

Reversals of the Mirror Stage

Lacan and Blanchot on the Precariousness of Reality

This essay offers a reflection on the porosity of borders, edges, frames, thresholds, and other liminal phenomena. The aim of this reflection is to trace out the limits of the subject who utters ‘I’ and the principles of its reality, which Lacan in his seminar *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* characterizes as “essentially precarious”¹. It will be argued that the exposure to such precariousness of reality may cause a certain ‘reversal of the mirror stage,’ which strips the subject of its ability to speak in the first person singular. Moreover, it is suggested that indications of such a reversal may be found at certain limit points of Lacan’s psychoanalytic discourse at which it brushes up against Maurice Blanchot’s writing of the neuter. In pursuit of these liminal points, the main body of the essay is divided into three sections each of which takes as its point of departure three key sentences from Lacan’s tenth seminar *L’angoisse* (1962-1963). The effort is to bring each of these sentences into a conversation (infinite no doubt) with different aspects of Blanchot’s writing of the neuter as these are put forward mainly in his *L’espace littéraire* (1955). Before entering into this conversation, however, a brief remark on the ‘mirror stage’ and a preliminary indication of its reversal is called for.

I. THE MIRROR STAGE AND ITS REVERSAL

In his 1949 essay “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je,” Lacan introduces his famous notion of the mirror stage in order to designate one of the early stages in the imaginary formation of the subject who can say ‘I.’ During this stage the infant proceeds from the sensations of a fragmented ‘body-in-pieces’ [*corps morcelé*] towards the identificatory image of itself, which orthopedically organizes its body into a more or less coherent whole². This early organization of the body is decisive to the formation of the subject insofar as the unifying image of the mirror stage provides the support by which the infant eventually becomes able to stand erect in “an armor of an alienating identity that will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development”³. Moreover, it is because of this alienating armorization of the subject, which masks its originary duplicity, that the subject will also become capable of employing the personal pronoun ‘I’⁴.

In a preliminary manner, we may therefore say that the *reversal* of the mirror stage can be conceived as a *disorganizing* and *decomposing* return to or of what had initially been masked, that is, the duplicitous origins of the *I*. In this way, the subject is exposed to the precarious limits of its own reality and to what had to be covered over and made to disappear in order for this reality to appear in the first place. Yet, as we shall come to see in the course of this essay, this exposure to the precariousness of reality also entails that the subject comes face to face, so to speak, with the *appearance of its own disappearance*. To unfold this preliminary suggestion, I shall argue that the reversal of the mirror stage, which I am here attempting to delineate, may be read as a displaced echo of Freud’s psychoanalytic leitmotif “where *It* was, *I* must come to be [*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*]”⁵.ⁱ Whilst admitting the manifold ways to interpret Freud’s imperative, it is my suggestion that

i Freud first articulated his imperative in the 1932 lecture, “Die Zerlegung der psychischen Persönlichkeit” subsequently published in *Neue Folge Der Vorlesungen Zur Einführung in Die Psychoanalyse* in 1933. In the *Standard Edition*, Freud’s sentence is translated as “Where *id* was, the *ego* shall be.” Even though the translator’s choice of wording refers back to Freud’s 1923 essay on “Das Ich und das Es,” it appears problematic since, as Lacan stresses in “La chose freudienne,” in 1932 Freud abstains from employing the definite articles. This is so, Lacan further argues, because whereas Freud aim in the 1923 article was to organize his new topology of the psychic apparatus by upholding a “fundamental distinction” between ‘the It’ and ‘the I,’ Freud’s interest in 1932 rather concerns the *locus* where I must come to be in the *place* of It, that is, the locus of the Other. Cf. Lacan 1995: 347-8/417-18.

one way by which the ‘I’ comes to be where ‘It’ was, is precisely by way of the exposure of the subject to the locus of its own vanishing point, which, following Lacan, also demarcates the “vanishing point of any reality that might be attained”⁶. Rather than simply overturning a hierarchical order by which the *It* would come to overthrow and reassume the position of the *ego*, however, the reversal of the mirror stage brings about a certain displacement of the subject in relation to *It*. This displacement causes anxiety in the *I*, which, according to Freud, is the ‘proper locus of anxiety’ [*die eigentliche Angststätte*] seeing as it unsettles the very limits of this locus by exposing it to the threat of disorganization and dissolution lying at its abyssal foundations⁷. Keeping these preliminary remarks on Freud, the *It*, and the uncanny in mind, let us therefore proceed to the *first* key sentence from Lacan’s tenth seminar, which states that “anxiety is not without object [*l’angoisse n’est pas sans objet*]”⁸.

II. THE ODD OBJECT OF ANXIETY

In arguing that anxiety is not without an object, Lacan interrupts a certain trajectory of thought according to which anxiety in contrast to fear is considered to be objectless.ⁱⁱ In reading Lacan’s irruptive sentence, however, we should note that the double negative figuring in “anxiety is *not without* object” does not arithmetically turn into a positive statement claiming that anxiety *has* an object, which may in turn be grasped in its presence and appropriated by the anxious *I*. Rather, the double negative is an instance of what Lacan in his seventeenth seminar on the reverse side of psychoanalysis calls “*le pas-sans*” (1969–1970: 58/65). The ‘not-without’ is a term that Lacan employs in various contexts as a double negative which disrupts and undoes the very opposition between presence and absence and, along with it, the entire structure that the dialectic play between these opponents upholds. That is, to speak with both Heidegger and Lacan, the presenc-

ii Freud’s position within this trajectory is ambiguous seeing as he, in some places, refers to anxiety as “a quality of *indefiniteness* and *lack of object* [Unbestimmtheit und Objektlosigkeit]” (Freud 1926: 164-165/197–198), whereas he, in other places, considers anxiety to be more of a response to the threat of *losing* its object (cf. Freud 1926: 108/137). There are, however, exceptions to the trajectory of objectless anxiety, one of which Lacan notes is Kierkegaard who, in his *Concept of Anxiety* writes neither that anxiety is anxious of *losing* its object, nor that it is *without* an object, but rather that “the object of anxiety is a nothing [*et Intet*]” (Kierkegaard 1844: 380/77).

