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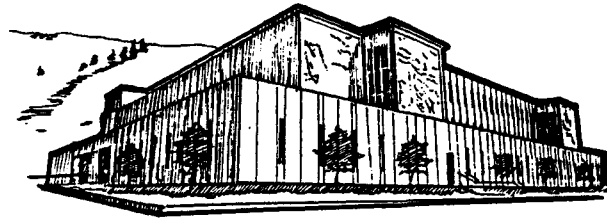
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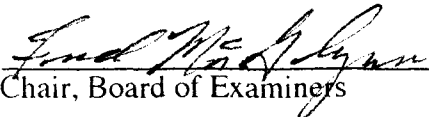
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Witnessing The Exterior
Blanchot and the Impossibility of Writing

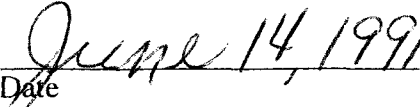
By
Philip John Maloney
B.A., University of Montana, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
University of Montana
1991

Approved by


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Maloney, Philip J., M.A., June 1991

Philosophy

Witnessing The Exterior: Blanchot and the Impossibility of Writing (65 pages)

Director: Fred McGlynn *F. Mc*

This paper examines two of Maurice Blanchot's theoretical works, The Space of Literature and The Writing of the Disaster. Blanchot has positioned himself within the ongoing critique of essentialism, and it is this paper's purpose to take up with these work's from the position of this critique and evaluate the extent to which he maintains the exteriority which the critique demands.

Both of these work's are meditations on writing, and Blanchot, as a writer, is concerned with describing the author's relationship with the work. As this paper demonstrates, it is a relationship of passivity, a relationship in which the author's concern for the work's exteriority renders her powerless. Though this relationship appears faithful to the demands of this critique, it is just this concern for the work, concern which necessitates that the writer write, which problematizes Blanchot's relationship to this exteriority. It is a problematicization, however, in which Blanchot finds the power to fulfill the demands which he thinks this exteriority, thought by him as disaster, commands.

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Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space
where our subject slips away, the negative where
all identity is lost...

Roland Barthes

With this statement, Barthes marks the point of separation between modern literature and classical or romantic literature: the rejection of interiority. Literature, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's *Ulysses*, has been defined as the exploration/revelation of man's being; as Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, put it, "...poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars."¹ In this classical sense, literature, like philosophy, is both a source of, and a means to, Truth; reason may be somewhat faulty, divine aid may have to be sought, we may perhaps have to be aware and watchful for some affective reservoir, but human actions, human passions, all those things which mask, or for some are, a human's being, are penetrable by the light of the writer's art. This penetrating power, common to literature and philosophy, is most potent when it is turned on itself: it is the power of extreme interiorization which, at the same time, allows literature to escape itself, to grasp its own being in this flight. "Great Literature" is marked by this doubled movement of interiority and transcendence -- the move from the fullness of

¹Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Pt. II, Ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1451b.

beings to the void of Being, from being, thought in its simple presence to the world, as Truth, to thinking this presence as difference, to a difference which:

...in itself is self-related difference; as such, it is the negativity of itself, the difference not of another, but of itself from itself; it is not itself but its other. But that which is different from difference is identity. Difference, therefore, is itself and identity.²

This is, of course, a suspicious movement; writers and thinkers alike have questioned the presumptions of a thought which claims to annul all differences and bring everything, even itself, into its penetrating gaze. Much of this suspicion has centered around the subject, possessor, at least since Descartes, of what were, at one time, qualities of the divine: pure presence and certitude, for example. In philosophy, the subject became the source of truth, ontology and metaphysics were conflated; it was no longer divine light, but the light of reason which penetrated to the heart of being. In literature, the author held the privileged position; she was the transcended transcending, both the creator of and created truth; the void of Being was not empty -- it was there that the author resided. It is in

²G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, Trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1969) p. 417. What I am indicating here is the sense in which the question of Being, in the Western intellectual tradition, has shifted from one of simple unity to one in which the very possibility of this unity has been predicated upon difference -- the notion that, when fully exfoliated, Being is, in fact, an absence, a gap.

opposition to this tradition, with its privileging of the author, that Barthes is pointing when he speaks of the subject slipping away; his "neutral, composite, oblique space" rejects the transcending interiority of the author, rejects her power. Barthes gives a first indication of the exteriority which is modern literature's rejection of interiority -- a literature from which the subject is excluded, which recognizes a fundamental difference between the transcendence of language and the identity, in interiority, of the author/self: a language, then, which is no longer discourse, no longer communication, but a spreading forth of pure exteriority. We must be cautious, however; Hegel has warned us of the dangers of strict oppositions, of their tendency to hide or enable a deeper unity. We must not think of exteriority as the binary opposite of interiority; in this sense, the exterior, like Hegel's difference, would merely be disguised, potential, unity. Rather, we must begin to think of an outside without an inside, an exteriority which is "the outside 'preceding' every interior".³ Modern literature is not the ceaseless exploration of language as language, the constant delving into the being of language, but language fleeing from itself -- a passage to the exterior, a passage which reveals, not being, but a gap. This is a language without a subject, a transcendence without an interior.

Still, this language of the exterior, and the writing which witnesses it, is not without its dangers; both interiority and exteriority have a certain gravity -- a certain irresistibility. It is this power of the tradition which

³Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) p. 625. Translated in Mark C. Taylor, *Alterity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.) p. 235. I am heavily indebted to this excellent book.

writers and thinkers have found so suspicious -- it is also this power which the witnesses of the exterior have found difficult to escape. The structuralism of Barthes, suspicious as it was of interiority, failed to completely escape its gravity. Though, as he says, "It is hardly possible any longer to conceive of literature as an art that abandons all further relation with language the moment it has used it as an instrument to express ideas, passion or beauty," he remains committed to the idea that language, through its own working, reveals itself as its being as a possibility, "...does not literature, particularly today, make a language of the very conditions of language?"⁴ This self-consciousness, which is one of the key characteristics of modernity in art as well as philosophy, indicates the extent to which, though critical of classical thought, Barthes cannot evade the tradition of interiority. The thought of at least the past one hundred years can be read as the history of the attempt to escape the interiorizing influences of the metaphysical tradition; attempts which, for the most part, failed, and continue, necessarily to fail. For, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a language faithful to exteriority -- a burden which the writer feels sharply. The writer works with a language which has, at its roots, the tradition of interiority -- a language which the writer of the exterior must allow to escape itself; a language which, "...seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the same and the one (other names for the light of Being)..."⁵ Anyone who works with language (at least the

⁴Roland Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narratives" in *Image - Music - Text*, Trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) p. 85.

