
The Infinite Conversation

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Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson

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XVIII

The Absence of the Book

Let us try to question, that is to say, welcome in the form of a question what cannot reach the point of questioning.

1. — "*This insane game of writing.*" With these words, simple as they are, Mallarmé opens up writing to writing. But these simple words are such that it will take a great deal of time—a great variety of experiments, the work of the world, countless misunderstandings, works lost and scattered, the movement of knowledge, and, finally, the turning point of an infinite crisis—for us to begin to understand what decision is being prepared on the basis of this end of writing that is announced by its coming.

2. — Apparently we read only because what is written is already there, laying itself out before our eyes. Apparently. But the first one to write, the one who cut into stone and wood under ancient skies, was hardly responding to the demands of a view requiring a reference point and giving it a meaning; rather, he was changing all relations between seeing and the visible. What he left behind was not something more, something added to other things; it was not even something less—a subtraction of matter, a hollow in relation to a relief. Then what was it? A gap in the universe: nothing that was visible, nothing invisible. I suppose the first reader was engulfed by this non-absent absence, but without knowing anything about it. And there was no second reader because reading, from now on understood as the vision of a presence immediately visible, that is to say intelligi-

ble, was affirmed precisely in order to make this disappearance into *the absence of the book* impossible.

3. — Culture is bound to the book. The book as a repository and a receptacle of knowledge becomes identified with knowledge. The book is not only the book found in libraries, that labyrinth where all the combinations of forms, words, and letters are rolled up in volumes. The book is the Book. Still to be read, to be written, always already written and thoroughly penetrated by reading, the book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing.

The book admits of three distinct investigations. There is the empirical book. The book acts as a vehicle of knowledge; a given, determinate book receives and gathers a given, determinate form of knowledge. But the book as book is never simply empirical. The book is the *a priori* of knowledge. We would know nothing if there did not always exist in advance the impersonal memory of the book and, more essentially, the prior disposition to write and to read contained in every book and affirming itself only in the book. The absolute of the book, then, is the isolation of a possibility that claims to have originated in no other anteriority. An absolute that will later tend to be affirmed with the romantics (Novalis), then more rigorously with Hegel, then still more radically (though in a different way) with Mallarmé as the totality of relations (absolute knowledge, or the Work) in which would be accomplished either consciousness, which knows itself and comes back to itself after having exteriorized itself in all its dialectically linked figures, or language, closing upon its own affirmation and already dispersed.

Let us recapitulate: the empirical book; the book: condition for all reading and all writing; and the book: totality or Work. But with increasing refinement and truth all these forms assume that the book contains knowledge as the presence of something that is virtually present and always immediately accessible, if only with the help of mediations and relays. Something is there that the book presents in presenting itself, and that reading animates and reestablishes through its animation in the life of a presence. Something that, on the lowest level, is the presence of a content or a signified; then, on a higher level, the presence of a form, of something that signifies or operates; and, on a still higher level, the development of a system of relations that is always already there, if only as a possibility to come. The book enfolds time, unfolds time, and holds this unfolding in itself as the continuity of a presence in which present, past, and future become actual.

4. — *The absence of the book* revokes all continuity of presence just as it eludes the questioning borne by the book. It is not the book's interiority, nor its continuously elided Meaning. Rather it is outside the book, although enclosed within it—not so much its exterior as the reference to an outside that does not concern it.

The more the Work assumes meaning and acquires ambition, retaining in itself

not only all works, but also all the forms and all the powers of discourse, the more the absence of the work seems about to propose itself, without, however, letting itself be designated. This occurs with Mallarmé. With Mallarmé, the Work becomes aware of itself and thereby seizes itself as something that would coincide with the absence of the work; the latter then deflecting it from ever coinciding with itself and destining it to impossibility. A movement of detour whereby the work disappears into the absence of the work, but where the absence of the work increasingly escapes by reducing itself to being no more than the Work that has always already disappeared.