ing-absencing of the being [*sein/Sein*] by which everything that comes to exist is nurtured.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this regard, Lacan is of course pleased by the circumstance that *sein*, which in French can mean both *breast*, *womb* and *heart*, in German designates *being*, which is precisely what the subject loses upon its inscription into the existence of symbolic desire, which, according to Lacan, is always the desire *of* the other in the double genitive. Seeing as Lacan underlines that the structure of desire, as supported by phantasy ($\$ \diamond a$),^{iv} and the structure of anxiety resemble each other to the point even that they are “well and truly the same” (Lacan 1962–1963: 3/11), we shall therefore take a brief look at this phantasmatic structure in order better to discern what occurs in anxiety.

According to Lacan, desire is structured by a fundamental lack emerging as the inaccessible residue of an originary ‘cut’ [*coupure*] that instigates the desiring subject as always already split or divided in itself. As Lacan explains in his second seminar, “[d]esire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists” (1954–1955: 223/263). Desire thus sustains itself by continually trying to fill out the void place in existence left behind by this original cut off being, which opens the subject of desire to a range of partial objects that *will never be it* (Cf. Lacan 1972–1973: 126f./158f). Put simply, if the (m)other did not show signs of lacking something, and therefore also of desiring something, the infant would never let go of its being-with-the-breast in its desire to become the object of the (m)other’s unknown desire. Indeed, in order to come into existence, the subject must turn the originary loss of the being-breast into an operative cause of its own desire, which is why Lacan in his eleventh seminar says that “[t]he phantasy of one’s death, of one’s disappearance, is the first object that the subject has to bring into play in this dialectic [i.e. of absence and presence]” (1964: 214/195).

iii In his lectures on Hölderlin’s hymn *Der Ister*, Heidegger argues that this overturning or displacement of the dialectic play between presencing and absencing opens unto an experience of the essence [*Wesen*] of uncanniness [*Unheimlichkeit*], which he describes as a “presencing in the manner of an absencing [*die Anwesenung in der Art einer Abwesenung*]” (1942: 75/ 92).

iv The algorithm of phantasy $\$ \diamond a$ can be read as follows: the barred subject ($\$$) through alienating identification and separation desires (\diamond) the object (*a*), which it will never succeed in obtaining. Therefore, Lacan states that “the path of the subject passes between the two walls of the impossible” (1964: 167/152).

In bringing up the phantasy of one's own death or disappearance as the first object of desire, Lacan is of course referring to the *Fort:da* game as described by Freud in "Jenseits des Lustprinzips."

In contrast to Freud, however, Lacan does not interpret the two acts of the game in which the infant repeatedly throws away and pulls back the wooden reel on a string as a *mise-en-scène* of the mother's departure and return. Instead, Lacan considers this 'Freudian Thing' with which the infant plays to represent his own disappearance brought about by the absence of the (m)other's attentive gaze, which functioned as the matrix inducing his being with presence. In other words, after the separation from the (m)other the infant plays his own remains like an abject thing, which, as Lacan says, "vacillates in a split of the subject" (1964: 29/28). Borrowing a term from Ernest Jones, Lacan refers to this dialectic game of absencing and representing as the *aphanisis* or *fading* of the subject in order to designate how "the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that he [i.e. Jones] describes as lethal"⁹.

It is important to notice, however, that what matters to Lacan is not so much whether or not this lost being can be said to have ever 'actually' been present or not. Rather, what matters is that the desiring subject is conditioned by this lacking ground of being in order to come to *ex-sist* in the first place, and that the myth of the immemorial loss of this being is inscribed only belatedly, that is, after the fact of the originary cut—*après coup(ure)*.^v In other words, just as there was nothing repressed before repression and vice versa, insofar as the *Urverdrängung* names the immemorial instigation of both at the same, yet anachronic, time, so there was no 'authentic' real of the drives before the alienating reality of symbolic desire, since neither emerges before the signifying cut that separates them both. As Lacan formulates it in 1956: "No prehistory allows us to efface the cut brought about by the heteronomy of the symbolic"¹⁰.

v In his rendition of the neurological etiology of consciousness from "Jenseits des Lustprinzips," Freud writes of an original 'belatedness' [*Nachträglichkeit*], which produces an immemorial past according to which "*consciousness arises instead of a memory-trace* [an *Stelle der Erinnerungsspur*]" (Freud 1920: 25/25). In other words, consciousness arises as the substitute, not for a memory of something once present, but for the *trace* of a memory, which means that consciousness develops as the memory of something that remains immemorial. For a brilliant discussion of the possible relation between the figure of the immemorial and the psychoanalytic discourse of the unconscious, see Lyotard 1988: 11ff.

