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WRITING OTHERWISE THAN SEEING

Writing and Exteriority in Maurice Blanchot

Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed,

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in auditorium XII, on the 25th of May, 2007, at 12 o'clock.

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Abstract

Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), the French writer and novelist, is one of the most important figures in post-war French literature and philosophy. The main intention of this study is to figure out his position and originality in the field of phenomenology. Since this thesis concentrates on the notion of vision in Blanchot's work, its primary context is the post-war discussion of the relation between seeing and thinking in France, and particularly the discussion of the conditions of non-violent vision and language. The focus will be on the philosophical conversation between Blanchot and his contemporary philosophers.

The central premise is the following: Blanchot relates the criticism of vision to the criticism of the representative model of language. In this thesis, Blanchot's definition of literary language as "the refusal to reveal anything" is read as a reference pointing in two directions. First, to Hegel's idea of naming as negativity which reveals Being incrementally to man, and second, to Heidegger's idea of poetry as the simultaneity of revealing and withdrawal; the aim is to prove that eventually Blanchot opposes both Hegel's idea of naming as a gradual revelation of the totality of being and Heidegger's conception of poetry as a way of revealing the truth of Being.

My other central hypothesis is that for Blanchot, the criticism of the privilege of vision is always related to the problematic of the exteriority. The principal intention is to trace how Blanchot's idea of language as infinity and exteriority challenges both the Hegelian idea of naming as conceptualizing things and Heidegger's concept of language as a way to truth (as aletheia). The intention is to show how Blanchot, with his concepts of fascination, resemblance and image, both affirms and challenges the central points of Heidegger's thinking on language.

Blanchot's originality in, and contribution to, the discussion about the violence of vision and language is found in his answer to the

question of how to approach the other by avoiding the "worst violence". I claim that by criticizing the idea of language as naming both in Hegel and Heidegger, Blanchot generates an account of language which, since it neither negates nor creates Being, is beyond the metaphysical opposition between Being and non-Being.

Acknowledgements

I began to read Blanchot in Athens in 1996 when I worked there as a member of the Finnish research group "Mythical Bodies and European Thought", led by Ph.D. Kirsti Simonsuuri. Kirsti encouraged me to read the history of the Orphic myth through Blanchot's version of Orpheus and Eurydice. I want to express my warmest thanks to Kirsti for her hospitality in Athens, her supervision as the leader of the research group, and her friendship during all these years.

After Athens, my work with Blanchot proceeded for a long time only slowly and painfully. During the years 1998-2001 I was working as the assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Helsinki, and my children Jalmari and Kaarina were born in 1996 and in 1999. I had the opportunity to work on Blanchot again when Ph.D. Päivi Mehtonen invited me to participate in her research group in 2001. The first drafts of my dissertation were written during my assignment as a researcher in Päivi's project "Illuminating Darkness. Rhetoric, Poetics, and European Writing" in 2001. After this project funding ended I had an opportunity to continue and finish my work in the research project "Encounters in Art and Philosophy" funded by the the Academy of Finland and led by PhD Kuisma Korhonen.

I wish to express my heartful thanks to Kirsti Simonsuuri, Päivi Mehtonen and Kuisma Korhonen for their valuable comments and guidance, and, above all, for having faith in my project during the writing process. I am greatful to Professors Hannu Riikonen and Heta Pyrhönen in the Department of Comparative Literature for their support and patience during all these years. I thank them also for commenting on the final draft of my dissertation.

Finally, I want to thank my supervisor, PhD Outi Pasanen for her valuable advice and encouragement especially in the early phases of this work. I am especially thankful to Jari Kauppinen and Markku Lehtinen for their help and feedback at all stages of my work and

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I Introduction

Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), the French writer and novelist, is one of the most important figures in post-war French literature and philosophy. A whole generation of contemporary writers and theorists, among them Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), Georges Bataille (1897-1962), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Paul de Man (1919-1983) acknowledge their debt to Blanchot's thinking.[1] From the 1940s onwards, Blanchot's work has participated in and influenced the discussion of all philosophical movements in the field of French philosophy: phenomenology in the 1940s, structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s, and post-structuralism in the 1960s, including the discussion of the relation between philosophy, ethics, and politics which has been the prevalent theme in Blanchot's writings throughout his career, and to which French discussion turned in the 1980s.

Blanchot's influence on the movements of post-structuralism and deconstruction has been remarkable. Citing Ullrich Haase and William Large, "What has come to be known as post-structuralism, which has had such a decisive impact on Anglo-American critical theory, is completely unthinkable without [Blanchot]".[2] Haase and Large even claim that "it is difficult to find an idea in Derrida's work that is not present in the writings of Blanchot".[3] Blanchot scholar Gerald L. Bruns in his turn writes that "the notions of language that turn up in the writings of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze are directly traceable to Blanchot".[4]

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[1] See for example *L'Œil du bœuf* 14/15 (May 1998), which is dedicated to Blanchot.
[2] Haase & Large 2001, 1.
[3] Haase & Large 2001, 131.
[4] Bruns 1997, 286. For example, Paul de Man's notions of "blindness" and "error" and Roland Barthes's idea of the death of the author refer to Blanchot's ideas on language. Derrida's ideas of the "undecidability" of language and thought have also been influenced by Blanchot's thinking. The relation between Blanchot and Derrida is to be understood as a dialogue. Derrida pays homage to Blanchot, for example, in *Parages* (1986, 55). Blanchot, in his turn, confesses Derrida's influence already in *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'Entretien Infini,* 1969), writing that "these pages are written at the margin of books by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Eugen Fink, and Jean Granier [...] and of several of Jacques Derrida's essays, collected in *L'écriture*

As a writer whose texts blur all the existing genre distinctions and definitions, Blanchot's position in the field of literature, criticism and philosophy is a complex matter to define. Typical of Blanchot's writing is the linking together of manifold philosophical questions, which stretch from the various thinkers in the fields of both philosophy and literature. He is known as a difficult writer, who defines the task of a literary writer as writing with one's "eyes on the horizon of philosophy",[5] and whose writings are characterized by deliberate but cryptic references to such philosophers as Heidegger, Hegel, Bataille, Levinas, Foucault, and Nietzsche – to mention a few.

The main reason for the ambiguity of Blanchot's theoretical texts is that he hardly ever mentions his references. One reason for Blanchot's withdrawal from naming is purely practical: most of his essays are originally published in journals, and only afterwards collected into volumes.[6] A more profound reason for not naming references can be found in Blanchot's idea of writing as anonymity, neutrality and exteriority. To write means writing without a proper name, without subjectivity: the one who writes gives him/herself up to the otherness of writing. "I" do not write, the voice heard in language does not belong to me, but to the neutrality of writing. Although writing is for Blanchot an endless conversation with other writers and

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et la difference" (IC 452, n. 16. See also "Thanks (Be Given) to Jacques Derrida" in *Blanchot Reade,* 317-323). Common to Derrida and Blanchot is an ethical relation to language as something which cannot be analysed by following the logic of representation.

[5] It is almost a convention in Blanchot studies to point out the unconventional nature of Blanchot's writings which causes difficulties in reading him. Emmanuel Levinas, Blanchot's lifelong friend, confesses that "It is not easy to speak of Blanchot" and adds that "The best pages that have been devoted to him in recent years have fortunately abstained – as I shall – from claiming to understand a contemporary and a Blanchot 'better than he understood himself' " (Levinas 1996, 157), whereas Paul de Man predicts "future prominence" for "the little-publicized and difficult writer, Maurice Blanchot" (de Man 1971, 61). Thomas Wall, in his turn, notes that Blanchot does not "make a contribution to arts and letters in any conventional sense", which makes any reading of his work "unconventionally difficult as well" (Wall 1999, 97).

[6] Most of Blanchot's essays have appeared originally in the form of book reviews in various journals, such as *Journal des débats*, *Critique*, and *La Nouvelle revue française*. These essays have been gathered in *Faux-Pas* (1943), *The Work of Fire* (*La Part du Feu*, 1949), *The Space of Literature* (*L'Espace littéraire*, 1955), *The Book to Come* (*Le Livre à venir*, 1959), and *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'entretien infini*, 1969).

philosophers, for him respecting the otherness of the other, or the value of friendship, demands not to pull the other into the limelight, but instead letting the other withdraw and disappear.[7] To be a contemporary writer does not mean to be in the role of an eyewitness or an observer, but rather to witness through the movement of writing that which remains invisible in the bright light of publicity. The task of a literary work is not to open an all-seeing perspective on contemporary reality, nor to show the nation its way to the future – it is to ask its own way of being. From the perspective of literature's refusal to politically commit we can also understand Blanchot's own refusal of publicity; there exist only two or three obscure photographs and not a single interview of him – the author whose significant contribution to the contemporary field of literature and philosophy has been one of the most visible.

The paradoxical relation between visibility and invisibility is important in all Blanchot's writings. Central to Blanchot's writings, both his essays and fictional stories, is the problematic status of vision. For Blanchot, that which appears in language is never unambiguously present or absent; nor is it possible to objectify that which appears. In his stories, Blanchot is interested in that which resists becoming visible and knowable, and which we nevertheless have to keep trying to attain. The whole of Blanchot's work could be claimed to argue against the idea formulated in *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'Entretien Inifini,* 1969): "Knowledge: gaze. Language: medium wherein meaning remains ideally proposed to the immediate reading of the look."[8]

Blanchot's narratives are always at least on one level narratives of vision. Characteristic of the experience of vision in Blanchot's stories is the becoming conscious of vision precisely at the moment when it is challenged. This sudden incident can be the unexpected

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[7] The concepts of "other" and "otherness" are central in this study. In Levinas's writings, there are at least three versions of other: *autre*, *autrui*, and *Autrui*. In Levinas the use of the capital letter in *Autre* refers to the uncontrollability of the other by the self. In Levinas's ethics, *Autre* refers normally to infinity or God, whereas *Autrui* refers to the alterity of the other human being.
[8] IC 252.

gaze of the other, as the gaze of the dead woman in *The Death Sentence* (*L'arrêt de mort*, 1948): this story, which can be read as an investigation of the gaze, asks what is it to see another person, and what is it to see something invisible, and what is it to testify to the presence of the other without light? The unexpected event that hurts both the mind and the eyes is in Blanchot often an experience of sightlessness, caused by the experience of something exterior or impossible to see, as happens to the narrator in *The Madness of the Day* (*La Folie du Jour*, 1973). In Blanchot's stories, painful for the one who sees is the effort to understand and to grasp the other, the exterior; that which remains beyond the scope of both external and internal vision. A distinctive feature of Blanchot's stories is to describe situations where *not seeing* is impossible and painful – as happens in *Thomas the Obscure* (*Thomas l'Obscur*, 1941/1950) and *The Madness of the Day* (*Folie du Jour,* 1973). Especially Blanchot's later fragmentary writings challenge the idea of language as seeing, revealing, representing and thinking. However, the source of inspiration for this study was in the following observation: although the suspicion of "the violence of vision" is central in all his writings, he nevertheless seems to acknowledge its unavoidability.

Despite the growing interest in Blanchot's work during the last decades, both in the field of philosophy and literary studies, the importance of the persistent theme of visibility and non-visibility in his work has so far not been analysed.[9] That theme of vision, and

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[9] One can mention the following exceptions. Martin Jay presents Blanchot shortly in his study *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought,* alongside Levinas and Lyotard, as a thinker whose "remarkable work" is "preoccupied with visual themes" (Jay 1993, 552-555). Adams Sitney owes some general accounts of Blanchot's non-visual language in his "Afterword" to *The Gaze of Orpheus* (1981), a collection of Blanchot's essays. Steven Shaviro's *Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory* (1990) notes in passing the interrelatedness of visual concerns and the notion of experience in Blanchot. In his *Radical Passivity. Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (1999) Thomas Carl Wall examines the notion of image in Blanchot in relation to Kant and Heidegger. In the field of philosophy, however, I can mention several studies made on the dominance of vision which have influenced my study of the relation between seeing, language and thinking in Blanchot. Martin Jay surveys in his *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993) the post-modern suspicion of vision particularly in the French philosophical discussion. David Michel Levin's *Opening of Vision* (1988) as well as his work *Philosopher's Gaze*:

especially the relation of vision to writing, seemed to be a kind of blind spot in Blanchot studies, urged me to take it as the starting point of my study in order to figure out Blanchot's position and originality in the post-war philosophical conversation in the field of phenomenology on the relations between seeing, language and thinking.[10]

Since this study concentrates on the notion of vision in Blanchot's work, its primary context will be the post-war discussion of the relation between seeing and thinking in France, and in particularly the discussion of the conditions of non-violent vision and language. The most relevant philosophical context for Blanchot's criticism of vision appears, not so surprisingly, to be phenomenology: the presence of the central figures of phenomenology (Hegel, Heidegger, Levinas) in Blanchot's work, both at the level of vocabulary and of philosophical questions, is undeniable from the beginning. My aim is to prove that Blanchot's analysis of the relation between language and vision – as well as his thesis "Speaking is not Seeing" ("*Parler, ce n'est pas voir*") becomes understandable in the context of phenomenology. Although it could have been possible to clarify Blanchot's thinking also through the work of Bataille, Merleau-Ponty or Lacan, in defining the framework for this study, I have concentrated on names which in my hypothesis have been most relevant to the question of vision in Blanchot: Hegel, Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida.

For Blanchot's generation in France, the main philosophical influence after the war came from the phenomenology of Husserl and his student Heidegger. As I will argue, especially Heidegger's analysis

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Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment (1999) have introduced me to the philosophical discussion concerning different kinds of seeing. In relation to Heidegger's criticism of vision, William McNeill's study *The Glance of the Eye. Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Ends of Theory* (1999) has been helpful.

[10] The studies written on the theme of the "gaze" in Blanchot's work have concentrated on Blanchot's theory of reading and writing, presented in his famous essay "The Gaze of Orpheus" ("*Le Regard d'Orphée*") and in the other essays of *The Space of Literature* (*L'Espace litteraire*, 1955). See for instance Chantal Michel, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée* (Saint-Genouph: Librairie Nizet, 1997).

of the dominance of vision, as well as his criticism of representative thinking, influenced enormously Blanchot's thinking. The way Blanchot questions the power of vision participates in the post-Heideggerian discussion of the ways to escape the metaphysics of presence.[11] In Derrida's analysis of the metaphysics of presence, vision as the model for knowledge is understood as a mode of presence, both as the independence of the present moment from past and future, and as the self-presence of and self-certainty of consciousness. The object of this kind of vision is in its turn independent of any (temporal) context. From the idea that vision is knowledge, and that the known can thus be assimilated to the knower, it follows also that a thing can become the object of knowledge only insofar as it is form, which is in a superior position in relation to matter.[12]

In my hypothesis, Blanchot relates the criticism of vision to the criticism of the representative model of language. He affirms Heidegger's analysis, according to which the privilege given to vision follows from the analogy made between seeing and presence in

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[11] In his analysis of the history of philosophy Heidegger claimed that in objectifying Being metaphysics neither thinks of Being as such nor the difference between Being and beings. The task of philosophy is therefore first to reawaken our understanding of the meaning of the nowadays forgotten question, and secondly, to ask this very question, namely, what do we mean by saying that something "is" or "appears"? For Heidegger, the metaphysics of presence culminates in the idea of a representation of a self for itself, which denies the meaning of all temporality. In his introduction to Heidegger's thinking Timothy Clark gives the following definition of the term metaphysics: "Metaphysics is traditionally the field of philosophy which asks the most fundamental questions about what things are. Here 'fundamental' means not just questions of the empirical kind that could in principle be resolved by experiment (such as that of the ultimate composition of matter, or the energy content of the universe), but questions which would remain even after all such issues were answered. Metaphysical questions would be: 'what is the nature of number?'; 'what is the distinction between the material and the non-material?'; 'what is cause and effect?'; 'why is there anything at all rather than nothing?' and, finally, 'what do we mean anyway when we say of something that it 'is' or ask 'what is…?' " (Clark 2002, 11).
According to Manfred Frank, among the most successful ways to interpret "metaphysics" in Heidegger is to understand it to signify "objectifying thinking" (Frank 1992, 218).
[12] See Derrida's analysis of vision as the model for knowledge in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (*La Voix et le Phénomène: introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1967).

Western metaphysics.[13] As Heidegger states, in metaphysics vision comes to be the privileged mode of access to beings, since in vision things appear most steadily present.[14] From the analogy established between vision and presence follows in turn the idea of seeing as the precondition of knowing, as well as the privilege of form over matter[15] – both prejudices which Heidegger relates to the metaphysics of presence.[16] I will argue that Blanchot's notion of language opposes the representative model of language, according to which, as Derrida formulates, "Representative thought precedes and governs communication which transports the 'idea', the signified content."[17]

My hypothesis is that the aim of Blanchot's early essays on language is to challenge the representative idea of writing, which Derrida defines as "a theory of the sign as a representation of the idea, which itself represents the perceived thing".[18] As Derrida explains,

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[13] BT 187.

[14] GA 34, 12. Heidegger writes: "Seeing, or having or keeping something in view, is indeed the predominant, most obvious, most direct and indeed the most impressive and extensive way of having something present. On account of its exceptional way of making-present, sensible vision attains the role of the exemplary model for knowing, knowing taken as an apprehending of entities" (GA 34, 159-60).

[15] In Heidegger's analysis, the privilege given to the notion of form follows from the notion of representation, grounded on determination of Being as presence. As he summarizes in "The Origin of the Work of Art", "Form and content are the most hackneyed concepts under which anything and everything may be subsumed. And if form is correlated with the rational and matter with the irrational; if the rational is taken to be the logical and the irrational the alogical; if in addition the subject-object-relation is coupled with the conceptual pair form-matter; then representation has at its command a conceptual machinery that nothing is capable of withstanding" (Heidegger 1977, 158).

[16] Heidegger underlines the etymology of knowing as "seeing": "Even at an early date cognition was conceived in terms of the 'desire to see' " (BT 214-5). In section 36 of *Being and Time*, entitled "Curiosity" ("*Neugier*"), he refers to Aristotle's treatise on ontology in *Metaphysics,* which begins with the sentence "All human beings by nature desire to know" ("*Im Sein des Menschen liegt wesenhaft die Sorge des Sehens*," SZ 171), which John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson render as "The care for seeing is essential to man's being." As these translators note, "Heidegger takes *eidenai* in its root meaning, 'to see'" (BT 215 n.2) and thus connects it with *eidos*. In Heidegger's interpretation, Being is for Aristotle "that which shows itself in the pure perception which belongs to beholding, and only by such seeing does Being get discovered" (BT 215). From the equivalence put between seeing and knowing follows the thesis that has "remained the foundation of western philosophy ever since: "Primordial and genuine truth lies in the pure beholding" (BT 215).

[17] MP 312. According to Derrida's analysis, "The same content, previously communicated by gestures and sounds, henceforth will be transmitted by writing, and successively by different modes of notation, from pictographic writing up to alphabetic writing, passing through the hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians and the ideographic writing of the Chinese" (ibid.).

[18] MP 314.

conventionally a sign is defined as a substitute for something absent, i.e., something which cannot be seen: "The sign is born at the same time as imagination and memory, at the moment when it is demanded by the absence of the object for present perceptions."[19] The theory of language has to do with the idea of the relation between seeing and thinking, since, as Derrida writes, the emphasis put on language as representation follows from "the self-evidence of the idea (*eidos, idea*)" and from "a theory of the sign as a representation of the idea, which itself represents the perceived thing."[20]

One of the questions that permeate this study is the following: Why does Blanchot define literary language a medium that aims to "reveal nothing"?[21] Why is "literature's ideal" "to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing"?[22] My hypothesis is that we can read Blanchot's definition of literary language as "the refusal to reveal anything" as a reference pointing in two directions: first, to Hegel's idea of naming as negativity which reveals Being incrementally to man, and second, to Heidegger's idea of poetry as the simultaneity of revealing and withdrawal; I will argue that with his analysis of language Blanchot challenges both Hegel's idea of naming as a

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[19] MP 314.
[20] MP 314. This is, in Derrida's analysis, also Husserl's conception of language, even if in analysing language in *Logical Investigations* (*Logische Untersuchungen)* Husserl acknowledges the ability of any mark to signify without the presence of its referent or signified content. In *Logical Investigations* Husserl realizes that "intuition of an object is not needed for signification: *Gegestandlosigkeit* is, presicely, what is structurally original about meaning" (Pasanen 1992, 102). In Derrida's interpretation, Husserl has to admit the possibility of any statement being cut off from its referent, since "Without this possibility, which is also general, generalizable, and generalizing iteration of every mark, there would be no statements" (MP 319). As Derrida summarizes: "The absence of the referent […] constructs the mark; and the eventual presence of the referent at the moment when it is designated changes nothing about the structure of the mark which implies that it can do without the referent" (MP 318). Husserl admits even the absence of the signified, even if he considers this absence to be dangerous to philosophy in opening a "crisis" of meaning. For Husserl, says Derrida, the cause of this crisis is the "nonpresence in general, absence as the absence of the referent, of perception – or of meaning – of the actual intention to signify" (MP 314). For Derrida, Husserl's interpretation of writing as a danger to phenomenological science represents the metaphysics of presence, which Derrida's own deconstruction – along with Heidegger's destruction of the history of Western philosophy – seeks to undermine.
[21] WF 326, PF 316, IC 25.
[22] WF 324.

gradual revelation of the totality of being and Heidegger's conception of poetry as a way of revealing the truth of Being.

The critique of vision, as well as the theme of exteriority, is present in Blanchot's entire work from the early 1940s to his last publications in the 1980s. His theory of literature is sketched out in the essays of *The Work of Fire* (*La Part du feu,* 1949), of which the essay entitled "Literature and the Right to Death" ("*Literature et le droit à la mort*, 1949) is the most seminal.[23] Since Blanchot never gave up the central arguments of this early essay, I have taken them as my starting point in analysing Blanchot's view on language.[24] In order to put a framework around otherwise unlimited material, I will limit my discussion within two landmarks: in addition to "Literature and the Right to Death" the other landmark is *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'Entretien infini*, 1969), the collection of philosophical essays which contain devices of writing that became dominant in Blanchot's later unclassifiable fragmentary texts. In this work, Blanchot's critical tone in relation to Heidegger's ontology finds its point of culmination and becomes explicitly expressed. Between these texts is situated *The Space of Literature (L'Éspace Littéraire)*, published in 1955, where Blanchot's relation to Heidegger's thinking is most intimate.

In the following thesis, my intention is to trace those points in Blanchot's writings between the 1940s and the 1960s where he departs from Heidegger's thinking on art and language. The focus of this study will be on the philosophical conversation between Blanchot and his contemporary philosophers. Although I will situate Blanchot's early work in the field of phenomenological philosophy, my intention

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[23] "Literature and the Right to Death" was originally published in two parts over 1947 and 1948 and was joined together under the same title in *The Work of Fire*. The original title of the first part, "*Le Règne animal de l'ésprit*" ("The Spiritual Animal Kindom") refers to the fifth chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* "The Spiritual Animal Kingdom and Deceit, and the 'Matter in Hand Itself' (Hegel 1977, 237-251). The title of the second part of Blanchot's essay, "*La Littérature et le droit à la mort*", refers to Friedrich Hölderlin's play *Empedocles*, where the hero affirms: "For death is what I seek. It is my right." ("*Dann sterben will ja ich. Mein Rech ist dies*.") See Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, II, 551*; Poems and Fragments*, 327.
[24] I agree with Leslie Hill, who in his study *Maurice Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary* (1997) defines "Literature and the Right to Death" as Blanchot's "most programmatic account of literature in general" (Hill 1997, 103).

is not to reduce it in the network of philosophical references. I hope, on the contrary, that I will clarify Blanchot's originality in the field of philosophical conversation on the nature of literary language.

My principal intention is to trace how Blanchot during these decades develops his notion of writing as the realm between Being and non-Being, light and darkness. I will restrict my perspective in following Blanchot's effort to formulate his own non-metaphysical account of language. Although I am aware, for instance, that doing justice to the later Heidegger's philosophy of language would demand taking into account those of his writings which Blanchot neglects in his essays written in the1960s, I will leave the affiliation between Blanchot and the later Heidegger for another study. The same applies to the development of Levinas's philosophy and to Blanchot's reception of it: I will also exclude Blanchot's interpretation of Levinas's later writings on language.[25]

The Violence of Light and Vision

In *The Infinite Conversation*, in an essay written in the form of a dialogue and entitled "Speaking Is Not Seeing", an anonymous speaker says, as if quoting Heidegger, that all through the history of Western philosophy, "the optical imperative […] has subjugated our approach to things, and induced us to think under the guaranty of light or under the threat of its absence."[26] The speaker notes also that in this tradition the "perversion of language" has always been to act "as thought we were able to see the thing from all sides": "Speech no longer presents itself as speech, but sight freed from the limitations of sight. Not a way of saying, but a transcendent way of seeing. The 'idea', at first a privileged aspect, becomes the privilege of what remains under a perspective to which it is tributary. The novelist lifts

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[25] On this subject, see Paul Davies, "A fine Risk. Reading Blanchot Reading Levinas". In *Re-Reading Levinas*. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 201-226.
[26] IC 28.

up the rooftops and gives his characters over to a penetrating gaze. His error is to take language as not just another vision, but as an absolute one."[27]

Despite the fact that the critique of sight is prominent in Blanchot, denigration of vision is not and has never been his problem alone: the question concerning the role of vision in philosophical thought had been central in the French post-war philosophical discussion from the 1940s onwards. Blanchot follows Heidegger in stating that we can trace already from the philosophers of antiquity the moment at which "light becomes idea and makes of the idea the supremacy of the ideal."[28] From the privilege given to vision follows the logic which dominates the tradition of all Western philosophy. From now on,

> To think is henceforth to see clearly, to stand in the light of evidence, to submit to the day that makes all things appear in the unity of form; it is to make the world arise under the sky of light as the form of forms, always illuminated and judged by this sun that does not set. The sun is the overabundance of clear light that gives life, the fashioner that holds life only in the particularity of form. The sun is the sovereign unity of light – it is good, the Good, the superior One, that makes us respect as the sole true site of being all that is 'above'.[29]

Common to Blanchot and his contemporaries writing under the influence of Husserl's phenomenology was the profoundly critical attitude toward the way vision had been constructed inside and outside the field of philosophical discourse: as the guarantee of meaning as presence. Although there are in Husserl's phenomenology characteristics which justify calling him both a critic of "ocularcentrism" and its exponent, the Husserl discovered in France in the 1930s was for Blanchot and most of his contemporaries an

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[27] IC 28-9.
[28] Ibid.
[29] IC 160, EI 239.

ocularcentric thinker.[30] As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*,

> Phenomenology maintains – it is true – the primacy of the subject: there is an origin. The origin is light, a light that is always more original from the basis of a luminous primacy that makes shine in all meaning the summons of a first light of meaning (as Emmanuel Lévinas says it so magnificently). Phenomenology thus accomplishes the singular destiny of all Western thought, by whose account it is in terms of light that being, knowledge (gaze or intuition), and the logos must be considered. The visible, the evident, elucidation, ideality, the superior light of logic – or, through a simple reversal, the invisible, the indistinct, the illogical or silent sedimentation: these are the variations of the Appearance, of primacy Phenomena.[31]

Blanchot finds in Husserl's phenomenology the same problematic assumptions as Heidegger: the primacy of the subject, the privilege given to visibility over invisibility, as well as the Platonic idea of light as the origin of meaning and truth. Blanchot's interpretation of phenomenology was influenced by Levinas's doctoral dissertation on Husserl, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (*Théorie de l'Intuition dans la Phénomenologie de Husserl*), appearing as early as 1930. Levinas's book was in France, as Jacques Derrida writes, "the first major work devoted to the entirety of Husserl's thought."[32] There is no doubt that Levinas's study, especially with its critique levelled against the ethical problems of phenomenology, strongly affected Blanchot's insights on both Husserl and Heidegger.[33]

As has often been pointed out, what is common to Blanchot and Levinas is their critique of Western philosophy as a discourse based on the suppression of the "other" in favour of the mastery of the "self". Blanchot accepts Levinas's claim according to which philosophy from Plato onwards has based itself on the priority of the

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[30] Following Levin, "ocularcentrism" can be understood as "the hegemony of vision in our cultural paradigm of knowledge, truth, and reality" (Levin 1997a, 44).
[31] IC 251.
[32] WAD 84.
[33] Blanchot acknowledges the influence of Levinas's interpretation of Husserl in his letter to Salomon Malka from 1988, writing that "it is to him [Levinas] I owe my first encounter with Husserl, and even with Heidegger" (BR 244).

same. Their dialogue from the 40s to the 60s focused particularly on the problem of how to approach the other or how to speak of the encounter with the other. In his essay "The Gaze of the Poet" ("*Le Regard du Poète*", 1956) Levinas formulates this question with the following words: "How can the Other (which Jankélévitch calls the *absolutely other* and Blanchot 'eternal streaming of the outside') appear, that is, be for someone, without already losing its alterity and exteriority by way of offering itself to view? How can there be appearance without power?"[34]

With regard to the themes of vision and otherness in the work of Blanchot, his indebtedness to Levinas is evident. Following Levinas, Blanchot does not only emphasize the question of the "otherness of the other" as the most important question of his thinking, but he also pays attention to the dominance of vision, not only in Husserl's phenomenology but also in Heidegger, who from *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) onwards, while criticizing Husserl's philosophy for understanding vision as a way of making-present, was looking for new, more primordial ways of seeing, i.e., ways to open us to "the light of Being".

According to both Levinas and Blanchot, verbs such as *voir*, *pouvoir* and *savoir* – to see, to be able to, and to know – always remain close to each other in philosophical discourse. Heidegger enters this dialogue, as Levinas introduces German phenomenology to Blanchot. In his lecture *The Age of the World Picture* (*Die Zeit des Weltbildes*) from 1938, Heidegger claims that representative thinking governs the age of modernity and "the conquest of the world as a picture."[35] He relates the representation of beings to the metaphysical tradition, emphasizing that 'to represent', '*vorstellen*', means to set out, '*stellen*', before oneself and to set forth in relation to oneself.[36]

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[34] Levinas 1996, 130. *"Comment l'Autre […] peut-il apparaître – c'est-à-dire être pour quelqu'un – sans déjà perdre son altérité, de par cette façon de s'offrir au regard? Comment peut-il avoir apparition sans pouvoir?"* (Levinas 1975, 14)
[35] Heidegger 1977, 134.
[36] Heidegger 1977, 132. Heidegger accentuates the point that in the metaphysical tradition to represent (*vorstellen*) means to set out (*stellen*) before oneself and to set forth in relation to oneself. *Vorstellung* means "to bring what is present at hand (*das*

The age of modernity regards the world as an image or a picture, and frames it like a window or like a photograph. To have a clear picture of something demands grasping it, to put it in front of oneself to see it from a distance, in order to present or to re-present it to oneself. When a being is brought before man as an object, it loses its existence outside the controlling gaze.

Blanchot's work, like Heidegger's, expresses a will to get beyond the dominance of vision understood as a subject's ability to control its object from a neutral distance with a motionless, disinterested a-historical gaze. Blanchot affirms Heidegger's analysis, according to which representative thinking follows from our tendency to think of the world from the outer position – that of a God or a subject – in order to give thinking a firm basis. For Heidegger, representative thinking is based on immediacy and to the violence of seeing.[37] Instead of being a gaze that would withdraw "in the face of beings in order that they might reveal themselves", the gaze that frames its object is violence of perception.[38] It is a "mere looking-at", "a fixed staring at something that is purely present-at-hand."[39]

For this study, an important aspect in Heidegger's analysis of representative thinking is the connection Heidegger makes between

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Vorhandene) before oneself as something standing over against (*Entgegenstehendes*), to relate it to oneself, to the one representing it (*den Vorstellenden*), and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the normative realm" (Heidegger 1977, 131-2). From this it follows, that "That which is, is no longer that which presences; it is rather that which, in representing, is first set over against […] which has the character of object" (Heidegger 1977, 150).

[37] In his 1942-43 lectures on Parmenides, Heidegger describes modern man as "the living being that, by way of representation, fastens upon objects and thus looks upon what is objective, and, in looking, orders objects, and in this ordering posits back upon himself the ordered as something mastered, as his possession." Heidegger speaks of the "figure-ground"structure, i.e., the difference between the focus of our objectifying gaze and the ground, which in this gaze is framed outside our attention (Heidegger 1992, 156).

[38] BW 125.

[39] BT 88. In section 15 of *Being and Time* Heidegger makes a distinction between *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*, between "presence-at-hand" and "readiness-to-hand." Whereas the first posits something in front of us, so that it can be seen, the latter means a practical using of something rather than visualizing it. Heidegger adopts from Aristotle the distinction between *poiesis* and *phronesis*. Theoretical knowledge concerns the universal, whereas *phronesis* as practical wisdom is the ability to act correctly in a specific situation. Especially ethics and politics are realms of *phronesis*. P*oiesis* is the realm of everyday practices that get their meaning from being "*wozu*". In this realm things are equipment (*Zeug*) or tools.

everyday looking and seeing and the problem of violence. As we name the thing that comes to us, we lose it as something that merely presences. For Heidegger, the problem with naming is that "As soon as presencing is named, it is represented as some present being. The essence of presencing, and with it the distinction between presencing and what is present, remains forgotten. *The oblivion of being is the oblivion of the distinction between Being and beings*."[40] In giving a name to Being we negate Being and forget the distinction (i.e., the "ontological difference") that actually lies between beings and Being.[41] This is what in Heidegger's view happens among others in Hegel's dialectics.[42]

The purpose of Heidegger's critique of representation is to make manifest the narrowness of metaphysics: as he argues, in

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[40] EGT 50-51.

[41] The main premise of *Being and Time* is that Being (*Sein*) is not "beings" (*Seiendes*), although philosophy has a tendency to think so, thus narrowing itself, under the rubric of "metaphysics", into a mere theory of "objects". From this it follows that before the discoverability of a concrete being (a flower, for instance) we need to have an understanding of Being at a more abstract level. Heidegger proposes that in order to become free from the representative way of thinking, we must ask what is meant by the term Being (*Sein*): is Being object and entities, or would it be possible to maintain the difference between Being and beings, and thus avoid objectifying Being? As he explains in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (*Einführung in die Metaphysik,* 1953), a series of lectures given in 1935, the purpose of the ontico-ontological difference is to teach us to look at things in a way that remains open to the possibilities that lie in each being: "The main thing is to not let ourselves be led astray by overhasty theories, but to experience things as they are on the basis of the first thing that comes to hand" (IM 30). For Heidegger, to ask about the difference between Being and beings is to ask: what is the condition of the possibility of appearing and having something at our disposal? In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger stresses that Being is only by being in relation to that which is not – to that which we cannot see or grasp – that opens up the possibility of having a relation to that which is. Being, in other words, is the condition of possibility for beings, and the possibility for us having anything accessible. Although Being in itself is no-thing, and even if it cannot be seen as such, it makes it possible for any entity to appear and be present at all. By acknowledging the difference between beings and Being – and what follows from this difference, namely that "everything that appears withdraws" – we can finally pose the question of Being anew in order to get beyond the dominant notion of presence. Only if we stop thinking of Being as presence can we get rid of our tendency to assume the equivalence between beings and presence; we can eventually notice that "The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity" (BT 26), although "Being is always the Being of an entity" (BT 29). To ask what the meaning is of Being of beings means to ask what is the difference between Being and beings and to become aware that the universality of Being (*Sein*) transcends the universality of every singular being ("beings" or "entities," *seiendes*) at the same time as Being pertains to every entity (BT 3).

[42] In "The Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger gives to naming another meaning. In this essay he speaks of the power of poetry to create beings by naming them. I will return to Heidegger's idea of poetical naming in Chapter Five.

determining Being as presence, metaphysics forgets, neglects, or denies the "open dimensionality" or the "clearing" of things.[43] As the subject (re)presents the object to itself, the object is split off from its ground, from its surrounding contextual and referential field. Although Descartes was to give philosophy a "new and firm footing" with his "*cogito ergo sum*", he left undetermined "the kind of Being that belongs to the *res cogitans*": "the meaning of the Being of the '*sum*'."[44] Kant, who adopted Descartes's ontological position, also fails to provide an ontological analysis of the subject,[45] and equally is with the tradition of theology: the essence of 'man' is understood as an entity created by an all-seeing God, and thus the question of his Being remains forgotten.[46] From this oblivion, claims Heidegger, "the history of the Western world comes to be borne out. It is the event of metaphysics."[47]

Heidegger's succinct definition of perception as the "appetite, which seeks out the particular being and attacks it, in order to grasp it and wholly subsume it under a concept" crystallizes the ethical premises of his judgment on representative thinking. According to Heidegger, every relation to something – be it willing, sensing, or having – is already representative, in Latin *cogitans*, which is usually translated as 'thinking.' In Descartes, "the fundamental certainty, the *me cogitare = me esse*" elevates man as a measure and a centre of different contents of thinking.[48] "Thinking is the representing relation

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[43] As Derrida interprets Heidegger to propose," "The best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the search for an archia tremble. Only the thought of Being can do so, and not traditional 'philosophy' or 'metaphysics'" (WAD 141).

[44] BT 46.

[45] BT 46.

[46] BT 75.

[47] EGT 51.

[48] Heidegger 1977, 150. According to Heidegger, until the discoveries of Galileo, man stood at the centre of the universe, under the eyes of an interested God. With Descartes, the place of the all-seeing God as the anchor of meaning is given over to a Cartesian subjectivity. As Descartes presents *cogito ergo sum* as the only solid ground of knowledge, consciousness and subject come to mean the same thing: every object becomes an object to a subject as pure consciousness (BPP 123). For modern philosophy, all thinking is "I am thinking" (BPP 126). The most indubitable fact for the Cartesian thinker using the method of radical doubt was the fact that *he* was thinking. From Descartes on, knowing is always the knowing *of* the subject, "every act of representing is an 'I represent.'" (BPP 126).

to what is represented, *idea* as *perception.*" As Heidegger writes in *Parmenides*, "It is through and for perception that the object comes to be a 'standing against.' As Leibnitz clearly saw, *percipere* is like an appetite which seeks out the particular being and attacks it, in order to grasp it and wholly subsume it under a concept, relating this being's presence [*Präsenz*] back to the *percipere* (*repraesentare*). *Reprasentatio*, representation [*Vorstellung*], is defined as the perspective self-presentation (to the self as ego) of what appears."[49] Already Plato makes vision the measure of truth. "Is it not true", Heidegger asks, "that the Being of whatever is, is grasped by Plato as that which is beheld, as *idea*?"[50] "Doesn't pure looking, *theōria*, form our relation to Being as such?" [51]

In my analysis, Heidegger's critique of representation as well as the following critique of the privilege given to the subject over the object influenced Blanchot's idea of language as non-representative.[52] As he writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, writing "is a rupture with language understood as that which *represents*, and with language

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In Heidegger's analysis, *cogitare* is not only "thinking" for Descartes, but also "perceiving" and "representing": "In important passages, Descartes substitutes for *cogitare* the word *percipere* (*per-capio*) – to take possession of a thing, to seize something, in the sense of presenting-to-oneself by way of presenting-before-oneself, *representing*" (N IV 104-105). *Cogito* means "presenting to oneself what is presentable" (N IV 105), that is, *cogito* is representation. An ego-logical subject, constituting himself as a subject, focuses on what is present and turns it into an object, a being that is there and present for the subject in the form of representation. Representing is always and essentially a representing of a 'myself' (*cogitare me cogitare*), i.e., self-representing, because consciousness of an object demands self-consciousness as its ground, as its subject (N IV 108).

[49] EGT 82. In the background of Heidegger's analysis one can find Kant's distinction between *Darstellung* as 'presentation', 'exhibition' or 'exposition', and *Vorstellung* as the traditional idea of representation or 'conception'. *Darstellung* refers to the Latin translation of 'exhibition' (*subjectio sub adspectum*), whereas *Vorstellung* means the way of making things present. With its prefix re- (*re-praesentio*) it refers to repetition, where something is established before oneself and kept at one's disposal. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 961, 980.

[50] Heidegger 1977, 143.

[51] I will write Being (*Sein*) with a capital "B" in order to differentiate between a being (entity) and Being in general, which is also the idea of Heidegger's ontological distinction between Being and beings. Although this is a usual way to translate Heidegger's original terms "Sein" and "*seiend*" in English, some of Heidegger's translators write Being with a small "b." In these cases, I have altered the translation by replacing the small "b" with a capital "B." I indicate the alteration by bracketing it [B].

[52] EI 390, IC 261.

understood as that which receives and gives meaning."[53] What relates Blanchot's work to Heidegger is, as Françoise Collin writes, "*le combat contre représentation*", the fight against representation.[54]

In *Pathmarks* (*Wegmarken*), published for the first time in 1969, Heidegger formulates a question that is, as I will try to prove, also central to Blanchot: "Is objectifying thinking and speaking a particular kind of thinking, or does all thinking as thinking, all speaking as speaking, necessarily have to be objectifying?"[55] Can thinking have a relation to its "exteriority" without interiorizing it, without forcing it to be present to the "eyes of the mind"? The question of the possibility to write without representing and objectifying is present all through Blanchot's work. One can even speak of Blanchot's "lifelong fascination with the complicity (if not identity) of speech and violence."[56]

Blanchot affirms, although with some reservations which will be focused upon in this study, the answer Heidegger gives to his question, the answer, according to which "an example of an outstanding nonobjectifying thinking and speaking" is poetry.[57] As I will argue, Blanchot also shares Heidegger's idea of language as something other than a human instrument: for both of them, language is without subjectivity, which means that it says and signifies without the presence of any intentional subjectivity. Both of these insights, vital in Blanchot's writings from the 40s to the 60s, are in my interpretation related to Heidegger's critique of vision, which entered the French discussion already in the 30s.

As I will show, however, for Blanchot, not only Husserl's phenomenology but also Heidegger's ontology is a representative of the metaphysics of presence. Although he accepts Heidegger's analysis of vision as presence in the philosophical discourse from Plato to Husserl, as well as the following criticism of the metaphysics

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[53] EI 39, IC 261.
[54] Collin 1971, 172.
[55] Heidegger 1998, 54.
[56] Bruns 1997, 22.
[57] Heidegger 1998, 61.

of presence and the following criticism of representative thinking, he does not accept Heidegger's analysis of art as the place of truth. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot comes to the conclusion that Heidegger's ontology has not found a language in which it would express its intentions without metaphysical presuppositions; as he writes, Heidegger's ontology is still "formulated in the language of metaphysics."[58]

How to (Not) Think of the Other?

"All the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek", remarks Derrida, and thus "the entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source."[59] Along with Levinas, Blanchot, and Heidegger, Derrida also argues that the entire history of philosophy follows the "violence of light", from which it follows that our vocabulary also is based on the dominance of light and vision. Derrida summarizes the discussion concerning the relation between vision and language in his famous essay on Levinas, entitled "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" ("*Violence et métaphysique*". *Essai sur la pensée d´Emmanuel Levinas*"), originally published in 1964. What Derrida is concerned with in the essay is Levinas's relation to Husserl and to Heidegger. Blanchot is not discussed, except for two passing references to his essays on Levinas. In my opinion, however, Blanchot's name could have been present much more explicitly: at the time when Derrida wrote the essay, Blanchot had already published three excellent essays on Levinas, not to mention his numerous references to Levinas in various essays and reviews.[60]

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[58] IC 439, n. 3.
[59] WAD 81.
[60] In "Literature and the Right to Death" Blanchot refers to Levinas's *il y a* in order to clarify it with his own account of language as infinite, non-human consciousness without subjectivity. In his later collection of essays, *The Infinite Conversation* from 1969 Blanchot takes up Levinas's idea of language as a non-symmetrical, non-

Derrida's essay is not only a careful close reading of Levinas's work,[61] but it gathers together questions and problems concerning the notion of "non-violent" language, and as such includes those questions to which both Levinas and Blanchot had been trying to find a solution since the 1940s.[62] As is well known, Levinas scholars consider Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" to be "the first serious and extensive philosophical study of Levinas's work",[63] after which Levinas's works went largely unnoticed until the 1980s. While the importance of Derrida's excellent close reading of Levinas's work has been widely acknowledged, what has been left without adequate attention is, as I claim, Blanchot's early critical reception of Levinas's thinking.[64]

Despite the fact that Derrida overlooks Blanchot, he poses a question that had been central to the dialogue between Levinas and Blanchot, a question which concerns my topic here, the relation between writing, seeing, and the other. At the end of the first section of his essay entitled "The Violence of Light" (*Violence de la lumière*), Derrida poses the question, how is it possible to speak of our encounter with the other without the metaphors of light, if "To see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same", and if "Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself", and *"if there is no history, except through language"*. Who will we ever "dominate" light, Derrida asks. "What language will ever escape it?" Derrida

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totalizing relation to the other, discusses the possibilities of this relation and develops it further.

[61] Derrida lists the following works of Levinas in the footnote of his essay: *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phenomenology de Husserl* (1st ed., Paris): Alcan, 1930; 2d ed., Vrin, 1963); *De l'existence à l'existant* (Fontaine, 1947); *Le temps et l'autre, in Le Choix, le Monde, l'Existence*, Cahiers du Collège philosophique (Artaud, 1949); *En découuvrant l'existence, avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Vrin, 1949); *Totalité et infini, Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martnus Nijhoff, 1961); and *Difficile liberté, Essais sur le judaisme* (Albin Michel, 1963).

[62] Derrida reads Levinas's work as a "philosophical discourse against light", against which he offers "the nudity of the face of the other – this epiphany of a certain non-light before which all violence is to be quieted and disarmed" (WAD 85).

[63] Critchley 2002, 2.

[64] Blanchot's essays on Levinas were published in 1961-2 in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and which were reprinted in 1969 in *L'entretien infini*, a collection of Blanchot's essays from 1953-1965. These essays are "*Connaissance de l'inconnu*", "*Tenir parole*" and "*Être juif*".

concludes by stating that "Light is only one example of several fundamental metaphors, but what an example! […] *Light perhaps has no opposite; if it does, it is certainly not night.*"[65]

The question that therefore according to Derrida remains, is the following: If language as light is violence of the day and of the significant, and if non-language as silence is the realm of the night and of the insignificant, would it be possible to imagine language that would remain outside this metaphysical opposition? If light is violence, is it possible to imagine its non-violent opposite?

Although Derrida does not discuss Blanchot, in my view this is the question to which he could have looked for an answer in Blanchot's effort to define language beyond the opposition between light and darkness, day and night. As I will try to show in this thesis, Blanchot seeks to define literary language in a way that would leave it beyond traditional oppositions used in describing the function of language, such as conceal-unconceal, day-night, light-darkness, truth-untruth. For Blanchot, the opposite of light is not night, but what he calls "the second night" (*The Space of Literature*) or "the neutral" (*The Infinite Conversation*, see Chapter Five of this thesis).

According to Derrida, Levinas's problem concerning the other is the following: how to translate the other in language, if the other must be conceived without relation to the same. Is it not impossible to encounter the other within language, which is always and already based on the repetition of the same and**,** thus**,** on violence? Or as Derrida formulates: "How to *think* the other, if the other can be spoken of only as exteriority and through exteriority, that is, nonalterity?"[66] If giving a name to the other annihilates the exteriority of the other, there arises the question of, how is it possible to approach the other in thinking and in language at all. Derrida's conclusion is clear: "Since finite silence is also the medium of violence, language

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[65] WAD 92.
[66] WAD 116.

can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it."[67]

      As I will show in Chapter Two in my analysis of Blanchot's notion of language, Blanchot affirms, in a similar way as Derrida, the violent nature of language, with which he understands its dependence on the concepts of the "same" and the "I". What both Blanchot and Derrida underline is the complexity of arguing against the tradition in which our language and thinking nevertheless is bound. The problem to which Blanchot's work seeks an answer is the following: how to speak without the violence of light, if our language is tied to it?[68] As Derrida writes, "Borges is right: light is the most powerful of all metaphors".[69]

      My intention in what follows is to show how Blanchot affirms, as does Derrida after him, the violent essence of language, but considers it (at the same time) as our only way to approach the other. Common to Blanchot and Derrida in their challenging of the metaphysical vision is that in their writings the criticism of metaphysics is not made from a standpoint beyond vision but from its limits, from which it follows that their main question concerns the conditions and possibilities of this vision. At the core of Blanchot's thinking is the idea of language as violence and non-violence, both at the same time. Language is a violent opening of communication, an opening which alone makes it possible to approach the other. Without the violence of language there wouldn't be appearance, communication, or signification to communicate. There would be only another violence which perhaps, as Derrida writes in "Violence and Metaphysics", is "the worst violence."[70] From this it follows, as

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[67] WAD 117.

[68] WAD 85.

[69] In *Writing and difference* Derrida writes that light and darkness is "the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics", "not only because it is a photological one – and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light – but because it is a metaphor. Metaphor in general, the passage from one existent to the other, authorized by the initial *submission* of Being to the existent, the *analogical* displacement of Being, is the essential weight which anchors discourse in metaphysics" (WAD 27).

[70] WAD 117, 130.