⁵Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," from *Writing and Difference*, Trans. by

languages of the West) must unavoidably work with the tradition of interiority; it is this inescapable pervasiveness which is the first danger the interior poses to exteriority.

There is more to the problem, however, than the metaphysical roots of language; the gravity of the interior extends beyond words to the forms that these words take. There is a tendency to make of exteriority merely a disguised interiority -- to cast the exterior in terms of the body, the will and presence to the other. A purely reflective discourse, for example, runs this risk of re-interiorization; reflection has always been a mode of consciousness, a mode of the interior. This is particularly true of fiction, which, with its cast of ready made allusions and descriptive tools, makes of exteriority merely another mode of subjectivity. This is true, as well, of the book, which, with its beginning and its end, with its ordered presentation, implies completion, systematicity and encirclement:

This is the circular requirement. Being deploys itself as movement turning in a circle and this movement goes from the most interior to the most exterior, from undeveloped interiority to exteriorization that alienates it and from this alienation that externalizes it until plenitude is attained and re-interiorized.⁶

Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 83.

⁶Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, p. 19. In Taylor, p. 222.

The gravity of the book, its deadly seriousness, is the gravity of the interior; the inescapably metaphysical character of the word continues in the expressive forms of language. We have not, however, reached a limit; the danger to the witnessing of the exterior does not end with the dominating tendencies of the metaphysics of interiority.

For, exteriority has its own gravity, a certain tendency towards the interior. There is a certain attractive seriousness to exteriority, as well as a seductive playfulness, both of which can lead to an ecstatic re-interiorization on the presence of this absence:

To write is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens...it is to stay in touch with language, in language, with the absolute milieu where the thing becomes image again, where the image, instead of alluding to some particular feature, becomes an allusion to the featureless, and instead of a form drawn upon absence, becomes the formless presence of this absence...⁷

Blanchot describes a response to the gravity of the interior, the gravity of an image which is supposed to re-present truth to the reader; he also indicates the dangers which this response runs. One of these is the playfulness which the transparency of the image encourages. It is not playfulness in itself which is the danger, it is a certain inactive playfulness

⁷Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p. 33.

which is the only answer to the seriousness of the metaphysical; however, fascination with the absence of exteriority invites a certain non-productivity -- not an inactivity but a careless circulation, a pushing of exteriority to its limits. There is a sense in which this careless flirtation with the absence of this absence can collapse upon itself. Deleuze and Guattari describe the movement to the exterior, away from the centeredness of the interior, as "deterritorialization:"

...what happens under conditions of precocious or extremely sudden deterritorialization...the machine then produces "individual" group effects spinning in circles, as in the case of chaffinches that have been isolated too early, whose impoverished, simplified song expresses nothing more than the resonance of the black hole in which they are trapped.⁸

Absence attracts us, daring us to try to fill it with the empty excrescence of form, an overabundance of signification. It is this tendency towards extreme, destructive deterritorialization, this rush outwards which ends by collapsing inwards, which is the result of this careless playfulness.

Exteriority shimmers; its weightlessness beckoned Sade and Bataille, Artaud and Robbe-Grillet, despisers all of the seriousness of traditional thought. Yet, the transcendence of language as pure exteriority has its own

⁸Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) p. 334.

seriousness; a seriousness necessary to avoid the re-interiorization which the ecstasy of absence can provoke as well as a seriousness which all too much resembles the seriousness of the tradition. The image, in its position as the marker of absence, makes demands of us. This is the experience of the need to write which, while perhaps recognizing that activity is a mode of interiority, cannot but forget the necessary inactivity of the exterior. There is a tendency to re-interiorize on the absence of the exterior which springs not from carelessness but from *Le souci de l'oeuvre* :

Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to *silence* if one wants, at last, to be heard.⁹

There is a certain violence at work in the need to write, an unceasing demand and an irresistible affirmation -- an impotence which is, at the same time, powerful and transgressive. It is this need to be heard, this seriousness, which poses the gravest danger to the witnessing of the exterior.

It is in spite of these dangers, and perhaps because of them, that Maurice Blanchot writes. His work, benefiting from the doubled

⁹Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 41.

movement of fiction and theory while refusing to distinguish sharply between the two, is the attempt to witness this exteriority, an attempt which is characterized by what Levinas has described as "a language of pure transcendence." He is a writer keenly aware of the dangers of this witnessing; in fact, he makes of this danger the possibility of writing. It is thus, at this site of 'pure transcendence,' that both the movement to and the danger of the exterior are most evident. This paper proposes to examine two of Blanchot's theoretical works, *The Space of Literature* and *The Writing of the Disaster*, taking up with these works at the places crucial to the development of Blanchot's "thought of the outside," and demonstrating, while attempting to remain faithful to the needs of the outside, that it is at these places of greatest exteriority that Blanchot's work necessarily¹⁰ re-interiorizes itself. This is not to privilege the theoretical expression of Blanchot's thought (a privileging which Blanchot himself prevents with his convergence of literature and theory), however, the vast, unruly body of Blanchot's work, as well as the scope of this project, necessitate that I limit it myself in some way.

¹⁰As will become more explicit, this is the necessity of "the one who needs to write."