As such, Lacan repeatedly emphasizes that the object of desire is not in front of but *behind* the desiring subject as an originally *lost cause* or as “the phantom known as the cause”¹¹, which cannot be recuperated by a representation. On this view, what Lacan in contrast to the various partial objects of desire calls *objet petit a* designates the remainder of an immemorial remainder, which is that formless part of itself from which the subject is cut off in order to come into reality. From its very inscription into reality, this abjected cause therefore remains inaccessible to the subject as other than an originary lack—albeit a lack that is constitutive of its subjective reality. In a note to his essay “D’une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose,” Lacan describes the mechanism as follows: “\$, the barred S of desire, props up the field of reality here; and this field is sustained only by the extraction of object *a*, which nevertheless gives it its frame”¹².

What happens in anxiety, however, is that the object that was always already lost *behind* desire now comes to the fore and enters the frame of reality, which causes a disturbance of the mirror stage whose functioning depends precisely on the extraction of this anarchic object. In anxiety, the specular image thus ceases to function as a mechanism of alienating identification, and instead becomes a mechanism of auto-dissimulation whereby, as Lacan says in his second seminar, “this imaginary relation itself reaches its own limit, and the ego fades away, dissipates, becomes disorganized, dissolves”¹³. Hence, anxiety is a signal that threatens to reverse the organization of the imaginary *I*, whereby the subject becomes re-consumed by that part of itself, which was originally abjected in order for it to position itself *as such*. Allow me to reproduce a lengthy passage from the tenth seminar in which Lacan very clearly unfolds what is at stake in this threat of reversal:

Don’t you know that it’s not longing for the maternal breast that provokes anxiety, but its imminence? [. . .]. It is not, contrary to what is said, the rhythm of the mother’s alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and absence. The security of presence is the possibility of absence. The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely the moment when the relationship upon which he has established himself, of the lack that turns him into desire, is disrupted, and this relationship is most disrupted when there’s no possibility of any lack¹⁴.

On this view, desire only functions against the backdrop of an originary loss and its perpetual lack, wherefore anxiety must be conceived of as a signal of “the failure of support that lack provides”¹⁵. In other words, Lacan redoubles the anxiety of *losing* by turning it into an anxiety of *losing lack*.

At this liminal point, we are thus approaching an initial sense of how the psychoanalytic discourse of Lacan tangentially comes into contact with the neutral writing of Blanchot, who in his *L'écriture du désastre* writes of an originally “lost loss [*la perte perdue*]”¹⁶, designating the unsettling disclosure that there never was anything to lose in the first place. This initial sense of contact between the two authors should gain more of a contour if we turn to *L'espace littéraire* where Blanchot discerns a difference between two kinds of lack: on the one hand, an operative *lack of being*, which Blanchot associates with the dialectics of negativity in Hegel and which in Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse would function as the support of desire; on the other hand, an inoperative *being of lack*, which disrupts the Hegelian dialectics and provokes anxiety in the Lacanian subject. Blanchot renders the difference as follows:

When being lacks, when nothingness becomes power, man is fully historical. But when being lacks, is there a lack of being? When being lacks, does this mean that this lack owes nothing to being? Or rather does it mean perhaps that the lack is the being that lies deep in the absence of being – that the lack is what still remains of being when there is nothing? When being lacks, it is still only profoundly concealed. He who approaches this lack is approached by the being which the absence of being makes present. This is no longer concealed being, but the being of *this concealment*: dissimulation itself.¹⁷

In an attempt to read Blanchot's distinction of lacks together with Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse, we could perhaps say that when the originary lack of being, which operates as constitutive and supportive of the frame of reality, comes to be lacking, this frame in turn becomes inoperative, which causes great anxiety to the subject who depends on its framing in order to form a coherent image of itself and be able to say *I*. According to Lacan, this means that anxiety is neither *without* an object nor about *losing* an object; rather, it is anxious about gaining an object, or better, *the* object called object little *a* insofar as this gain

threatens the very existence of the anxious *I* who would no longer be there to receive this gift since *It* would already have displaced or dispersed its place.

Hence, although Lacan in many respects alters Heidegger's interpretation of anxiety, a striking similarity in their languages nevertheless remains, as when Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* writes that what anxiety uncannily forebodes is that "*it* is already 'there'—and yet nowhere. *It* is so near that it is oppressive and takes away one's breath—and yet nowhere"¹⁸. According to Lacan, this imminence of something that remains nowhere, a nearness not of a presence but rather of the absence of presence, a hyper-proximity of the absence of presence, is nevertheless experienced as claustrophobic to the point of asphyxiation thereby repeating the anxiety, which dates back to the very trauma of birth.^{vi} This suffocating hyper-proximity brings us to the *second* key sentence from Lacan's tenth seminar.

III. ON THE LACK OF LACK AND SEEING

ONESELF DISAPPEAR

The second key sentence from Lacan's tenth seminar states that what provokes anxiety "is always the *there is no lack* [*c'est toujours le ça ne manque pas*]"¹⁹. Recalling that *ça* is Lacan's translation of the Freudian *Es*, the phrase may be read both as '*it* is not lacking' and as '*there is no lack*.'^{vii} Putting these two possible translations together, one could therefore read Lacan's sentence in a third way, namely, as stating that 'where lack is not, there *It* is.' This third translation points us in the direction of both Lacan's assertion that "there is no lack in the real [*il n'y a pas de manque dans le réel*]"²⁰, and Blanchot's engagement with the 'impersonal' designating precisely what remains when '*there is* [*il y a*] nothing'²¹. In what follows, I will attempt to qualify this possible intermingling of Lacan's encounter with the lack of lack and Blanchot's experience of what remains in the absence of being.