5. — The act of writing is related to the absence of the work, but is invested in the Work as book. The madness of writing—*this insane game*—is the relation of writing; a relation established not between the writing and production of the book but, through the book's production, between the act of writing and the absence of the work.

To write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking [*désœuvrement*]). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as it *produces itself* through the work, traversing it throughout. Writing as unworking (in the active sense of the word) is the insane game, the indeterminacy that lies between reason and unreason.

What happens to the book in this "game" in which worklessness is set loose in the operation of writing? The book: the passage of an infinite movement that goes from writing as an operation to writing as worklessness; a passage that immediately impedes. Writing passes by way of the book, but the book is not that to which it is destined (its destiny). Writing passes through the book, accomplishing itself there even as it disappears there; yet we do not write for the book. The book: a ruse by which writing goes toward *the absence of the book*.

6. — Let us try to gain a clearer understanding of the relation of the book to *the absence of the book*.

a) The book plays a dialectical role. In some sense it is there in order that not only the dialectics of discourse can be accomplished, but also discourse as a dialectic. The book is the work language performs on itself: as though there had to be the book in order for language to become conscious of itself, in order for language to grasp itself and complete itself in its incompleteness.

b) Yet the book that has become a work—even more, the whole literary process, whether it affirm itself in a long succession of books or manifest itself in a single book or in the space that takes the place of that book—is at once more a book than other books and already outside the book, outside the category of book and outside its dialectic. *More* a book: a book of knowledge scarcely exists as a book, as a volume unfolding; the work, on the other hand, claims to be singular: unique, irreplaceable, it is almost a person. Hence the dangerous tendency for

the work to promote itself into a masterpiece, and also to essentialize itself, that is to say, designate itself by a signature (not merely signed by the author, but also—and this is more grave—in some sense by itself). And yet it is already outside the book process: as though the work only marked the opening—the interruption—through which the neutrality of writing passes and were oscillating, suspended between itself (the totality of language) and an affirmation that has not yet come about.

Moreover, in the work, language is already changing direction—or place: the place of its direction; no longer the logos that participates in a dialectics and knows itself, it is rather engaged in a relation that is other. So one can say that the work hesitates between the book (vehicle of knowledge and fleeting moment of language) and the Book raised to the Capital Letter (Idea and Absolute of the book), and then between the work as presence and the absence of the work that constantly escapes, and where time deranges itself as time.

7. — The end of the act of writing does not reside either in the book or in the work. Writing the work, we come under the attraction of the absence of the work. We necessarily fall short of the work, but we are not by this reason, by this failing, under the necessity of the absence of the work.

8. — The book: a ruse by which the energy of writing—which relies on discourse and allows itself to be carried along by the vast continuity of discourse in order, at the limit, to separate itself from it—is also the ruse of discourse, restoring to culture the mutation that threatens it and opens it to the absence of the book. Or again, a labor through which writing, modifying the givens of a culture, of "experience" and knowledge, that is to say, discourse, procures another product that will constitute an entirely new modality of discourse as a whole and will become integrated with it, even as it claims to disintegrate it.

The absence of the book: reader, you would like to be its author, being then no more than the plural reader of the Work.

How long will it last—this lack that is sustained by the book, and that expels the book from itself as book? Produce the book, then, so it will separate, disengage from itself in its dispersion. This will not mean you have produced *the absence of the book*.

9. — The book (the civilization of the book) affirms: there is a memory that transmits, there is a system of relations that orders; time ties its knot in the book where the void still belongs to a structure. But the absence of the book is not founded on a writing that leaves a mark and determines a directional movement—whether this movement unfolds in linear fashion from an origin toward an end or unfolds from out of a center toward the surface of a sphere. The absence of the book makes appeal to a writing that does not commit itself, that does not set

itself down, and that is not content with disavowing itself or with going back over its tracks to erase them.

What is it that summons us to write when the time of the book, determined by a relation of beginning-end, and the space of the book, determined by deployment from a center, cease to impose themselves? The attraction of (pure) exteriority.