I

The image, capable of negating nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness on us. The image is light, and nothingness is immensely heavy. The image shines and nothingness is the diffuse thickness where nothing reveals itself. The image is the crack, the mark of this black sun, the tear {*déchirure* }, which, under the appearance of the dazzling burst {*éclat* }, gives us the negative of the inexhaustible negative depth. That is why the image seems so profound and so empty, so threatening and so attractive, always rich in more senses that we lend it, and also poor, void and silent, because in it advances this dark impotence, deprived of mastery, which is that of death as recommencement.¹¹

It is to avoid the power of the image to negate absence, a power which we saw in the discussion of language's metaphysical character and in the false exteriority of reflective narrative, that Blanchot turns to the outside. A turning away from the certitude of the interior, to the outside where language, fleeing from itself, runs into itself at the limits of its possibility. This collision marks the point, not of a Hegelian self-contradiction, with its attendant *Aufhebung*, but of the void. It is to this void that language moves, negating itself, casting itself outside of itself into the silence of the outside. Not the silence of the death camps, but the silence of what cannot be silenced; not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but the burst

¹¹Blanchot, *L'Amitie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) Trans. by Taylor in *Altarity*, p. 229.

which, with its empty light, effaces; not the self in its constant quest for unity, but the impotence of the void; not language, then, revealing itself in its own light, as Truth, but the 'Errant Word' which is a "language which makes nothing heard."¹² Blanchot's work speaks to the void created by language's movement outside of itself; speaks to, while speaking outside of, this absence. The discourse formed by this ceaseless undoing has no truth, no center; yet, as discourse that is always outside of what it says, this work incessantly moves to the ambiguous hollowness of its undoing as origin — language about the outside of all language. It is a discourse, then, of attentiveness to what in language already exists, has already been said; an attentiveness not to what is being said, but to the void circulating between words, to the murmur that is its incessant self-undoing.

Blanchot's theoretical work is this attentiveness. In both *The Space of Literature* and *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot asks the question: "What is it about the void, about 'the inexhaustible negative depth' of language, about the disaster, that moves, and in a sense compels, a person to write?" He asks the question without answering it, asks it in such a way, and for the purpose of making it such, that it cannot be answered. There is a difference between these two books, however, in the way that Blanchot fails to answer the question; a difference which marks the space of Blanchot's theoretical meditations. *The Space of Literature* is perhaps the most bookish of Blanchot's texts; Blanchot goes so far as to bow to the necessity of the book, and its ever-accompanying methodological discourse,

¹²Blanchot, *Space*, p. 51.

by beginning it with a brief prefatory remark indicating its thematic center, while, at the same time, denying this center any real presence.¹³ This is not, of course, to say that *The Space of Literature* falls easily prey to the obscene attraction of interiority; on the contrary, Blanchot's meditations here, as in the fictional and critical work which preceded it, are necessarily sensitive to the demands of witnessing exteriority. However, as Ann Smock, in her introduction to her translation of *The Space of Literature* indicates, though Blanchot's object of concern necessitates unconcern, an inactivity (a necessity which the work in no way fails,) "...*L'Espace littéraire* retains plenty of the outward signs of straightforward discussion."¹⁴ This straightforwardness takes the form of a certain definitiveness toward the non-answering of the work's central questions, all of which circulate around the fundamental demand of the rupture that is language. Blanchot, of course, does not presume to answer these questions; however, he does move purposefully to the site of their final incomprehensibility, presuming a certain insightful, if not definitive, position on its horizon.

This definitiveness disappears in *The Writing of the Disaster*, to be replaced by a text whose fractured, aphoristic form indicates the probable impossibility, but at least problematicity, of any approach, beside

¹³The preface, of course, is an indication of both the power and the failure of interiority and the Book. The preface, starting on the outside of the text, is reappropriated by the text as its surplus negativity; a re-appropriation which always fails. (cf. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (University of Chicago Press, 1981) and *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)).

¹⁴*Space*, p. 5.

language's itself, to the void. In this work, the writing, fractured, tortured, bent beyond itself, attempts to show, rather than to describe, language's movement outside. Thus, *The Writing of the Disaster* marks a confluence in Blanchot's work between the fictional and the theoretical; never fully distinct, the difference now becomes indeterminable. Blanchot takes up the same questions concerning the possibility of writing which were the project of *The Space of Literature* ; yet here, in a distinction which indicates the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and Edmond Jabès, Blanchot shifts his discussion of the void to what he calls 'disaster.' This shift, which will be discussed at greater length later, undermines any attempt at analysis, no matter how indeterminate. All that is left, in the facelessness of the disaster, is writing, a writing which the disaster makes an impossibility, "The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience — it is the limit of writing...the disaster describes."¹⁵ The disaster is the outside of any exteriority; there is no approach to it which the disaster does not render void and silent. This silencing power is not, of course, foreign to the analysis of *The Space of Literature*; however, Blanchot, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, is more acutely aware of the dangers the disaster poses to writing.

It is, however, exactly because of *The Space of Literature's* bookishness, its tendency towards the determinate, that I am concentrating on it; it is here that the gravity of the exterior, and those places where Blanchot's language succumbs to its interiorizing pull, are most evident. In

¹⁵Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln, The University of Nebraska Press, 1986) p. 7.

a sense, the aphoristic style of *The Writing of the Disaster* makes any such concentration impossible; any discussion of the work would be forced to remain as fragmented as the work itself is. This is not, however, to ignore the more careful treatment of the writer's relationship to the void in *The Writing of the Disaster*; here, also, there are moments of re-interiorization. This should come as no surprise; in both works, Blanchot is ultimately concerned, as a writer, to leave space for writing. Unfortunately, though this is an important, even necessary, task, it cannot resist the attraction of the interior. This is not to suggest, however, that I have completed these works — determined their meaning in some way from outside of them. Both works are so densely exterior to their object, so richly transcendent, that they evade any attempt, even their own, to complete them in this way. To read either of these works is to follow it outside of itself into an exteriority from which no critical distance, no privileged insight is possible. Thus, I am limiting myself to discussing only a few concerns of these works; points where Blanchot runs patiently, even joyously, into the limits of his own thought.

