Summary: In this essay I engage two critiques of Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism, both found in Kevin Hart’s work: first, that Blanchot allegorizes Judaism out of history, and second, that his interpretation of Judaism is fundamentally no different from his formulations of writing and atheism. My argument is that Sarah Hammerschlag’s interpretation in The Figural Jew, in addressing the first critique, also gives us the tools necessary for more robustly developing the second. While Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism does not fail to take account of history per se, it abstracts Judaism to the point that recourse to Jewish thought appears hardly necessary—we can see separately that the ethical content of Judaism is just as easily found in Blanchot’s understandings of community and writing, among other phenomena. In light of this analysis, I will take up the question of whether Blanchot’s work ought to be considered a part of modern Jewish thought. If the notion of a specifically Jewish thought suggests that Judaism is a category which brings something to discourse that other categories do not, it becomes hard to defend a place for Blanchot therein precisely because of the wealth of categories in his thought which have the same structure and purpose as Judaism.

---

In the conclusion of his book on Maurice Blanchot and the sacred, The Dark Gaze, Kevin Hart writes that “one could regard Blanchot as turning all the peoples of the world, including the Jews, into anonymous Jews.”\(^1\) Blanchot, Hart says, “comes very close” to “allegoriz[ing] the Jews out of history.” For Hart, Blanchot effectively “redefines the Jew’s relation to Scripture and Israel’s calling, while erasing both monotheism and monolatrism.” Citing Blanchot’s “Being Jewish,” Hart writes that “the Jews exist so that we may have the ideas of exodus and exile, so that ‘the experience of strangeness may affirm itself close at hand as an irreducible relation,’ and so that we might speak with our neighbors rather than kill them.”\(^2\) This amounts to valuing the Jews only for what they teach us at the ethical level, rather than for the significance of Judaism within a divine history. According to Hart, Blanchot’s interpretation amounts to “an impoverished version of the religion.”

---

1 Hart, The Dark Gaze, 226.
2 Ibid., citing Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 125.
That Blanchot redefines the Jew’s relation to history and Israel’s calling is, in fact, plain. Blanchot writes in “Being Jewish” that “every society, and in particular Christian society, has had its Jew in order to affirm itself against him through relations of general oppression,” and he concurs with Rosenzweig that there “is a movement in history that makes every Jew the Jew of all men.” There is no doubt that for Blanchot, Judaism’s significance is not in a historical claim, but in a message which disrupts history. We can indeed have anonymous Jews, who obligate each society to answer to an ethical relation without being “Jews.” What is contestable is what we should make of this as Blanchot’s readers; here Hart’s judgment of an “impoverished version of the religion” is not at all obvious to me, although it is worth consideration. The site of that contestation, it seems to me, is precisely in Hart’s subordinate clause: that Blanchot turns “all the peoples of the world, including the Jews, into anonymous Jews.” It is not only that Blanchot draws a universal message from Judaism, but that Blanchot reduces Jews and Judaism to the medium of this message, rather than Jews or Judaism being an integral part of its content. For Hart, this is precisely what is problematic about Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism. But Sarah Hammerschlag provides an alternative in The Figural Jew: what if the anonymizing of Jews themselves is precisely what Blanchot believes to be the core of the tradition, and the only form of fidelity to it? One would then at least have to recognize that this would not be the same as allegorizing Judaism’s historical claims and reducing the tradition to a medium.

But if Judaism’s message is precisely what calls for the anonymizing of the community which transmits it, we must also recognize that it is hardly unique among Blanchot’s categories in this regard. Once we understand the structure of the exile and exodus that Blanchot locates at the heart of Judaism, we can see that this structure is prevalent work under a number of other names.

---

3 Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 123-4.
Even the “so that” in Blanchot’s “the Jews exist so that we may have the ideas of exodus and exile” becomes suspect; it seems exile and exodus can be encountered in all manner of places, from writing and literature, to community and communism, to the problem of defining the word “nihilism.” The question is not, then, whether Blanchot anonymizes Jews – for we know this is what he thinks Judaism requires. The question is whether he abstracts this requirement to the point of the erasure of any Jewish particularity, such that Judaism or being Jewish no longer appears even in their absences.

The first part of this essay will deal with Hart’s suggestion that Blanchot anonymizes Jews, with the possibility in view that this alone does not necessarily provide a basis for calling Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism “impoverished.” To set up a contestation over this designation, I turn first to Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, to establish the notion of an impossible obligation to the other; then to the essay “Being Jewish” in *The Infinite Conversation*, which presents Judaism as a source, or perhaps the source of this obligation; and then to Hammerschlag’s argument about this text, which provides an alternative understanding of what it means to “anonymize” Jews. The second part of this essay will examine how Hammerschlag’s argument about Judaism allows us to draw another parallel in addition to community, that of writing. The driving question here is whether these comparisons slip into identity, or at least get close enough that any Jewish particularity or recourse to Jewish thought becomes auxiliary for Blanchot.

**The Impossible Necessary Community**

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot develops the idea that community is both ethically necessary and by definition impossible. This is an ever-present theme in Blanchot’s work, and is central to my claim regarding the abstraction of Jewish exigency—that a number of
Blanchot’s categories contain a paradox where it is precisely the exigency of the other which also makes impossible what I must do for the other. Blanchot develops the theme here by way of some notes of Bataille’s. The necessity of community arises as follows: that “there exists a principle of insufficiency at the root of each being” which cannot be answered to by achieving completeness but rather only with self-questioning. A being is only aware of its insufficiency “from the fact that it puts itself into question,” and this “question needs the other or another to be enacted.”