The time of the book: determined by the beginning-end (past-future) relation, on the basis of a presence. The space of the book: determined by deployment from a center, itself conceived as the search for an origin.

Wherever there is a system of relations that orders or a memory that transmits, wherever writing gathers itself within the substance of a trace that reading regards in the light of a meaning (referring this trace back to an origin whose sign it is), and when emptiness itself belongs to a structure and allows for adjustment, there is the book: the *law* of the book.

As we write, we always write from out of the exteriority of writing and against the exteriority of the law, and always the law draws upon what is written as a resource.

The attraction of (pure) exteriority—the place where, since the outside “precedes” any interior, writing does not set itself down in the manner of a spiritual or an ideal presence, inscribing itself and then leaving a mark, a trace, or a sedimentary deposit that would allow one to track it down, that is, restore it to its ideal presence or ideality, its plenitude, its integrity of presence on the basis of that mark as lack.

Writing marks but leaves no trace; it does not authorize us to work our way back from some vestige or sign to anything other than itself as (pure) exteriority—never given, never constituting or gathering itself in a relation of unity with a presence (to be seen, to be heard), with the totality of presence or the Unique, present-absent.

When we begin writing, we are either not beginning or we are not writing: writing does not go along with beginning.

10. — Through the book, the disquiet—the energy—of writing seeks to rest in and accrue to the work (*ergon*); but the absence of the work always from the outset calls upon it to respond to the detour of the outside where what is affirmed no longer finds its measure in a relation of unity.

We have no “idea” of the absence of the work; not as a presence, certainly, but also not as the destruction of what would prevent it, even if only as an absence. To destroy the work, which itself is not, to destroy at least the affirmation and the dream of the work, to destroy the indestructible, to destroy nothing so the idea that destruction would suffice—an idea that is out of place here—will not impose itself. The negative can no longer be at work where the affirmation that affirms

the work has taken place. And in no case can the negative lead to the absence of the work.

To read would mean to read in the book the absence of the book, and, as a consequence, to produce this absence precisely where there is no question of the book being either absent or present (defined by an absence or a presence).

The absence of the book is never contemporaneous with the book, not because this absence would announce itself from out of another time, but because from this absence comes the very non-contemporaneity from out of which it, too, comes. The absence of the book, always diverging, always without a relation of presence with itself, and in such a way that it is never received in its fragmentary plurality by a single reader in the present of a reading—unless, at the limit, with the present torn apart, dissuaded—

The attraction of (pure) exteriority or the vertigo of space as distance; a fragmentation that sends us back to nothing more than the fragmentary.

The absence of the book: the prior deterioration of the book, its dissident play with reference to the space in which it is inscribed; the preliminary dying of the book. To write: the relation to the *other* of every book, to what in the book would be de-scription, a scriptuary exigency outside discourse, outside language. To write at the edge of the book, outside the book.

This writing outside language: a writing that would be in a kind of originary manner a language rendering impossible any object (either present or absent) of language. This writing would never be the writing of man, that is to say, never God's writing either; at most the writing of the other, of dying itself.

11. — The book begins with the Bible in which the logos is inscribed as law. Here the book attains its unsurpassable meaning, including what exceeds its bounds on all sides and cannot be gotten past. The Bible refers language to its origin: whether it be written or spoken, this language forms the basis for the theological era that opens and endures for as long as biblical space and time endure. The Bible not only offers us the preeminent model of the book, a forever unparalleled example, it also encompasses all books, no matter how alien they are to biblical revelation, knowledge, poetry, prophesy, and proverbs, because it holds in it the spirit of the book. The books that follow the Bible are always contemporaneous with it: the Bible doubtless grows, increases on its own through an infinite growth that leaves it identical, it being forever sanctioned by the relation of Unity, just as the ten Laws set forth and contain the monologues, the One Law, the law of Unity that cannot be transgressed, and that negation alone cannot deny.