Solitude and Inertia The Outside

Solitude is dangerous: it has the power of madness. From the benign ego-mania of the solipsist, to the treacherous, consuming madness of solitary confinement, solitude presents a threat to the integrity of consciousness. Perhaps it is for this reason that Blanchot begins *The Space of Literature* with solitude. He begins not with the agonizing solitude of the prisoner, the deluded solitude of the solipsist, nor even the solitude of the artist, the concentration necessary to the production of a work; but rather, the very solitude of the work itself, its indeterminacy as being, "...the work — the work of art, the literary work — is neither finished nor unfinished: it is."¹⁶ The being of the work, then, is just this expression of its own unfinished, unfinishable existence. In an assertion which evidences the conjunction of Heidegger and Bataille in his thought, Blanchot says that the work works to the extent to which it proclaims this indefiniteness, this terrible, solitary absence — works, then, by not working. This should not surprise us, production has always been a mode of the interior; it is the possibility of rationality, "Reason is bound up with work and the purposeful activity that incarnates its laws."¹⁷ In a meditation on the writer and his relation to the work's exteriority, Blanchot must reject the notion of a fruitful essence of the work, suggesting instead the solitude and

¹⁶*Space*, p. 22.

¹⁷Georges Bataille, *Erotism, Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books 1986) p. 168.

inactivity of the void.

The work has no center, no self, and, likewise, no other; the author belongs to it only in its beginning when it is merely a book, a collection of words, the reader only to the extent that he affirms its solitude, its otherness. This solitude is not, thus, limited to the work, Blanchot points to the work's incomprehensibility to the author, the *Noli Me Legere*, to indicate that this solitude is shared by the writer — not as partners, but as an absence which, when the author recognizes it, commands her. The work, escaping the author in its solitary being, leaves her alone at the beginning, leaves her with nothing left to do but try once again to approach the work's being. This is a solitude which is not mere concentration, but the solitude of belonging, "to the shadow of events, not their reality, to the image, not the object, to what allows words themselves to become images, appearances — not signs, values, the power of truth."¹⁸ Opposed to the being of the work, a being which, as absence, is not a positivity, is the solitude of the writer, a negative, but a negative without a positive. An opposition then, but it is also a connection — not as a sublated difference, but as a solitary relationship to the solitude of language. It is from this relationship between solitudes that Blanchot begins to approach literature's space, the outside.

The solitude of the work, and thus, as it is the work's movement outside which constitutes her solitude, the solitude of the author, reveals itself, for Blanchot, in the author's inability to stop writing; the solitude of

¹⁸*Space*, p. 24.

the beginning, the presence of the work's absence, is the solitude of a ceaseless beginning over. Writing somehow escapes the writer; the authority of the author, the power assigned her by the tradition of interiority to express herself determinately and with certitude — to create value — disappears in the indeterminacy of the work:

What he is to write delivers the one who has to write to an affirmation over which he has no authority, which is itself without substance, which affirms nothing...¹⁹

The work commands us: the artistry of the writer, her command of language and her style, do not give her control over the work; if anything, such attempts at control emphasize, with their necessary incompleteness, their endless 'maybe it would be better if...,' the indeterminacy of the work, and, thus, the incessantness of the writer's task. In the face of the work's empty affirmation, the endless surplus of the work, the author loses the ability to do anything other than surrender to the work's movement. This must not be understood as a surrender to the work as essence, surrender to the work as movement inward to the realm of pure thought; but a realization, with its incessant beginning-over, of the movement outward into indeterminacy, into excess of the work; a movement in the face of which only passivity is possible — a passivity in

¹⁹Ibid., p. 24.

which the presence of the "I" disappears, leaving only the indefiniteness of the third person.

It becomes possible to describe a certain physics of solitude, a time and space of the outside;²⁰ a physics not of closed systems, and not even of the bounded indeterminacy of non-linear systems, but an anti-physics, a physics of the exterior which circulates around, without circumscribing, the work's flight outward. This is not of course to suggest a certain closure to Blanchot's description of the work in its indeterminacy; rather, it is an attempt to examine the paradoxical relations between the solitary work, in its absence, and its activity as a certain affirming presence, a relation which is always already impossible. As part of this non-physics, we can discuss the work in terms of a certain non-temporality, a temporality of disaster.

The movement of the work outside marks the end of time, understood as the condition for the possibility of doing work; the time of time's absence is the time in which nothing is done, in which no work is possible. Yet, this ending of time, an ending which is both a result and the mark of the work's absence, is also the time of the work in its immanence as being, is the time of the work's empty affirmation as that which is only as unfinished and unfinishable — absent. Thus, this absent time indicates the negativity of the work's positivity, the fundamental worklessness of the work's affirmation, the work's being as absence; as well as the positivity of

²⁰I do not want to make too much of this metaphor, which, like all metaphors, is limited to a binary logic. However, such a binarism is suggested by Blanchot's discussion of the problem. This is, in fact, a feature of this work's determinateness.

the work's negativity, the incessantly non-productive re-approach to the work — the work's absence as a certain presence. Though this reversal appears to be a movement of Hegelian relation, a sublating of differences (absence and presence) to a greater unity (absence as presence), it is in fact a rejection of any such dialectical re-interiorization:

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 in it; nor are they reconciled.²¹

There is no sense, then, in which the disastrous time of the work's oscillation between its impossibility-to-work and its incessant working is the time of the work's unity, of its ultimate possibility. The temporality of the disaster is this time of unreconciled contradiction, the time in which the work's absence is as an activity and in which the affirmation of its being is as silence and the void. It is the necessary before of the work: the halting, never begun time of the work's absent presence, the outside.

