L'Espace littéraire*, 1955) and *Le Livre à venir*. The key idea in this essay is that language, when it names something, deprives that something of its reality or being. "For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her" (*WF* 322). Death is always involved in language. It is even the very condition for all understanding and meaning.

My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is.

Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. (*WF* 323)

The power of language to annihilate is exerted on a speaking subject as well as an addressed object.

Clearly, in me, the power to speak is also linked to my absence from being. I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void. (*WF* 324)

In the face of this negation, death, or nothingness inherent in language, everyday language retrieves a meaning of a thing after the thing is annihilated by speech, and by so doing assures our ordinary communication. But literary language seeks to explore what has disappeared by speech, "what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight" (*WF* 327). This search becomes possible because of the materiality of language — "rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book" (*WF* 327). When language becomes a thing or material object and refuses to mean anything, it "insists on playing its own game without man, who created it." At this moment, literature shows that it is destined to be "the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of a consciousness deprived of self" (*WF* 328). This peculiar state of "my consciousness without me" is the primordial obscurity which literature tries to recover.

From this point on, Blanchot variously rephrases this basic distinction between everyday language and literary language. For instance, he discusses two slopes of literature, which are
in fact fundamentally intertwined with each other. The first slope, "meaningful prose," corresponds to everyday language and negates things only in order to restore their meaning for communication. The second one is that "consciousness deprived of self," which emerges with the materiality of language. It is in reformulating this latter state that Blanchot first mentions something very close to the strange unceasing voice which he evokes in his Beckett essays. After pointing out that in this state language becomes "an interminable resifting of words," Blanchot says:

[T]his endless resifting of words without content, this continuousness of speech through an immense pillage of words, is precisely the profound nature of a silence that talks even in its dumbness, a silence that is speech empty of words, an echo speaking on and on in the midst of silence. (WF 332)

It is also in this same passage that Blanchot, in a footnote, finally reveals that he owes his idea of that "consciousness deprived of self" explored by literary language to Emmanuel Levinas's *Existence and Existents* (*De l'existence à l'existant*, 1947), especially his notion of the *il y a*. In fact, when Blanchot describes that impersonal state emerging in literature, he is virtually transposing Levinas's descriptions of the *il y a*, one feature of which is the endlessly speaking silence.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas analyzes how an existent (a being) is born out of the state of existence (Being) into a conscious subject in the event of "hypostasis." In opposition to Heidegger who subordinates beings to Being, Levinas claims that existence without existents (Being without beings) is a horrifying state which is to be overcome by the emergence of existents (beings) as conscious subjects. He calls this bare state of existence "*il y a*" ("there is"). In the *il y a*, there is no possibility of death because there is no personal subject capable of dying: " 'Tomorrow, alas! one will still have to live' — a tomorrow contained in the infinity of today. There is horror [of] immortality, perpetuity of the drama of existence, necessity of forever taking on its burden" (*EE* 63). This is like insomnia in which one is forced to be awake eternally without any possibility of sleep. (Levinas calls the *il y a* "insomnia, which is like the very eternity of being" (*EE* 66).) A conscious subject, which is achieved by "hypostasis," is an escape from this horrifying state. When a conscious subject is "posited" or "hypostatized," this insomnia of being can be interrupted.

Mainly through discussing Mallarmé, Blanchot had worked out the idea that language involves death and the writer becomes an impersonal being in front of the materiality of language. His uniqueness lies in deepening this idea by combining it with Levinas's *il y a*. For Levinas, the *il y a* is a horror which we escape by being a conscious subject. But for Blanchot, it is a state which literature is destined to explore. Thus Blanchot incorporated a general

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4 Blanchot says that "an art which purports to follow one slope is already on the other" (*WF* 332). In the first slope, for example, "there comes a moment when art realizes that everyday speech is dishonest and abandons it" (*WF* 332) in search of true meaning. And Mallarmé, the representative of the second slope, is also a master of lucid prose, whereas the prose of Sade and Lautrémont points to the second slope. We should, then, regard as only provisional the distinction between everyday language and literary language. For detailed analysis of the two slopes, see Simon Critchley, 48–65. Critchley says that the *il y a* in Blanchot is the experience of ambiguity in being suspended between the two slopes (62–63).

5 The idea that language involves death is also from Hegel (cf. *WF* 323). Hegel (especially his idea of negation in dialectic) is very important throughout "Literature and the Right to Death" in providing a theoretical springboard for Blanchot.
philosophical concept into his theory, which concerns above all literature, and not human beings in general as in Levinas.\(^6\)

In the context of our discussion, it is to be noted that Levinas presents the *il y a* as silence that “murmurs.” As the night of insomnia and not of sleep, the *il y a* cannot provide complete silence. When he first introduces the term “*il y a*,” he says, “This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*” (EE 57). He also says, “[The *il y a*] is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us, but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens like the silence of those infinite spaces Pascal speaks of” (EE 58) or “It is like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence” (EE 63–64). Now it is evident that when Blanchot incorporated the *il y a* from Levinas, he also inherited this idea of “a murmur of silence.”