For Bataille, the most radical form of the necessity of community is the obligation to an other who is dying. It is here that my radical insufficiency is exposed: “A man alive, who sees a fellow man die, can only survive beside himself.” By “holding the hand of ‘another who dies’, ‘I’ keep up with him, I don’t keep up simply to help him die, but to share the solitude of the event which seems to be the possibility that is most his own and his unshareable possession in that it dispossesses him absolutely.” The death of the other puts me most radically into question by revealing my permanent insufficiency in my inability to do anything about it. But the impossibility of doing anything about the other’s death also becomes the basis of sharing in the other’s death, as they too are powerless against their fate. It would not suffice for me to merely question myself as a result of this encounter; mere self-criticism, Blanchot writes, would be “clearly only the refusal of criticism by the other, a way to be self-sufficient while reserving for oneself the right to insufficiency, a self-abasement that is a self-heightening.” Thus the other, and especially the death of the other, makes possible and requires community: I am required to undergo questioning by the other, but I am also able to share in the solitude of the event of death which is precisely what I

---

4 Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, 5.
5 Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, 9.
6 Ibid., 8.
cannot take on. This is precisely the origin of the necessity of community: my insufficiency as regards the other requires a questioning of myself by the other.

But precisely in the unshareability of the other’s death, because this exigency can only take place in “dissymmetry in relation to the one looking at that Other,” here “a completely different relationship imposes itself and imposes another form of society which one would hardly dare call community.” The demand of community only exists insofar two individuals are not the same, and therefore insofar as the unity of community is not possible. Should one accept the label “community,” one does so while asking “whether the community, no matter if it has existed or not, does not in the end always posit the absence of community.”\(^7\) The other who is the very condition and exigency of community also marks it as impossible; community always posits its own absence.

How does one relate to community, if it is also impossible? With respect to both community and his slippery notion of “communism,” Blanchot makes a crucial distinction between “abandonment” and “negation.”\(^8\) Community and communism are among those “concepts that are not ‘appropriate’ without their proper-improper abandonment (which is not simple negation),” which “do not permit us to calmly refuse or refute them. No matter what we want, we are linked to them because of their defection.”\(^9\) We should not understand the impossibility of community as a reason to negate it, but rather as making community something to participate in through abandonment. That community is impossible does not make it nothing—it is still there, but is proper(-improper) only insofar as it is abandoned. Abandoned community is not the same as community that never exists, or community erased, because abandonment must be simultaneous.

---

\(^7\) Ibid., 3.
\(^8\) Ibid., 2.
\(^9\) Ibid.
with the community’s existence, and is even a condition for its proper existence. So to say community is impossible, to Blanchot, is not to say it does not exist, but rather to say that its existence is a contradictory one.

Blanchot does not say explicitly what other concepts take a similar shape, but the fact that he refers to “concepts” is telling—indeed, Jewish identity is precisely one of those concepts of which “acceptance is bound to an equivalent refusal or rejection.” We can now turn to “Being Jewish” to make sense of how that is, and what it means for Hart’s claims vis a vis Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism.

**Being Jewish**

“Being Jewish” appears under the heading of “The Indestructible,” along with a shorter essay entitled “Humanity.” Blanchot suggests in this essay, via a range of sources from modern Jewish thought and its interlocutors, what his own understanding of the universality of Judaism might be. Blanchot also finds Judaism a clearer formulation of what it means for community to require “abandonment.” It is thus a crucial writing for understanding what Kevin Hart means when he calls Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism “impoverished,” and whether this is defensible. Recall that for Hart it was the fact of turning Jews into “anonymous Jews” that made Blanchot’s idea of Judaism so weak; he charges that Blanchot “redefines the Jew’s relation to Scripture and Israel’s calling, while erasing both monotheism and monolatrism,” thus coming close to “allegoriz[ing] the Jews out of history.”

Hart’s claim operates on two levels: first, that the history and historical community of Judaism is for Blanchot not essential to the ideas which Judaism communicates, such that we can understand these ideas without the history; second, that whether or not this history is fact is

---

10 Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 12.
irrelevant to Blanchot. I take the latter to be the larger and more complex claim, insofar as the factuality historical claims can only take on significance once the message a tradition communicates is taken to be intertwined with history in a certain way. But we know this is part of Hart’s claim because of the citation of Adorno that follows: “If religion is accepted for the sake of something other than its own truth content, then it undermines itself.” I will not refute the fact that the historical factuality of Judaism’s claims is irrelevant for Blanchot, but rather argue that he does chart a relationship between Jewish history and tradition, on the one hand, and the message he believes Judaism communicates, on the other. That is, “the ideas of exodus and exile” are not contingent on the historical factuality of exodus and exile, but these ideas are means by which Jewish community is formed and exists within history; and it is indeed in the paradoxical community that comes out of these ideas that they reveal their fullest meaning.