This absent time is the time of what Blanchot calls "the central point," the non-place where the work, in its ceaseless flight from itself,

²¹*Space*, p. 30.

displays itself as absent; there is also, then, a spatiality of the work's solitude. The space of the work, in this first approximation, is not a space at all, rather, it is the presence of the work, its affirmation, which, as we have seen, is always as absence. The work, then, is a movement between the outside, language in its unfolding, and the always absent world; as well as the movement of the language itself between its absent presence and its presence as absence:

One would like to say that the [work], like the pendulum that marks the time of time's abolition...oscillates marvelously between its presence as language and the absence of things in the world. But this presence is itself oscillating perpetuity: oscillation between the successive unreality of terms that terminate nothing, and the total realization of this movement...²²

The work's space is marked by this ceaseless movement, the incessant immanence of language on the void of the world which is in fact an immanence of nothingness. Constant movement, but no production — interplays of force, but no work. This is inertia; though the central point is "the mark of the black sun, which, under the appearance of the dazzling burst," presents being in its brilliance:

...we must also comprehend and feel that this

²²ibid., p. 45. Additions mine.

point renders the work impossible, because it never permits arrival at the work. It is a region anterior to the beginning where nothing is made of being, and in which nothing is accomplished. It is the depths of being's inertia [*desoeuvrement*].²³

The space of the work's solitude, then, is the space in which the work, as work, becomes impossible. The space of the work — that through which it moves and to which it approaches — is the outside; "the inexhaustible negative depth" which is, at the same absent time, the point where the work, in its flight from itself, finally, fatally, escapes itself into its own disappearance as pure exteriority, and the point where this flight, through its own inertia, ends before it begins. This is, then, the non-space of the work's solitude, the space where the movement to the exterior of the work and the inertia of the work's empty being oscillate endlessly. As of yet, however, what we have, with reservations, called the physics of solitude remains only half articulated; as was noted before, the work has a partner in its solitude.

It is now time to return to the author, waiting patiently at the work's beginning — before even the work's before, before its possibility as impossibility. It would be misleading, however, to attempt to extend the physical metaphor of the work's solitude to make room for the writer; rather, we must begin to consider, with Blanchot, the author's response to this solitude. As we saw, the movement outside of the work leaves the

²³Ibid., p. 46.

writer with nothing but an acquiescence to the work's incessantness. This is not to suggest, however, that the author has no relation to this movement; in fact, the solitude of the work makes certain demands on the writer, makes her into "the one who has to write." The passivity of the author is not a complete inactivity, or rather, it is an inactive, unproductive activity, an activity which, in its sheer excessiveness, makes itself impossible. In one sense, at least, this is obvious; it is the incessant return to the work of the writer, even though limited to the book, to a collection of words, which is the work's possibility. However, there is a certain exertion of power by the author that, with the work, precedes this possibility; even in the incessantness of the work's affirmation, even with the loss of the "I," the author still writes:

To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking — and since it cannot, in order to become its echo I have, in a way, to silence it. I bring to the incessant speech the decisiveness, the authority of my silence.²⁴

For Blanchot, in order to write, in order to stand testament to the work's affirmation, the author needs to make of his silence a certain mastery over the absence of the work. Of course, this is not the mastery of the "I," the domination of the irreducibly other by the self; it is, instead, the mastery of the third person, a mastery possible only in the author's anonymity. The

²⁴Ibid., p. 27.

movement of the work outside leaves the author voiceless, selfless; what is left commands, in silence, for silence — for a ceasing of the incessant in which she who has to write, can write.

The demand of the work in its exteriority, then, is that the writer be this commanding echo, that she use this power to silence what cannot be silenced; what needs to be worked through is that which necessitates the power of the author: the need to write. For Blanchot, the need to write is a certain fascination with the site and the time of the work's absence. It is the outside of the work, the end of time which, in its always before, is the impossibility of any presence, which depersonalizes the author, rendering him selfless and fascinated. The dead time of the work is the time of solitude, the time of the impersonal:

The fact of being alone is my belonging to this dead time which is not my time, or yours, or the time we share in common, but Someone's time...Where I am alone, I am not there; no one is there, but the impersonal is: the outside, as that which prevents, precedes and dissolves the possibility of any personal relation.²⁵

It is to this solitude, the solitude of the absent time which she experiences as the impersonal, that the author turns, fascinated. For it is at that "always then," the disastrous time of the work, that language's inertia reigns, that

²⁵Ibid., p. 31.

words, having the power to make things "arise" at the heart of their absence, also have the power to disappear in it themselves. The "central point" of the work is also, then, a distance, the space of the work's presence as absence; it is this distance which is the possibility of fascination:

Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity...even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance...Fascination is the relation the gaze entertains — a relation which is neutral and impersonal — with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding.²⁶

What fascinates the writer is the doubled attraction of the image, its rich profundity which appears, at the same time, as shining and black, as immediate and limitlessly distant, as presence and the void; fascination, then, with language itself. Yet, as Blanchot points out, fascination is not merely a distant pre-occupation; rather, it "touches [the author] in an immediate proximity" establishing a certain connection, a relation which, though neutral and impersonal, still obscures its own distance — an obscuring which, in the case of the author's fascination with the outside, establishes a connection of demand and response which silences language, which, rendering the work impossible, ceaselessly reinforces itself.

This relation bears attention, for it is this circle of absence and

²⁶Ibid., p.33. Additions mine.

fascination which is both the possibility and the gravity of writing. For Blanchot, the absence of the work, an absence which, importantly as we shall see, he links with death, is that which brings the writer to write. It is not from some naïveté concerning her ability to bridge the gap of Being, to give some form to absence, that the writer writes; rather, it is just the depth of this gap, its inexhaustibility, which draws the writer forth. The writer writes only to the extent that she "already belongs to the work's requirements,"²⁷ already belongs to the disastrous time and space of the work. This already belonging is fascination, a fascination which draws the author ever back to the beginning of the work; an incessant return which, in its impossibility, emphasizes the work's absence. Thus we see the depth of the work's demand, and the author's passive reinforcement of it.

Fascinated with the absence of the work, drawn by the demand of this absence, the author approaches the work, an approach which the work's absence renders impossible. Yet, this very impossibility merely emphasizes the demand, making the return of the writer to the work's beginning ever more necessary, while, at the same time, making it ever more impossible. At this point, however, I can do nothing more than sketch this circle; I will return to it after a closer discussion of Blanchot's notion of the demand and the writer's response.