Given that Lacan refers to the originally lost object as the very cause engendering the phantasy that sustains desire in its metaphoric

vi In Lacan's view, the crux of the birth trauma does not pertain to the separation of the infant from the mother, as Freud would have it, but rather to the separation of the infant from itself due to the intrusion of alterity, that is, "the inhalation, into oneself, of a fundamentally Other environment" (1962–1963: 327/378).

vii Price and Gallagher translates Lacan's sentence as "*there's no lack*" (Price 2014: 54) and "*it is not missing*," (Gallagher 2002: 47), respectively.

and metonymous relation to the objects that are never *It*, the return of the object that would be *It* threatens to destroy the very composition of desire. This is why Lacan says that “desire is a defense, a defense against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*”²². As already mentioned, anxiety emerges when *something*, and Lacan stresses that this could be *anything* whatsoever, appears in the place of lack. Put differently, anything can trigger your anxiety in that it does not really matter *what* appears in the place of lack but rather *that* something appears there. To put it in the terms of Blanchot’s distinction between two lacks: When the lack of being comes to be lacking, it is the very *being of lack* that appears. However, since it is the lack of being that sustains the frame of reality, this disastrous turning point occurs at a threshold where the absence of presence turns into a presence of absence and *nothing happens to appear*. In Blanchot’s words, this catastrophe designates the “apparition of ‘everything has disappeared’”²³. My suggestion is that something similar to such an apparition of disappearance takes place in Lacan’s tenth seminar, namely, in what I have referred to as a reversal of the mirror stage. This suggestion may be clarified by focusing on two phenomena of Lacan’s text: ‘the frame’ and ‘the double.’ We will begin with the frame.

According to Lacan, anxiety exposes its subject to the realization that “a mirror doesn’t extend to infinity”²⁴, that is, to the fact that a mirror has limits and borders up against something, which remains unseen ‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ its frame, but which is nevertheless operative in the constitution of a framed vision. Borrowing a term from Derrida (who borrows it from Kant), we can therefore say that the frame is an instance of the *parergon*, which is to say that the frame is “neither simply outside nor inside”²⁵, but rather marks a threshold between inside and outside, which *at the same time* establishes and destabilizes the very status of this dichotomy.

As we have seen, Lacan renders the field of reality as being sustained by the extraction of something that must remain on its ‘outside’ in order to maintain its frame. In anxiety, however, this ‘outside’ appears ‘within’ the frame of reality thus endangering the very function of framing. This is one reason why Lacan states that “anxiety

is framed”²⁶.^{viii} In anxiety the borders of reality are exposed in their porosity insofar as they are not uncontaminated by that against which they are bordered up, that is, ‘the outside.’ Accordingly, anxiety discloses the fact that reality is not simply a ‘naturally’ given foundation on which we all have our bearings, but rather an artificial and symbolic construction. This, however, does not entail that the framed ‘reality’ is impervious to the ‘real,’ which was necessarily extracted from this construction, but which might return to threaten its framework. In Lacan’s view, this is why one of the most significant insights of Freudian psychoanalysis is precisely the realization that when it comes to the anxious the issue is not that they are disturbed by figures of their own imagination; rather, “the disturbing thing is that, in the unreal, it’s the real that torments them”²⁷.

On this view, anxiety is the signal or the ‘premonition’ [*presen-timent*] of that which cannot be seen inside the frame of reality but which nevertheless conditions it from elsewhere; that is to say, it is a premonition of the spectral real that does not allow for specular representation.^{ix} However, there is a moment of ‘catastrophic reversal’ where this premonition of anxiety suddenly turns into the uncanny and spectral apparition of this ‘elsewhere’ situated inside the frame *as* its inappropriable outside. The liminal phenomenon of the uncanny is precisely the appearing inside of what should have remained on the outside in order to uphold and sustain the untainted separation and dialectical relation between inside and outside. As Lacan explains: “Anxiety is the appearance, within this framing, of what was already there, at much closer quarters, at home, *Heim*. It’s the occupant [*l’hôte*]”²⁸. As such, the object, that anxiety is not without, concerns the clandestine and uninvited guest who has always already arrived, not only outside at the door, but already inside the house of the supposed host, and

viii In light of the above, I find Derrida’s claim in “Pour l’amour de Lacan” that Lacan, along with the failure to take notice of the literary structure of narration, also misrecognizes—and here Derrida’s choice of the word *méconnaissance* is undoubtedly not a fortuitous one—‘the frame,’ and in particular its parergonal effects, to be somewhat odd, considering the frequent references to frames and framings, not to mention all the other liminal phenomena such as borders, rims, and thresholds swarming the texts of Lacan. Cf. Derrida 1996: 59/77. See also Johnson 1977.

ix In his talk at the Congress of Rome in 1974, Lacan designates anxiety as “the paradigmatic symptom of every arrival of the real” (1974: 7). The spectrality of this arrival is alluded to when Lacan in his eleventh seminar describes the real as that which is “neither being, nor non-being” and yet “always comes back [*revient*] to the same place” (1964: 30/32; 49/49).

who, as Lacan says, has “already slipped into the hostile”²⁹. Although Freud speaks of a certain “expectancy” or “preparedness” in relation to anxiety³⁰, Lacan maintains that “the magisterial German *Unheimliche*, presents itself through little windows” and always “suddenly, all at once [tout d’un coup]”³¹.

Furthermore, the strange appearance of the uncanny guest or host who was already there within the frame of reality leads us to the figure of *the double*, which represents precisely one of those long known yet immemorial secrets of the home that can neither be remembered nor forgotten. This is because, in the mirror stage the subject identifies itself as one only by identifying with the mirror image of the imaginary other, which means that it must retrieve its alienated self-identity outside of itself in order to obtain an inside in the first place. However, this originary duplicity is masked by the misrecognition that, according to Lacan, is inherent to recognizing oneself. Anxiety, however, signals a reversal of this movement of identificatory alienation whereby “the constitution of the specular image shows its limit [...] and marks the limit of the illusory aspect of the world of recognition, the one I have been calling *the stage* [*la scène*]”³².