The Bible: the testamentary book where the alliance, the covenant is declared, that is to say, the destiny of speech bound to the one who bestows language and where he consents to dwell through this gift that is the gift of his name; that is to say, also, the destiny of this relation of speech to language that is dialectics.

It is not because the Bible is a sacred book that the books deriving from it—the entire literary process—are marked with the theological sign and cause us to belong to the theological realm. It is just the opposite: it is because the testament—the alliance or covenant of speech—was enfolded in a book and took the form and structure of a book that the “sacred” (what is separate from writing) found its place in theology. The book is essentially theological. This is why the first manifestation of the theological (and also the only one that continues to unfold) could only have been in the form of a book. In some sense God only remains God (only becomes divine) inasmuch as He speaks through the book.

Mallarmé, faced with the Bible in which God is God, elevates the work in which *the insane game of writing* sets to work and already disavows itself, encountering indeterminacy's double game: necessity, chance. The Work, the absolute of voice and of writing, unworks itself [*se désœuvre*] even before it has been accomplished; before, in accomplishing itself, it ruins the possibility of accomplishment. The Work still belongs to the book and therefore helps to maintain the biblical character of every Work; yet it designates (in the neutral) the disjunction of a time and a space that are *other*, precisely that which no longer affirms itself in relation to unity. The Work as book leads Mallarmé outside his name. The Work in which the absence of the work holds sway leads he who is no longer called Mallarmé to the point of madness. If we can, let us understand this *to the point of* as the limit that, once crossed, would be decisive madness; from which we would have to conclude that the limit—“the edge of madness”—conceived as the indecision that does not decide, or else as non-madness, is more essentially mad: this would be the abyss—not the abyss, but the edge of the abyss.

Suicide: what is written as necessity in the book denounces itself as chance in the absence of the book. What the one says the other says over, and this reiterating speech, by virtue of its redoubling, contains death, the death of the self.

12. — The anonymity of the book is such that in order to sustain itself it calls for the dignity of a name. The name is that of a momentary particularity that supports reason, and that reason authorizes by raising it up to itself. The relation of Book and name is always contained in the historical relationship that linked the absolute knowledge of system with the name Hegel: this relation between the Book and Hegel, identifying the latter with the book and carrying him along in its development, made Hegel into a post-Hegel, a Hegel-Marx, and then a Marx radically foreign to Hegel who continues to write, to bring into line, to know, and to affirm the absolute law of written discourse.

Just as the Book takes the name of Hegel, in its more essential (more uncertain) anonymity, the work takes the name of Mallarmé, the difference being that Mallarmé not only knows that the anonymity of the Work is his (its) trait and the indication of his place, not only withdraws in this way of being anonymous, but also does not call himself the author of the Work: at the very most he proposes him-

self, hyperbolically, as the power—the never unique or unifiable power—to read the non-present Work, in other words the power to respond, by his absence, to the always still absent work (the absent work not being *the absence of the work*, being even separated from it by a radical break).

In this sense, there is already a decisive distance between Hegel's book and Mallarmé's work; a difference evidenced by their different ways of being anonymous in the naming and signing of their work. Hegel does not die, even if he disavows himself in the displacement or turning about of the System: since every system still names him, Hegel is never altogether nameless. Mallarmé and the work are without relation, and this lack of relationship is played out in the Work, establishing the work as what would be forbidden to this particular Mallarmé, as it would be to anyone else bearing a name, and as it would be to the work conceived as the power of accomplishing itself in and through itself. The Work is freed from the name not because it could be produced without anyone producing it, but because its anonymity affirms it as being always and already outside whatever might name it. The book is the whole, whatever form this totality might take, and whether the structure of this totality is or is not wholly different from what a belated reading assigns to Hegel. The Work is not the whole, is already outside the whole, but in its resignation it still designates itself as absolute. The Work is not bound up with success (with completion) as the book is, but with disaster: although disaster is yet another affirmation of the absolute.

Let us say briefly that if the book can always be signed, it remains indifferent to whoever would do so; the work—Festivity as disaster—requires resignation, requires that whosoever claims to write it renounce himself as a self and cease designating himself.