Derrida says, that all questions concerning the other are "questions of language".[71]

As I will try to prove in the following chapters, the conclusions of "Violence and Metaphysics" – that language always depends on the "same" and thus follows the "violence of light" – are views that are central to Blanchot and can be already found in his early essay "Literature and the Right to Death", known as his key essay on language, where he shows how all language has its origin in violence which, even thought it is the violence of the same, is nevertheless "our only hope of being man". Since all language (both "poetical" and "philosophical") is essentially violent, it is not possible to think of literary language as "the realm of the unrevealed". Blanchot's conviction is that eventually all language is tied to light and darkness, conceptuality and exteriority.

However, in the following chapters I will propose that Blanchot's idea of language as infinity and exteriority challenges both the Hegelian idea of naming as conceptualizing things and Heidegger's concept of language as a way to truth (as aletheia). To use J. L. Austin's classic distinction between the constative and the performative function of language as a heuristic tool in analysing Blanchot's idea of language, I will also make the following proposition: Whereas naming in Hegel works in constating, and whereas in Heidegger the performative function of naming is to create, in Blanchot language is neither naming in its constative nor in its performative function.[72] In criticizing the idea of language as naming both in Hegel and Heidegger, Blanchot generates a third account of language which neither negates nor creates being.

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[71] WAD 109.

[72] I am ready to admit that interpreting Hegel's notion of language as "constative" and Heidegger's notion of language as "performative" does not do justice to the complexity of their work. The notion of language in both Hegel and Heidegger is much more complicated than it is in Austin's thinking. Austin's distinction is thus for me only a heuristic instrument in analysing Blanchot's thinking, and I will not go closer to Austin's theory of language. Blanchot himself does not analyse Austin, nor does he use Austin's distinction. As I will argue, Blanchot's notion of language goes beyond Austin's distinction.

Blanchot's aim is, as I will claim, to say nothing with words.[73] In my interpretation, Blanchot seeks to formulate the idea of language that remains beyond the distinction between naming as negativity and naming as creativity.[74]

Exteriority and Language

One of the central hypotheses of the following chapters will be that the most significant affinity between Heidegger and Blanchot is their demand to take up seriously the question of language, and use it against the dominance of vision understood as presence, and further, to place the question of language explicitly against the ideology of transparency, which comes down to us from a tradition that already begins with Plato. In Blanchot it is language as material writing which most apparently challenges the indefinable line between visible and invisible, exteriority and interiority. In opposition both to the Hegelian idea of language as the tool of the Spirit and the Husserlian idea of the consciousness of subjectivity as the origin of meaning, for Blanchot the condition for a word to continue its signifying beyond the existence of the writing or reading subjectivity is the materiality and the repeatability of the written mark. The otherness of language, its exteriority and obscurity, is due to the possibility of repeating marks and extracting them from their original contexts. As repeatable, words

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[73] As Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death", the ideal of literature has been "to speak in order to say nothing (WF 324); "*L'idéal de la littérature a pu être celui-ci: ne rien dire, parler pour ne rien dire*" (PF314).
[74] Blanchot challenges Hegel's idea of language as negativity and conceptuality with the obscurity and ambiguity of the literary language. But whereas Heidegger finds poetic language as an affirmative, non-violent, and "aletheic" way of approaching Being, by following Kojève's idea of negativity as the ground of meaning Blanchot finds violence even in poetry, and in the core of language itself. In my analysis, Blanchot's third way of determining language – which is not based on the dialectical movement central in Hegelian philosophy, nor on the dialectical opposition between the assertative and the performative function of language – defines language as both negativity and affirmation, visibility and invisibility, conceptuality and non-conceptuality. As I suggest, Blanchot's goal is in this way to affirm the violence of language in an ethical way.

have the ability to continue their existence independently, beyond the intentionality of a single subjectivity.

In Blanchot's essay "Speaking is Not Seeing" an anonymous speaker asks, why is it that we should choose between speech and sight: "why should the thing be separated into the thing seen and the thing said (written)?"[75] His friend answers in a way that can be taken as the hypothesis of Blanchot's investigation of the relation between seeing and writing: "To see, perhaps, is to forget to speak; and to speak is to draw from the depths of speech an inexhaustible forgetfulness."[76]

The question of that which remains unthought in the history of philosophy is common to Blanchot and his nearest philosophers, Heidegger and Levinas. As we will see, the question of exteriority both connects and separates these thinkers. For Levinas, as he argues in *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (*Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité,* 1969), metaphysics should be defined in a new way that understands "the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other."[77] In order to be ethical, vision should not incorporate the other but admit that there is always something other, which remains left in our effort to understand the other. Blanchot in his turn, as I claim, defends literature as the place for radical exteriority: only as pure exteriority does literary language remain beyond the metaphysical opposition between the visible and the invisible, as well as the opposition between the truth and non-truth which, however, is still crucial for Heidegger. The basic question of Blanchot's thinking is, would it be possible to think of the other or the exterior without negating the otherness of the other in language, and would there be something exterior which philosophical systematic thinking would not be able to internalize?

In Blanchot, the experience of exteriority can be defined as the experience of something that remains beyond the concepts of

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[75] IC 29.
[76] IC 29.
[77] Levinas 1969, 34; Levinas 1961, 4.

philosophical thinking. The difficulty with analysing Blanchot is that – in addition to leaving his references obscure – he in most cases leaves concepts without definition. This is the case also with exteriority. Despite this, one might propose that in Blanchot exteriority is always the exteriority encountered in and through literary language. The space of literature is the place of exteriority; literary language is the medium that brings exteriority forth without defining it.[78] My hypothesis is that for Blanchot, the critique of vision also is a defence of exteriority and that his criticism of the privilege of vision is always related to the problematic of exteriority.

My hypothesis is that the starting place of Blanchot's analysis of language is the same as Heidegger's *Destruktion*:[79] to challenge the tradition of Western metaphysics which "attempts to comprehend everything by returning all things to their origin".[80] Blanchot seeks to think of language in a way that would not return a linguistic meaning to an origin or anchor of meaning either in the mind of the writer or the reader. As I will show in the second chapter, Blanchot's notion of language already in his early writings from the 1940s confronts the idea of meaning as either delayed or deferred presence. His idea of language as absence, as it is presented in his essays in *The Work of Fire*, contradicts the conventional view of language, where writing is understood as a neutral way of communicating pre-existing meanings and which thus remains bound to the structure of representation.[81] Already in this early work, published in 1949, the goal of Blanchot's analysis of language is to challenge the idea of the self-identical

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[78] Levinas writes in "The Poet's Vision" ("*Le Regard du Poète*", 1956) that "Blanchot determines writing as a quasi-mad structure in the general economy of being, by which being is no longer an economy, as it no longer possesses, when approached through writing, any abode – no longer has any interiority. It is literary space, that is, absolute exteriority: the exteriority of absolute exile. This is what Blanchot also calls the 'second night'" (Levinas 1996, 133).

[79] Heidegger names his interrogation of the tradition of ontology *Destruktion*. The aim of this destruction is to reawaken an understanding of the importance of the question of Being, the first step of which is to become conscious of our prejudices concerning the question of Being. By analysing our presuppositions of Being, Heidegger's *Destruktion* hopes to make the prevailing philosophical discourse aware of its blindness to the neglected dimensionality of Being (BT 44).

[80] Taylor 1990, 204.

[81] MP 312.

subjectivity and to find a way of writing, both in theory and in practice, beyond the metaphysical dominance of perceptual presence.

As I will show in Chapter Three, the defence of exteriority also goes hand in hand with the criticism of the idea of subjectivity as the origin and the anchor of meaning. In Blanchot, as in Heidegger, the definition of a subject is related to our concept of a subject's relation to its outside, to its other, to exteriority. Common to Blanchot and Heidegger is that both relate the experience of exteriority to our encounter with art. Blanchot's defence of Mallarmé's material poems already in "Literature and the Right to Death" can be interpreted to refer to Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1933-1935), where Heidegger speaks of the materiality of the work of art, by virtue of which there is always something excessive in art.[82] In Blanchot, as in Heidegger, the exteriority of art is linked to its obscure materiality, which is visible and invisible, both at the same time.

The question of exteriority links Blanchot's work also to Levinas. As we well see, Blanchot refers to Levinas either explicitly or implicitly in all his central writings on language from the 1940s to the 1960s. For both of them, at least in some broad sense, philosophy is a thinking and questioning of our experience in relation to the other, to exteriority.[83] In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas defines the relationship between the self and the other as a relation between interiority and exteriority: in the experience of exteriority I encounter something which overflows my abilities to make an idea of it. For Levinas,

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[82] *The Origin of the Work of Art* is based on three lectures given in November and December 1936.
[83] Perhaps the most significant of Levinas's books as regards Blanchot's early writings on language was *Existence and Existents* (*De l'existence à l'existant*, 1947), whose impact, with its analysis on the alterity of existence, is already evident in "Literature and the Right to Death" ("*La literature et le droit à la mort*", 1949) and in the essays from the 1950-60s collected in *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'entretien infini*, 1969). But in relation to Blanchot's critique of vision – which becomes the key issue in *The Infinite Conversation* – the most important of Levinas's books is *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini*, 1961), with its question of ethics as "first philosophy". Especially relating to Blanchot's later writings (1970s-80s), which however remain beyond the scope of this study concentrating on Blanchot work from the 1940s to the 1960s, the impact of Levinas's later writings (for instance *Autrement qu'être* from 1974), with its question of the importance of language, is significant.

exteriority is a state where it is not possible for the self to be united into a totality.

However, whereas the early Levinas sees as problematic the way Husserl's "disinterested spectator" objectifies the other human being, in Blanchot the problematic concerns from the beginning the essence of language. For him, language is violent in its essence, from which it follows that violence is a necessary condition of meaning and signification in general. Whereas in Blanchot the most central question is the question of literary language as something fundamentally other, for Levinas the most central problem is the ethical relation to the other, to which all other matters are subordinated. Concerning the question of exteriority, this is the primary difference between Blanchot and Levinas. Already in Blanchot's first essays, exteriority is the exteriority of language.[84] However, there is certain symmetry between the ethical question and the question of language: they both concern our relation to exteriority, or the relation between interiority and exteriority, or between the same and the other. The exposure to the alterity of the other person (in Levinas) and the exposure to the exteriority of language (in Blanchot) expose us to the regions which challenge the idea of the mastering subjectivity, i.e., its ability to control its being or the being of the other.

In Chapter Two, I will outline the contemporary philosophical reception of Blanchot's first and most renowned short story *Thomas the Obscure*. In his review of this story Sartre claims that in opposition to his intentions, Blanchot ends by "revealing nothingness" in his story, i.e., by making it an object of his philosophical reflection. Against Sartre's interpretation I claim that language does not "reveal nothingness" in Blanchot, since there is nothing behind the surface of the text to be revealed. Writing itself is this nothingness which,

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[84] According to Levinas, it is necessary to define the other as a personal other, *Autrui*, in order to create a space, an *ethical* space, in which the other as absolutely exterior could present itself as such without being represented by us: "The metaphysical relation cannot be properly speaking a representation, for the other would therein dissolve into the same: every representation is essentially interpretable as a transcendental constitution" (Levinas 1969, 38).

however, is too obscure or ambiguous to expose itself to the reading gaze. In opposition to Sartre, I will argue that in Blanchot language does not express or name exteriority after the fact, i.e., after the experience of exteriority is over, but it *is* this exteriority. In my view, the aim of Blanchot's stories is to bring exteriority forth, without conceptualizing and naming it and without forcing it into the form of an object. For Blanchot, (literary) language is not just a medium that uses mechanisms to express alterity in an alternative way but it is itself this alterity. For Blanchot, literary narrative cannot be understood as a later composition of pre-narrative experiences or ideas to which a narrative would be faithful, but rather narrative constitutes this experience itself.[85]

In Blanchot, the exteriority encountered in reading challenges not only the key concepts of Husserlian phenomenology, but also the idea of the phenomenological theory of reading. In my analysis Blanchot poses the question of what is the theory of reading like, that is not based on the idea of the presence of vision and meaning as its object, central to the phenomenological model of reading, but understands reading rather as a textual encounter with something that dislocates time. In interpreting Blanchot's narrative of reading experience in *Thomas the Obscure*, I will argue in Chapter Four that the story questions the idea of reading as a process of becoming conscious of the present meaning of the text. In Blanchot's story, the experience of the infinity of time in reading is the experience of something invisible that nevertheless grounds the object of vision.

Blanchot speaks of the literary experience as the experience of fascination (*la fascination*), which challenges seeing as intentionality and making present. In analysing reading in Blanchot, I will claim that the experience of fascination opposes the classical phenomenological theories of reading where reading is understood as an act of the

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[85] As Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death", before the work is born, there is nothing. Only as the work is written, is the writer born, even if it is true that the work is not born without its author. There is no writer without a work, and no work without a writer. Both are born at the same instant, but neither is before the other.

reading consciousness. For Blanchot, reading is not an act of subjectivity but turns from consciousness to affection and from perception to fascination. I will propose that Blanchot replaces Heidegger's notion of seeing as *Umsicht* with his own notion of fascination, which eventually is an experience that remains beyond the opposition seeing/non-seeing. For Blanchot, the literary experience prevents any seeing, revealing, illuminating or appearance of truth from happening. With his concepts of fascination, resemblance and image, Blanchot both affirms and challenges the central points of Heidegger's thinking on art.

In the closing chapter of the study I argue that Blanchot's fragmentary writings, already in *The Infinite Conversation* but especially in *The Writing of the Disaster* (*L'écriture du désastre*, 1980), can be read as radical repudiations of phenomenological perception as such: by challenging the idea of language as seeing, revealing, representing and thinking, Blanchot's fragmentary writing questions the power of vision and perception, and aims to fill the needs of "less violent language", to which Heidegger already aimed with his idea of art as a way of *aletheic* seeing, and to which Derrida refers in his analysis of Levinas's thinking in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics" ("*Violence et Métaphysique*", 1964).

For Blanchot, the question is not only how to approach the otherness of the other in language, but how to approach anything with something that is already otherness – something internal and external at the same time. He asks, is it possible to understand something that has no essence, and is it possible to think of anything without essentializing and thematizing it? How should one respond to the primordial violence of language? Is there language that would be beyond all objectifying and essentializing tendencies of the metaphysical thinking, and if not, what is our hope of ever encountering exteriority and otherness in language? In my view, Blanchot's originality in, and contribution to, the discussion about the violence of vision and language is found in his answer to the question of how to approach the other by avoiding the "worst violence". This is

the question to which Blanchot, as well as Derrida, continuously returns.

II How to Avoid Doing Things with Words?

The Question of Literature

"Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question."[86] This opening sentence of Blanchot's early, philosophical essay "Literature and the Right to Death" ("*La litterature et le droit á la mort*", 1949) crystallizes his starting point in approaching literature. The performative "Let us suppose…" asks us to think of literature as its own origin. There is no essence of literature, which is why there is no answer to Sartre's essentializing question, "What is literature" (*Qu'est-ce que la literature,* 1948). The "what is" of the question "what is literature" assumes an essence for its object, which is why the question, accompanied by the reflective attitude of a philosopher, becomes bogus when applied to literature.[87]

Since the essentializing attitude and an objectifying question such as "What is a novel" or "What is poetry" prove powerless in the face of literature, it must be put on hold in order that literature itself can re-emerge as the question of its own being.[88] For Blanchot, to

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[86] WF 300. A little bit later Blanchot formulates another performative: "Let us suppose the work to be written: with it the writer is born" (WF 305, PF 297). These performatives can be read to refer not only to Hegel whose name Blanchot mentions explicitly at the beginning of his essay but also to Heidegger's questions concerning the origin of the work of art.

[87] We could propose Blanchot to say that it is not possible to define literature with a "constative" (to use Austin's vocabulary) or with an "assertion" (which according to Heidegger follows the idea of thinking as representation).

[88] According to Blanchot, the origin of literature is a "miracle" which philosophical reflection has in vain tried to solve. Blanchot thus rejects Kojève's idea that the task of philosophy could be to solve the "miracle" of discourse. In the opening pages of "Literature and the Right to Death" he refers ironically to Kojève, writing that "if literature coincides with nothing for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!" (WF 302) For Blanchot, contradictions and impasses, which every writer confronts in the act of writing, are not anything solvable. The origin of writing is in the experience of impossibility, which cannot be transgressed by any higher term or aspect, as happens in Hegel's dialectic. In Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, the miracle which philosophy seeks to explain, concerns the birth and condition of language. Kojève writes: "Now if the traditional conception of [the conjunction] Being-Thought takes account of the *possibility* of a discourse revealing the meaning of what is, by explaining how and why Being has meaning, it does not say how and why discourse becomes *real*, that is how and why we manage in fact to 'disengage the meaning from the being' and to

encounter the exteriority of literature presupposes a non-objectifying attitude. Only if the reflective attitude withdraws and retreats, it follows that literature "once again becomes something important, essential, more important than philosophy, religion or the life of the world which it embraces."[89] Or as Blanchot writes in his later work, *The Space of Literature* (1955), as if quoting Heidegger: "Investigations on the subject of art such as those the aesthetician pursues bear no relation to the concern for the work of which we speak. Aesthetics talks about art, makes of it an object of reflection and of knowledge. Aesthetics explains art by reducing it or then again exalts it by elucidating it, but in all events art for the aesthetician is a present reality around which he constructs plausible thoughts at no risk."[90]

Blanchot's way of opening his essay "Literature and the Right to Death" reminds one of the opening of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where Heidegger states that philosophy forgets, in turning away from its original interrogative nature, to ask the "meaning of Being". In order to regain the name of philosophy as fundamental ontology, philosophy should look at itself as the source of questioning. Philosophy itself – and not the consciousness of the one who asks – should be seen as the ground from which the inaugurating question is born.

The central point of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" is, as I read it, that the inaugurating question concerning the essence, the being and the condition of literature's possibility, has to be derived from its existence and its signification, and not from the consciousness and pre-existing ideas of the one who asks, be the questioner a critic or a philosopher.[91] This question "awaiting us" at the heart of literature does not concern the task of literature in

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incarnate it in a collection of words that have nothing in common with that meaning and that have been created out of a whole discourse that is the miracle that philosophy must explain" (Kojève 1993, 327).

[89] WF 302.

[90] SL 234.

[91] WF 301.

contemporary political reality or literary genres.[92] Literature is concerned with itself, and literary writing is, in its turn, writing in the form of a question.

The question that organizes "Literature and the Right to Death", Blanchot's central essay on the essence of language and literature, concerns the condition of the possibility of language to turn towards its own origin in order to ask what makes language possible. Blanchot formulates this ultimately Orphic question in the following way: "Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*?"[93]

In a similar way as philosophy in Heidegger begins with a question that concerns its own being, in Blanchot the task of both writer and reader is to concentrate on the being of language. In *Being and Time* the inaugurating question concerns the beginning of philosophy, whereas in "Literature and the Right to Death" the question concerns the beginning of literature. As Heidegger claims, philosophy has turned away from its original interrogative nature, and in order to regain the name of philosophy as fundamental ontology, philosophy should look at itself as the source of questioning. Blanchot, in turn, claims that literature "begins" only when literature is understood as "language, which has become literature."[94] The question that awaits us at the heart of literature is one that concerns the being of literature itself. As Blanchot writes, "one thing is true: as soon as the page has been written, the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing – though he may not have been aware of it – is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work, waiting for a reader to approach – any kind of reader, shallow or profound; this question is addressed to

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[92] Blanchot opposes here Sartre's view, according to which "Speech is action," "*Parler c'est agir*" (Sartre 1948, 27).
[93] WF 327.
[94] WF 301.

language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading, by language that has become literature."[95]

Blanchot's key essay on language, "Literature and the Right to Death" and his first essay on Heidegger, "The Sacred Speech of Hölderlin" ("*La Parole Sacrée de Hölderlin)*" were both published in *The Work of Fire,* the collection of essays published in 1949. In this work, the impact of Heidegger's thinking on Blanchot becomes apparent not only in his questioning of the essence of language and in his criticism of the essentializing ways of approaching literary language, but also in his demand for a non-reflective attitude towards literature. In my analysis, for Blanchot, as for Heidegger, the question concerns our ability to think of something that does not take place in the form of any object or that does not exist in the manner of a thing.

For Heidegger, however, it is the question of the "meaning of Being" to which all the other questions, including the question of language, are subordinated.[96] In Blanchot, instead, the privilege is from the beginning given to language as literary writing, from which follow all the major differences between him and the early Heidegger.[97] Whereas in Heidegger Being comes to us with language,

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[95] WF 301.

[96] Heidegger defines "the meaning of Being" as the proper and the sole theme of philosophy and as the basic question of his own ontological investigation (BT 1). What has been forgotten in the tradition of Western philosophy is the question of "the meaning of Being", i.e., the question "What is the Being of beings" (*Sein des Seienden*). Heidegger's opinion is that the full extent of the oblivion of Being "cannot be estimated until both the meaning and the limitations of the ancient ontology have been exhibited in terms of an orientation directed towards the question of Being" (BT 46-7). Heidegger begins his magnum opus *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), by citing Plato's *Sophist*, where the philosopher confesses to his listeners that he does not know what is meant by the expression "Being": "We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed." Heidegger continues by posing the question: "Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being' [*seiend*]?" And he answers: "Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise again the question of the meaning of Being [*Sein*]" (BT 1). In his early lecture from 1927 Heidegger had already concluded that "[B]eing is the proper problem of philosophy": "This is not our own invention: it is a way of putting the theme, which comes to life at the beginning of philosophy in antiquity, and it assumes its most grandiose form in Hegel's logic. At present we are merely asserting that [B]eing is the proper and the sole theme of philosophy. Negatively, this means that philosophy is not a science of beings but of [B]eing or, as the Greek expression goes, *ontology*" (BPP 11).

[97] As Timothy Clark puts it, in Heidegger poetry as "*Dichtung* concerned a sending of [B]eing that even though most fully realized in certain poets, is not to be entirely identified with language in any received sense but which must be associated,

Blanchot seeks to speak of language as an element that is neither Being, nor not-Being, but beyond this opposition.

The most significant common characteristic of Blanchot and Heidegger is their intention to challenge those metaphysical prejudices which determine our thinking about art, language and the other. In Heidegger's analysis, these prejudices are our tendency to conceive of Being always as an entity of some kind, as a substantial being, as well as our tendency to understand Being as presence.[98] As Heidegger says, every time as we think, speak or write of any entity, our first supposition is that something is there, rather than nothing at all.[99]

Common to Heidegger and Blanchot is their will to turn away from metaphysical thinking, which posits the world as an object of representation.[100] If to think metaphysically means to posit the world as an object of representation, in the case of literature a metaphysical attitude means having literary work as an object of analysis. In Blanchot's view this is not a correct way to approach something which refuses to be analysed and defined: rather than "investigating" literature, our reading should take into account the "concern that literature has with itself".[101] For Heidegger, the violence of perception is the problem of all thinking and theory, and therefore it is the

broadly speaking, with anything of significance for *Dasein*. Blanchot, however, also shows minute concern with literature in the narrower sense" (Clark 2002, 67-8).
[98] BT 22.
[99] IM 1. Understanding Being as presence already originates in Aristotle and Plato, who understood the words *ousia* or *parousia* as "coming to-presence" of Being (IM 61, 64). In identifying beingness as *ousia* we think that "the presence of the presence" is eternal, unchangeable, and permanently present (BT 47). Heidegger points out that the Greek term *ousia* designates both temporal presence and property, and that this double meaning is also included in the German word *Anwesen*. While tracing the early meaning of *ousia* in his lectures from 1927, collected in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (*Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, 1975), Heidegger connects *ousia* to "producing" (*Herstellen*). To "pro-duce, to place-here, *her-stellen*" means to put something in front of oneself, so that it is accessible and disposable: "What is thus tangibly present for dealing with [*vor-handen*] is reckoned by everyday experience as that which *is*, as a being, in the primary sense. Disposable possessions and goods, property, are beings; they are quite simply that which is the Greek *ousia*" (BPP 108-9).
[100] One could refer to Derrida's essay on Levinas, "Violence and metaphysics", where this question is formulated in the following manner: "But can one speak of an experience of the other or of difference? Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence? Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of phenomenality?" (WAD 152).
[101] SL 196.

problem also in aesthetics, where the artwork is posited as the object for a subject. In "The Origin of the Work of Art" he questions the idea of a work of art as an object we can possess and subdue to our experience: a work of art is not an object of any kind, but an event where something unusual manifests itself. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot in his turn writes, as if with Heidegger's words: "It cannot be said that the work belongs to being, that it exists. On the contrary, what must be said is that it never exists in the manner of a thing or a being in general. What must be said, in answer to our question, is that literature does not exist or again that if it takes place, it does so as something 'not taking place in the form of any object that exists.' "[102]

In my analysis, the questions shared by Blanchot and Heidegger are the following: Is it possible for man as a being who "has language" to approach nothingness without objectifying it?[103] Can we reach for anything without determining it somehow? Why is our first supposition that something is there rather than nothing at all?[104] Does thinking always require thematization? Doesn't language always, as soon as something is said, pose a relation to being? Isn't it impossible to negate something without positing it beforehand?[105] In what follows I will analyse Blanchot's answer to these fundamental questions concerning the possibility of non-representative language.

The Debate over "Nothingness" and Blanchot's *Thomas l'Obscur*

The question of whether language always, as soon as something is said, poses a relation to being, was also a question shared by Jean-Paul

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[102] SL 43.

[103] BT 208-209.

[104] IM 1. Heidegger asks at the beginning of his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" Heidegger defines Being as Nothingness, since Being is nothing that "is". Thus the question is, how can we have a relation to something that is defined as not-a-thing, that is, nothingness? (IM 1.)

[105] As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, "It has often been remarked – by philosophers, linguists, and political analysts – that nothing can be negated that has not been posited beforehand" (IC 386). "One can only *negate* what was first *posited*" (IC 439, n.3).

Sartre, Georges Bataille, and Emmanuel Levinas, the contemporary thinkers and renowned readers of Blanchot. The fictional text that provoked the debate on the capacity of the literary language to thematization was Blanchot's first and most renowned short story *Thomas the Obscure* (1941/1950)[106], in particularly the second chapter of the story, which describes how the protagonist, Thomas, gets lost in a dark, cave-like space, possibly a cellar. Blanchot's text, demonstrating in different ways the impossibility of its protagonist to gaze into the abyss of nothingness, participated in its own way in the philosophical discussion of the interrelatedness of truth and sight, of knowing and seeing, in French philosophy at the time the story was published.

The dispute among Blanchot's readers concerned the meaning and the position of nothingness in Blanchot's story; the main question was whether Blanchot's story succeeds in presenting nothingness without objectifying it. One could, using J.L. Austin's classical distinction in *How to do Things with Words* (1962), claim that the focus of this debate was the difference between the "constative" and "performative" functions of language: according to Austin, constative signs refer to a thing or a state of affairs independent and external of the process of signification, whereas a performative's referent is internal to the linguistic event itself. Austin suggests that instead of "constating" or "describing" what is the case, language in its performative dimension is rather doing than reporting something,[107] and that the performative function of language is to create something new, independent of any referent outside this linguistic event.[108] Or as

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[106] Blanchot published the first version of *Thomas l'Obscur* in 1941 and a new, shorter version in 1950. The story was translated into English by Robert Lamberton in 1973. The first version describes itself as a "*roman*", whereas from the second version this subtitle is missing.

[107] See J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1962.

[108] Jacques Derrida gives, while commenting on Austin's distinction in his article "Signature Event Context" ("*Signature événement contexte*", 1972), the following explanation of performative: "Differing from the classical assertion, from the constative utterance, the performative's referent (although the word is inappropriate here, no doubt, such is the interest of Austin's finding) is not outside it, or in any case preceding it or before it. It does not describe something that exists outside or

Derrida puts it, the "performative does not describe something that exists outside or before language."[109]

Jill Robbins, in her study on the place of literature in Levinas's thinking (*Altered Reading. Levinas and literature,* 1999), uses Austin's distinction to draw a contrast between Levinas and Blanchot: according to Robbins's interpretation, Levinas "uses" Blanchot's story in a way that we could name "constative", i.e., he only utilizes Blanchot's fiction as material for his own philosophical arguments. What we should instead do, says Robbins, is to give to Blanchot's text a possibility to "perform" what a philosophical argument can only "constate".[110]

Although I admit the usefulness of Austin's distinction in clarifying the difference between the place of literature in Levinas (the philosopher) and in Blanchot (the writer), I would also argue that both Austin's distinction and his question "How to do Things with Words?" prove to be inaccurate in the case of *Thomas the Obscure*. I will argue – following here Mark C. Taylor's absorbing article "How to do Nothing with Words?" (1992) – that in addition to the distinction between "constative" and "performative" use of language we should distinguish a third function or dimension of language, that which in contrast to the constative, which always refers to something, and in contrast to performative, which always "does" something, "struggles to do nothing with words."[111] As Taylor writes, the question that remains is "whether words sometimes are neither constative nor

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before language. It produces or transforms a situation, it operates; and if it can be said that a constative utterance also effectuates something and always transforms a situation, it cannot be said that this constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination, as in the case of the performative" (MP 321). In Derrida's interpretation, Austin frees the performative from the opposition truth/false, but replaces it with the value of "force", which means that it "does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content guarded by its own aiming at truth (truth as *unveiling* of that which is in its Being, or as an *adequation* between a judicative statement and the thing itself)" (MP 322).

[109] MP 321.
[110] Robbins 1999, 98.
[111] Taylor 1990, 225.

performative but function as an unthought third that *allows words to do nothing*".[112]

Before entering the dispute between Levinas, Bataille, and Sartre on the relations between thinking and nothingness in Blanchot, I would like to give space to the story itself, the obscure centre of this discussion. Now, since Levinas restricts himself only to describing the story, without actually quoting it,[113] and since Bataille, who nonetheless appreciates the same story as a fictional text, makes (in my opinion) only a short citation of it, I will restart the discussion by making what Robbins insists we should do: instead of allowing the philosophical arguments alone to introduce Blanchot's text, I will let the text speak for itself. The below-quoted paragraph from Blanchot's story encompasses the second half of chapter two.[114]

> The night was more somber and more painful than he [Thomas] could have expected. The darkness immersed everything; there was no hope of passing through its shadows, but one penetrated its reality in a relationship of overwhelming intimacy. His first observation was that he could use his body, and particularly his eyes; it was not that he saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he bathed. Naturally, he formulated this remark only as a hypotheses, as a convenient point of view, but a one to which he was obliged to have recourse only by necessity of unravelling circumstances. As he had no means of measuring time, he probably took some hours before accepting this way of looking at things, but, for him, it was as if fear had immediately conquered him, and it was with a sense of shame that he raised his head to accept the idea he had entertained: outside himself there was something identical to his own thought which his glance or his hand could touch. Repulsive fantasy. Soon the night seemed to him gloomier and more terrible than any other night, as if it had in fact issued from a wound of thought which had ceased to think, of thought taken ironically as object by something other than thought. It was night itself. Images which constituted its darkness inundated him. He saw nothing, and, far from being

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[112] Taylor 1990, 210. Emphasis is mine.
[113] Robbins 1999, 97-99.
[114] That the reference in made to the English translation of Blanchot's story should be understood as a compromise following the fact that the language of this article, addressed to the English-speaking academic audience, is English. Of course, this compromise does not undo the fact that to do justice to Blanchot's story we should read it in French.

distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight. Useless for seeing, his eye took on extraordinary proportions, developed beyond measure, and, starching out on the horizon, let the night penetrate its center in order to receive the day from it. And so, through this void, it was sight and the object of sight which mingled together. Not only did his eye which saw nothing apprehend something, it apprehended the cause of its vision. It saw as object that which prevented it from seeing. Its own glance entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed the death of all image. New preoccupations came out of this for Thomas. His solitude no longer seemed so complete, and he even had the feeling that something real had knocked against him and was trying to slip inside. Perhaps he might even be able to interpret this feeling in some other way, but he always had to assume the worst. What excuses him is the fact that the impression was so clear and so painful that it was almost impossible not to give way to it. Even if had questioned its truth, he would have had the greatest difficulty in not believing that something extreme and violent was happening, for from all evidence a foreign body had lodged itself in his pupil and was attempting to go further. It was strange, absolutely disturbing, all the more disturbing because it was not a small object, but whole trees, the whole woods still quivering and full of life. He felt this as a weakness which did him no credit. He no longer even paid attention to the details of events. Perhaps a man slipped in by the same opening, he could neither have affirmed nor denied it. It seemed to him that the waves were invading the sort of abyss which was himself. All this preoccupied him only slightly. He had no attention for anything but his hands, busy recognizing the beings mingled with himself, whose character they discerned by parts, a dog represented by an ear, a bird replacing the tree on which it sang. Thanks to these beings which indulged in acts which escaped all interpretation, edifices, whole cities were built, real cities made of emptiness and thousands of stones piled one on another, creatures rolling in blood and tearing arteries, playing the role of what Thomas had once called ideas and passions. And so fear took hold of him, and was in no way distinguishable from his corpse. Desire was this same corpse which opened its eyes and knowing itself to be dead climbed awkwardly back up into his mouth like an animal swallowed alive. Feelings occupied him, then devoured him. He was pressed in every part of his flesh by a thousand of hands which were only his own hand. A mortal anguish beat against his heart. Around his body, he knew that his thought, mingled with the night, kept watch. He knew with terrible certainty that it, too, was looking for a way to enter into him. Against his lips, in his mouth, it was forcing its way toward the monstrous union. Beneath his eyelids, it created a necessary sight. At the same time it was furiously destroying the face it kissed. Prodigious cities, ruined fortresses disappeared. The stones were tossed outside. The trees were transplanted. Hands and corpses were taken away. Alone, the body of Thomas remained, deprived

of its senses. And thought, having entered him again, exchanged contact with void.[115]

Thomas the Obscure is a paradoxical story about an experience that, even if it is not grounded on vision, nevertheless seems to remain – in a way that urges on interpretation – an optical experience; although everything that happens to Thomas seems to happen to his eyes, there is not much to visualize. As the text tells us, it was not that Thomas "saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he bathed." As the narrator tells, Thomas has to accept the new "way of looking at things", the way that hurts his eyes as much it frightens him. Without the ability to see and to objectify with his intentional gaze, Thomas is unable to keep his identity, and it is as if "outside himself there was something identical to his own thought which his glance or his hand could touch […] And so, through this void, it was sight and the object of sight which mingled together."

However, precisely when much is not seen, the question of our capacity for vision comes to the forefront. As the text describes Thomas's feelings, "He saw nothing, and, far from being distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight." One could also say that because Blanchot's story does not try to be representative, it brings up the question of representation; in being suspicious of the idea of representation, it asks the limits of representation. Thomas's experience hurts not only his physical eyes, but it challenges also his capacity (as an "intentional consciousness" perceiving with the "eyes of the mind", as Husserl would say) to internalize what remains exterior to him.[116] The story underlines the impossibility of Thomas encountering the night or the nothingness as such, as well as the impossibility of him escaping the intentionality of

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[115] TTO 14-16.
[116] The goal of Husserl's phenomenology was to formulate a new phenomenological method and a phenomenological programme committed to the restricted exercise of the "mental eye" in order to analyse how the world was represented to the mind as images in its metaphorical eye. See e.g. Husserl 1969, 94, 107, 109, 173, sect.57, p. 156, sect. 84, 223, sect. 137, pp. 353-354.

his mind.[117] "And so, through this void, it was sight and the object of sight which mingled together." As Adams Sitney proposes, Blanchot's writings are oppositional to Horace's famous slogan *Ur picture poesis*, i.e., the idea that visibility would be a self-evident literary value.[118] The question which Blanchot's story poses to us is, as I interpret it, what is the relation between seeing and writing: what is the difference between having something in view and reading something? What is the relation between an image and a word?

Vision in Blanchot

Blanchot's story, with its network of philosophical allusions, seems to suggest itself generously to philosophical interpretation. "A wound of thought" ("*une blessure de la pénsee*") could be read as a reference to Bataille and his notion of the "inner experience".[119] Toward the end of the story Thomas's existence is compared to an enormous "lens", and thus also Spinoza is involved.[120] To Descartes's philosophy refer Thomas's constant doubts of his perceptions, as well as his inability to find any secure basis for his own existence (his existence is "obscure", as the title already informs), and the impossibility of getting confirmation for different uncertain perceptions; to the Cartesian revolution in philosophy refer ironically also the recurrence of the

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[117] Husserl 1982, 112.
[118] GO 163.
[119] "The open wound that is my life" is Bataille's famous expression from his 1937 letter to Alexandre Kojève. According to Bataille, the "open wound of his life" "constitutes by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system" (Bataille 1988b, 123). Bataille participated in Kojève's famous lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Paris in 1933-1937. See Bruce Baugh, *The French Hegel. From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
[120] Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), the post-Cartesian philosopher and a lens grinder of great skill, judged sense perception to be inadequate as a means of acquiring knowledge: since sense perception is grounded in the mind's representation of the state of one's own body, it is indirect rather than direct perception, from which it follows that the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body rather than the nature of the external bodies; i.e. our vision of the external bodies is always coloured by the "lens" of our own body.

verb "to think" and the increasing ambiguousness of its meaning towards the end of the story, until Thomas pronounces explicitly: "I think, therefore I am not."[121] Ironical enough, this is the only instance in the story, told in the third person, when Thomas says anything. He thus says "I" only in order to deny the analogy between thinking and existing, or at least to deny this analogy in his own existence – which, paradoxically, the linguistic performative ("I am not") despite its negative form succeeds only to affirm: "It was then that, deep within a cave, the madness of the taciturn thinker appeared before me and unintelligible words rung in my ears while I wrote on the wall these sweet words: 'I think, therefore I am not.' These words brought me a delicious vision."[122]

The story also brings to mind Plato's famous cave story in the *Republic*. But whereas Plato in his cave story lectures his interlocutor, that we have to learn to *see* properly in order to have access to truths, Thomas's effort is to do just the opposite: to learn how not to see. One can also think of the cave of Zarathustra – although Thomas's cave in the woods is not up on a mountaintop as Zarathustra's. The cave is not only a metaphor for a womb; it is also Hades, where Thomas accompanies his beloved Anne soon after the cave scene. *Thomas the Obscure* is also a love story, and as such it is one of the recurrent variations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in Blanchot's work. The myth of Orpheus, which Blanchot rewrites through his work, defines the gaze of Orpheus as a gaze that kills. In

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[121] One could say that Thomas is not able to rehearse the Cartesian rational method of doubt because he is not sure of anything or because the basis of rational thinking (the Cartesian ego) is lacking. Even Thomas's erring in the woods could be read as one of the numerous hidden and semi-hidden references to Descartes, although Thomas's way to understand his situations is opposite to the Cartesian "traveller" in *Meditations*. For example, Thomas likes to hide himself in different obscure places, where he feels he belongs "more properly than in himself", as is told in chapter three, when Thomas hides himself under the bed, in a "corner full of dust" (TTO 28).
We could compare this episode to René Descartes's *Discours de la Method* (*Discourse on Method,* 1637) where Descartes writes: "In this respect, I would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can [...] for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end is a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest" (Descartes 1985, 123).
[122] TTO 99.

the Western tradition, Orpheus, whose forbidden gaze sends Eurydice to death, has been interpreted as a mediating figure between opposite realms: between life and death, men and gods, as well as between two kinds of languages, literary and philosophical.

The "nocturnal mass" Thomas encounters in the woods could in turn be seen as an "element" (*élément*) in the sense of Levinas: an "element" does not give itself as an object of our vision; rather, it surrounds and functions like an environment for the experience, that no longer represents and objectifies (Levinas's "element" could also be found in the first chapter of the story where Thomas is swimming in the sea). For me, Blanchot's story also brings to mind Bataille's short text "Man, that Night" (1947), where Bataille writes:

> As Louis Althusserl writes in his short text "Man, That Night" (in "The Spectre of Hegel - Early Writings") from 1947, night is one of "the profoundest themes of the Romantic nocturne" that "haunt Hegel's thinking". "Yet Night is not," in Hegel, Althusserl continues, "the blind peace of the darkness through which discrete entities make their solitary way, separated from one another for all eternity. It is, by the grace of man, the birth of Light. […]. At the level of nature, man is an absurdity, a gap in being, an 'empty nothing', a 'Night'. '*We see this Night,' as Hegel profoundly says, 'when we look a human being in the eye: a Night which turns terrifying, the Night of the World that rises up before us....*' This passage, which one would like to have seen Sartre choose as the epigraph for his chapter on the gaze, dominates, from a commanding height, the whole of contemporary anthropology. The birth of man is, in Hegel, the death of nature. Animal desire whether hunger, thirst, or sex sates itself on natural creatures."[123]

The title of Bataille's text "Man, that Night" is a phrase drawn from a lecture Hegel delivered in 1805-06, and which Alexandre Kojève in turn cited in his study on Hegel, *Introduction a la lecture de Hegel* – which is for the early Blanchot the most relevant philosophical text on the nature of language. One could propose that what Blanchot's story tries to do is to "look a human being in the eye" and to ask how meaning is born. In Blanchot, in opposition to Hegel, it is not by the

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[123] Bataille's text was first published in the *Cahiers du Sud,* no. 286, in the latter half of 1947. Emphasis is mine.

grace of man that the light of meaning is born. In Blanchot the opposite happens: as is narrated in *Thomas the Obscure*, meaning comes to Thomas in the form of objects and entities from which he is not able to close his eyes: "a foreign body had lodged itself in his pupil and was attempting to go further. It was strange, absolutely disturbing, all the more disturbing because it was not a small object, but whole trees, the whole woods still quivering and full of life. He felt this as a weakness which did him no credit. He no longer even paid attention to the details of events. Perhaps a man slipped in by the same opening, he could neither have affirmed nor denied it. It seemed to him that the waves were invading the sort of abyss which was himself." [124]

However, despite the fact that *Thomas the Obscure* includes numerous references to the philosophical discussion on the relation between thinking and vision, for Blanchot the question of vision is not only a philosophical problem, but a problem that has to do with the praxis of writing. In *Thomas the Obscure* vision is not only a theme seducing us to different philosophical readings on the difference between thinking and seeing; Blanchot does not claim that he would represent how a man called Thomas sees his environment. Rather, in the story it is foremost a question of vision that is created in language. We could call it a performative of vision, a textual encounter with vision, where also vision is made textual.

In Blanchot, the alternative to the violence of vision is not an absolute darkness, blindness, or an inability to see, but vision that is blindness and inability to stop seeing, both at the same time. Despite the weakness of the eye, it is not possible to gaze into nothingness, either. As the narrator tells in *Madness of the Day* (*La Folie du Jour*, 1973): "I nearly lost my sight, because someone crushed glass in my eyes. That blow unnerved me, I must admit. I had the feeling I was going back into the wall, or straying into a thicket of flint. The worst thing was the sudden, shocking cruelty of the day; I could not look,

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[124] TTO 14-16.

but I could not help looking. To see was terrifying, and to stop seeing tore me apart from my forehead to my throat."[125] In *Madness of the Day,* light is not only what enables the narrator to see, but first of all what prevents him from seeing.[126] As the narrator tells "But this was what was strange: although I had not forgotten the agonizing contact with the day, I was wasting away from living behind curtains in dark glasses. I wanted to see something in full daylight; I was sated with the pleasure and comfort of the half light; I had the same desire for the daylight as for water and air. And if seeing was fire, I required the plenitude of fire, and if seeing would infect me with madness, I madly wanted that madness."[127]

If idealization means bringing being to light, into the realm of consciousness, from this it follows that to think clearly is to see clearly, and not to think is not to see; what can be seen can also be idealized, and what cannot be idealized cannot be the object of thinking, or to quote Samuel Beckett's famous story, *Ill seen is ill said* (*Mal vu mal dit*, 1981) In Blanchot's stories, characters often try *not* to see, only to notice that it is impossible: it is not possible to avoid the violence of light and vision. Thomas the Obscure even tries to bury himself in the ground (which can be interpreted as an ironical allusion to Heidegger's notion of death in *Being and Time* as Dasein's "possibility of the impossibility").

In the above-quoted passage of Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* visions and glances are born, tied and inscribed within the temporal movement of writing. An image created by language is not

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[125] "*Je faillis perdre la vue, quelqu'un ayant écrasé du verre sur mes yeux. Ce coup m'ébranla, je le reconnais. J'eus l'impression de rentrer dans le mur, de divaguer dans un buisson de silex. Le pire, c'était la brusque, l'affreuse cruauté du jour; je ne pouvais ni regarder ni ne pas regarder; voir c'était l'épouvante, et cesser de voir me déchirait du front à la gorge*" (FJ 18).

[126] As Leslie Hill interprets, "much of the same double bind confronts the narrator when he attempts to narrate the event of the destruction of sight: such an event, standing as it does at the centre of the *récit*, is what allows the text to aspire story-telling at all, except that such an event, no longer belonging to the realm of the visible, refuses to be narrated, and leaves the text of Blanchot's *récit*, like the light itself, oscillating madly between being a condition of possibility and one of impossibility, simultaneously opening and closing the narrative itself" (Hill 1997, 98).

[127] FJ 23-4.

eidos or *Gestalt*, but rather an evasive happening, obscure from its limits and centre. Images created by the story are dependent on the movement of writing which, as temporal, does not have a stable ground, focus, or figure. As a textual construction vision is necessarily tied to the temporality of language, and also, as Derrida would add, to writing as "spacing".[128] Blanchot's story, encountered by its reader as a precipitate and transitory event, is something in which a reader's gaze is not able to dwell, i.e., the story can't be approached by making it present to a reader's interpretative gaze. Writing as event is not a stabile structure, which could be objectified with the motionless vision. In language as temporality vision becomes motion. We cannot say that meaning "is" – it rather happens. Language makes things appear, disappear, and to continue (dis)appearing. Or as the narrator expresses the interrelatedness of the experience of vision and time in *Thomas the Obscure:* "His eyes tried to look not in space but in duration, and in a point in time which did not yet exist".[129]

Michel Levin introduces the notion of the "textual vision" in *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (1997), while analysing the function of the materiality of vision in Derrida. According to Levin's interpretation, "Derrida demonstrates a post-metaphysical vision by inscribing and encrypting his glances and gazes within the movement of *écriture,* subverting the metaphysical eye in the articulation of texts. In effect, he articulates a '*vision écriture':* in a style of vision that insists on being strictly optical, he inscribes a vision, a gaze that has no identity apart from the

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[128] Derrida 1982, 317. Derrida underlines the spatio-temporal essence of writing in his analysis of the position of writing in Husserl. He draws out two consequences from Husserl's affirmation, that the function of signification is possible without the presence of an animating subject. First, Husserl has to posit the possibility of writing as a material body (*Körper*) in order to retain the constitution of ideal objectivity, and second, this necessary possibility of *spatio*temporality or rather space, puts the pure intentional ideality of sense in danger. In phenomenology the spatio-temporal essence of writing (writing as "spacing") means in its turn, as Outi Pasanen explains in her article "Gasché on de Man and Derrida: Forgetting the Moment of Crisis" (1992), "a fall from the interiority of self-present transcendental life," since "within the thematics of phenomenology the status of space is that of exteriority" (Pasanen 1992, 115). As compared to time, writing as spacing is exteriority in a radical sense, since time, "as long as it is defined on the basis of the punctuality of the now, grounds or rather *is* this interiority itself" (ibid.).
[129] TTO 27.

operations and effects of the text."[130] In Blanchot, as in Derrida, vision is not only "hermeneutical" (as it is in Heidegger) but it is also textual, i.e., tied to the effects and movement of the text: *l'écriture vision* becomes a vehicle in questioning the absolute gaze of traditional metaphysics.

In what follows I will propose that Blanchot's fictional writing does not concern a "being" or an "entity", of which we could say that "it is here", "it was here" or "it is not here": it is not possible to fix one's eyes on the being (existence) of this being (entity), nor is it possible to get hold of it by reflecting on it. One cannot imagine it as an "object", an entity "present-at-hand" (as Heidegger would say), which one could perceive from "different sides" (as Husserl puts it). In Blanchot, writing gives us nothing that "is". As such, its being reminds of the elusive "flow of being" of which "Heraclitus the Obscure" discusses.

How to Read *Thomas the Obscure*

As is well-known, Blanchot's contemporary thinker Emmanuel Levinas reads Blanchot's fictional story *Thomas the Obscure* from the philosophical position: in *Existence and Existants* (*De l'existence à l'existant,* 1947) he mentions Blanchot's text as the most fitting example of the *il y a,* "there is": "*Thomas l'Obscur*, *de Maurice Blanchot*, *s'ouvre sur la description de l' Il y a* (ch., en particulier chapitre II, pages 13–16)."[131] With his notion of *il y a*, Levinas refers to existence without any existent, to being devoid also of nothingness. To illustrate the scope of the *there is* Levinas gives a list of themes that Blanchot expresses in *Thomas the Obscure*: "*La presence de l'absence, la nuit, la dissolution du sujet dans la nuit, l'horreur d'être, la retour d'être au sein de tous le mouvements négatifs, la réalité de*

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[130] Levin 1997b, 427.
[131] Levinas 1993, 103.

l'irréalité."[132] As the familiar forms dissolve in the night, it is no longer possible to distinguish between inwardness and exteriority; darkness is neither an object nor the quality of an object, which questions the ability of consciousness to determinate its object by objectivizing it.