In a move that could allow us to contest Hart’s charge of allegorizing Jewish history, Blanchot opens “Being Jewish” by criticizing precisely Judaism which ignores history. It is the first of a number of definitions or modes of Judaism that Blanchot cites and subtly comments on to begin the essay. Blanchot introduces first an idea of Jewishness that is attuned to history: one might be Jewish through the struggle to “reflect historically” on Jewish suffering. This would be to think on abstract words like “attention, waiting,” and “affliction,” but to do so while “undergoing the ordeal of history” and what has been “allotted to the Jews” within it. Or, says Blanchot wryly, one might have to “close her eyes” to history in order to maintain abstract reflection on injustice—as he says Simone Weil did. But here we note that what Blanchot means by the ordeal of history for the Jews is likely not what Hart means by a history out of which Blanchot allegorizes the Jews. Blanchot, as we shall see, is speaking to the place of Jewish suffering in human history, and thereby

---

of Judaism in human history. Hart, in accusing Blanchot of ignoring “Israel’s calling” while treating exodus and exile as mere “ideas,” speaks rather of the place of history within Judaism.

Blanchot goes on to redouble this emphasis on Judaism within human history, rather than history within an interpretation of Judaism. As I cited in my introduction, he invokes the Jew as a trope: “Every society, and in particular Christian society, has had its Jew in order to affirm itself against him through relations of general oppression.”\textsuperscript{13} Jewish particularity would at first seem nowhere to be found; every society has its Jew, and relates to him through general oppression. Not only does each society have a non-Jew who is that society’s Jew, though: “One could say—borrowing the expression from Franz Rosenzweig—that there is a movement of history that makes every Jew the Jew of all men, which means that every man, whoever he may be, has a particular relation of responsibility...with this “Other” that is the Jew.”\textsuperscript{14} So the existence of Jews obligates every one, not only those who know Jews, and every Jew is a Jew in each of their relations—they are the Jew of all men. Blanchot both universalizes the Jew into a category which many non-Jews amount to, and presents the Jew as a particular other with universal significance. He neither adjudicates between these two statements, nor even indicates that they are in conflict; they are presented one after the other with no comparison to speak of. The implication, if both of these universalizing moves are sincerely meant, is that each of us is doubly obligated by Jewishness—both by the particular existence of actual Judaism and Jews, and by the fact that Jews are essentially a universal category of the other who places a demand on each person and each society. But how can both of these be true?

It is in answering this question that we can see that perhaps the harshness of Hart’s judgment is not so obviously warranted, at least as formulated in \textit{The Dark Gaze}. If I were to stop

\textsuperscript{13} Blanchot, \textit{The Infinite Conversation}, 123.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 124.
here, I would have to come to the following conclusion: that while Blanchot certainly prizes Judaism and sees it as a particular tradition with universal significance, Hart is entirely right to say that Blanchot has erased the significance of history within Judaism, treating it purely as a philosophical category—much as Levinas does, but without Levinas’s emphases on the significance of history to Judaism itself. But if, with the help of Hammerschlag, we can more precisely formulate what the philosophical category of Judaism is for Blanchot, and in particular deal with the question I have just posed, we will see that for Blanchot Judaism does not merely function to bring us the ideas serving as essential motifs in Jewish history—exodus and exile—but rather that Judaism is a tradition whose history, whether mythic or factual, embodies the core philosophical truths Blanchot takes it to bear, and thereby also communicate them. That is, Jewish history and tradition, to Blanchot, embody uprootedness, the continual abandonment of community—thus a community that is both impossible and necessary, and properly-improperly speaking, transcendent.

So how can Judaism and Jews have not only a particular existence, but also function as a universal philosophical category? What is the relation between these such that Jewish particularity can have a function within that category?

This can only be answered by further developing the universal meaning of Judaism is for Blanchot. Blanchot writes: “There is a Jewish thought and a Jewish truth; that is, for each of us, there is an obligation to try to find whether in and through this thought and this truth there is at stake a certain relation of man with man that we can sidestep only by refusing a necessary inquiry.”

16 Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 125.
Unavowable Community: it is necessary to come together that one might allow themselves to be questioned by the other, but this requires precisely that the other is experienced as other. In the same sense, the truth of Judaism involves a relation that is unveiled through inquiry. This “relation of man with man” is precisely what is communicated by “exile” and “exodus”:

If Judaism is destined to take on meaning for us, it is indeed by showing that, at whatever time, one must be ready to set out, because to go out (to step outside) is the exigency from which one cannot escape if one wants to maintain the possibility of a just relation. The exigency of uprooting; the affirmation of a nomadic truth. In this Judaism stands in contrast to paganism (all paganism). To be pagan is to be fixed, to plant oneself in the earth, as it were, to establish oneself through a pact with the permanence that authorizes sojourn and is certified by certainty in the land. Nomadism answers to a relation that possession cannot satisfy.17

Again we see parallels to community/communism: to be “fixed” through a “pact with the permanence that…is certified by certainty in the land” is to refuse to allow oneself to be uprooted and thereby questioned. The “relation of man with man” in Judaism is one in which I must reject stability, permanence, rootedness so that I can encounter the other as other rather than continually affirming my own identity. Judaism, to Blanchot, is a message of continual abandonment, a commitment to only ever be led to “a place which is not a place and where it is not possible to reside.” “Dispersion” is a “Jewish truth” and “vocation” rather than merely a “malediction.” This truth of exile destroys “every fixed relation of force with one individual, one group, or one state,” and “forbids the temptation of Unity-Identity.”18 Thus the basis for Jewish identity, the exigency of uprooting necessitates the abandonment (not negation) even of Jewish identity, just as the need to come together with the other in community also requires abandoning any notion of identity between the other and the same. Jewish identity, in parallel, is both impossible and necessary.