In the essays collected in *The Space of Literature* or *Le Livre à venir*, where Blanchot continues to elaborate his theory, the “murmur of silence” is frequently referred to under various names\(^7\) and its import is more clearly delineated. In the former collection, the state of the *il y a* which the writer enters into in writing is designated as the space of literature (“*l’espace littéraire*”). In this space, the writer is deprived of self (“*I*”) and becomes an impersonal and neutral “he.” He is surrendered to “the interminable, the incessant,” or “the absence of time,” which involves the absence of beginning and end. Apart from rephrasing these now familiar ideas, Blanchot in *The Space of Literature* specifies the role of the writer in relation to the “murmur of silence.” He says:

>The poem — literature — seems to be linked to a spoken word which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it is. The poem is not this word itself, for the poem is a beginning, whereas this word never begins, but always speaks anew and is always starting over. However, the poet is the one who has heard this word, who has made himself into an ear attuned to it, its mediator, and who has silenced it by pronouncing it. [...] The one who writes is [...] one who has “heard” the interminable and incessant, who has heard it as speech, has entered into this understanding with it, has lived with its demand, has lost in it and yet, [for having necessarily] sustained it, has [...] made it stop — has, in this intermittence, rendered it perceptible, has proffered it by firmly reconciling it with this limit. He has mastered it by imposing measure. (SL 37)

The interminable “word” (“*parole*” in the original) mentioned here evidently refers to the “murmur of silence,” for Blanchot says of the same thing, “It is not silent, because in this language silence speaks” (SL 51). The writer is supposed to impose silence on this word which “does not speak” but “is.” (We recall that the space of literature is inseparable from the material existence of language.) Just as in Levinas the eternity of the *il y a* should be interrupted by the emergence of an existent as a conscious subject, in Blanchot, the interminable murmur of silence should be broken by the writer's imposition of (another kind of) silence. But here the writer's role is highly paradoxical. First of all, quite plainly, it is only by writing

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\(^6\) Simon Critchley, however, doubts this kind of neat distinction between Blanchot the literary critic and Levinas the philosopher. He tries to show that the *il y a* is “the literary moment in Levinas's work,” and that despite appearances, it is not surmounted by philosophy even in his later works (73–83).

\(^7\) Blanchot uses “*parole vide,*” “*parole non parlante,*” “*rumeur,*” “*murmure,*” etc., though not “*murmure du silence*” itself.
and by means of words that he can impose silence on the murmur. Secondly, it seems that the writer "has silenced it by pronouncing it," or he has "rendered it perceptible" by stopping it. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot ponders over this second type of paradox deeply in an important essay entitled "Orpheus's Gaze."

In Greek mythology, Orpheus descends into the Underworld to bring back his wife Eurydice. Although he is forbidden to turn around to look at her, he transgresses the law so that both of them are ruined. Just like Orpheus who brings about disaster by gazing at Eurydice, the writer ruins his work by interrupting the interminable murmur, by imposing silence on it. At this point, however, something more important than the work emerges: in other words, the origin of the work can be approached. Blanchot says:

Orpheus's gaze is Orpheus's ultimate gift to the work. It is a gift whereby he refuses, whereby he sacrifices the work, bearing himself toward the origin according to desire's measureless movement — and whereby unknowingly he still moves toward the work, toward the origin of the work. (*SL* 147)

The 1955 essay, "The Death of the Last Writer," collected in *Le Livre à venir*, is centred on the writer's role of silencing the murmur. In it, a work of literature is defined as "a rich dwelling-place of silence, a firm defence and lofty wall erected against [the murmur]" (*BR* 152, Trans. L. Hill), so that the death of the last writer means total prevalence of the endless murmur. When the writer produces a work, the silence harbored in the work is imposed on the murmur. But at the same time, struck against the murmur, as it were, the work is ruined and its silence is dissipated, giving way to a new murmur. This disastrous process, parallel to Orpheus's experience, is, however, necessary for literary creation because only through this can the origin of the work emerge. Blanchot says:

[The non-speaking speech] leads only to the place that is unique for each one, the underworld to which Orpheus descended, which is a place of dispersion and discordance, in which all of a sudden he has to confront [the non-speaking] speech and find within it, and within himself and the experience of the whole art, that which transforms powerlessness into power, loss of direction into direction, and non-speaking speech into a silence on the basis of which it can really speak and voice the origin within it, without destroying humankind. (*BR* 154, emphasis added)

The underlined passage merits particular attention. The original French reads: "la parole non parlante en un silence à partir duquel elle peut vraiment parler et laisser parler en elle l'origine." After the writer confronts the non-speaking speech (the murmur of silence) and transforms it into silence, i.e., imposes silence on it, then, on the basis of this silence, the non-speaking speech "can truly speak and let the origin speak within it." Therefore, the new murmur, which prevails after the silence harbored in the work is dissipated, announces the "speech" of the origin. Indeed, the origin of the work seems to have the murmur of silence as its essential attribute. In an essay on André Breton, which immediately follows "Orpheus's Gaze" in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot suggests that the murmur of silence, as is affirmed by automatic writing, directly links to "language as origin, the pure springing of the origin" (*SL* 181). In "The Death of the Last Writer," he also says that the writer should become intimate with "the initial murmur" (*BR* 154, emphasis added). To sum up, the writer needs to
impose silence on the murmur at the sacrifice of his work, in order to let the origin emerge, let it speak, or enable the murmur itself to murmur more authentically. That seems to be what Blanchot means when he says that in silencing the murmur, the writer also “pronounces it” or “renders it perceptible.” Through the loss of his work, the writer can paradoxically approach this positive stage which also seems to transform “powerlessness into power, loss of direction into direction.”