Before the beginning is the writer, not the word, not even the book which is always already nothing, the writer, re-turning incessantly to the non-time of the non-space of the work's movement outside; fascinated,

²⁷Ibid., p. 47.

connected to the work by a demand which, with its catalytic relation to the transcendence of the work, propels herself deeper into, but ever farther from, the void. We thus begin to follow Blanchot to the outside, recognizing the extent to which his description of the work's solitude remains a faithful witness to the exterior's demand. Instead of describing writing as the perhaps endless, but ever hopeful, approximation to Truth, Blanchot offers a ceaseless, and despairing, return to a never achievable central point; a point which, even were the approach possible, offers nothing but the infinitely deep void. Instead of a movement inside, a movement marked by the penetrating power of reason, the grand dialectical dance of identity and difference, by a faithful productivity, he suggests a trajectory which, having no beginning, aims at that which has no end, no closure, no value as truth: the outside. He offers, then, a description, not of the Book, but of the work, of the space where language, murmuring interminably, spreads itself forth.

Similarly, in opposition to the traditional notion of the author as the enlightened and enlightening subjectivity residing at the center of the work's being, Blanchot describes a writer shorn of his self, rendered nameless, by the passivity of the work's flight; a sheering which, in the incessantness of the author's return, is a self-mutilation, "This act of self-destruction is in every respect similar to the ever so strange event of suicide which, precisely, gives to the supreme instant of *Igitur* all its truth."²⁸ In the passivity of the author, Blanchot describes a writer

²⁸Ibid., p. 43. The relation of death to the work, as I noted above, will be explored in greater detail later.

faithful to the needs of the outside, who, rejecting the interiorizing pull of Literature, remains faithful to the point of self-destruction. Even that non-productive activity which is for Blanchot the act of writing, the author's response to the work's demand, remains, at least at first glance, true to the outside. For Blanchot, to speak of a writer's style, to speak of her mastery and concern for language, is to speak of the extent to which the writer acquiesces to the demand of language:

When we admire the tone of a work, when we respond to its tone as to its most authentic aspect, what are we referring to? Not to style...but to this silence precisely, this vigorous force by which the writer, having been deprived of himself, having renounced himself, has in this effacement nevertheless maintained the authority of a certain power: the power decisively to be still so that in this silence what speaks without beginning or end might take on form, coherence and sense.²⁹

The traditional categories of Literature, its structure and form, its characteristics and thematics, its creators, are all rendered void by the outside. It is to this void, the void which the outside is and that which it leaves behind, that Blanchot is returned, not to interrogate, or to discover Truth, but to witness; to witness the shared solitude of the work and the one whose self has been stripped by the work's solitude, and to witness the

²⁹Ibid., p. 27.

demand the work makes of this anonymous She, the demand that incessantly calls her back to the work's beginning.

It is a witnessing that continues in *The Writing of the Disaster*; instead of a physics of solitude, we have a writing of solitude, the solitude of the fragmented and the fragmentary. A writing, then, in which the very writing itself speaks of the work's solitary, effacing power; as well as its inescapable demand, "To read, to write, the way one lives under the disaster: exposed to the passivity that is outside passion...It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you..."³⁰ Yet, despite this shift away from determination to the empty immanence of the disaster, here, as in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot, as a writer, is forced to make certain concessions to the needs of the writer; concessions which, as I hope to demonstrate, necessarily re-interiorize on the absence of the work. These concessions are not merely formal; the extent, for example, to which, as Derrida points out, even fragmentary writing, "like the ellipsis - the 'I say practically nothing and take it back right away' - makes mastery over all that goes unsaid possible, arranging in advance for all the continuities and supplements to come."³¹ Rather, it is the demand of the work itself which necessitates this movement inside, a demand the writer feels as a certain need for control, a need to silence the interminable, a demand which, as we saw above, feeds on itself by propelling the absent center of the work farther and farther outside — a farther and farther which serves to make

³⁰*Disaster*, p. 4.

³¹Derrida, *Spurs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 93.

the writer's power more necessary, more complete, "Thus, writing continues by discontinuity; it is the lure of silence which, in very absence, has already delivered us to the disastrous return."³²

As in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, speaks of the work in terms of a certain site and time of the disaster. Speaks of them by speaking through them; each of the passages of this work are both bound and transgressed³³ by the disaster's absent time and place. For, 'writing the disaster' is both the means by which the disaster, the outside, is attested to and the means by which it writes itself — writes itself by rendering any attempt at witnessing it impossible. The space and time of the disaster are, thus, solitary; a solitude which, as we saw in *The Space of Literature*, leaves the writer alone while at the same time refusing her the solace of solitude by exposing her to absence and commanding her concern:

But the disaster is unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought which dissuades us from thinking it, leaving us, by its proximity, alone. Alone, and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside.³⁴

³²*Disaster*, p. 56.

³³Understood, with Bataille, as the formalized violation of an ineluctable law.

³⁴*Disaster*, p. 5.

Once again, then, we see that the absence of the work, its disastrous presence, demands of the author a certain effort, not to produce perhaps, but to witness; a witnessing which, in *The Space of Literature*, took the form of a certain silencing power, and which, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot describes as interruption.

There seems to be an important distinction between these two characterizations, a distinction which mirrors the more careful treatment of the relation of the writer to the absent work in *The Writing of the Disaster*. Blanchot's description of the writer's need to silence the incessantness of the work has the character of a definitive act; it is as if the writer, invited by the work's absent being, inserts herself in what would otherwise be the uninterrupted flight outward of language:

Being very sensitive to this invitation, Thomas' first movement was to obey by hurrying forth into empty space. then, when silence had enveloped the call once more, he was no longer so sure of having really heard his name, and he contented himself with listening expectantly, hoping that someone would call him again.³⁵

Like doubting Thomas, the author, in *The Space of Literature*, is called outward into the work's absence, called into silence, to silence language's murmuring. And yet, as Thomas's movement shows, this demand takes the

³⁵Blanchot, *Thomas The Obscure*, Translated by R. Lamberton (New York: David Lewis, 1973) p. 31.

form of a plea, a plea which the author, always unsure of having heard, must nevertheless respond to. It is this plea which is emphasized by Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*. In this text, the demand of the work is not so much for the author to be an interruption as to be a witness to the interruption which the disaster is:

The interruption of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing: interruption's having somehow the same meaning as that which does not cease. Both are effects of passivity. Where power does not reign -- nor initiative, nor the cutting edge of a decision -- there, dying is a living.³⁶

The difference, then, is in a certain attention to the writer's passivity: a shift from the author's necessary inattentiveness in the work's absent being which is transgressed, opened and, in a sense, empowered by this absence, to a passivity which, exposed to the interminable, stands as a commanding witness not only to the absence of the work, but to the extent to which it is the work itself, in its very excessiveness, which is this absence.