Then why do we sign our books? Out of modesty, as a way of saying: these are still only books, indifferent to signatures.

13. — The “absence of the book,” which the written thing provokes as the future of writing—a future that has never come to pass—does not constitute a concept, any more than does the word “outside,” the word “fragment,” or the word “neutral,” but it helps conceptualize the word “book.” It is not some contemporary interpreter who, in giving Hegel's philosophy its coherence, conceives of it as a book and thus conceives of the book as the finality of absolute Knowledge; Mallarmé does it already at the end of the nineteenth century. But, through the very force of his experience, Mallarmé immediately pierces the book in order (dangerously) to designate the Work whose center of attraction—a center always off-center—would be writing. The act of writing, *the insane game*. But the act of writing has a relation (a relation of alterity) with the absence of the Work, and it is precisely because Mallarmé has a sense of this radical mutation that comes to writing through writing with the absence of the Work that he is able to name the Book, naming it as that which gives meaning to becoming by proposing a

place and a time for it: the first and last concept. Only Mallarmé does not yet name the absence of the book, or he recognizes it simply as a way of thinking the Work, the Work as failure or impossibility.

14. — The absence of the book is not the book coming apart, even though in some sense coming apart lies at the origin of the book and is its counter-law. The fact that the book is always undoing itself (dis-arranging itself) still only leads to another book or to a possibility other than the book, not to the absence of the book. Let us grant that what haunts the book (what beleaguers it) would be the absence of the book that it always falls short of, contenting itself with containing it (keeping it at a distance) without being able to contain it (transform it into a content). Let us also grant the opposite, saying that the book encloses the absence of the book that excludes the book, but that the absence of the book is never conceived only on the basis of the book and solely as its negation. Let us grant that if the book carries meaning, the absence of the book is so foreign to meaning that non-meaning does not concern it either.

It is very striking that within a certain tradition of the book (as it is brought to us through the Cabalists' formulation, and even if it is a matter of sanctioning with this usage the mystical signification of literal presence), what is called the "written Torah" preceded the "oral Torah," the latter then giving rise to an edited version that alone constitutes the Book. Thought is here confronted with an enigmatic proposition. Nothing precedes writing. Yet the writing of the first tablets becomes legible only after they are broken, and because they are broken—after and because of the resumption of the oral decision that leads to the second writing, the one with which we are familiar: rich in meaning, capable of issuing commandments, always equal to the law it transmits.

Let us attempt to examine this surprising proposition by relating it to what might be an experience of writing yet to come. There are two kinds of writing, one white, the other black: one that renders invisible the invisibility of a colorless flame; the other that is made accessible in the form of letters, characters, and articulations by the power of the black fire. Between the two there is the oral, which, however, is not independent, it being always involved with the second kind of writing inasmuch as it is this black fire itself, the measured obscurity that limits and delimits all light and makes all light visible. Thus what we call oral is designation in a present of time and a presence of space, but also, first of all, the development or mediation that is ensured by a discourse that explains, receives, and determines the neutrality of the initial inarticulation. The "oral Torah" is therefore no less written than the written Torah, but is called oral in the sense that, as discourse, it alone allows there to be communication, that is, allows the word to be enunciated in the form of a *commentary* that at once teaches and declares, authorizes and justifies: as though language (discourse) were necessary for writing to give rise to general legibility, and perhaps also to the Law under-

stood as prohibition and limit; as though, as well, the first writing, in its configuration of invisibility, had to be considered as being *outside speech*, and as turned only toward the *outside*; an absence or fracture so originary it will have to be broken to escape the savagery of what Hölderlin calls the anorgic.

