

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## The Space of Literature: Echoes of Blanchot and Beckett's Explorations of Creativity in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Lucia Esposito

University of Teramo

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### Abstract:

In Mark Danielewski's experimental novel *House of Leaves* (2000), space is a crucial concern. Yet, as this paper will argue, space seems less to do with geographical, political, or socio-cultural factors, and more to do with what French writer and critic Maurice Blanchot calls the 'space of literature' – the ineffable place of origin of any work of art. In *House of Leaves*, a mysterious and ever-shifting labyrinth is unexpectedly found inside and below a house, which causes extreme feelings of disorientation and discomfort to anyone who enters it. This strange place of the story seems particularly identifiable with Blanchot's space: a space of impossible geography, of blackness, and nothingness. However, since the voice of art speaks solely from here, the artist must necessarily engage with its perturbing discovery to be able to create. Not only does the novel evoke Blanchot's view, it strikingly echoes other similar musings on the workings of literature, such as those put forward by Samuel Beckett, whose presence in the text is also tangible.

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**Author contact:** [lesposito@unite.it](mailto:lesposito@unite.it)

I'm in words, made of words, others' words... The place too – the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling: all words. [...] Everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows. Like flakes. I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder.  
Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

Tiny flakes [...] burning holes through the fabric of my mind, dismantling memories, undoing even the strongest power of imagination and reason.  
Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*

### **The intricate topography of the *novel* house**

*House of Leaves* was published at the very beginning of the new millennium, but its enigmatic nature has caused it to be constantly re-explored. As Paula Berinstein reminds us, 'books transport us to other places – some real, some imaginary. And books are places of a sort themselves, with a geography of pages, sections, and features' (2006: online). This text, however, reveals such a rich and complex topography that it indefinitely expands the notion of written, sequential narrative: it forces the borders of literary space, making them flexible, elastic, porous. With its multiple layers and narrative paths, and its assemblage of heterogeneous and colourful texts – such as film transcripts, scientific reports, personal memoirs, letters, collages, cartoons, images, and poems – *House of Leaves* might be said to attempt to map 'the realm of narrative virtuality' (Askin 2012: 116).

The novel, indeed, aims to represent the potentialities of printed literature, following the writer's conviction that books are 'remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities', even though 'somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten' (Cottrell and Danielewski 2002: online). A great number of academic articles and essays have been dedicated to the experimental nature of the novel in relation to (or in competition with) other technologies and forms of narration, whether digital or audiovisual (Hayles 2002; Hansen 2004; Pressman 2006; Chanen 2007; Gibbons 2010; and others). Alison Gibbons, for example, has highlighted its intermediality: the way it incorporates cinematic spatiality, movement, time, and rhythm, using a 'multimodal combination of word and image' (2010: 291). My own interpretation, instead, is more akin to Ridvan Askin's view (2012), which highlights the so called 'analogue powers' of this book in order to see how experimental literature can be conveniently used to question the ontology of any artistic representation, not to show how the written page can be more effective at conveying meaning than all other arts and media.

In fact, Danielewski had a profound knowledge of, and passion for, cinema (McCaffery, Gregory and Danielewski 2003: *passim*; McCormick 2011). One of the main plot elements in *House of Leaves* is a fictional documentary called *The Navidson Record*. Shot by one of the characters – photojournalist Will Navidson – to document his family's settling in a new home, the film allows Navidson to convey (in a very fragmentary way)

the frightening experience of discovering a huge labyrinth that suddenly and incomprehensibly begins to open inside and below the house. Its cold, dark corridors and ever-shifting walls defy human understanding. Navidson recruits an expert team of explorers and speleologists, equipped with sophisticated visual recording instruments; but they are unable to accurately document, measure or map the uncanny space. Unable to find their way out, Navidson's brother and one of the explorers even die in process. Navidson's own life is saved; but his film is a constant deconstruction of continuity, its frequent jump-cuts making impossible any accurate representation or mapping. It 'offers a schismatic rendering of empty rooms, long hallways and dead ends, perpetually promising, but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout' (*House of Leaves*, hereafter *HoL*: 109).

Described in the novel as a cult movie, the documentary is the subject of an unfinished academic commentary, written by an old blind man called Zampanò (the same name as the protagonist of Federico Fellini's 1954 film *La strada*). We learn about Zampanò's work when it is discovered by the novel's protagonist, a young man called Johnny Truant, after Zampanò has died. Johnny gradually becomes engrossed in Zampanò's disjointed work, and feels compelled to take on the task of assembling the disconnected pieces of the commentary. He acts as editor of the material to make it suitable for publication, sewing together Zampanò's huge quantity of hand-written narrative segments, academic footnotes, quotations, and analyses of other commentaries on *The Navidson Record*. He also adds his own 'Introduction', some personal notations on the film, and many long autobiographical footnotes; these all work as a narrative frame around Zampanò's text. In the footnotes, in particular, Johnny recollects some painful incidents in his personal life; and the task of remembering and ordering these, he tells us, nearly drives him to madness.

