'Since we have been a dialogue': Blanchot's *Entretiens*

John McKeane

> Much has it, since morning,
> Since we have been a dialogue and have
> been hearing one another,
> Felt, mankind; but soon we shall be song.[1]

For a writer often taken to be withdrawn and obscure, Maurice Blanchot started the new decade with a bang. In April 1960 he contributed to the *Nouvelle revue française* with 'Interview on a Change of Epoch' ('Entretien sur un changement d'époque'), his first text to be written in dialogical form, and yet — on current estimates — the 534th of his career. Numerous other dialogical pieces followed throughout the early 1960s and then in the collection *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'entretien infini*), ranging for instance from the short and sharp exchanges of 'Words Must Travel Far' ('Les paroles doivent cheminer longtemps') to the essayistic 'Humankind' ('L'espèce humaine'), where one interlocutor dominates, his or her interventions running to several pages.[2] Together these texts form a body of work that has been largely bypassed by critics, who have instead taken the change in Blanchot's writing in this period to be synonymous with the fragmentation that indeed went on to dominate his writing in the 1970s, having prevailed over the dialogic texts alongside which it emerged.

Named *entretiens* in French, these texts present difficulties to each of the English translations that might be attempted: 'interview'

privileges vision and the gaze in a way they directly oppose (one is named 'Speaking is not Seeing' ('Parler, ce n'est pas voir')), and 'conversation' is too suggestive of togetherness when they often underline misunderstanding and separation. The least bad translation seems to be simply 'dialogue': and indeed we shall address Blanchot's relation to a central form of Western philosophy since Plato (the proximity of this relation is surprising given his declared intent of moving towards 'a wholly other — and still unforeseeable — type of affirmation').[3] Nonetheless, given that Blanchot chose not to use the term 'dialogue', it is best simply to refer to *entretiens*, not least because 'dialogue' privileges the actual words (via one of the more literal meanings of *logos*), whilst these exchanges often take place at and across the boundaries of language. We can thus repeat the question that appears in one *entretien*: "'but what is this voice?'" (EI, 483 twice, 486). It can be read as showing unease at the opposing interlocutor speaking words taken from Beckett, or as signalling that the thread of argument has been lost, and perhaps the capacity to hear too (might this be a *dialogue de sourds*?). These interjections can therefore function both as local interruptions within a discursive realm, and as more radical interruptions of that discourse itself. Blanchot's discussion of this distinction, to which we now turn, allows us to understand to which questions the *entretien* might provide an answer.

I. Two Kinds of Interruption

At first sight, we might be tempted to distinguish between between dialogue as lying within *logos* or the realm of discursive language and Blanchot's *entretiens* as an exchange at times involving language and at times pauses or gaps. However, we must look at the connotations of dialogue more carefully than this distinction might suggest. Whilst Blanchot does ultimately reject dialogue, in doing so he sets out his relationship to its traditional epistemological suppositions in instructive detail.[4] For example, the text 'Interruption (as on a Riemann surface)' ('L'interruption (comme sur une surface de Riemann)') sets out how even a continuous dialogue must contain pauses, moments where one interlocutor allows the other to speak, thus creating the impression of fragmentation: 'interruption is necessary for all successive speech [*suite de paroles*]; intermittence makes becoming possible;

discontinuity guarantees a continuity of understanding [*entente*]'
(EI, 107). But why should dialogue, a meeting of two interlocutors'
viewpoints and therefore at first sight an affair of plurality and
otherness, be concerned with unity? The answer is that dialogue itself
represents a reconciliation and relativisation of plural viewpoints — it
is not simply two, but two-in-one.[5] Blanchot writes that 'dialogue is
founded on reciprocity of speech and the equality of those speaking;
only two "I"s can establish a dialogical relation ; (...) each interlocutor
asserts himself as the equal of the other and sees in the latter another
"Me". It is the paradise of decorous idealism' (EI,114). In this light, to
concentrate on the superficial plurality of dialogue is to accept a model
of community between interlocutors that is dangerously self-present,
and whose engagement with otherness excludes anyone (or anything)
who (or which) has not already internalized the conventional language
of political agency.[6]