As an event of which we cannot make the *noema* of the *noesis*, *il y a* marks the end of objectivizing and thus violent consciousness, and the egoism of Husserl's phenomenology. For Levinas, the problem with light and vision is that vision does not open anything that, beyond the "same", would be absolutely other: "The light that permits encountering something other than the self makes it encountered as if this thing came from the ego. *The light, brightness, is intelligibility itself*; making everything come from me […]."[133] Husserl's phenomenology, with light and vision as its accomplices, follows the "logic of the same" and thus the logic of violence by reducing the other to the same.[134] Since light is for Levinas the proper element of violence, the experience of the *il y a* as the total exclusion of light involves the possibility of an encounter that escapes the violence of an intentional consciousness. In art in general and in Blanchot's fiction in particular Levinas finds a possibility to make a "voyage into the end of the night itself"[135] without enlightening, rational consciousness. As he puts it in "The Poet's Vision" ("*Le Regard du Poète*," 1956), "literature casts us upon a shore where no thought can land – it lets out onto the unthinkable."[136] In this review on Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* Levinas suggests that art should be understood as an impossibility to interiorize the exterior (or as Heidegger would say, impossibility to transpose the "sensible" into the "nonsensible"). As the place where seeing no longer guarantees

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[132] Levinas 1993, 103.
[133] Levinas 1978, 68. Emphasis is mine.
[134] See Derrida's analysis of the relation between light and the "same" in Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" (WAD 123).
[135] Levinas 1996, 133.
[136] Levinas 1996, 134. As Michel Levin notes, the word "vision" refers not only to "sight, to visual perception, but also to a certain moral capacity; a vivid, articulate, imaginative understanding of the world, of life, of reality" (Levin 1997a, 19). By "poets vision" Levinas indubitably means vision in both these meanings.

knowing, art is a place where "the idealist metaphysics of *esse-percipi* comes to an end."[137]

However, despite this conclusion one can ask, does not Levinas still read *Thomas the Obscure* from a philosophical position, i.e., as a material for his own philosophy and as a philosophical argument made against Heidegger's philosophical interpretation of art? As Levinas proposes in "The Poet's Vision", "Blanchot's research brings to the philosopher a 'category' and a new 'way of knowing' ".[138] Levinas's interpretation of Blanchot is therefore ambiguous. On the one hand he acknowledges that Blanchot's literary writing "casts us upon a shore where *no thought can land.*"[139] On the other hand he sees Blanchot's literary writings as "an invitation to leave the Heideggerian world", where every relation to another is subordinated to philosophy as ontology and to "the light of Being".[140] Even if he seems to acknowledge that *Thomas the Obscure* presents us something that withdraws both from the thought of Thomas and from our ability as readers to interpret it, he does not question the legitimacy of his own philosophical reading of the story as an example of the *il y a.*[141]

In his essay "From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy" from 1947 ("*De l'existentialisme au primat de l'économie*", 1999)[142] Georges Bataille expressed his disapproval of Levinas's way to use Blanchot's fictional narrative as the example of the *il y a*. Both in this essay and in his book *Inner Experience* (*L'Experience Interièure,* 1954), Bataille reads *Thomas the Obscure* as a kind of affirmation of

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[137] Levinas 1996, 133.
[138] Levinas 1996, 133.
[139] Levinas 1996, 134. Emphasis is mine.
[140] Levinas 1996, 135, 137.
[141] The experience, which might be called the *il y a*, is developed at the same time in the texts of Blanchot and Levinas. Levinas speaks of the *il y a*, where as Blanchot speaks in his essays from the 1950s of the "experience of the night" and from 60s on of the "experience of the neutral". Levinas associates *il y a* with horror and anguish in such experiences as insomnia and pain, whereas Blanchot encounters the *il y a* in literature. See Chapters IV and V in this study.
[142] Bataille's review, entitled "*De l'existentialisme au primat de l'économie*", was published in *Critique 3* in 1947, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). The English translation of Bataille's essay, "From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy", has been published as the "Appendix" of Robbins 1999.

the "non-knowledge",[143] making a sharp distinction between what he calls "a description of life" and "a cry of life": "Levinas says of some pages of *Thomas the Obscure* that they are the description of the *there is*. But this is not exact. Levinas describes and Blanchot cries – as it were – the *there is.*"[144] As Bataille sees it, Levinas prefers thought over life and philosophy over literature; in Levinas "the accent is put on the intellectual operation, and not on a suppression – by ecstasy or poetry – of discursive knowledge."[145] In his own texts Bataille thus carefully avoids merely to "describe" Blanchot's fictional story or to use it as a description of something else (of which Levinas is guilty), but instead cites a passage from *Thomas the Obscure*, in order to let the story speak for itself. What Bataille tries is to approach literature in its own right.[146] According to Bataille, we should in general, and not only in Blanchot's case, draw attention to the essential "difference between the modes of literary and philosophical writing"[147] – or, as we could also say, between the "constative" and "the performative" dimension of language.

But does Bataille really succeed in not using Blanchot's text? In *Inner Experience* he opens a chapter on "non-knowledge" with a citation of *Thomas the Obscure*, claiming that Blanchot's story affirms non-knowledge rather than claims to say something about anything. In this respect, as Bataille himself notes, his interpretation of *Thomas the*

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[143] Bataille 1988a, 101-102.
[144] Bataille 1999, 168.
[145] Bataille 1999, 169, n. 12.
[146] Bataille 1999, 168. Bataille's citation of Blanchot goes as follows: "*La nuit lui parut bientôt plus sombre, plus terrible que n'importe quelle autre nuit, comme si elle était réelement sortie dune blessure de la pénsee qui ne pensait plus, de la pensée prise ironiquement comme objet par autre chose que la pensée. C´était la nuit meme. Des images qui faisaient son obscurité l'inondaient et le corps transformé en un esprit démoniaque cherchait à se les représenter. Il ne voyait rien et, loin d'être accablé, il faisait de cette absence de vision le point de culminant de son regard. Son oeil inutile pour voir, prenait des proportions extraordinaires, se développait d'une manière démesurée et, s´étendant sur l'horizon, laissait la nuit pénétrer en son centre pour se créer un iris. Par ce vide c´était donc le regard et l´objet du regard qui se mêlaient. Non seulement cet oeil qui ne voyait rien appréhendait quelque chose, mais il appréhendait la cause de sa vision. Il voyait comme un objet, ce qui faisait qu'il ne voyait pas.* " Bataille's citation is from the first 1941 version of *Thomas the Obscure*.
[147] Bataille 1999, 97.

Obscure does not differ from Levinas's:[148] along with Levinas, Bataille reads the cave scene of *Thomas the Obscure* as a description of an experience where the act of objectification is put into question. In Blanchot's story, writes Bataille, "the indifference to formal definition effectuates an inhibition of a will to insert in the sphere of objects of thinking that which has no place except outside."[149] The question that one could therefore ask is the following: does not Bataille himself use the story and its experience of the unknown to clarify his own (philosophically loaded) concept of the "inner experience"? This, in fact, was the question Jean-Paul Sartre in his turn addressed to Bataille.

While commenting on Bataille's interpretation of Blanchot's story[150] Sartre pointed out that "Thinking that thinks that it doesn't know anymore is still thinking." ("*Une pensée qui pense qu'elle ne sait pas, c'est encore une pensée*.")[151] In his critique, entitled "A New Mysticism" ("*Un nouveau mystique*", 1947) and levelled against Bataille's *Inner Experience* Sartre accused Bataille for not wanting "to see that non-knowledge is always immanent in thinking" ("*que le non-savoir est immanent à la pensée*").[152]

Sartre acknowledges that even if Bataille "*substantifie le non-savoir, c'est avec prudence: à la manière du'un movement, non d'une chose.*"[153] For Bataille, non-knowledge appears as the movement of consciousness, where consciousness loses control of itself. What Sartre disapproves of is that by this movement what previously "was nothing" becomes now "the unknown", determined as that which is "beyond knowledge." As Sartre argues, after this Bataille can no longer claim, that "nothing […] is revealed" ("*Rien, ni dans la chute ni dans l'abîme, n'est révelé*"), because what is revealed is precisely the "essential": that there is a "non-sense *of* this non-sense" – "*il y a un*

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[148] Bataille 1999, 168, n. 11.
[149] Bataille 1999, 169.
[150] The review entitled "*Un nouveau mystique*", February 1943. Reprinted in Sartre, *Situations I. Essais Critiques*. (Gallimard 1947), pp. 143-188.
[151] Sartre 1947, 183.
[152] Sartre 1947, 183.
[153] Sartre 1947, 182.

no-sens de ce non-sens."[154] As I interpret Sartre's criticism, even if he affirms that Bataille substantifies "le non-savoir" "with prudence", he is not happy with the status nothingness (*le rien*) has in Bataille's writing. By writing "*le rien*" in quotation marks and by naming it as "the unknown", Sartre claims, Bataille detaches and isolates nothingness, and makes it almost like existing by itself.[155] With this gesture, Bataille makes of "the unknown" something that escapes consciousness.[156] Sartre thus concludes that "*En s'y jetant, M. Bataille se trouve soudain du côté transcendant.*"[157] What Sartre wants to point out, as far as I understand him, is that Bataille still acknowledges communicating with "nothingness" or with "the unknown" somehow, even though he wouldn't communicate with it by means of knowledge.[158] For Sartre, Bataille as well as Blanchot are mystics, and their thinking "new mysticism", as the title of Sartre's review tells us.[159]

To illustrate the communication with the unknown or nothingness Sartre refers to a passage from *Thomas the Obscure* with which Bataille had clarified the experience of the unknown (or as Bataille says, the "inner experience"). Sartre recites the following

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[154] Sartre 1947, 183. Emphasis is mine.
[155] Sartre 1947, 183.
[156] Ibid. 184.
[157] Ibid. 183.
[158] Ibid. 183.
[159] In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot answers to Sartre's accusation that Bataille "substantializes nothing" in defending Bataille's concept of the interior experience in the following manner: "[I]nterior experience is the manner in which the radical negation that no longer has anything to negate is affirmed. […] It affirms nothing, revels nothing, communicates nothing. Then one might be content to say that the affirmation is this 'nothing' communicated, or the incompletion of the whole seized in a feeling of plenitude. But in this case, we run the risk of substantializing this 'nothing, that is, we risk substituting for the absolute-as-a-whole its most abstract moment: the moment at which nothing immediately passes into the whole and in turn unduly totalizes itself. Or are we to see here a last dialectical reversal, the last degree (but a degree pertaining to no scale) on the basis of which man, this intellect accomplished in proportion to the universe, would send the entire edifice back into the night and, doing away with this universal intellect, still receive from this ultimate negation a light, a supplementary affirmation that would add to the whole the truth of the sacrifice of the whole? Despite the nature of such movement […] I would like to say that the limit-experience is still more extreme". In Blanchot's interpretation, for Bataille the "non-knowledge" of the inner experience is beyond knowledge. As he writes, the inner experience in Bataille is "the mode of relating or holding oneself in a relation (be it by way of existence) where relation is impossible" (IC 208).

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sentences from (the first version of) Blanchot's story: "*Par ce vide, c'était donc le regard et l'objet du regard qui se mêlaient. Non seulement cet œil qui ne voyait rien appréhendait quelque chose, mais il appréhendait la cause de sa vision. Il voyait comme un objet ce qui faisait qu'il ne voyait pas.*"[160] Sartre does not interpret these sentences in their context, i.e., the fictional story; neither does he question, like Bataille does, the use of fiction in the philosophical argumentation. Despite this, he is ready to avert his conclusion of the meaning of nothingness in Bataille: "*C'est un pur néant hypostasié.*"[161] Bataille doesn't recognize, Sartre teaches us, that he constructs a universal *object*, the night.[162] Sartre refers again to Bataille's direct citation from *Thomas the Obscure*, which – as Sartre promises – will now "reveal us the cheating" ("*va nous découvrir la supercherie.*")[163] The cited sentence is from the second chapter of *Thomas the Obscure*: "*La nuit lui parut bientôt plus sombre, plus terrible que n'importe quelle autre nuit, comme si elle était réellement sortie d'une blessure de la pensée qui ne se pensait plus, de la pensée prise ironiquement comme objet par autre chose que la pensée.*"[164] Sartre claims that eventually both Bataille and Blanchot see the unknown as an object of some kind, which is why the unknown is not "nothingness" anymore – it is rather something that is thus taken as an object of philosophical reflection.

In the light of this conversation on the place and meaning of "nothingness" in Blanchot's story, it is interesting to read what Blanchot tells his readers on the first page of the revised (and much shorter) version of *Thomas the Obscure* from 1950. Blanchot writes that "to the pages written starting 1932, turned into the editor in May 1940, published in 1941, the present version adds nothing" (*la présente version n´ajoute rien).* He does not tell us which sentences have been cut off, which words have been omitted and replaced but

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[160] TOI 15.
[161] Sartre 1947, 184.
[162] Sartre 1947, 184.
[163] Sartre 1947, 183.
[164] TOI 14.

announces that "nothing" has been added to the story. But what does it mean to "add nothing" in the story? Or rather, would it even be possible to "add nothing" to language? This ironical question, I argue, Blanchot wants to pose back to his contemporary philosophers.[165]

The Experience of Literature

Formally Sartre's argument is justified: to doubt is to have a cognitive attitude and, as I have proposed, Blanchot's text is also teeming with allusions to Descartes's philosophical thinking.[166] Despite this, I see it as problematic to claim curtly that Blanchot would think of the "impossible", the "outside", the "unnameable", or the "other". I would like to ask Sartre, for instance, if it is not possible to think that the

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[165] Blanchot writes: "*Il y a, pour tout ouvrage, une infinité de variants possibles. Aux pages intitulées Thomas l'Obscur, écrites à partir de 1932, remises à l´éditeur en mai 1940, publiées en 1941, la présente version n´ajoute rien, mais comme elle leur ôte beaucoup, on peut la dire autre et meme tout pareille, si, entre la figure et ce qui en est s´en croit le centre, l'on a raison de ne pas distinguer, chaque fois que la figure complete n'exprime elle-même que la recherché d´un centre imaginaire*" (TOII 6). In my analysis, Blanchot challenges the idea that a literary text would have a fixed centre. If the literary work is rather an event than a present form or figure, to extract something from the text does not move its centre elsewhere. In fact, the story denies already at its first page the truthfulness of Blanchot's announcement: under the title of the book, *Thomas l'Obscur*, has been added a note: "*Nouvelle version*".

[166] Sartre writes that "*Une pensée qui pense qu'elle ne sait pas, c-est encore une pensée. Elle découvre de l´intérieur ses limites, elle se se survole pas pour autant. Autant faire de rien quelque chose, sous prétexte qu'on lui donne un nom*" (Sartre 1947, 183; emphasis is mine). Sartre underlines the impossibility of *cogito* to lose itself: "*Quand une fois l'on s'est trouvé par le cogito, il n'est plus question de se perdre: plus d'abîme, plus de nuit, l'homme s'emporte partout avec soi; où qu'il soit, il éclaire, il ne voit que ce qu'il éclaire, c'est lui qui decide de la signification des choses*" (Sartre 1947, 186). Blanchot seems to refer ironically to Sartre's claim in "Literature and the Right to Death", where he defines literature as the impossibility of loosing its consciousness: "[*L*]*a literature ne se borne pas à retrouver à l'interieur ce qu'elle a voulu abandoner sur le seuil. Car qu'elle trouve, comme 'etant l'intérieur, c'est le dehors qui, d'issue qu'il était, s'est change en impossibilité de sortir – et comme étant l'obscurité de l'existence, c'est l'être du jour qui, de lumière explicatrice et créatrice de sens, est devenu le harcèlement de ce qu'on ne peut empechêr de comprendre et la hantise étouffante d'une raison sans principe, sans commencement, don't on ne peut render raison*" (PF 320). "[L]iterature does not confine itself to rediscovering in the interior what it tried to leave behind the threshold. Because what it finds, as the interior, is the outside which has been changed from the outlet it once was into the impossibility of going out and what it finds as the darkness of existence is the being of the day which has been changed from explicatory light, creative of meaning, into the aggravation of what one can't prevent oneself from understanding and the stifling obsession of a reason without any principle, without any beginning, which one cannot account for" (WF 311).

experience of the impossible would be born in language itself – that the impossible would not exist before the story, as something which the story tries impossibly to represent or refer to, but rather that the story itself creates the very experience of the impossible (or of exteriority, the other, the unnameable, and so on). Would it be possible to imagine meaning as an event or a happening that does not exist before the story or after it, but which we encounter only in the event of our reading? Or as Derrida writes of the performative: its referent is not outside it, since "It does not describe something that exists outside or before language."[167]

Sartre's novel *Nausea* was published in 1938, two years before Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*. In his short critique of the work, entitled "The Beginnings of a Novel" ("*L'Ebauche d'un roman*"), Blanchot wrote that Sartre's "novel is visibly inspired by a philosophical movement that is little known in France, but it is of the utmost importance: that of Edmund Husserl and especially Martin Heidegger." As Blanchot tells his readers, some extracts from Heidegger's work had just been translated into French for the first time. In Blanchot's words these extracts "reveal the power and the creative will behind this thinking which, in the infinite debate between laws, intelligence and chance, offers art a new point of view from which to contemplate its necessity."[168]

Blanchot continues by referring to the contemporary reception of Sartre's novel. As he states, in Sartre's novel "the representation of life" and "the attention to circumstances" counts for little. This, in turn, has aroused among critics "astonishment, curiosity and incomprehension."[169] In its indifference to the make-believe realism of the traditional novel *Nausea* is "a rare, important and necessary undertaking", since it "accustoms the mind to thinking that there can be artistic creation outside any desire for a real event, outside those make-believe existences we call characters which are usually the

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[167] MP 321.
[168] BR 34.
[169] The essay is published in *The Blanchot Reader* (BR), pp. 33-34. It was originally published in *Aux Ecoutes*, July, 30, 1939, p. 31.

object of a novelist's ambitions." Blanchot describes Sartre's novel with words which foretell his own enterprise with *Thomas the Obscure*: in his words, *Nausea* "takes the novel to a place where there are no longer any incidents, any plot, any particular person; to that site where the mind sustains itself only by beguiling itself with philosophical notions like existence and being, notions that appear indigestible to art and which are only refractory to it as a result of the arbitrary workings and thought".[170]

Despite this promising beginning, Blanchot's review eventually shows his disappointment with Sartre's venture. With its "realistic adventures" and "conventional psychology", Sartre's novel "ends up with the story of a man struck dumb before the fact of existence and seeking to go beyond it to a deeper world." As Blanchot interprets Sartre's novel, in it, nausea is "the distressing experience" that reveals to its protagonist "what it is to exist without being, the pathetic illumination which puts him in contact, in the midst of things that exist, not with those things but with their existence." Blanchot's conclusion is discourteous: "This is an original and authentic sentiment which could, in a more rigorous work, have opened the way, from symbol to symbol, towards essences, and produced a sort of novel of being which would have been a masterpiece on a par with the greatest. But it is a sentiment which, in Mr Sartre's book, simply proliferates, analyses itself and becomes enfeebled in a story which, while remaining very interesting, is almost always inferior to its substance."[171]

Both versions of *Thomas the Obscure* can be read as Blanchot's effort to avoid the conventional psychology of Sartre's renowned novel.[172] For Blanchot, what he calls *récit* does not strive to narrate "what is believable and familiar". It does not re-stage or

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[170] BR 33.
[171] BR 34.
[172] Leslie Hill writes: "Part philosophical inquiry, part *Bildungsroman*, part inner experience, part self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*, part Pentecostal fable, part apocalyptic rhapsody, part ironic romance, part stylistic *tour de force*, this is a work that displays few, if any, of the standard features of the conventional novels of the time" (Hill 1997, 54).

describe an event or a sentiment but rather brings it out: "The tale [*récit*] is not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the place where that event is made to happen – an event which is yet to come and through whose power of attraction the tale can hope to come into being, too."[173] Although Blanchot speaks of our experience with language, he is looking for, along with Heidegger, a way to trace this experience without a presupposition of subjectivity as the centre of this experience. As Timothy Clark notes in his book *Martin Heidegger* (2002), Blanchot follows Heidegger in rejecting a representationalist view of art as the representation of something that exists before or independent of a work of art. In Clark's reading, Blanchot as well as Derrida are "Heideggerian" in that they would protest against the view that the work could be seen as a projection of the psychology of the writer.[174]

For Blanchot, the power of the story as an event is in its ability to happen every time singularly, beyond the intentions of the author or the reader. Literary language is not a thinking experience, but rather an experience which challenges the limit of thinking and of experience. Blanchot does not suggest that there could be an original experience to which literature would be faithful or to which literature would return or seek after. Rather, the textual event we call literature or our encounter with language – the encounter between the text and the reader – *is* the experience of language. In opposition to Sartre, I would argue that in Blanchot literary language does not express or name exteriority after the fact, i.e., after the experience of exteriority is over, but *it is this exteriority*. In Blanchot, language does not "objectify", "constate" or "name" alterity; rather, language *is* alterity in that it *gives* this alterity. Blanchot's stories bring exteriority forth, without conceptualizing and naming it and – what is essential – without forcing it into the form of an object.

Even though I just made a distinction between literary and philosophical language, it is important to notice that Blanchot himself

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[173] GO 109.
[174] Clark 2002, 48.

does not believe that we could maintain this distinction. As I will show in the next chapter, for Blanchot all language is by its essence both representative and non-representative, both at the same time. Although I find it important to point out (for Sartre) that in Blanchot, literature does not represent something that is before the act of reading as the *eidos* or model of what the text would mirror, but rather the literary experience exists only in the act of reading and writing, eventually this claim goes to all language: in Blanchot's view, language by its "essence" questions the idea of writing as representation. In my analysis, Blanchot's aim is to help us speak of our encounter with different texts in non-idealist vocabulary. For Blanchot, the question which the experience of exteriority in language demands us to answer does not concern the conditions of mystical experience – as Sartre claimed in reading *Thomas the Obscure* – or the conditions of empirical experience, but the manifestation of the essence of language in writing.[175]

Blanchot's poetically written essays and philosophical novels are encounters with language as exteriority. Blanchot does not define language as an object of experience but something in which a reader participates. In asking what is it to experience something with language, and how literary experience should be understood, Blanchot's writings challenge the idea of subjectivity as the origin of experience or meaning. The experience of writing is not the experience of the subject, but the experience that happens in the "space of literature", as if it were an experience that is born in the encounter between the reader and the text, or in the disappearance of the limits between the subject and the object. Against Sartre's interpretation of *Thomas the Obscure* I would thus claim that language does not "reveal nothingness" in Blanchot. Writing itself is this nothingness which, however, is too obscure or ambiguous to expose itself to the reading gaze. Or as Thomas Wall writes, "Art, quite simply, has no self, no *ipse*, to be revealed."[176]

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[175] IC 261.
[176] Wall 1999, 106.

According to my experience, Blanchot's writings are almost never figurative language. They are more discourse, words and writing than visual images (one can ask, of course, what else could writing be?). It is not that Blanchot's sentences would not be clear, since they are – every sentence is understandable as such. However, although every sentence would have been lucid and understandable, it is only impossible to imagine the scenes produced by these sentences. It even "hurts the eyes" (as Levinas says of modern art) to imagine what is happening in these texts. Although *Thomas the Obscure* narrates to us a series of scenes where something is evidently happening to somebody, and although the narrator seems to be aware of everything Thomas sees, and although he seems to tell us everything he knows, the scenes of the story do not translate themselves into visual images or into knowledge. In his study *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (1997) Leslie Hill pays attention also to the violence with which Blanchot's narratives constantly interrupt the reader: there is no logic which would explain the relation between the scenes that follow each other.[177] From all this it follows that Blanchot's stories are also difficult to bring to mind afterwards.

As I proposed, Blanchot's story *Thomas the Obscure* can be interpreted to ask the following question, concerning the tension between a "constative" and a "performative" use of language: does literary language have a capacity to "posit" something, in the sense of laying down something, which did not exist previously, and if it does, what does this "to posit" mean? Does literary language posit or postulate "entities" or "beings", or does it rather, as Heidegger claimed in his later writings, create happenings, equivocal events (*Ereignis*)? And finally, if a literary text is encountered rather as an event than a being, what is born from this event? Does literary text have a capacity to create something?

What has to be asked, however, is the following: Don't we always, every time we encounter in literature the experience with

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[177] Hill 1997, 54.

obscuritas, with exteriority, face the problem between the "constative" and "performative" use of language? Isn't it impossible for language to ever be free of all "contamination by the constative",[178] or to cite Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu'être ou au-dela de l'essence*, 1978), to be free of the "language of ontology"? In order to do justice to the otherness of the other we should repeat the other in its original otherness, but do we have other possibilities than to perform this repetition with language? Don't we risk losing the other at the very moment we turn to the other in language?[179] Also my own reading of Blanchot's story encounters the question of the unavoidability of violence in interpretation. Ultimately, isn't it impossible to speak of Blanchot's stories without paraphrasing them (as I actually did here already in referring to the English translation of his story)? How do we speak of Blanchot's originality without making a description of his style, of his use of language? Eventually, isn't it impossible to quote the originality of the other without making the other "my other"? Isn't the otherness of the other always (as Derrida shows in "Violence and Metaphysics") the otherness of *my* other? As I claim, these are the questions Blanchot's work poses for us.

As I already stated, the way Blanchot questions the power of vision participates in the post-Heideggerian discussion on the ways to escape the "metaphysics of presence". Blanchot takes seriously Heidegger's opinion, according to which "poetic saying", in opposition to the statement (*Satz*) or assertion (*Aussage*), "*does not posit* and represent anything as standing over against us or as object."[180] Blanchot takes as his task to analyse whether Heidegger is

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[178] Robbins 1999, xiv.
[179] Or as Timothy Clark asks, "If to welcome *the other* is to experience the non-familiar, unforeseen, the incalculable, or that in relation to which any concept is inadequate, how can thought or language affirm it except in negatives? Is not the *concept* of the other, or the notion of a language that correlates with the other, a contradiction in terms?" (Clark 1992, 16)
[180] Heidegger 1998, 61.

right in claiming that there is nothing in poetical language "that could be placed before a grasping or comprehending representation."[181]

Blanchot shares with Heidegger the suspicion of the representational capacity and the epistemological power of language. The ultimate ambiguity and the impersonality of (all) language – which poetical language underlines – questions the idea of language as the production of the creative subject, from which it follows that language (as Blanchot defines it) does not eventually fulfil the conditions Austin demands from the performative: as Derrida points out in "Signature Event Context", the most essential of these conditions is "the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject".[182] Although signs in the performative do not refer to independent, pre-existing objects, what nevertheless remains is the act of *objectification*: for Austin, the performative utterance can be successful only if the engagement of the performing subject is self-conscious and sincere.[183] From this it follows that if literature is *not* understood as a self-conscious act of a creative subjectivity, in literary writing a successful performative can never be performed.

In what follows I will show how literary language in Blanchot's analysis aims to 'do nothing' by 'positing nothing'. I propose that Blanchot asks us to ponder the possibility of language that in contrast to the "constative" (which always refers to something), and in contrast to "performative" (which always "does" something) "struggles to do nothing with words".[184] In my analysis, essential for Blanchot is the ambiguity of *all language*: although language in its constative dimensionality is the violence of conceptuality and light, there is always also another possibility, the "other side" of language, where language, by doing violence to itself, seeks ways to minimize the violence of conceptual thinking.

In the next chapter I will analyse more closely Blanchot's conception of language. I will suggest that in Blanchot's work, Hegel

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[181] Heidegger 1998, 61.
[182] MP 322.
[183] MP 323; Austin 1962, 8-9.
[184] Taylor 1990, 225.

and Heidegger are presented as representatives of oppositional ways to define the function of language, i.e., language in its constative (Hegel) and language in its performative function (Heidegger). As I will propose, by criticizing the idea of language as naming both in Hegel and Heidegger, Blanchot's intention is to generate a third account of language which, since it neither negates nor creates Being, is beyond the metaphysical opposition between Being and non-Being.

III The Exteriority of Language

Language as a Gaze that Kills

In "Literature and the Right to Death", known as Blanchot's key philosophical essay on the nature of language, Blanchot takes as his starting point the identification of death and language in the notion of naming in Hegel's philosophy. He borrows from Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968) the idea according to which naming equals murder for Hegel: naming is killing, appropriation and annihilation.[185] Blanchot clarifies the connection between language, death and absence in the following way:

> *I say, 'This woman'*, Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvellous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me being able to say, "This woman," I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious right.[186]

The performative Blanchot uses as his example (*I say, This woman*) works as an allusion to Stèphane Mallarmé's text on poetry, "*Crise de Vers*". In this famous text the poet describes how the poetic "action" of the word "flower" rids us of the original flower and replaces it with "the pure notion". The poet writes:

> What purpose is served by the miracle of transposing a natural fact into its almost vibratory disappearance by means of the word's

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[185] On language as naming and annihilation of the "thing itself", see also Jean Hyppolite, *Logique et existence: Essai sur la logique de Hegel* (Paris, 1953), as well as Lacan, *Séminaire I: Sur les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris, 1975).
[186] WF322-323. Emphasis is mine. Blanchot's Hegel citation can be found in Hegel's *Gesammelte Werke Bd. 6: Jenaer Systementwürfe I* [Hrsg. Klaus Düsing & Heinz Kimmerle. Hamburg: Meiner (1975)], 288 (Fragment 20).

action; however, if fact is not that there may proceed from it, without the embrassement of an immediate or concrete reminder, the pure notion.

I say: a flower! and, out of the forgetfulness where my voice banishes any contour, inasmuch as it is something other than known calyxes, musically arises, an idea itself and fragrant, the one absent from all bouquets.[187]

By substituting Mallarme's substantive "flower" (*I say: a flower!*) with the substantive of "woman" (*I say, This woman*) Blanchot connects Hegel's idea of the name-giving power of language to Mallarmé's idea of naming as the act of annihilation. Language is not only the ideal absence created by naming, but also the possibility of real death, which language in Kojève's interpretation always accepts. Blanchot in other words proposes, following Kojève's anthropologic interpretation of naming in Hegel, that mortality is the condition of signification in general.[188]

"Literature and the Right to Death", known as Blanchot's key essay on language, is written two decades before the linguistic turn of French philosophy: the arrival of Saussurean structuralism in France.[189] Although Blanchot affirms absence as the condition of meaning, his context is not structuralism, but rather Kojève's renowned reading of Hegel, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*), published in 1947. As Stuart Barnett shows in *Hegel After Derrida* (1998), in his Hegel lectures

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[187] Mallarmé 1965, 174-175. "*Je dis: une fleur! Et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se leve, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets*" (Mallarmé 1945, 368). Gerald Bruns writes in *Maurice Blanchot. The Refusal of Philosophy* (1997) that "Blanchot's poetics – or perhaps we should say, the whole career of his thinking – is in certain respects an extended, open-ended commentary on this passage" (Bruns 1997, 8).
[188] Gasché 1996, 52.
[189] Ferdinand de Saussure's main work, *Course in General Linguistics*, was published in 1915. Vincent Descombes defines the essence of the "linguistic turn" as follows: "Today, we say referent rather than object. 'Referent' means: an object to which reference is made by means of an expression belonging to language and used in discourse. Implicit in this definition is the assumption that our access to things is mediated through language. It is this language that must be analysed if we are to determine anything whatsoever about the relation between a person and a world. Such is the argument we might make to convey the essence of the linguistic turn" (Descombes 1980, 53).

Kojève related language, negativity, and death to each other in a way that stimulated a whole generation of French thinkers, including Blanchot, Bataille, Sartre, and Lacan, to question the limits of language and thinking.[190]

The key text for Blanchot was the appendix of Kojève's *Introduction*, entitled "The Idea of Death in Hegel's Philosophy" ("*L'idée de la mort dans la philosophie de Hegel*").[191] Blanchot adopts from Kojève's reading two points which according to Kojève make the essence of man for Hegel: the faculty of discourse and the consciousness of finitude.[192] Both language and death negate being and both form a necessary condition for the self-consciousness of human beings. As the animal that speaks, a human being has a special relation to negation and to death.[193] Since understanding and language

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[190] According to Barnett, Kojève presents a consciously strong interpretation of Hegel, whose reception has been controversial, even thought Kojève's reading has undeniably been decisive and long-lasting (Barnett 1998, 19).

[191] For some reason, this section is left out from the English translation of Kojève's book published in 1980. The section is included in Robert Stern (ed.): *G. W. F. Hegel - Critical Assessments Volume II* (Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Readings), Routledge, London-New York (1993), pp. 311-358.

[192] Kojève 1993, 317, 323.

[193] As Kojève writes, "The being which negates the given real dialectically also preserves it as negated – that is, as unreal or 'ideal': it preserves what is negated as the 'meaning' of the discourse by which it reveals it. Hence it is 'conscious' of what it negates" (Kojève 1969, 200-201). According to Kojève, revealing Being is creating Being to man who speaks (Kojève 1993, 314). In his interpretation, "The Hegelian Spirit is the spatio-temporal totality of the natural World and implies human Discourse revealing this World and itself. Or better, who lives in a World without God and who speaks of all that exists in it and of all that he creates in it, including himself". Spirit is, writes Kojève, "a discourse that is immanent to the natural World and that has for its 'support' a natural being limited in its existence by time and space" (Kojève 1993, 320).

Hegel's idea of language as revealing Being can be clarified by referring to his early Jena lectures. There Hegel states, that from a subject's point of view the thing named is closer to consciousness and thus on a higher level than a merely sensory thing which is still without a name; a being that can be seen with the eyes of the soul is more real and more truthful than a being which can be seen only with the physical eyes. Hegel makes an analogy between saying and illuminating, as he states that to name is to pull things from their dark independent existence to the light of conceptual thinking. For the speaking man the nameless being appears as lifeless being, towards which a man has to descent in order to rescue a being into the life and light of conceptual thinking with his or her speech. In Hegel, the ability of man to speak is the condition for the sensible thing to became something "other" than what it is in its singular being. Hegel writes: "[We might ask, for example,] What *is* this? We answer, it *is* a lion, a donkey, etc. it *is*. Thus it is not merely something yellow, having feet, etc., something on its own independently. Rather, it is a *name*, a sound made by my voice, something entirely different from what it is in being looked at – and this is its true *being*. [We might say:] This is only its *name*, the thing itself is something different; but then we fall back onto the sensory representation.

are both based on the affirmation of man's temporality, "the dialectical or anthropological philosophy of Hegel is in the final analysis a philosophy of death."[194]

According to Kojève's interpretation, for Hegel language means to separate things from their natural surroundings and to make of them things for human consciousness.[195] In naming beings, language detaches them from their primordial being, "neutralizing" them and thus making them beings of consciousness, beings without real "existence" or an existence of their own. Kojève explains Hegel's notion of concept in the following way:

> Generally speaking, when we create the concept of a real entity, we detach it from its *hic et nunc*. Thus, the concept of a thing is that thing itself is [*en tant que*] detached from its given *hic et nunc*. Thus, the concept 'this dog' differs in no respect from the real concrete dog to which it is 'related', except that this dog is here and now, while its concept is everywhere and nowhere, always and never. Now, to detach an entity from its *hic and nunc* is to separate it from its 'material' support, [which is] determined in a univocal manner by the rest of the given spatio-temporal universe, of which that entity is a part. That is why that entity can be altered or 'simplified' as we wish, after it has become a concept. It is thus that this real dog is, as a concept, not only 'this dog', but beyond that [it is, as a concept] 'any dog' ['*un chien quelconque*'], 'dog in general', 'quadruped', 'animal' etc., and even simply Being.' And once again that power of separation, which is the source of [all] the

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Or: It is *only* a name, in a higher sense, since to begin with the name is itself only the very superficial *spiritual being*. By means of the name, however, the object has been born out of the I *as being*. This is the primal creativity exercised by the Spirit. Adam gave a name to all things. This is the sovereign right [of Spirit], its primal taking-possession of all nature – or the creation of nature out of Spirit" (*Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, 1805-6), trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State university Press, 1983), pp. 89-91. Cited by Bruns 1997, 285.

[194] Kojève 1993, 319, 321.

[195] "It is this 'activity', capable of disengaging the meaning from Being, of separating essence from existence and embodying the meaning-essence in discourse […] that is the miracle for which philosophy (or more precisely, Science and Wisdom) is supposed to account. And it was in [the course of] seeking to account for it that Hegel discovered (or made precise) the fundamental (ontological) category of Negativity, which he calls here the 'Negative' [*le 'Négatif'*], or the 'negative-or-negate-ive-entity [*l'entité-négative-ou-négatrice*']. This negativity is 'the energy of thought', which disengages the meaning from Being by separating essence from existence. It [this Negativity] is what is 'the energy of the pure abstract-Ego' engendering 'thought', that is the Understanding and its discourse" (Kojève 1993, 328).

sciences, arts and crafts, is an 'absolute' power, against which nature can oppose no effective resistance.[196]

For Hegel, as Kojève sums up, "all conceptual understanding (*Begreifen*) is equivalent to a murder."[197] The act of naming is an act of the negative: language controls and destroys, turns a thing into a universal word or a concept, and annihilates the singular reality of a given being.[198] As Kojève explains, in Hegel's idea of language things named enter into language as ideal and universal, without their "flesh-and-blood reality".[199] They no longer exist independently, but depend on the power of the one who names. Language is a victory of the general over the singular: what is denied in naming is the being of the singular as a uniquely real thing.[200] In the following quotation, Kojève uses as his example the word "dog":

> In Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel said that all conceptual understanding is equivalent to a murder. Let us, then, recall what he had in view. As long as the Meaning (or Essence, Concept, Logos, Idea, etc.) is embodied in an empirically existing entity, this Meaning or Essence, as well as this entity, *lives*. For example, as long as the Meaning (or Essence) of 'dog' is embodied in a sensible entity, this Meaning (Essence) *lives*: it is the real dog, the living dog which runs, drinks, and eats. But when the meaning

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[196] Kojève 1993, 324.

[197] Kojève 1980, 140.

[198] "*Im Namen ist sein empirisches Sein, daß es ein Konkretes, in sich Mannigfaltiges, Lebendes und Seiendes ist, aufgehoben, es zu einem schlechthin in sich einfachen Ideellen gemacht. Der erste Akt, wodurch Adam seine Herrschaft über die Tiere konstituiert hat, ist, daß er ihnen Namen gab, d. h. sie als Seiende vernichtete und sie zu für sich Ideellen machte.* [...] *Der Namen aber ist an sich, bleibend, ohne das Ding und das Subjekt*" (*Jenaer Systementwürfe I*, Felix Meiner Verlag, 201). Kojève writes: "Now to detach [something] from the *hic et nunc* is to universalize it, to transform it [into] a *general* notion or into a concept" (Kojève 1993, 335).

[199] WF 322-323. The structure of negativity in language is the starting point of Giorgio Agamben, who in his book *Language and death: The Place of Negativity* (1991) claims that the notion of negativity clarifies the relation between language and death in both Hegel and Heidegger: "Both the 'faculty' for language and the 'faculty' for death, inasmuch as they [...] open for humanity the most proper dwelling place, reveal and disclose this same dwelling place as always already permeated by and founded in negativity. Inasmuch he is speaking and mortal, man is, in Hegel's words, the negative being who 'is that which he is not and not that which he is' or, according to Hegel, the 'placeholder (*plazhalter*) of nothingness' " (Agamben 1991, xii).

[200] "The essence-meaning of a thing is that very thing minus its existence" (Kojève 1993, 325).

(Essence) 'dog' passes into the *word* 'dog' – that is, becomes an *abstract* Concept which is different from the sensible reality that it reveals by its Meaning – the meaning (Essence) *dies*: the *word* 'dog' does not run, drink and eat; in it the Meaning (Essence) *ceases* to live – that is, it *dies*. And this is why the conceptual understanding of empirical reality is equivalent to a *murder.*[201]

In Kojève's interpretation of naming in Hegel, language neutralizes a living thing by replacing it with the concept. Although a living dog is annihilated and negated by naming it with the concept of "dog", it nevertheless "endures" in the concept of dog as neutralized, i.e., it continues "living" in the word "dog".[202] Whereas "the real concrete dog" is "here and now", "its concept is everywhere and nowhere, always and never."[203] Kojève refers to the "Introduction" of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel famously describes the dialectical movement of the Spirit as a movement that "endures death and maintains itself in it."[204] Hegel writes: "The life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself intact from devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it."[205] Also Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" puts the

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[201] Kojève 1980, 140.

[202] Kojève 1980, 142, n. 32.

[203] Kojève 1993, 324.

[204] Kojève 1993, 340.

[205] Kojève refers here to the following passage from Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Death – if we wish so to call that unreality [*Unwirklichkeit*] – is what-there-is-most-terrible [*Furchtbarste*], and to sustain [*maintenir*] death is what requires the greatest force. Powerless beauty hates the understanding, because it [the understanding] demands (*zumutet*) this of it; which it [beauty] is not capable of. *Now the life of the Spirit is not [that] life which shudders [scheut]before death and [merely] protects itself (rein bewahrt) from wasting-away (Verwüstung), but [it is] that [life] which supports death and conserves (erhält) itself in it.* Spirit achieves its truth only in finding itself in absolute rending [*Zerissenheit*]. It [*Spirit*] is not this [prodigious] power by being the Positive which turns away [*wegsieht*] from the Negative, as we say of something: this is nothing or [this is] false, and having [thus] got rid of it (*damit fertig*), we pass on there from to something else; no, Spirit is that power only to the extent that it contemplates the Negative full in the face (*ins Angesicht schaut*) [and] abides (*verweilt*) with it. This abiding-with [*séjour-prolongé*] [*Verweilen*] is the magical-force (*Zauberkraft*) which transposes (*umkehrt*) the Negative into given-Being (*sein*)" (Kojève 1993, 322; emphases are mine.)
"[T]he activity of dissolution [*Seiendes*] is the power and work of the understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power […] the monstrous power of the negative […] *The life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself intact from devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it*. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment

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emphasis on the above-mentioned passage of Hegel's "Introduction". He quotes it four times in his essay (without identifying the source of the sentence), in suggesting that the movement of language as negativity is like "life that endures death and maintains itself in it."[206]

Referring ironically to Hegel, Blanchot writes that language is the "amazing force of death", "the terrible force that draws beings into the world and illuminates them."[207] Speaking is first of all letting the Spirit turn its mortifying gaze to things, letting death "loose in the world."[208] An "I" capable of saying "I am" is a force in the world; since for man language guarantees "life's ease and security", the ownership of the world, by putting everything under his controlling eye. Blanchot thus underlines Kojève's interpretation according to which language is negativity and violence for Hegel. As he writes, Kojève "demonstrates in a remarkable way how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder."[209] Blanchot explains Hegel's idea of language as annihilation as follows:

> In a text dating from before *The Phenomenology*, Hegel, here the friend and kindred spirit of Hölderlin, writes: "Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)." Hegel means that from that moment on, the cat ceased to be a uniquely real cat and became an idea as well. The meaning of speech, then, requires that before the word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all creation into a total sea. God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared.[210]

[*Zerissenheit*], it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which looks away [*wegsieht*] from the negative […] on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and lingering with it. This lingering [*Verweilen*] with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being (Hegel 1977, sect.207, p. 126. Emphasis is mine.)

[206] WF 322, 336, 345. Hegel 1977, sect.207, p. 126. See also SL 252.
[207] WF 326. In his later work *The Space of Literature* Blanchot writes that "This is what Hegel has shown. 'The life of the mind begins with death'" (SL 252).
[208] WF 323-4.
[209] WF 323.
[210] WF 322-323. Hegel 1975, 288 (Fragment 20).

While referring to Kojève's interpretation, according to which in Hegel language "kills" the thing named, turns it in the act of naming into a thing for consciousness, and thus replaces the original thing with the idea of that thing, Blanchot underlines the simultaneity of creating and annihilating in Hegel: for Hegel, naming is not only world-making but also destruction, appropriation and annihilation. From this follows the interrelatedness of death and language, the fact that death "exists in words as the only way they can have meaning."[211] In denying the particularity of things as "existants" writing establishes the universal level of being, "existence", which is based on the absence of the uniquely real beings.[212] As Blanchot explains Hegel's notion of language, "only instead of beings [*êtres*] and, as we say, existants [*existants*], there remained only being [*l'être*], and man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create. He saw that he was enclosed in daylight, and he knew this day could not end, because the end itself was light, since it was from the end of beings that their meaning – which is being – had come."[213]

In Blanchot's interpretation Hegel tells us that "We cannot do anything with an object that has no name." Since the condition of naming is the annihilation and suppression of the thing named, negativity and death is a condition of all meaning and communication.[214] In Hegel this movement of annihilation and death is necessary for the sovereignty of the Spirit who with concepts constructs the world for itself: thanks to the constitutive power of

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[211] PF 313, WF 323-4.

[212] As naming attaches beings ("*existens*") from their primordial being, it neutralizes those beings and makes them beings without real existence. If translated into the vocabulary of modern linguistics, i.e. of structuralism, the level of existence could be named as the level of signifiers. The relation of Levinas's terms "existent" and "existence" to Heidegger's terms *Seiendes* and *Sein* is one of the issues that has been discussed in relation to Levinas's *Existence and Existants*. Derrida comments on these terms in his 1967 article on Levinas, writing that "by *existent* Levinas mostly understands the "being which is man, being in the form of *Dasein*", and thus the existent is not being in general (*Seiendes*) (WAD 89). See also Levinas's Preface to the second edition of the book (1963/1990, 9), where he comments on the relation of his terms to Heidegger's thinking.

[213] WF 322-323.

[214] PF312, WF322.

language, man has the ability to control the world, and eventually the Totality of Being, with the power of language. Essential to Hegel is the conviction that all things are in principle comprehensible. Dialectic can master anything else in its path, i.e. eventually the Totality of Being. As dialectic confronts death – the absolutely other that negates life – it is capable of transforming even it into a concept of death and therefore mastering it.[215] If the act of naming were a gaze, and if language were a vision, each new vision would be larger than the previous one, and it would contain the previous vision, using it as a moment in its development into the vision of the whole.

For Hegel, as Kojève interprets him, with its capability to create loss and absence language carries with itself the force of annihilation and death. Although Blanchot affirms the idea of language as absence, for Blanchot from this affirmation follows the question, how should one respond to the primordial "violence" of language? If language as absence is the only way to communicate with the other, and if there is no meaning except by negating (by representing and objectifying) there follows the question, what is the possibility of language to avoid the violence of metaphysical thinking: isn't it impossible to think of anything without essentializing and thematizing it? Isn't it unfeasible to write without naming anything? Can one have a relation to anything without "revealing" it?

If we ask, why is it that Blanchot replaces Kojève's example "dog" and Mallermé's example "flower" with the substantive "this woman", the answer might be the following: Blanchot proposes that by acknowledging the relation between negativity and language, we encounter our responsibility as human beings who use language. As

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[215] From Hegel's idea that "Concept is Time" and "man is Time" Kojève concludes that a history of philosophy is possible only at the end of historical time. The thesis of the end of history is the condition for the possibility to have absolute knowledge, since the whole of Being can be attained only at the end of history; at the end of history, when substance becomes subject (and vice versa), absolute knowledge realizes itself. For Hegel, a philosopher appears as a thinker who uses the "amazing power" of the negative in order to create a conceptual order of the world. As Kojève writes, "it is by resigning himself to death, by revealing it through his discourse, that Man arrives finally at the absolute Knowledge or at Wisdom, in thus completing History" (Kojève 1993, 321).

Blanchot puts it in "Literature and the Right to Death", that language is "life that endures death" becomes our "question" concerning language: " 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the 'question' that seeks to pose itself in literature, the 'question' that is its essence."[216] In my analysis, Blancot's choice of the substantive "woman" underlines the ethical problem which Blanchot – following again Heidegger – finds in the capacity of language to annihilate, in its capacity to objectify and to essentialize.