Even though, on the novel's inner title page, Danielewski's name does not appear (under the title are the words 'by Zampanò,' followed by 'with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant'), the story presents at least three different narrative layers; possibly even four, if we consider the appendix containing the letters of Johnny's mother, which function as a sort of prequel to the story. The woman's surname, Lièvre – mispronounced as 'Livre' (French for book) by the director of the asylum where she is confined (*HoL*: 643) – even suggests (along with many other such hints in the letters) that she is the real originator of the book, as many critics (such as Cox 2006) have pointed out. Daniel Wishart (2007) also speaks of 'the many storeys' of *House of Leaves*, conflating in a pun the multi-layered structure of both house and novel. Through all these disparate narratives, however, runs a *fil rouge*: the labyrinth itself, or the metaphor of one. Labyrinthine forms of writing, and references to physical or mental labyrinths, connect all the main characters. In this way, the text seems less like a narrative by a single authorial voice, and more like an obsessive re-verbalizing of the same story by many voices – a chamber of mirrors reflecting an irremediably fragmented or alienated subjectivity.

Indeed, since the novel's content and form – its stratified narration and experimental layout – are both maze-like, the labyrinth is an obvious analogy (Hamilton 2008; Shiloh 2010, among others). *House of Leaves* 'mobilizes' the materiality of the printed page (Hayles 2002: 797) to such an extent that 'the finality of an immutable layout' may forever elude it (*HoL*: 109). This not only makes reading particularly challenging; the book even appears designed to be discouraging. On the opening page, the isolated words 'This is *not* for you' (my emphasis) seem to express 'hostile hospitality', or 'hostipitality', in Derrida's words (Bida 2012: 56), while introducing a fundamental negation. In fact, some footnotes also contain endless lists, both of what the house architecturally is *not*, and of what is *not* contained in it (*HoL*: 119-42). Any readers sufficiently fascinated to access this negative text/space – filled with what Johnny calls 'hundreds of black, empty fucking rooms!' (324) – find themselves in an uninviting, even dangerous, place. To convey a sense of the house's strangeness, Johnny quotes a passage from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) about the concept of uncanniness (the *unheimlich*). It means, as Johnny says, not only *nothing* and *nowhere*, but also *not* feeling at home (*HoL*: 28).

The exploration of this unfamiliar and dreadful space, far from being connected to any geography of the real, seems to me more like an allegory of the quest for the origin of a work of art: a risky voyage into the dark and mysterious depths of writing that both the two writers – first Zupanò and then Johnny – make as they attempt to translate the uncanny experience into words. The labyrinth might be apprehended as a perturbing place, where the writer's mind must temporarily abide in order to undertake the process of creation. Therefore, rather than merely representing the physical world, I argue that the novel's space should be seen in more strictly literary or, in Linda Hutcheon's words, 'intramural' terms: as a space in which the author self-consciously focuses on the text qua text (Hutcheon 1985: 43-4). As Askin underlines, it is 'a matter of cartography (mapping the unknown), of geology (exploration of depths), and of chemistry (darkness) – not of tracing and representation' (2012: 116).

### **The ungraspable space of the source of imagination**

My hypothesis – that the concept of space in *House of Leaves* is less geographical, and more concerned with the 'space of literature' – embraces Askin's view of the novel as problematizing the ontological status of representation. For him, the task of unearthing the immeasurable 'virtuality' of the Idea lying beneath the 'actuality' of narrative (2012: 115) almost defies conceptual mastery. However, Askin's argument mostly harks back to Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference, particularly as expressed in the latter's *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988): he views the novel's problematization of the 'being of narrative' (Askin 2012: 117) as an allegorical representation of the ever-changing nature of being. My own view of the novel, instead, focuses more on the issue of artistic creation than on the ontology of being. I also argue that Danielewski's work echoes other explorations of the subterranean processes of the

imagination, such as those conducted by Maurice Blanchot in the 1950s. In fact, the theoretical framework that Blanchot established in *The Space of Literature* (1955; hereafter *SL*) is particularly well suited for my analysis of Danielewski's allegorical narration and performative *mise en texte* of the labyrinthine experience of writing.

As well, a number of striking resonances bring me to consider the works of Blanchot's contemporary, Samuel Beckett, as a strong influence. Even though no actual exchanges between the two are documented, a reciprocal admiration and sharing of ideas, in the period when both Beckett and Blanchot produced their major works, cannot be excluded.<sup>1</sup> The affinities between the two writers have been noticed and commented on by several critics, including Boxall (1997), and Willits (2005), among others. Granted, Danielewski does not list the Irish writer among Zampanò's or Johnny's hundreds of references in the novel's footnotes (where Blanchot *is* included), nor among the many other sources of inspiration he has mentioned. But in spite of the signal difference in writing style (which I will come back to later), Beckett seems to me a significant presence in the novel, especially with regard to the 'negative geography' (Boxall 1997: 49) and labyrinthine configuration of his narrative world, which Blanchot defined as 'a circle where [who speaks] turns obscurely, led on by a wandering speech, one that is not deprived of meaning, but deprived of center, that does not begin, does not end' (2003: 210).

Both Blanchot and Beckett share the basic idea that writers, like all artists, must find their own conditions of work and existence – which may often be likened to a profound suffering, solitude, exile, and estrangement from oneself. They must endure being drawn into a deep nocturnal region: a space beyond, or outside, normal life and meaning, 'the outside from which [the writer] could not make an abode' (*SL*: 24), that 'has no location' (31), and that 'will not allow itself to be charted' (106). This space, where the elusive origin of a work of art or literature dwells, is one that all artists must discover; but it almost entraps the writer, who feels painfully lost, engulfed by an absolute otherness. As Ludovic Janvier says of Beckett's imagination, 'the theatre of words is a dwelling; they create space, an enclosure, an absolute exterior that is within, a tomb. In the inmost part of this enclosure is myself, that other' (1975: 109-10).