Yet, this difference seems merely to be one of articulation; the emphasis placed on "the break which the uninterrupted, the unbroken, is"³⁷, though perhaps expressed here with a greater indeterminacy, is not

³⁶*Disaster*, p. 21.

³⁷Ann Smock, in her translator's introduction to *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. ix.

foreign to the treatment of the question in *The Space of Literature*. As was discussed above, the time and space of the outside is the empty before of the unreconciled contradiction of a certain empty presence in absence. Here, as in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the interruption of the incessant is both the writer's interruption of the ceaseless spreading forth of language and the absence which this spreading forth, in its emptiness, is: in both of these work's, a certain necessary activity is suggested for the author. Thus, despite this more careful expression of the writer's response to the work's demand, if, as I have suggested, Blanchot, feeling the necessity to reserve for the author some space in literature, moves away from the outside to the interior, there is no indication that *The Writing of the Disaster* does not also leaves the writer this room.

This is not to suggest, however, that the problem has been decided. As of yet, the demand of the work, and the author's response to it, have only been provisionally discussed. It is now necessary to move closer to what Blanchot indicates is the center of *The Space of Literature*, the experience of Orpheus, to continue the discussion of these topics. A movement which will bring into the discussion Blanchot's notion of the work's relationship to death, as well as that witnessing which is appropriate to it. For it is with this notion that Blanchot hopes to avoid the obscene gravity of the work's demand and the need to write.

The Work's Demand and the Author

The approach to the outside, the work's flight and the author's despairing return, is the approach to the night, "Whoever devotes himself to the work is drawn by it toward the point where it undergoes impossibility. This experience is purely nocturnal..."³⁸ Thus Blanchot begins the section of *The Space of Literature* which contains the pages he cautiously indicates, in his prefatory remark, as the center towards which the book moves — "Orpheus's Gaze:" Orpheus, a man who felt his solitude like a sledgehammer, who despite the marvelous ability to charm men and beasts, even inanimate objects, was drawn by the death of Eurydice to brave the perpetual night of Hades in the hope of bringing her back to the light. It is this "Orphic" experience which we must take up with, the author's experience of the gravity of the work; it is the experience of the circularity of fascination, of the constantly reinforcing cycle of the work's demand and the author's persistent movement towards the perpetually absent central point of the work. This is the experience of the night, the experience of the impossibility of the outside, as well as the experience of the necessary impossibility of the response to this exteriority — an experience which, as Bataille described it, is the "...summoning [of] a silence [which we] can only approach from the outside..."³⁹ It is an

³⁸*Space* p. 163.

³⁹Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice, California: The Lapis Press, 1988) p. 7. Additions mine.

experience which, if we are to discuss the extent to which Blanchot is able to transcend the gravity of his own work, we too must approach.

It is an approach, however, which necessitates some care. Blanchot, in his discussion of the orphic experience, a discussion which elucidates the requirements of the work provisionally sketched in the discussion of the work's exteriority, turns away from a primarily theoretical discussion, to an examination of the writings, both public and private, of Kafka, Mallarmé and Rilke. Blanchot takes up with these writers' various responses to the gravity of the work, in an attempt to expand his treatment of the work's demand: an expansion which takes the form of a meditation on impossibility — the impossibility of inauthenticity, of the interior, as well as an impossibility proper to the work's exteriority. It is this expansion which is of interest here; and yet, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage Blanchot's interpretive discussion directly. Instead, we must look towards Blanchot's theoretical observations, those places where he moves between these writers' responses to the gravity of the work, to examine the differing senses of impossibility they describe. Unfortunately, this focus on theory runs the risk of misrepresenting an experience which is radically resistant to theory, not, of course, the resistance of the personal, the extent to which this experience, as private, is inaccessible to others, but the resistance of absence itself, the sense in which, as we have discussed, the disaster pre-empts any attempt to speak about it. It is necessary, then, if we are to follow Blanchot towards the work's orphic space, to refer constantly to the preliminary approach to this space described in the last section. It is only from within the topography

established by this first discussion of the problem that it is possible to situate the expansion which the discussion of Orpheus's gaze is.

It is the death of Eurydice which strips Orpheus, exposing him to the pull of the underworld, and it is with death, or at least the author's fascination with it, that Blanchot begins his approach to the work's orphic zero-point. Starting from the recognition that being has, as both its limit and its source, the nothingness which is death, the fact that I can "not be,"⁴⁰ Blanchot points towards the author's fear of her mortality, fear not so much of not existing, but rather of the imperviousness of death, its resistance to understanding, as that which first draws her toward the work:

As long as I live, I am a mortal man; but when I die, ceasing to be a man, I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer able to die and I am horrified...for I see it as it is: no longer death, but the impossibility of dying.⁴¹

In this inability to die, we see the first impossibility of the author's response to death, the sense in which it is not dying which fascinates the author — in which she feels the demand that she write -- but the realization

⁴⁰This is, of course, a recognition which resonates throughout Twentieth century European philosophy, especially in the work of Heidegger, "Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself." Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Row, 1971) p. 178.