The clarification of the negative power of language with the feminine substantive can also be read as one of the variations of the Orphic myth in Blanchot's work. However, I would also suggest that Blanchot's reference to Mallarmé's performative (*I say: a flower!*) proposes to us to ponder the performative power of language: it is worth noticing that while picking up his example from Mallarmé's poetry Blanchot rejects the notion of "naming", which dominates his analysis of language in the first part of the essay; instead of writing "*I name* this woman" he chooses to write "*I say, This woman.*"

I say, "My future disappearance"

In *Hegel After Derrida*, Stuart Barnett introduces Kojève as a significant processor of a structuralist notion of language: "Kojève argues that signs are an ideal vehicle for spirit because of their independence from their referents. What later critics were to call the arbitrariness of the sign is for Kojève a necessary precondition of absolute spirit. The arbitrariness of the sign enables the transformation of nature into sign and thus into a malleable component of discourse."[217] The persistence of the Kojèvian reading of Hegel in France can be explained by the notions of "sign" and "discourse" which Kojève introduces in reading Hegel. According to Barnett, the

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[216] WF 322.
[217] Barnett 1998, 18.

notion of discourse was taken up by structuralism, which "understood that discourse, much as spirit, encompassed all realms of human endeavour and that it was the task of criticism to account for its variety."[218]

Kojève's ideas of language – the absence of referent, language as a recombination of linguistic elements – influenced the background of French philosophy from the 1960s onward, as the majority of French intellectuals, among them Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, dedicated themselves to the examination of discourse and language.[219] It is therefore interesting to notice that Kojève's interpretation of "sign" and "discourse" in Hegel influenced Blanchot's thinking of language already in the 1940s. As has been noted, both Barthes's idea of the death of the author and Derrida's interest in Mallarmé and literature are in debt to Blanchot's early writing on language. Therefore, even if Gerald Bruns is right in writing that Blanchot's "concerns are more ontological than logical or linguistic", there is also a dimension in his thinking of language that refers back to Kojève's analysis of language before structuralism and its conceptual tools.[220]

Along with Kojève, Blanchot argues that language has its ability to signify only in the absence of a thing named or referred to. Language is not only world-making but also destruction, from which it follows that "language can only begin with the void."[221] The condition of meaning is death: by naming things language kills their original way of being and turns them into the things of consciousness, which Blanchot calls "an immense hecatomb": "The meaning of speech […] requires that before any word is spoken there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all creation into a total sea". This is why death, or the absence of the thing named,

[218] Bernett 1998, 21.
[219] Barnett 1998, 22. In his later work, Blanchot's notion of writing was influenced especially by Derrida and Foucault. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot refers to Foucault's (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966) and Derrida's (*L'Écriture et la Différence*, 1967) insights on language.
[220] Bruns 1997, 51.
[221] WF 324.

"exists in words as the only way they can have meaning."[222] As Blanchot puts it, "To write is to know that death has taken place though it has not been experienced."[223]

Blanchot argues that words are independent marks whose ability to signify does not depend on individual things or objects; the universality of the word is rather tied to its independency of a singular being. From this it follows that even though the origin of language is in absence of the thing named, the break between a word and a thing is not to be interpreted as "a defect" of language[224]. Mathematics is "the most perfect" language, since its universal concepts do not refer to any existing referents: "Is it that words have lost all relation to what they designate? But this *absence of relation* is not a defect, and if it is, this defect is the only thing that gives language its full value, so that of all languages the most perfect is the language of mathematics, which is spoken in a rigorous way and to which no entity corresponds."[225]

Already Kojève acknowledges the absence of the natural relationship between meaning and word. Forming a concept is creating a new thing that is a word, which exists independent of any real existing object.[226] As Kojève explains Hegel's idea of the junction between language and death, "The Concept 'dog' which is *my* Concept […] only if dog is *essentially* mortal. That is, if the dog dies

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[222] PF 313, WF 323-4.

[223] WD 66.

[224] WF 322.

[225] WF 322. Emphasis is mine. Blanchot does not use the term "referent". Instead of the referent he speaks of the "object", and instead of "reference" of "representation" (*réprésentation*) or of "signifying" (*signifier*): "*L'ambiguïté est là aux prises avec elle-même. Non seulement, chaque moment du langage peut devenir ambigu et dire autre chose qu'il n edit, mais le sens general du langage est incertain, don't on ne sait s'il exprime ou s'il représente, s'il est une chose ou s'il la* signifie*; s'il est là pour être oublié ou s'il ne se fait oublier que pour qu'on le voie; s'il est transparent à cause du peu de sens parce qu'il dit trop, opaque parce qu'il ne dit rien*" (PF 329).

[226] Kojève writes: "[T]hanks to the absolute power of the Understanding, the essence becomes meaning and is incarnated in a *word*, there is no longer any 'natural' relationship between it and its support; otherwise, words that have nothing in common among them in so far as [they are] phonetic or graphic spatio-temporal realities, whatever they may be ('dog', *chien*, *Hund* etc.). […] There has been, therefore, a *negation* here of the given as given (with its 'natural' relationship between essence and existence); that is [there has been] *creation* (of concepts or of word-having-a-meaning, which as words have nothing to do, by themselves, with the meaning that is incarnate in them); in other words [there has been] *action* or *labour*" (Kojève 1993, 326).

or is annihilated at *every* instant of its existence."[227] Without the possibility of dying, Kojève concludes, "there would be no Discourse (logos) in the World",[228] from which in turn it follows that man "has negativity as its ultimate basis."[229] Blanchot follows in "Literature and the Right to Death" Kojève's interpretation of the relation between language and death, as he writes:[230]

> Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet, when I say, "This woman," real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is.
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> Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me.[231]

In Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, speaking also requires the finitude of the speaker: "the discursive revelation of Being is possible only if the revealing or speaking being is essentially finite or mortal."[232] By writing that "my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself", Blanchot thus refers again to Kojève's interpretation of Hegel: "If the dog were not mortal", Kojève writes, "one could not detach its Concept from it".[233] For Hegel, the condition of possibility for understanding and knowing the world is the finite and temporal nature of the world.[234]

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[227] Kojève 1980, 141.
[228] Kojève 1980, 142.
[229] Kojève 1993, 313.
[230] WF 323
[231] WF 323
[232] Kojève 1993, 320.
[233] Kojève 1993, 141.
[234] Kojève 1993, 162-3. In Kojève's interpretation, negativity (of language) is based on temporality and the potential absence of Being and existence. He explains: "Now the 'subtraction' that removes the being from Being is nothing other than Time,

Blanchot follows Kojève in concluding that "The power to speak is alone linked to my absence from being", from which it follows that as soon as I say "I", "it is as though I were chanting my own dirge."[235] Speaking is conditioned not only by the mortality of the other but also by my own mortality, which means that absence as the ground of meaning refers both to the absence of the "other" *and* to the potential absence of the speaker. As Blanchot writes, "Death ends in being: this is man's hope and his task, because nothingness itself helps to make the world, nothingness is the creator of the world in man as he works and understands."[236] "Therefore", concludes Blanchot, "it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what contains the conditions for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness."[237] As Rodolphe Gasché writes, the

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which makes Being pass from the present, in which it *is*, into the past, in which it *is not* (is no more), and in which there it is therefore only pure *meaning* (or essence without existence)." (Kojève 1993, 325). Temporality is in Hegel, as Kojève interprets him, based on "the transformation of the present into the past, that is of Being into Concept" (ibid.).

[235] WF324.

[236] WF 344.

[237] WF 324. By writing that "when I speak, death speaks in me" Blanchot makes an implicit reference to Hegel's idea of voice as articulating the presence of death. Giorgio Agamben analyses the connection between language, voice and death in Hegel's Jena lessons in 1805-6. For the Hegel of these lessons, human language is "articulated voice" whose origin is in the memory of the animal voice. Human language articulates the "pure sound of the animal voice", namely the voice or the scream of an animal as it confronts its violent death. The origin of language is thus in death, because in its scream an animal "expresses itself as a removed-self". As Agamben interprets: "In dying, the animal finds its voice, it exalts the soul in one voice, and, in this act, it expresses and preserves itself as dead. Thus the animal voice is the *voice of death*" (Agamben 1991, 45). According to Hegel, the articulation and the preservation of the animal language give rise to human language as the voice of consciousness. "The articulation of the animal voice transforms it into the voice of consciousness, into memory and language." According to Agamben, in Hegel the "voice (and memory) *of death*" means two things: "the voice is death, which preserves and recalls the living as dead, and it is, at the same time, an immediate trace and memory of death, pure negativity" (ibid. 45). "Only because the animal voice […] contains the death of the animal, can human language, articulating and arresting the pure sound of this voice […] articulating and retaining the voice of death – become the voice of consciousness, meaningful language" (ibid.

condition of language in Blanchot as an "idealizing and universal medium of signification" is real death, the fact of mortality[238]: "Mortality is the condition under which language can proceed to that idealizing destruction of a singular reality in the flesh, thus making it ideal and, by the same token, the object of a possible address."[239]

The idea of death as a necessary condition of meaning is analysed also by Derrida in "Signature Event Context" (1967), in the way that brings to mind Blanchot's words in "Literature and the Right to Death":

> *When I say* "my future disappearance," I do so to make this proposition more immediately acceptable. *I must be able simply to say my disappearance*, *my nonpresence in general*, for example the nonpresence of my meaning, of my intention-to-signify, of my-wanting-to-communicate-this, from the emission or production of the mark. For the written to be written, it must continue to "act" and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written "in his name."[240]

Neither Derrida nor Blanchot understand the functioning of language as naming "in the name of" a self-present consciousness, i.e., in the name of *my* present intention as I write a sentence. As Derrida puts it, the sign must be legible "even if the moment of its production is

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45). If the "voice of death" is the original language of nature, a human language that is the articulation of this original confrontation with death, and is "both the voice and memory of death": "For this reason, meaningful language is truly the 'life of spirit' that 'brings on' death and is maintained in death; and so – inasmuch as it dwells (*verweilt*) in negativity – it has the magical power that converts the negative into being'. But language has this power and it truly dwells in the realm of death only because it is the articulation of that 'vanishing trace' that is the animal voice; that is, only because already in its very voice, the animal, in violent death, had expressed itself as removed. Because it is inscribed in voice, language is both the voice and memory of death – death that recalls and preserves death, articulation and grammar of the trace of death" (ibid. 46). Also in Heidegger the experience of death is related to the ability to speak. In his *The Way to Language* Heidegger writes: "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought" (107).

[238] Gasché 1996, 52.
[239] Gasché 1996, 52.
[240] MP 316. Emphasis is mine.

immediately lost, and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor meant consciously and intentionally at the moment when he wrote it."[241] The structure of writing presupposes the possibility of *absolute absence*, which is not to be interpreted as a mode of delayed presence or an ontological modification of presence. I am not the origin or the anchor of the sentence I write.

Language itself doesn't die, since the sentence I have written "supports" or "endures" my death and also the death of the one to whom I write, the reader of my text. From this it follows (as Blanchot underlines also in the essays of *The Space of Literature*) that language is unable to catch the moment of death – death never "happens" in language. I cannot witness my own death by writing "I die, now, at this moment, I die". In relation to the act of speech the moment of death has already happened or is yet to come. Blanchot, in other words, opposes Hegel's idea that death itself could be conceptualized. For human beings, Blanchot argues, death is both the limit and the end of (self-) consciousness.[242]

In Blanchot, a written text is like a textual event which – being temporal – resists the metaphysical understanding of meaning as presence. In "Signature Event Context" Derrida explains the relation between absence, iterability, and the concept of the other in the following way:

> A written sign is proferred in the absence of the adressee. How is this absence to be qualified? One might say that at the moment when I write, the adressee may be absent from my field of present perception. But is not this absence only a presence that is distant, delayed, or, in one form or another, idealized in its representation?

[241] MP 317.

[242] This is also what George Bataille says. See Bataille's article "Hegel, death and sacrifice" from 1955 (*G.W.F. Hegel. Critical Assessments*. Ed. by Robert Stern. Routledge, London and New York 1993, 383-399). Bataille writes: "The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in fact, reveals nothing. In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being ceases to be. In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-)consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being" (1993, 390-1).

It does not seem so, or at least this distance, division, delay, *différance* must be capable of being brought to a certain absolute degree of absence for the structure writing, supposing that writing exists, to be constituted. It is here that *différance* as writing could no longer be (an ontological) modification of presence. My "written communication" must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined adressee or of the empirically determinable set of adressees. This iterability (iter, once again, comes from *itara*, other, in Sanskrit, and everything that follows may be read as the exploitation of the logic which links repetition to alterity), structures the mark of writing itself, and does so moreover no matter what type of writing (pictographic, hieroglyphic, ideographic, phonetic, alphabetic, to use the old categories). *A writing that was not legible – iterable – beyond the death of the adressee would not be writing.*[243]

For Derrida, writing has the capacity to challenge the metaphysics of presence only because the absence of the original writer is not only "a continuous modification of presence", but rather "a break in presence, 'death', or a possibility of the 'death' of the adressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark."[244] For Blanchot, as for Derrida, the absence of the signified and the signified intention are necessary "absences" belonging to the possibility of signification in general.[245] The idea of language as something that does not ground itself on presence delayed or referred but rather on absolute absence challenges the metaphysical idea of meaning as presence, as well as the idea of language as representation.[246]

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[243] MP 315. Emphasis is mine.

[244] MP 316.

[245] In "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida describes the independence of writing on a singular consciousness in the following manner; "The originality of the field of writing is its ability to dispense with, due to its sense, every present reading in general. But if the text does not announce its pure dependence on a writer or reader in general (i.e., if it is not haunted by a virtual intentionality), and there is no purely juridical possibility of being intelligible for a transcendental subjectivity in general, then there is no more in the vacuity of its soul than a chaotic literalness or the sensible opacity of a defunct designation, a designation deprived of its transcendental function. The silence of prehistoric arcana and buried civilizations, the entombment of lost intentions and guarded secrets, and the illegibility of the lapidary inscription disclose the transcendental sense of death as what unites these things to the absolute privilege of intentionality in the very instance of its essential juridicial failure" (WAD 88).

[246] Blanchot's notion of language as absence contradicts the traditional view of writing that, as Derrida shows in his analysis of language in "Signature Event Context", remains bound to the structure of representation. In the conventional idea of writing as communication, writing is understood as a neutral way of

In Blanchot, the beginning and the ground of meaning is not in the consciousness of the one who writes, nor in the consciousness of the reader, but in writing itself, or in the event of writing: Derrida's performative ("*When I say 'my future disappearance'*"), Mallarmé's performative ("*I say: a flower!*"), as well as Blanchot's ("*I say, 'This woman'* ") form a chain of signifiers, which refer to each other without a fixed point of departure or end – this is the infinity of meaning. As Derrida puts it in "Signature Event Context", language is a kind of "machine" that is able to continue its functioning even in one's absence: "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and rewriting."[247]

The Two Sides of Language

Blanchot follows Kojève in stating that there is no meaning without the absence of the thing named; language necessarily intends something, objectifies something, and represents something. Blanchot asserts, however, that another perspective to language is also possible. He suggests that we divide language into two coexistent sides (*pentes, versants*). From one perspective, there is language as negativity and death: language that believes in the assertive and ideal force of language. Blanchot proposes, however, that language is not only the work of negativity and death, the power and the possibility to name, but also infinity of dying: "the loss of the power to die, the loss of death."[248]

Although Blanchot does not believe that we could actually divide language into two sides, he proposes that in relation to

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communicating pre-existing meanings, and to extend communication beyond the field of oral communication (MP 312).
[247] Derrida 1967a, 104 ff.; 1973, 93ff.
[248] SL 242.

language itself the poet and the philosopher stand on opposite sides: on the side of (Hegel's) philosophy, negativity constructs truths and meanings; on the side of poetry, language is non-usefulness and extravagancy. It is important to realize that both these sides are always present in language. Since language is always negativity, these two sides are essentially violent: both have their condition of meaning in absence and death. As I understand Blanchot to say, the "two sides" of language are two possible ways to think of language.

On the first side, which is language as naming in Hegel's sense of the word, one believes in the force of negation. Here language tends to conceptualize things and to turn them into consciousness: for (Hegel's) philosophy determined by a will to know, language is a tool that illuminates things by naming them and by analysing them.

Along with philosophy, the first side encompasses realistic or "meaningful prose". Blanchot mentions the prose of Flaubert, whose goal is to "express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean. This is the way everyone speaks; and many people write the way we speak."[249] The first side could also be called the "metaphysical side" since it makes of presence the ground of language. On this side, "Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not."[250] Although naming on the first side negates the existence of a cat, "the cat itself comes to life again fully and certainly in the form of its idea (its being) and its meaning: on the level of being (idea), the word restores to the cat all the certainty it had on the level of existence. […] the idea is definitive, it is sure, we can call it

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[249] WF 332, PF 321. By realistic or meaningful prose Blanchot refers implicitly to Sartre's *What is Literature?* which privileges prose over poetry because of its ability to speak out on contemporary political issues. As Blanchot writes, philosophy and "much of literature" appropriate "the movement of negation, by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated" (WF 330, PF 310).
[250] WF 325.

eternal."[251] The deceitful aim of the first side of language is to make us believe that the living cat and its name could be identical.[252]

What counts on the first side is our ability to think and clarify things with language. For Blanchot, however, language is not only a functioning of names, concepts, and ideas, but also material writing, made of physical words on paper. Language is not only clarity of concepts, but also pure sound, the murmur of language, which can be heard in places crowded by people. In poetry this materiality comes up in the darkness of words – in poetry language is material, dense, opaque, and impenetrable rather than immaterial and transparent.[253] In Blanchot's analysis, language on the second side does not aim to represent, receive and give meanings, or transmit truths and theories. On the contrary, the second side is indifferent to the truth of things, to their *eidos*. Literary language underlines "a non-existence made *word*", i.e., the material reality of language, its physical reality as sound and black marks on paper.

Although both sides admit absence as the condition of meaning, the second side of language is conscious of "a difficulty and a lie" included in the idea according to which a word could replace the existence of the original thing; "literary language observes that the word 'cat' is not only the non-existence of the cat but a non-existence made *word*."[254] For Mallarmé, Blanchot says, "The word has meaning only if it rids us of the object it names."[255] Or as he writes, as if using Heidegger's words, on the second side of literature the nonexistence of the thing named is the condition of meaning: "This is why we can say that there is being because there is nothingness."[256] Instead of

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[251] WF 325.

[252] WF 325, 326.

[253] As Foucault famously puts it, in our world there are two categories of things, *les mots et les choses*, words and things (Foucault 1966). By naming and labelling things we put them under our control. But what interests Foucault is the hostility between these two realms, the fact that things do resist our tendency to label and categorize them.

[254] WF 325.

[255] WF 30, PF 37. Blanchot's division into two co-existent "sides" of language can also be seen as analogical to the division Mallarmé himself had made between the instrumental and the material side of language.

[256] WF 337.

enclosing the absence in a presence as the first side does, the second side of language affirms that the absolute absence of the thing named is the unavoidable condition of all meaning.

For Blanchot, the force of Mallarmé's poetry is its ability to affirm absence and destruction: it does not pretend that it would replace things with concepts; it does not believe that it would make present that original flower, which it names in pronouncing "this flower". For this reason it seeks not only to name or constate things; on the contrary, in emphasizing the "thingness" of the word, its materiality, language chooses the opaqueness of things instead of the transparency of concepts. This is why, Blanchot explains, in Mallarmé's poetry "language is a thing: it is the written thing, a piece of a shell, a splinter of a rock, a brittle fragment in which the reality of the earth subsides."[257]

In my analysis, the first side of language could be called the Husserlian side: on this side language pretends to flow from the intentional consciousness of the writer who expresses his thoughts with language. The aim of literary language, instead, is to make evident that language has no source that could be identified with a person or with a specific context. In stressing the materiality of language, poetical language highlights its autonomous character, its exteriority and independency of a writing subjectivity. For Blanchot, the most remarkable feature of Mallarmé's poems is their independency, "the impersonal character of language, the kind of independent and absolute existence that Mallarmé lends it."[258]

As I interpret Blanchot to say, in affirming absence as the condition of meaning, the aim of language on the second side is to remember what language as negativity forgets. For this reason it turns around and asks: what is beyond the obvious – what is it that we have forgotten in order to understand and to represent? Literary language, in turning towards its own beginning, asks the Orphic question of

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[257] "*Le langage est une chose: c'est la chose écrite, un morceau d'écorce, un éclat de roche, un fragment d'argile où subsiste la réalité de la terre*" (PF 317).
[258] WF 41.

what it has left behind: "How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*?"[259] Blanchot formulates this question also in the following manner: "How can it [language] hope to have achieved what it set out to do, since it has transposed the unreality of the thing into the reality of language? How could the infinite absence of comprehension consent to be confused with the limited, restricted presence of a single word?"[260] For Blanchot, as I interpret him, the second side of language is born from the observation that there always remains something exterior that language itself is not able to negate and conceptualize. The prime example of something that cannot be conceptualized is death, which at the same time is the condition of negativity and meaning in general.[261]

For Mallarmé, as Blanchot interprets, poetry is not the way to subjectivity but to the obscure reality of words and with it to a kind of "incarnate consciousness, reduced to the material form of words, to their sonority, their life."[262] In emphasizing the material autonomy of words, Mallarmé's poetical language underlines their "thing-like" quality: for Mallarmé, language appears as the material existence of concrete physical words or "beings" (*êtres*).[263] In *The Work of Fire*, Blanchot makes several references to surrealism and its non-instrumental interpretation of language. The surrealists understood that language "is not an inert thing; it has a life of its own"; "they saw that words have their own spontaneity", "they move, they have their demand, they dominate us".[264] For Blanchot as for the surrealists, literature has a truth of its own which is not dependent on any referent outside the literary world. For Mallarmé, one could say, poetry is

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[259] WF 327, PF 316.
[260] WF 326.
[261] As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, writing begins at the moment when it turns its Orphic gaze to itself: "Writing only begins when language returns back upon itself, marks itself, grasps itself, and disappears" (EI 390).
[262] PF 42.
[263] Rodolphe Gasché notes in his essay "The felicities of paradox: Blanchot on the null-space of literature" that in Blanchot "names" regress to "words": "It is words that for Blanchot make up language, and the word is not thought from the name" (Gasché 1996, 69).
[264] WF 88-89, PF 93.

made of words rather than images. In his poems, the blank spaces and the invisible silence between the lines are as important as that which is visible and stated. Poetical materiality obscures the line between visibility and invisibility: although sonority is a sensory quality of language, it is not anything that could be seen with the bodily eyes. Poetical language is exteriority: in the materiality of language there always remains something external and something other that the subjectivity of the writer or the reader is not able to interiorize.

Double Meaning

Although Blanchot in "Literature and the Right to Death" often refers to Mallarmé's poetry, he does not clarify or illustrate his philosophical claims with concrete examples. Could we thus claim that Blanchot "uses" Mallarmé's poems in a way that we could name as "constative", i.e., does he only utilize Mallarmé's poems as material for his own philosophical arguments? Does Blanchot only "constate" what Mallarmé's poems "perform"? I would disagree. Blanchot does not use Mallarmé's poems at all: instead of citing Mallarmé's obscure poems, Blanchot obscures his own writing. He writes:

> *I say a flower!* But in the absence where I mention it, through the oblivion to which I relegate the image it gives me, in the depths of this heavy word, itself looming like an unknown thing, I passionately summon the darkness of this flower, I summon this perfume that passes through me though I do not breathe it, this dust that impegrates me though I do not see it, this colour which is a trace and not light. What hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away? My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature – this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand. Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance.[265]

In the passage just quoted, Blanchot refers again to Mallarmé's text "*Crise de Vers*" where Mallarmé writes: "*I say: a flower!* and, out of

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[265] WF 327, PF 316-17.

the forgetfulness where my voice banishes any contour, inasmuch as it is something other than known calyxes, musically arises, an idea itself and fragrant, the one absent from all bouquets."[266] This text, although it is not a poem, is poetically written. What does Blanchot want to say by changing his own style from theoretical into poetical, and why does he choose to cite Mallarmé's text on poetry instead of Mallarmé's poem?

In my interpretation, by transforming his own style Blanchot underlines his conviction that in all writing both sides of language are always co-existent and possible. If he would clarify his philosophical analysis by citing Mallarmé's poem, he would admit the ultimate disparity between the two sides of language. Instead, by obscuring his own writing and by mixing philosophical terms and poetical language he *performs* what the duplicity of language means in practice. He writes, for example, as if in Mallarmé's words, that in poetical language words "*no longer signify* shadow, earth, they *no longer represent* the absence of shadow and earth which is meaning, which is shadow's light, which is the transparency of the earth: opacity is their answer; the flutter of closing wings is their speech; in them, physical weight is present as the stifling density of an accumulation of syllables that has lost all meaning."[267] Also in the following citation, where Blanchot "explains" what happens on the second side of language (in order to differentiate this side from the first side of language), the difference between the two sides is eventually only blurred:

> The metamorphosis has taken place. But beyond the change that has solidified, petrified, and stupefied words two things reappear in this metamorphosis: the meaning of this metamorphosis, which illuminates the words, and the meaning the words contain by virtue of their apparition as things or, if it should happen this way, as vague, indeterminate, elusive existences in which nothing appears,

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[266] Mallarmé 1965, 174-175. "*Je dis: une fleur! Et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se leve, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets*" (Mallarmé 1945, 368). Gerald Bruns writes that "Blanchot's poetics – or perhaps we should say, the whole career of his thinking – is in certain respects an extended, open-ended commentary on this passage" (Bruns 1997, 8).

[267] WF 331. Emphasis is mine.

the hearth of depth without appearance. Literature has certainly triumphed over the meaning of words, but what it has found in words considered apart from their meaning is meaning that has become thing: and thus it is meaning detached from its conditions, separated from its moments, wandering like an empty power, a power without power, a power no one can do anything, a power without power, the simple inability to cease to be, but which, because of that, appears to be the proper determination of indeterminate and meaningless existence. In this endeavour, literature does not confine itself to rediscovering in the interior what it tried to leave behind on the threshold. Because what it finds, as the interior, is the outside which has been changed from the outlet it once was into the impossibility of going out – and what it finds as the darkness of existence is the being of day which has been changed from the explicatory light, creative of meaning, into the aggravation of what one cannot prevent oneself from understanding and the stifling obsession of a reason without any principle, without any beginning, which one cannot account for.[268]

For Blanchot, as I read this passage, language is meaning and meaninglessness, both at the same time. The poetical form of Blanchot's own writing, however, put the emphasis on infinity, density, impermeability, exteriority, and obscurity. One could say that Blanchot chooses the side of poetry instead of conceptuality. Rather than "constating" something, Blanchot's writing is more like a literary event performing only its own existence. (Or, as Gerald L. Bruns writes of Mallarmé, writing is for Mallarmé "more event than mark."[269])

In my analysis, the purpose of Blanchot's division into two sides of language is eventually to show that in practice this division is impossible to maintain. Blanchot does not think, and this is important for us to realize, that the distinction between the two different sides of language (the negative and affirmative, or constative and performative sides) could actually be made. Rather, he emphasises that the distinction is possible only from "*a certain point of view*" that merely pretends that it could divide language into two sides.[270] Language has always its two co-existent sides, the material, "sensible" side of

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[268] WF 331.
[269] Bruns 1997, 7.
[270] WF 330.

physical words, and the ideal, "insensible" side of meanings, which only in appearing together make meaning possible. As Blanchot writes, "Every time we speak, we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence".[271]

From this ambiguity it follows that language is not able to function without its violent side, i.e., the power of negativity: not even the poetical side is able to escape the negativity of conceptuality.[272] On the other hand, not even the most understandable scientific language is able to eliminate the ambiguity of language completely. The negative (conceptual) and the affirmative (poetical) sides of language exist simultaneously. Blanchot describes the instability of language in the following way: "If we call this power negation or unreality or death, then presently death, negation, and unreality, at work in the depths of language, will signify the advent of truth in the world, the construction of intelligible being, the formation of meaning. But just as suddenly, the sign changes: meaning no longer represents the marvel of comprehension, but instead refers us to the nothingness of death, and intelligible being signifies only the rejection of existence, and the absolute concern for truth is expressed by incapacity to act in a real way".[273]

Our difficulty in defining literature arises precisely from this ambiguity. From this duplicity it follows that the process of signification goes in two opposite directions:[274] on the one hand, there is meaning that "illuminates the word", i.e., language as concepts. On the other, there is "the meaning the words contain by virtue of their apparition as things, or if it should happen in this way, as vague, indeterminate, elusive existences in which nothing appears, the heart of depth without appearance."[275] Although there always exists in language both meaning and non-meaning, truth and falsity, we do not

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[271] WF 342.
[272] WF 330, PF 318.
[273] WF 344.
[274] WF 343-4.
[275] WF 331.

know where the one begins and the other ends: "It is not just that each moment of language can become ambiguous and say something different from what it is saying, but the general meaning of language is unclear: we do not know if it is expressing or representing, if it is a thing or means that thing; if it is there to be forgotten or if it only makes us forget it so that we will see it; if it is transparent because what it says has so little meaning or clear because of the exactness with which it says it, obscure because it says too much, opaque because it says nothing."[276]

In *The Work of Fire*, where "Literature and the Right to Death" is also included, Mallarmé is introduced not only as a poet who brings forth the poetical exteriority, but also as a writer who is aware of the duplicity of language. Although Mallarmé in his material and semantically obscure poems is on the side of exteriority, he is also aware of the "Hegelian" side of language, language as negativity and ideality.[277] Blanchot's idea of the duplicity of language can also be clarified by referring to Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics", where Derrida proposes that a linguistic sign can be thought to consist of two co-existent inseparable sides. A written sign can function only if one recognizes its signifying form, its identity, which constitutes the "sameness" of the word.[278] This sameness must be identified even when the sign is grafted from its original context and inscribed into a completely new one. Because of the repeatability of the same expression in different contexts, the meaning cannot be definitely decided. As Derrida explains, a linguistic mark is characterized by a certain amount of "otherness", which is due to the absence of a fixed signified content. There is no present intention or specific context to which the sign could be anchored, from which follows not only the absence of the referent but also the absence of the specific signified sense. For Derrida, the "iterability" (i.e., the repeatability of the same expression in different contexts), is not "accidental or an anomaly, but

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[276] WF 342.
[277] WF 30, PF 37.
[278] MP 318.

is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called 'normal' functioning."[279] The otherness of the word follows paradoxically from the sameness of the word:

> [T]he unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability, by the possibility of being repeated in the absence not only of its referent, which goes without saying, but of a determined signification, as of every present intuition of communication. This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is, as we have seen, the nonpresent remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged 'production' or origin. And I will extend this law even to all 'experience' in general, it is granted that there is no experience of pure experience, but only chains of differential marks.[280]

The otherness and exteriority of language, its ambiguity, is also for Blanchot a "normal/abnormal" characteristic of language.[281] Because of their repeatability, words are able to function in different contexts and to produce effects beyond the presence of the original writer, his or her intentional consciousness, as well as beyond the presence of the original "adressee" of the message.[282]

In a similar way as Blanchot, Derrida underlines the co-existence of the two sides of language. As Derrida points out in *Positions* (1971), traditional philosophy easily forgets the sensual nature of language. According to Derrida, typical of traditional philosophy is to repress the materiality of the sign and treat it like a "transparent window" into mental meanings.[283] Blanchot suggests, as I interpret him, that our answer to the materiality of language must be in

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[279] MP 321.

[280] MP 318.

[281] MP 313.

[282] Although ambiguity follows from the lack of the original context, without the possibility of any statement being cut off from its referent "there would be no statements." As Derrida writes in "Signature Event Context": "The absence of the referent [...] constructs the mark; and the eventual presence of the referent at the moment when it is designated changes nothing about the structure of the mark which implies that it can do without the referent" (MP 318).

[283] In *Positions* (1981) Derrida states: "I have often insisted on the fact that 'writing' or the 'text' is not reducible either to the sensible or visible presence of the graphic or the 'literal' " (Derrida 1981, 65).

a double reading, which acknowledges both the conceptual and non-conceptual, both the visible and invisible side sides of language. Blanchot's division into two co-existent sides of language can be read as a critical comment on Kojève's analysis of naming in Hegel: according to Blanchot, the exteriority of language is something that philosophers in most cases want to forget.

The Exteriority of Language

As Blanchot's focus in "Literature and the Right to Death" is on Hegel's notion of language, the emphasis he puts on the materiality of language can be read as a way to oppose the Hegelian idea of conceptualization, i.e., as a way to move from the outer, external reality to the inner reality of ideal meanings or significations.[284] Blanchot says, as I understand him, that in language there is always something that cannot be negated, interiorized, and conceptualized, something that remains definitely exterior, and which cannot be internalized with the mental eye of the reader by denying it or by reducing it into concepts and ideas of the mind.[285]

Hegel's idea of language as naming is based on a metaphysical idea of language which both Blanchot and Heidegger disapprove of: the idea of language as a tool at the disposal of the self-present ego, i.e., language as an element which has the ability to make things present, and as if eternal, to consciousness. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot remarks that with intentionality Husserl's phenomenology maintains the primacy of the subject as the origin of meaning.[286] In phenomenology, he writes,

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[284] As Kojève interprets Hegel, in order to understand the world conceptually or philosophically, one has to internalize it. In Kojève's interpretation this internalization (*Er-innerung*) demands "the passing of its 'meaning' (or 'essence') from the *external* Reality into the Concept which is in me, inside of the 'Subject'" (Kojève 1993, 162-3).

[285] As Derrida writes, writing as "spacing [...] is not the simple negative in the service of meaning, or of the living concept, the *telos*, which remains *relevable* and reducible in the *Aufhebung* of a dialectics" (MP 317).

[286] IC 251.

The act of speech remains one of expression; it is a matter of expressing the meaning that always precedes, then of preserving it as much as possible in its luminous ideality. Or, in fact, scientific truth must be *said* in order to constitute itself by freeing itself from the psychological singularity of the one who is supposed to have brought it to light, if, therefore, language has a certain constitutive power, one must immediately add that it is the speaking subject itself that holds this power. Speech would not therefore take the place of the subject in this act that is constitutive (phenomenologically speaking, this would be scandalous) – the subject speaks […]. Language, the expression of meaning that it serves and safeguards; meaning, the ideality of light; a primacy of light; a primacy that originates in the Subject with which a beginning occurs.[287]

According to Blanchot's words, language in Husserl receives its characteristics from the idea of consciousness understood as the "origin of light". In Husserl the foundation of meaning is the enlightening subjectivity and the primacy of the subject.[288] Even if he admits that speaking a scientific truth aloud frees it from the psychological singularity of just one person (from which it follows that even in Husserl language has a certain "constitutive power"), in Husserl "the speaking subject itself holds this power": in his philosophy, the essential function of language is to articulate pre-existing thoughts and to express pre-linguistic meanings. In phenomenology the origin of meaning is the light of consciousness, from which it follows that in phenomenology the act of speech remains one of expression".[289] For Husserl, the act of speech "is a

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[287] IC 251-2.
[288] IC 251-2. In Taylor's classification, Husserl's strategy of signification is "expressive". According to Taylor, when "signifier and signified are both 'within' the subject, the sign is expressive". This means that "signification involves a structure of reference in which the signifier points beyond itself to a signified that is in some sense ideational. The signified idea secures the foundation of meaning by establishing a clear referent for the expressive signifier. To read such a sign, one must reverse the process of expression by returning to the signified origin from which the signifier arises. If the origin is accessible, the sign is meaningful; if it is inaccessible, the sign is meaningless. While transparence is the goal of the constative sign, clarity is the ideal of the ideationally expressive sign" (Taylor 1990, 207).
[289] IC 251.

matter of expressing the meaning that always precedes, then of preserving it as much as possible in its luminous ideality."[290]

As Blanchot interprets it, in Husserl's phenomenology language is "the expression of a meaning that receives it, that it serves and safeguards; meaning, the ideality of light; a primacy of light that originates in the Subject with which a beginning occurs; finally, experience."[291] In giving privilege to man "with its divine attributes" (i.e., "consciousness in the first person, the transparency of light, a speech that sees and says meaning, a speaking gaze that reads it") Husserl excludes from his philosophy "all Presence that is radically other".[292]

Blanchot maintains that language is not an expression of "my" creativity: "I" do not speak in language, but rather language speaks in me. It is not the action or labour of the speaking subject that "kills" and negates things in naming them; instead, language kills, negates and signifies.[293] The interrelatedness of negativity and the life of the Spirit in Hegel (which Kojève expresses by writing that "Man is not only *mortal*; he is *death* incarnate; he is his own death"[294]) is in Blanchot transformed into the anonymity of speech, and into the idea that death speaks in man. As he writes: "It is accurate to say that when I speak: *death speaks in me*. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world."[295] Whereas for Hegel language is

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[290] IC 251.
[291] IC 251-2.
[292] IC 253.
[293] On the other hand, Blanchot's idea of the autonomous character of language can be seen as analogical to Kojève's idea of the autonomous character of discourse in Hegel. I refer here to Stuart Barnett's interpretation of the notion of discourse in Kojève. Barnett writes: "What later critics were to call the arbitrariness of the sign is for Kojève a necessary precondition of absolute spirit" (Barnett 1989, 18). In Barnett's reading, Kojève's idea of discourse can be seen as compatible to the idea of discourse in structuralism. Whereas in Hegel " 'Spirit is the Real revealed by the Discourse,'" in structuralism discourse encompasses all realms of human endeavour" (Barnett 1989, 18). In Kojève's interpretation of the historical evolution of consciousness in Hegel, discourse becomes the condition of possibility of man as such. The task of philosophy in its turn is to elucidate the autonomous character of this discourse. The basic premise of structuralism, then, is that sociological or cultural practices can be analysed as signifying systems (Barnett 1998, 18).
[294] Kojève 1980, 151.
[295] WF 323. Emphasis is mine. "*Il est donc précisément exact de dire, quand je parle: la mort parle en moi. Ma parole est l'avertissement que la mort est, en ce moment meme, lâchée dans le monde* […]" (PF 313).

first of all a tool in the hands of man, for Blanchot there is always an inhuman, uncanny element in language that speaks in spite of the speaking subject.[296]

In Blanchot, the one who uses language is not in the outer or upper position in relation to language, but always involved in it; he is, as Blanchot says, on the side of language.[297] It is not the author who speaks in literature; instead, in literature "no one speaks". The "no one speaks" of language challenges both the Husserlian idea of the traditional subjectivity, which controls language with intentional decisions, and the Hegelian idea of the Spirit which constructs the world for itself with the negativity of language. Most of all, the anonymity of literary speech challenges the idea of the traditional subjectivity that controls language with his or her intentional decisions.

In opposition to both the Hegelian idea of language as the tool of the Spirit and the Husserlian idea of the consciousness of subjectivity as the origin of meaning, for Blanchot the condition for a word to continue its signifying beyond the existence of a writing or reading subjectivity is the materiality and the repeatability of the written mark.[298] The otherness of language, its exteriority and

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[296] In "The idea of death in the philosophy of Hegel" Kojève cites Hegel's words in *Phenomenology*: "In my opinion, which can be justified only through the exposition of the System itself, everything depends on this, that one expresses and understands (*aufzufassen*) the True (*Wahre*) not [only] as *substance*, but rather as much as *subject*" (Kojève 1993, 311).

[297] In "The Essential Solitude" Blanchot describes the powerlessness of the writer in the following way: "To the extent that, being a writer, he does justice to what requires writing, he can never again express himself, anymore than he can appeal to you, or even introduce another's speech. Where he is, only being speaks – which means that language doesn't speak any more, but is. It devotes itself to the pure passivity of being" (SL 26-27).

[298] In my analysis, materiality serves for Blanchot the same purpose as the notion of "spacing" in Derrida's "Signature Event Context" ("*Signature événement context*", 1972). That a sign can be transferred into a new context is in Derrida's words "due to the spacing which constitutes the written sign". Spacing is defined by Derrida as the condition of meaning as repetition, i.e., as the condition for any written mark to be extracted from its original context. Whereas Blanchot speaks of materiality as the "hope of language", Derrida states that spacing is "not the simple negativity or lack, but the emergence of the mark", the "force of rupture", which follows from the possibility of iteration and repetition of any mark in a new context, and which challenges the metaphysics of presence. Derrida writes: "The spacing which separates it [the sign] from other elements of the internal contextual chain (the always open possibility of its extraction and grafting), but also from all the forms of

obscurity, is due to the possibility of repeating marks and extracting them from their original contexts. As repeatable, words have the ability to continue their existence independently, beyond the intentionality of a single subjectivity. Blanchot's description of the "savage freedom" of names and words also anticipates Derrida's idea of meaning as a chain of signifiers. He writes:

> Take the trouble to listen to a single word: in that word, nothingness is struggling and toiling away, it digs tirelessly, doing its utmost to find a way out, nullifying what encloses it – it is infinite disquiet, formless and nameless vigilance. Already the seal which held this nothingness within the limits of the word and within the guise of its meaning has been broken; now there is access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence – they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of "turn of phrase" which do not lead anywhere. Thus is born the image that does not directly designate the thing but, rather, what the thing is not; it speaks of a dog instead of a cat.[299]

a present referent (past or to come in the modified form of the present past to come) that is objective or subjective. This spacing is not the simple negativity or lack, but the emergence of the mark" (MP 317).

[299] WF 326. In my view, Blanchot's notion of language radicalizes Kojève's idea of the autonomous reality of language and the following possibility of "error". Already Kojève affirms the spatial and temporal existence of a word and the autonomous reality of language. As he writes, "the meaning does not float in the void: it is necessarily the meaning of a *word* or of a *discourse* – [words or discourses] pronounced, written or only thought, but existing always in the midst of the spatial and temporal world." The condition of meaning is based on the possibility of man to detach a word from its referent, or as Kojève also puts it, the autonomous reality of language is due to the ability of man to separate "the essence from its natural support" and to procure for it an "'empirical-existence of its own' by incarnating it in a spoken, written or thought word or discourse" (Kojève 1993, 327). As Kojève in a quite modern way concludes, because of its "freedom," i.e. its lack of a fixed referent or context, in language "error" is always possible: "For the meaning embodied in the word and in discourse is no longer subject to the necessity that rules essences bound to their respective natural supports [that are] determined in a univocal manner by their *hic et nunc*. Thus, for example, the meaning embodied in the word 'dog' can continue to subsist even after dogs have disappeared from the earth; it can (by being transmitted by radio, for example) overcome obstacles [that would be] insurmountable for a real dog; it [the word] can be placed where there would be no room for the latter [the real dog]; and so forth. And it is this 'separated freedom' and the 'absolute power' from which flows that condition of possibility of *error*, of which pre-Hegelian philosophers could never account. For this Freedom allows the meaning embodied in words to be combined otherwise than the corresponding essences, bound to their natural supports, would be" (Kojève 1993, 327).

Blanchot's idea of the independent existence of language comes close to Derrida's idea of language in *Margins of Philosophy*, where Derrida writes of the written sign "that is abandoned to its essential drifting"[300]: "This essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from an absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the authority of the last analysis, writing orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is indeed what Plato condemned in *Phaedrus*." According to Derrida, Plato's gesture is "the philosophical movement *par excellence*," which represents the metaphysics of presence that dominates the tradition of philosophy in general.[301] Against this metaphysical tradition, Blanchot underlines absence as the basis of meaning.

As I claim, Blanchot takes exteriority as the starting point for his analysis of language. In his analysis, the materiality (and exteriority) of language is the only hope of language to mean anything. As he writes, Mallarmé's poems show us that the only "hope" of a poet to attain what representative language forgets "lies in the material reality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, a kind of nature".[302] As I interpret Blanchot to say, the independency of language is grounded on its materiality. Even if the author would die, because of their relative independency his works still have their ability to signify.

Whereas on the first side of language obscurity is an obstacle to comprehension, on the second side this same obscurity is our way to exteriority. I would even suggest that for Blanchot, language as ambiguity is the answer to the philosophical problem of exteriority. In Blanchot's analysis, we can approach otherness only *because there is language,* and not language in the traditional meaning of "logos" in the possession of man: in Blanchot man is "possessed" by language. As I interpret Blanchot, in his analysis language as materiality is "always already" on "the side of things" in a way that can be seen as

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[300] MP 317.
[301] MP 316.
[302] WF 327, PF 316-17.

analogical to Dasein's way of being "always already-alongside" things and entities, in Heidegger's philosophy.[303] As Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death", Françis Ponge, the poet, has in his poems "gone over to the side of objects: sometimes he is water, sometimes a pebble, sometimes a tree."[304]

Already Heidegger defines poetical discourse as a kind of expression of exteriority that opens Dasein's eyes to its own Being.[305] Analogically for Blanchot, the hope of man to transgress his limits rests not in the negativity of language as the power of the subject, but in the fact that in language the subject is "always already" on the side of the other, or on the side of exteriority. As Blanchot poetically writes, "The language of literature is searching for this moment that precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence: it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things,* not man, but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into daylight, the

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[303] By emphasizing the historicity and temporality of Being, Heidegger comes to the conclusion that a subject is neither present nor transparent to himself, but rather partakes in different pre-theoretical practices of human life, as well as in the lived experiences of these practices. The idea that man as Dasein is not a subject that constitutes the world is in opposition to Husserl's philosophy of consciousness and the idea of subjectivity as a disinterested observer of the external world. From the idea that the world is not anything that could be objectified it follows that Dasein is always already "thrown" into the world, which precludes any extrawordly perspective demanded by Husserl: as a decentralized subjectivity Dasein is not the centre of its world. For Heidegger, Dasein's finite transcendence was a condition of intersubjectivity as our always already intentional relation to Being and to other beings (BT 89). To encounter the Other, Dasein does not have to first abandon its inner space, since, as Heidegger writes, "the perceiving of what is known is not a process of returning with one's booty to the 'cabinet' of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it; even in perceiving, retaining, and perceiving, the Dasein which knows *remains outside*, and it does so as Dasein" (BT 89). In an analogical way, Heidegger later claims that man is always already "in language", since language is man's way to be in the world and with others. To be a human being means to "be there", as if "thrown" into the world, always in some community, with some language, in some position.
[304] WF 334.
[305] In section 34 of *Being and Time* Heidegger states that poetry has an ability to express "Dasein's transcendence". Heidegger writes that "In 'poetical' discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing existence" (BT 205).

one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life."[306]

The Infinity of Meaning

In putting the emphasis on the materiality of language, Mallarmé's poems show the ability of language to seduce with its optical properties to the point where language is not light, not the conceptual clarity of meaning, but rather the obscurity of words – their material, dense, and opaque being.[307] As Blanchot writes, in poetry "A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning sense, the meaning which was all it wanted be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book."[308]

In accentuating the material appearance of language as sounds and blank spaces, Mallarmé's poems fragment language, and in this way resist the dialectical movement of negativity. As Bruns writes, for Mallarmé poetry is "the blank space on which nothing is seen, the white space that occurs as such in the appearance of letters".[309] In a way, poetry shows us means to escape the violence of the negative which dominates the first side of language. As I interpret Blanchot to say, Mallarmé's poetry, conscious of the violence it does to things by

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[306] WF 327, PF 316-17.
[307] In Mallarmé, language is "an incarnate consciousness, reduced to the material form of words, to their sonority, their life, and giving us to believe that this reality opens up who knows what path to us into the obscure heart of things" (WF 42).
[308] WF 327. One could also say that Blanchot's definition of language as negativity underlines the loss of the "signified", the abyss between a word and a thing, which metaphysics has been trying to forget. The purpose is not to transfer writing from the realm of the "sensible" to the realm of "non-sensible" ideas, but to underline that in language both sides (ideal and material) are co-existent. In a similar way, Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art" puts the emphasis on the materiality of language, on its "earthly" character: "To be sure the painter [...] uses pigment, but in such a way that colour is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word – not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have used them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word" (Heidegger 1971, 47-48).
[309] Bruns 1997, 7.

naming them, directs the violence to language itself. In making language obscure and useless, poetical language refuses to conceptualize and internalize things. Instead, it uses the negative power of language against itself.[310]

Blanchot proposes, as I interpret him, that by putting the weight on its materiality poetical language performs its refusal to clarify and reveal things. By obscuring itself, poetry "protects against revelation", Blanchot says. As if answering Sartre's question "what is literature", he writes:

> Literature is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence; literature is their innocence and their forbidden presence, it is the being which protects against revelation, it is the defiance of what does not want to take place outside. In this way, it sympathizes with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world. In this way too, it allies itself with the reality of language, it makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces – through its refusal to say anything – that it comes from night and will return to night.[311]

Since the second side of language takes as the starting point the radical absence of the thing named, its principal aim is not to represent reality, but rather to make a reality of its own. While the goal of language in philosophy is to clarify and illuminate things, poetical language is "the realm of the unrevealed".[312] As I propose, these words can be interpreted to defend the right of literature in its own reality against Sartre's political demands in *What is Literature?* Blanchot states that the task of poetry is not to tell truths or ideas

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[310] According to Michel Foucault, this characteristic can also be found in Blanchot's own writing: "Blanchot does not use language dialectically. To negate dialectically brings what one negates into the troubled interiority of the mind. To negate one's own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at the moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak" (Foucault 1990, 22).
[311] WF 330, PF 319.
[312] WF 326, PF 316.

about reality surrounding us, nor does it ask how things really are, but it asks the question concerning its own being.[313]

In my interpretation of "Literature and the Right to Death", Kojève's analysis of naming in Hegel inspired Blanchot to develop in it an account of language which would oppose the Hegelian idea of language as "revealing Being". As Kojève interprets in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, in Hegel every word has a function of revealing some object in the world: in naming beings with concepts man transforms being into a concept, which Kojève interprets to mean that in transforming things a man "creates (new things)", that is, concepts.[314] In his early essay Blanchot challenges Hegel's idea according to which words "reveal" the particular singularities that constitute the totality of being. As I interpret Blanchot's division into two sides of language, the aim of the second side is to approach things without naming, revealing and thus objectifying them.[315] This is why, on its second side, language "refuses to reveal anything", as Blanchot writes. According to Blanchot, poetical language does not aim to clarify things by saying them; rather, it takes as its aim to write "without saying anything", or to withdraw "*in order to say nothing*".[316]

That literature "reveals nothing", "sympathizes with darkness", and "allies itself with the reality of language" by listening and opening itself to the mystery of language is its *effort* to avoid the violence of naming and negativity[317]: as Blanchot writes, "By turning itself into an inability to reveal anything literature is *attempting* to become the revelation of what revelation destroys. […] Literature says: 'I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present.' "[318] Further, "*The*

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[313] WF 328.