This idea of writing as an estranging and painful discovery seems to permeate the whole story of *House of Leaves*. However, there is also a passage where Zampanò specifically elaborates on the concept. In his footnotes, he cites a book (the fictional *The Architecture of Art*, by Cassandra Rissman Larue) that enumerates seven incarnations of an artist, with their associated qualities (except for the final incarnation). They are: '1. Explorer (Courage). 2. Surveyor (Vision). 3. Miner (Strength). 4. Refiner (Patience). 5. Designer (Intelligence). 6. Maker (Experience). 7. Artist' (*HoL*: 420). Tellingly, when the novel's characters try to discover the secrets of the labyrinth house, their first task is to 'explore' it. That work (continues Rissman Larue's text) means to leave 'the safety of your home and go out into the dangers of the world, whether to an actual territory or some unexamined aspect of the psyche' (420). If her sixth stage is achieved, and a Maker

accomplishes the work of giving chaos a suitable form, only the most ‘exceptional’ writers are likely to progress to becoming an artist, as the following excerpt concludes.

At this stage, the work is acceptable. You will be fortunate to have progressed so far. It is unlikely, however, that you will go any farther. Most do not. But let us assume you are exceptional. Let us assume you are rare. What then does it mean to reach the final incarnation? Only this: at every stage, from 1 thru 6, you will risk more, see more, gather more, process more, fashion more, consider more, love more, *suffer more*, imagine more and in the end know why less means more and leave what doesn’t and keep what implies and create what matters. This is what is meant by ‘Artist.’ (*HoL*: 420; my emphasis)

The seven incarnations of the artist are suggestive of the Stations of the Cross, and indeed a writer’s work may be described as ‘excruciating’ (*HoL*: 327). A similar Christ-like theme appears in another reference in Zampanò’s commentary, when he describes the ‘passion’ for writing by recurring to etymology: ‘Like patience, passion comes from the same Latin root *pati*. It does not mean to flow with exuberance. It means to suffer’ (527). Blanchot seems to imply the same in *The Space of Literature*, pointing out that the French polysemic word *travail* can mean the writer’s ‘work’ as an artefact, as a performed action, as a labour, as a Calvary ordeal, or as a sufferance. Beckett, for his part, often describes the task of expression as excruciating. He also elaborates on a similar idea of the writer in *Proust* (1931), when he conceives the author as both an artisan (imposing form on chaos) and a tortured artist (capable of glimpsing the ineffable source of imagination). Many of Beckett’s writers are lonely and isolated figures, especially in the trilogy novels (*Molloy* 1951, *Malone Dies* 1951, *The Unnamable* 1953). Such figures are frequently caught in a tormented act of composition, as if they were perpetually performing in a Passion play or a *danse macabre*.

From this perspective, both Zampanò and Johnny are somewhat Beckettian characters, drawn as they are to the vortex of the all-absorbing process of writing – one that causes them to withdraw from relationships and family ties, and instead isolate themselves in the prison-like, labyrinthine space of their ‘house of (paper) leaves’. When Johnny first comes into contact with Zampanò’s endless work, he reflects on the old man’s state of mind.

Can’t help thinking of old man z here and those pipes in his head working overtime; alchemist to his own secret anguish; *lost in an art of suffering*. Though what exactly was the fire that burned him? [...] the murmur of Zampanò’s thoughts, endlessly searching, reaching, but never quite concluding, barely even pausing, a ruin of pieces, gestures and quests [...]. He tries to escape his invention but never succeeds because for whatever reason he is compelled day and night, week after week, month after month, to continue building the very thing responsible for his incarceration. (*HoL*: 337; my emphasis)

As described in this passage, Zampanò reminds us of the characteristic Beckettian figure Krapp – the old, clownish writer from the 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape* – bent in frustration over his tape recorder, searching his fragmented story/memory for the unique moment when (devoured by the same creative fire as Zampanò) he separated from his beloved and started a life of solitude. Like Krapp, Zampanò is portrayed by Johnny as having ‘a cracked voice, lips barely creasing into a smile, eyes pinned on darkness’ (*HoL*: xx); and as a man ‘who never finished anything, especially the work he would call his masterpiece or his precious darling. His mind never ceased branching out into new territories’ (xxii). Even more compelling – to the point of appearing to be an explicit homage to Beckett – is the fact that both Zampanò and Johnny seem to take after the anonymous protagonist of *The Unnamable*. In that work, the writer, interminably engrossed in the search for a story inside the dark, immense, trapping labyrinth of his brain, can never stop inventing stories: he feels the obligation to write as an internal imperative, despite a fundamental feeling of inadequacy and the almost certainty of failure. He finally says: ‘Where I am I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on’ (Beckett 2010: 134).

In Danielewski’s novel, all the writers seem to be caught in the same trap or labyrinth, almost condemned to go deep inside it and explore its subterranean meanderings in order to be able to write. On the one hand, this plunging into the depths reminds us of Beckett’s conviction that the ‘only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy’ (Beckett 1965: 65). On the other hand, it seems to evoke Blanchot’s identification of the artist’s work with a descent into the Underworld. According to the French writer, only a *katabasis* into the ‘indifferential deep’ that precedes reality and ordinary meaning allows the artist to glimpse the true source of inspiration (*SL*: 158). As Johnny would say in *House of Leaves*, such a view can only be snatched ‘between the lines, between the letters, like a ghost in the mirror’ (*HoL*: 502).