Hence, anxiety is when I look into the gaze of the mirroring other and what is reflected back is no longer what I took to be my own image but instead a “passage from the specular image to the double that escapes me”³³. As Lacan stresses in relation to the later work of Maupassant, anxiety emerges when one is no longer able to see the image of oneself in the mirror, but instead begins to discern something else, something which can only be perceived in its perpetual turning away: a specter rather than a specular image. However, as Lacan continues, “when the phantom turns around, he [i.e. the subject Maupassant] sees that it is himself”³⁴. With this turning of the specular image of identification and recognition into the estranging and spectral image of the double, one might say that the double represents that which had to disappear in order for me to appear in the first place such that when the double reappears I, in turn, am threatened with my own disappearance. In other words, the double constitutes a sort of negative autopsy in the appearance of which I see myself disappear.

The figure of the double returns to remind me that there is something in the constitution of myself that escapes me and that there is something in my mirror reflection that I am prevented from seeing in that I only see it turning away from me in the gradual dissolution of myself. The double is the apparition of something more intimate to

me than I am to myself [*interior intimo meo*]; an irreducible remainder that threatens to disperse and dissipate me from the outside of my 'within.' As such, the double is a manifestation of that 'absolutely other' [*dissemblable*], which is alien to our fellow others [*semblables*], and which Lacan in his second seminar designates as "the very image of dislocation, of the essential tearing apart of the subject"³⁵.

Turning to Blanchot and his *L'écriture du désastre*, we might say that when the double appears in the mirror, I see myself as nothing but a "simulated *I*, an imitation of nothing"³⁶, and this imitation is precisely the mask that I wear in order to conceal the hollowness behind it. Anxiety, in other words, has to do with a certain gaze and with a certain vision, which is why Lacan stresses that the object, without which there would be no anxiety, is the eye, that is, the organ of both vision and blindness³⁷. This duplicity of vision and blindness in anxiety brings us to our *third* and final key sentence from Lacan's tenth seminar before finally entering into a discussion with Blanchot.

IV. THAT WHICH DECEIVES NOT IS THE DREADFUL CERTAINTY OF THE OUTSIDE

In French, Lacan's third sentence states that "la véritable substance de l'angoisse, c'est le *ce qui ne trompe pas*, le hors de doute"³⁸. Price translates this sentence as "the true substance of anxiety, is *that which deceives not*, that which is entirely free of doubt"³⁹, whereas Gallagher translates it as "the true substance of anxiety, the 'what does not deceive,' what is beyond doubting"⁴⁰. In the following, however, I would like to pursue a different, and perhaps more literal, translation of Lacan's sentence emphasizing that 'the true substance of anxiety' is that which does not deceive, because it concerns a relation to that which is 'outside of doubt' [*le hors de doute*] even if it is the very 'cause of doubt' [*la cause du doute*]. Indeed, Lacan states that doubt is a mechanism that arises in an attempt to avoid the appalling and dreadful certainty of anxiety⁴¹.

The question is, then, how we are to conceive of this anxious certitude belonging to the outside of doubt. A partial answer to this question would be to link the outside of doubt to the outside of reality mentioned above, such that anxiety would be a premonition of the remainder of the real that falls outside of reality, but which in this very falling out constitutes its frame. As Lacan says, this irreducible remainder usually hides in the "penumbra of symbolic effectiveness"⁴²,

and perhaps it ought to have remained there in the shadows of reality. Nevertheless, in anxiety the irreducible real of the outside returns to haunt the homes of the anxious in such a manner that it exposes them to the heteronomy or “non-autonomy of the subject”⁴³. On this reading, anxiety would thus be signaling towards the certitude that *there is* “an outside that stands prior to a certain internalization”⁴⁴, and that *there is* an anteriority of heteronomy, which precedes the grasp and understanding of the self-conscious and supposedly autonomous *I*. According to Lacan, anxiety therefore discloses the fact that: “There is no auto-analysis, even when one imagines there is. The Other is there”⁴⁵.

However, even though this exposure to an (archi)originary heterogeneity is perhaps anxiety-provoking enough as it is, it does not end there. Anxiety not only discloses how what *I* held to be *my* desires, *my* thoughts, or *my* speech, is really the desire, thought, and speech of the Other; anxiety also discloses how the subject of the Other’s desire, as Lacan puts it, “enters the lair where it has been awaited for all eternity in the shape of *the object that I am* in so far as it exiles me from my subjectivity”⁴⁶. Coming back to the seventeenth seminar on the reverse side of psychoanalysis and to the function of the ‘pas-sans,’ Lacan not only states that anxiety is *not without* an object, but also that we are *not without* a relation to the truth and then goes on to ask:

But is it certain that we should find it [the truth] *intus*, within? Why not to one side? *Heimlich*, *Unheimlich*—each of us, from our reading of Freud, has been able to recall what shelters in the ambiguity of the word which, through not being within, and yet evokes it, accentuates precisely everything that is strange.⁴⁷

In other words, anxiety discloses the truth of reality’s strange and uncanny ‘outside,’ which was already there before the beginning and which evokes ‘an inside’ only by evading its grasp. With certainty, then, anxiety knows that right *there* where our habits of ‘conscious’ thinking tells us to look for ‘ourselves’—as the authors of our speech and writing, or as the deliberate cause of an action, a conduct, or a desire—that is *where* we should look instead, or in spite of ourselves, for *that thing* of the *outside within*, which supports the framing of reality only by escaping our specular grasp. In this regard, Lacan is of course appreciative of the linguistic ‘coincidence’ that the German *Es* and the

first letter of the subject are homophones,^x since it allows him to show how anxiety exposes the subject as the very object that is not lacking.