17 Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 125.
18 Ibid., 126.
Does this mean, then, that there is ultimately no place for Jewish identity as such? Can this definition of Judaism include any sort of community that one might, however normatively, associate with being Jewish? Does it function in any way as a reflection on Jewish community as it exists and has existed, or is it merely an esoteric vision of what Jewish community could be, if only it held fast to its best teaching? The answer is found precisely in the paradox of the necessity of communicating the trope of being Jewish, which renders identification (in the sense of possession) with Judaism and Jewish election impossible. Hammerschlag writes:

This is not to say that Banchot rejects the fact that there is a community of Jews—individuals who identify as Jews and have the right to that identification. For, here, Blanchot, unlike Levinas, clearly distinguishes between “the exigency of being Jewish” and the future of the Jewish people. The question that being Jewish poses is, Blanchot suggests, “a universal question.” In the difference between the definition of being Jewish and the facts of political life a question appears—a challenge, moreover, to the very demands of the political, to the demands, that is, of power. This is a question, Blanchot suggests, posed by this trope to the society that is being tried in Palestine as it is posed to any society. The difference is only that, in those societies that have at their heart a claim such as Judaism or communism, there is a claim to justice that might, in fact, show itself, if only negatively, as the dissonance between the demands of “safeguarding that identity” and what that identity demands.  

Just as community/communism obligates us to take it up at the same time that it must be abandoned, those who claim Judaism as their own must do so through the very disavowal of possession, stability, ownership. Jewish identity is precisely that identity which puts itself, and thereby “Unity-Identity,” into question. The “trope” of being Jewish “disallows the possibility that one could take it up as an identity, by the very fact that it has been defined as that which disallows identification—yet at the same time there is a historical tradition and community which has this trope at its core.” The contradiction here is one that Blanchot embraces: “One ought to deal with this dissonance, his own discourse suggests, not by trying to solve it, but by allowing it to be seen

---

in the very violence it commits.” So what to make of the seeming contradiction of “every Jew the Jew of all men” and “every society has its Jew”? On Hammerschlag’s reading, the answer is that the trope of being Jewish disallows identification at the same time that it functions as an essential mode of being; the necessary violence of the latter which makes impossible the former should only call one further into disidentification. By extension, the violence of a universalizing formulation of Judaism upon the particular history of Judaism is the only way to speak Judaism’s message, and at the same time produces that message’s urgency through the “dissonance between the demands of ‘safeguarding that identity’ and what that identity demands.”

Hammerschlag herself notes that this is more complex than the “mere simplification and allegorization of Judaism” which Hart, among others, ascribes to Blanchot. But I do think her reading gives us ground to say, at least on the count of “simplification,” that there is good reason to think Blanchot’s interpretation of Judaism is more interesting and complicated than Hart may think, something further demonstrated by the extent to which Hammerschlag shows Blanchot’s formulation to be a repetition and distortion of Levinas’s.

But I do believe the charge of “allegoriz[ing] the Jews out of history” remains on the table, even if we take “Being Jewish” to be more of a commentary on Levinas than an exhaustive interpretation of the Jewish tradition, which indeed Blanchot himself says it cannot be. We have to make an additional move in saying that what Hammerschlag shows about Blanchot’s concept of particular identities and communities also addresses history. It would go something like this: the role of history in Judaism—the claim to historical election (“Israel’s calling”)—produces a trope which calls for the abandonment of this election. Indeed the abandonment of election is precisely what Israel is elected to do. So if indeed Blanchot does allegorize the Jews out of history,

---

21 Ibid., 196.
22 Ibid., 195, note 82.
it is only because this is precisely the meaning of the history which Judaism claims and must therefore simultaneously relinquish. Such relinquishment, of course, functions in the same way as identification: one relinquishes historical election as a product of one’s election; there is an unresolvable dissonance in one’s claim that abandonment of any place or fixity is what is given to one group through election. But if being Jewish is a necessity, if being in community is a necessity, then indeed history is a necessity, but to rephrase Hammerschlag, it is a necessity within which “there is a claim to justice that might, in fact, show itself, if only negatively, as the dissonance” between the claiming of historical election and what that election demands. Granting that Blanchot indeed allegorizes the Jews out of history, we must also acknowledge that to him this seeming betrayal is in fact an act of fidelity. Hart’s charge to Blanchot of “turning all the peoples of the world, including the Jews, into anonymous Jews” is exactly right, but for Blanchot that is also exactly the point of Judaism.

**Judaism and Writing**

I will now argue that in the same analysis by which Hammerschlag defends Blanchot against Hart’s critique (or rather shows it to be a boon!), we also find the tools to mount one that might be more successful. The core of this critique is the extent to which this more nuanced reading of Blanchot’s category of being Jewish functions in precisely the same way as a number of other categories in his thought, to the point of erasing any specifically Jewish exigency. In other words, problem is not that Blanchot’s trope of being Jewish anonymizes the Jews, but that there are so many other tropes which have the same basic structure such that no justification for an ever-abandoned Judaism is found. While I maintain there is value to Blanchot’s interpretation, I ultimately believe this critique shows it to be insufficient for developing a “Jewish” thought.
In a standalone essay expanding upon the conclusion to *The Dark Gaze*, Kevin Hart adjusts his critique of Blanchot. He raises the possibility of several critiques without seeking to make them, including the one we just addressed. The most interesting of these, to my mind, is the fact that “Blanchot’s interpretation of ‘being Jewish’ is no more than an ethics of relationality proposed under the title ‘Atheism and Writing’ as much as under ‘Being Jewish,’ and that it is an abomination to associate Judaism with nihilism, such as he does in *L’entretien infini* and elsewhere.”