Writers are, predictably, fatally attracted to this deep place; they often become almost addicted to what Blanchot famously describes as the ‘Gaze of Orpheus’. What the myth of the poet Orpheus and the shade of Eurydice teaches us, according to Blanchot, is that artists are obliged, nearly condemned, to descend into the ‘other night’ of the inspiration (*SL*: 167-70) – even though they will never be able to really bring to light what they see: it will remain forever invisible, paradoxically resplendent *in* and *as* its absence (172). For artists, this also means a sort of living death. Johnny describes Zampanò’s experience as a man who ‘lived to feel another kind of death, a closing in of such impenetrable darkness [...] a great coffin’ (*HoL*: 299). In Blanchot’s opinion, this is the only way to catch even an ephemeral shadow of the unreachable source of creativity, which is even described as ‘divine’, so that the artist feels compelled to go back continuously to this risky but sacred place. For this same reason, the photojournalist Will Navidson, after shooting a fragmented film of the labyrinth in his house, writes to his

wife that he needs ‘to go back to that place one more time. Slowly the pieces have been coming together. I’m starting to see that place for what it is, and it’s not for [...] National Geographic. Do you believe in God? [...] God’s a house. [...] What I mean to say is that our House *is* God’ (390).

Divinity can be dangerous: Exodus 33:20 says that ‘no man shall see me and live.’ (In the novel’s footnotes, Blanchot translates the original Latin *non enim videbit me homo et vivet* as ‘Whoever sees God, dies’ (388)). Navidson’s urge to explore the labyrinth nearly costs him his life. He is saved only by his love for his family, and his drive to accomplish his work (in Blanchot’s view); these triumph over his desire for the total annihilation of the self. Whatever knowledge he can ‘rescue’ from this underworld – like Eurydice’s shade – would be lost if he couldn’t bring it to light, even just as a shadowy artefact (*SL*: 171, ff.). (In the same way, Johnny ‘rescues’ whole chunks of Zampanò’s erased text dedicated to the de-formed, or still in-formed, figure of the Minotaur, which I see as symbolizing the deadly works of the imagination). This is the lesson of the house, says Zampanò, quoting another of his invented references: ‘Life is impossible there [...] If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place’ (*HoL*: 387-8).

This description reminds us vividly of the irremediably in-between condition of Beckett’s writers – who are always poised in an unstable balance between the ‘horrible’ demand of the work (*SL*: 108), which irresistibly requires them to be *outside* (themselves), and the need to remain *inside* (themselves), to retain even fragments of their subjectivity and memory, in order to keep living and writing. One of many examples of this is Henry, the protagonist of the 1959 radio play *Embers*. Much of the play takes place beside a ‘sea,’ which most probably exists only in Henry’s head (see Lawley 1980; Esposito 2009). This frighteningly deep and vast expanse seems a sea-monster, which threatens to literally suck him under.<sup>2</sup> ‘Listen to it!’ Henry exclaims. ‘Lips and claws! [*Pause*] Get away from it! Where it couldn’t get at me! [...] And I live on the brink of it! Why? Professional obligations? [...] Family ties? [...] A woman? [...] Some old grave I cannot tear myself away from?’ (Beckett 1986: 258). Perhaps here Beckett is suggesting that one should always engage with the deep space of creation, but try not to be totally engulfed in its darkness or sucked into its ‘black hole’ (as he would put it later in his 1983 ‘closed space’ tale *Worstward Ho* (Gontarski 1996: viii)). The space of literature is a pre-categorical space of negation, one that eludes any ordinary language of representation and allows only an imaginary language, or the ‘language of the imaginary’, according to Blanchot (*SL*: 48). Since this language of the un-word is made only of ‘fundamental sounds’, as Beckett says (1984: 109), totally surrendering to it would simply mean surrendering to death and silence. Hence, Beckett’s characters never stop talking to themselves and telling stories in order to ‘fill the void into which [...] [they are] falling; out of the anguish of this empty time, which will become the infinite time of death; in order not to let this empty time speak, and the only way of silencing it is to force it to say something whatever the cost, to tell a story’ (Blanchot 2003: 212).

In the same way, in *House of Leaves*, Johnny’s creative drive is said to stem from his need to ‘look away’: ‘we all create stories to protect ourselves’, he confesses (*HoL*: 20).



Navidson, on his part, is rescued by an inkling. When he is lost in the labyrinth, he feels he is about to ‘vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza’ (*HoL*: 484). But his camera suddenly manages to capture ‘a tiny fleck of blue crying light into the void. Enough to see, but not enough to see by. The film runs out. Black. A different kind of black’ (489). The blue light helps him to succeed in recording something – even a different, and negative, kind of something – and leaving the labyrinth.

However, much effort is needed to find a way through the labyrinth, and out of the deadly ‘other night’ of inspiration. In his commentary, Zampanò suggests that we should look at the etymology of the word ‘labyrinth’. As he says, the Latin *labor* is akin to the root *labi* meaning to slip, sink, fall, or slide backwards, though the word now is most commonly perceived as meaning hard work. As he says, ‘Implicit in “labyrinth” is a required effort to keep from slipping or falling; in other words, stopping. We cannot relax within those walls, we have to struggle past them’ (114). Finding a way out means learning to name shadows, to create stories out of darkness – no one can emerge ‘except by writing a little’, Blanchot points out (*SL*: 55). But, as Gerald L. Bruns emphasizes in his discussion of the hardships of exploring Blanchot’s ‘space of literature’, this can be a tough and disorienting task.