The certainty of anxiety beyond doubt thus concerns a certain reversal of the mirror stage whereby, as Lacan says in his second seminar, the “[v]ision of anxiety, the identification of anxiety, [would be] the final revelation of *you are this—You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness*”⁴⁸. Anxiety is an encounter with myself as an ‘it’ or as a strange and disorganized ‘thing,’ which is an encounter that is always missed [*dystychia*] because it is an encounter with a ‘formlessness of the flesh’ over which *I* have no authority or ownership since “there is no longer anyone who can say I”⁴⁹. Nonetheless, this always missed encounter can come to fascinate and possess the subject like the petrifying gaze of Medusa in a sort of blind vision, which, as Blanchot writes in *L’espace littéraire*, “is no longer the possibility of seeing, but rather the impossibility of not seeing”⁵⁰.

Hence, anxiety is the cause of doubt because it makes the limits of our reality tremble with the threatening premonition that the unrepresentable, unimaginable, unthinkable, and inappropriable, or in short ‘the real,’ might come to perforate and penetrate our horizons of possibility and let the impossible happen. Doubt is a mechanism succeeding anxiety insofar as it is an attempt to restore the limits of what can reasonably be expected by discriminating between the certain and the uncertain, the known and the unknown, the likely and the unlikely. However, anxiety exposes the blindness of this wanting to know, which causes Oedipus to tear out his eyes only to become a seer with the particular kind of certainty that only anxiety can achieve. In this regard, Lacan remarks that anxiety does not concern the *possibility* of tearing out one’s eyes, but rather “the impossible sight that threatens you, of your own eyes lying on the ground”⁵¹ – a blind sight, no doubt, but nonetheless a sight that is *not without* seeing.

Once again, this blind vision of anxiety indicates another limit point where Lacan’s discourse touches upon Blanchot’s writing, and where psychoanalysis approaches the space of literature. For anxiety

x Phonetically the German ‘Es’ is indistinguishable from the letter ‘S,’ which, according to Lacanian algebra, signifies the immemorial and mythical subject, which was made to disappear in the ordinary cut of the signifier, and which can only return as the originally repressed remainder of the barred subject. In other words, the homophonic pair *Es/S* designates the subject of the unconscious, which is a “subject devoid of any *das* or other objectifying article” (Lacan 1955: 347/417).

does not come to an end with this mortifying vision of one's eyes on the ground. It continues to the point where one could even say that anxiety is a relation with the impossibility of ending, that is, with what Blanchot calls '*the incessant*'.^{xi} Yet, the incessant is precisely that which unendingly resists relation, which makes anxiety an impossible relation, or, in Lacan's words, an "abyssal relation to that which is most unknown"⁵². Perhaps, this relating to non-relation is what relates the art of psychoanalysis to the art of literature since, as Blanchot says, the 'relation without relation' is precisely what "links inspiration to *desire*"⁵³. Moreover, this shared destiny—or rather *destinerrance* understood as an interminable destiny initially deprived of direction—of maintaining a relation with that which escapes relation is perhaps what impels both Blanchot and Lacan to compare their work with that of Orpheus' descent into Hades in his attempt to retrieve Eurydice from the land of the deceased. According to Blanchot, Orpheus' quest consists precisely in a passion for inspiration—a passion, moreover, which Lacan would perhaps call a death drive, which is *ultimately* the drive of all drives.^{xii} Thus, in his eleventh seminar, Lacan resorts to mythology since, as he says, "we have, in Eurydice twice lost, the most potent image we can find of the relation between Orpheus the analyst and the unconscious"⁵⁴.

In this regard, it is interesting to note what Lacan says of the uncanny, namely, that "[i]n reality, this experience is too fleeting. Fiction demonstrates it much better"⁵⁵. However, as Lacan also tells us in his eleventh seminar the always framed 'reality,' is that which we wake up to only in order to keep dreaming and thus to avoid the traumatic kernel of the real, which approaches us only by turning away in our sleep. In other words, fiction has a more intimate relation with the non-rela-

xi In *L'entretien infini* Blanchot writes that 'the incessant' names what "imposes upon us the idea that nothing has ever truly begun, having from the beginning begun by beginning again—thereby destroying the myth of the initial or the original, to which we remain unreflectively subject—and tying speech to the neutral movement of what has neither beginning nor end" (1969: 343/503). This reminds us of Lacan's myth of the lamella, which designates the immortality of the drives, which was lost already prior to the process of meiosis, and which Lacan offers as a sort of counter-myth to Aristophanes' myth of the original hermaphrodite who was complete before the mortal rift of sexual differentiation. Cf. 1964: 179ff./197ff.

xii In Seminar 11, Lacan refers to Heraclitus' fragment "the bow [βίος] is called life [βίος], but its work is death" (Diels 1903: B48), and he correlates it with his own theory according to which all drives are ultimately driven by their own end.

tional 'real' than 'reality' proper, which is one way of conceiving how "truth shows itself [*s'avère*] in a fictional structure"⁵⁶.