The article 'Interruption' goes on: 'there is another type of
interruption which is more enigmatic and more weighty' (EI, 108).
This second sort of interruption is said to be more demanding, as is
not recuperable by continuous discourse:

> what is at stake and needs accounting for is everything that separates
> me from the other, which is to say the other insofar as I am infinitely
> separated from it [*lui*] ; this separation, fissure or interval leaves the
> other infinitely outside me, but also aims to found my relation with
> it [*lui*] on this very interruption, which is an *interruption of being* —
> an alterity whereby it is, we must repeat, neither another 'me', nor
> another existence (...), but the unknown in its infinite distance. (EI,
> 109; emphasis original)

This type of interruption is what Blanchot's writing of *entretiens* seeks
to open towards; it is not a relative opening to the other, but an
absolute one. For him the other is by definition unavailable, not having
any stable identity, always being an *other* other. This leads to an
awareness of the difficulties that would be encountered were a model of
dialogue that simply represented the voice of the other to be proposed
(for instance as a way of widening political participation); or, in other
words, if the irruption of difference merely allowed dialectical business
as usual to be resumed. Regarding this possibility, Blanchot writes:

> It is enough (…) to have heard the 'dialogue' between a man
> who is supposedly innocent until proven guilty and the magistrate
> interrogating him if we want to learn the meaning of equal speech
> against a backdrop of an inequality of culture, condition, power,
> chance [*bonheur*] ; however, at every moment each of us is either
> a judge or in the presence of one ; all speech is commandment,
> terror, seduction, resentment, flattery, machination ; all speech is
> violence — and to aim to remain ignorant of this [*prétendre l'ignorer*]
> within dialogue is to add liberal hypocrisy to the dialectical optimism
> for which war is just one more mode of dialogue. (EI, 114)[7]

By referring here to Von Clausewitz's statement that war is nothing
but the continuation of politics by other means, Blanchot signals his
wariness towards dialogue's claim to overcome unspoken prejudice and
(self-)censorship. Similarly, he is wary of any representation of the other
that is wholly given over to the interests of any determined group:
his *entretiens* seek instead to stage an opening to the other's voice
that remains neutral or indeterminate. This can be seen in an early
occurrence of the title that is given to the work that would appear in
1969: 'In this infinite conversation [*entretien infini*], the other, side by
side with he who speaks tirelessly, is not really an other ; it is a double ;
it is not a presence but a shade, a vague possibility of understanding
[*entente*], the interchangeable, anonymous associate with whom no
society can be formed'.[8] In other words, the voice of this other is not a
presence opposing or symmetrical to language. Indeed, it is perhaps not
even a voice at all (see the importance Blanchot's political writing of the
1960s gives to 'those who can not speak'), but rather the claim made by
whoever or whatever is disenfranchised from discursive language: the
silent demand of worklessness.[9]

   Challengingly, these deferred or asymmetrical qualities of the second
type of interruption mean that it can not stand independently: instead
it must exist in and through the first type of interruption, in a second-
order way. This means that Blanchot's gesture in beginning to write
the *entretiens* in question cannot be wholly identified with this second
interruption, as a benignly alternative mode of writing. Instead, much
of the tension that drives them stems from the constant negotiation
between a pause that serves to articulate a greater unity, and a pause
signalling that the thread of the argument is going astray (and thus

opening onto indeterminacy and plurality). As Blanchot writes, the distinction between the two types of interruption may be 'very firm in theory' (EI, 110); it is no less the case that in the messy business of any given interaction, there is always ambiguity between the two. '[W]hen two people speak, the silence that allows them, as they speak together, to speak in turn, is still only a first-order pause of alternation, but also, already in this alternation we can find at work the interruption that indicates the unknown' (EI, 110–11). In other words, the second type of interruption is at play in the interruptions necessary in all discourse. This of course includes the dialogue format, whether understood as one mode of writing amongst others, or — raising the stakes for Blanchot's gesture in beginning to write such texts — as a privileged representative of epistemological inquiry in general. Thus these *entretiens*, as reiterations of traditional dialogues, stage the interaction between the two types of interruption, rather than merely putting the case for the second type of interruption.