The event resembles the prophetic invasion of an alien divinity that breaks one off from the world. No one asks to be a prophet, words stuffed in one’s mouth, raving in the desert. Responsibility takes the form of exposure, being exposed [...] to something like an empty, abandoned space. In this space, one is no longer a cognitive subject that can take *the measure of its surroundings*. Rather, the subject has been turned out of its house, deprived of any refuge; it is now a restless, itinerant ego, if ego is still the word. (Bruns 1997: 62-3; my emphasis)

In *House of Leaves*, Johnny is still unaware of the ‘measureless experience of the deep’ (*SL*: 171), and thinks he can finish Zampanò’s chaotic work merely by imposing order on it – that is, by confining it and himself within a controlled space. He seals the windows of his room, and locks the door, in order to prevent the risk of having a single word wasted or dissipated. (In *The Unnamable*, the writer similarly muses: ‘Yes, we must have walls: I need walls, good and thick. I need a prison [...], for me alone. I’ll go there now, I’ll put me in it’ (Beckett 2010: 130)). Then, perhaps feeling the same frustration as Navidson and Zampanò for the shifting reference points that undermine the accomplishment of their work, Johnny also fastens several measuring tapes to the floor and walls of his apartment, criss-crossing them up and down. ‘That way’, he says, ‘I can say for sure if there are any shifts. So far the dimensions of my room remain true to the mark’. He realizes, in fact: ‘This was about space. I wanted a closed, inviolate and most of all immutable space’ (*HoL*: xviii). But his purely spatial precautions turn out to be useless when he starts having nightmares and feeling disorientated. Feeling as if he were in a dark, mysterious region where he is ‘outside’ of himself (*SL*: 31), he resembles Kafka’s beast in *The Burrow*, as described by Blanchot: ‘The more the burrow seems solidly closed

to the outside, the greater the danger that you will be closed in with the outside, delivered to the peril without any means of escape' (168). Here, in the immeasurable void of the other night, 'the beast hears the other beast', the 'monstrous thing' that is nothing else but itself, become the 'other' (169). Only this frightening encounter – only this temporary incarceration in a space of darkness and nothingness, where 'here coincides with nowhere' (48) – allows the writer to truly respond to the call of inspiration.

However, since this space is the original void from which everything comes, and which suddenly reveals itself as such, it also 'resists' mapping and/or representation (*HoL*: 90). This explains why the explorers of Navidson's labyrinth, and the writers who try to describe it, are destined to fail. Before Johnny began to impose order on Zampanò's chaos, the latter had already embarked on the impossible mission of trying to portray the ungraspable architecture in a rational way. What he wrote was merely 'endless snarls of words [...] years of years of ink pronouncements' (xvii), combined with academic jargon and techniques – such as an abundance of verbose footnotes 'burrowing' tunnels into the main text, becoming 'circular hallways' (Askin 2012: 111).

In Danielewski's book, however, this excess of wordiness is counterbalanced by its opposite: many of the pages are almost totally blank, the words dissolving into 'empty rooms'. In Askin's opinion, 'this oscillation between the over-spilling of narrative and its vanishing, the white and black noise of narrative, [...] the too much and the not enough' produces the effect of 'disintegrat[ing] narrative as we know it' (2012: 111). A very similar effect is achieved by Beckett, despite the apparent differences of style between the two authors (Danielewski's exuberance versus Beckett's progressive paring down), in the contrast between the breathless ramblings of his characters and the silences that continually undercut their speeches. They seem to both fear, and long for, the absence of words. In *House of Leaves* Johnny might almost be aware of this fact when he abruptly interrupts his tirade on Zampanò's verbosity (his endless 'designating, describing, recreating' (xvii)), admitting defeat at his task: 'Find your own words; I have no more; or plenty more, but why? And all to tell – what?' (xvii).

*Nothing*, is what Beckett's Watt would probably reply to the question. Watt is the main character of his 1953 novel *Watt*, whose name is usually interpreted as the interrogative *what?* (Doherty 1971, among others). Inside a house as mysterious as Danielewski's, Watt's inexplicable relationship with a certain Mister (or Master) Knott (another play on words: *not* or *nought*) is also very likely predicated on an ontological question. Watt, who used to be fixated on finding the exact logical meaning and measure of things, suddenly finds himself (as Knott's manservant) unable to understand and define the nature of the latter's house. He finds the place incomprehensible as he runs through the halls in search of the elusive Mr. Knott – that is, in search of an explanation to the 'unintelligible intricacies' (Beckett 1988: 73) of the nothing that abides there. Watt's problem, as György Dragomàn (2000, online) points out, is the basic Beckettian struggle of 'seeing the unseeable, knowing the unknowable, and speaking about the unspeakable'. This perception, and the labyrinthine structure of the novel, strongly suggest a comparison with Danielewski's work. As there, the story is

told by several narrators, all disturbingly unreliable – just like Zampanò and Johnny. Like the latter, who openly admits having manipulated Zampanò's narration of Navidson's events (*HoL*: 16), the narrator Sam in *Watt* goes as far as to interpolate his own words into Watt's story, recollected in bits and pieces; he essentially edits Watt's own narrative, creating 'something' from 'nothing' (Beckett 1988: 76). The resulting narration is 'stiff with the word "not"' (Butler Lance 1984: 47), and full of 'insanely parodistic' (Dragomàn 2000) footnotes and addenda. As in *House of Leaves*, these achieve the effect of undermining the whole construction of the house/text; they reduce the non-Euclidean geometry to its inherent indeterminacy and illegibility.