[314] "If Man can understand (reveal) Being by the Concept, it is because he transforms (given) Being in terms of this Concept (which is then a Project) and makes it conform to it" (Kojève 1980, 142, n. 33).

[315] The second side tries to do what Heidegger insists we should do: to approach that which is "presencing" without naming it, since, as Heidegger argues, "as soon as presencing is named, it is represented as some present being" (EGT 50-51).

[316] WF 330, PF 319. Emphasis is mine.

[317] WF 330.

[318] WF 328. Emphasis is mine.

ideal of literature could be this: say nothing, speak and say nothing."[319]

In *The Space of Literature* (1955) Blanchot also suggests that poetical language does not seek to represent anything but rather to "withdraws". Literary language is, he writes as if quoting Heidegger, a way of speaking without causing anything to appear: in language something appears, but only to disappear. Blanchot follows Heidegger also in suggesting that the condition of meaning is in that which is not present but which rather "withdraws in appearing". The existence of language is both a condition of possibility for any entity to appear as something and a condition of possibility for approaching something without making it appear as an entity. As Blanchot writes, again as if in Heidegger's words, in literature "concealment tends to appear":

> When beings lack, being appears as the depth of concealment in which it becomes lack. When concealment appears, concealment, having become appearance, makes "everything disappear," but of this "everything has disappeared" it makes another appearance. It makes appearance from then on stem from "everything has disappeared." "Everything has disappeared" appears. This is exactly what we call an *apparition*. It is the "everything has disappeared" appearing in its turn. And the *apparition* says precisely that when everything has disappeared, there is still something: when everything lacks, lack makes the essence of being appear, and the essence of being is to be there still where it lacks, to be inasmuch as it is hidden…[320]

According to Blanchot, the experience of language as the continuous movement of appearing challenges the dialectical movement where "concealment tends to become negation".[321] In language "everything that has disappeared appears"[322]: something appears, although only to disappear in the same movement of appearing.[323] This is almost what Heidegger writes in "The Origin of the Work of Art". He writes that what is, is only by virtue of its concealment: "Every being which we

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[319] WF 324. Emphasis is mine.
[320] SL 252-3.
[321] SL 252-3.
[322] WF 329
[323] WF 334.

encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presencing, and in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealment. The clearing in which it stands is in itself at the same time concealment".[324]

Blanchot's answer to the question of whether there is language that would be beyond all objectifying and essentializing of representative thinking, is in the negative. Although our hope of encountering exteriority is in the otherness of language, it is not possible to close one's eyes to the negative and the representative side of language, either. As Blanchot concludes, literature's effort to turn "itself into an inability to reveal anything" is unfeasible: its "Orphic" will to catch things "before" meaning, language and consciousness is an impossible, "tragic endeavour".[325] Blanchot writes:

> By turning itself into an inability to reveal anything, literature is attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys. This is a tragic endeavor. Literature says: 'I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present.' But this wish to be a thing, this refusal to mean anything, a refusal immersed in words turned to salt; in short, this destiny which literature becomes as it becomes the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of consciousness deprived of a self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact that it is visible – all this is what literature now manifests, what literature now shows. If it were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind the stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse.[326]

Why is it, then, that language fails in "attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys"? The answer is, Blanchot

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[324] BW 178.
[325] WF 329. Analogically Derrida claims in "Violence and Metaphysics" that not even Heidegger's ontology is able to avoid violence. Since Being appears only in beings, Being is caught in history, in language and in certain violence: "A Being without violence would be a Being that would occur outside the existent; nothing, nonhistory, nonoccurrence; nonphenomenality". Derrida continues that in the same manner a language without the verb "to be" would be a non-language: "A non-violent language", "a language of pure invocation, pure adoration, preferring only proper nouns in order to call to the other from afar" (WAD 197). Such a language would exist as a kind of pre-ontological silence, and thus "The violence of war is inescapable" (WAD 147).
[326] WF 328.

proposes, in the duplicity of death. In his analysis, the second side of literature puts the weight on all that which the first side is not able to deny even if it tried to. First of all, it emphasizes the materiality of language as the residue of meaning: materiality itself is something that evades conceptualization and the movement of negativity. For Blanchot, the prime example of something which cannot be negated and conceptualized is negativity itself: the moment of death which escapes all our efforts to catch death with language. In Blanchot's analysis, it is not possible for language to reach its own beginning, the moment of negation, the moment of death. Death as the ultimate exteriority is something that makes meaning possible, remaining at the same time beyond our ability to catch it.

Even if I would try to negate the spatial existence of a thing, its living existence in the world by creating a concept, what I cannot negate is another existence that in the word continues its being despite my effort to deny it in turn. From this it follows that although language is based on absence and death, language itself "cannot die"; it expresses "the impossibility of going out",[327] as Blanchot says. In contrast to Heidegger's idea of death as "the possibility of impossibility" Blanchot speaks of the impossibility of language attaining its own death, i.e., the moment when it would cease to signify. Although the possibility to speak is rooted in our death, language can never attain its origin (death) as such. Language delays death, prevents it from happening and expressing itself. In searching the moment before speech, literature encounters only language's inability to deny itself – it meets the endless continuity of its own meaning, the "signification in general", as Blanchot writes:

> When literature refuses to name anything, when it turns a name into something obscure and meaningless, witness to the primordial obscurity, what has disappeared in this case – the meaning of the name – is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as an expression of the obscurity of

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[327] WF 331.

existence, so that although the precise meaning of the terms has faded, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning – a strange impersonal light.[328]

Language is the impossibility to stop signifying, it cannot stop making sense. As such, language is a kind of eternal return of meaning, or as Blanchot says, language "becomes the disappearance of every way out"[329]; literature is the "process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be", and "whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying."[330] There is no exit from language, which is why the question of the condition of meaning has to be found from language itself. This is why Blanchot opens his essay by suggesting, "Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question."[331]

Blanchot proposes in "Literature and the Right to Death" that literature's way of being a kind of passive subjectless consciousness comes close to what Levinas intends with his notion of the *il y a*. Both the experience of language in Blanchot and the experience of the "there is" in Levinas challenge the subjectivity and the identity of the self. In a way analogical to the exteriority of language questioning a reader's authority, Levinas's *il y a* (as Levinas writes) "will strip my consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'".[332]

Blanchot refers to Levinas's *Existence and Existants* in "Literature and the Right to Death" in suggesting that literature encounters horror in its experience of anonymity: "This is why existence is his [the human being's] only real dread; as Emmanuel Levinas has clearly shown, existence frightens him, not because of death which could put an end to it, but because it excludes death, because it is still there underneath death, a presence in the depths of

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[328] WF 329, PF 331.
[329] WF 344.
[330] WF 334.
[331] WF 300.
[332] Levinas 1993, 98; 1978, 60.

absence, an inexorable day in which all days rise and set."[333] From the horrifying infinity of meaning it follows that in spite of for what reasons and in which style the novelist writes, in the end he has only one subject: "The horror of existence deprived from the world, the process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be […] whatever dies encounters the impossibility of dying. This process is day which has become fatality, consciousness whose light is no longer the lucidity of the vigil but the stupor of lack of sleep, it is existence without being, as poetry tries to recapture it behind the meaning of words, which reject it."[334]

Blanchot refers to Levinas's idea according to which dread is not caused by our "being towards death" (as Heidegger in *Being and Time* maintains), but rather by the impossibility of death in the experience of the universality of existence. When meaning and consciousness are unavoidable, being becomes a torture, the feeling of an endless process of dying. Blanchot cites Levinas in asking, "Isn't dread in the face of being – horror of being – just as primordial as dread in the face of death? Isn't fear of being just as primordial as fear for one's being? Even more primordial, because one could account for the latter by means of the former."[335]

Whereas Levinas speaks of the interminability of existence, Blanchot sees in language an impossibility to stop making sense.[336]

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[333] WF 337, PF 324.

[334] PF 322, WF 334. Blanchot already speaks about the indeterminacy of existence in his essay "*La lecture de Kafka*" in 1945, writing that "If night suddenly is cast in doubt, then there is no longer either day nor night, there is only a vague, twilight glow, which is sometimes a memory of day, sometimes a longing for night, end of the sun and sun of the end. Existence is interminable, it is nothing but an indeterminacy; we do not know if we are excluded from it (which is why we search vainly in it for something solid to hold on to) or whether we are forever imprisoned in it (and so we turn desperately toward the outside). This existence is an exile in the fullest sense: we are not there, we are elsewhere, and we will never stop being there" (PF 17, WF 9).

[335] WF 337.

[336] Gerald Bruns sees the difference between Levinas and Blanchot from a different perspective than I do, as he writes that "whereas Levinas considers the *il y a* from the standpoint of the subject's experience of it (ecstasy, horror), Blanchot considers it from the standpoint of things in their freedom from subjectivity" (Bruns 2002, 222). Bruns writes that this question is "at the heart of Blanchot's poetics", even though for Blanchot this question is "concerned precisely with the alterity of *things*" (Bruns 2002, 222). I disagree with Bruns's interpretation according to which in

Literature is movement where that which disappears appears again; its mode of being is "existence without being."[337] Writing never attains the experience of the final death but rather the infinite experience of dying. As the infinity of existence encountered in literature excludes the possibility of death, literature becomes the "process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be", and "whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying".[338] What is heard in the endless murmuring of language is the voice of "nothingness at work", or the voice of the un-negatable being, pure existence, to which Levinas gives the name "there is" (*il y a*).

Whereas Levinas in *Existence and Existants* underlines the otherness of being, Blanchot stresses the fundamental exteriority of language. Both death and language are meta-phenomenological in a fundamental way, borderline cases which demarcate the limits of phenomenological experience and language.[339] Blanchot's idea of the otherness of literary language reminds us also of the "createdness" of art in Heidegger, the solitary, uncanny character of art, which creates an experience we cannot put into concepts but which, nevertheless, continues its being.

For Blanchot, literature is "consciousness" without a subject; it is not the consciousness of an I, not the "unconscious" side of a subject, but rather "the experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness, in the movement whereby, as it disappears, as it tears itself away from the meticulousness of an I, it is recreated beyond unconsciousness as an impersonal spontaneity, the desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which no one knows, and which

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Blanchot the main question concerns the alterity of "things". Rather, as I will argue, the question is of the *alterity of writing* as neutrality. See Chapter Five in this study.

[337] PF 322, WF 334.

[338] PF 335

[339] See Simon Critcley, "*Il y a* – holding Levinas's hand to Blanchot's fire" (in *Maurice Blanchot. The Demand of Writing*, pp. 108–122) and *Very Little… Almost Nothing. Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

ignorance always discovers behind itself as its own shadow changed into a gaze."[340]

For Blanchot, it is not one's consciousness that speaks through language, but rather language as "consciousness without the ability to lose consciousness."[341] If language is born by transforming negativity into a concept, the movement of negativity as a chain of signifiers can never stop, i.e., it does not "die", which means that in language death is always deferred (language cannot stop signifying). Writing never attains the experience of final death but rather the experience of eternal dying, the infinity of death. Language is a continuous anticipation of death which never arrives. It is consciousness without subjectivity, a kind of awareness or consciousness without anybody being conscious or aware. Literature's "consciousness" does not refer to any singular living consciousness ("because writing itself, of course, neither lives nor dies", as Leslie Hill writes)[342], from which follows also its infinity and groundlessness.

In Blanchot's stories, the infinity of meaning is indicated also by their beginnings and endings, which are often left open and indeterminate. The beginning of *Thomas the Obscure*, for example, leaves the reader without information of what has happened earlier, before the story. The ending of *The Madness of the Day*, in its turn, tries to deny its own existence in letting the last line ask: "A story?" And the story answers: "No. No stories. Never again".[343] Even though the story denies the possibility of any future stories, the story itself is already a story about telling a story. Writing is unable to negate its own continuation: even if it tried to deny its own existence, it always signifies something. Between the first and the second version of *Thomas the Obscure*, there is also an important difference, which indicates the loss of its author's belief in closed endings. In the first 1941 version, the chapter where Thomas is reading his text closes with the word "FIN". From the 1950 version, this important word is

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[340] WF 331-2.
[341] WF 331.
[342] Hill 1997, 97.
[343] The story asks, "A story? No. No stories. Never again" (MD 18, FJ 32-33).

missing. From these open beginnings and endings follow the experience of meaning as a kind of endless horizon (the space of literature) without a fixed origin or end.[344]

In my analysis, Blanchot challenges Hegel's idea of language as pure negativity and conceptuality with his idea of the infinity and ambiguity of language. Although Blanchot defines the second side of language as a non-objectifying way of speaking, i.e., as a "refusal to say anything", by following Kojève's idea of negativity as the ground of *all meaning* he finds violence in the core of language itself. Blanchot defines language as negativity and affirmation, visibility and invisibility, conceptuality and non-conceptuality, all at the same time.

This ambiguity of all language is (as I will suggest in the following chapters) the main difference between the answer Blanchot and Heidegger give to the problem concerning the violence of representative language. Whereas Heidegger sees poetic language as an affirmative, non-violent, and "aletheic" way of approaching Being, Blanchot underlines the co-existence of the negative and the affirmative, i.e., the violent and the non-violent side in all language.

The Force of Language

In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the ego's reality is the product of the labour in which the ego struggles to find itself an identity. In Blanchot, instead, writing is beyond both the notion of labour and of subjectivity. Because of its independency language has a way of being that is not anchored to the intention of the present subjectivity. Neither is it possible to assimilate the entities, phenomena, experiences, and situations in the literary world to those in the real or phenomenological world.

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[344] See Leslie Hill's analysis of the ending of *Thomas the Obscure* in Hill 1997, 56-7. Hill writes that the ending of *Thomas the Obscure* is "like the ultimate condemnation of both Thomas and the literary discourse that carries his name, the final proof, so to speak, that the only possible end to writing is in fact the interminable impossibility of such ending" (Hill 1997, 57).

As I have claimed, by adopting from Mallarmé the idea of language as materiality and physicality, Blanchot is able to develop the idea of language as autonomous, as anonymity, i.e., the idea of language as signification without the idea of subjectivity as the origin or foundation of meaning. From Blanchot's view of language as an autonomous field follows in turn both his idea of the dissolution of the theoretical subject and the impairment of the analytical gaze. As I interpret Blanchot, the experience of the impoverishment of the "I" in the encounter with the textual other leads him in turn to criticize those philosophies and theories based on the primacy of "intentional", "enlightening", "mastering" subjectivity.

Because of its independency, language should also be freed from the demand of truth. As something that remains beyond the opposition between the true and the false, the notion of literary writing in Blanchot comes close to the definition of the linguistic performative in Austin. According to Austin, the analysis of the performative should be kept free from the authority of the value of truth.[345] In Derrida's interpretation, however, Austin's definition of the performative fails, since it does not take into consideration what Derrida himself calls "the intrinsic conventionality" of the mark. Blanchot, instead, underlines the independency of writing, its way of being a kind of consciousness without anyone being conscious or aware.[346]

As Derrida interprets, in defining the performative as a linguistic act that "does something with words" Austin substitutes the

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[345] As Derrida interprets in *Margins of Philosophy,* unlike Heidegger's truth as *aletheia* or truth as assertion, Austin's performative does not aim to tell or uncover the truth: "The performative is a 'communication' which does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content guarded by its own aiming at truth (truth as an *unveiling* of that which is in its Being, or as an *adequation* between a judicative statement and a thing itself)" (MP 322).   On Heidegger's notion of truth, see Chapter Five of this thesis.

[346] As I interpret Blanchot, his thinking is in line with Derrida's notion of intentionality two decades later: although he does not deny the category of consciousness, or of intentionality, he challenges the idea of the subject as its self-present basis. As Derrida says, even if we affirm the iterability and the independency of the mark, and take it as the ground of meaning, "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from this place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and the entire system of utterances" (MP 326).

value of truth with the value of force: the idea of language as something that is able to cause effects is based on the idea of language as active and forceful.[347] Derrida points out that Austin's analyses always demand the idea of "an exhaustively determinable *context*":[348] Austin thinks of the context as the ground or "the circumstance of the statement"[349] that secures the successfulness of the given performative. As such, the context refers to consciousness as its basis. With the demand of the determinable context, the ultimate responsibility for the success of the performative is given to "a free consciousness present for the totality of the operation, of an absolutely full meaning that is master of itself: the teleological jurisdiction of a total field whose intention remains the organizing centre."[350]

According to Derrida, to understand where the performative gets its force (and how meaning in general is possible) demands an understanding of "*what* the 'occurring' or *the eventhood of an event consists of,* when the event supposes in its allegedly present and singular intervention a statement which in itself can be only of a repetitive or citational structure, or rather […] an iterable structure."[351] Derrida does not reduce the "force" or the "power" of language (its ability to signify) to an exhaustively determinable context or to the consciousness of the writing subjectivity. For Derrida, as for Blanchot, the power of language is rather in its repetitive or citational structure; as I propose, the idea of language as repetition comes up already in Blanchot's early essays on language.

In Derrida's words, the absence of intention can be understood as "the structural unconsciousness" of language, which again comes close to Blanchot's notion of language in "Literature and the Right to Death", where language is a "consciousness without the ability to lose consciousness", or "the light of consciousness deprived of a self."[352] Blanchot defines absence as the force of language, which makes

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[347] MP 321.
[348] MP 291.
[349] MP 323.
[350] MP 323.
[351] MP 326. Emphasis is mine.
[352] WF 328, 331.

language continue the never ending movement towards the goal it can never attain. Language is not able to reveal its origin, since the movement of writing is all there is. That writing is "consciousness without ability to lose consciousness" means that writing is independent, autonomous, and as if orphaned in the sense that it is not – and cannot be – dependent on the existence of its creator or of its reader. If language were a gaze, it would be a gaze unable to close its eyes.

Blanchot suggests (in a similar way as the post-structuralists after him) the possibility to cut off the word (or the "mark", to use structuralist vocabulary), from its context of production.[353] The functioning of writing necessitates the radical absence of the context, in a similar way as it necessitates the radical absence of the writer and the reader. As Derrida writes in *Margins of Philosophy*, from understanding language as a textual event follows "the subtraction of all writing from the semantic horizon or the hermeneutic horizon which, at least as a horizon of meaning, lets itself be punctured by writing."[354] In Derrida's words, a written sign "carries with it a force of breaking with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription."[355]

In "Literature and the Right to Death" Blanchot in his turn asks: if literature as "an impersonal power" does not get its force from the writer or from the specific context, and if literature "does not act", where, then, does literature get its power? He answers: from language itself. Literary language is, Blanchot writes, "a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing", and in this way "makes language into matter without content, content without form."[356] Understood as a textual event, literature is a "meaning detached from its conditions, separated from its moments", which wanders "like an empty power, a power no one can do anything with, a power without power, the simple inability to cease to be, but which,

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[353] MP 320.
[354] MP 317.
[355] MP 317.
[356] WF 330.

because of that, appears to be the proper determination of indeterminate and meaningless existence."[357]

In place of Hegel's concept of language as pure negativity, Blanchot develops the idea of language as "worklessness" or un-working (*désœuvrement*), i.e., language as an infinite movement which bases itself on nothingness without being able to name this nothingness itself. From the infinity of signification follows the impossibility to finish a work; instead of a completed work there is the interminable process of signification in its endless becoming. This concept is not to be understood as the dialectical opposition to the concept of a work of art (*œuvre*); it refers to the interminable process of signification, which due to the repeatability of words cannot be anchored to the intentionality of the writer or the reader, and which therefore undoes the idea of the finished work, of which the writer would have the image in his mind at the moment of finishing the work.

In Blanchot, the materiality of the word is like the "the structure of the iterability" for Derrida, in that it takes the work away from the activity of the writer and instead underlines the radical passivity of language, its independency of a single consciousness, and the infinity of signification. In other words, if Hegel's concept of language as negativity and communication underlines the constative or assertative function of language, Blanchot's concept of literary language, rather, takes from it the power to "operate", or the force to "transform situations" (which is the power Austin gives to the performative). Blanchot's conception of language is beyond the opposition between language as referring to something and language as doing things. He proposes that we think of *a third* way of defining language, which neither constates nor performs things. As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation* "to write is to make (of) speech (a) work, but that this work is an unworking [*désœuvrement*]; that to

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[357] WF 331.

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[357] WF 331.

speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech whose task is not to say things".[358]

Because of the possibility of repetition and iterability, language is never "mine" or "ours"; as an element that consists of signs and words independent of a single writer or a reader, language should be understood rather as an anonymous field, in which we always already live, act, and make plans. In Blanchot, the exteriority of language takes the place of a controlling subjectivity. As Derrida suggests, "By absolutely virtualizing dialogue, writing creates a kind of autonomous transcendental field from which every present subject can be absent."[359] The ultimate ambiguity and the impersonality of literary language questions the idea of poetry as the production of the creative subject. From this it follows that poetical language does not eventually fulfil the conditions Austin demands from the performative: as Derrida points out in "Signature Event Context", the most essential of these conditions is "the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject."[360] Although signs in the performative do not refer to independent, pre-existing objects, what nevertheless remains is the act of objectification: according to Austin, the performative utterance can be successful only if the engagement of the performing subject is self-conscious and sincere.[361] From this it follows, that if literature is *not* understood as a self-conscious act of a creative subjectivity, in literary writing a successful performative can never be performed. As Blanchot puts it:

> When I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something, rather a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing. This formulation explains why literature's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing. That is not the musing of a high class kind of nihilism. Language perceives that its meaning derives not from what exists, but from its own retreat before existence, and it is tempted to proceed no further than this retreat,

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[358] EI 524, IC 357.
[359] Derrida 1978, 88.
[360] MP 322.
[361] MP 323; Austin 1962, 8-9.

to try to attain the negation itself and to make everything of nothing. If one is to talk about things except to say what makes them nothing, well then, to say nothing is really the only hope to say everything about them.[362]

Blanchot's description of language brings to mind Heidegger's question at the beginning of his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger asks "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" If Heidegger is understood to be asking how can we have a relation to something that is defined as not-a-thing, that is, nothingness, one could answer with Banchot's words: that literary language does "nothing" by "positing nothing", or at least something impossible to determine or approach with the seriousness of the philosophical reflection, since language creates nothing that "is".

Blanchot underlines the ultimate ambiguity of all language: although language in its "constative" dimensionality is violence of conceptuality and light, there is always also another possibility, the other side of language, where language, by doing violence to itself, seeks ways to minimize the violence of conceptual thinking. In addition to the distinction between constative and performative, we could therefore propose *a third possibility*, that – in contrast to the constative, which always refers to something, and in contrast to the performative, which always "does" something – struggles to do nothing with words.[363]

In an interview in December 2003 Jacques Derrida relates to the performative a conventional idea of the right to do things with the power of words. Derrida differentiates between this power and the event, which is something more or something other than the performative. Derrida asks, how can the event – which I understand to be a textual event – constitute the truth. For Derrida, the event constitutes the truth which is beyond traditional truth. This truth is "always revolutionary" or as he says, as if referring to Heidegger, "*de*

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[362] WF 324-5.
[363] As Mark Taylor writes, we should pose the question "whether words sometimes are neither constative nor performative but function as an unthought third that allows words to do nothing" (Taylor 1990, 210).

type poétique si vous voulez, ou du type de l'événement." This non-objectifiable and non-thematizable truth cannot even be thought of. In adding that this kind of poetical or event-like truth is not "*du type du théorème, de ce qu'on peut voir devant soi ou transmettre",* Derrida is speaking as if through Blanchot's mouth. The difference is, however, the following: as I will underline in the following chapters, Blanchot always shuns speaking of truth in relation to writing.[364]

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[364] Derrida says: "*L'événement ne peut pas être performatif. Le performatif implique la maîtrise dans l'observance d'une convention donnée et inflexible. Donc, un événement plus que performatif ou autre que performatif, comment peut-on dire qu'il constitue une vérité? Eh bien, pourtant je le crois. Je crois que la vérité, celle qui m'intéresse au-delà du concept traditionnel de vérité, est toujours révolutionnaire, de type poétique si vous voulez, ou du type de l'événement, et non du type du théorème, de ce qu'on peut voir devant soi ou transmettre. C'est une mutation qu'on peut après coup essayer de réfléchir. On peut tenter de la transformer en vérité transmissible, avec tous les risques que cela comporte, mais au moment où cela arrive, ce n'est pas pensable, thématisable, objectivable.*" (In "La vérité blessante, ou le corps à corps des langues. Entretien avec Jacques Derrida." /*Europe: Revue littéraire mensuelle,* /82ème année, mai 2004, No. 901, pp. 8-27, here p. 20; cf. pp. 19-20).

IV From Perception to Fascination, and from Representation to Image: Literary Experience in Blanchot

The cornerstone of Blanchot's notion of language as it is presented in his early essays from the 1940s, is the idea of meaning without an intending or anchoring subjectivity. "Literature and the Right to Death" already presents language as a kind of subjectless field which challenges the idea of meaning as intentionality. As well, in Blanchot's essays from the 50s, collected in *The Space of Literature*, both the writer and the reader encounter in the force of language an event which questions the functionality of the classical subject-object-dichotomy. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot speaks of the literary experience as the experience of fascination (*la fascination*), which challenges seeing as intentionality and making present by the gaze.

In "The Essential Solitude" ("*La Solitude Essentielle*", 1955) fascination is presented as an experience that derives from the special nature of literary language. The experience of fascination is born as we encounter in the otherness of the text something we can neither comprehend nor relinquish: the text remains radically separate; it cannot be studied as an object of knowledge. Blanchot's notion of fascination comes close to the surrealist experience of automatic writing to which Blanchot also refers several times in *The Space of Literatur*e. As Gerald Bruns notes, for Blanchot the surrealists stand for the noninstrumental notion of language.[365] As Blanchot writes in *The Work of Fire,* "The surrealists became well aware – they made use of it admirably – of the bizarre character of words: they saw that words have their own spontaneity. For a long time, language had laid claim to a kind of particular existence: *it refused simple transparency, it was not just a gaze, an empty means of seeing; it existed, it was concrete thing and even a colored thing*. The surrealists understand, moreover,

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[365] Bruns 1997, 10.

language is not an inert thing; it has a life of its own, and a latent power that escapes us."[366]

In the experience of fascination the subject loses its ability of subjectivity and its ability to analyse its perception by giving meanings to it: "What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense. It abandons its 'sensory' nature, abandons the world, draws back from the world, and draws us along. It no longer reveals itself to us, yet it affirms itself in a presence foreign to the temporal present and to presence in space."[367] In fascination, we are no longer in a cognitive relation to the text. We no longer look, think, or gaze at it as as aesthetic object; instead, it gazes at us. As Levinas explains Blanchot's notion of fascination, "If vision and knowledge consists in being able over their objects, in dominating them from a distance, the exceptional reversal brought about by writing comes down to being touched by what one sees – to being touched from a distance. The gaze is seized by the work, the words look at the writer (This is Blanchot's definition of fascination.)"[368]

In Blanchot's words, in the experience of fascination the gaze finds the power which neutralizes it: "Of whoever is fascinated it can be said that he doesn't perceive any real object, any real figure, for what he sees does not belong to the world of reality, but to the

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[366] WF 88-9, PF 93. Emphasis is mine.

[367] SL 32, EL 29.

[368] Levinas 1996, 132. Levinas's concept of desire reminds of Blanchot's notion of fascination in that they both replace the phenomenological concepts of intentionality. For Levinas the power which moves us unto the exteriority of the other is not philosophical contemplation or conceptual thinking; it is not the movement of a dialectic thinking of which Plato already writes in his cave allegory. The relationship to exteriority cannot be that of fusion or "bringing together", but requires distance. In Levinas's view, the other can be approached only if the distance between myself and the other is radical: "This remoteness is radical only if desire is not the possibility of anticipating the desirable, if it does not think it beforehand, if it goes toward it aimlessly, that is, as toward the absolute, unanticipated alterity, as one goes forth unto death. Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there in no idea. Vision is an adequation of the idea with the thing, a comprehension that encompasses. Non-adequation does not denote a simple negation or an obscurity of the idea, but – beyond the light and the night, beyond the knowledge measuring beings – the inordinateness of Desire" (Levinas 1996, 34).

indeterminate milieu of fascination."[369] In the experience of fascination, light is not the light of subjectivity and reason, but rather the black light of things and beings which attract one's gaze like the dark surface of water: "This milieu of fascination, where what one sees seizes sight and renders it interminable, where the gaze coagulates into light, where light is the absolute gleam of an eye one doesn't see but which one doesn't cease to see since it is the mirror image of one's own look – this milieu is utterly attractive. Fascinating. It is light which is also the abyss, a light one sinks into, both terrifying and tantalizing."[370]

In what follows, I will read the fourth chapter of the revised *Thomas the Obscure* (1950) as a world of fascination. In this chapter, Blanchot presents to us an act of reading, or as Gerald L. Bruns writes, the chapter "represents language" in a way that "we might figure as a sort of surrealist allegory of reading" or "a surrealist allegory of poetic experience".[371] One can also propose that Thomas's relation to the book he is reading is determined by fascination, as Blanchot in *The Space of Literature* defines the notion. In Blanchot's story, Thomas's act of reading turns from "seeing as staring" to the experience of fascination which according to Blanchot is beyond both seeing and not-seeing. As I argue, reading, for Blanchot, is eventually not seeing as staring or seeing as *Umsicht*, but is determined by the experience of fascination, which is neither the ability to see nor the ability to stop seeing. I will first argue that Blanchot replaces Heidegger's term *Umsicht* with "fascination" and Heidegger's term "revelation" with the term "image": in the experience of fascination, the text turns from the object into something which Blanchot calls "the image" (*l'image*). I suggest that with these concepts Blanchot both affirms and challenges the central points of Heidegger's thinking on art.

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[369] SL 32, EL 29.
[370] SL 32-3.
[371] Bruns 1997, 35.

The Gaze of the Text

There is a scene in Blanchot's novel *The One Who Was Standing apart from Me (Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, 1953) which tells about an encounter with words and which is close to the experience of fascination as Blanchot defines it in *The Space of Literature*. The story recounts how the narrator experiences in words "impersonal presence, the frightening affirmation of something", which he is not able to comprehend:

> Beautiful hours, profound words which I would like to belong to, but which would, themselves, also belong to me, words empty and without connection. I cannot question them and they cannot answer me. They only remain close to me, as I remain close to them. That is our dialogue. They stand motionless, as though erect in these rooms; at night, they are concealment of the night; in the day, they have transparency of the day. Everywhere I go, they are there.
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> What do they want? We're not familiar to one another, we don't know one another. Words from the empty depth, who has summoned you?...
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> I don't know that they press on me, but I sense it. I see a sign of it in the immobility which, even when they seem to wander, even when I leave them, keeps them crowded around me in a circle whose centre I am in spite of myself…
>
> Am I their goal, what are they seeking? I will not believe it. But sometimes they stare at me with a power so restrained, a silence so reserved, that this silence points me out to myself; then I have to remain firm, I have to struggle with my refusal to believe…
>
> I didn't invoke them, I am without power over them, and they have no relations with me…
>
> They are always together. No doubt this means I can only see them together, together even though unconnected, motionless around me though wandering. I see them all, never one in particular, never one single one in the familiarity of an undivided gaze, and if, even so, I try to stare at one of them separately, what I'm looking at then is terrible, impersonal presence, the frightening affirmation of something I don't understand, don't penetrate, that isn't here and that nevertheless conceals itself in the ignorance and emptiness of my own gaze. [372]

This scene recounted in *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me* resembles the scene of reading narrated in the fourth chapter of *Thomas the Obscure*. In both these stories the characters are effaced with a kind of gaze of being that takes from them their ability to approach things by the power of the gaze. Being looked at by words is what happens also to the protagonist of *Thomas the Obscure*: in this story, the act of reading is not controlled by the desire of Thomas, the reader, but by the seductive force of the text which does not only "challenge the reader" (as is said of difficult texts) but also fascinates him.

In Chapter Four of *Thomas the Obscure*, the opening lines present Thomas reading a book in his room. He reads with rapt attention, so deep in concentration that he doesn't notice if someone enters the room. The open book, interpreted as a feminine praying mantis, is just about to take control, just about to consume the reader. Thomas, in turn, is like a male mantis at the moment of being devoured by the female:

> Thomas stayed in his room to read. He was sitting with his hands joined over his brow, his thumbs pressing against his hairline, so deep in concentration that he did not make a move when anyone opened the door. Those who came in thought he was pretending to read, seeing that the book was always open to the same page. He was reading. He was reading with unsurpassable meticulousness and attention. In relation to every symbol, he was in the position of the male praying mantis about to be devoured by the female. They looked at each other.[373]

The praying mantis, *mantis religiosa,* signifies in Greek a seer and a prophet, i.e., someone who has second sight. Although the praying mantis has been named after its way of crossing its front legs as if it were praying, in truth it waits in this position for the right moment to attack its prey. The comparison of the reader to a seer (and to its victim) can be read to imply that something/somebody is to be revealed

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[372] CAP 139-43, OW 74-76.
[373] TTO 25.

to the reader, or that the story is going to pose a question of the structure of revelation and of a prophetic event.[374] The praying mantis can also be seen as a sign or an omen to the reader. It can be read at the same time as a promise of insight and a warning: be careful, or the story, like the mantis, will deceive and devour you.[375]

In the mythical figure of a mantis, sexuality and death confront each other: the adult female usually eats the male after or during mating. The mantis's grasping response is extremely fast, hardly visible to the eyes; the motion is barely a flicker if perceived at all. In order to stay alive the male must therefore to be extremely cautious: as soon as it catches the gaze of the female, it must begin approaching so slowly that the female it not able to see it moving. Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst and philosopher, pays attention to the link the story makes between death and castration. In his seminar *Identification* (*L'Identification*, 1962), Lacan analyses the relation between sight and anxiety in *Thomas the Obscure*. In Lacan's interpretation, the figure of the mantis relates the gaze and anxiety to each other, since to surrender to the other's gaze means giving oneself up to the anxiety.[376]

For Thomas concentrating on his reading, the most significant thing is the object of his gaze, the text. Like any reader, he wants the text to uncover its secret. For Blanchot, reading is a distracted desire for illumination, an attempt to bring concealed meaning from darkness to light, in the same way as Christ called upon Lazarus: *Lazare, veni foras*, "Lazarus, come forth".[377] However, as Thomas encounters in the text someone or something that looks at him, he also becomes aware of his own gaze, of himself looking at the text, and of the separating distance between him and the object of his gaze. One could propose also, as Lacan does, that in trying to catch the meaning of his

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[374] Schestag 1998,224.

[375] The figure of *mantis* can also be interpreted as referring to the Greek oracle who, by giving a "sign" to the people, does not give a sign in the linguistic meaning of the word. The sign of the oracle is rather a hint, warning, or clue, which in turn must be interpreted. As Heraclitus writes, "The Oracle of Deplhi does not speak, it gives a sign" (Fr. 93).

[376] Gondek 1990, 21-28.

[377] EL 257.

gaze Thomas becomes aware of the gaze of the other – which he needs in order to catch the meaning of his own gaze. For Lacan, what is essential is not that I am looking, but that *I am looked at* while I am looking at. *The other looks at me.* For Lacan, the questions heard between the lines are: Why am I looked at? Why does the other look at me? What does it want from me? *How* does it want me?[378]

However, without going deeper to Lacan's psychoanalytic analysis, what in my view is essential in the encounter between the reader and the text in Blanchot's story is not Thomas's consciousness, the reader's intentionality, but rather the activity of the text, or the gaze of the other. From the first moment of his reading Thomas is conscious of feminine seducing desire, which he senses from the text:

> The words, coming forth from the book which was taking on the power of life and death, exercised a gentle and peaceful attraction over the glance which played with them. Each of them, like a half closed eye, admitted the excessively keen glance which in other circumstances it would not have tolerated. And so Thomas slipped toward these corridors, approaching them defenselessly until the moment he was perceived by the very quick of the word. Even this was not fearful, but rather an almost pleasant moment he would have wished to prolong. The reader contemplated this little spark of life joyfully, not doubting that he had awakened it. It was with pleasure that he saw himself in this eye looking at him.[379]

The text is not, however, simply a desiring or a seducing subjectivity: although the text has the power to seduce with its gaze, already at the next moment it turns from the seducing subject into the seducing object, as if playing with both positions. Like a male mantis Thomas is fascinated by the words looking at him; the text, like the female praying mantis, is like a catastrophic omen to which Thomas, the male mantis,

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[378] According to Hans-Dieter Gondek, Lacan picks up precisely these questions in his unpublished seminar from 1962. Lacan ponders how it would feel to confront the giant mantis, to be opposite to it, but hiding behind a mask (Gondek 1992, 21-23).
[379] TTO 25.

remains blind.[380] The deeper Thomas sinks into the text he is reading, the more unordinary he feels his new position:

> The pleasure in fact became very great. It became so great, so pitiless that he bore it with a sort of terror, and in the intolerable moment when he had stood forward without receiving from his interlocutor any sign of complicity, he perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living being, and not simply by one word, but by all the words that were in that word, by all those that went with it and in turn contained other words, like a procession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute.[381]

The "eye of the absolute" brings to mind the Judeo-Christian idea of the all-seeing eye of God, and also the idea of the Holy Book as an eye of God that stays on readers' thoughts. As well, the angels guarding the words associate themselves with the gaze: angels, having eyes also in their wings, have the power to see everywhere. The word "eye" also entails a reference to the corporeality of seeing, i.e., to the fact that seeing is always conditioned by a certain location – a certain body, perspective or point of view, or as Blanchot writes in "Reading" ("*Lire*", 1955), "Each painting, each piece of music makes us a present of the organ we need to welcome it; each one 'gives' us the eye and the ear we need to see and hear it."[382]

Despite the reference to the eye of the absolute, nothing transcendental breaks out from Thomas's book. Inside every word there is only another word and inside it other words. The sliding of the words into other words, this movement of "signifiers" one could say, is "like a procession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute."[383] The eye of the absolute is eventually as empty of meaning as the line of words referring to it; the words "eye" or "eyes" are marked by the absence of meaning: the meaning of the word eye disseminates into the multiplicity of signifying words, and in this

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[380] Schestag 1998, 224.
[381] TTO 25.
[382] SL 192.
[383] TTO 25.

movement also the all-seeing absoluteness of the transcendental eye disseminates into the multiplicity of potential views.

As Thomas tries to eliminate the distance between him and the text by approaching the other he hopes to encounter, he is like Orpheus looking at Eurydice: instead of reaching the other, his gaze breaks up the preceding connection. The effort of the reader to make the book transparent, to dissolve its secret with a penetrating gaze, is condemned to fail. The work is neither a mirror which reflects back an image of man, nor a window through which we could see our world as new and enlightened. Thomas reading the text resembles Narcissus of Ovid's myth: as Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Narcissus "bending over the spring, does not recognize himself in the fluid image that the water sends back to him. It is thus not himself, not his perhaps nonexistent 'I' that he loves or – even in his mystification – desires. And if he does not recognize himself, it is because what he sees is an image, and because the similitude of an image is not a likeness to anyone or anything: the image characteristically resembles nothing. Narcissus falls 'in love' with the image because the image as such – because every image – is attractive: the image exerts the attraction of the void and of death in its falsity."[384]

One could again refer also to the story of Lazarus, which Blanchot often uses to clarify the role of the reader: if Lazarus does not come out from his tomb, it is because he is already dead, and nothing can eliminate this exteriority. Face to face with the strange faceless exteriority, Thomas becomes frightened: the other no longer only fascinates him, it is uncanny to be observed by the word and not only by one word but with it all possible words.[385] The fascination turns to terror, and Thomas feels like he is losing his position as a sovereign reader: "Rather than withdraw from a text whose defenses were so strong, he pitted all his strength in the will to seize it, obstinately refusing to withdraw his glance and still thinking himself a profound reader, even when the words were already taking hold of him and

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[384] WD 125.

beginning to read him."[386] Words look at Thomas, read him, and under their pressure it is as if his whole being were substituted by words: "He was seized, kneaded by intelligible hands, bitten by a vital tooth; he entered with his living body into the anonymous shapes of words, giving his substance to them, establishing their relationships, offering his being to the word 'be'. For hours he remained motionless, with, from time to time, the word "eyes" in the place of his eyes (*avec, à la place des yeux, de temps en temps le mot yeux*); he was inert, captivated and unveiled."[387]

From sinking into the text follows the division of Thomas into two coexistent sides, the subject and the object, the reader and the text, the spectator and the thing being looked at. The spectacle of reading is not inside the text or inside the reader but rather in the 'between', in their encounter. This is shown by the different meanings of the word "eye", which transform the stage of reading into the stage of writing: in the spiral movement of signifying words, meanings escape into new meanings, coexistent and layered. "Eyes" is a word that contains other words; the word "eyes" takes from time to time the form of the eye and then the word "eyes" looks at Thomas. "Each word is like an eye – eyes, however, is, at times, a word."[388] Instead of the fixed context to which a word could refer there is, as Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death", "within the limits of the word […] access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence – they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of 'turn of phrase' which does not lead anywhere."[389]

Words in the book Thomas is reading are not only dense with linguistic meaning; the play with the word "eyes" calls attention to the openness of the "perceptual ground", of which Heidegger talks. Every

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[385] TTO 28.
[386] TTO 26.
[387] TTO 27.
[388] Schestag 1998, 228.
[389] WF 326.

determinate element in the text evolves out of the indeterminate chain of signifiers and is tied to this indeterminate ground. It is not possible to look at the word "eyes" without taking into account other words in the background. Reading becomes a shifting back and forth between the word and its context, or between the "figure" and the "ground", to use Heidegger's terms. Words resist Thomas's sight and his effort to make them transparent; he cannot tell where one word ("eyes") ends and other ("eyes") begins. Meaning is not created by the reference of words to things but from words to words.

The play of words signifying "eyes" and acting like "eyes" takes intentionality away from the reader in order to give it to the text. The word "eyes" in Thomas's book seems to refer both to the marks on the page as well as to Thomas's own eyes. One could even suggest that the story presents the gaze of the eyes as a quasi-object that remains beyond the reach of the intentional consciousness. The text seems to literally give Thomas the eyes he needs in reading, only to take these organs away from him. Thomas is able only passively to witness the activity of the text, the scene and the event of writing. He is now literally a victim of the gaze: words penetrate him, consume, dismember and replace him. As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, for sight, writing is "war and madness": "The terrifying word passes over every limit and even the limitlessness of the whole: it seizes the thing from a direction from which it is not taken, not seen, and will never be seen; it transgresses laws, breaks away from orientation, it disorients."[390] Thomas, the reader, is no longer the one who "devours a book" or "devours with his eyes", but the text attacks Thomas (who now resembles Orpheus after the second death of his beloved Eurydice, as the furious bacchants dismember him): "And even later when, having abandoned himself and, contemplating his book, he recognized himself with disgust in the form of the text he was reading, he retained the thought that (while, perched upon his shoulders, the word *He* and the word *I* were beginning their carnage) there remained

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[390] IC 28.

within his person which was already deprived of its senses obscure words, disembodied souls and angels of words, which were exploring him deeply."[391]

From *Umsicht* to Fascination

"Thomas stayed in his room to read." The opening sentence of the chapter encloses the reader and the text into the proximity of each other, into the literary space (*l'espace litteraire*), which is the stage of this encounter. On this stage, Thomas is forced to answer the text's demand. The story presents language as a loss of everything that grammar, logic, rhetoric, and science is able to bring under conceptual control. As such, the narrative inquires about the relation of the reading subject to that which remains exterior, other and unknown. Reading is a risk the reader takes. "The work of art is linked to risk; it is the affirmation of an extreme experience."[392] Even a refusal not to look is an expression of the power of the work since, as Blanchot writes of Picasso's painting, "one cannot live with a painting in plain sight."[393] The one who rejects the painting by turning his look away is not mistaken: "Not to look at it does not put him in the wrong; it is a form of his sincerity, an accurate premonition of the force that closes his eyes."[394] In Blanchot, the task of reading is not to remove the obscurity of language in order to enter into its hidden meaning, but to risk oneself, to loosen the strangeness of language, and to let go of that which is securely grounded. For Blanchot, as for the later Heidegger, language is a way of letting go of firm ground. The task of reading is not to eliminate darkness, but to enter into it.

The story asks what the relation between the gaze, the vision and the manifestation of artwork is, and what is to appear if we talk of

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[391] TTO 26.
[392] SL 236.
[393] SL 192, EL 253.
[394] EL 253.

literary language. What is that which remains beyond the scope of seeing and reading, although it conditions both? What must be thought from the fact that the gaze itself cannot be seen, that one cannot see one's eyes, nor the distance between the gaze and its object, although they are necessary for anything to be seen? The act of reading described in *Thomas the Obscure* is a kind of meta-phenomenological event that questions the ordinary prejudices and dichotomies concerning the act of seeing.

Blanchot writes that in the experience of fascination, the surface of the work does not stay at a distance, as something perceptible and transparent, but is seen as a kind of density and materiality of being into which the gaze sinks. The reader no longer understands what he reads, but is rather swallowed up by the words he is reading. The question this experience poses is "What happens when what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with its appearance?" In Blanchot's words in *The Space of Literature,* "What happens is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep."[395]

The experience of fascination opposes the classical phenomenological theories of reading where reading is understood as an act of the reading consciousness, and where the task of the reader is to animate the "death letter of the text", which Husserl talks about. In Blanchot's story, intentionality changes direction. As Blanchot writes in *The Space of literature,* "Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance. Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone. Fascination is the relation the gaze entertains – a relation which is itself neutral and impersonal – with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees

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[395] EL 28, SL 32.

because it is blinding."[396] Experiencing fascination is blinding since it means losing one's distance and one's perspective to that by which one is fascinated. To be fascinated is to be like a literary text without a fixed perspective or standpoint.

In Blanchot's story the reader does not build a *Gestalt* out of the text, as does, for example, the reader in Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological theory of reading. In contrast to Roman Ingarden's classical theory of the phenomenology of literature, where meaning is seen as the result of the reading process and text as material for meaning, for Blanchot reading is not a subjectivist act, but turns from consciousness to affection, and from perception to fascination. In contrast to the reception theories of reading that define reading as a conscious act, Blanchot refuses to think of reading as an appropriation or a domination of the text. The phenomenological idea of intentionality as a ray or light emanating from a subject is also watchfully avoided: in Blanchot's story Thomas does not think he would have "awakened" "the little spark of life" that glitters in the eye of the text.[397] His reading has not illuminated the text. As Blanchot writes in *The Space of Literature*, "Reading does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is. It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can only say yes, and, in the space opened up by this yes, lets the work's overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself, lets be its affirmation that it is – and nothing more."[398] As Paul de Man interprets, the text has in Blanchot an "ontological priority over the reader."[399]

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[396] SL 33.

[397] TTO 25. The reflection of another in the surface of the text and the following statement that Thomas did not doubt that he had awakened the spark of life in the text reminds one of the myth of Narcissus Ovid describes in *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus says: "I am on fire with love for my own self. It is I who kindle the flame which I must endure. What should I do? Woo or be wooed?" (Ovid, 86). The encounter between Thomas and the text does not follow the logic of narcissistic reflection, since Thomas does not seek a reflection of himself in the surface of the text, nor does he recognize his own image in it.

[398] SL 194

[399] de Man 1971, 64.

The passivity of reading, the requirement not to add anything to the text, can also be compared to Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, the attitude of "letting beings be". As Heidegger scholar Michel Levin interprets, Heidegger suggests that we have to learn to see further than the horizon determined by our present vision, which demands that we learn to "release" the openness of the horizon from the grasp of perspective. Vision should be open to the "event of openness", instead of representing what gives itself to be beheld. This requires an attitude Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit*, or letting-be.[400] Thomas's way to encounter the world in *Thomas the Obscure* could, up to a certain point, be described by Heidegger's notion of *Umsicht* as it is explicated in *Being and Time*. I argue, however, that eventually Blanchot's idea of fascination opposes Heidegger's analysis of seeing in *Being and Time*. In my analysis, the target of Blanchot's criticism is the relation between seeing, truth and language in Heidegger's philosophy. In order to illuminate Blanchot's departure from Heidegger's thinking, I will shortly outline Heidegger's analysis of the relations between seeing and truth in *Being and Time* and in "The Origin of the Work of Art".

Heidegger claims that the traditional notion of truth as correspondence prevents us from seeing a more primordial sense of truth as *aletheia* in the Greek sense of the word as unhiddenness. In Heidegger's analysis, from the idea of Being as presence it follows that we understand truth as "the correspondence (*Angleichung*) of the matter to knowledge."[401] He suggests that turning from the truth as correspondence to the truth as *aletheia* demands turning from the dominance of *eidos* (truth as ideality, atemporality) to the event of Being ("unconcealment" of whatever appears, *Ereignis*).[402]

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400 Levin 1997, 425.

401 BW 118.

402 Heidegger writes: "If we translate *al▉theia* as 'unconcealment' rather than 'truth,' this translation is not merely literal; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended dislosedness and disclosure of beings. To engage oneself with the dislosedness of beings is not to lose oneself in them; rather, such engagement withdraws in the face of beings in order that they might reveal themselves with respect to what and how they are, and in order that presentative correspondence might take its standard from them" (BW 125).