This is perhaps one reason why Blanchot's writing of the neuter appears to follow Orpheus's passion more closely than Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse regarding this 'outside within,' since Blanchot does not stop at its anxious exposure, which would be to stop at what he calls 'the first night' [*la première nuit*]. Instead, alongside Orpheus, Blanchot descends into what he calls 'the other night' [*l'autre nuit*] or simply 'the outside' [*le dehors*] by the strange movement, the step-not-beyond [*pas au-delà*], which at the same time allows and forbids the passage to the outside. Through this passage of passion, Blanchot makes us experience another turn to the Lacanian reversal of the mirror stage understood as the appearance of disappearance, which consists in the inability, in turn, of this appearance to disappear, and this further turn is where the writing of the neuter makes itself apparent as the only author there is. As Blanchot explains: "Literature is that experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness [...] it is re-created beyond unconsciousness as an impersonal spontaneity"⁵⁷. In *L'espace littéraire*, Blanchot depicts the transition from the first to the other night as follows:

The first night is welcoming. Novalis addresses hymns to it. Of it one can say, *in* the night, as if it had an intimacy. We enter into the night and we rest there, sleeping and dying. But the *other* night does not welcome, does not open. In it one is still outside [...] The *other* night is always the other, and he who senses it becomes the other. He who approaches it departs from himself, is no longer he who approaches but he who turns away, goes hither and yon [...]. But the echo sends this step back to him as the whispering immensity, the void is now a presence coming toward him."⁵⁸

Hence, 'the other night' or the 'outside' of which anxiety is certain, designates an oppressing vastness entirely deprived of intimacy, and therefore belongs to an experience without any personal subject, that is, an experience *of* anonymity in both the subjective and objective genitive—that is, an experience which strictly speaking belongs to no one, which is an experience of what Blanchot, in contrast to a 'mundane solitude,' calls the 'essential solitude'. In approaching the outside of this essential solitude, I do not approach a more intimate, personal,

or profound essence of myself; instead, I am approached by something that “is not my being a little less myself, but rather something which there is ‘behind me,’ and which this ‘me’ conceals in order to come into its own”⁵⁹. Thus, similar to the ‘I’s originary masking of the Lacanian subject’s duplicitous origins, what this Blanchotian ‘me’ conceals in its worldly solitude is precisely “the solitude of non-interiority, exposure to the outside, boundless dispersion [*dispersion hors cloture*], the impossibility of holding firm, within bounds, enclosed [*l’impossibilité de se tenir ferme, fermé*]”⁶⁰.

V. CLOSING: WHO APPEARS TO DISAPPEAR?

Nearing the end, I would like to stress once again that anxiety, understood here as the signal or premonition of a reversal of the mirror stage, is a *limit experience*. In fact, if we recall that the term ‘experience’ comes from the Latin *experiri*, which designates both a *testing* and a *traversal of danger* [*periculum*], but which, according to its Greek root, πέρρας or πείρω, also designates a *going to, a running through, a piercing or a transgression of a limit*, then anxiety would seem to be an experience *par excellence*. In the context of Lacan and Blanchot, we might then think the limit experience of anxiety as a going *beyond* the limits of ‘reality,’ a going to the *other* or *reverse* side, or finally, as a going towards the *outside*, and this approach of the inapproachable would designate the shared experience of literature and psychoanalysis.

Already in his first seminar, Lacan states that psychoanalysis aims at a deconstruction of imaginary formations, such that what occurs at the end of an analysis concerns “a twilight, an imaginary decline of the world, and even an experience at the limit of depersonalization”⁶¹. Moreover, this experience occurs in what Lacan with explicit reference to Freud’s psychoanalytic imperative calls “a genuine reversal [*renversement*], a displacement, like a minuet executed by the *ego* and the *id*”⁶². As I have tried to show throughout this essay, the space of both analysis and literature would seem to open up to an anxious experience of the precarious limits of reality upholding not only the demarcations between the *I* and the *It*, the personal and the impersonal, and the familiar and the foreign, but also—as with Antigone approaching the limit of her *Até*—the demarcation between desire and *jouissance*, as the separation between one death and an *other* death⁶³.

Yet how can we traverse this limit of depersonalization without thereby ceasing to experience all together? *Who* remains either at the twilight of analysis or in writing of the neuter to experience the ap-

pearance of his or her own disappearance? There still seems to be a perspective at stake in this seeing oneself disappear within the deteriorating frame of reality – but is it still a first-person perspective? According to Lacan, an answer to this question of ‘the who,’ which is also a question that Blanchot’s poses,^{xiii} is already given with the signal of anxiety. For, as Lacan explains:

If the ego is the locus of the signal, then the signal isn’t given for the ego [...]. In principle, it doesn’t address me as someone here in the present, it addresses me, if you like, as expected and far more still as lost. It solicits my loss, so that the Other can find itself there again. That’s what anxiety is⁶⁴.

Otherwise put, the signal mediated through the anxious ‘I’, who only comes to supplement itself in the place of an Other, is addressed to the originally repressed *S* that is phonetically indistinguishable from the Freudian *Es*, and which rhymes with what Lacan elsewhere calls the “prehistoric Other that is impossible to forget”⁶⁵. Impossible to forget, indeed, but also impossible to remember since it has never been present otherwise than as the trace of the originally repressed and, as such, it remains immemorial.