### The fleeting voice of the artist's inspiration

Zampanò's critical and erudite cartography of Navidson's text is not just inefficacious; we quickly also become aware of his unreliability. As Johnny soon finds out and tells us, *The Navidson Record* never actually existed. Most of the books cited in Zampanò's footnotes don't exist either. This fact establishes in the readers a profound sense of indeterminacy that contrasts oddly with the apparent preciseness of the scholarly analysis. Furthermore, the old man, despite being blind, always writes about *seeing*: his vocabulary is strictly linked to the sense of sight, in terms of 'light, space, shape, line, colour, focus, tone, contrast, movement, rhythm, perspective, and composition' (*HoL*: xxi). This is particularly paradoxical in describing a film whose subject is 'the sight of darkness' (xxi). In Johnny's words, in fact, the walls of the labyrinth 'are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. They are without texture. Even to the keenest eye [...] they remain unreadable' (423). They have no 'image. No colour. Just blackness' (503).

As Mark Hansen (2004) points out, this explains the impossibility of recording the labyrinth's, contours by any visual means – either the human eye, or the sophisticated movie cameras of the explorers. Sight, the rational sense *par excellence*, cannot fulfil its function in a space of nothingness, of 'sightless' and 'shapeless depth' (*SL*: 33). The only sense that might be capable of perceiving its invisible depths is hearing – a sense with more tactile and affective capabilities, and more closely linked to the human inner dimension. In fact, the explorers of the labyrinth report that echoes are the only possible way to measure distances: 'where there is no Echo there is no description of space' (*HoL*: 50). Thinking back to Zampanò, we suddenly realize that blindness, in circumstances like these, is less a disability than a kind of negative capability. In that condition, a person might be capable of seeing something that appears *in* and *as* its invisibility. Zampanò was able to see through the augmented eye of his imagination; the house of leaves he has built is only the projection of his inner vision.

Indeed, following this line of thought, Zampanò – in search for the essence of art – might only be able to catch a glimpse of its 'inessential' quality (*SL*: 168). But like all writers, he feels compelled to translate what he finds into words, trying to define what is ontologically indefinable. As a scholar, his major fault appears to be writing too much. In

this he forgets the philosophy that he himself derived from the invented book *The Architecture of Art*. There he concludes that after risking more, gathering more, processing more, and imagining more, the writer will learn that 'less means more' (*HoL*: 420).

Despite Zampanò's excess, his experience is an important one: only through the ear, indeed, can a writer hope to perceive the interminable and incessant murmuring of silence, and transcribe it by writing something. Blanchot affirms this point when he argues that 'to write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking – and since it cannot, in order to become its echo, I have, in a way, to silence it' (*SL*: 27; see also 184). Similarly, he also claims that 'The poet only speaks by listening' (226). Beckett too insistently depicts characters absorbed by listening to voices in the dark. In *The Unnamable*, for instance, the writer says: 'A voice like this, who can check it, it tries everything. It's blind, it seeks me blindly, in the dark. It seeks a mouth, to enter into' (Beckett 2010: 130). In another place is this thought: 'It will be the silence, full of murmurs, distant cries. The usual silence, spent listening, spent waiting, waiting for the voice' (133).

We might assume that this 'voice' that suddenly speaks, as if it were real, is the work of art itself, or the general force of creation. It speaks to the characters' ears from the obscure and indefinable space in which they are plunged – both inside and outside themselves – and where their eyes can only stare into the dark of the void. Thus, writers are almost condemned to enter this alien region and wait patiently for the voice, since only hearing it will enable them not merely to *make* (to give form to chaos, and produce meaning), but to *create*: to translate the received message into art. Yet, the uncertainty of hearing the voice, and the obscurity of the message, may lead to a fundamental indeterminacy, or even silence.

In *House of Leaves*, explorers of the depths of this space mostly report hearing only incessant, murmuring silences. But after a while – in the distance at first, then getting closer and closer – are also heard 'strange ever-present roar[s], sounds, voices, sometimes just a few, sometimes a multitude, and one by one, all of them starting to scream' (*HoL*: 503). The darkness, indeed, is inhabited by a voice, Johnny comes to realize: a voice that is 'invisible to the eye' but that continues to speak 'day and night, year after year' (518). Johnny knows it cannot be 'the voice of god: but whose?' (298). Eventually he figures out that the labyrinth may actually be the vortex of creation in his own brain. And this causes him to doubt the existence of Zampanò as anything other than just a voice in his head.

A moment comes where suddenly everything seems impossibly far and confused, my sense of self de-realized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe [...] that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's work implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me where *I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice* [...] *possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own*; inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally any association I can claim as my own [...]

relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what's worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò. Though by whom I have no idea. (*HoL*: 326; my emphasis)

The process of writing imposes on the artist a state of impersonality, of dissolution of the self (the 'I' gives way to 'Someone' or 'they' (*SL*: 30-1)), till becoming an 'empty place' (55). Johnny experiences a kind of 'recursivity' taking place between the container and the contained (Hansen 2004: 634); his mother, gradually revealing herself to be a crucial facet of the novel's prismatic paradigm on which authoriality is predicated, accuses the Director of her asylum (another variant of the labyrinth trap) of robbing her of 'her memory, her ability to function, her chance to flee or feel. The "I," no matter where it stands, still stands for the same thing: loss of self' (*HoL*: 615).