Hart offers what he thinks would be Blanchot’s self-defense:

Blanchot would point out that “first writing,” or the “relation without relation,” is found in the Bible, though only if we wrest the work from the book and wear the consequences of the rupture: living not by the revelation of the Law but by a law that binds us before the Law, namely, an ethical obligation to the other person. The vocation of the Jews is not that of a people elected by God to be singular and unique but rather to open what has been given to them—“first writing,” the law before the Law—to all the nations.

Interestingly enough, this would seem to account for the points we found in Hammerschlag’s writing. Hart gestures toward the same fundamental aspect of Blanchot’s interpretation, namely that allegorizing the Jews out of history and forsaking of the claim to election is precisely the essence of a Jewish vocation, not simply the consequence of an impoverished interpretation. Hart undermines this defense by noting that it seems dogmatic to maintain that the law before the Law, a contesting encounter with alterity prior to any Unity-Identity or ontotheology, must only come from the other person and could not occur through Eckhart’s infinitely other, pre-dialectical Godhead. It is a counter to Blanchot well worth pondering, but not one that has the force through which one might maintain that his interpretation of Judaism is a nihilistic abomination.

Yet a combination of Hart and Hammerschlag’s observations actually makes such a charge possible, though not without difficulty, and not with finality. I don’t hold to it myself, but I do

---

24 Ibid.
think it needs to be raised. The key is something Hart alludes to in one of the above citations: that what comprises being Jewish to Blanchot is indistinguishable from what comprises atheism and what comprises writing, along with communism, community, defining nihilism and thinking against “System.” Each of these makes a demand of the individual whose fulfillment is impossible, just as Judaism is necessary yet impossible to be taken up as a fixed and possessed identity precisely because it is defined as the foreclosure of enrootedness. It is not clear to me that, given all of these categories which appear to function in the exact same way, we can really uphold Blanchot’s conception of Judaism as meaningful beyond being an example of a broader category in which he takes interest. This is what I wish to concern myself with in the final section of this essay.

Hart cites Blanchot’s “Atheism and Writing” in The Infinite Conversation as expressing the same ethics of relationality as Judaism; I have chosen instead to focus on the formulation of writing in The Writing of the Disaster, if only because I think this ethics of relationality is most clearly developed in Blanchot’s description of specifically fragmentary writing therein. How does writing compare to Judaism, that is, to Jewish uprootedness, and indeed to community? The answer is a development of something we have already seen, namely the coincidence of necessity and impossibility that constitutes the conditions of community and of being Jewish. What becomes clear when we examine writing and literature is that the source of the demand and the impossibility of such endeavors is one and the same, always an excluded Other that both demands something of me and is impossible for me to know. Community, Judaism, writing: each is a response to the exigency of the other, but is at the same time made impossible by the other. There are too many senses in which such a paradox takes place in writing and literature to recount them all; I will rather identify one such paradox from The Writing of the Disaster, and highlight the work of
Rodolphe Gasché who clarifies several such paradoxes in Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death.”

We will start with Gasché, as the clarity of his formulations of Blanchot gives me much of the language necessary for this analysis. The origin of literature is mysterious in that language is founded on an absence it cannot contain, the death of the other. Gasché writes that language “announces real death,” in that as Blanchot writes, language “means that this person, who is right here now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence.” Language does not kill the other, but it marks the other for non-existence. To speak ethically, then—to expose what is normatively “proper” and makes the other absent—already requires the other be mortal, and indeed announces the other as such. Thus to speak or write for the sake of the other is impossible, as it requires such an act be already futile. But this contradiction is the point: in literature which miraculously appears in spite of the contradiction which founds it, the other which is absent becomes present precisely in our inability to speak it. Gasché writes:

> Literature, writing, the work, are solutions to the positively irreconcilable contradictions and equivocations. Poetry, Blanchot writes, is "the realization, or carrying out, of a total irrealization, such that once it is completed…the original absence from which arise all our gestures, all our acts, and even the very possibility of our words, is affirmed in it." Now, although literature is the solution to unresolvable paradoxes, it cannot be a logical or dialectical one. It must remain a solution that, even though it occurs, is impossible. Gasché brings immense clarity to the paradox of the impossible and necessary: what shows itself in spite of its impossibility (community, writing, Jewish ethics) is miraculous, not because it finds a solution to a founding paradox, but because it exists in spite of unsolveability. Impossibility

---

should be understood not as saying, per se, that something cannot exist, but rather that it cannot
exist in a way that can be accounted for in a logical or dialectical manner, that is, it can only arise
in spite of persistent contradiction, not through its resolution or sublation. To see more clearly
how this claim about literature is comparable to Judaism and community it is worth turning to The
Writing of the Disaster, where the exigency of fragmentary writing is framed in terms of the other
which writing cannot contain.