Encountering truth as *aletheia* is not posed in order to attain something "present-at-hand", but rather to think of the event of Being, the ontico-ontological difference, and finally, in the later Heidegger, the open dimensionality of language as the *Sprachereignis,* the happening or the event of language.[403] Truth is thus something that gets "discovered or uncovered."[404]

As I interpret Heidegger, in differentiating truth as correspondence from truth as *aletheia*, he aims to open a path to a less violent way of seeing.[405] According to Heidegger we have to ask, what is the condition of the possibility of truth, if truth is not driven back to the metaphysical idea of seeing as making present or to the subjectivity of the human subject?[406] The purpose is to show that a sense of *aletheia* is a precondition for understanding truth as prepositional correctness, and that the traditional concept of truth as correspondence is ontologically grounded in truth as *aletheia*.[407] The only possibility of differentiating between the traditional conception of

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[403] That logos is true does not mean that it agrees with something or that there is a correspondence between logos and the entities of which one is talking, but that "the entities of which one is talking are [with logos] taken out of their hiddenness; one must let them be seen as something unhidden" (BT 56).

[404] BT 57, n. 1. What appears as truth is what "is given" in *aletheia*. This "givenness" Heidegger describes with his famous notion *es gibt* which describes the "givenness" of that whose appearing is anonymously appearing being, like the appearing of language as a kind of subjectless field in Blanchot.

[405] In Heidegger's analysis, metaphysics does not only forget to ask the ontological meaning of Being but also the ontological meaning of the notion of truth (BT 228). In defining beings as objects "present-at-hand" and in equating this presence-at-hand with the meaning of Being in general, we let the question of truth slip into the same oblivion as the question of the meaning of Being: "Metaphysics does not ask the truth of [Being] itself. Nor does it therefore ask in what way the essence of the human being belongs to the truth of [Being]. Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question, the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such" (Heidegger 1998, 246). Along with such philosophical concepts as intentionality, subjectivity, and Being, the notion of truth needs therefore to be thought through again by going into its ontological nature.

[406] Although the concept of *aletheia* comes up already in *Being and Time* (sect. 7 and 44) it is only in *The Essence of Truth* (*Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,* 1931), where Heidegger gives a full analysis of this notion. According to Heidegger in *The Essence of Truth*, Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic* initiates the decline of *a-létheia* into correctness and truth as agreement, which have dominated metaphysical thinking ever since. Therefore Plato's allegory of the cave presents the "event of metaphysics" (BW 111-138). As Derrida writes in "Violence and metaphysics", for Heidegger Plato marks "the moment at which the thought of Being forgets itself" (WAD 81).

[407] BT 268.

truth as correspondence and the truth as *aletheia* is to ask the way in which beings become accessible to us.[408] In Heidegger's interpretation, Plato's mistake is to assimilate truth into light and seeing into knowing.[409] Heidegger himself insists that *a-létheia* – if understood as *Lichtung* rather than a physical light – is a condition of seeing and looking. Truth as *aletheia* cannot be 'seen' or 'comprehended', since the truth as *aletheia* does not come to us in the form of an object, and neither does it depend on the correctness of statements.

With his ontological analysis of seeing, Heidegger's goal is to give to the concept of seeing a new meaning that would no longer be based on making-present, and which would help us to uncover a non-appropriative relation to Being. He therefore warns us to understand his expression "sight" in a metaphysical way, but to read it in its ontological context: seeing does not mean just seeing with bodily eyes, nor with Husserl's mental eyes.[410]

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[408] For Plato, the visible things outside the cave are only illustrations of the immaterial eternal ideas, or the resemblance of ideas in human perceptions. Human beings who take visible things as the real are like the prisoners who do not recognize their prison for what it is. We recognize something as something in the light of the corresponding idea, and that which we presume to be real is only a shadow of this idea. For Heidegger, however, the proper dimension of Plato's story is the movements of passage out of the cave into the daylight and then back into the cave (Heidegger 1998, 165). These passages require that the eyes can "accustom themselves to the change from darkness to brightness and from brightness back to darkness" (ibid.). In Plato's allegory, the ignorance of the soul is equivalent to the blindness of its physical eyes. From this Heidegger concludes that "Just as the physical eye must accustom itself, slowly and steadily at first, either to the light or to the dark, so must the soul, patiently and through an appropriate series of steps, accustom itself to the region of beings to which it is exposed" (1998, 166). This movement from darkness to light requires that the soul "turns around as regards the fundamental direction of its striving." Heidegger's point is that this "turning around" opens our eyes to a transformation in the essence of truth, which happens in Plato's story. The turning around means an orientation that transforms a human being's relation to the "unhidden" (1998, 167-8).

[409] According to Heidegger, in Plato's doctrine of truth, "the inquiry into what is unhidden shifts in the direction of the appearing of the visible form, and consequently toward the act of seeing that is ordered to the visible form, and toward what is correct and toward the correctness of seeing" (Heidegger 1998, 177).

[410] Heidegger writes that "Seeing does not mean pure non-sensory awareness of something present-at-hand in its presence-at-hand" (BT 187). In *Being and Time* he describes the interrelatedness of Being and seeing by saying that "Dasein is sight [*Sicht*]" (BT 186). "Dasein is sight" means that Dasein is sight in each of its basic ways of its Being. Heidegger's goal is to give "an existential signification to 'sight' " in a similar way as he gave an ontological interpretation to the concepts of Being, subjectivity and intentionality (ibid.).

The starting point for Heidegger's study of different ways to see is his view according to which our Being in the world is always already grounded or determined from a certain perspective. From this it follows that man does not have an omnipotent outer vision of the totality of things but is tied to its restricted perspective.[411] Heidegger suggests that we experience or see the world only to the extent that it 'experiences' and 'sees' us and only if we define seeing not as representing but openness to the Being as withdrawal. A subject does not "face the world", but is rather "faced by the phenomena themselves in their closure".[412]

Heidegger differentiates different kinds of seeing in *Being and Time* by suggesting that in a similar way as Dasein already always understands its Being-in-the-World some way, it equally already always sees and looks at the world and itself in some way or another. We can differentiate between two basic ways of Being and seeing: one that stares, observes, and by objectifying things makes them "present-at-hand", and the other that is seeing as "concern" or "caring" (*Umsicht*). Equivalent to the truth as correspondence is seeing as "staring". "The grasping look" characterizes the modern age where vision tends to become a fixed staring at something that is purely present. Heidegger claims that precisely when we merely stare at something as if from a safe distance, we cease to understand it.[413]

Heidegger's way to define seeing distinguishes itself from the way the tradition of philosophy has oriented itself towards seeing, namely "as a way of access to entities *and to Being*."[414] In contrast, the existential signification Heidegger gives to 'sight' does not refer to seeing that objectifies and represents, but to seeing that "lets entities which are accessible to it be encountered unconcealedly in themselves."[415] According to Heidegger, to resist objectifying thinking

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[411] As Blanchot puts it in *The Infinite Conversation*: that which is "a prior" is not "a priority of a subject, that is, of a transcendental subjectivity" (IC 250).
[412] Clark 1992, 25.
[413] BT 190.
[414] BT 187.
[415] BT 187.

demands uncovering a more primary, non-reflective and non-appropriate relation to the ontological difference between beings and Being and to the "light of Being" (*Lichtung*), with which Heidegger replaces Husserl's idea of the rays of light of a perceiving, intentional consciousness. Since our habitual ways of seeing are forgetful of the "lighting" which makes seeing possible, a seeing that would recollect the "lighting of Being" would see in a more truthful way.[416]

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger relates to Dasein's Being a special kind of seeing, seeing as *Umsicht*, or "caring", which can be interpreted as a critical alternative to the prevalent idea of seeing as knowing.[417] For Dasein, the world is not just something to be seen as a projection of consciousness but a "dwelling place". As "The Origin of the Work of Art" argues, the world is not anything we could represent to ourselves: "The world is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. The world is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject."[418] Rather than objectifying, manipulating and producing, *Umsicht* holds back from these attitudes. *Umsicht* thus describes Dasein's caring attitude towards the world, into which Dasein is thrown; it means pre-reflective, circumspect vision, as the viewer is not outside a visual field but hermeneutically situated within it. The horizon, which the eye of the viewer cannot control, is limited by what can be seen from his or her position. Dasein's caring way of seeing is equal to Dasein's Being as "Being-already-alongside" things and entities in the world: in contrast to a theoretical attitude and representation, seeing as *Umsicht* renounces the traditional subject-

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[416] BT 410. See also section 36.

[417] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines "perception" ontologically as a way of Being-in-the-world, and not as a "procedure" executed by consciousness. He writes: "What is thus perceived and made determinate can be expressed in propositions, and can be retained and preserved as what has thus been asserted. This perceptive retention of the assertion about something is itself a way of Being-in-the-world; it is not to be interpreted as a 'procedure' by which a subject provides itself with representations [*Vorstellungen*] of something which remains stored up 'inside' as having been thus appropriated, and with regard to which the question of how they 'agree' with actuality can occasionally arise" (BT 89).

[418] BW 170.

object distinction.[419] "Letting something be encountered is primarily circumspective; it is not just sensing something, or staring at it. It implies circumspective concern."[420] Since knowing is always founded beforehand in Dasein's Being-already-alongside-the-world, its Being cannot be *"just a fixed staring* at something that is purely present-at-hand."[421] On the contrary, as "concern", Dasein's Being-in-the-world "is *fascinated* by the world with which it is concerned."[422]

Thomas's way to encounter the world in *Thomas the Obscure* could, up to a certain point, be clarified by the notion of *Umsicht*: not as a relation to the world but as being that is "already 'alongside' its world."[423] At the beginning of his reading, Thomas "stares" at the text: to use Heidegger's terms, his reading is more like "staring" than "circumspective concern" or "caring". Rather than objectively grasping the world from an outer position, Dasein is, as Thomas in Blanchot's story, in the grasp of the world.

Blanchot's analysis of the experience of fascination also comes close to the same term in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger defines as fascination the experience where one feels being "already-alongside" things and entities, and not on the side of the subject: a subject does not experience or encounter objects, but rather objects come to subjectivity; the subject does not look at the world, but the world looks at the subject, as happens to Thomas in Blanchot's story. In Blanchot, however, the experience of fascination questions both the idea of reading as a way of seeing and the idea of reading as opening oneself to truth, even if truth would be defined as *aletheia*. For

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[419] BT 89.

[420] BT 176. Heidegger writes: "In its projective character, understanding goes to make up existentially what we call Dasein's sight. With the disclosedness of the 'there,' this sight is existentially; and Dasein is this sight primordially in each of those basic ways of its Being which we have already noted: as the circumspection [*Umsicht*] of concern, as the considerateness [*Rücksicht*] of solicitude, and as that sight which is directed upon Being as such [*Sicht auf das Sein als Solches*], for the sake of which Dasein is as it is. The sight, which is related primarily and on the whole to existence, we call 'transparency' " (BT 186).

[421] On the subject of "staring" in *Being and Time*, see also p. 98, 104, 190.

[422] BT 88.

[423] BT 88.

Blanchot, language is beyond both truth and non-truth – for the reasons that I will analyse in what follows.

Il y a – "it watches"

In the sections of *The Space of Literature*, where Blanchot presents his concepts of *la fascination* and *l'image*, the relation to Heidegger's philosophy is evident, although Heidegger's name is rarely mentioned: as already discussed, Blanchot writes so close to Heidegger's vocabulary that it seems as if he is citing Heidegger, even if at the same time, if one reads him closely, he also distinguishes between his and Heidegger's thinking. This is the case for example in the essay entitled "The Essential Solitude", where he writes: "The writer belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no centre, and *which reveals nothing*. To the extent that, being a writer, he does justice to what requires writing, he can never again express himself, anymore that he can appeal to you, or even introduce another's speech. Where he is, only being (*être*) speaks – which means that language doesn't speak any more, but is. It devotes itself to the pure passivity of being". [424]

As Gerald Bruns writes in *Maurice Blanchot. The Refusal of Philosophy* (1997), although Blanchot's account of the essential solitude is "much a derivation of Heidegger's notion of the work of art as alien and uncommunicative", "being" in *The Space of Literature* is not Heidegger's Being of beings, but, as Bruns puts it, "only a sheer fact or event of existing".[425] I my analysis, Heidegger's notion of Being is too commanding for Blanchot, whose aim is to find a neutral way of speaking about language that would remain beyond the opposition being/non-being. I propose further that the reason why being in *The Space of Literature* is pure existence or existence without being, rather than Heidegger's ontological difference, follows from his criticism of

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[424] SL 26-27.

Heidegger's idea of language as "revealing Being", which Blanchot also in the above-quoted passage implicitly criticizes, in writing that "The writer belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no centre, and *which reveals nothing*." Language for Blanchot is instability, which cannot reveal anything as anything, or as he writes, in referring to Levinas, its way to be is "existence without being."[426]

Language is existence without being because it is all that is left after the disappearance of the knowing subject. Essential to the literary experience in Blanchot is the inability of the subject to say "I", the experience of the loss of subjectivity, where the phenomenological ego is replaced by a feeling of the presence of some featureless "third" (and thus not of the "Other", as in Levinas) anonymous and faceless being, which Blanchot names "*il*" (he/she/it) or "*quelqu'un*" (someone or somebody). As the writer enters the space of literature, "he is no longer himself; he isn't anyone any more. The third person substituting for the 'I': such is the solitude that comes on the writer on account of the work. It does not denote objective disinterestedness, creative detachment. It does not glorify consciousness in someone other than myself or the evolution of a human vitality which, in the imaginary space of the work of art, would retain the freedom to say 'I.' The third person is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say 'I'; it is his not being himself."[427]

For Blanchot, the otherness of language is without a face and a name; it cannot be reduced to a single origin, for example a personal or intentional other. In contrast to the French literary theorist George Poulet, for instance, Blanchot does not reduce the otherness of language to the consciousness or thoughts of an original author. Nor is this otherness the personal other of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*, the strangeness, or a

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[425] Bruns 1997, 57.

[426] PF 322, WF 334.

[427] SL 28.

"relation of the third kind" (*le rapport du troisième genre*) experienced in literature is "occasioned by another kind of speech or by the other as speech (as writing)."[428] For Blanchot, the otherness of "the third" is not personal or human exteriority, neither otherness in me (like the unconscious self) or the otherness of God. The voice heard in literature does not belong to anybody, nor is language understood as an anonymous speaker, whose identity should be revealed by the reader.

The 'room' where the text seduces Thomas is the literary space, where everything is other than usual, where the indeterminate has replaced the determinate and the unfamiliar has replaced the familiar. The "somebody" or "something" which nears Thomas and surrounds him is the text he is reading; it is the strange, invisible, ungraspable and nevertheless inescapable "being" or "presence" which the story names as "monstrous absence", and which haunts Thomas as a reader:

> The first time he perceived this presence, it was night. By a light which came down through the shutters and divided the bed in two, he saw that the room was totally empty, so incapable of containing a single object that it was painful to the eye. The book was rotting on the table. There was no one walking in the room. His solitude was complete. And yet, sure as he was that there was no one in the room and even in the world, he was just as sure that someone was there, occupying his slumber, approaching him intimately, all around him and within him. On a naïve impulse he sat up and sought to penetrate the night, trying with his hand to make light. But he was like a blind man who, hearing a noise, might run to light his lamp: nothing could make it possible for him to seize this presence in any shape or form. He was locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could say: That doesn't exist… and which nevertheless filled him with terror as he sensed it wandering about in the region of his solitude. [429]

The experience of language in Blanchot, as it is described in his stories and in his essays, comes close to the notion of the *il y a* in Levinas's philosophy. Blanchot refers in a footnote of "Literature and the Right to Death" to Levinas's book *Existence and Existants* (*De l'existance à*

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428 IC 384.
429 TTO 26–27.

l'existant, 1947) where Levinas states that it is not Heidegger's Being that has been forgotten in the history of philosophy, but rather the strangeness of Being. To this strangeness of Being, which according to Levinas can be experienced especially in art, he gives the name "*il y a*", "there is".

What Levinas is trying to describe with the *il y a* is the event of Being in general. According to Levinas, the infinity of the *il y a* is a critical alternative to the "generosity of Heidegger's *es gibt*". He asks his readers to imagine "all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness."[430] The complete annihilation of all existence, and the very nothingness of all existence, would be experienced as an impersonal, neutral and indeterminate feeling that "something is happening" although one does not know what. Levinas proposes that we name this indeterminate sense of something happening in the absence of all beings with the impersonal third person pronoun ("*il*"), that designates the action when the author of that action is unknown or not relevant, for example as one says "*il pleut*" ("it is raining") or "*il fait nuit*" ("it is night"). Levinas refers to Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* and its themes as "the most fitting example of the *il y a*": "The presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night, the horror of being, the return of being to the heart of every negative movement, the reality of irreality are there admirably expressed."[431]

In Blanchot's essay "Literature and the Right to Death" Levinas's *il y a* functions as an alternative to Hegelian negativity.

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[430] Levinas 1978, 57. Levinas writes: "The breakup of continuity even on the surface of things, the preference for broken lines, the scorning of perspective and the 'real' proportions between things, indicate a revolt against the continuity of curves. From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple, absolute, swellings or abscesses of being. In this falling of things down on us objects attest their power as material objects, even reach a paroxysm of materiality. Despite the rationality and luminosity of these forms when taken in themselves painting makes them exist in themselves, brings about an absolute existence in the very fact *there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry*" (Levinas 1978, 56-57. Emphasis is mine).

[431] Levinas 1978, 63.

Literature's existence, its passive consciousness without subjectivity in Blanchot is like the absurd *cogito* of the "it watches", which Levinas associates with the experience of "there is". As Simon Critchley writes, the consequence of the experience of the *il y a* is reversed intentionality: we no longer regard things, but they seem to regard us.[432] For Levinas, night is the proper environment of this experience: the "there is" describes the nocturnal experience where it is no longer possible to distinguish between inwardness and exteriority, the subject and the object.

The experience of the *il y a* is not a tranquil night of sleep and rest, but a night which is interminable, a night of pure vigilance. In the night, the one who does not get sleep lays in bed with eyes wide open, feeling the passive watch of the surrounding darkness as the night itself seems to be awake.[433] The experience of this passive watching strips the subjectivity of its cognitive mastery over surrounding objects. As the familiar forms dissolve in the night, it is no longer possible to distinguish between inwardness and exteriority; darkness is neither an object nor the quality of an object, which questions the ability of consciousness to determinate its object by objectivizing it. As is recounted in Blanchot's story, in his encounter with the night, "it was not that he [Thomas] saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he bathed."[434]

For Levinas, the event of the *il y a* is experienced as the presence of something which at the same time is absent, and which can be neither denied nor affirmed; "there is" describes the voice that is heard even after negating it.[435] Fascination is, for Blanchot, like the experience of *il y a* in Levinas, the experience where both as absence and presence are so absolute that it is no longer possible to negate anything:

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[432] Critchley 1997 ,57.

[433] As Levinas writes, "*La veille est anonyme. Il n'y a pas ma vigilance à la nuit, c'est la nuit elle-même qui veille. Ca veille*" (Levinas 1993, 111).

[434] TTO 14.

The time of time's absence is not dialectical. In this time what appears is the fact that nothing appears. What appears is the being deep within being's absence, which is when there is nothing and which, as soon as there is something, is no longer. For it is as if there were no beings except through the loss of being, when being lacks. The reversal which, in time's absence, points us constantly back to the presence of absence – but to this presence as absence, to absence as its own affirmation (an affirmation in which nothing is affirmed, in which nothing ever ceases to affirm itself with the exhausting insistence of the indefinite) – this movement is not dialectical. Contradictions do not exclude each other; nor are they reconciled. Only time itself, during which negation becomes our power, permits the 'unity of contraries. In time's absence what is new renews nothing, but represents itself and belongs henceforth and always to return.[436]

When both presence and absence are absolute, nothing can be denied: fascination is time without beginning, end or future; time where "here" means the same as "nowhere."[437] As such, it can be interpreted as an antithesis of the "here" and "now" of Husserlian phenomenology.

The anguish of Thomas arises not only from his experience of the otherness of language but also from his effort to in vain deny the presence of this "being". As Thomas sinks into the profundity of the text he experiences horror, which Blanchot links to the experience of fascination and Levinas to the *il y a*. Thomas encounters something which cannot be grasped or named but which, despite his effort to deny its existence, continues to be.

Blanchot's story seeks to name the presence of this strange somebody or something: "The first time he perceived this *presence*, it was night", and: "nothing could make it possible for him to seize this *presence* in any shape or form." "Something" or "somebody" coming closer to Thomas cannot be attached to any singular existent, which the sentence "That doesn't exist" (*cela n'existe pas*) announces: "He was locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could say: That doesn't exist… and which nevertheless filled

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[435] Levinas 1978, 94-5.
[436] SL 30.

him with terror as he sensed it wandering about in the region of his solitude."[438] Even if Thomas denies existence to this presence, already the next sentence affirms its existence by calling it "being" (*être*):

> Having stayed up all night and all day with this being (*cet être*), as he tried to rest he was suddenly made aware that a second had replaced the first, just as inaccessible and just as obscure, and yet different. It was modulation of that which did not exist, a different mode of being absent, another void in which he was coming to life. Now it was definitely true, someone was coming near him, standing not nowhere and everywhere, but a few feet away, invisible and certain. By an impulse which nothing might stop, and which nothing might quicken, a power with which he could not accept contact was coming to meet him. He wanted to flee. He threw himself in the corridor. Gasping and almost beside himself, he has taken only a few steps when he recognized the inevitable progress of the being coming toward him. He went back into the room. He barricaded the door. He waited with his back to the wall. But neither minutes nor hours put an end to this waiting. He felt ever closer to an ever more monstrous absence which took an infinite time to meet. He felt it closer to him every instant and kept ahead of it by an infinitely small but irreducible splinter of duration. He saw it, a horrifying being which was already pressing against him in space and, existing outside time, remained infinitely distant. Such unbearable waiting and anguish that they separated him from himself.[439]

In *Thomas the Obscure*, anguish is in connection to ambiguity: the being which comes closer to Thomas evades the text's effort to name it. As soon as the text names it "being" (or "*présense*" or "*être*"), it's existence is transformed into something else. The first being ("*être*") is replaced by another being, which is mentioned as being as obscure but nonetheless different from the first. Thomas has thus encountered a being, or a modulation of being, which one cannot annihilate by saying "that doesn't exist". It cannot be denied or affirmed by speech; its being is something between presence and absence.[440] The "presence"

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[437] EL 26

[438] TTO 27.

[439] TTO 27.

[440] Thomas's obsession with the threatening "presence", with its dialectical movement of concealment and disclosure, could be interpreted to refer to Heidegger's philosophy of Being, or even to clarify what Heidegger says about

which Thomas is trying to deny resembles the interminable meaning of literature, its indefinite being as the impossibility of dying which, as Blanchot writes, follows literature "like its own shadow turned into a gaze".[441]

At the end of the reading process, Thomas goes through a painful metamorphosis: "It was in this state that he felt himself bitten or struck, he could not tell which, by what seemed to him to be a word, but resembled a giant rat, an all-powerful beast with piercing eyes."[442] Thomas is forced to struggle, tasting the venom of the creature in his mouth, "for an immeasurable time" with this "horrible beast of the text".[443] The giant rat, or the serpent, associates with the beast of the Bible. However, whereas the devil is responsible for Eve and Adam becoming conscious of the existence of both good and evil, the "beast of the text" is responsible for Thomas losing his consciousness. Filled with a fear of being completely visible Thomas seeks to hide himself by "obscuring" himself, by crawling into a dusty corner of his room: "He stuck his head under the bed, in a corner full of dust, resting among the rejectamenta as if an a refreshing place where he felt he belonged more properly than in himself."[444]

Thomas attempts to put an end to the struggle by giving himself totally to the text, "by tearing out his eyes to force the beast inside."[445] But there is no longer a reference point to the "inside" or to the "outside". Thomas is divided in two: "I" (*Je*) and "He" (*Il*) battle inside

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Being. Following this observation we might feel tempted to read the sentences which describe Thomas's encounter with the "presence" concretely as referring to the emergence and dissolution of the "figure-ground" structures that, according to Heidegger, form the event of perception and depend on the way our looking lets them emerge out of the including field of visibility. Using Heideggerian language, in Thomas's encounter with the text, it would thus be a question of our attitude towards the "ground", or as Levin claims Heidegger to ask, of the status of the ground to us: "whether or not its dynamism, its openness, its dimensionality, is granted by the corresponding receptive openness of our perception – our willingness, for example, to let perception be decentreed, drawn into abysses of invisibility, radically surprised" (Levin 1999, 125).

[441] WF 332.
[442] TTO 28.
[443] TTO 28.
[444] TTO 28.
[445] TTO 28.

him, and in this fight his whole being is substituted by the text, by its words and marks. Eventually Thomas is only "a sort of Thomas" ("*une sorte de Thomas*") – not the same as earlier but not completely different either: "A sort of Thomas left his body and went before the lurking threat."[446] As Levinas writes of the experience of the *il y a*: "*there is* transcends inwardness as well as exteriority; it does not even make it possible to distinguish these."[447] The violent metamorphosis of Thomas seems like a parody of a sovereign reader controlling reading with his subjectivity and gaze. Also the reciprocity between the reader and the text – the leading idea of the phenomenological idea of the reader response theories – is rejected. The text is absolutely transcendent: we are not talking about reading anymore, but of butchery.[448]

As a consequence of Thomas's metamorphosis Blanchot's reader does not eventually know if the story refers to Thomas or to the beast of the text as it reports how the battle between the two looks: "It was almost beautiful for this dark angel covered with red hair, whose eyes sparkled."[449] Thomas is now like a praying mantis to which the text was compared in the beginning of the chapter: as Thomas sees his enemy in the figure of a giant rat, he cannot "escape the desire to devour (*dévorer*) it, to bring it into the deepest possible intimacy with himself."[450] Eventually, as the obscure words enter his being, word-by-word, letter-by-letter the obscure text replaces its reader:

> One moment, the one thought he had triumphed and, with uncontainable nausea, saw the word "innocence", which soiled him, slipping down inside him. The next moment, the other was

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[446] TTO 27.

[447] Levinas 1989, 309.

[448] Blanchot also speaks about "a cutting movement" and "a butchery" of writing in his essay "Speaking Is Not Seeing " where writing is through an etymological play brought close to *déchirure*, which in French means crack, agony or wound. The etymological connection is in Blanchot's words an "incisive reminder" that "the proper tool for writing was also proper for incising: the stylet" (IC, 28, EI, 38–39). Writing is always cutting with a stylet: it is violence and death because is breaks the immediate relation or contact with being and with the other.

[449] TTO 28.

[450] TTO 29.

devouring him in turn, dragging him out of the hole he had come from, then tossing him back, a hard, emptied body. Each time, Thomas was thrust back into this being by the very words which had haunted him and which he was pursuing as his nightmare and the explanation of his nightmare. He found that he was ever more empty, ever heavier; he no longer moved without infinite fatigue. His body, after so many struggles, became entirely opaque, and to those who looked at it, it gave the peaceful impression of sleep, thought it had not ceased to be awake. [451]

Thomas, transformed into the text he is reading, full of obscure words, is now *Thomas the Obscure*, as the title of the book states.[452] At the end of the story the figure of a female praying mantis can also be seen as a kind of Eurydice figure, in the guise of whom Thomas has encountered death. Thomas, full of obscure words from the text, is like Orpheus, a mediator between night and day, who has disappeared in order for the work to appear.

As Thomas lies on the floor of his room eyes closed, the text is gone, but Thomas is entirely awake. His being is similar to the text: the inability to lose consciousness, wakefulness, and appearance without the intentional act of the subject. We could refer to "Literature and the Right to Death", where Blanchot asks: "Then where is the work? Each moment has the clarity of a beautiful language being spoken, but the work as a whole has the opaque meaning of a thing that is being eaten and that is also eating, that is devouring, being swallowed up, and re-creating itself in a vain effort to change itself into nothing."[453]

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[451] TTO 29.

[452] Thomas Schestag asks in his article"Mantis, Relics", how the title of *Thomas the Obscure* should be interpreted. One possibility is to interpret it as telling the truth about Thomas: ambiguousness is the truth about his character. But the title can also mean the reverse: the essence of his character is not necessarily obscure – it remains opaque only to us who try to see through it. That which in our interpretation appears as a "revelation" of Thomas's essence ("Thomas's essence is dark"), makes in the other interpretation the truth withdraw from us – "not only does Thomas's essence remain dark, but Thomas himself remains hard to see". In the case of *Thomas l'obscur*, ambiguity and obscurity are qualities that can refer both to the text and its reader, and when obscure words fill Thomas, he becomes what the title promises – *Thomas the Obscure* (Schestag 1998, 222).

[453] WF 336.

The Two Versions of the Imaginary

In the appendix to *The Space of Literature*, entitled "The Two Versions of the Imaginary", Blanchot asks: "But when we are face to face with things themselves – if we fix upon a face, the corner of a wall – does it not also sometimes happen that we abandon ourselves to what we see?"[454] This is exactly what happens to Thomas. In the experience of fascination our relation to the text changes and the being of the text turns into something which Blanchot calls *l'image*. As Blanchot writes, the experience of fascination "happens because the thing we stare at has foundered, sunk into its image, and the image has returned into that deep fund of impotence to which everything reverts."[455]

Thomas's body, "entirely opaque" at the end of his reading, reminds one of the being of the *image* (*l'image*) introduced in "Two Versions of the Imaginary". In my analysis, what Blanchot calls the image comes close to the concept of fascination as its counterpart: for Blanchot, the experience of the latter is a condition for the appearance of the first. In the experience of fascination, seeing becomes an experience where that which is looked at touches the gaze, gets hold of it, and attracts it in order to get it in contact with something, which Blanchot calls the *image*[456]: "What is given us by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is passion for the image."[457]

Whereas Heidegger differentiates between two versions of truth (truth as correspondence and truth as *aletheia*), Blanchot differentiates between two versions of the image. On the one hand, there is the image in the sense of classical art, whose ideal is that art resembles the represented object. According to an ordinary analysis of the image, the image comes after the object. This image is grounded on the "vital

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[454] SL 255.
[455] SL 255.
[456] EL 28-9.
[457] SL 32.

movement of the comprehensive action", i.e., in the ideal operation which puts the work into the service of the world and its truth.[458] Classical art, in taking resemblance as its ideal, privileges nature as its highest ideal.

Whereas the first version of the image is characterized by truthfulness, harmony and beauty, the other version of the image gives up on these ideals. In literature, words cease to be only marks, or comprehensible concepts in the service of truth; they rather become images, the images *of words* rather than images of things in the world. Literary text itself is the image *par excellence*. In literature, language becomes the image *of itself*: "We do not mean a language containing images or one that casts reality in figures, but one which is its own image, an image of language (and not a figurative language)".

One could say that the other version of the imaginary gives up the Platonic model in which the image comes after or imitates the original object or *eidos*. For Plato, a painting is a copy of a thing which in its turn is a copy of an idea (*eidos*), from which it follows that a copied thing is closer to the truth than a work of art which is only the image of the image. As Plato writes in *The Republic*, the image "is and is not" what it is, since it borrows its reality from something other than itself without actually being that other.[459] Blanchot comments on the Platonic idea of art as a copy of the real in the following way:

> What are we seeking to represent by saying this? Are we not on a path leading back to suppositions happily abandoned, analogous to the one which used to define art as imitation, a copy of the real? If, in the poem, language becomes its own image, doesn't this mean that poetic language is always second, secondary? According to the common analysis, the image comes after the object. It is the object's continuation. We see, then the image. After the object comes the image. "After" seems to indicate subordination. We really speak, then we speak in our imagination, or we imagine ourselves speaking. Wouldn't poetic language be the copy, the dim shadow, the transposition – in a space where the requirements of effectiveness are attenuated – of the sole speaking language? But perhaps the common analysis is

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[458] SL 255.
[459] Plato, *Republic* 477a.

mistaken. Perhaps, before going further, one ought to ask: but what is the image?[460]

Instead of asking what is the relation of a work of art to the truth Blanchot asks what we mean by the image. He answers: literary language is not a figurative language. It is not language that would be a false copy of something absent, but it rather "issues from its own absence, the way the image emerges upon the absence of the thing; a language addressing itself to the shadow of events as well, not to their reality, and this because of the fact that the words which express them are, not signs, but images, images of words, and words where things run to images."[461] By image Blanchot does not mean the images of literature in the classical sense: "the poem is not a poem because it contains a number of figures, metaphors, comparisons; on the contrary, the poem's particular character is that nothing in it functions as image."[462] (Accordingly, Heidegger writes that "The truth that discloses itself in the work can never be proved or derived from what went before."[463]) Poetical or literary language is not an imaginative projection of the subject; it is not imitation, a copy or a representation of something that would exist before the poem. The text that has become "its own image" does not imitate or represent the real world, nor does it refer to the world. The absence of the world, "the neutrality and the fading of the world" is rather a condition for the image to appear.

That language is its own image means that language as such is exteriority and otherness. The materiality of language is emphasized in language as image, which in Blanchot's words is the "formless weight of being, present in absence".[464] Literary language discredits the distinction into form and substance. As Blanchot writes, although the image can "represent the object to us in a luminous formal aura [...] it is

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[460] SL 34.
[461] SL 34.
[462] SL 34.
[463] BW 200.
[464] SL 258.

nonetheless with substance that the image is allied – with the fundamental materiality, the still undetermined absence of form".[465] That language is more substance than form says that language does not clarify things by saying them, or as Foucault puts it, poetry "must no longer be a power that tirelessly produces images and makes them shine, but rather a power that undoes them, that lessens their overload, that infuses them with an inner transparency that illuminates them little by little until they burst and scatter in the lightness of the unimaginable." Foucault finds this imageless writing from Blanchot whose "fictions are, rather than images themselves, their transformations, displacement, and neutral interstices. They are precise; the only figures they outline are in grey tones of everyday life and the anonymous."[466]

In the second version of the image there is something extravagant, excessive and horrifying, which Blanchot in *The Space of Literature* ends by comparing to the strangeness of a cadaver. Both a cadaver and a work of art *are there,* present, and at the same time undeniably absent. They are not present *for me* but somehow present *in spite of me.* Like a work of art, "What we call mortal escapes common categories."[467] The cadaver, the dear departed, although present is other than itself. Or as the narrator of Blanchot's story *Death Sentence* (*Arrêt de mort*, 1948) reports after the death of his friend J., "She who was once absolutely alive was now no more than a statue." ("*Elle n'était déjà plus qu'une statue, elle absolument vivante.*"[468] Whereas the first image is totally safe and joyful to look at from a distance, in the second version of the image there is something unreal and impossible, which no one can recognize and which therefore

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[465] SL 255.

[466] Foucault 1990, 23. Foucault continues: "The fictitious is never in things or in people, but in the impossible verisimilitude of what lies between them: encounters, the proximity of what is most distant, the absolute dissimulation in our very midst. Therefore, fiction consists not of showing the invisible, but of showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible" (ibid.).

[467] SL 256.

[468] DS 20, AM 35.

frightens us.[469] It is a thing "*as distance*, present in its absence".[470] In a similar way as the words in literature do not represent anything a corpse is no one else's image, since it "impresses the living of the appearance of the original never perceived before".[471] Blanchot writes:

> The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except for that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living from which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms itself entirely into shadow. The corpse is a reflection becoming master of the life it reflects – absorbing it, identifying substantively with it by moving it from its use value and from its truth value to something incredible – something neutral which there is no getting used to. And if the cadaver is so similar, it is because it is, at a certain moment, similarity par excellence: altogether similarity, and also nothing more. It is the likeness, to an absolute degree, overwhelming and marvellous. But what is it like? Nothing.
>
> That is why no man alive, in fact, bears any resemblance yet. In the rare instances when a living person shows similitude with himself, he only seems to us more remote, closer to a dangerous neutral region, astray from himself and like his own ghost already: he seems to return no longer having anything but an echo life. [472]

These last lines could be read to refer to Thomas's being, transformed into the text at the end of his reading: also his being is neutral, remote, opaque, and almost lifeless. In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" Blanchot asks, how does the ambiguity of language become manifested, i.e., "what happens, for example, when one lives an event as an image?" And he replies:

> To live an event as an image is not to remain uninvolved, to regard the event disinterestedly in the way that the aesthetic version of the image and the serene ideal of classical art propose. But neither is it to take part freely and decisively. It is to be taken: to pass from the region of the real where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them into that other region where the distance holds us – the

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[469] SL 34, 255.
[470] SL 256.
[471] SL 258.
[472] SL 258.

distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things.[473]

That the image "continues to affirm things in their absence", as Blanchot writes, is to say that in the image the meaning is not based in the presence of things, but rather in the impossibility of having them present.

From the ambiguity of language follows its pure exteriority, its obscurity, the fact that a work of art is not just "another world, but the other of all worlds, that which is always other than the world."[474] For this reason our task as readers cannot be to imagine the world where everything is different; rather, the literary world is a world which cannot be imagined since it is "beyond all possible worlds".[475] Although the appearing of the image requires "the neutrality and the fading of the world",[476] the question is not of the phenomenological reduction of the real world in order to analyze the intentional content of consciousness without presuming the actual existence of the given object. The literary world constitutes a world with its own laws, independent both of the writer and of the reader. We do not make a reduction; rather, the "reduction" (if this is a right word) happens in spite of the experiencing subjectivity. In *Thomas the Obscure*, the narrator tells, playing with the word "image", how the whole world suddenly becomes an image and in this act takes away the capacity to see: "My being subsists only from a supreme point of view which is precisely incompatible with my point of view. The perspective in which I fade away for my eyes restores me as a complete image for the unreal eye to which I deny all images. A complete image with reference to a

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[473] SL 261.

[474] SL 228.

[475] As Michel Foucault writes, Blanchot's concept of the image is part of his thinking as the "thought from outside", *le pensée du dehors*, as Foucault calls it (Foucault 1990, 23).

[476] SL 254.

world devoid of image which images me in the absence of any imaginable figure."[477]

Behind this Mask there Is Nothing

In *The Space of Literature* the finished work is compared to a cadaver. In Blanchot's analysis, the completed work, drifting freely and independent of its author, reminds the anonymous and independent being of a cadaver. Since a cadaver is characterized rather by a self-resemblance than a resemblance to something, a human corpse is also a perfect example of an image. It is only a shadow of a person we once knew and whom we loved: "Man is made of his own image: this is what we learn from the strangeness of a cadaver. But this formula should first of all be understood this way: man is unmade according to his image. The image has nothing to do with signification, meaning, as implied by the existence of the world, the effort of truth, the law and the brightness of the day."[478]

That the image is its *own image* means that it refers only to itself. In order to be its own image, the image must first distance itself from itself. If we look at a corpse, we can see a distance in it: it is still the person we knew but also something else, which we do not recognize and which does not belong to our world. The corpse is distanced from the person who was alive. The cadaver challenges our metaphysical prejudices: it is here, and at the same time it is not. It is "nowhere", or rather in some place between here and nowhere. As frozen in its place it is totally present, and nevertheless it fills the house with its absence. It looks at us, and it does not look at us. Even thought it is there, it does not possess a standpoint or perspective. Its open eyes are blind and (as dead) non-blind at the same time. At this moment, as the cadaver becomes anonymous, as if neutral, it starts to resemble itself.

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[477] TTO 106.

Blanchot's notion of the image does not refer only to Heidegger's analysis of the death mask, but also to Levinas's analysis of art as an image in "Reality and its Shadow" ("*La réalité et son ombre*", 1948), where Levinas states: "The most elementary procedure of art consists of substituting for the object its image."[479] Although Levinas speaks positively of art – he finds from Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* the intrusion of exteriority – he eventually rejects art, because it offers only images, not concepts, and in this way evades all ethical responsibility. For Levinas, every work of art is in the end a blind statue, an idol, a caricature of life.[480] For Levinas, the philosopher of ethics, art is irresponsible and reckless: "There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague."[481] As careless, the "poet exiles himself from the city", leaving behind him blind statutes and caricatures.[482]

The position given to the exteriority of art is thus different in Levinas and Blanchot. For Blanchot, nothingness or exteriority encountered in language as the realm of neutrality is nothing that could even be transcended. Levinas, in contrast, demands that the strangeness of the *il y a* – which can be experienced especially in poetry – has to be transcended with the help of ethics as the "first philosophy". Like Heidegger, Levinas seeks for the truth, which he doesn't find from art. Even if Levinas thus praises Blanchot's fictional stories for casting us "upon a shore where no thought can land", where "the idealist metaphysics of *esse-percipi* comes to an end"[483], in "The Reality and its Shadow" his conclusion on art in general – and on the ethical power of Blanchot's fiction – remains skeptical: he finds in Blanchot's thinking the same ethical "neutrality" of which he accuses

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[478] EL 350, SL 260.

[479] Levinas 1989, 132. Levinas's essay is published for the first time in *Temps Modernes*, 38 (1948), 771-89.

[480] Levinas 1989, 138.

[481] Levinas 1989, 138.

[482] Levinas 1989, 138.

[483] Levinas 1996, 134.

Heidegger. There is something "inhuman and monstruous" in art[484], which is why the otherness of literary language is finally an obstacle, a thing that must be left behind and surpassed, on the way to ethics.[485] As Blanchot notes in *The Infinite Conversation*, "Levinas mistrusts poems and poetic activity."[486]

Blanchot's analysis of the image refers implicitly also to Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" in explaining how "a tool, when damaged, becomes its image": the damaged tool, "no longer disappearing into its use, appears. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection: the object's double, if you will".[487] Analogically, a cadaver, like a work of art, is an image of itself: "The category of art is linked to this possibility for objects to 'appear', to surrender, that is, to the pure and simple resemblance behind which there is nothing – but being. Only that which is abandoned to the image appears, and everything that appears is, in this sense, imaginary."[488] Blanchot does not take up the etymology of the word "image" in the Latin word *imago* which means death mask.[489] Neither does he mention Heidegger, although his example of the cadaver as image *par excellence* is obviously indebted to Heidegger's analysis of the image and the death mask in *Kantbuch*.[490] In

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[484] Levinas 1989, 141.

[485] Despite Levinas's suspicious attitude towards the "neutrality" of art, his criticism of vision-generated language also in aesthetics as well as his insights of the materiality of a work of art were, as Gerald L. Bruns notes, "an important contribution to modernist aesthetics for the way it articulates the ontological significance of modern art and its break with the aesthetics of form and beauty that comes down to us from classical tradition and from Kant" (Bruns 1992, 207).

[486] EI 76; IC 53.

[487] SL 258.

[488] SL 259.

[489] Nancy 2003, pp. 147-79.

[490] Heidegger's analysis was in turn inspired by the appearance of Ernst Benkard's *Undying Faces* (*Das ewige Antlitz*) in 1926, at the same time as Heidegger himself was giving lectures on Kant (these lectures were later published as *Kantbuch*). Benkard's book presented photographs of over a hundred death masks of famous personalities, among them for example Newton, Beethoven, and Pascal. See Ernst Benkard, *Das ewige Antlitz: Eine Sammlung von Totenmasken*, with a foreword by G. Kolbe (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlangsanstalt, 1926). *Undying faces. A collection of death masks from the 15th century to the present day* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929). Heidegger's interpretation of Kant focused on the notion of the imagination as a way to guarantee the synthesis of the manifold of perception with the concept

Heidegger's analysis, the death mask produces a real effect, since through it we can see what the mask is representing, i.e., the face of a dead man. The question arises, however, of what is it that the death mask represents. How can we explain the fact that the death mask resembles the man we knew and at the same time refers only to itself? Heidegger explains that in appearing in a space between empirical sensory diversity and a rational unity of concepts, the death mask offers a perfect example of the method of schematism. In this way, Heidegger's question of the metaphysics of presence in Kant turns into the question of image.[491] What, then, is the difference between the image in Heidegger and the image in Blanchot?

Blanchot writes in "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" that the place occupied by the corpse is "drawn down by it, sinks with it, and in this dissolution attacks the possibility of *a dwelling place* even for us who remain."[492] Although Blanchot does not mention Heidegger's name, the reference is clear. For Heidegger, the world or the work of art is not just what we see as a projection of our consciousness but a "dwelling place". In "The Letter on Humanism" ("*Brief über den Humanismus*", 1946) Heidegger writes in turn that "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are guardians of this home."[493] Although Blanchot agrees with Heidegger that the space of the poem is not a place which the reader creates but which the reader encounters, he seems to find in Heidegger's term "dwelling" a positive aspect which makes it an inappropriate term in defining language. Blanchot wants to underline that reading understood as fascination does not "give" us anything, nor does it offer us a more truthful way to see. For

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of the understanding. Heidegger, who interpreted Kant's schema-image as the perfect example of the metaphysics of presence (as it was constructed on the adequation model of truth), made in his analysis a differentiation between representation (*Vorstellung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*), which he defined as a "depiction". As the example of presentation as depiction Heidegger used the death mask.

[491] Nancy 2003, pp. 147-79.

[492] SL 257.

[493] BW 217.

Blanchot, art is "exile from truth"[494]. The experience of the image prevents us from recognizing what it is that we have encountered.

For Blanchot, language that is its own image escapes truth. This is because images in language (as Blanchot defines them) have no anchors outside themselves. They are not tied to any concepts or representations of the pre-existing ideas: "The fixed image knows no repose, and this is above all because it poses nothing, establish nothing. Its fixity, like that of the corpse, is the position of what stays with us because it has no place."[495] For Blanchot, the image has nothing to do with signification, meaningfulness, or truth, since the image of an object is not the sense of this object, nor does it aim to understand this object; rather, "it tends to withdraw the object from understanding by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance which has nothing to resemble."[496]

In *The Space of Literature*, in the essay entitled "The Original Experience" (which precedes the essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary" and can thus be read as an introduction to it) Blanchot speaks of "a contemporary philosopher" − without mentioning Heidegger's name − who "names death as man's extreme possibility".[497] Blanchot is not satisfied with Heidegger's solution to name death Dasein's possibility for understanding life more authentically and truthfully. In Blanchot's analysis, Heidegger is not able to solve the problem that eventually death remains beyond our possibility to experience; it is not possible to say, "I die, at this moment I die". Death escapes one's capability of experiencing it, and from this it follows that death cannot make one's experience of life more

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[494] SL 240. In *The Infinite Conversation,* Blanchot criticizes Heidegger's notion of a "dwelling place" by analysing the experience of temporality in suffering. Although the person who suffers is not beyond the grasp of time, he is "delivered over to another time – to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse. [...] A time without event, without project, without possibility; not that pure immobile instant, the spark of the mysticism, but an unstable perpetuity in which we are arrested and incapable of permanence, a time neither abiding nor granting the simplicity of a dwelling place" (IC 44).

[495] SL 259.

[496] SL 260.

authentic. As Blanchot writes, "in death the possibility which is death dies too".[498] Death is not a possibility, and neither is it possible to figure or imagine death: the death mask is only an effort to give a face to something, which eventually cannot be imagined or figured. The death mask is the mask behind which there is nothing – or there is precisely this nothing, i.e., death (which cannot be faced or seen). In Blanchot's view, as I understand him, the mistake of Heidegger is to think that the ambiguity of language – which eventually is duplicity of the negative as death – could be resolved and transgressed by transforming it into possibility, authenticity, and truth. For Blanchot, in contrast to Heidegger, the ambiguity of death – death as possibility and death as impossibility – "always remains present in the choice itself".[499]

In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" Blanchot points out that the two versions of the image always exist simultaneously and that only mutually can they make possible what is called image, imagination, and meaning. This duplicity is analogical to the division of language into two coexistent sides that Blanchot makes in "Literature and the Right to Death". For Blanchot, the simultaneity of language as conceptuality (ideal meaning) and ambiguity (obscurity) is grounded in the double meaning of the negative: negativity as death and negativity as the infinity of dying. In Blanchot's words, the two versions of the imaginary "come from the initial double meaning that the power of the negative brings with it and from the fact that death is sometimes truth's elaboration in the world and sometimes the perpetuity of that which admits neither beginning nor the end."[500] The duplicity of language is present even in classical art. With its ideal of being faithful to the figure, it ends up with impersonality which eventually betrays it.[501] It is as if there were two Eurydices: the one whom Orpheus recognizes in the daylight, and the other whom he encounters in the night of death. As Orpheus, having turned his eyes towards Eurydice, sees his beloved

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[497] SL 240.
[498] SL 261.
[499] SL 261.
[500] SL 261.

face to face, he does not see the woman he once lost, but the gaze or rather the mask of death: Eurydice transformed into an image of herself.