This loss of the subjective 'I' reminds us of the concept of the writer as basically a mediator or a medium – a concept that permeates the works of both Blanchot and Beckett. In *The Space of Literature*, the former describes the poet as living 'in the *separation* were the still wordless rhythm and the voice that says nothing but does not cease to speak must become power to name in him alone who hears it, who is nothing but attunement to it, a mediator capable of informing it' (*SL*: 226); in *The Unnamable*, Beckett's protagonist describes this condition in explicitly acoustic terms: 'Perhaps that's what I am: the thing that divides the world in two – on the one side the outside, on the other side the inside. [...] I'm the partition. [...] I'm the tympanum' (Beckett 2010: 99-100). In Beckett's view, and Danielewski's as well, the act of creating dispossesses writers from themselves; but, conversely, it also obliges them to perpetually listen to voices – to be stalked by them, possessed, invaded. This is the case, even though, as *The Unnamable* laments, 'It's not to me they're talking, it's not of me they're talking' (100). As Johnny himself realizes in *House of Leaves*, it is from those voices that he derives his imperative to dwell in that liminal place; and he can only hope to be delivered from their influence and take his *leave*<sup>3</sup> of them by finishing the text.

Johnny is also painfully aware that with Zampanò's body reduced to ashes, and nothing remaining of him but fragments of a story, all he retains of the old man is a vanishing echo 'trapped' inside him. And the voice is now fading, drifting off, perhaps dying: 'his voice has gotten even fainter, till *echoing in the chambers of my heart*, sounding those eternal tones of grief. [...] I can see myself clearly. *I'm in a black room and I'm hollow*' (*HoL*: 338; my emphasis). Likewise, Henry, Beckett's protagonist in *Embers*, also continuously tries to extract some communication – even just a sentence or a word – from the voices he once heard distinctly, but which are now relentlessly fading and 'leaving' him. He hopes that if he finally finishes the story he has been working on for ages, this will put an end to his torment.

In Henry's story, an old man called Bolton waits in the dark ('no light [...] and no sound of any kind' (Beckett 1986: 254)) for a doctor to come and end his suffering with an injection. Although it is not explicitly stated, when Bolton pleads with Holloway, it seems clear that he is looking to be put out of his misery (his excruciating impulse to

create) with an ‘anaesthetic’ (263). Bolton wants to get out of the depths of nothing, and put an end to his wanderings in the dark region of ‘midnight’ (255). (Significantly, the doctor is called *Holloway*, like the explorer who dies in *House of Leaves*’ labyrinth – unable to find his own *way* out of its *hollow* chambers). Like Henry, Bolton is presumably in search of a conclusion to his story; and traps himself and Holloway in a sealed room, so as not to waste a single word (‘The waste [*Pause.*] Words’ (264)). Unfortunately, no new voice or sound capable of giving him rest lightens the obscurity of his original situation: ‘great trouble, not a sound, only the embers, sound of dying, dying glow’ (255).

In *House of Leaves* this same experience of hollowness is essentially lived by Johnny – evoked by images such as the trapping labyrinth inside the ever-shifting walls of the house (also described as made of ‘molten magma’ (*HoL*: 383)) that reveals itself as an allegory for the ‘space of literature’. His feeling of disorientation might be due both to the terrible shifts he feels within him<sup>4</sup>, to the point of losing his own subjectivity, and to the elusiveness of the voice of artistic inspiration. This voice often fades or vanishes before one can catch what it says – before one can bind it in some immutable way, and silence (at least for a little) its incessant flow of primordial, ungraspable murmurs. Too often, in fact, when the fire of creation burns out, writers feel nothing inside them but dying embers or ashes.

‘Embers’, indeed, are what Johnny expressly calls the dark remnants of ‘stories lost or taken’ (*HoL*: 150), but also what is left of his memory (and consequently of himself) when he tells us that he has lost the REM phase of his sleep (48). The play on words (REM/embers) combines, as in Beckett’s play *Embers*, the ‘other night’ of the inspiration with the obliteration of memory. As well, ashes are a metaphor that Danielewski frequently uses. Navidson’s house is on Ash Tree lane; the walls of the labyrinth are described as ash-coloured; and ashes are all that is left of Zampanò’s corpse, identified with the ‘trunk’ (21) that contains his unfinished writing (and that reminds us of Beckett’s own “trunk” manuscripts’ (Bair 1990: 347)). Finally, the fictional *House of Leaves* manuscript itself is reduced to ash. When Navidson is trapped inside the labyrinth, with nothing to do but read and hope for rescue, he burns the pages one by one so he can read the others. ‘Ash peels off into the surrounding emptiness [...] and then as the fire retreats [...] the book is gone, leaving nothing behind but invisible traces’ (467).

This ‘metafictional’ destruction of the book-within-the-book (see Gibbons 2010; Lord 2014) establishes a circular loop that coalesces cause and effect, beginning and end. The book is supposedly there before Zampanò has finished writing it, and before the very actions that destroy it are narrated. Where does the story begin? Where does it end? Who wrote it in the first place? This image, Ouroboros-like, seems to literally translate Blanchot’s concept of a work of art as an eternal commencement, a circular starting over, a never-ending labyrinth with no point of entry or exit (*SL*: 30, and *passim*).