We can see Blanchot frame writing in a number of ways that resonate with his comments
on Judaism and community. Rather than writing from a position of stable selfhood, or writing as
an expression of one’s identity, the writer faces an exigency of uprooting: in writing one must
“abandon everything and be abandoned by everything.” Whoever “praises style, the originality
of style, only exalts the self of the writer” who has refused this abandonment. The language here
recalls The Unavowable Community; indeed, writing is one of those “concepts that are not
‘appropriate’ without their proper-improper abandonment.” Writing that is not ‘abandoned’
attempts to create a false unity; instead writing must be abandoned in the sense that it can never
do what it purports and intends. The writer must write, but “what escapes all that can be said” is
precisely “what must be said,” such that what is necessary to do is also impossible. Why, exactly,
is writing necessary?

Why yet another book, where a seismic shuddering—one of the forms of the disaster—
lays waste to it? Because the order of the book is required by what the book does not
contain—by the absence which eludes the book. Likewise, the “proper” of
“appropriation”—the event to which man and being both belong—plummets into the
improperness of writing which escapes the law—escapes the mere vestige, as well as the
rule, of secure meaning. But the improper is not merely the negation of the “proper”; it
turns away from, by turning toward, the “proper.” It makes “propersness” unfathomable, for

---

27 For a more rigorous account of how Blanchot’s account differs from Hegelian sublation, Cf. Gasché, “The
felicities of paradox,” esp. 47-53.
it maintains by dissolving this illusion. Proper still resounds in the improper: as the absence of a book, that which is exterior to any book makes what it surpasses heard.  

Blanchot’s answer is not easy to parse, but it does give us what we need to understand him provided we bring in a few other fragments to throw this one in relief. The book is “required by what the book does not contain,” but “that which is exterior to any book makes what is surpasses heard.” Thus the book is both necessary and made possible by an other which is exterior to the book. We don’t know from this passage whether that “which is exterior to any book” is an other person, per se—but we can easily see from other fragments that the other person is at least part of the range of meaning here. Blanchot tells us elsewhere in The Writing of the Disaster that the “I that is responsible for others, the I bereft of selfhood, is sheer fragility, through and through on trial. This I without any identity is responsible for him to whom he can give no response; this I must answer in an interrogation where no question is put.” But what does writing do for the other? It reveals the improper, opposed to “appropriation,” which makes “propers” un-fathomable by dissolving its illusion. This is not to say that writing destroys the proper; it is by showing the proper that it makes the “absence which eludes the book” felt, and therefore destroys the illusion of the proper. Writing does not actually attack totality, the “false unity” which attempts to incorporate the other. It is rather precisely by making the absence of that which is not a part of Unity-Identity felt that it brings about a self-undermining of totality.

We can see this theme developed more explicitly in Blanchot’s comments on fragmentary writing opposed to a System:

The correct criticism of the System does not consist (as is most often, complacently, supposed) in finding fault with it, or in interpreting it insufficently…but rather in rendering it invincible, invulnerable to criticism or, as they say, inevitable. Then, since nothing escapes it because of its omnipresent unity and the perfect cohesion of everything, there remains no place for fragmentary writing unless it come into focus as the impossible necessary: as that which is written in the time outside time, in the sheer suspense which

29 Ibid.
without restraint breaks the seal of unity by, precisely, not breaking it, but by leaving it aside without this abandon’s ever being able to be known.\textsuperscript{30}

True fragmentary writing—writing which escapes the unity and cohesion of a totalizing, appropriating System, is impossible; but by showing the invincibility of the System, the impossibility of truly fragmentary writing outside of System—that is, the \textit{absence} of such writing, the “absence of a book” we noted earlier—“breaks the seal of unity,” which Blanchot elsewhere notes is “false” unity, as it is never able to appropriate this absence. “‘False’ unity, the simulacrum of unity,” compromises unity “better than any direct challenge.” Lest there be any doubt that this exigency amounts to a form of uprooting for the writer, Blanchot writes: “Schleiermacher: By producing a work, I renounce the idea of my producing and formulating myself; I fulfill myself in something exterior and inscribe myself in the anonymous continuity of humanity.”\textsuperscript{31}

We should note the parallel to Hammerschlag’s comments on Judaism and communism, namely that “in those societies that have at their heart a claim such as Judaism or communism, there is a claim to justice that might, in fact, show itself, if only negatively, as the dissonance between the demands of “safeguarding that identity” and what that identity demands.\textsuperscript{32} The writer is responsible when she shows the \textit{absence} of the book which could include what is outside System, unity, or propriety—the impossibility of this book is precisely what undermines that which attempts to appropriate all alterity. We can see, finally, why writing, saying what cannot be said, is “required”: because it is a means of exposing what is always excluded from thought, the violence that Unity-Identity commits. Just as it is impossible for a Jewish community to avoid a certain enrootedness in the very claim of identity, it is impossible for the book to avoid recapitulating Unity-Identity, but they can nonetheless expose its falsity and make it “unfathomable.”