The dialectical movement of dialogues since Plato is a prime example of this continuous discourse that is reinforced by the first type of interruption and yet inflected by the second. But it is characteristic of this totalizing or continuous discourse to comprehend other areas too. I have chosen the epigraph from Hölderlin to illustrate this point: that 'we' should 'have been a dialogue' brings out on the one hand a notion of self-present human community, the two-in-one existing even in apparent division (i.e. the multiplicity necessary for a dialogue to be defined as such). On the other hand, it suggests a model of Western history as continuous and as being driven by a dialogical or dialectical impulse. This is an important reason why we cannot say that Blanchot's *entretiens* leave philosophy behind in a turn to a language that would be completely non-thetic (were this to be possible in the first place). The dialogue form that he adopts and adapts is after all the form par excellence of philosophical argumentation, where the voice of the other is incorporated as a stage leading to a more essential truth. On this view, dialogue has been crucial for Western history understood as a process of questioning and advancement. This sense emerges when Blanchot compares Socrates's speech with the dialogic voices present in Malraux's writing, describing the latter thus: 'The time [*temps*] in which one might come to agreement is lacking. The lull where the divided spirit of time speaks comes to an end, and violence asserts

itself anew'.[10] The division present in 'the divided spirit of time' is to be understood as the type of interruption that enables discourse to articulate itself, to catch its breath before continuing on. Blanchot's aim in beginning to write *entretiens* is to explore the limit between this continuous view and what escapes it: a time out of time that Hölderlin mentions as 'soon', an impending yet suspended moment that Blanchot calls 'a change of epoch'. In these texts the positioning of two or more interlocutors in relation to one another allows this limit to be explored more concretely, with more precision, articulation, and perhaps even neutrality than would be provided by a critical text. As we shall see once some of the deconstructive context for Blanchot's gesture has been filled in, these characteristics mean that not only is the coming of a 'change of epoch' announced by an *entretien* bearing that title, but it is announced as lying beyond dominant discursive conceptions of futurity.

II. Between Closure and Ending

We have begun to see that Blanchot's *entretiens* stage a complex relationship with continuous philosophical discourse, or what Nietzsche calls 'the Socratism of morality, the dialectics, modesty and cheerfulness of theoretical man'.[11] This relationship entails recognising that to peremptorily dismiss or negate continuity is in fact to be brought back within it dialectically: negation being the dialectical *modus operandi*. What's more, any engagement with a possible limit to this continuity, as well as with the availability or otherwise of any alternative mode of intervention, is likely to be a fraught one. These aspects can be seen in the way in which many of the *entretiens* begin: 'Knowledge of the Unknown' ('Connaissance de l'inconnu') begins starkly with "'What is a philosopher?", and discussion is set in motion by altering the canonical definition ("'(…) someone who feels astonishment (…)'") to: "'(…) someone who is afraid'" (EI, 70). Similarly, at the outset of 'Speaking is not Seeing' interlocutor A asks what B is looking for, to which no clear response comes, except that this second interlocutor doesn't know. When this ignorance is attacked by A as being poisedly *désinvolte*, B counters that rather than not going far enough, even such a profession of ignorance is too presumptuous: Blanchot here is moving away from the Socratic notion that philosophy begins in knowing what one does not know

(a classically dialectical recuperation or setting-to-work of ignorance).[12] These examples suggest that the discussions in Blanchot's *entretiens* are concerned less with treating a wide range of issues than with one central question, or rather with the question of centrality itself: how the Western epistemological tradition is altered by the 'change of epoch' that he addresses.

A striking and problematic aspect of Blanchot's characterizations of continuous discourse is how it is often identified with philosophy, by which he means not such currents as phenomenology, but rather the Western tradition of metaphysical idealism from Plato to Hegel. In order to put these characterisations in their context, let us look at various similar gestures made by deconstructive thinkers close to his work. We can begin with Derrida, and a complex gesture concerning the limit or closure of philosophy that is made in *Of Grammatology.* Discussing in an interview the chapter 'The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing', Derrida states:

> A page before the chapter bearing this title, a distinction was drawn between *closure* [clôture] and *ending* [*fin*]. What is caught in de-limited closure can continue indefinitely. So long as one reads more than its title, this chapter announces precisely that the book has no ending and writing has no beginning. Indeed, this chapter shows that writing does not begin. Writing is even that from which, if you like, we can call into question the search for *archie*, for an absolute beginning, for an origin. Writing can therefore no more begin than the book can end . . . [13]

This gesture is complex because it is not, as the rhetoric of deconstruction as an avant-garde would have us imagine, simply a call to make a transgressive step beyond continuity. Thus Derrida avoids naïvely imagining that any such step could be definitively accomplished, or in other words that any *écriture* that was programmatically championed could ultimately escape becoming in its turn part of what is called the Book, meaning the metaphysical or philosophical tendency towards continuity.[14] If the Book cannot come to an end, therefore, how can we distinguish deconstruction from a quiestist acceptance of established discourse? The answer is to be found in the distinction between closure and ending: whilst there

is no empirical end to the dominion of the Book (and perhaps quite the contrary, as we shall see), this dominion can nonetheless be said to have come to a qualitative point of closure. The Book may continue to exist, but there is no guarantee that it will remain open and responsive to the singularity of the events that it recounts. What's more, the same interview also sees Derrida referring to the contemporary juncture in the history of thought as a 'moment when such an ending [of the book] *delimits* itself'.[15] In this description we can see a double gesture: on the one hand to delimit this *clôture* (meaning in French closure, or more literally a fence) means reinforcing it, ensuring that the entrenched habits of continuous or logocentric discourse are unable to make their return. On the other hand, I suggest that this delimitation can also be a de-limitation, a removal of what had penned diverse thinkers into one tradition. This gesture can be seen in the work *Dis-Enclosure* by Derrida's associate Jean-Luc Nancy: a dis-enclosure or a liberation of thought.[16] This second aspect of the deconstructive gesture concerning philosophy as a continuous totality is also present in a letter from Derrida to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe concerning the polyphonically-named *Mimesis: des articulations* volume, and proposing the removal of a *clôture*/fence: 'It seems necessary (...) to hustle/stir up the population of theoreticians, make them run after the livestock as if one were creating havoc in a cattle market or as if one were opening wide — allow me to specify : towards the outside — the gates of an agricultural fair'.[17]

The distinction between closure and ending is also adopted by Lacoue-Labarthe: he writes that philosophy 'has accomplished itself [*s'est accomplie*]' (being careful not to say that it 'has completed itself [*s'est achevée*])', and that since Heidegger this 'is well-known; it has almost become a basic commonplace'.[18] His account is particularly useful because he sets out that not only does the closure of philosophy not necessarily imply its ending, but that this closure exists in and through the massive expansion of philosophy:

> The accomplishment of philosophy signifies (...) that starting from the moment when it verified and exhausted its programme (...), philosophy, because this verification contained within it an immense power — the being of what *is* being thinking [*l'être de ce qui est étant la pensée*]: what can be represented, calculated, rationalized,

transformed, etc. — philosophy, whether going by this name or by those of Science or Knowledge which it claimed as its own, generalized and universalized itself ; and, as a not solely empiricial consequence, globalized itself [*s'est mondialisée*]. Henceforth the philosophical dominates in a total way, in the form of modern technology, and whatever the varying ideology (the 'philosophy') whereby this domination is expresssed.[19]

In other words, the discourse of continuity is dominant to the point that it has exceeded all previous yardsticks by which we might have attempted to measure it. For Lacoue-Labarthe, the scale of this dominance must be understood via the grip of continuity over history, philosophy and human community, and at the same time via the technological globalization that is at work in the modern world. Indeed, not only are these factors at work *within* that world, but they have created the space that is named thus (in the sense that the world is an artificial construct, defined by its interconnectedness or smallness, rather than being an empirical globe). In this light, Lacoue-Labarthe writes elsewhere that 'an age of the world, which is perhaps the age of the world, is coming to its end due to the accomplishment, closing off the horizon, of what since the Greeks the philosophical West has named, in multiple ways, knowledge. Which is to say *technè*'.[20] Thus not only is this tendency towards totalisation and globalisation a contemporary phenomenon, but it also has roots stretching back throughout the time during which, in Hölderlin's words, 'we have been a dialogue'.