For Blanchot, language is beyond the opposition between the conceptual and non-conceptual, truth and untruth. It is not the case that language would be untrue (poetry) or true (philosophy) but we do not know what language at each moment is. From this it follows that it is not relevant to reflect on poetry in the context of truth or to speak of it with the vocabulary of truth, as Heidegger does. As Blanchot writes, "the image can certainly help us to grasp the thing ideally, and in this perspective it is the life-giving negation of the thing; but at the level to which its particular weight drags us, it also threatens constantly to relegate us, not to the absent thing, but to its absence as presence, to the neutral double of the object in which all belonging to the world is dissipated."[502] The duplicity of the imaginary refers back to the duplicity of all language. The two sides of language are always present in language. Language is violence and non-violence, both at the same time, from which it follows that our ability to distinguish between the two sides is always uncertain. Blanchot does not, in other words, believe that the step beyond the violent side could ever be possible – in Blanchot, it wouldn't be possible to choose between seeing as *Umsicht*, staring, or fascination; nor does the experience of fascination teach one to see more truthfully. From the ambiguity of language it follows that language is not only beyond the opposition violent/non-violent, but also beyond the opposition truth/untruth. This, I argue, is the point where Blanchot stops following Heidegger.[503]

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[501] SL 260-1.
[502] SL 262.
[503] SL 172.

V Writing Otherwise than Seeing

The Question of the Neutral

In *The Infinite Conversation*, in the essay entitled "The Most Profound Question" (1969), Blanchot pays attention to the tendency of thinking and sight to address a "whole" or a "totality". He writes, as if criticizing the interpretative method of hermeneutics (in which our capability for understanding is related with the horizon structure of our vision), that in our thinking "every view is a general view", and although "sight holds us within the limits of a horizon", our perception is always "planted in the earth and forming a link between the immobile boundary and the apparently boundless horizon – a firm pact from which comes peace."[504] Also for Heidegger, says Blanchot, the question of Being becomes a "totalizing question", to which the philosopher subordinates all other questions.

In Blanchot's interpretation, the goal of Heidegger's ontological difference is to approach anew the question where Hegel's dialectics failed, namely "the question of the whole". The aim of Heidegger's ontological difference is to entail not only what "is" but also Being that surrounds it. As Heidegger writes, "A more fundamental ontology claims to take up this question beyond question anew by transforming it into a question of the difference between [B]eing and what is (the 'whole' elaborated by the work of the dialectic involves not [B]eing, but what is)."[505]

Blanchot claims that even though Heidegger's fundamental ontology claims to think of that which remains beyond the whole of the dialectical movement (by transforming it into a question of the ontological difference between Being and what is), Heidegger's ontology itself is not able to avoid the same totalizing movement of which it accuses Hegel's philosophy. Heidegger's question of the

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[504] IC 28.
[505] EGT 50-51.

whole of Being is, as Blanchot writes, "like a question of God": both are too "ultimate" and too "general" a question, aiming to bear all other questions.[506] As Blanchot concludes, "The thought that asks about being, that is to say, about the difference between being and what is – the thought that thus bears the first question, renounces questioning."[507]

In Blanchot's interpretation, Hegel's dialectic and Heidegger's ontology (as well as Levinas's critique of ontology) "have the same postulate: all three deliver themselves over to the One, be it that the One accomplishes itself as everything, be it that it understands being as gathering, light, and unity of being, or be it that, above and beyond being, it affirms itself as the Absolute". Blanchot claims that even Heidegger's thinking is eventually more towards the affirmation of the totality of Being than towards the affirmation of exteriority. As I interpret Blanchot, he says that both Hegel's dialectic and Heidegger's ontology aim to be comprehensive. To cite Mark C. Taylor, "To think the ground of all things is to comprehend everything".[508] For Blanchot this ground in Heidegger is the ontological difference between beings and Being.

Blanchot, instead, proposes that in the place of the totalizing questions of dialectics and ontology – which still remain trapped within the metaphysics of presence – we would ask the question that in the history of philosophy is not posed and has been unthought of.[509] For Blanchot, the question that "escapes the reference to the One" is the question of writing understood as exteriority and as neutrality:[510] "this question that is not posed; a question we will call, in defiance, in derision and with rigor, the most profound question – or the question of the neutral."[511]

Whereas Heidegger in *Being and Time* claims that the history of metaphysics has forgotten the question of Being, Blanchot thus

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[506] IC 440, n.3.
[507] IC 439, n. 3.
[508] Taylor 1990, 204.
[509] IC 16.
[510] IC 440.
[511] IC 17.

accuses the entire history of philosophy *of leaving the neuter unthought of*: from it we can find "an effort either to acclimatize or to domesticate the neuter by substituting for it the law of the impersonal and the reign of the universal, or an effort to challenge it by affirming the ethical primacy of the Self-Subject, the mystical aspiration to the singular Unique. The neuter is thus constantly expelled from our languages and our truths."[512]

In the essay entitled "René Char and the Thought of the Neutral" ("*René Char et la pensée du neutre*") Blanchot criticizes the ontological difference for not being neutral enough, even if it "calls to think in the neutral".[513] Although "Heideggerian philosophy can be understood as a response to this examination of the neuter and as an attempt to approach it in a non-conceptual manner", Heidegger's ontology "must also be understood as a new retreat before that which thought seems only able to entertain by sublimating it."[514] In a footnote to his essay Blanchot continues:

> Reflection upon the difference between being and beings – a difference that is not the theological difference between the Transcendental and the finite (less absolute and at the same time more original than the latter), a difference that is also entirely other than that between the existing being and its manner of existing – seems also to call upon thought and upon language to recognize in *Sein* a fundamental word for the neuter or neutral; in other words, it calls one to think in the neutral. But it is also necessary to rectify this immediately and say: the dignity accorded to being in the summons that would come to us from it, everything that relates in an ambiguous manner Being and the divine, the correspondence between *Sein* und *Dasein*, the providential fact that being and the comprehension of Being go together – being being that which illuminates itself, opens, and destines itself to beings that become an opening of clarity; the relation, therefore, between *Sein* und truth, a veiling unveiling itself in the presence of *light* – all this does not prepare us to seek the neutral as it is implied by the unknown.[515]

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[512] IC 299.
[513] IC 458, n. 2. EI 441.
[514] IC 299.
[515] IC 458, n. 2. EI 441.

Blanchot does not only seek a way of thinking that would not privilege seeing, but also a way of thinking that would not privilege Being. He claims that Heidegger's ontological distinction is not neutral enough, since it thinks of absence as the absence *of* Being, which is why Heidegger's notion of Being still returns meaning to Being. In my view, Blanchot's concept of writing as neutral (*le neutre*) can be interpreted as a critical reply to Heidegger's ontological difference between Being and beings which, as Blanchot says, in making a relation between *Sein* and truth, "a veiling unveiling itself in the presence of *light*", is not neutral enough even thought it "calls one to think in the neutral."[516] Whereas in Heidegger truth, art, and Being still maintain a "correspondence" to Dasein, Blanchot seeks a way of speaking and writing that would bring us neither Being nor non-Being but would be engaged with what he calls the neuter. According to Blanchot, we should not think of the neuter as a structure which has a relation to Being, but as a possibility of "saying that which would say being without saying it, and yet without denying it either" ("*de dire qui dirait sans dire l'être et sans non plus le denier*").[517] As he says, the neuter "does not belong to any questioning that the question of being might precede."[518]

In my view, the neuter can thus be understood as Blanchot's answer to the philosophical debate concerning the relation of writing to nothingness which circled around Blanchot's first fictional narrative, *Thomas the Obscure*, and the questions relating to it, such as "Can we reach for anything without somehow determining it? Does thinking always require thematization? Doesn't language always, as soon as something is said, pose a relation to being? Isn't it impossible to negate something without positing it beforehand?" In the essay "The Narrative Voice (the 'he,' the neutral)", Blanchot explains the concept of the neutral in the following way:

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[516] IC 458, n. 2. EI 441.
[517] IC 387. EI 567.
[518] IC 220.

The exigency of the neutral tends to suspend the attributive structure of language: the relation to being, implicit or explicit, that is immediately posed in language as soon as something is said. It has often been remarked – by philosophers, linguists, and political analysts – that nothing can be negated that has not already been posited beforehand. To put this another way, every language begins by declaring and in declaring. But it may be that recounting (writing) *draws language into a possibility of saying that which would say being without saying it, and yet without denying it either.* Or again, to say this more clearly, too clearly: it would establish the centre of the gravity of speech elsewhere, there where speaking would neither affirm being nor need negation in order to suspend the work of being that is ordinarily accomplished in every form of expression.[519]

Blanchot's "neuter" can be seen as a continuation of his earlier concepts "existence without being" (""Literature and the Right to Death") and image (*The Space of Literature*): all three concepts challenge the idea of language as "revealing" or "illuminating" Being, as well as the idea of language as creating something new, or as making something to appear *as* something.

As has been noticed by many Blanchot scholars, in the essays of *The Space of Literature* (*L'espace littéraire*, 1955) Blanchot writes so close to Heidegger's terminology that Heidegger's influence is easily recognized.[520] However, already in *The Space of Literature* Blanchot's interpretation of Heidegger's thinking is "personal", as for example Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt notes.[521] The discrepancy between Blanchot and Heidegger becomes gradually stronger in Blanchot's essays written during the 1950. In the following pages I will analyse from different points of view how Blanchot's essays, written in the 1960s, introduce the neuter as a critical equivalent to Heidegger's thinking. I will analyse the neuter (first) in terms of Blanchot's criticism of the notion of "revealing" as it comes up in both Hegel and Heidegger; (secondly) in terms of Blanchot's criticism of Heidegger's notion of naming, and (thirdly) in terms of Blanchot's

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[519] IC 386-7. Emphasis is mine.
[520] Schulte Nordholt 1995, 225.
[521] Schulte Nordholt 1995, 225.

criticism of Heidegger's vocabulary which for him is "still too metaphysical".

Heidegger's Ontological Analysis of Language

As I tried to show in the previous chapter, Blanchot's way of challenging the phenomenological theory of reading with the notion of fascination echoes Heidegger's ontological investigation of seeing as *Umsicht* in *Being and Time*. I propose further that the division into the two versions of the imaginary that Blanchot makes in *The Space of Literature* can be read as commenting on the differentiation Heidegger in his turn makes between the representational and the affirmative dimension of language as *Dichtung*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger differentes between the "assertative" function of philosophical language and the "aletheic" function of poetical language. Whereas Hegel is a representative of the assertative and Heidegger of the *aletheic* function of language, Blanchot steps beyond this opposition in proposing a third account of language. As I have proposed, Blanchot seeks from the beginning a third way to define language, which would not be language in its "negative", "representational", "constative" or "assertative" function, nor language in its "performative" or affirmative function as "creating" or making something appear as something. In my analysis, both the ambiguity of language in "Literature and the Right to Death" and the image in *The Space of Literature* aims to describe language in its third dimension. In *The Infinite Conversation*, as I interpret it, Blanchot names this third type "language as neutral".

As I proposed, the neuter can be read as Blanchot's critical reply to Heidegger's way of understanding language. Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that seeing and using language are always related: the foundation of any sentence is in the way we see and observe the world in which we are. Just as there are different ways of seeing, there are different ways of understanding language, although

they all have the same origin in Dasein's practical concern for the world. As Heidegger reminds us, the Greeks already connected speaking with seeing and thus with knowing: "Among the Greeks their existence was largely diverted into talking with one another, but at the same time they 'had eyes' to see."[522] From ancient times linguistic assertion has thus been understood as the "locus" of truth: language in its Greek meaning *logos* (λόγος) has always been related to the question of truth, i.e., to the question of how something appears to us.

Heidegger argues that language is based on the way we look at the world, from which it follows in turn that seeing the world and using language are ontologically connected. Since Dasein's ways of Being are dependent on the ways it sees and looks, Dasein as a being who "has language" always expresses its ways to be and to see the world. From the interrelatedness of seeing, understanding, and language it follows that Dasein has the possibility to investigate its way of Being by investigating its relation to language. Language is both a way of understanding one's own Being, and a way of communicating with others and expressing oneself to them.

As the goal of Heidegger's ontology is to find a more truthful way to look and see the world, this also becomes the goal of language. Thus the starting point of Heidegger's ontological analysis of language is that in order to challenge the idea of language as representation we need the right concept of language. In order to attain a more open relation to Being, we must find a more truthful way to speak of Being. As Heidegger asks in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, "How do intentional experiences, belonging as they do to the subjective sphere, relate to transcendental objects?"[523] This question is, in my interpretation, Heidegger's way to poetry.

Even though the focus of Heidegger's ontological analysis in *Being and Time* and *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* is in Dasein's Being, and even if language in these writings is not in such a

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[522] BT 208.
[523] BPP 62-61. Emphasis is mine.

central position as it is in Heidegger's later writings, already *Being and Time* includes strategic references to language as poetry. One of these can be found in sections 4-5, where poetry is mentioned as one of Dasein's ways to investigate its Being. Heidegger writes that the question of Being can be answered only if Dasein's Being is investigated in "an ontologically adequate manner."[524] Even though Dasein always has some kind of "pre-ontological" understanding of its own Being, the true nature of this Being remains concealed from it, since Dasein has a tendency to also objectify its own Being, understanding it as something present-at-hand.[525] For this reason it needs specific ways to open its eyes even to its own Being. Although Dasein's understanding of Being changes ("develops or decays") in time, depending on what kind of Being Dasein possesses,[526] it is only by actively seeking different ways to investigate and understand its Being that Dasein has also the possibility to influence what is its current mode of Being.[527] Dasein has the possibility to progress in its ways of seeing Being, which means that Dasein can "develop the different possibilities of sight."[528] While listing different ways Dasein has at its disposal in investigating its Being, Heidegger mentions poetry: along with philosophy and various sciences, poetry can participate in the interpretation of Dasein's Being, presuming that it explicitly points toward the problem of Being itself:[529]

> Not only, however, does an understanding of Being belong to Dasein, but this understanding develops or decays along with whatever kind of Being Dasein may possess at the time; accordingly there are many ways in which it has been interpreted, and these are all at Dasein's disposal. Dasein's ways of behaviour, its capacities, powers, possibilities, have been studied to varying extents in philosophical psychology, in anthropology, ethics, and 'political science', in poetry, biography, and the writing of history, each in different fashion. [...] Only when the basic structures of Dasein have been adequately worked out with explicit orientation

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[524] BT 35.
[525] BT 36, 226.
[526] BT 37.
[527] BT 209.
[528] BT 385.
[529] BT 37.

towards the problem of Being itself, will what we have hitherto gained in interpreting Dasein get its existential justification.[530]

In section 34 of *Being and Time* Heidegger defines poetry as a kind of expression of exteriority that has the ability to open Dasein's eyes to its own Being: "What is expressed [in poetry] is precisely this Being-outside […]. In 'poetical' discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing existence."[531] Poetical discourse is a way to express "Dasein's transcendence", its way to be always already outside itself, which Heidegger in *Being and Time* understands as a condition for Dasein's Being.[532]

In my view, the most important point of *Being and Time* concerning language is Heidegger's claim that language has the capacity to open one's eyes to Being understood not as a presence-at-hand but also as a condition of possibility for understanding and communicating in general. If seeing the world is usually understood as presenting the world to the subject with representative and thus violent language, in order to create a more open relation to the world and to Being one must find a less violent way to use language: language that defines the relation between seeing and using language in a new way. From this observation follows in turn the question of what kind of language is needed in order to not objectify Being, but rather to open oneself to Being and to the existence of other people? In order to answer this question we need an ontological analysis of different ways to use and understand language.

After *Being and Time* Heidegger came to the opinion that the ontological analysis of Dasein was not enough to challenge the traditional subject-object schema, since from the analytic of Dasein still followed the paradoxical pre-eminence of Dasein, i.e., the idea of man as Dasein as the origin of meaning, although ontologically

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[530] BT 37.
[531] Heidegger writes in sect. 34 of *Being and Time* that "In 'poetical' discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing existence" (BT 205).
[532] BT 205.

grounded. As Heidegger already puts it in *Being and Time*, the main problem of his ontology was the lack of adequate "words" and "grammar", with which it would be possible to grasp entities in their Being. Heidegger's solution to the violence of the ego and theory was the turning from the analytic of Dasein to the anonymous speech of language, i.e., to the structure of meaning without subjectivity. With language it should be possible to speak of the appearance of the meaning of Being without presupposing the metaphysical idea of subjectivity.

On the same basis that Heidegger distinguishes "theoretical seeing" and "circumspective seeing", he makes a distinction between two ways to understand or interpret language. When we base our interpretation on truth as correspondence, we see things in their prepositional truth, and language as a medium for transmitting these truths, i.e., as signifying something that already exists in the world. But when an assertion is posited on the horizon of circumspective concern (*Umsicht*) the meaning of a sentence is different than when it is read in a theoretical context. In the same way as Being makes the appearing of beings possible, language in the sense of *aletheia* makes appearance and signifying possible.

In my view, Blanchot's description of the first side of language in "Literature and the Right to Death" can be read as commenting on Heidegger's analysis of the "assertative" function of language in *Being and Time*. In understanding language as a tool at the disposal of the self-present ego, assertative language follows the idea of thinking as representation, as well as the metaphysical model of the subject-object relation, which sees man as an observer independent of the external world. Since *logos* in the Aristotelian tradition has been reduced to assertion, and since logos is traditionally understood as "letting something be seen" with language, its effect has been understood to be based on its ability to make its object "present-at-hand".[533] When an entity is understood as the object of assertion, it is

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[533] BT 203.

turned from something "ready-to-hand" to something merely "present-at-hand"; assertion cuts off an entity from its environment, thus objectifying its Being. A theoretical assertion in Heidegger's analysis is the linguistic equivalent of seeing as "staring", i.e., seeing as objectifying, making present.[534] As Heidegger puts it, "Representing the relation to what is represented" follows the conception of "idea as perception."[535]

Being and Time highlights that a linguistic assertion is not "free-floating behaviour" but includes and requires "a fore-having" or a foresight of that which is asserted.[536] Eventually each linguistic assertion has its ontological source in primordial understanding and interpretation based on circumspective seeing.[537] Since all the different ways of seeing and knowing presuppose the same structure of prior projection, all interpretation is based on some kind of "foresight" (*Vorsicht*), i.e. hermeneutical preconception (*Vorgriff*) of something, which is yet to come, but which we always unavoidably grasp somehow in advance.[538] This fore-having or preconception has later become known as the hermeneutical fore-conception or the "horizon" that determines and shapes the meaning for the interpreting eye. According to Heidegger, a consequence of the interpretative dimension of seeing is the violence of interpretation, i.e., our tendency to objectify and essentialize that which is coming.[539] From this it follows that the violence of language and thinking is necessarily

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[534] BT 209.
[535] Heidegger 1977, 143.
[536] BT 199.
[537] BT 201.
[538] BT 191. For Heidegger the possibility of ontology is in "liberating grammar from logic", which can happen only by understanding "the basic a priori structure of discourse as an existentiale" (BT 209). The hermeneutical circle of understanding, which belongs to all meaning, is in Heidegger's analysis analogical to the "fore-structure" of Dasein itself, since Dasein's Being is that of "interpretative understanding" (which Heidegger also called "Dasein's transcendence") (BT 195).
[539] From the interpretative dimension of seeing it also follows that to Dasein's proper and most authentic Being does not belong to seeing its life in terms of the absolute presence, but rather in terms of temporality. To see authentically means the ability to see that things can always be wholly otherwise; eventually, there can always be "nothing" rather than "something", as Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* formulates.

involved in all interpretation.[540] Heidegger is thus again faced with the question of violence and the problem of is it ever impossible to approach entities and Being without violence, if hermeneutical ontology also is, due to its dependence on the structure of a projection, necessarily tied to the violence of interpretation.

Despite this observation of unavoidable interpretative violence, Heidegger insists that poetical discourse can fulfil the task which all previous philosophical tradition (primarily representative thinking and truth as correspondence) has neglected – to open our eyes to the open dimensionality of Being. As a non-assertive way to use language, literary language is a way to experience something exterior, something totally other.[541] From the exteriority of art it follows that art is a potential place for a different kind of seeing: as something that conceals itself, art resists theoretism and its objectifying way of seeing. In teaching us to see objects anew, art can alter our sense of the whole of beings, i.e., of that context in which objects we see inhere. As Heidegger suggests in "The Nature of Language", a "thinking experience with language" offers a fundamental mode of truth and knowledge. Poetical language has the capacity for a more primordial and more "authentic" way of seeing which has, similar to the philosophical and the everyday way of seeing, its own way to be in connection with thinking and knowing.

Heidegger thus finds in poetry the alternative to the representative way to use language which corresponds to what Blanchot in "Literature and the Right to Death" says of the second side of literature. Poetry is for both of them a way of speaking that challenges the metaphysical way of thinking. Heidegger, however,

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[540] For instance, if we understand the sentence "The hammer is too heavy" to imply that the hammer has the property of heaviness, we contemplate the hammer as something "present-at-hand". If we place the same sentence "The Hammer is too heavy" in a circumspective context, the interpretation can be that the hammer is unsuitable for its use (BT 196-7).

[541] Fóti finds the potential for "an ontological ethics" or "an ethics of alterity" in Heidegger's meditations on poetry. She writes that "To the extent that an ontological ethics that is an ethics of alterity announces itself in an inchoate way in Heidegger's meditations, it takes the form of a poetically instituted human dwelling upon the earth, which respects and responds to the enigma of manifestation" (Fóti 1992, xx).

defines poetry also as a more truthful and *therefore* less violent way of seeing that is able to transgress the violence of representation because of its truthfulness. He suggests that the shift to an ontologically more justified idea of truth demands us to listen to a mode of discourse or "saying" that is not assertive but rather "poetizing". In "Phenomenology and Theology", dating from 1927, Heidegger turns from the objectifying way to use language to poetry. From Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923, *Sonetten an Orpheus*), in its "poetic saying", he finds a way of speaking that does not "posit and represent anything as standing over against us or as object", since "*There is nothing here that could be placed before a grasping or comprehending representation.*"[542]

Heidegger suggests that in poetry we encounter something that is not "present" in the same manner as a being or an entity is present. Even though that which is present and that which is "presencing" appear only as not distinguished, poetry has the ability to make us aware of the difference between the two. It makes us realize that "What is present does not have to stand over against us; what stands over against us does not have to be empirically perceived as an object."[543] While avoiding metaphysical articulations based on the oblivion of the ontological difference, a work of art becomes a perfect example of thinking of Being. Heidegger thus concludes that "an example of an outstanding non-objectifying thinking and speaking is poetry."[544] For Heidegger, poetry is the answer to the problem of how is it ever possible to "enter the side of things" and to be open to "the phenomena as they offer themselves." Poetry is, in short, a place for more truthful truth (as *aletheia*) to appear.

For Blanchot, writing is not a mode of seeing or thinking of truth, even if truth would be defined as truth as *aletheia*, since in his interpretation to speak of art as any kind of truth is to subordinate it to something else, in Heidegger's case to ontology and to the ontological

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[542] Heidegger 1998, 61.
[543] Heidegger 1998, 62.
[544] Heidegger 1998, 61.

difference.[545] The task of art in Blanchot is not to clarify or illuminate something else, but rather to perform *its own* existence. Blanchot thus seems to follow Levinas's interpretation, according to which the concept of art in Heidegger establishes the world and a place for truth to appear. In opposition to Heidegger, in Blanchot art "does not condition truth," as Levinas puts it.[546] In Levinas's words, in Heidegger the light of art comes from on high, from the "light of Being," whereas the "light" of art in Blanchot is "a black light, a night coming from below – a light that undoes the world." As Levinas concludes, "Far from elucidating the world," art in Blanchot "exposes the desolate, lightless substratum underlying it."[547]

Following Levinas's interpretation of Heidegger's ontology Blanchot finds from Heidegger the same metaphysical connection made between "truth" and "light" of which Heidegger accuses Husserl's phenomenology: in Husserl it is the light of consciousness that brings objects into view, whereas in Heidegger – as Levinas puts it – light ("Light of Being") is an essential condition of truth.[548] Even if Blanchot thus accepts Heidegger's analysis of vision as presence in the philosophical discourse from Plato to Husserl, as well as Heidegger's criticism of representative thinking, he does not accept Heidegger's analysis of art as the place where truth (even if truth as *aletheia*) appears. For Heidegger, in opposition to Blanchot, poetry is still a way of thinking about the truth, whereas in Blanchot, as he sums up in *The Space of Literature*,

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[545] Paul de Man interprets the difference between Blanchot and Heidegger as follows: "Blanchot's criticism, starting out as an ontological meditation, leads back into the question of the temporal self. For him, as for Heidegger, Being is disclosed in the act of its self-hiding and, as conscious subjects, we are necessarily caught up in this movement of dissolution and forgetting. A critical act of interpretation enables us to see how poetic language always reproduces this negative movement, though it is often not aware of it. Criticism thus becomes a form of demystification on the ontological level that confirms the existence of a fundamental distance at the heart of all human experience. Unlike the recent Heidegger, however, Blanchot does not seem to believe that the movement of a poetic consciousness could ever lead us to assert our ontological insight in a positive way. The centre always remains hidden and out of reach; we are separated from it by the very substance of time, and we never cease to know that this is the case" (de Man 1971, 77)
[546] Levinas 1996, 139.
[547] Levinas 1996, 137.
[548] Levinas 1996, 137.

The work brings neither certitude nor clarity. It assures us of nothing, nor does it shed any light upon itself. It is not solid, it does not furnish us with anything indestructible or indubitable upon which to brace ourselves. These values belong to Descartes and to the world where we succeed in living. Just as every strong work abducts us from ourselves, from our accustomed strength, makes us weak and as if annihilated, so the work is not strong with respect to what it is. It has no power, it is impotent: not because it is simply the obverse of possibility's various forms, but rather because it designates a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation.[549]

Heidegger claims that because of its estrangement and exteriority art can open our eyes to something to which we have become blind. For Blanchot, the exteriority of art is without meaning in the sense of truth. It is not that writing would not be true or non-true, but we don't know what it is at each moment.[550] For Blanchot language is not the "house of Being" which the poet would create and then guard, nor is it possible to find from a work of art "a dwelling place"[551]. Language is not a secure basis for anything; it is not a house but rather a place or a space governed by the laws of fascination.

Literature against Revelation

Blanchot writes in "Literature and the Right to Death" that literary language "protests against revelation".[552] As I interpret Blanchot, with these words he resists Hegel's idea of language as the revelation of the totality of Being. As Kojève understands, the progressive revelation (understanding) of the Real is in Hegel achieved in speech and

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[549] SL 223.
[550] The question of truth becomes central also in the debate between Levinas and Blanchot. Whereas Levinas wants to "save" our relation to truth and ethics by passing from the obscurity of art to the realm of ethics and justice, for Blanchot the violence of language is our only possibility to ground an ethical relation to the other. See Gerald Bruns's article "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, pp. 206-233.
[551] SL 257.
[552] WF 330.

through speech only.[553] To reveal Being in speech means that every concept reveals and refers to a part of conceptually understood reality. A concept is thus to be defined as "Being revealed by Speech or Thought".[554] The goal of philosophical thought is in turn "the goal of revealing, through the meaning of a coherent discourse (*Logos*), Being (*Sein*) as it is and exists in the totality of its objective-Reality (*Wirklichkeit*)."[555] In Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, "The philosopher must describe the *totality* of what *is* and exists."[556] The final goal of the progressive revealing with concepts is the complete understanding of the whole of Being, "a total revelation of real Being or an entirely revealed Being."[557] The totality of Being created in the movement of negation is the sum total of the movement of discourse, which means that the totality of Being can be achieved only at the end of its dialectical and historical becoming.[558]

As was already discussed, in order to to challenge the Hegelian view of language as revealing Being, Blanchot proposes that the poetical language seeks to be the realm of "the unrevealed":[559] in poetry, language "reveals nothing", but "allies itself with the reality of language."[560] In contrast to the idea of language as the revelation of Being, Blanchot refers to Mallarmé's idea of poetry as the elimination of things that it seeks to name. In "Literature and the Right to Death" Blanchot describes literary language as the successive movement of negation that seeks to get control of the totality of its own movement, i.e. the totality of Being:

> Literature is not content to accept only the fragmentary, successive results of this movement of negation: it wants to grasp the

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[553] Kojève 1980, 173. Kojève explains: "For real Being existing as Nature is what produces Man who reveals that Nature (and himself) by speaking of it. Real Being thus transforms itself into 'truth' or into reality revealed by speech, and becomes a 'higher' and 'higher' truth as its discursive revelation becomes ever more adequate and complete" (173).
[554] Kojève 1980, 170-1.
[555] Kojève 1980, 171.
[556] Kojève 1993, 312.
[557] Kojève 1980, 173.
[558] Kojève 1993, 314.
[559] WF 326, PF 316.
[560] WF 330,PF 319.

movement itself and it wants to comprehend the results in their totality. If negation is assumed to have gotten control of everything, then real things, taken one by one, all refer back to that unreal whole which they form together, to the world which is their meaning as a group, and this is the point of view that literature has adopted – it looks at things from the point of view of this *imaginary* whole which they would *really* constitute if negation could be achieved. Hence its non-realism – the shadow which is its prey. Hence its distrust of words, its need to apply the movement of negation to language itself and to exhaust it by realizing it as that totality on the basis of which each term would be nothing.[561]

Although poetical language would fail in its effort to avoid conceptual meaning, what it nevertheless can do is to challenge the idea of meaning as a whole. The conditional formula in Blanchot's text cited above is crucial: "[Literature on the first side] looks at things from the point of view of this *imaginary* whole which they would *really* constitute if negation could be achieved."[562] – Why is it, then, in Blanchot's view that totality remains uncompleted in literary language? In "Literature and the Right to Death" the explanation is found in Blanchot's idea of language as "the savage freedom" of words, thanks to which singular words – or singular poems in a collection of poems – do not refer to some "imaginary whole" consisting of words. There is no fixed context, to which a word would refer. Instead, there is "within the limits of the word [...] access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence – they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of 'turn of phrase' which does not lead anywhere."[563] From the endlessness of the signifying process (or of the "chain of signifiers", as one could say) it follows that the movement of language is not to be understood as a process which in aiming to create the whole of Being could have a beginning or an end; rather, language

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[561] WF 330.
[562] WF 330.
[563] WF 326.

turns out to be an anonymous and subjectless neural force, that is able to break with the idea of the "whole of Being." [564]

I propose that Blanchot's question concerning the origin of language in "Literature and the Right to Death" can also be read in relation to Heidegger's idea of language as naming, and not only in relation to Hegel. Also Heidegger condemns the traditional notion of language in "The Origin of the Work of Art". As Heidegger argues, according to the common view, language is only a vehicle which communicates and represents pre-existing thoughts and ideas without having an effect of its own on the transmitted meaning.[565] In defining language as the representation of pre-existing representative thoughts, the conventional notion of language as communication misses the ontological function of all language. In Heidegger's ontological analysis of language, language does not represent, but "brings beings as beings into the open for the first time."[566]

From Heidegger's way of understanding language ontologically it follows that he understands the function of linguistic naming in a different way than Hegel. In "The Origin of the Work of Art" he defines language as naming, not in the sense of referring or

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[564] In the following passage, as I read it, Blanchot makes an analogy between the movement of reason aiming at the totality of Being and the act of the reading process towards "the work as a whole". The result can be read as a parody of the dialectical journey of the Spirit on its way to perfect knowledge. Blanchot asks, as if directing his ironical words to Hegel: "Where in a work lies the beginning of the moment when the words become stronger than their meaning and the meaning more physical than the word? When does Lautrémont's prose lose the name of prose? Isn't each sentence understandable? Isn't each group of sentences logical? And don't words say what they mean? At what moment, in this labyrinth of order, in this maze of clarity, did meaning stray from the path? At what turning did reason become aware that it had stopped 'following,' that something else was continuing, progressing, concluding in its place, something like it in every way, something reason thought it recognized as itself, until the moment it woke up and discovered this other that had taken its place? But if reason now retraces its steps in order to denounce the intruder, the illusion immediately vanishes into thin air, reason finds only itself there, the prose is again prose, so that reason starts off again and loses its way again, allowing a sickening physical substance to replace it, something like a walking staircase, a corridor that unfolds ahead – a kind of reason whose infallibility excludes all reasoners, a logic that has become the 'logic of things.' Then where is the work? Each moment has the clarity of a beautiful language being spoken, but the work as a whole has the opaque meaning of a thing that is being eaten and that is also eating that is devouring, being swallowed up, and re-creating itself in a vain effort to change itself into nothing" (WF 336).
[565] BW 198.
[566] BW 198.

pointing out to something that already exists, but in the sense of making something appear for the first time *as something*: "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their Being from out of their Being. Such saying is a projecting of clearing, in which the announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the open *as*."[567]

In Hegel's philosophy the condition of meaning is to negate being, which happens by negating the being of being in the act of naming. What Hegel's dialectics according to Heidegger forgets or is unable to think of is the distinction between Being and beings. As Blanchot explicates Heidegger's starting place in *The Infinite Conversation*, "From the perspective of ontology, the dialectic cannot pronounce on the being of the dialectic itself, any more than on the *this is* that is prior to the work of negation: the dialectic can begin only on the basis of a given that is devoid of meaning, and out of which it can then make meaning; the meaning of non-meaning is what without which there could be no meaning. One can only *negate* what was first *posited*, but this 'positive' and the 'first' remain outside the question."[568]

From this criticism it follows that Heidegger, in contrast to Hegel, does not define naming as giving names to objects or referents, but rather as a linguistic act that "calls into the word", as a kind of linguistic "happening" or event. As he writes in "The Origin of the Work of Art", "language alone brings beings into the open for the first time".[569] Whereas in Kojève's interpretation of naming in Hegel the emphasis is put on the negative power of language to control the world, and to construct the world for the man who speaks, in Heidegger poetic language "summons to presence" that which it names, and inaugurates the world by giving to things their

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[567] BW 198.
[568] IC 439, n. 3.
[569] BW 198.

appearance.[570] From this it follows in turn that all modes of "presencing" are effects of language. In giving existence to something that previously did not exist, language has an ontological dimension. Understood as a linguistic happening or a performative, language is like an archaic enchantment or spell, *Dichtung* calls things into Being.[571] Heidegger's slogan *Sprache spricht* (language speaks) underlines the idea of language as the condition of Being in general. That language names something means that language names, and not a subject who uses language to name. As defined according to its performative function, language does not refer outside itself but to itself, to its own Being.

In Heidegger's view, because of its exteriority, poetic language questions the idea of truth as correspondence: in poetry truth is no longer assertions, statements or propositions but rather an event, *Ereignis*, which resists conceptualization and exceeds the intentionality of both its author and the reader. Not only is writing a poem a poetic act, but also reading a poem presupposes an open attitude, a willingness to "remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own essence itself to take a stand in the truth of beings."[572] The exteriority or the otherness of a work of art "thrusts down the ordinary or what we believe to be such", from which it follows that "*the truth that discloses itself in the work* can never be proved or derived from what went before."[573] In suggesting that poetical language follows the structure of *aletheia*, Heidegger defines art in general as "the clearing projection of truth," i.e., as a place where truth as *aletheia* "happens". For Heidegger as the philosopher, poesy is, as he notes in "The Origin of the Work of Art", "*only one* mode of the clearing projection of truth".[574]

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[570] WL 124.
[571] PLT 198.
[572] BW 199.
[573] BW 200.
[574] BW 198. My emphasis.

In my analysis, Blanchot remains sceptical about Heidegger's way of defining poetical language as a way to reveal the truth. Even though he agrees with Heidegger's interpretation of a work of art as an unpredictable event, or as the unnameable, he refuses to accept Heidegger's definition of poetry as a "projective saying" which could reveal the truth of Being (to Dasein). For Blanchot, as the most problematic aspect in Heidegger's view on poetry remains his idea of poetry as a possibility for founding a place for truth. Although Blanchot in many ways accepts the analysis of art in "The Origin of the Artwork", he departs from Heidegger's interpretation of art as a place for truth to appear. Whereas in Heidegger poetry reveals the truth, in Blanchot literary language as resemblance is not able to reveal anything.

For Blanchot, to speak of poetry as a non-violent way of seeing the truth does not make sense, since literary language as ambiguity is beyond both truth and non-truth. The fact that Heidegger names this truth as ontologically defined *aletheia* does not make a difference to Blanchot. He affirms Heidegger's criticism of representation but not his analysis of language as *aletheia* as revealing Being, illuminating Being or as a more truthful way of seeing. In my analysis, Blanchot's disappointment concerns particularly the homology Heidegger makes between poetical saying as revelation and truth as *aletheia*. For Blanchot, the space of literature is not – in the final analysis – the place where seeing as staring could change into seeing as *Umsicht*, but the place where fascination prevents any seeing, revealing, illuminating or appearance of truth to happen, and which for this reason challenges the opposition between seeing and non-seeing. Blanchot, unlike Heidegger, does not believe that literature could teach us how to "see" otherwise. Reading as fascination is not a revealing or learning. As he writes in "Sleep, Night": "One seeks the original model, wanting to be referred to a point of departure, an initial revelation. But there is none."[575]

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[575] SL 168.

It seems to me that eventually Blanchot agrees with Levinas's (much criticized) interpretation of Heidegger. In "The Poet's Gaze" Levinas claims that even if for Heidegger error is simultaneous with truth, in Heidegger "all that is human can be said, in the final analysis, in terms of truth".[576] According to Levinas, Heidegger and Blanchot are opposed to each other, since in Blanchot, he cries, "the work uncovers, in an uncovering that is not truth, a darkness. In an uncovering that is not truth!" Levinas claims that although for Heidegger "the revelation of being is also its dissimulation", eventually in Heidegger truth "conditions all wanderings".[577] Françoise Collin makes the same interpretation in her study on Blanchot: as she writes, even if a work of art does not reveal for Heidegger anything which one could "know", it nevertheless reveals to us the truth.[578]

Blanchot criticizes Heidegger's terminology, when speaking of language and art, for being too metaphysical. As the anonymous speaker argues in "Speaking Is Not Seeing", the word 'reveal' (used by Heidegger) is not suitable to define writing, since to reveal is "to remove the veil, to expose directly to view. Revealing implies that something shows that did not show itself. Speech (at least the one we are attempting to approach: writing) lays bare even without unveiling, and sometimes, on the contrary (dangerously), by reveals a way that neither covers nor uncovers."[579] As Françoise Collin also interprets Blanchot, in Heidegger the notion of revelation is connected to seeing and light. From Blanchot's notion of "resemblance", for instance, these characteristics are missing.[580]

For Blanchot, as I understand him, language in Heidegger is 'towards' Being, whereas in Blanchot language is rather towards nothingness or disappearance. For Blanchot, who already in his early essays on language takes as his starting point the idea of absence as

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[576] Levinas 1996, 136.
[577] Levinas 1996, 136.
[578] Collin 1971, 172.
[579] IC 29.
[580] Collin 1971, 172.

the ground of meaning, it is important to ask how language restores its relation to nothingness, from which it is born. As was discussed, Blanchot disagrees with the idea that even death, negativity itself, could be conceptualized. For Blanchot, language and poetry exist precisely because the immediate is not possible. For Heidegger, instead, at least as Blanchot interprets him, at stake is an interrogation of the nature of Being's coming into presence. In Heidegger, poetical language as naming makes the world appear in its plenitude, here and now.

Blanchot does not put the emphasis on the ability of (literary) language to let something appear or to be seen but rather to let that which is said to withdraw. In Blanchot's notion of literary language, it seeks to make us conscious of absence which is not only the absence of being but also the absence of truth. Since the ultimate ground is missing, the event of disappearing always remains stronger than the event of appearing. As I interpret Blanchot to say, for Heidegger, in his turn, language as naming makes Being appear; it is the condition of the possibility of anything to appear and to be present at all. As Levinas interprets, "Light from on high in Heidegger, making the world, founding a place. In Blanchot it is black light, a night coming from below – a light that undoes the world".[581] Françoise Collin notes in turn that for Heidegger art is an element that "calls Being" and makes it appear, whereas for Blanchot art is most of all absence.[582]

Although Blanchot's dislike of Heidegger's philosophical terminology of truth is understandable, one can nevertheless doubt the correctness of his interpretation of Heidegger's notion of language. In the light of Heidegger's later essays on language (for instance *On the*

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[581] Levinas 1996, 137. In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man notes that Blanchot's texts shed light on the dark recesses of language: "The light they cast on texts is of a very different nature. Nothing, in fact, could be more obscure than the nature of this light" (de Man 1983, 62-63).

[582] Collin refers to Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's painting in "The Origin of the Work of Art" in writing that "*Par la langage poétique, l'étant, pour Heidegger, en appelle à l'Être. Les souliers de la paysanne, peints par Van Gogh, convient l'existence des pieds, les champs, la terre meuble, le Cosmos entire; pour Blanchot, ils attestent l'absence des pieds et du sol qui s'est dérobé*" (Collin 1971, 172).

Way to Language, 1950-59) one can ask, isn't the function of language in both the same: not to make the unthought manifest but to let it disappear at the moment of its appearing? Doesn't Heidegger already write in his early essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" that what is, is only in virtue of its concealment: "Every being which we encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presencing, and in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealment. The clearing in which it stands is in itself at the same time concealment".[583]

Gerald Bruns points out in his study on Heidegger, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language,* that in comparison to the early Heidegger, for the later Heidegger after *Being and Time* the function of language is not a "revelation of Being" but rather its withdrawal, "letting be of things", or "speaking that disrupts signification".[584] Blanchot, however, seems to base his criticism mostly on *Being and Time, The Origin of the Work of Art, The Letter on Humanism* and *The Ground of Reason.*

As I propose, Blanchot's criticism of Heidegger seems to follow Levinas's early interpretation according to which Heidegger's thinking is ultimately more towards the affirmation of the totality of Being than towards the affirmation of exteriority. For Levinas, Heidegger's ontological difference remains also violent against the singularity of existents, or of singular beings: Levinas accuses Heidegger for privileging the universality of Being over the singularity of the personal other. Analogically, Blanchot says that the privilege Heidegger gives to the truth of Being precludes him from taking into account the special characteristics of language. Blanchot claims – if I have understood him right – that although Heidegger opposes poetry to philosophy in the traditional sense, he still regards poetry as a way of *thinking* of the truth.

In analysing Levinas's early work in "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida shows that Levinas's accusation of the

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[583] BW 178.
[584] Bruns 1989, 115, 190.

totalizing tendency of Heidegger's philosophy is ultimately not justified. In Heidegger's ontology, Being does not subsume or efface the existent, because in Heidegger there is no Being without the existent; it is not possible to imagine Being without beings because Being always appears as the Being of beings. If we accept Derrida's criticism of Levinas's reading of Heidegger, as I do, Blanchot's accusation of the totalizing tendency of Heidegger's philosophy also seems groundless. However, although I can admit that Blanchot's criticism of Heidegger is at some point baseless, his own point is in my opinion nevertheless clear: we should seek to define language in a way that would remain beyond the opposition between Being and non-Being. This happens by turning from Being to writing.

From Being to Writing

Blanchot does not accuse Heidegger, as did Levinas, of forgetting ethics in his ontological philosophy. Blanchot remains, instead, skeptical as to whether Heidegger's own fundamental ontology has found a language for speaking of the other, i.e., of exteriority. Despite its good intentions, Blanchot claims, Heidegger's ontology has not found a language in which it would express its intentions without metaphysical presuppositions; as Blanchot writes, "the very language in which it [ontology] speaks remains a language that belongs to the domain of what is. This supposed ontology is thereby formulated in the language of metaphysics."[585]

Blanchot claims that Heidegger's difficulty finding non-metaphysical language emerges in his effort to replace the metaphysically problematic notion of seeing with the notion of hearing (*hören*). In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot's term for the narrative voice (*le voix narrative*) challenges Heidegger's notion of "hearing": whereas hearing entails an allusion to someone (Dasein)

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[585] IC 439, n. 3.

who hears, the term "voice" refers to writing itself. In Blanchot's interpretation, Heidegger claims that the being of the other must be heard in speech, since in order to catch what remains beyond the whole of being it is not enough to make a question of the being of the other. As Blanchot interprets it, Heidegger thinks that the question of being must be "transmitted to us by way of voice." In his interpretation, for Heidegger only "hearing is authentic"[586]:

> Heidegger says initially: "questioning is the piety of thought"; he then takes back his assertion and later substitutes another for it: questioning is not what authentically bears thought, only hearing is authentic, the fact of hearing the saying wherein what must come into question announces itself. A decisive remark. It signifies: (a) that the question of being is not authentic, at least is not the most authentic question inasmuch as it is still a question; (b) that in whatever manner we question being, this question must have announced itself as speech, and that this speech must have announced itself, been transmitted to us by way of the voice; (c) that only hearing is authentic and not questioning.[587]

Blanchot's criticism is directed to Heidegger's identification of speaking with listening.[588] In "The Most Profound Question", he pays attention to the metaphysical presuppositions Heidegger's notion of hearing bears: does not Heidegger with the notion of hearing privilege presence in a similar way as the history of metaphysics does in privileging vision? Doesn't hearing remain, despite Heidegger's criticism of the visually informed *theoria*, tied to the metaphysics of presence? Is not hearing in Heidegger "hearing that looks"?

As an example of Heidegger's ontology formulated in the language of metaphysics, Blanchot cites Heidegger writing in *The Essence of Reason* that "to hear is to seize by sight, to enter into

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[586] EI 33, IC 439.

[587] IC 439, n. 3.

[588] In *The Way to Language* ("*Der Weg zur Sprache*") Heidegger explains the connection between speaking and listening in the following way: "Speaking is listening to the language we speak [...] a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking [...] We do not merely speak *the* language – we speak *by way* of it. We can do so solely because we always have already listened to the language. What do we hear there? We hear language speaking (*das Sprechen der Sprache*)" (US 254, OWL 123-24).

seeing" (*entendre, c'est saisir par la vue, entrer dans le voir*").[589]

From the idea that "to hear is to seize by sight" it follows in turn that "thought is an appearing by hearing that apprehends by looking"[590] which in Blanchot's reading corresponds to Heidegger's idea that "Being is shining". He writes:[591]

> In *The Essence of Reason*, Heidegger says: Man speaks only when he responds to language according to what is meted out. But in the same work, he says *that to hear is to seize by sight, to enter into seeing*; "in Greek thought to say signifies to bring to show, to make a thing appear in the figure that is proper to it, to show it in the manner in which it regards us, and this is why, saying it, we see (understand) it clearly." […] This corresponds to the idea that "being is shining." Hence the inordinate privilege accorded to sight: a privilege originally and implicitly presupposed not only by all metaphysics, but by all ontology (and, needless to add, all phenomenology), and according to which everything that is thought, everything that is said, has as its measure light or the absence of light ("*tout ce qui se pense, tout ce qui se dit a pour mesure la lumière ou l'absence de lumière*").[592]

For Blanchot, Heidegger's formulation that "to hear is to seize by sight, to enter into seeing" signifies that Heidegger is not taking seriously enough his own terminology in order to be able to recognize its metaphysical presuppositions. Heidegger's ontology – and with it all ontology and all phenomenology – ends up with the same "inordinate privilege accorded to sight", for which Heidegger himself had blamed the tradition of metaphysics.

In my view, taking into account Heidegger's disapproval of the privilege given in the metaphysical tradition to seeing over the other

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[589] EI 33.

[590] IC 439.

[591] Gerald L. Bruns defines Heidegger's hearing as a mode of the poetic event. In Heidegger, a poem "rings in the ear" in a way that is not empirical hearing, because one does not really register any sound. Rather, there is an "echoing," or a haunting of something: "whatever it is, it isn't there, but neither will it go away, it is excessive but inaccessible" (Bruns 1989, 116).

[592] IC 439; EI 32, note 3. Blanchot refers to Heidegger's *Der Satz vom Grund* (1958, 56. My emphasis.) In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida famously defines "hearing oneself speak" as one of the basic characteristics of the metaphysics of presence: "This self-presence of the animating act in the transparent spirituality of what it animates, this inwardness of life with itself, which has always made us say that speech [*parole*] is alive, then that the speaking subject hears himself [*s'entend*] in the present" (Derrida 1973, 78).

senses, one has good reason to ask, as Blanchot does, why is it that Heidegger still wants to speak of language in terms of "light", "truth", "revealing" and "seeing"?[593] It is interesting to note that *Being and Time* already is embedded with terms relating to seeing and looking; eventually all the elements that somehow constitute Dasein's Being are described with vocabulary more or less related to seeing. Despite Heidegger's ontological determination of these terms, one can wonder why he chooses to speak of poetry as the way to "reveal the truth" of Being and of Being as the "light of Being", as he at the same time underlines the problematic nature of these metaphysically loaded terms. As Blanchot concludes, "one of the traits of philosophy as it manifests itself in Heidegger can be expressed in this way: Heidegger is essentially a writer, and therefore also responsible for a writing that is compromised (this is even one of the measures of his political responsibility)."[594] As Blanchot concludes in a footnote of his essay "The Most Profound Question", Heidegger's ontology "has not found a language in which it can be said; the very language in which it speaks remains a language that belongs to the domain of what is. This supposed ontology is thereby formulated in the language of metaphysics."[595] One could also cite the rude words of the anonymous speaker from Blanchot's philosophical dialogue "Speaking Is Not Seeing": "Despite your efforts to avoid having to evoke light in speaking of the obscure, I cannot help but refer everything you say back to day as the sole measure."[596]

As discussed, Blanchot criticizes the correspondence Heidegger in his interpretation makes between *Sein* and *Dasein*. For Blanchot, it seems to me, Heidegger's mistake is to think of language as revealing, hearing or appearing in the sense of making something

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[593] BT 186. Herman Rapaport suggests that Heidegger invokes his "metaphorics of light" in order to illuminate the way *Dasein* understands Being on the horizon of time, and that the "lexicon of lighting or illumination" is needed in order to speak of the "disclosure" or "unconcealment" (*Entborgenheit*) as the characteristics of truth. As Rapaport suggests, it is in the "light of time" that Being must be interpreted (Rapaport 1993, 219).