\textsuperscript{30} Blanchot, \textit{The Writing of the Disaster}, 61.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Hammerschlag, \textit{The Figural Jew}, 195, citing Blanchot, \textit{The Infinite Conversation}, 448.
Why is it, exactly, that this critique of System takes precisely the same form for Blanchot as Judaism? And, given this isomorphic relation, why does Blanchot have recourse to Judaism at all? Yes, Levinas already sees Judaism paired with thinking against or without a totalizing System, as well as with a "nomadic" ethics - but Blanchot finds ways to express these ideas without Judaism. We have also to understand that for Levinas, the affirmation of this pairing is a subversion of Hegel's own positioning of "the judaic spirit" as "the negation of spirit." 33 Levinas notes that, citing an anlysis from Bernard Bourgeouis, that for Hegel "the act by which Abraham founds the Jewish people is an act of separation, the breaking of all ties with the surroundings." This reads as a harsh critique of a Jewish refusal to participate in the unfolding of Spirit in History; yet precisely in this sense it would be for Levinas a responsible statement of uprooting, as it would be for Blanchot a statement of "proper abandonment." Indeed, a number of the quotations from this Hegelian critique of Judaism constitute positions Levinas here or elsewhere affirms. In another essay from Difficult Freedom, "A Religion for Adults," Levinas writes:

> For equality to make its entry into the world, beings must be able to demand more of themselves than of the Other, feel responsibility on which the fate of humanity hangs, and in this sense pose themselves outside humanity. This 'position outside nations,' of which the Pentateuch speaks, is realized in the concept of Israel and its particularism. It is a particularism that conditions universality… 34 Precisely to engage in the universal, to engage in a struggle for equality and justice, requires a break - not with responsibility toward the other, but with any system by which one is deemed sufficiently to have performed their role. More must always be demanded - but in a System, here seen as aligned with political powers, the individual is never responsible - "the fate of humanity" does not hang on our capacity to demand more of ourselves.


34 Levinas, “A Religion for Adults” in Difficult Freedom, 22.
So Levinas, too, gives Judaism the form of a critique of System, as a foil to Hegel. And his notion that Judaism is a “particularism that conditions universality”—or, elsewhere, that “it is for the whole of humanity that Judaism came into the world”—might seem to persist in Blanchot’s claim, seen earlier, that Judaism exists "so that the experience of strangeness may affirm itself close at hand as an irreducible relation." But for Levinas, Judaism is the enabling condition for other forms of resistance to totalization, whereas for Blanchot it is merely one of many forms; for Levinas Jewish particularism "conditions universality" where for Blanchot it only models it in the same way as writing and community. While Levinas might affirm that this particularism can involve a certain kind of “proper-improper abandonment,” and he certainly views Judaism’s ethical message as universally communicable, he does not see the message Jewish particularism brings to the world as something we would otherwise have without that election. It is true that, as Hammerschlag writes, "Blanchot…follows Levinas in a revalorization of Hegel's claim that Judaism is a form of separation that excludes union." But because for Blanchot this move is one of many isomorphic pieces in his opposition to totalization, it is hard not to view his invocation of Judaism as a purely instrumental one in a broader project against totalizing, Systemic thought for which Hegel is a representative. Yet for Levinas Judaism is not merely one means of opposing totalization, but something which "conditions universality.”

Without uncritically lauding Levinas’s position on Israel’s election as conditioning universal

35 Levinas, “Israel and Universalism, in Difficult Freedom, 176.
36 See, for example, his claim in “Israel and Universalism” that chosenness “is not ‘still anterior’ to the universalism of a homogenous society in which the differences between Jew, Greek, and barbarian are abolished. It already includes this abolition but remains, for a Jew, a condition that is at any moment still indispensable to such an abolition, which in turn at any moment is still about to commence.” Difficult Freedom, 177.
37 Ibid. 176: “A Jew can communicate just as intimately with a non-Jew who portrays morality—in other words, with a Noachide—as with another Jew. The rabbinic principle by which the jut of every nation participate in the future of the world expresses not only an eschatological view. It affirms the possibility of that ultimate intimacy, beyond the dogma affirmed by the one or the other, an intimacy without reserve.”
38 Hammerschlag, 191.
morality, we can see why Blanchot’s break from this move produces a different problem for Jewish thought. He has, in reducing Judaism to one among many rhetorical instruments against System, made it a superfluous instantiation of a general form.

**Conclusion**

The problem Kevin Hart brings up in passing—that “Blanchot’s interpretation of ‘being Jewish’ is no more than an ethics of relationality proposed under the title ‘Atheism and Writing’ as much as under ‘Being Jewish’”—seems to have some legs.³⁹ (I will note in passing that the form of paradox which seems to define community/communism, Judaism, and writing/literature, can also be found in the problem of defining nihilism.)⁴⁰ This form of paradox Blanchot describes, where I am obligated to the other in such a way that what is required of me is also impossible, is not specific to Judaism, but rather found throughout a constellation of terms in Blanchot’s thought. The message of exile and exodus which he identifies as Judaism’s raison d’être does not actually distinguish “Judaism” from other categories.