For its part, Blanchot's writing at the turn of the 1960s pays particular attention to technology — i.e. continuous discourse manifested in technology — and its domination over or innervation of Western(ized) societies. For instance, he writes on the first spacewalk and its implications for the relationship between heavenly and earthly power:

On his return, Gagarin cracked several poor jokes : he had been to heaven and had not met God. The spokesmen of Catholicism protested. They were wrong to do so. The profanation had indeed taken place : the old heavens, the heavens of religions and of contemplation, the sublime and pure heights, had been erased in an instant, stripped of the privilege of inaccessibility and replaced by

another absolute, that of space as it is comprehended by researchers, which is nothing but a calculable possibility.[21]

The 'nothing... but' clause is significant here: despite the apparent singularity and newness of this event, for Blanchot it only serves to underline the domination of continuous discourse, of possibility, knowledge, and calculation. However, this does not mean that he is proposing a return to pre-technological modes of existence: the closure of technology is also valuable insofar as it takes us beyond any conception of pre-industrial existence, for instance the Romantic vision of the non-alienated individual. Blanchot therefore neither proposes a return to the past nor an acceptance of the future being offered by continuity: and indeed his concept of what is neither... nor..., which therefore apes the negativity of dialectics without providing any resolution, emerges here: it is named 'the neuter'.[22] An important field of resonance for this thinking of the neuter can be found in how *entretiens* stage difference on several levels: difference between voices, difference between registers of voice, and difference between voice and what cannot be voiced.

    This is particularly the case in 'Interview on a Change of Epoch' ('Entretien sur un changement d'époque', renamed 'On a Change of Epoch' in *The Infinite Conversation*), to which we can now return. This text occupies a key place in his œuvre insofar as it opens the rich vein of *entretiens* that are to follow — we could even call it programmatic in this respect —, and because the change that it discusses has a complex dual status. On the one hand this change proceeds from the unparalleled extension of the dominance of continuous discourse, not least through technology, and on the other hand this change represents a second-order interruption of that continuity, a fragmentation that remains singular, resistant to all narratives, including any self-defeatingly predictable or durable narrative of change.

III. 'Interview on a Change of Epoch'
The linking of historical, philosophical and technological continuity takes us to the heart of Blanchot's adoption of the *entretien* format, not least in the case of this text with such relevance to his relationship with change at a wider level. It wastes no time in coming to the topic named by its declamatory title, the opening words reading:

[A] 'Will you allow this certainty : that we are at a turning-point ?'

[B] 'If it is a certainty, it is not a turning point (. . .).' (EI, 394)

This would have leapt out at attentive readers, for five years previously the essay entitled 'The Turning Point' ('Le tournant') began with the statement that '[w]e are at a turning-point', and a few pages later affirmed that '[m]ankind today must therefore turn around [*se retourner*]'.[23] Something striking is therefore at stake between the two texts: the earlier one is being pointedly updated, despite its already radical claims, by a fragmentation or evacuation of Blanchot's position as the author or critic responsible for the text. The *entretien* therefore allows Blanchot to gather his previous text into a defined, limited totality, before using the other voice to call that totality into question. What's more, interlocutor B calls for doubt and caution, arguing that the continuous model of history is remarkably persistent, in the face of A's radical, eschatological position. Thus the hypothesis of a change of epoch is questioned from the outset, even as Blanchot's writing mutates in response to it. Mutation and questioning go hand in hand, as the logic of an *ère du soupcon* (age of suspicion) is rigorously explored. Indeed, this questioning is such that the change of epoch will ultimately not be identified in the *entretien*, despite the various signs (nuclear weapons, other instances of technology's dominance) that point to it: the closest that we come to a definition of this change is interlocutor A's assertion that "'(. . .) through the power of modern technology an attack is being readied in comparison with which the explosion of bombs seems unimportant'" (EI, 403).

We have seen that Blanchot's *entretiens* are concerned with the notion of a totalizing mode of thought — particularly the heritage of Plato — even as they attempt to bring out an asymmetrical, second-order type of interruption. This *entretien* in particular deals with the question of where this continuity might be criticized from, i.e. whether there is any exterior position that is able to resist assimilation into totality. In line with Hölderlin's words which allow us to think of history as one version of this continuity, possible versions of such an exterior position can be seen when the text's interlocutor A (although he/she is not — even — named thus) states "'(. . .) Remember Herodotus who is often called 'the father of history'.