In this regard, we might take heed of Lacan’s suggestion in the essay “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l’inconscient freudien,” that the only improper signifier of the enunciating subject is the negation or the ‘*ne*’ of every proper signifier, and that the ‘real subject’ is therefore only to be found in the interdiction of discourse. As such, the ‘real subject’ only announces itself as “[a]n enunciation that denounces itself, as statement that renounces itself, an ignorance that sweeps itself away [*se dissipe*], an opportunity that self-destructs”⁶⁶. On this view, might we not read the triple negation of the French phrase “l’angoisse *n’est pas sans* l’objet” as saying that the object without which anxiety is not, is, in fact, the subject as it disappears in the very appearance of its signifier? In other words, might we not take at least one of the certainties about which anxiety does not deceive to concern the “*lethal factor*” of language, which entails that, “the *I* comes on the scene as a subject who is conjugated with the double aporia of a veritable subsistence that is abolished by

xiii As the title of Blanchot’s essay “Qui?” indicates, it concerns precisely this question of the ‘who’ (Blanchot 1989).

his knowledge, and by a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence”⁶⁷.

Returning to Blanchot one final time, we have seen how he associates literature and writing with an outside without intimacy that undoes any personal relation and with the essential solitude of the impersonal to which anxiety exposes its subjects. Commenting on the experience of Mallarmé in whose writing the impersonal comes to language, Blanchot remarks: “We have seen that this language does not imply anyone who expresses it, or anyone who hears it: it speaks itself and writes itself. That is the condition of its authority”⁶⁸. In other words, the writing of literature is not the result or the representation of the writer’s intentions, thoughts, or wishes; on the contrary, it is the writing that demands and puts its claim on the writer who, in turn, remains strangely distanced from the automatic autonomy of the written. Nevertheless, as Paul de Man points out, the writer still remains as a witness of his or her own process of impersonalization throughout the writing in which “the will to consciousness keeps asserting itself, even from beyond the catastrophic event in which it was destroyed”⁶⁹. Accordingly, in the first part of *Faux pas* entitled “De l’angoisse au langage,” Blanchot gives prominence to the experience of the writer with regard to responding to the question of the ‘who’ that remains in anxiety:

The existence of the writer brings with it the proof that, in the same individual, alongside the anguished being subsists a being of cold blood; alongside the mad, a reasonable being; and, close-coupled with a mute who has lost all words, a master of rhetoric. The case of the writer is privileged because it represents the paradox of anxiety in a privileged way. Anxiety calls into question all the realities of reason, its methods, its possibilities, its possibility, its purposes, and yet it forces reason to be there; it compels reason to function as perfectly as it can. Anxiety itself is possible only because in all its power there remains the faculty that it annihilates and makes impossible⁷⁰.

By way of closing, then, we might say that the passage from the first night to the night of the essential solitude belonging to the outside, which can be experienced in the anxiousness of both analysis and writing, may be discerned as a shifting or indeed a reversal of perspectives. Speaking in psychoanalytic terms, the perspective of the ‘other

night' is no longer that of the anxious 'I' who trembles in the elusive approach of the foreign alterity that threatens its organization from within. Rather, the other night is where the 'I' gazes blindly at its own disappearance from the impersonal perspective of the outside already within itself. For, as Blanchot says, almost as if in response to Freud's psychoanalytic dictum:

"Where I am alone, I am not there; no one is there,
but the impersonal is".

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- 1 1959-1960: 27/30
 - 2 Lacan 1949: 78/97
 - 3 1949: 78/97
 - 4 Lacan 1960: 685/809
 - 5 Freud 1932: 80/86
 - 6 1959-1960: 21/29
 - 7 Freud 1926: 140/171
 - 8 1962-1963: 69ff/85ff; 89/105; 100/119
 - 9 1964: 207-8/189
 - 10 1956: 392/468
 - 11 1960: 695/820
 - 12 1959: 487/554
 - 13 1954-1955: 178/210
 - 14 1962-1963: 53/67
 - 15 *ibid*: 53/66-67
 - 16 1980: 41/71
 - 17 1955: 252/265
 - 18 1927: 180/186
 - 19 1962-1963: 54/67
 - 20 *ibid*: 132/156
 - 21 Blanchot 1949: 300-344/291-331
 - 22 1960: 699/825
 - 23 1955: 163/169
 - 24 1962-1963: 72/89
 - 25 Derrida 1978: 53/63
 - 26 1962-1963: 73/92
 - 27 *ibid*: 79/95
 - 28 1962-1963: 75/91
 - 29 *ibid*: 75/91
 - 30 Freud 1920: 31-32/31-32
 - 31 1962-1963: 75/90
 - 32 *ibid*: 108/128
 - 33 *ibid*: 88/104
 - 34 *ibid*: 99/116
 - 35 1954-1955: 177/209
 - 36 1980: 85/135
 - 37 1962-1963: 106/125
 - 38 *ibid*: 76/92.

- 39 2014: 76
 40 2002: 68
 41 Lacan, 1962–1963: 76-77/92
 42 1949: 77/95
 43 Lacan 1962–1963: 48/60
 44 *ibid*: 102/121
 45 *ibid*: 22/32
 46 *ibid*: 48/61
 47 1969–1970: 58/65
 48 1954–1955: 154–155/186
 49 *ibid*: 164/196
 50 1955: 23/32
 51 1962–1963: 161/191
 52 1954–1955: 176/209
 53 1955: 175/183
 54 1964: 27/25
 55 1962–1963: 49/61
 56 Lacan 1958: 625/742
 57 1949: 331/320
 58 1955: 162-63;168/170;176
 59 *ibid*: 250/263
 60 Blanchot 1980: 30/53
 61 1953–1954: 232/387
 62 *ibid*: 232/387
 63 Lacan 1959 –1960: 270–283/315-333 and Blanchot 1955:
 84–159/83–166.
 64 1962–1963: 152-153/179
 65 1959-1960, 71/87
 66 1960: 678/801
 67 *ibid*: 679/802
 68 1949: 41/48
 69 de Man 1971: 70
 70 1971: 4/12

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