### Conclusion: Literature as a chamber of echoes

It is a challenging task to translate the measureless space of silence and nothingness, as well as the artist's measureless anguish, into words – and till more so to reduce it into the confines of a book (*HoL*: 327). This task is always, as both Blanchot and Beckett argue, destined to failure. The writer's only chance, as Beckett says, is to 'Fail again. Fail better' (1996: 89). The goal might be to conceive an imaginary language, or a 'language of the imaginary' that, as much as possible, exceeds its merely conceptual function: not words conveying images, but words *as* images (*SL*: 24).

Of course, despite all the foregoing, writing is not really impossible. A prime example is Danielewski himself, whose work – when it first appeared in 2000 – was acclaimed as a true revelation. Even at a time when the novel, or all of print literature, seems doomed, a striking and truly innovative book can always give us hope. Indeed, the shifting and precarious nature of the novel's construction seems an analogy for the book itself; and its burning in the story, leaving nothing but the ashes or dust of words, might be seen as the author's fear of seeing his work 'perishing in a flood of darkness'. As Johnny puts it, 'no matter how large or how real' a writer's work may appear, it can easily be lost (*HoL*: 261).

It is worth noting that before Johnny became involved with Zampanò's manuscript, he worked in a tattoo parlour. One day he has a panic attack, but is able to overcome it when his face and arms are accidentally splattered with purple ink; this grants him the 'contrast' he feels he needs, 'defining, marking, and at least for the moment, preserving' him (72). Conversely, he is offended when the permanence of the tattoo ink is questioned, and he sputters and howls with indignation (261). But permanence, especially for characters and stories, is often hard to achieve. Near the end of the novel (646), Johnny quotes a line from Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927): 'Un livre est un grand cimetière où sur la plupart des tombes on ne peut plus lire les noms effacés' (A book is a large cemetery where most of the names on the tombs are worn away, and can no longer be read). Maybe Danielewski too grieves for the precariousness of literature, as he writes in one of the poetic fragments in the Appendix.

Little solace comes  
 To those who grieve  
 When thoughts keep drifting  
 As walls keep shifting  
 And this great blue world of ours  
 Seems a *house of leaves*  
 Moments before the wind. (563; my emphasis)

Danielewski's 'house of (paper) leaves' is destined to be wiped out by the same winds of time and change. Nevertheless, it can leave, and be, a trace: 'however imperfect, however incomplete [...] an echo from across the years' (514). It can even conjure up echoes of

voices from the past, including the echoes of other authors' musings – such as those of Blanchot and Beckett on the workings of literature itself.

As I said earlier, Beckett seems such a significant presence in the book that I almost see Danielewski's ingenious work as a resonating chamber for the Irish writer's imagery, especially for the latter's depiction of the imagination as an echoing soundscape. Strikingly reverberating within the novel is a scene from Beckett's 1952 play *Waiting for Godot*. The two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are in an 'indescribable' desert place, one that Vladimir calls 'nothing', although actually "There's a tree" (Beckett 1986: 81).<sup>5</sup> They hear the same multitude of faint voices and growling murmurs heard by Johnny in *House of Leaves*. These voices seem to emerge from the underworld; they are precious but ephemeral, sources of inspiration always on the verge of oblivion. The two men's reactions to these mysterious noises form one of Beckett's most evocative passages, which is worth quoting to conclude this discussion on the evanescent fabric of the imagination.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: *Like leaves.*

....

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

....

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: *Likes ashes.*

ESTRAGON: *Like leaves.* (58; my emphasis)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Blanchot also wrote two pieces on Beckett: a short essay in 1959 ("Where Now? Who Now?"), and a tribute called 'Oh All to End' a year after Beckett's death in 1989.

<sup>2</sup> In *House of Leaves*, the 'sucking' process of creation is itself continually identified with a beast or monster. In an iconic passage, Johnny speaks of Zampanò 'making his way [...] around the walls of another evening, a slow and tedious progress but one that begins to yield, somehow, the story of his creature darkness [...] jaws lunging open, claws protracting'. Afterwards, Johnny hints at his own 'scarred' existence as belonging to the same process, or rather, as being itself the creature to be born: 'and just so you understand where I'm coming from, I consider "...long past midnight" one claw, and "empty hallways" another' (*HoL*: 48).



<sup>3</sup> Danielewski may have played with the word ‘leaves’ contained in the title: beyond being the plural of a tree and/or book ‘leaf’, it might allude to Johnny’s recalcitrant presence (as the origin/ator of a work of art). Johnny’s surname is Truant, in fact, supposedly meaning that he is away (from work) without leave. His mother often laments his absence (‘Johnny is truant and his mother ruined’ (*HoL*: 631)) and Zampanò wishes that ‘perhaps in the margins of darkness’ he ‘could create a son who is not missing’ (543). An enigmatic kind of father-son relationship between Zampanò and Johnny is also hinted at by Johnny (404).

<sup>4</sup> In the introduction, Johnny warns readers: ‘you’ll detect slow and subtle shifts going on all around you, more importantly shifts in you. [...] you’ll care only about the darkness and you’ll watch it for hours. [...] then no matter where you are [...] even in the comforts of your home, you’ll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by’ (*HoL*: xxiii).

<sup>5</sup> The figure of the tree is often repeated in *House of Leaves*. The main images are that of the tree on Ash Tree Lane (whose leaves the title supposedly references); and that of the sacred Yggdrasil, the ash tree from Norse mythology, which is illustrated at the very end of the novel (*HoL*: 709).

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