One enters his books as one enters a landscape on which morning is shortly to break (…)"' (EI, 395). The same interlocutor later returns to an opposition between "'(…) mythical-heroic times (…)"', represented by the hero Hercules and the bard of heroic deeds Homer, and time understood as historical discourse. However, A underlines how the historical model of time relies on the mythical model as a useful counterpoint, even though they appear to be mutually exclusive: "'(…) historical man shares much with the myths of heroic times, insofar as he asserts himself now by struggling against them, now by identifying with them (…)"' (EI, 401).[24] This position is then developed to the point where A declares that he/she is happy to see the back of the model of time that declared itself to be historical but in truth reproduced the violence of the mythical. In turn, B counters with the argument that "'You prefer instead the myth of the end of time (…)"' (EI, 402). A's reply to this is: "'It is not my business to indicate a preference (…)"', thus attempting to take matters beyond the realm of the individual subject's opinion and situating the debate at the limit between historical time and something—anything—lying beyond it.

   This question of the limit between a continuity bringing together history, philosophy and community (the three elements being united in the words 'since we have been a dialogue'), and a fragmentation or interruption lying beyond it, provides the terms in which Blanchot's text will approach its headline issue, the change of epoch. It spends considerable time unpicking several eschatological hypotheses, notably Ernst Jünger's in *On the Wall of Time (on the World-Spirit of the Atomic Age)* (1959) and those present in the work of theologian/paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin. The merits of various such claims are weighed and debated, with the debate coming to focus on the technological developments of recent decades, more specifically nuclear weapons. In this context, interlocutor A states as a development of his/her eschatological argument that "'(…) When, for the first time in the history of the world, we possess the ability to put an end to this history and to this world, it is because we have departed the realm of history. The change of epoch has taken place (…)".' (EI 402) In other words, the status of death and human finitude has been radically altered by technology's dominance, specifically by the advent of nuclear weapons. The direct language, as if drawing on something that was verifiable and in little doubt, is important here: the argument

is not that a nuclear war would represent the onset of a new age, but rather that the very possibility of this taking place, even as only a possiblity, i.e. something that remains potential and suspended, means that the change of epoch has already taken place. The all-powerfulness of continuity (of technological knowledge and of the society that wields it) is what is significant, together with the fact that nuclear-empowered continuity falls outside any moral or ethical frameworks that might have been equal to it.

But why should an *entretien*, that form strikingly adopted for the first time on this text's appearance in April 1960, be particularly suited to Blanchot's discussion of a change of epoch having been accomplished by the dominance of technology? In addition to this form's general reiteration of dialogue (and with it the Western philosophical tradition that we have seen key deconstructive thinkers identifying with technology), the reason can be seen in this particular text. Let us consider the relationship of interlocutor A's eschatological argument to interlocutor B's historicist one: perhaps the most revealing exchanges between the two immediately follows the intervention in which A states that the invention of nuclear weapons means that "'(. . .) the change of epoch has taken place (. . .)'":

'[B] (. . .) Are you certain that it is the first time ? Perhaps you have forgotten the Bible. Biblical man lives constantly in this situation that you describe as new ; he has been warned by Jahweh that if men persist in their habits, they will be exterminated and creation will be abolished. History is born under this threat, it is the threat of historical time itself.'

[A] 'Back then the fire rained from on high. Now it is a creation of the world.' [*vient d'en bas*]

[B] 'I could reply lightly that when God promises to annihilate humanity if it continues to act badly, he leaves the latter a choice. Everything always depends on mankind, whether there is God or whether there is atomic science.'