III. Reassessing “Where Now? Who Now?”

If we return to “Where Now? Who Now?,” we find it permeated with the basic ideas about the space of literature we have just looked into in the previous section. After pointing out that the voice in The Unnamable is impersonal and neutral, Blanchot meditates further:

Perhaps we are not dealing with a book at all, but with something more than a book: Perhaps we are approaching that movement from which all books derive, that point of origin where, doubtless, the work is lost, the point that always ruins the work, the point of perpetual unworkableness [désœuvrement] with which the work must maintain an increasingly initial relation or risk becoming nothing at all. (OB 144-45)

There is no doubt that Blanchot has in mind Orpheus and his approach to the origin when he mentions “that point of origin” here. For a few pages after this, he digresses from Beckett and discusses the relationship between the writer and his work in reference to Genet (as expounded by Sartre). Contrary to the common assumption — exemplified by the “sublimation” theory — that by writing the writer is delivered of a darker self, Blanchot claims that the work is not where the writer is protected from the world but where he is “exposed to a much greater, much more ominous danger” (OB 146-47). In other words, he has to be deprived of self, transformed into “no one,” or expelled out of the world. Returning to The Unnamable, Blanchot makes the comment we quoted at the beginning: “Here the voice [la parole] does not speak, it is; in itself nothing begins, nothing is said, but it is always new and always beginning again” (OB 147). This is very similar to Blanchot’s words in the passage from The Space of Literature, where he describes the murmur in the space of literature in general: “The poem — literature — seems to be linked to a spoken word [une parole] which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it is. The poem is not this word itself, for the poem is a beginning, whereas this word never begins, but always speaks anew and is always starting over” (SL 37, cited above).9

As we remember, in this passage in The Space of Literature, Blanchot goes on to delineate the writer’s role of imposing silence. We are surprised to find that in “Where Now? Who Now?” as well, exactly the same sentences about the writer’s role follow the above-quoted comment on the non-speaking voice.10 Finally, mentioning the dangerous but necessary approach to the
origin once again, Blanchot evaluates Beckett in the following way: "[I]t is by having rendered this approach evident in the nakedest, most abrupt manner that The Unnamable has more importance for literature than most 'successful' works in its canon" (OB 148).

It would be possible now to conclude that Blanchot is applying his general ideas to Beckett or testing them through Beckett, rather than trying to explore his uniqueness that would distinguish him from other authors. Even in "Where Now? Who Now?," Blanchot refers to Lautréamont, Michaelangelo, Goya, Nerval, Hölderlin in addition to Genet, when he evokes the danger of the work. It would appear that Beckett is only one of the many examples with which Blanchot can illustrate his theory of the space of literature. If Beckett has any uniqueness at all, it is that The Unnamable makes evident the dangerous approach to the origin "in the nakedest, most abrupt manner." In The Space of Literature as well, Blanchot detects the same murmur of silence, the same space of literature, the same approach to the origin in such diverse authors as Mallarmé, Kafka, Rilke, or even André Breton. Le Livre à venir, as the title suggests, is more concerned with the historical situation of modern literature or the future of literature itself. This question is particularly dealt with by the last part entitled "Où va la littérature?," of which "Where Now? Who Now?" and "The Death of the Last Writer" are the third and fourth essays. In the preceding two essays ("The Disappearance of Literature" and "The Pursuit of the Zero Point"), Blanchot suggests that largely with Hölderlin and Mallarmé literature has stopped being a clear, assured domain and become a space ("non-literature") where only neutral impersonality speaks. The last paragraph of the second essay mentions that Beckett's pages "bring us closer to" the torment of this condition, thus preparing the way for the next "Where Now? Who Now?" At the end of "The Death of the Last Writer," Blanchot says that in all great modern works we can hear the murmur of silence since literature tempted writers to confront it in order to silence it. Henry Michaux as a good example but certainly he could have referred to Beckett. Thus, in the historical perspective given in Le Livre à venir, Beckett is recognized as one of those writers who illustrate the fundamental change literature has undergone with Hölderlin and Mallarmé. As we have seen, Blanchot invokes this position of Beckett again in his 1990 essay:

If, as was said once (rightly or wrongly), literature tends towards its essence which is to efface itself or disappear, this exhaustion [...] constantly appeals to its own perseverance by making itself heard as a ceaseless, interminable voice. Samuel Beckett was entrusted with this movement of the end that never reaches the end (BR 298).

But Beckett appears to be only one of the numerous modern writers in this movement, ranging from Sade and Hölderlin to Mallarmé and Kafka to Ponge and Michaux, even if he might be a typical or salient example. This remarkable inclusiveness of Blanchot's perspective is not necessarily an advantage. For instance, are we really convinced when we find that the noise the beast hears in Kafka's The Burrow is indicative of "the other night," which corresponds to Beckett's The Unnamable are both considered as the murmur of silence in the space of literature? Does this kind of broad applicability not risk homogenizing differences and losing sight of uniqueness?

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11 Sade is another writer privileged in Blanchot's perspective. Blanchot describes his works as "the prodigious repetition of an eternal speaking" or "terrifying murmur" (IC 220-21). As we will see later, Beckett is compared to Sade in "Words Must Travel Far." cf. Nordholt, 80-82.

12 Blanchot regards the noise the beast hears as indicative of "the other night," which corresponds to the approach of the origin after the ruin of Orpheus and his work (SL 168-69).
Blanchot’s concentration on his own theme of the voice also results in leaving out some other interesting aspects of *The Unnamable* itself. For example, one of the most conspicuous features of this novel is a paradox concerning the narrator’s identity. We could even say that the variety and vicissitudes of his struggle with the paradox constitute the whole novel and give it its uniqueness. In a self-enclosed space of consciousness, the narrator is hearing himself speaking. He cannot believe the voice he is hearing is his own and attributes it to others, though after all he is obliged to admit it is his. Time and again he oscillates like this: “[T]his voice is not mine, but can only be mine since there is no one but me” (26). Throughout the novel this dilemma haunts him and confines him to various but futile self-questioning, in which one view is immediately refuted by another. To give one simple example, at one point he thinks that the voice might be Mahood’s, but he is also feeling that he is forced to continue by a certain master. And the master might be more than one, or Mahood might be the master. There is no solution whatsoever to such questions which arise one after another. And this endless process makes it impossible for him to escape from the voice he tries in vain to disown, though his only wish is to attain silence. According to Jacques Derrida, the history of Western philosophy has been dominated by the system of “hearing-oneself-speak” which guarantees the presence of the self to itself in pure interiority, and contributes to the metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism which he seeks to deconstruct. In the case of *The Unnamable*, however, the narrator cannot establish his identity, and concomitantly the presence of the self to itself becomes impossible because the self is always already invaded or contaminated by “the other” and perpetually forced to be differentiated from itself. Blanchot in “Where Now? Who Now?” rightly emphasizes that the impersonal and neutral voice is keeping on endlessly in the novel. But he discusses the voice only insofar as it fits his idea of the space of literature. Therefore, he takes little interest in how the voice involves the narrator in the paradox concerning the self and the other. The voice is abstracted as a unitary motif away from the narrator’s actual struggles with the paradox. And this abstractness of the voice of Blanchot guarantees its broad applicability. But in the 1960s, when he diversified and deepened his ideas considerably, he became more engaged in the questions concerning the other. In order to see how this shift affected his views of Beckett, we need to return to his 1961 essay on *How It Is*. But, first of all, it would be appropriate to have a brief look at the essays collected in *The Infinite Conversation*, which mark Blanchot’s shift.