15. — Writing is absent from the Book; writing being the non-absent absence from out of which the Book, having absented itself from this absence (at both its levels: the oral and the written, the Law and its exegesis, the interdiction and the thought of the interdiction), makes itself legible and comments upon itself by enclosing history: the closure of the book, the severity of the letter, the authority of knowledge. What we can say of this writing that is absent from the book, and nonetheless stands in a relationship of alterity with it, is that writing remains foreign to legibility; illegible, then, inasmuch as to read is necessarily to enter through one's gaze into a relation of meaning or non-meaning with a presence. There would therefore be a writing exterior to the knowledge that is gained through reading, and also exterior to the form or the requirements of the Law. Writing, (pure) exteriority, foreign to every relation of presence, as to all legality.

As soon as the exteriority of writing *slackens*, that is, as soon as, in response to the appeal of the oral force, it accepts taking form in language by giving rise to the book—written discourse—this exteriority tends to appear: at the highest level as the exteriority of the Law, and, at the lowest, as the interiority of meaning. The Law is writing itself, writing that has renounced the exteriority of interdiction [*l'entre-dire*] in order to designate the place of the interdict. The illegitimacy of writing, always refractory in relation to the Law, hides the asymmetrical illegitimacy of the Law in relation to writing.

Writing: exteriority. Perhaps there is a "pure" exteriority of writing, but this is only a postulate already unfaithful to the neutrality of writing. In the book that signs our alliance with every Book, exteriority does not succeed in authorizing itself, and, in inscribing itself, inscribes itself in the space of the Law. The exteriority of writing, laying itself out and stratifying itself in the form of the book, becomes exteriority as law. The Book speaks as Law. Reading it, we read in it that everything that is, is either forbidden or allowed. But isn't this structure of authorization and interdiction a result of our level of reading? Might there not be another reading of the Book in which the book's other would cease to proclaim itself in precepts? And if we were to read this way, would we still be reading a book? Would we not be ready then to read *the absence of the book*?

The initial exteriority: perhaps we should assume that its nature is such that we would be unable to bear it except under the sanction of the Law. What would happen if the system of prohibition and limitations ceased to protect it? Or might it simply be there, at the limit of possibility, precisely to make the limit possible? Is this exteriority no more than an exigency of the limit? Is the limit itself con-

ceived only through a delimitation that is necessary at the approach of the unlimited, a delimitation that would disappear if it were ever passed—for this reason impassable, yet always passed over precisely because it is impassable?

16. — Writing contains exteriority. The exteriority that becomes Law falls henceforth under the Law's protection; the Law, in turn, is written, that is to say, once again falls under the custody of writing. We must assume that this redoubling of writing, a redoubling that from the outset designates it as difference, does nothing more than affirm in this duplicity the trait of exteriority itself, which is always becoming, always exterior to itself and in a relation of discontinuity. There is a "first" writing, but inasmuch as it is first, it is already distinct from itself, separated by that which marks it, being at the same time nothing but this mark and yet also other than it if it thereby marks itself: so broken, distanced, denounced in this disjunctive outside where it announces itself that a new rupture will be necessary—a brisure that is violent but human (and in this sense, definite and delimited) so that, having become a text that shatters, and the initial fragmentation having given way to a determined act of rupture, the law, under the veil of interdiction, can offer a promise of unity.

In other words, the breaking of the first tablets is not a break with a first state of unitary harmony; on the contrary, what the break inaugurates is the substitution of a limited exteriority (where the possibility of a limit announces itself) for an exteriority without limitation—the substitution of a lack for an absence, a break for a gap, an infraction for the pure-impure fraction of the fragmentary: that which, on the hither side of the sacred separation, presses in the scission of the neutral (the scission that is the neutral). To put it yet another way, it is necessary to break with the first exteriority so that with the second (where the logos is law and the law logos), language, henceforth regularly divided, in a reciprocal bond of mastery with itself and grammatically constructed, might engage us in the relations of mediation and immediation that guarantee discourse, and then with the dialectic, where the law in its turn will dissolve.