[A] 'Precisely, whether there is God or atomic science, not everything depends on mankind (. . .)' (402)

Here B presents a synthetizing position that, whilst striking and radical — the Bomb and God being presented as two instances of a single phenomenon, namely mankind's need to threaten itself with extermination — is nonetheless dialectical, bringing two disparate phenomena together into a more general category. It is then retained by A, but raised to a new and opposing position in a classically dialectical move. The hyperbolic, radical nature of this position therefore confirms that dialectics is able to recalibrate and rearticulate itself in relation to newness, i.e. it is concerned with the accounting for change and singularity rather than with the conservative schemas and pre-ordained categories of myth and mysticism. The necessity of leaving this possiblity open will continue to influence many aspects of Blanchot's writing — not least in a later dialogue where an interlocutor representing continuous discourse says to one representing radical interruption: "'(…) You torment me, it is true, even by leaving me in peace, but I too can torment you: justice, truth, truth, justice, these terms which you reject in your premature snickering pursue you in turn (…)'". [25]

It is crucial that Blanchot's position on these issues not be confused with the eschatological argument: such readings of him as an enigmatic prophet-figure, a herald of some New Age, are merely a subset of the equally misplaced argument that deconstruction is indifferent to historical particularity and therefore to political justice. Indeed, perhaps no strategy could allow him to disqualify such readings more forcefully than beginning to write *entretiens* in which this position is adopted by only one of two voices, and argued against by the other. Here deconstruction's complex gesture in relation to an *écriture* which cannot begin and a continuous, totalizing book that cannot end — despite and perhaps due to its closure — finds itself reflected and refracted in illuminating ways. Ultimately, Blanchot's *entretiens* allow us to glimpse a writing of the many. This is not simply because they contain two interlocutors, however: we saw above that this duality can too easily be recuperated into a self-present, continuous community, into the 'we' that for Hölderlin 'have been a dialogue'. Instead, this writing of the many is to be found in what Nancy, writing on Plato's dialogue *Ion*, calls 'le partage des voix'. [26] The *partage* in question (the term of course means both a sharing-out and a division) takes place between an extension or exposure, but not complete abandonment or

peremptory dismissal, of dialectics, and on the other, a second-order type of interruption whose generative-disseminative force was — is — in being still to come.

Notes

1 From Friedrich Hölderlin's 'Celebration of Peace', after Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's translation into French in *L'animal*, 19–20 (Winter 2008), 154.
2 *The Infinite Conversation/L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Henceforth abbreviated to EI. All translations are my own, and references are given to the French texts. See also *Awaiting Oblivion/L'attente l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), which opens on the failure of a male writer to engage a woman in a dialogue of equals.
3 In *Lautréamont and Sade/Lautréamont et Sade*, 2nd rev. ed. (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 14.
4 It is well known that Socrates's presence was particularly notable, insofar as he fulfilled the role of *maître* with all its personal and erotic magnetism: on this and other questions, see Sarah Kofman, *Socrate(s)* (Paris: Galilée, 1989).
5 As Jean-Luc Nancy writes: 'We can better understand the "dia-" [of dialogue] or the "dis-" [of distribution]: by understanding that they are of absolute necessity also a "syn-" or a "cum-". (That all this should also therefore be political is obvious (. . .))' in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'Dialogue sur le dialogue' in *Les études théâtrales*, 31–32 (2004–5), 79–96 (88).
6 Several critics have looked at this meta-subjective position, for instance Joseph Libertson, who describes it as 'panoramic or synoptic' in *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille, and Communication* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), 279; Leslie Hill, who is aware of 'Blanchot's growing reservations regarding the term "dialogue" — on the grounds that it subordinates the multiple to the One' in *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 259; and Timothy Clark, who contrasts Blanchot's use of *entretiens* to Levinas's avoidance of them — despite or due to his desire to think how the Other disturbs our phenomenological horizons — in *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97–8.
7 This text follows Blanchot being called to an interview with a *juge d'instruction* in the wake of his role in the 'Declaration on the Right to Insubordination' ('Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission') in the context of the Algerian War: after this encounter with Blanchot, the judge was reportedly given leave for 'moral exhaustion'! See Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Angelica or Enchantment/Angélique ou l'enchantement* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), 204.

⁸ In *Friendship/L'amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 142.

⁹ In *Political Writings/Écrits politiques: 1953–1993*, ed. by Éric Hoppenot (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 29.

¹⁰ In 'The Pain of Dialogue' ('La douleur du dialogue') in *The Book to Come/Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, folio/essais, 1959), 207–18 (210).