IV. Blanchot’s Shift in the 1960s

Blanchot reformulated his former ideas fundamentally in the 1960s. Particularly important in this shift was his encounter with Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini*) published in 1961. Leslie Hill summarizes the meaning of the impact as follows:

A rapid transformation takes place in Blanchot’s critical writing with the result that what, for instance, had figured earlier in his texts under the rubric of impossibility, is henceforth...
The account Levinas gives, in *Totalité et infini*, of the relation of non-relation that obtains between the Same and the Other, thus provides Blanchot with the means of re-inventing or re-articulating as the question of the Other the question of the impossibility of dying that is so crucial in his earlier work. (169–70)

What Hill calls “the question of the impossibility of dying” no doubt includes the idea of the space of literature based on the *il y a*. Along with the shift to “the question of the Other,” terms such as “neutral” (“neutre”), “outside,” “writing,” “absence of the Book,” “worklessness” (“désœuvrement”), “fragment,” “multiplicity,” “interruption,” all interrelated to each other, emerged to the fore or re-emerged with new meanings. Let us first pay attention to the term “writing” in *The Infinite Conversation*. In the preliminary note, Blanchot puts particular stress on this word, which he gives a very special meaning:

*Writing, the exigency of writing: no longer the writing that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say, moralizing), but rather the writing that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question — and first of all the idea of God, of the Self, of the Subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work — so that this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the Book as its goal rather signals its end: a writing that could be said to be outside discourse, outside language.* (IC xii)

In a sense this passage neatly epitomizes the most important themes of *The Infinite Conversation*. Any idea that tends toward identity, unity or totality is radically put in question by “writing,” which is always linked to “the other,” “the outside,” or “the neutral.” “The Book” is one of the typical concepts that come under attack. The final essay of *The Infinite Conversation* is entitled “The Absence of the Book” and devoted to detailed discussions about the exigency of writing that would replace the Book and its correlatives, including the notions of beginning-end, presence, centre, origin, the Bible, theology, logos, and law. Writing as “pure exteriority” or “the relation to the other of every book” (IC 427) goes beyond all these and goes “outside discourse, outside language.” Here, we are inevitably reminded of Derrida and his use of the term “writing” in *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammaïologie*, 1967). In its first chapter, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” as the title eloquently suggests, Derrida opposes the book to writing in much the same way as Blanchot does. He says:

> The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and [...] against difference in general. (18)

As is well known, Derrida criticizes logocentrism and phonocentrism in the entire Western philosophical tradition — the privileging of speech with its alleged proximity to (the presence of) truth over writing which is denounced as a lifeless shadow of speech. Trying to deconstruct this tradition, he argues that in fact speech is preceded by writing because “the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language” (8) so that it even includes that which
precedes language and makes it possible in the first place: "arche-writing" or "differance." While it is true that Derrida is philosophically far more methodical and precise than Blanchot, we are still struck by the similarity in their conception of writing. Writing in both cases designates the other of unity, identity, presence and all the related ideas that have governed Western philosophy. Our impression of their similarity might even be enhanced when we find Blanchot saying the following:

In other words, the Book always indicates an order that submits to unity, a system of notions in which are affirmed the primacy of speech over writing, of thought over language, and the promise of a communication that would one day be immediate and transparent. (IC xii)

The break required by writing is a break with thought when it gives itself as an immediate proximity; it is also a break with all empirical experience of the world. In this sense, writing also entails a rupture with all present consciousness, it being always already engaged in the experience of the non-manifest or the unknown (understood as neutral). (IC 261)

From this point, Derrida's deconstruction of "the metaphysics of presence" and of "phono-centrism" is just a step ahead. We could not easily determine how Derrida and Blanchot influenced each other in this period. It is certain, however, that Blanchot's position here is extremely close to Derrida's. In fact, Blanchot's emendations to the essays collected in The Infinite Conversation show the influence of Derrida whose important early works were published two years before the publication of The Infinite Conversation.14

Writing points to the outside of the Book, discourse and language, and the outside is another name for the other. Blanchot developed his ideas of the other particularly through reading Levinas's Totality and Infinity. Levinas in that book tries to overturn the whole Western philosophical tradition, which, according to him, is based on the appropriation of the Other by the Same. Instead, he conceives the Other who can never be appropriated and therefore stands in infinite distance from the Self. The Other in this sense, which he names autrui, is never in a dialectical relation to the Self; i.e., he is never another "myself." The Other transcends the relation of equality or inequality. In The Infinite Conversation, three essays in dialogic form are specifically devoted to tortuous considerations of the Other and autrui, all of them originally written right after the publication of Totality and Infinity. Let us look at the third one, "The Relation of the Third Kind (Man without Horizon)." For Blanchot, the relation to the Other, who is infinitely distant and thus eludes the comprehension of the unitary Self, is "a relation of the third kind," as opposed to the Self's appropriation of the Other through dialectical identification (the first kind) and the Self's immediate fusion with the Other (the second kind). This relation, which is also called "neutral" or "a relation without relation," forms "a double dissymmetry" in that while the Other is infinitely foreign to me, I am also infinitely foreign to the Other, although Blanchot quickly warns us that this should not be mistaken for a return to the dialectic because there is no equality implied in it. What is more important, however, is that in this relation, neither I nor the Other is really a self. According to Blanchot, this relation "seems to draw-repel any 'I' into leaving its site or its role — which, nonetheless, the 'I' must maintain, having become nomadic and anonymous" (IC 67), and the Other is "the unidentifiable, the 'I'-less, the nameless, the presence of the inaccessible" (IC 70)