The "first" writing, far from being more immediate than the second, is foreign to all these categories. It does not give graciously through some ecstatic participation in which the law protecting the One would merge with it and ensure confusion with it. The first writing is alterity itself, a severity and an austerity that never authorizes, the burning of a parching breath infinitely more rigorous than any law. The law is what saves us from writing by causing writing to be mediated through the rupture—the transitivity—of speech. A salvation that introduces us to knowledge and, through our desire for knowledge, to the Book where knowledge maintains desire in dissimulating it from itself.

17. — The proper nature of the Law: it is infringed upon even when it has not yet been stated. Of course, it is henceforth promulgated from on high, at a dis-

tance and in the name of the distant, but without there being any relation of direct knowledge with those for whom it is destined. We might conclude from this that the law—as transmitted and as bearing transmission, thus becoming the law of transmission—establishes itself as law only through the decision to fall short of itself in some fashion: there would be no limit if the limit were not passed, revealed as impassable by being passed.

Yet does not the law precede all knowledge (including knowledge of the law), which it alone inaugurates in paving the way for its conditions by a prior "one must," if only on the basis of the Book in which the law attests to itself through the order—the structure—that it looms over as it establishes it?

Always anterior to the law, neither founded in nor determined by the necessity of being brought to knowledge, never imperiled by anyone's misunderstanding, always essentially affirmed by the infraction that supposes reference to it, drawing into its trial the authority that removes itself from it, and all the more firm for being open to facile transgression: the law.

The law's "one must" is first of all not a "thou shalt." "One must" applies to no one or, more determinedly, applies only to no one. The non-applicability of the law is not merely a sign of its abstract force, of its inexhaustible authority, of the reserve it maintains. Incapable of saying "thou," the law never aims at anyone in particular: not because it would be universal, but because it separates in the name of unity, being the very separation that enjoins with a view to the unique. Such is perhaps the law's august falsehood: having "legalized" the outside in order to make it possible (or real), the law frees itself of every determination and every content in order to preserve itself as pure inapplicable form, a pure exigency to which no presence can correspond, even though it is immediately particularized in multiple norms and through the code of alliance in ritual forms so as to permit the discrete interiority of a return to self, where the infrangible intimacy of the "thou shalt" will be affirmed.

18. — The Ten Commandments [*lois*] are law only in reference to Unity. God—the name that cannot be taken in vain because no language can contain it—is God only in order to uphold Unity and in this way designate its sovereign finality. No one can assail the One. And thus the Other bears witness, testifies to nothing Other than the Unique; a reference that unites all thought with what is not thought, keeping it turned toward the One as toward that upon which thought cannot infringe. It is therefore of consequence to say: not the One God but Unity, strictly speaking, is God, transcendence itself.

The exteriority of the law finds its measure in responsibility with regard to the One: an alliance of the One and the many that thrusts aside as impious the primordially of difference. There nonetheless remains in the law itself a clause that retains a memory of the exteriority of writing, when it is said: thou shalt make no images, thou shalt not represent, thou shalt reject presence in the form of resem-

blance, sign, and mark. What does this mean? First, and almost too clearly, interdiction of the sign as a mode of presence. Writing, if to write is to refer back to the image and to invoke the idol, is inscribed outside the exteriority that is proper to it; an exteriority writing then rejects by attempting to fill it with the emptiness of words and with the pure signification of the sign. "Thou shalt make no idol" is thus, in the form of law, not a statement about the law, but about the exigency of writing that precedes every law.

19. — Let us grant that the law is obsessed with exteriority, by that which beleaguers it and from which it separates via the very separation that institutes it as form, in the very movement by which it formulates this exteriority as law. Let us grant that exteriority as writing, a relation forever without relation, can be called an exteriority that *slackens* into law precisely at the moment when it is *most taut*, when it has the tension of a gathering form. It is necessary to know that as soon as the law takes place (has found its place), everything changes; and it is the so-called initial exteriority that, in the name of the law henceforth impossible to denounce, gives itself as slackness itself, an undemanding neutrality, just as the writing outside the law, outside the book, seems now to be nothing more than the return to a spontaneity without rules, an ignorant automatism, an irresponsible movement, an immoral game. To put this differently, one cannot go back from exteriority as law to exteriority as writing; in this context, to go back would be to go down. That is to say: one cannot "go back up" save by accepting the fall, and being incapable of consenting to it; an essentially indeterminate fall into inessential chance (what the law disdainfully calls a game—the game in which everything is each time risked and everything lost: the necessity of the law, the chance of writing). The law is the summit, there is no other. Writing remains outside the arbitration between high and low.¹