¹¹ In *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), 4.

¹² The Socratic dialogues interrogate the epistemological status of philosophy on many levels, for instance in the investigation in *Charmides* of 'knowledge of knowledge' or in the major rift between sophism and Socrates's approach — not least in *The Sophist* which, as Nancy recalls, was intended to give rise to a dialogue named *The Philosopher*. See Nancy, 'The Ventriloquist' ('Le ventriloque') in Sylviane Agacinski, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman et al., *Mimesis: (Dis)articulations* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1975), 273–338 (274–5, 283) and Plato, *Early Socratic Dialogues* (1987; London: Penguin, 2005), 165ff.

¹³ In *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 23 (emphases original). In *Of Grammatology/De la grammatologie* itself, he writes: 'today something is allowing this newness to appear as such, is allowing us somehow to charge ourselves with it, however without this newness becoming translatable via the summary notions of mutation, explanation, accumulation, revolution or tradition' (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 13.

¹⁴ This Mallarmean term is also used extensively by Blanchot, for instance in 'The Absence of Book' ('L'Absence de livre'), the culminating essay of *The Infinite Conversation* that also provided its working title.

¹⁵ *Positions*, 11.

¹⁶ *Dis-Enclosure : The Deconstruction of Christianity, I/La déclosion (la déconstruction du christianisme, I)* (Paris: Galilée, 2005). As in *The Creation of the World or Globalization/La création du monde ou la mondialisation* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), here Nancy thinks *mondialisation* not only as a *déclosion*, but as an *éclosion*: a birth, blossoming, or hatching.

¹⁷ Letter of 4 September 1974, quoted in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida* (Paris : Flammarion, 2010), 334. *Mimesis: des articulations* can be variously translated as *Mimesis: of Articulations*, *Mimesis: Some Articulations* and *Mimesis: Disarticulations*.

¹⁸ The Heideggerian thinking being referred to can be found in 'Overcoming Metaphysics', where we read that '[t]he name "technology" is understood here in such an essential way that its meaning coincides with the term "completed metaphysics"': collected in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. by Richard Wolin (London: MIT Press, 1993), 67–90 (75). See also 'What is Metaphysics?', which confirms the link between technology/metaphysics and the Western conception

of mankind: 'Human existence can relate to beings only if it holds itself out into the nothing. Going beyond beings occurs in the essence of Dasein. But this going beyond is metaphysics itself. This implies that metaphysics belongs to the "nature of man". [...] Metaphysics is the basic occurrence of Dasein. It is Dasein itself' in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Harper and Row, 1977), 95–112 (111–12).

[19] Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Tradition and Truth' ('Tradition et vérité') (1979) in *Europe*, 973 (May 2012), 61–71 (62–3).

[20] In *Poetry as Experience/La poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), 15–16. In *The Song of the Muses/Le chant des muses*, we read: 'it is no accident if the first sages were mostly researchers [*savants*], mathematicians for example, or physicists (...). Just like it is no accident if just over two hundred years ago, science and philosophy went hand in hand, nor if philosophy was what allowed the emanciation of technology and science' (Paris: Bayard, 2005), 13.

[21] In *Political Writings/Écrits politiques: 1953–1993*, 126.

[22] From the late 1950s on Blanchot places such importance on this term that his biographer Christophe Bident has referred to it as '[his] major concept and contribution to thinking' in 'The Movements of the Neuter', trans. by Michael FitzGerald and Leslie Hill in *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, ed. by Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2005), 13–34 (22).

[23] 'The Turning Point' ('Le Tournant') in *La nouvelle nouvelle revue française*, 25 (January 1955), 110–20 (110, 114).

[24] Blanchot's interest in Heraclitus — often called a pre-Socratic, in a tellingly inadequate phrase — is relevant here. See 'Héraclite' (EI 119–31), where we read that there are (...) two dangers, both of which are inevitable: one is to read Plato, Christian spirituality, Hegel, in Heraclitus's place; the other is to cling on to a history capable of making us, by virtue of its erudition, the masters of a vanished world and a dead truth' (EI 119).

[25] *The Step Not Beyond/Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 160.

[26] *Le partage des voix* (Paris: Galilée, 1982).