14 cf. Hill, 129, 251 n.3.
or "the presence of man precisely insofar as he is always missing from his presence, just as he is missing from his place" (IC 71). These remarks remind us of the space of literature, where a self is dissolved into anonymity and neutrality. What was considered as the writer's unique experience in writing is now reformulated in terms of the relation to the Other.15 This is also suggested by Blanchot's idea that the relation to the Other is introduced above all by "the experience of language — writing" (IC 73), because "writing" here is not yet completely dissociated from the domain of literature, judging from Blanchot's mention of "the very fact of writing" as "one of the essential traits of the 'literary' act" (IC 73).16 Even though Blanchot received an impact from Levinas's idea of the Other or autrui, he transforms it fundamentally in his own way, just as he did with the il y a. For instance, Blanchot says, "[T]his 'Other' in play in the third kind of relation, is no longer one of its terms; it is neither the one nor the other, being nothing other than relation itself, a relation of the one to the other that requires infinity" (IC 73–74). It seems that, unlike Levinas's autrui, the Other of Blanchot does not necessarily mean another "man" with distinct personality that would be conceived as a "term" of a relation. It could also cover what was earlier conceived as the writer's experience of the space of literature.17 This is clear from another essay, "The Narrative Voice (the 'he,' the 'neutral')," for example, where the transition from "I" to "he" discussed in The Space of Literature, is now reconsidered in terms of "the intrusion of the other understood as neutral" (IC 385), although Blanchot here prefers "the other" to "the Other" because the latter risks implying something substantial. Probably because of this vestigial link with his former framework, Blanchot is obliged to say the following in discussing the Other:

[T]he Other man who is 'autrui' also risks being always Other than man, close to what cannot be close to me: close to death, close to the night, and certainly as repulsive as anything that comes to me from these regions without horizon. (IC 72)

[F]or myself, and insofar as I am (momentarily and by function) the one, I undergo the experience of the Other, not as a strange relation with a man like myself, but as man in his strangeness [...]. (IC 74)

The Other (or better, the other) of Blanchot thus exceeds "man" and could mean anything out of the reach of my unitary self, anything outside or unknown.

In discussing "the third relation," Blanchot foregrounds the interval or interruption. He says:

When Autrui speaks to me he does not speak to me as a self. When I call upon the Other, I respond to what speaks to me from no site, and thus am separated from him by caesura such

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15 We should note, however, that impersonality is no longer important. Blanchot says, "Autrui would be man himself, through whom comes to me what discloses itself neither to the personal power of the Subject nor to the power of impersonal truth" (IC 72). Then he says: "[T]he neutral — which is never the impersonal" (IC 72). Probably "the neutral" is now conceived as transcending the domain of the personal / impersonal.

16 We might also note that the first epigraph to The Infinite Conversation is Mallarme's words, "This mad game of writing," which are also discussed first of all in the final essay, "The Absence of the Book."

In quoting from The Infinite Conversation, I do not preserve the original italicization when a whole essay or a substantial part of it is italicized, in order to avoid confusion.

17 Gerald L. Bruns says of the Other of Blanchot: "The Other: man, but now man is 'a name for the nameless' — anonymous, like the murmur of the il y a, that space without place" (117). Timothy Clark says: "[I]n Blanchot, Levinas's conception of language as a relation to transcendence [of autrui] is rewritten in terms of the realm he names elsewhere 'writing' or the 'space of literature'" (104). cf. also Nordholt, 103 n.43.
that he forms with me neither a duality nor a unity. It is this fissure — this relation with the other — that we ventured to characterize as an interruption of being. And now we will add: between man and man there is an interval that would be neither of being nor of non-being, an interval borne by the Difference of speech — a difference preceding everything that is different and everything unique. (IC 69)

This is another instance that shows Blanchot's similarity with Derrida — especially the idea of "difference." What is more notable, however, is that the concept of an "interval" or "interruption" here leads to considerations of dialogue. The essay, "A Plural Speech," for instance, tries to depart from dialogue which necessarily presupposes a dialectical relation of equality, and conceive "a truly plural speech" (or "the speech of writing") in which difference counts — difference "that alone [...] gives voice to two instances of speech by keeping them separate even as they are held together only by this separation" (IC 81). It is interesting that while Blanchot is aware of the limit of dialogue in this way, he still adopts dialogic form in many essays in *The Infinite Conversation*. At the beginning of the recapitulative commentary to the dialogue of "The Relation of the Third Kind," Blanchot says:

I listen in turn to these two voices, being neither close to the one, nor close to the other; being, nevertheless, one of them and being the other only insofar as I am not me — and thus, from the one to the other, interrupting myself in a manner that dissimulates (simulates only) the decisive interruption. (IC 72)

"[T]he decisive interruption" here is that which introduces "the third relation" between interlocutors, the relation to the other, instead of simply contributing to a dialectical relation. Writing in dialogic form, Blanchot dissimulates it on account of the risk of becoming dialectical, but he can also simulate (even if "only" simulate) it because dialogue with oneself like Blanchot's implies an interval within oneself, or difference within oneself. And from this difference, the other emerges, because of which "I" loses its self and unity, dissolving into multiple voices. Elsewhere Blanchot gives the following dialogue, the last two speeches of which are taken as one of the epigraphs to *The Infinite Conversation*:

-- And why can a single person speaking, a single speech, despite appearances, never succeed in naming [the neutral]? We are obliged to be at least two to say it.
-- I know. We have to be two.
-- But why two? Why two instances of speech to say a same thing?
-- Because the one who says it is always the other. (IC 396)

In adopting dialogic form, Blanchot in a sense tries to practice his own idea of the other. That is why, in the very last page of *The Infinite Conversation*, he characterizes the essays collected in it as "belonging to everyone and even written, always written, not by a single person, but by several" (IC 435).