XVII. Tomorrow at Stake

1. For myself, I cannot erase the memory that this text was written in the shadow of André Breton's death. Why, then, in the face of the "absolute impropriety" of this death that filled us with grief, evoke "the future of surrealism?" I reproduce here, not as response but as excuse, these lines destined to erasure: *"Surrealism was unique in Breton insofar as he brought it to the light of day, loaned it the passionate truth of an existence and made it begin, without origin, in a living manner as a life begins (when does it begin?): bound to an epoch, to this power of suspense and interruption that makes an epoch less something that lasts than the interval disordering duration. In this sense alone surrealism is the phenomenon of an epoch. Through it something was interrupted. There was a hiatus, a caesura of history—in every sense a derangement, a disarray that negation is incapable of defining (hence the impossibility of giving, through laziness and as one might wish, preponderance to dadaism); nonetheless a negation that does not accord with any affirmation ready to become law, institution, or a firmness one can proffer. Those who nevertheless think they are doing justice to André Breton by arresting surrealism at the hour of death, saying that his end brought everything to an end, are allowing themselves to be deceived by sorrow's counsel. Others, with even more haste, already reproach him for having been weak enough to prolong a movement that had for a long time been over. Let us ask why surrealism, whether it bear this name or none at all and as indissociable from Breton, is summoned by the very force he gave it to affirm itself as always still to come, or as the limit it never reached: and yet without future, without present, without past."*

2. With Artaud the surrealist exigency in a sense turned about, affirming itself against itself. Artaud was excluded because he rejected Revolution in the communist sense of the word, rejecting even more fiercely all that (in his view) adherence to communism dissimulated in the way of a desire for action and immediate efficacy. Artaud could not without fraud allow his "powerlessness"—which was the point of departure for his protest—to be taken from him any more than his solitude, without which, for him, there would be no communication. How could he engage himself beyond himself? He could, but by powerlessness. This powerlessness, then, could not permit itself to be diverted from its own "force"—a paroxysm—by a search for compensatory results. *"It is for having refused to engage myself beyond myself, for having demanded silence around me and for being faithful in thought and in deed to what I felt to be my profound, my irremissible powerlessness that these gentlemen judged my presence among them to be inopportune. But what seemed to them above all condemnable and blasphemous was that I should wish to take solely upon myself the task of determining my limits."* This powerlessness is therefore not pure negation; it is what affirms itself as a limit determining limits. Artaud, necessarily excluded from surrealism, is the absence—an absence André Breton qualifies as abstract and Artaud as weak, moronic, useless, abnormal, and vile—that always gives an uneven contour to surrealist plurality, keeping it from being pure presence and yet making it necessary *"at the edge of the abyss."*

3. We know, but forget, that surrealism, as much as Mallarmé, restored power to language: *"Language can and ought to be torn from its bondage. "Doesn't the mediocrity of our universe depend essentially on our power of enunciation?" "The problem of social action is only one of the forms of a more general problem that surrealism set out to deal with: the problem of human expression in all its forms."*

4. Another formula, nonetheless the same: "SURREALISM is writing negated."

5. Even if they intend this playfully. Valéry: "Lack and lacuna are what create."

6. André Breton speaks as well of "the search for surprise": *"Surprise ought to be sought out for itself, unconditionally."*

XVIII. The Absence of the Book

1. *I dedicate (and disavow) these uncertain pages to the books in which the absence of the book is already producing itself as promise in keeping its word; books written by—, but let no more than the lack of a name designate them here, for the sake of friendship.*