[594] IC 437, n 4.

[595] IC 439, n. 3.

[596] IC 31.

appear as something to Dasein. In *The Infinite Conversation*, where Blanchot turns from language to writing, he seems to replace the notion of both Being and language with that of "fragmentary writing".[597] In so doing, Blanchot announces explicitly that the notion of writing alone is for him able to question those prejudices and oppositions that follow from the dominance of seeing and light. To challenge the metaphysical distinctions does not succeed in the context of Being but in the context of writing *as neutral*, since only the neutrality of writing by its nature deconstructs all metaphysical oppositions. Blanchot argues in his essay entitled "The Narrative Voice (the 'he,' the neutral)" in the following way:

> Neutral speech does not reveal, it does not conceal. This does not mean that it signifies nothing (by claiming to abdicate sense in the form of non-sense); it means that the neutral does not signify in the same way as the visible-invisible does, but rather opens another power in language, one that is alien to the power of illuminating (or obscuring), or comprehension (or miscomprehension). It does not signify in the optical manner; it remains outside the light-shadow reference that seems to be the ultimate reference of all knowledge and all communication, to the point of making us forget that it only has the value of a venerable, that is to say inveterate, metaphor.[598]

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[597] Blanchot accentuates the autonomous existence of language, it's independence of the writer and the iterability of words already in "Literature and the Right to Death". So it is not a question of a radical "turn" in his thinking, but rather of a change of emphasis which partly can be explained by Derrida's influence which Blanchot himself acknowledges in a footnote to *The Infinite Conversation*, writing that "these pages are written at the margin of books by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Eugen Fink, and Jean Granier [...] and of several of Jacques Derrida's essays, collected in *L'écriture et la difference*" (IC 452, n. 16). Leslie Hill gives the following account of the influence of Blanchot and Derrida on each other's thinking: "Derrida's influence on Blanchot's vocabulary is evident from the changes made to some articles of the late 1950s or early to mid- 1960's in the versions published in *l'Entretien Infini* and *L'Amitié*; alongside the withdrawal of terms like 'présence', for instance, Blanchot also has more extensive recourse to words such as 'écriture' or 'différence', using them in their largely Derridean sense [...]. While the responsiveness of Blanchot to Derrida is beyond question, Derrida's own dept to Blanchot, as Derrida has been the first to make clear, is difficult to underestimate; indeed, much of the principle – if not the detail – of Derrida's account of phonocentrism in *De la grammatologie* in 1967 is already contained in the opening pages of Blanchot's essay on Char, '*La Bête de Lascaux*', first published in 1953" (Hill 1997, 251).
[598] IC 386.

In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot also claims that the notion ofwriting challenges Heidegger's idea of meaning as appearing (*l'Apparaître*) which only establishes a connection between meaning and seeing in a way that makes a concession to the "ontological logos"[599]: "Writing conceives of itself on the basis neither of vocal nor of visible manifestation, these being merely opposed through a complicitous opposition of what is roused where Appearing reigns as meaning, and light as presence: the pure visibility is also pure audibility. And this is why Heidegger, in his faithful belonging to the ontological logos, can still affirm that *thought is a seizing by hearing that seizes by the way of the gaze"* ("*la pensée est une saisie par l'ouïe qui saisit par le regard*")[600].

As an alternative to the metaphysical idea of language Blanchot proposes the idea of language as writing, i.e., the idea of "speech" as language that is "in advance always already written".[601] With writing it would become possible to get beyond both Hegel's dialectics (and the idea of being as Totality) and Heidegger's ontology (and the idea of language as Being): "[T]hrough the exigency of *speech that is in advance always already written*, it may be that an entirely different relation announces itself – a relation that challenges the notion of being as continuity or as a unity or gathering of beings; a relation that would except itself from the problematic of being and would pose a question that is not one of being. Thus, in this questioning, we would leave dialectics, but also ontology."[602]

In Blanchot's philosophical dialogue entitled "Speaking is not Seeing" the speaker explains that he is searching for "a speech such that to speak would no longer be to unveil with light."[603] The conversation goes as follows:

"Speaking frees thought from the optical imperative that in the Western tradition, for thousands of years, has subjugated our

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[599] IC 261.
[600] IC 261, EI 390.
[601] IC 10.
[602] IC 10. My emphasis.
[603] IC 29.

approach to things, and induced us to think under the guaranty of light or under the threat of its absence. I'll let you count all the words through which it is suggested that, to speak truly, one must think according to the measure of the eye."

"You don't wish to oppose one sense to another, hearing to sight?"

"I would not fall into that trap."

"Especially since writing – which is your own way, and no doubt the first way – would be lacking to you in this case". [604]

Later in the essay entitled "Atheism and Writing. Humanism and the Cry" Blanchot explains why it is not possible to reduce writing to hearing:

> Writing is not speaking. This brings us back to the other exclusion: speaking is not seeing, and thus leads to rejecting everything – hearing or vision – that would define the act that is at stake in writing as the immediate seizing of a presence, be it of interiority or exteriority. The break required by writing is a break with thought that gives itself as an immediate proximity; it is also a break with all empirical experience of the world. In this sense, writing also entails a rupture with all present consciousness, it being already engaged in the experience of the non-manifest or the unknown (understood as neutral).[605]

In Blanchot's words, language understood as always already written, "has ever and always, nonetheless never now, broken with language, whether it be a discourse that is spoken or written." He continues with a performative: "Let us admit what this rupture entails: a rupture with language as that which represents, and with language understood as that which receives and gives meaning; therefore also with this composite of the signifying-signified which today has replaced, in the distinctions of linguistics (already outmoded, it is true), the old division of form and formulated; a duality always ready to become unified and such that the first term receives its primacy only by immediately restoring it to the second term into which it necessarily changes."[606]

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[604] IC 27.
[605] IC 261.
[606] IC 261. Emphasis is mine.

Blanchot's thesis is as follows: Only in taking writing as the starting point in analysing language it is possible to get rid of the metaphysical assumption of meaning as presence, as well as beyond the metaphysical distinctions between Being and non-Being, light and darkness, truth and non-truth, violence and non-violence, and sensible and non-sensible. The neutral in Blanchot is not Being or non-Being, but both at the same time.

In my analysis, however, the purpose of Blanchot's fragmentary writing is not to be a new 'hyper concept' into which Being and non-Being as well as all the other metaphysical oppositions could be reduced. Taking fragmentary writing as a starting point is thinking without a presupposing of a totality, a ground or an origin. Or as Mark Taylor suggests, thinking without presupposing an origin or a ground of being, demands us "*to think otherwise by learning to write differently*". From this follows the question, "*How to do nothing with words*?"[607] Taylor argues, "Different philosophical and theological positions represent contrasting accounts of the original ground from which everything emerges and to which (the) all returns. The ground is always the ground of being – even when the notion of being is not explicitly invoked or appears in the guise of a being rather than being as such. Being, moreover, is that which is present. To be is to be present, though presence need not always be immediately present. If being is primal, everything else is secondary or derivative."[608] As I proposed at the beginning of this study, the starting point of Blanchot's analysis of language is the same as Heidegger's: to challenge the tradition of Western metaphysics which "attempts to comprehend everything by returning all things to their origin".[609] In my analysis, Blanchot's thesis is that his concept of the neuter succeeds is this aim better than Heidegger's notion of Being.

For Blanchot, writing in its essence opposes the primal values of phenomenology, i.e., "The visible, the evident, elucidation, ideality,

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[607] Taylor 1990, 206. Emphasis is mine.
[608] Taylor 1990, 204.
[609] Taylor 1990, 204.

the superior light of logic – or, through a simple reversal, the invisible, the indistinct, the illogical or silent sedimentation."[610] Blanchot speaks of the "exigency of writing" which demands that we give up the notion of writing "that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in the service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say, moralizing)." Instead of this metaphysical notion of writing we should admit about the idea of writing "that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) it seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which anything is put into question."[611]

Fragmentary Writing

The drive to totality is striving to form a whole circle: if the human eye (as the eye of the intellect) is the first circle, then the world as a total circle (the all-seeing eye of the Absolute) is the final vision that is attained through the procession of temporal horizons. The world as a totality or a whole is seeing without limitations. However, if thinking is not seeing but rather seeing and non-seeing, the idea of the literary work as a visually formed whole is also challenged. In *The Infinite Conversation*, the idea of the literary work as a whole is opposed by the notion of "fragmentary writing" (*l'écriture fragmentaire, la parole fragmentaire, la parole de fragment*). In my analysis, fragmentary writing puts the emphasis on language as textuality which Heidegger in Blanchot's interpretation neglects.

Blanchot's later fragmentary essays from the 1960s onwards can be interpreted as radical repudiations of phenomenological perception as such: by challenging the idea of language as seeing, revealing, representing and thinking, they question the power of vision

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[610] IC 251.
[611] IC xii.

and perception, and aim to fill the needs of "less violent language", to which Heidegger already aimed with his idea of art as a way of *aletheic* seeing, and to which Derrida famously refers in his analysis of Levinas's thinking in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics". In *The Infinite Conversation*, if compared to *The Space of literature*, the starting point is not a literary work but non-uniform, fragmentary writing, which nevertheless comes close to what Blanchot intends earlier with his concept of *désœuvrement*.

Although the distinction between fictional narration and philosophical discourse is challenged in Blanchot's work from the beginning, in his later work the distinction between these two genres seems finally to disappear. From 1960s onwards, Blanchot adopts the fragmentary manner of writing which characterizes his writings collected in *The Infinite Conversation*, *Awaiting Oblivion* (*L'Attente l'oublie*, 1962), *The Step Not Beyond* (*Le pas au-delà,* 1971) and *The Writing of the Disaster* (*L'Ècriture du désastre,* 1980). These collections, though not fictional texts in a traditional sense, contain extensive fictional passages, questioning the distinctive line between discursive and narrative prose. As I argued in my analysis of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death", this is what Blanchot aims to do from the beginning.

As is clear, the form of fragmentary writing questions the ideals of scientific writing – clarity, coherence, continuity, linearity, etc. Needless perhaps to say, this fragmentary writing does not seek to end up to a totality that would reconcile all impasses and contradictions the writer might have had in writing. To the contrary, the fragmentary, discontinuous and consciously temporal form of writing questions the possibility of writing to achieve a totality of any kind. As such, the notion of fragmentary writing challenges the metaphysical idea of form. Blanchot's fragmentary dialogues do not represent conversations with a beginning and an end, but rather the event or process of dialogue that continues infinitely, i.e., writing in

its infinite incompleteness as *désœuvrement*.[612] One could say that Blanchot's fragmentary writing aims to fill the needs of "less violent language", to which also Heidegger's idea of art as a way of *aletheic* seeing aimed, but without the presupposition of the truth which with language could be achieved.[613]

Derrida suggests in *Margins of Philosophy* that the metaphysics of presence can be traced back to Plato's emphasis on form. As Derrida reminds, the etymology of the notion *eidos* refers back to the theme of presence: "All the concepts by means of which *eidos* or *morphē* have been translated or determined refer to the theme of *presence in general*. Form is presence itself. Formality is whatever aspect of the thing in general that presents itself, lets itself be seen, gives itself to thought. That metaphysical thought – and consequently phenomenology – is a thought of Being as form, that in metaphysics thought thinks of itself as a thought of form, and the formality of form, is nothing but what is necessary; a last sign of this can be seen in the fact that Husserl determines the living present (*lebendige Gegenwart*).[614]

The dominant textual 'form' of the essays in *The Infinite Conversation* is that of a dialogue, where philosophical discussion moves back and forth without pre-determined concepts and without a final conclusion. The anonymous speakers in these essays do not assert; they rather ask, ponder, blunder, and listen to each other's questions: in its "infinite" dialogues they participate in the same event of conversation, or in a philosophical or literary community, which is not based on sight, but rather on listening to – and reading – the movement of endless conversation. As Timothy Clark says, dialogue

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[612] In *The Writing of the Disastre*, Blanchot writes: "*Je revies sur le fragment: n'étant jamais unique, il n'a cependant pas de limite externe – le dehors vers lequel il tombe n'est pas som limen, et en meme temps pas de limitation interne (ce n'est pas le hérisson, fermé sur soi); pourtant quelque chose de strict, non pas à cause de sa briè veté (il peut se prolonger comme l'agonie), mais par le resserrement, l'étranglement jusqu'à la rupture: des mailles toujours ont sauté (elles ne manquent pas). Pas de plenitude, pas de vide* (ED 78).

[613] I would also say that the non-linear, non-conceptual writing of Blanchot's essays challenges the traditional concept of *theoria* in the sense of "to look attentively" (Heidegger 1977, 143, 163).

[614] MP 158.

in Blanchot is an "implicit model of community", which gives it "a certain ethical force". In his later work, *The Writing of the Disaster,* a collection of philosophical fragments, Blanchot writes of the gift the poem brings to thought – a "ruinous" or "disastrous" fragment that breaks linear thinking.

Although Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* condemns Heidegger's language for being the language of metaphysics, it is evident that the dialogue form of his essays in *The Infinite Conversation* has its model in Heidegger's philosophical dialogues. The following excerpt is from Heidegger's *Conversation on a Country Path* (1959):

> SCIENTIST: Then we can't really describe what we have named.
>
> TEACHER: Any description would reify it. Nevertheless it lets itself be named, and being named it can be thought about…
>
> SCHOLAR: …only if thinking is no longer re-presentation.
>
> SCIENTIST: But what else could it be?
>
> TEACHER: Perhaps we now are close to being released into the nature of thinking.
>
> SCHOLAR: … through waiting for its nature.
>
> TEACHER: Waiting, all right; but never awaiting, for awaiting already links itself with re-resenting and what is re-presented.
>
> SCHOLAR: Waiting, however, lets go of that; or rather, I should say that waiting lets re-presenting entirely alone. It really has no object. SCIENTIST: Yet if we wait we always wait for something.
>
> SCHOLAR: Certainly, but as soon as we re-present to ourselves and fix upon that for which we wait, we really wait no longer.[615]

In his study *Derrida*, *Heidegger, Blanchot. Sources of Derrida's notion and practice of literature*, Timothy Clark argues that the dialogue form in Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida expose the limits of philosophical models of coherence.[616] In Clarks view, what makes dialogue ethical is that it necessarily embodies an event, which gives power to the "midwifery of new, unanticipated ideas". In Clark's interpretation, dialogue is an implicit model of community, which

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[615] Heidegger 1966, 67-68.
[616] Clark 1992, 18.

gives it a certain ethical force. As his words, a form of heteronomic philosophical writing engages otherness in writing in a way that is "inaccessible to theoretical texts".[617]

If in realistic prose, where sentences only express thoughts, language is like a transparent window, which does not show its own material, fragmentary poetry is more like a broken and opaque window, which questions its own ability to express thoughts with language. By making vision textual Blanchot's writing resists and questions the metaphysics of presence upon which, as Heidegger shows, the dominance of vision is grounded. In Blanchot's essay "Speaking Is Not Seeing", one of the speakers says that he would at least want that "we not give ourselves in language a view that is surreptitiously corrected, hypocritically extended, deceiving."[618]

Fragmentary dialogue breaks the argumentative line of assertative conversation, and thus defies the idea of the whole both visually and logically. One can also say that it questions the idea of language as "seeing" or thinking of the hermeneutical whole. As Blanchot writes later in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "fragmentation is the pulling to pieces (the tearing) of that which never has pre-existed (really or ideally) as a whole, nor can it ever be reassembled in any future presence whatever."[619] One could claim that whereas Heidegger made vision hermeneutical, in Blanchot vision is made textual. In Blanchot's words, fragmentary writing, "withdrawing from discourse any power to totalize, assigns it to multiple regions; a plurality that does not tend to unity (be it vain) nor is constructed with relation to unity – as lying to its hither side or beyond – but that has always already set it aside."[620]

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[617] Clark 1992, 18-19.

[618] IC 29.

[619] WD 60.

[620] IC 312, EI 457-8. According to Blanchot's definition, a fragment is "relation without relation": "A new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite centre from out of which, through speech, relation is to be created: an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is, leaves each of the terms that come into relation *outside* one another, respecting and preserving this *exteriority* and this distance as the principle – always already undercut – of all signification" (IC 308, EI 452).

Fragmentary writing is also fragmentary thinking, the "madness of the day", "*la folie du jour*", to cite the title of Blanchot's late story from 1973. Although fragmentary writing is "ruinous", as Blanchot puts it in his late collection of essays *The Writing of the Disaster*, a fragment (a sentence, for instance) is not a part of a larger philosophical system, neither is it a past or a future whole.[621] As an anonymous speaker says in "Speaking is not Seeing", "To write is not to give speech to be seen. The game of common etymology makes of writing a cutting movement, a tear, a crisis", which is "simply a reminder that the proper tool for writing was also proper for incising: the stylet." Writing is "a cutting operation, if not a butchery: a kind of violence." [622] Fragmentary writing is "disastrous", i.e. based on a "disaster". (In Blanchot *désastre* refers also to "desire" or "destruction" of stars, i.e., it does not mean ascension to heights where one would possess a larger vision and understanding, but rather the destruction and fragmentation of all thinking.

The literary tradition into which Blanchot relates the fragmentary writing is Jena romanticism. In *The Infinite Conversation*, he refers to the "discontinuous form" of Jena romanticism as a way of writing that is able to overlap discourse and silence.[623] However, as Bruns notes, for Blanchot the mistake of the romantics was that they wanted to "reduce madness to a style".[624] As Bruns argues, for Blanchot, "The fragment, after all, is not the expression of madness, as if madness or the fragment) were the disintegration, lack, or negation of something. Whatever it is, madness is outside affirmation and negation; neither discourse nor silence, neither system nor incoherence".[625] For Blanchot, I would add, fragmentary writing is not

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[621] In *The Writing of the Disastre*, Blanchot writes: "*Le fragmentation, marque d'une coherence d'autant plus ferme qu'il lui faudrait se défaire pour s'atteindre, nor par un système disperse, ni la dispersion comme système; mais la mise en pieces (le déchirement) de ce qui n'a jamais préexisté (réellement ou idèalement) comme ensemble, ni advantage ne pourra se rassembler dans quelque presence d'avenir que ce soit. L'espacement d'une temporalisation qui ne saisit – fallacieusement – que comme absence du temps*" (ED 99).
[622] IC 28.
[623] IC 358, EI 526.
[624] Bruns 1997, 149.
[625] Bruns 1997, 149.

self-expression. As he argues: "In truth and particularly in the case of Friedrich Schlegel, the fragment often seems a means for complacently abandoning oneself to the self rather than an attempt to elaborate a more rigorous mode of writing. Then to write fragmentarily is simply to welcome one's own disorder, to close up upon one's own self in a contended isolation, and thus to refuse the opening that the fragmentary exigency represents; an exigency that does not exclude totality, but goes beyond it".[626]

Fragmentation is violence not only to language and thought but also to vision. In "Speaking Is Not Seeing", the anonymous speaker confesses that he is seeking a speech with which we would arrive at a mode of "manifestation that would not be one of unveiling-veiling. Here what reveals itself does not give itself up to sight, just as it does not take refuge in simple invisibility."[627] Also the experience of fascination challenges the idea of language as seeing or revealing: fascination is not seeing in which a specific object is seen or not seen. Rather, fascination "implies a reversal to the possibility of seeing."[628]

The Narrative Voice – Writing Otherwise Than Seeing

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot introduces not only the concept of fragmentary writing but also the concept of writing as the "neutral". According to Blanchot, writing as neutrality is grounded neither on hearing nor on vision. Although language as sound or as written marks is always materiality, and although poetical writing has the ability to seduce with its optical properties, neutral (or fragmentary) writing cannot be reduced to its materiality either. If language is in advance "always already written"[629], i.e., based on the materiality and iterability of words, it is also temporal, and as temporal, non-visible

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[626] IC 359; EI 526.
[627] IC 29.
[628] IC 30.
[629] IC 25; EI 35.

and visible at the same time. In his later work *Friendship* (*L'Amité,* 1971) Blanchot writes,

> To write under the pressure of the neuter: to write as if in the direction of the unknown. This does not mean to speak the unspeakable, to recount the unrecountable, to remember the immemorable, but to prepare language for a radical and discreet mutation, as can be foreseen if we recall the following statement that I will be content to repeat: the unknown as the neuter, *whether it is, whether it is not*, could not find its determination there, but only insofar as the relation to the unknown is the relation *that light will not open, that the absence of light will not close* – a neuter relation; which means that to think in the neuter is to think, that is to write while turning away from all that is visible and all that is invisible. [630]

Blanchot cuts the neuter off from the category of presence which the tradition of metaphysics in Heidegger's interpretation has attached to Being: writing as the neuter is not Being, neither is it non-Being, since it is nothing that "is". As I interpret Blanchot to say, we should not think of the neuter as a structure which has a relation to Being as Heidegger understands it. In my view Blanchot claims that the notion of writing can challenge the metaphysics of presence only if it has not been understood as secondary or derivative to Being.

Since for Blanchot the function of literature is not to make the unthought manifest but rather to let it disappear at the moment of its appearing, the neutral is not appearance, nor should language as neutrality be understood as a way of communicating pre-existing meanings. In my view, Blanchot's definition of the neutral as something which neither reveals nor conceals opposes both Hegel's idea of naming as the revelation of being and Heidegger's view of a work of art as the revelation of truth as *aletheia*.[631] Between Hegel's notion of language as negativity and Heidegger's notion of naming as creating Being there is a third way of "saying that would say being without saying it, and yet without denying it either."[632]

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[630] IC 222.
[631] IC 386.
[632] IC 387.

To the concept of fragmentary or neutral writing is related the notion of the narrative voice. With the "narrative voice", claims Blanchot, it is "no longer a question of vision".[633] Unlike a hermeneutical vision, the narrative voice is not tied to a single place or a fixed centre.[634] Blanchot proposes that the narrative voice governs the stories that do not follow the rule of aesthetic disinterestedness, which has been "an essential category in the judgement of taste since Kant and even Aristotle". Blanchot's example is Kafka: in his stories the writer's and the reader's distance from the work turn into the distance in the work itself, where it appears of the form of "irreducible strangeness".[635]

In a classic story governed by an aesthetic distance, the author keeps his distance from the work, from which it follows that the reader or the spectator can do the same: "The ideal is still the form of representation of classical theatre: the narrator is there only to raise the curtain. The play is performed on the stage, from time immemorial and as though without him; he does not tell, he shows, and the reader does not read, he looks, attending, taking part without participating."[636] In Flaubert's stories, governed by the rule of impersonality, "to tell is to show, to let be or to make exist".[637]

In contrast to the storytelling of Flaubert, the narrator of Thomas Mann (who knows that his readers have lost their naïveté) constantly breaks the rule of non-intervention by involving himself in what he is telling. Mann makes of the aesthetic illusion his game, plays with it, and makes it so visible that the reader also becomes drawn into the game. In this way, says Blanchot, Thomas Mann succeeds in restoring a "feast of narrative illusion": "if aesthetic distance is denounced in his work, it is also proclaimed, affirmed by a narrative consciousness that takes place as a theme, whereas in the

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[633] IC 384.
[634] IC 386-7. The concepts of the "narrative voice" and the "neutral" are close to each other, but as Blanchot explains, the narrative voice encompasses or "bears" the neutral, which wants to say that the realm of the narrative voice is neutral.
[635] IC 383.
[636] IC 382.
[637] IC 382.

more traditional impersonal novel it disappeared, placing itself in parenthesis."[638]

However, in the story governed by the narrative voice the distance is no longer between the reader and the story, but becomes, in a similar way to the experience of fascination, the object and the substance of the narrative. In this kind of narrative it is not possible for the reader to maintain the role of the disinterested spectator: the reader "is no longer allowed to look at things afar, to keep between things and himself the distance that belongs to the gaze, because the distant in its non-present presence is not available either close up or from afar; it cannot be the object of the gaze. Henceforth it is no longer a question of vision."[639]

Or as the narrator of *Thomas the Obscure* tells us: "It was a story of emptied events, emptied to the point that every memory and *all perspective were eliminated*, and nevertheless drawing from this absence its inflexible direction which seemed to carry everything away in the irresistible movement toward an imminent catastrophe. What was going to happen? She did not know, but devoting her entire life to waiting, her impatience melted into the hope of participating in a general cataclysm in which, at the same time as the beings themselves, *the distances which separate beings would be destroyed*."[640] In contrast to the narrative of Flaubert, governed by aesthetic disinterestedness, in the narration of Kafka – and of Blanchot himself – narration no longer presents "something to be seen through the intermediary of, and from the viewpoint of, a chosen actor-spectator."[641]

Although both the "narrative voice" and the "neutral" substitute the notion of a subject, neither of them simply takes the

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[638] IC 383.

[639] IC 384. Blanchot also writes: "To speak the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown, is precisely not to take hold of it, not to comprehend it; it is rather to refuse to identify it even by sight, that 'objective' hold that seizes, albeit at a distance. To live with the unknown before one […] is to enter the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of power" (EI448/IC304).

[640] TO 51. My emphasis.

[641] IC 384.

"place traditionally occupied by a subject". First of all the narrative voice "modifies what we mean by place: a fixed location, unique or determined by its placement".[642] The experience of the neutral affects our relation to the text in a similar way as the experience of fascination: the distance is no longer between the reader and the text, but in the text itself as its profundity and indeterminate meaning. It is not experienced as a whole or as a structure with a centre, nor does the narrative voice create a centre or speak out of a centre; in contrast, it prevents the work from having a centre. As such, it challenges the hermeneutical idea of the interpreted text as a whole.[643]

Neither does Blanchot substitute the writing subject with the characters of the story: as he says, the narrative event cannot be reduced to the analysis of "the use of personal pronouns in the story".[644] One could also interpret the narrative voice as Blanchot's effort to speak of the narrative world without the "conventional psychology" that he criticized Sartre's *Nausea* of.[645] In Blanchot's words, the narrative voice speaking in the text does not "designate another me", nor "aesthetic disinterestedness" – it is not "that impure contemplative pleasure that allows the reader and the spectator to participate in the tragedy through distraction". What therefore remains to be discovered, says Blanchot, "is what is at stake when writing responds to the demands of this uncharacterizable 'he'."[646] As I interpret Blanchot to say, we have to ask who comes after the subject: what or who is the neutral voice that speaks in the text?

That the neutral voice is "neutral in the decisive sense" wants to say that it is not the voice of the character, nor the voice of the author, nor the voice of Levinas's Other, but rather *another voice*, the voice that is anonymous, impersonal, and does not belong to anybody. The otherness of which Blanchot speaks is not otherness that first of all would be "otherwise than being", since the otherness of writing is

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[642] IC 462, n.2.
[643] IC 386.
[644] IC 380.
[645] BR 34.
[646] IC 380.

beyond the opposition Being/non-Being. For Blanchot, the otherness of writing is not otherness brought first of all in the realm of ethics, either. It is rather otherness that is, as I propose, "otherwise than seeing".

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the relation to the other is not a relation of knowledge; ethics is "*Autrement que savoir*". The absolute alterity is "an exteriority which can be neither derived, nor engendered, nor constituted on the basis of anything other than itself".[647] Levinas's later book *Autrement qu'Être (Otherwise than Being*, 1974) which has been read as a response to Derrida's critical reading in "Violence and Metaphysics", seeks to describe the ethical relation to the other in a language that would break free from the violence of ontology. Language is here no longer reducible to propositional form. Levinas makes a distinction between the Saying and the Said, which could be seen as somewhat analogous to Blanchot's early distinction between two sides of language in "Literature and the Right to Death". The difference between the Saying (*Dire*) and the Said (*le Dit*) corresponds to a difference between ethical language and the logical construction of identity, or the distinction "between the kind of speech that foregrounds the relation to its addressee, and a denotative speaking that absorbs alterity into thematization".[648] The goal of Levinas is to pass discursively to what is other than being, even if, as Jill Robbins interprets, "such effort always risks falling into a being otherwise, that is, into a modality of being".[649]

In *Otherwise than Being* the intention of Levinas's ethics is to be something other than Heidegger's ontology, which according to him fails to do justice to the otherness of the Other. Whereas Heidegger's primal question concerned our possibility to remain open with regards to the openness of Being, Levinas seeks a way to encounter the other beyond the metaphysical vocabulary of ontology.

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[647] Levinas 1967, 156; 1978, 106.
[648] Robbins 1999, xiv.
[649] Robbins 1999, xiv.

Derrida, especially in his later essays on Levinas, focuses on a certain syntax that permits Levinas to say "the otherwise than being" and to protect its ontological insecurity. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas asks: "Is it necessary and is it possible that the saying on the other side be thematized, that is, manifest itself, that it enter into a proposition and a book?" And he answers: "It is necessary. The responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said. The surprising saying which is a responsibility for another is against 'the winds and tides' of being, is an interruption of essence, a disinterestedness imposed with a good violence".[650] This saying must be fixed as a philosophy that "makes this astonishing adventure (…) intelligible".[651] In Levinas's "good violence" one can hear an allusion not only to Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" but also to Blanchot's idea of language as our only "hope".

As Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conersation,* writing is "not yet a gaze", which means also that it is "otherwise than seeing": for Blanchot, the anonymous consciousness of language, its way to be "consciousness without anyone being conscious" which means that it is not tied to a singular meaning giving consciousness, makes of writing something other than "seeing", if seeing is defined as objectifying and knowing in the presence of an object. Language as neutrality is Blanchot's answer to the question Derrida posed in "Violence and Metaphysics": If language as light is violence of the day, and if non-language as silence is the realm of the night and of the insignificant, would it be possible to imagine language that would remain outside this metaphysical opposition? For Blanchot, writing as neutrality is not pure visibility or invisibility, not pure seeing or non-seeing, but is beyond these metaphysical opposites.

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[650] Levinas 1974, 75; 1991, 43.
[651] Levinas 1974 75; 1991, 44.

Language as the Other

In her study *L'être et le neutre à partir de Maurice Blanchot*, Marlène
Zarader claims that Blanchot ends up, with his concept of "the
neutral" to "think of the impossible". In Zarader's analysis, Blanchot
proceeds in *The Infinite Conversation* from literature to thinking.
Before this, exteriority had, in Blanchot's work, been "under the
shelter of literature". From now on, the poet who "lives in language"
finds from language "a shelter" for his experiences. For Zarader,
Blanchot's defence of exteriority remains contradictory: according to
her analysis, Blanchot claims to "think" of that which by definition
cannot be thought ("*penser le interdit*"), to name that which cannot be
named, and to say something of the "unsayable". As Zarader reminds
us, if exteriority is something that remains beyond all knowledge and
vision and shatters the power of a conscious subject, we should not be
able to think of it. For Zarader, "Blanchot's lesson" is that one must
"be faithful" to the experience of the night, since only by being "a
guardian" of his experience does a poet remain faithful to the
experience of the other, which Blanchot names the experience of the
neutre.

Although I am in agreement with Zarader's interpretation,
according to which the unnameable in Blanchot is the other which can
only be encountered in language, I disagree with her claim that
Blanchot would prepare us to think of the other with his concept of the
neuter. In Blanchot, writing does not seek to be thinking about
anything, if by thinking we mean an act which has an object existing
prior to this act (the night, for instance) or an object which should be
attained during this act (the experience of the other night in
literature).[652] Although I agree with Zarader's interpretation according
to which Blanchot asks if it is possible to remain faithful to the
experience of exteriority and at the same time avoid transforming this
experience to a figure of the mind, I disagree with her claim that

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[652] SP 169.

Blanchot would, from *The Infinite Conversation* onwards, think of this experience using the concept of the neuter. In his practice of writing Blanchot does not end in naming the other, as Zarader claims; instead he creates a "heteronomic" style of writing that does not lean against the representative notion of language, and that understands language as the space of alterity.

I am not proposing that with his concept of the neuter Blanchot would oppose literature to thinking and to philosophy: as I will claim, for Blanchot, writing as neutrality challenges all metaphysical oppositions, and among them is unquestionably the opposition between thinking/non-thinking, seeing/non-seeing. As Blanchot writes, with the neutral voice the "reign of circumspect consciousness […] has been subtly shaken, without, of course, coming to en end."[653] As I interpret it, henceforth it is no longer a question of seeing, or of not-seeing, but of writing otherwise than seeing.

In opposition to Zarader, I have claimed that Blanchot does not name the other, although he speaks of language as neutral, as image, as unworking, and as the third. For Blanchot, it is not the written (or "the Said", *le Dit*, as Levinas would say) but rather that which has been left unwritten, that is decisive in the encounter with the textual other. For Blanchot, the ambiguity of literary language is not something that could be comprehended by returning it to some origin, i.e., the writer or the reader. This is also what Derrida notes in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics". In analysing Levinas's way to determine the other, Derrida refers to Blanchot's disapproval of Levinas's theological vocabulary in defining the other, and thus implicitly to Blanchot's way of leaving the other without definition. He then asks: "Independent of its 'theological context' […] does not this entire discourse collapse?"[654] Isn't it impossible to think of the other without a specific context?

My central claim has been that for Blanchot the other can be spoken of only as exteriority and through exteriority; language does

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[653] IC 384.
[654] WAD 103.

not only "express" exteriority or "name" it after the experience of exteriority is over, but language is this exteriority. The question in Blanchot is thus not of the other of negative theology. If we define negative theology the way Derrida does in his essay "How to avoid speaking: denials", it is not possible to situate Blanchot's work under the loose heading of negative theology: we cannot find in his thinking the presupposition of the "hyperessentiality" of God, nor the promise of the immediacy of the mystical, silent union with the unspeakable (that one finds at work for example in Dionysius and in Meister Eckhart).[655] Blanchot does not ask what is or is not beyond knowledge and language, but what and where is the limit of experience or how is this limit expressed in the "limit-experience" of literature.

For Blanchot, the condition of writing is absence, the trace of the absent other, which every act of writing repeats. This structure of repetition, or the "structure of trace", as Derrida calls it, is also the possibility of an experience of finitude, or of an experience in general.[656] We can only desire someone or something that we do not possess. If there is a link between negative theology and Blanchot it is this essential absence, rather than the supposed hyperessentiality of which nothing can be said. As Derrida writes: "Perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy or the – at least apparent – multiplicity of addresses, initiation. If there were a pure experience of prayer, would one need religion and affirmative or negative theologies? Would one need a supplement of prayer?"[657]

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[655] Derrida 1996, 8-9. As Timothy Clark notes, the "beyond being" of negative theology "does not break with being but is, in the words of Meister Eckhart, 'hyperessential being' (*überwesendes Wesen*). So understood, the beyond *of* being still belongs to being" (Taylor 1990, 205). Clark continues that "Negative philosophers and theologians from Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysus to Nicholas of Cusa and Jocab Boehme anticipate the conclusion that forms the foundation of Hegel's entire System: being and nothing are One. In the final analysis (and for Hegel and his precursors the analysis is never interminable), difference gives way to identity – even when identity and difference are understood dialectically" (Taylor 1990, 205.
[656] Derrida 1996, 29.
[657] Derrida 1996, 62.

The presence (silent union with the divine) is excluded from writing from the beginning, which is the paradox of language: our only possibility of approaching the absent, of reliving it, is to represent it in language which is a medium based on absence. For Blanchot, the nameless alterity is not something transcendental, but immanent in language itself. The movement of writing is without a controlling subjectivity, the presence of an author, be it God or the writer of the text. It is a nameless alterity,[658] which Blanchot calls "neutrality".[659]

In his article "How to do Nothing with Words", in pondering the possibility of a third way to think of language which would remain beyond both its "constative" and "performative" function, Mark C. Taylor proposes that we should call this third possibility "parapraxis". Language as parapraxis is drawn toward nothing, which however is not the nothing of negative theology. Taylor explains: "While negative theologians tend to regard nothing as the binary or dialectical opposite of being, the atheologian interprets nothing as neither being nor nonbeing. Parapraxis, therefore, is no more positive than negative, no more assertion than negation."[660] As Taylor suggests, "for the atheologian, the question that repeatedly returns is: How to do nothing with words?"[661]

As I proposed at the beginning of this study, for Blanchot, too, the question is how to speak without saying anything, or without revealing anything. For Blanchot, the task of literary language is not to ask "how to do things with words" but to ask "how to speak without saying anything", or how to do nothing with words. In Blanchot, however, as in Derrida, it is eventually not possible to avoid speaking, because, as Derrida writes, "Language has started without us, is us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will

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[658] Hill 1997, 160.
[659] As Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* concludes, "Let us leave aside God – the name is too imposing" (IC 59).
[660] Taylor 1990, 225.
[661] Taylor 1990, 206.

have been necessary, to speak."[662] It is not possible to avoid speaking of God, either, since "every negation of God (that is to say, affirmation of the absence of God) is still always a discourse that speaks of and to God in God's absence."[663] Common to both atheistic and theological discourse is the impossibility of freeing the Other from the One: "The presence of man excludes – because it includes it – all presence that is radically other,[664] and: "For God can very well be the Other and the Wholly Other, but he remains ever and always the unity of the Unique."[665]

However, as Blanchot suggests, poetic discourse, instead, is in relation to the neutral, "without reference to the Same, without reference to the One."[666] As he writes in "Atheism and Writing. Humanism and the Cry", "Let us now attempt to ask of discourse what would happen to it if it were possible for it to break free of the domination exercised by the theological, be it the humanized form of atheism. It may well come down by asking whether to write is not, from the start and before anything else, to interrupt what has not ceased to reach us in light; to ask as well if writing is not, always from the start and before all else, to hold oneself, by way of this interruption, in relation with the Neutral (or in a neutral relation): without reference to the Same, without reference to the One, outside everything visible and everything invisible." For Blanchot, the man of the atheistic discourse is only "a pseudonym of God who dies in order to be reborn in his creature."[667] Humanism calls up God in human form in order that he may construct the world. "To meddle with man is to meddle with God."[668] True atheism, instead, requires excluding any response in the first person: "The ego, in its autonomy, secures and constitutes itself by way of the unmitigated theological

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[662] Derrida 1996, 29.
[663] IC 253.
[664] IC 253.
[665] IC 256.
[666] IC 256.
[667] IC 248.
[668] IC 248.

project."[669] "As long as knowledge requires unity and light we speak of God even when we pretend to speak of man. [...] where there is man with his divine attributes – consciousness in the first person, the transparency of light, a speech that sees and says meaning, a speaking gaze that reads it – there the theological has already been preserved."[670] "God is there as a sign and as the future each time the same categories that have served in thinking of the divine logos, be they profaned, are turned over to the understanding of man at the same time they are entrusted to history."[671] The absence of a controlling subjectivity differentiates the poetic discourse not only from theological but also from atheistic discourse. As Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* writes, when engaged "in the experience of the non-manifest or the unknown (understood as neutral)" writing entails a rupture with all present consciousness.[672] It is the neutrality of poetic language rather than the denial or avoidance of speaking that differentiates it both from negative theology and atheism.

As was discussed in the Introduction of this study, in Derrida's essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics", Blanchot's work is not analysed, except for two passing references to his essays on Levinas. How, then, is Blanchot present in Derrida's famous essay? In outlining the problems leading to Levinas's way to determine the other, Derrida remarks that Blanchot leaves the other without determination. Derrida also refers to Blanchot's disapproval of Levinas's theological vocabulary in defining the other. He then continues by asking a rhetorical question: Isn't it impossible to think of the other without a specific context. "Independent of its 'theological context' [...] does not this entire discourse collapse?"[673] Isn't it impossible to approach the other, if we don't define the other somehow?

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[669] IC 252.
[670] IC 253.
[671] IC 248.
[672] IC 261.
[673] Derrida 1978, 103.

If I should name two constants in Blanchot's thinking, these would be his idea of language as violence, and his idea of language as our only way to approach the other, to approach the impossible, that which language – based on the power to name and to negate – excludes and forgets. What is of primal importance for Blanchot is to reach for language that would leave such concepts as "other", "impossible", and "the unnameable" without a determination. In Blanchot's view, we can approach the other only by leaving the question of the other unanswered.[674]

Marlène Zarader makes the same claim in her study on Blanchot: she proposes that by refusing to define the other as the personal other Blanchot fails to have ethics. She asks: If Blanchot does not define the other as the personal other, but understands otherness rather as neutrality that escapes all definition, how can Blanchot anymore speak of the other in an ethical sense?[675] As I argue, not naming the other is precisely the cornerstone of Blanchot's ethics. Since language is for him both the structure of alterity (as it was for Heidegger) as well as a way to be in contact with the other (as it is for Levinas), from this it follows that the other cannot eventually be named. Since language is otherness and since there is not – as Heidegger already underlined – "a name for language", we cannot ultimately answer the question "Who is the Other", as Blanchot concludes in *The Infinite Conversation*.[676]

As I have suggested, Blanchot follows Levinas in relating the problematic of seeing to violence and thus to ethics. For Levinas,

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[674] According to Timothy Clark, the notion of "the other" opposes the idea, foundational to philosophy in its traditional sense, that the real would be always knowable and rational. "The 'other', provisionally speaking, is what knowledge concerns itself with once the disjunction between being and knowledge is acknowledged" (Clark 1992, 10). In my view, Blanchot's way to understand the other as that which comes to us with language but is at the same time beyond language, is in line with Derrida's notion of the other. According to Derrida, deconstruction searches for "that in language that is the other of language". Timothy Clark observes that "Heidegger provides the vocabulary within which Derrida's 'other' can be sketched" (Clark 1992, 10). As Clark writes, for Derrida "The mode of being of language is a problem that opens upon the 'other' and the question of being in general" (Clark 1992, 15).
[675] Zarader 2001, 238.
[676] IC 101.

however, the most central question is that of ethics, to which all other questions are subordinated, whereas for Blanchot all questions – including the question of the other – derive from the question of language. This is the primal difference between them, the difference that remains even in their later writings, despite Levinas's effort to protect the ontological insecurity of the other in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas approaches another human being as the absolutely other, in his/her transcendence or exteriority. His answer to the pressing question, "how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into a relationship with another without immediately divesting it of its alterity", is thus an attempt to think of both the exteriority of transcendence and the other as a human being.[677] For Levinas, the notion of exteriority equals the notion of transcendence, whereas for Blanchot exteriority is characterized by its immanence; for Levinas, exteriority is first of all the exteriority of God, whereas for Blanchot exteriority is immanent and impersonal.

As Derrida also observes in "Violence and Metaphysics", the disagreement between Levinas and Blanchot is based on Blanchot's sceptical view of the theological vocabulary of Levinas's ethics. Derrida's remark is more pertinent than Levinas's, who claims that Blanchot, by privileging language, "abstains from ethical preoccupations".[678] Language becomes an ethical problem for Blanchot already in its ability to "kill" its object – in its power to deny and annihilate the "existence" of the "existent". For Blanchot, the most essential question concerning our comprehension of language is how to fulfil our ethical responsibility as human beings and answer to the other, if all language by its essence is violence of light and consciousness. As Derrida writes in "Violence and Metaphysics" (it seems as if he was summarizing the dialogue between Levinas and Blanchot without mentioning Blanchot's name): "How to think of the other, if the other can be spoken of only as exteriority and *through*

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[677] TI 38.
[678] Levinas 1996, 137.

exteriority, that is, nonalterity?"[679] In his later work, Blanchot's interest as a writer and as a philosopher is to formulate a notion of a literary community that, as ethical, would not base itself on the vocabulary of light and vision.

Zarader claims that Blanchot turns from the exteriority of language ("*alterité*") in his "earlier" works to the exteriority of the other human being ("*autrui entendu comme mon prochain*") in his "later" works.[680] In her analysis, Blanchot turns from language defined as exteriority to the exteriority of another person only in his essays in and after *The Infinite Conversation*, in discussing Levinas's definition of the other in *The Infinite Conversation*. According to her reading, Blanchot adopts from Levinas the idea of the other as the ethical other, i.e., as another human being.[681] Zarader claims further that Blanchot is incapable of justifying this turning from the otherness of language (ontology) to the otherness of the other human being (ethics).[682]

I oppose Zarader's claim concerning the unjustified place of the ethical other in Blanchot's thinking. Language has an ethical status for Blanchot from the beginning, although he does not privilege ethics as a "first philosophy", as Levinas does. With its capability to create loss and absence, language carries with itself the force of negativity and death. Blanchot proposes, however, that we can have access to the other only because we are human beings who are always already tied to communicating with language. There is the other, and communication exists, only because of this linguistic relation to the other. It is only in language as the *otherness as such* that we can approach the other.

In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot also suggests that we should stop asking "who is the other", since this is a question for which we cannot, after all, have an ethical answer (the other as truly other cannot be defined); instead, we should ask "what is the human

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[679] Derrida 1978, 116.
[680] Zarader 2001, 235.
[681] Zarader 2001, 232.
[682] Zarader 2001, 235.

community"; i.e., how should the notion of community be defined – is there an ethical definition of community?[683] Can we think of community as the community of those who "have nothing in common"? In his later work Blanchot turns from the question of the other and from the question of writing – questions which saturate the essays of *The Infinite Conversation* – to the question concerning the meaning of community. For the later Blanchot, the question is whether there is an ethical definition of community, and if it would it be possible to think of a non-visual community, i.e., a community that would not be built on visual interaction. What would a community without the violence of light be? Blanchot's notion of a "textual community" understood as a community of readers challenges the idea of community based on the dominance of vision.[684]

Blanchot's fictional stories, as well, can be read as efforts to reach for something which cannot appear as such, and which remains beyond our ability to conceptualize. The task of literary language, says Blanchot, is not to ask "how to do things with words" (which was Austin's question) but to ask "how to speak without saying anything", or how to do nothing with words. Although Blanchot defines language as otherness, as exteriority, he at the same time emphasizes that language is our only way to communicate with the other and to the other. The crucial question Blanchot poses is how to approach the other without doing violence to the otherness of the other, and this, as I claim, happens by defining language as, not only "otherwise than being" but also "otherwise than seeing".

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[683] IC 101.
[684] See *La Communauté inavouable* (1983), on the problem of community.

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Abbreviations

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A   *L'Amitié*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971.

AC   *Après-coup, precede par le ressassement eternal.* Paris: Èditions de minuit, 1983.

AM   *L'arrêt de mort* 1948. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948.

AMV   *Au moment voulu*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1951.

AO   *L'attente, l'oubli*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.

BR   *The Blanchot Reader*. Ed. Michael Holland. London: Basil Blackwell, 1995.

BC   *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2003.

CAP   *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1953.

CI   *La communauté inavouable*. Paris: Èditions de minuit, 1983.

DH   *Le dernier homme*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1953.

DM   *Le dernier mot*. Paris: Editions de la revue Fontaine, 1948.

DS   *Death Sentence*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1978.

ED   *L'écriture du désastre*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1980.

EI   *L'entretien infini*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969.

EL   *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955.

F   *Friendship*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford California: Stanford California Press, 1997.

FJ *La folie du jour*. Montpelier: Fata Morgana, 1973 (2002).

FX *Faux pas.* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943.

GO *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981.

IC *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

ID *The Instant of My Death*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2000.

IM *L'Instant de ma mort*. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1994.

LM *The Last Man*. Trans. Lydia Davis. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

LS *Lautréamont et Sade*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1963.

LV *Le Livre à venir*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1959.

MD *The Madness of the Day.* Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1985.

NCC "Notre compagne clandestine." *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Françoise Laruelle. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980.

OW *The One Who Was Standing apart from me*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1993.

PD *Le pas au-delà.* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971.

PF *La Part du Feu*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949.

SL *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1982.

SNB *The Step Not Beyond*. Trans. Lycette Nelson. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992.

TH *Le très-haut*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948.

TOI *Thomas l'Obscur. Roman.* Sixième edition. Paris: Gallimard, 1941.

TOII *Thomas l'Obscur. Nouvelle version*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1950.

TTO   *Thomas the Obscure*. Trans. Robert Lamberton. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1973.

UC   *The Unavowable Community.* Trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y., 1988).

VC   *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and "After the Fact."* Trans. Paul Auster. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1985.

WD   *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

WF   *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford University Press. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

WTC   *When the Time Comes*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1977.

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MP   *Margins of Philosophy.* Harvester Wheatsheaf: Toronto, Unversity of Chicago, 1982.

WAD   *Writing and Difference*. Translated, with an Introduction and Additional Notes, by Alan Bass. Chicago: Routledge, 1978.

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BPP   *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

BT   *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macqarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980 (1962).

BW   *Basic Writings*. Revised and expanded edition. Ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 1993.

EGT   *Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi. Introduction by David Farrell Krell, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.

GA   *Gesamtsausgabe*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 1977.

IM   *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. *New York: Doubleday, 1961.*

N IV   *Nietzsche*. 2 vols. Pfullingen: Neske. Trans. by David Farrell Krell under the title Nietzsche. 4 vols. in 2. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

SZ   *Sein und Zeit*. Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1941.

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