The idea of the interruption in this context might appear to contradict Blanchot's earlier emphasis on "the interminable." In fact, this is not the case. In the first essay of *The Infinite Conversation*, which is now untitled but was originally named (significantly) "L'Entretien
While speaking to someone, he comes to feel the cold force of interruption assert itself. And strangely, the dialogue does not stop; on the contrary, it becomes more resolute, more decisive, yet so hazardous that their relation to the common space disappears between them forever. (IC xxii)

Just as the murmur in the space of literature became more authentic after being interrupted by silence, dialogue is intensified and made more significant when it enters into “the third relation” and the interruption introduces the other. Dialogue is thus both interminable and interrupted. Here we might discern another facet of the way Blanchot modifies his former ideas in a new framework.

V. Reassessing “Words Must Travel Far”

“Words Must Travel Far” was published as “Notre épopée” in 1961 right before the three essays on Totality and Infinity. Even before his encounter with Levinas’s book, Blanchot’s thought was already tending toward what would later characterize The Infinite Conversation as a whole — the thought of writing, the neutral, the outside, the other. In any case, Blanchot revised his essays considerably to accentuate these key ideas when he republished them in The Infinite Conversation. “Notre épopée,” already anticipatory in many ways (especially its dialogic form), was also reworked with a number of significant changes, so that “Words Must Travel Far” now contains various important themes of The Infinite Conversation as a whole.

At first centred on the status of the critic or criticism, the dialogue of “Words Must Travel Far” soon comes to a self-conscious questioning of dialogic form itself. At one point, the conversation goes like this:

-- This double anonymous voice behind which, under an assumed silence, there is someone standing apart who indeed ought to answer for it.
-- Then why does he not speak directly?
-- Because, I imagine, he cannot: in literature there is no direct speech. (IC 327)

This passage points to Blanchot’s ideas of dialogue which we saw in the previous section. In dialogue with oneself like this, one loses a self so that he cannot speak directly. This sense of the absence of the author leads to the following remarks which give the essay its final title: “Between [the author] and what he says there is a margin that should be made apparent. Words must travel a long way. / -- Far enough to efface their tracks, and above all the authoritarian presence of a man who is master of what should be said” (IC 327). The presence of the author as the centre or origin is thus put in question in a way reminiscent of Michel Foucault or Roland Barthes. We remember that “Where Now? Who Now?” already pointed out that the voice of The Unnamable was not the author’s but that of the impersonal or neutral. In The Infinite Conversation this question is reconsidered with reference to new ideas. For example, when the narrative voice is called neutral in “The Narrative Voice (the “he,” the neutral),” it is because, far from being the author’s or character’s voice, it “comes from exteriority itself, from the outside that is the enigma proper to language in writing” and “tends to absent itself in its bearer and also efface him as the center” (IC 386).
Beckett’s *How It Is* is first mentioned when the value judgement of the critic is discussed. It is said to belong to “a category of works that go unrecognized more through praise than through disparagement” and as such compared to the books of Sade, which are read “outside reading” because ordinary reading misses their “true scandalous power” (*IC* 328–29). Then comes an important passage:

-- [...] Let us say, perhaps, that works such as these, and first of all Beckett’s, come closer than is customary to the movement of writing and to the movement of reading, seeking to combine them in an experience that, if not common to both, is at least scarcely differentiated — and here we meet up again with the idea of indifference, of a neutral affirmation, equal-unequal, eluding all that would give it value or even affirm it. 

-- The term hearing would befit this act of approach better than reading. Behind the words that are read, as before the words written, there is a voice already inscribed, not heard, not speaking; and the author, close to this voice, is on an equal footing with the reader — each nearly merged with the other, seeking to recognize it. (*IC* 329)

We could say that “a voice already inscribed, not heard, not speaking” refers to the murmur of silence in the space of literature. In fact, the narrator of *How It Is* is in basically the same situation as that of *The Unnamable* in that in hearing himself speaking, he cannot be sure of the identity of the voice. There is the same oscillation between the denial (“an ancient voice in me not mine” (7)) and the admission (“yes my voice yes mine yes not another's no mine alone” (146)) just as in *The Unnamable*. The recurrent phrases like “I say it as I hear it” and “I quote” also suggest a difference within himself which dislocates his identity or self-sufficiency. In this sense it is natural that Blanchot again focuses on the voice and its alienness even to the author. And the idea of the fusion of writing and reading is not necessarily new because the same could be said of *The Unnamable*. We should note, however, that Blanchot now discusses the voice in reference to “the idea of indifference, of a neutral affirmation, equal-unequal” which certainly indicates the new formulation of *The Infinite Conversation*. The strange term “equal-unequal,” for instance, probably implies “the relation of the third kind” (the relation to the Other), which transcends the question of equality and inequality.19

Blanchot’s new approach becomes even more manifest when the dialogue goes on like this:

-- Yes, and thus we find justified in Beckett’s case the disappearance of every sign that would merely be a sign for the eye. Here the force of seeing is no longer what is required; one must renounce the domain of the visible and of the invisible, renounce what is represented, albeit in negative fashion. Hear, simply hear.