What does it mean that for Blanchot, Judaism hardly stands alone? In particular, I want to close by asking: what is the status of Blanchot in relation to modern Jewish thought as a result of this move? Can one consider him one of its interlocutors or even members? The difficulty being: can there be a Jewish thought which does not ultimately consider Judaism vital to the task at hand,

⁴⁰ Jason Winfree Kemp argues that Heidegger’s influence on Blanchot, in the form of the question of nihilism and of truth, provides another form of the exigency of the fragment. He writes: “It is as though the oblivion of being elicits a response that can never measure up to the demands placed upon it, the apohantic and descriptive character of our philosophical language destined to mis(re)present the space of withdrawal and belonging, and in this failure alone perhaps indicate its own emergent condition. There can be little doubt that this is the difficulty that imposes upon Blanchot what he will eventually call the exigency of the fragmentary, and its decription, or un-writing.” Kemp frames this paradox in terms quite similar to those of Gasché, and was thereby another helpful voice in trying to generalize the form of Blanchot’s paradoxes: “Blanchot is less concerned with a way out of the problem than he is attracted by the prospect of what the situation itself gives and the manner in which this giving is encountered.” (Kemp, 252). Kemp helpfully points to the following passage from *The Infinite Conversation*: “[I]f to want to give ‘a good definition’ of nihilism is a bizarre pretension, to renounce this temptation is to leave the field open to what in it is perhaps essential: its gift of travesty, its refusal to avow its origins, its power to slip away from every decisive explication.”⁴⁰
but could rather substitute for it writing or communism? Blanchot told us himself that Judaism exists so that we would have the ideas of exile and exodus, but in light of what we have seen in his other writings—*The Unavowable Community* and *The Writing of the Disaster* especially—I am not sure we can take him at his word. Again, the problem is not in the fact that affirmation of Jewish identity becomes ambiguous with Blanchot; it is the fact that its ambiguity has the same form and function as the ambiguity of community and of writing.

We should note in fairness that Blanchot tells us himself that his interpretation of Judaism does not “exhaust the meaning that gives [the Jewish experience] its richness; each one understands what he can.” What Blanchot anonymizes in the Jewish experience, so to speak, is only what he himself sees in it—as a non-Jew, for that matter. I do not accuse him here of interpretive violence. I only note that what he seems to bring to the table regarding Jewish thought does not, by his own description, actually require Jewish thought in order to be encountered. This does not mean that Judaism, alongside communism, does not appear to us as an example. But this exemplarity among human communities does not appear so essential that it justifies Blanchot’s phrase “so that we may have the ideas of exodus and exile”; it seems for Blanchot we could receive a notion of uprootedness and impossible relation regardless. There is no doubt that this formulation of Judaism is deeply influenced by Levinas and owes much to modern Jewish thought. But my worry is that Blanchot has transformed these influences sufficiently through abstraction such that he no longer seems to need them.

After all: we identified two forms of an “exigency of being Jewish.” One is the demand placed on Jews to which they are elected, the other that which is communicated through Judaism to the rest of the world. Any notion of necessity or especially urgency is weakened at each juncture

---

41 Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 125.
where it turns out this demand can be encountered elsewhere. This is not to say no valuable interpretation of Judaism is found in his understanding of uprooting; it is rather that according to his own categories, there is nothing specifically Jewish about this teaching. Judaism is reduced to one vehicle among many, and not only in the sense that other peoples can encounter an ethical demand in their own traditions—this would be a model already present in the likes of Henri Atlan\textsuperscript{42}—but rather in the sense that even for the Jews themselves, there are already modes outside of religion by which they might find themselves called into an ethical relation.

The fact that this abstraction seems to render Judaism no more than a rhetorical instrument is especially troubling within Blanchot’s own thinking here—that Judaism presents us with “an irreducible relation” which becomes the basis for an ethics “which possession cannot satisfy,”\textsuperscript{43} as a manner of learning “to speak.”\textsuperscript{44} To speak properly here means “to accept not introducing him into the system of things or of beings to be known; it is to recognize him as unknown and to receive him as foreign without obliging him to break with his difference.”\textsuperscript{45} It seems to me that in making of Judaism yet another category with which to critique “System,” and in seeming not to find more in it than just that, Blanchot has not lived up to his own interpretation.

I do not propose that the boundaries around what is or is not Jewish thought ought to be confined to something so strict as, say, avowed monotheism, nor do I even wish to suggest “Jewish thought” must have a particular set of thematic engagements. I find it very difficult, however, to imagine a “Jewish thought” which does not actually view Judaism as vital, both in the sense that it is alive and active, and in the sense that it is necessary that specifically Judaism exist and persist,

\textsuperscript{42} Atlan, 167. Atlan notes that the separation between different cultures, rather than a single totalizing unity of peoples, allows each to best attain “humanity in its universality.”
\textsuperscript{43} Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, 126.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 128.
whatever we think constitutes Judaism itself. What would be the point of producing such a classification if one did not believe it to have a specific value, a specific way of speaking to our world and its needs? Why else cling to a specific tradition?

While I think Blanchot engages themes within Judaism in a way that can be helpful to Jews and non-Jews alike, I do not think he does so in such a way that meets this qualification. Even if it is true that the demand of uprooting is one of which Judaism has been an especially significant proponent, Blanchot’s generalization of this theme makes “being Jewish” practically a cosmetic distinction. This may be a harsh designation, but I make it because I believe Jewish thought can be and is more than this. And because I think it must be so if we are to justify the notion of exclusion and inclusion into a canon of religious thought—this could only ever be justified if there is a specific need for a way of thinking to be preserved. To place within a canon is to assign institutional value, and therefore power—we only do this if we must. The demand toward the other placed on each of us, which Blanchot locates in Judaism, is by his own thinking already placed on each of us in a number of other arenas; it therefore neither measures up to the real and particular richness of what Jewish thought can be, nor justifies the idea of a tradition.
Bibliography