-- And this goes for the pure movement of writing. (*IC* 329)

It is arguable that *How It Is* really renounces the domain of visibility, and in fact Blanchot himself admits in the next page that images to be seen still survive in the novel. In *The Infinite Conversation*, however, the domain of the visible / invisible is very frequently mentioned as conducive to unity and totality because of the all-embracing nature of sight, and as such denounced along with ideas related to light or vision that have governed Western philoso-

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19 In “Notre épopée,” it was simply “égale” (694). The addition of “-inhérale” strengthens the sense of neutrality.
Therefore it is always contrasted to writing, the outside, the other or the neutral. The remark, "And this goes for the pure movement of writing," which is a later insertion, is characteristic because it is clear that "the pure movement of writing" here has a special (Derridean) meaning suitable for *The Infinite Conversation*.

At this point we cannot help wondering whether the emphasis on hearing ("Hear, simply hear.") might not contradict the Derridean criticism of phonocentrism which Blanchot seemed to come so close to. In "Atheism and Writing, Humanism and the Cry," Blanchot tries to reconcile these two apparently incompatible motifs. He suggests that while the privileging of the voice by the Romantics is inseparable from the idea of an immediate communication with the divine logos in subjective interiority, it also leads to the experience of the outside and therefore writing, insofar as "[t]he voice [la voix] that speaks without a word, silently — in the silence of a cry — tends to be, no matter how interior, the voice [la voix] of no one" (IC 258). Thus his former idea of the voice or murmur in the space of literature ("the voice of no one") is now connected to the new ideas of writing and the outside. But it is undeniable that Blanchot's way of reconciling the voice with writing appears slightly strained or at least ambiguous, especially in view of the fact that Blanchot clearly says: "Writing conceives of itself on the basis neither of vocal nor of visible manifestation" (IC 261). It seems that in *The Infinite Conversation* this problem is not precisely worked out. The resultant ambiguity is reflected by "Words Must Travel Far." Let us return to the phrase, "there is a voice already inscribed, not heard, not speaking." In the original "Notre épopée,” it was simply "il y a une voix à entendre" (694). The radical change of words accentuates the new interpretation of the voice in terms of writing. But this misleadingly coexists with the emphasis on hearing the voice. In fact, even in his former formulation, Blanchot often used the verb "hear" for the voice while characterizing it as something "not heard, not speaking." (This characterization would make easier the later connection between the voice and writing.) It seems that this preexistent ambiguity has now become more manifest.

Focusing on the unceasing voice in *How It Is*, the dialogue of "Words Must Travel Far" also pays attention to its differences from the voice in *The Unnamable*. Still beset with the paradox of identity, the narrator of *How It Is* recounts in three parts how he was before meeting Pim, when he was with him, and after leaving him, while crawling in the mud and recollecting images of the past. He torments Pim when he is with him, but he will be tormented in turn by Bom after leaving Pim. It is suggested that there is an endless cyclic pattern of a tormentor becoming a victim and vice versa. This simple and neat design is considerably different from the chaotic flow of words in *The Unnamable*. In addition, the whole novel is made up of short fragments, each of which has unique poetic cadence effected by the removal of punctuation marks and the fragmentation of sentence structure. (One example would suffice: "past moments old dreams back again or fresh like those that pass or things things always and memories I say them as I hear them murmur them in the mud" (7).) This stylistic innovation announces the start of Beckett's later phase in both theatre and prose. Duly sensitive to the fragmentary style, Blanchot's interlocutors say:

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Blanchot shares this anti-ocularcentric concern with Levinas (cf. IC 251). It is a recurrent motif in *Totality and Infinity*. 
-- [...] *How It Is* is our epic, a narrative of the first citation in three parts, with stanzas and verses, the back and forth that by nearly regular interruptions gives us a sense of the necessity of this uninterrupted voice.  
-- Everything, in fact, begins in a way as it does in the *Iliad*, with an invocation of the Muse, a call to voice and the desire to give oneself over to this speech of the outside that speaks everywhere. (*IC* 329)

Here again, we find that Blanchot's old concern for the "uninterrupted voice" is blended with his new interest in the interruptions created by the fragmentary style — the interruptions that point toward "the outside."

When the recurrent question, "But what is this voice?,” is asked for the first time, the answer is that it is something evocative of the images of the remote past. The second answer is that "it is perhaps the voice of all of us, the impersonal, errant, continuous, simultaneous and alternating speech in which each of us, under the false identity we attribute to ourselves, cuts out or projects the part that falls to him or to her" (*IC* 330). In the words "simultaneous and alternating speech" we could discern Blanchot's attempt to reinterpret the voice in terms of dialogue, though his older concern is still dominant here. This time more attentive to the diversity of Beckett's text and less reductive than in "Where Now? Who Now?,” Blanchot cites some passages from *How It Is* in reference to the transmission of the rumour among the illusory characters, the narrator's responsibility for the murmur (voice), and the evocation of "the interminable time without sleep." Then, after describing the voice as "a soft specter of speech, at times nearly appeased" (*IC* 331), he quotes from *Texts for Nothing (Textes pour rien*, 1958) to show that it has "becalmed moments" similar to those in *How It Is*. *Texts for Nothing* is a transitional work written between the deadlock of *The Unnamable* and the innovation of *How It Is*, and as such it shares many features with the two novels, notably the unceasing non-speaking voice. Blanchot's interlocutors return to this old theme and end their dialogue in the following way, referring to the endlessness of the voice:

-- So we must still wait. And in waiting what is there to be done?; what do we do?
-- Well, waiting, we chat.
-- Yes, listening to the voice. But what is this voice?
-- Not something to hear, perhaps the last written cry, what is inscribed in the future outside books, outside language.
-- But what is this voice? (*IC* 331)

This ending without closure epitomizes "Words Must Travel Far" as a whole in the sense that Blanchot's older concern for the unceasing voice is interspersed with his new ideas. The theme of waiting, for example, is directly related to "the relation of the third kind." In "Interruption (As on a Riemann surface),” Blanchot says that the interruption which does not contribute to the dialectical relation "introduces the wait that measures the distance between two interlocutors — no longer a reducible, but an irreducible distance" (*IC* 76). The remark, "Well, waiting, we chat," suggests that in their endless chatting, these interlocutors "simulate" the fundamental interruption which puts them in the third relation, the relation to the radical other. The voice they are listening to is not only the voice in Beckett's works, but also the voice one is destined to "hear" in the confrontation with the other. The penultimate remark, which was added later with the final question, repeats Blanchot's rather awkward attempt to relate
the voice to writing, which we have already seen. In “Atheism and Writing, Humanism and the Cry,” Blanchot mentions “the written cry” in discussing writing in his new sense of the word. In his view, writing of the future is indicated by the cry which most distances it from language: “[T]he cry — that is to say, the murmur; cry of need or protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry — or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls” (IC 262). While still trapped in the framework of the book and language, he suggests, we are perhaps starting to have a glimpse of such writing of the future, which will come after everything related to humanity in the ordinary sense disappears.

VI. Conclusion

Reflecting the multiplicity of Blanchot’s thought in the 1960s, “Words Must Travel Far” is more diverse in contents and more attentive to the details of Beckett’s text than “Where Now? Who Now?.” But as the recurrence of the question, “But what is this voice?,” suggests, the central theme is still the voice, and the most important shift from the former essay also bears upon the interpretation of the voice. The voice, which was an essential element in the idea of the space of literature, is now more variously considered in relation to epic, memory, and most importantly, writing “outside books, outside language.” But in “Words Must Travel Far,” the new ideas concerning writing are not extensively developed as in other essays in The Infinite Conversation, because the concern for the voice, basically rooted in the earlier framework, is still dominant and the new elements are mentioned only by way of it. It seems that the voice is chosen from the start as one distinct motif, and then, the new elements are grafted on to it. As a result, this essay gives the impression of ambiguity caused by its transitional nature, as we saw in the relation between the voice and writing. Blanchot’s emendations to emphasize the new elements enhance rather than reduce this impression. Although the theme of the other is implicitly brought in when writing (in the new sense) is referred to, this essay, just like its predecessor, does not address the questions of the paradoxical relation between the self and the other and the differentiation of the self from itself, which How It Is inherits from The Unnamable.

What is more strange is that Blanchot seems to take no interest in the multiplicity of the self in The Unnamable and How It Is, although this is one of the most important themes of The Infinite Conversation. In The Unnamable, the narrator’s inability to establish his identity causes uncontrollable multiplication of the self. The narrator is always obliged to be conscious of the existence of the other, who is after all within himself and indistinguishable from himself. In consequence, he has to wonder whether he is alone or has company. He says at the beginning, “I shall not be alone, in the beginning. I am of course alone. Alone” (4). He is haunted by this oscillation, which is inseparable from another type of oscillation concerning the identity of the voice. The other, whether he is conceived as singular or plural, usurps the narrator’s identity, speaks in his place, manipulates him, and forces him to continue speaking and hearing the voice. But because the other is after all the narrator himself, he has to conceive himself as plural. He says, for example, “[T]here might be a hundred of us and still we’d lack

21 In suggesting this, Blanchot is conscious of Foucault’s The Order of Things, which famously declares that man is a recent invention and might disappear soon.
the hundred and first, we'll always be short of me" (72). How It Is completely takes over this multiplicity of the self from The Unnamable. In the former novel, the narrator feels compelled by the other to continue speaking and hearing the voice, but because the other is nothing but himself, he is compelling himself. This split of the self into a compelling part and a compelled part is represented as a couple of a tormentor and a victim in How It Is. Just like the self in The Unnamable, the couple can be infinitely multiplied. Hence the infinite chain of the tormentor / victim couples. But all this is illusory because there is no one but the narrator himself after all. This ambiguity causes the following characteristic oscillation: "[E]ither I am alone and no further problem or else we are innumerable and no further problem either" (124). Blanchot totally ignores this feature, which he could have found very interesting.

There is another point to note in this context. As we remember, the multiplicity of the self is closely related to dialogue in Blanchot. In a different way, these two features seem to be related also in Beckett, in whose plays we often see a couple keeping dialogue. For instance, dialogue between two terms of a couple in Beckett can be considered as a device for restricting the chaotic multiplication of the self.22 Waiting for Godot (En attendant Godot, first performed in 1953), written right before The Unnamable, seems to be particularly interesting because it is centred on the theme of waiting, which is also important in Blanchot's idea of dialogue, as we have seen. Considering this, it is difficult to understand why Blanchot did not discuss the play at all.

It is certainly useless, however, to criticize Blanchot in this way. What remains to be done is to examine how Blanchot and Beckett illuminate each other outside the scope of Blanchot's own views of Beckett. (For example, we might be able to discuss Waiting for Godot in the light of Blanchot's ideas of the voice, interruption, dialogue or writing.) A sequel to this essay will attempt to do it and further explore the infinitely alluring relation between the two authors.

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**A. Blanchot’s Works**


\[22\] Fredric Jameson says that the “pseudo-couple” (the couple like Beckett’s) emerges midway between the construction of the subject in bourgeois individualism and its disintegration in late capitalism, and regards it as a device for preventing narrative from its total dissolution that accompanies the disintegration of the subject (58–61).

B. Other Works