⁴¹Blanchot, *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) p. 359. As quoted in "White Writing," Roger Laporte, *Diacritics* vol. 7, no. 2 Summer 1977, p. 35.

that death, though in some sense the condition of the artistic experience, itself lies somewhere outside of experience, forever beyond the author's power. In this recognition lies the ruin of writing; the horror of an impersonal death, of a death that I cannot die, subverts any presumption of power on the part of the author, negates any purposeful activity before such activity is begun. At least at this first level of the author's impossible response to the work, however, this negation remains only provisional.

For, the impossibility of the "I cannot die" is primarily epistemological, it stands only as the limit of the author's knowledge; as such, it offers itself to some sort of a definitive resolution: it stands as only one more barrier for the interiorizing power of Literature. This is the response of the author, who, confronted with the sheer excessiveness of death, the extent to which it is always other than being, writes in the attempt to domesticate death, to bring it within the realm of her experience:

The writer, then, is one who writes in order to be able to die, and he is one whose power comes from an anticipated relationship with death.⁴²

This is the experience of the author who, with Kafka, writes in order to be able to "die content;" it is an experience which, in the author's need to know death, to make it her own, bears a certain resemblance to suicide.

⁴²Ibid., p. 53.

On the surface, both suicide and writing purport to accomplish something, both seek to exert a certain control over death: suicide, by making death yet one more task which the subject can perform, and writing, which seeks to end its quest for Truth in death. And yet, each must ultimately be considered as failing to do so.; both suicide and this traditional notion of writing are attempts to represent an extreme situation; they are reactions to the experience of absence, an experience which seems to encourage an expression of power, but which the profundity of this absence renders problematic, "Both involve a power that wants to be a power even in the region of the ungraspable, where the domain of goals ends."⁴³ This suicide, this writing, are not, of course, the self-destruction Blanchot indicates is the authentic relationship of the author to death. For, in this desire for an impossible power, in the attempt to reduce the limit which death's absence draws to an epistemological obstruction, we recognize the interior: ultimately, this desire is a desire to retain a certain presence, a certain self in the anonymity of the exterior. It is, however, an attempt which, for Blanchot, points towards the outside.

In her failure to overcome what would seem to be the limit of writing, the sheer excessiveness of death's exteriority, the author feels a strong attraction:

It seems that Kafka recognized in precisely this
terrible state of self-dissolution, where he is lost

⁴³Ibid., p. 94.

for others and for himself, the center of gravity
of writing's demand...⁴⁴

With this recognition, we begin to recognize a response to death's transgressive power which is faithful to the exterior; rather than an experience of an epistemological impossibility, an impossibility which is thus penetrable by reason, Kafka's experience of this "horrible state of self-dissolution" is an experience of the impenetrability of the void, an experience of the profound emptiness of the image:

...it is correct to say that the artist's experience is an ecstatic experience and that it is...an experience of death. To see properly is essentially to die. It is to introduce into sight the turning back again which is ecstasy and which is death.⁴⁵

This ecstatic experience of death is, at least apparently, an experience of surrender to death's gravity; Kafka's vision offers not the ability to die, but the ecstasy of fascination: the necessity of re-approaching death's impossibility.

In this re-approach, it is possible to discern an important difference between suicide and writing. Suicide, for all of its despair of the world, remains part of it; to the end, suicide retains the character of an act, and

⁴⁴*Space*, p. 62.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 151.

thus asserts a certain productivity - until death surprises the suicide, she still hopes to accomplish the production of her own death. The author, on the other hand, necessarily turns away from this fictive production; compelled by the absent work, she "...wants, so to speak, to install [herself], to dwell in this absence."⁴⁶ It is no longer her own personal death which attracts the writer; she turns instead to the possibility of death, to the death which is everyone's. However, though this re-approach to the work's absence seems at first a faithful response to the needs of the work's exteriority, this turning back, though not an attempt to overcome this absence, remains an attempt on the part of the author to retain a privileged position with regards to it.

For, the death which is no longer mine has a certain potential; its universality has a definitiveness which seems almost to be an affirmation, a definitiveness which speaks strongly to the author:

...if death is true, if it is a genuine act...the supreme possibility...then the negation that operates in words, and 'this drop of nothingness' which is the presence of consciousness in us, the death from which we derive the power not to be which is our essence, also partake of truth. They bear witness to something definitive; the function to 'set a limit upon the infinite' And so the work, which is linked to the purity of negation, can in its turn arise in the certainty of that distant Orient

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 107.

Orient which is its origin.⁴⁷

In death's universality, in the inescapable fact that "everyone dies," seems finally to lie the truth which can empower the author, enabling her to overcome the horrible gravity of death's impossibility. It is an absence which can be purified, which can be used as a weapon against that other absence: the terrible effacing presence of the outside.

Recognizing the futility of attempting to overcome death, the author looks to death's truth, its purity as essence, as an entry to the outside -- not to close it off, to overcome its exteriority, but to become its interior, to dwell in it, to move with familiarity within it:

In the work, the artist protects himself not only against the world, but also against the requirement that draws him out of the world. The work momentarily domesticates this 'outside' by restoring an intimacy to it. The work silences and gives the intimacy of silence to this outside bereft of intimacy and repose...⁴⁸

This intimacy characterizes the second sense of the interior's impossible response to the work. To the extent that the ecstatic experience of death seems to provide the space for an affirmation by the author, the extent to

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 53.

which it seems to offer the power to domesticate the outside, this turning towards, like the attempt to overcome death's absence, remains an inauthentic response to the gravity of the outside. The movement towards death's essence makes of the exterior merely a privileged mode of the interior; thus purified, death is not only completely penetrable by the author, but stands as a ground for her -- what once loomed as the author's undoing now becomes that which shelters her from exteriority.

Thus we begin to understand the fascination of death, and with it, the demand of the work. The absence which is death, those "drops of nothingness" which stand as the limit of the author's experience, also seem to proffer a certain power. It seems possible, at least at first, that this absence can be erased; that it is possible, through some definitive act, that the author can survive death -- perhaps not by living past it, but by bringing it within her experience through her artistry:

At such moments writing is [more than] a compelling call; it is not waiting upon grace, or an obscure prophetic achievement, but something simpler, more immediately pressing: the hope of not going under, the hope of sinking faster than [oneself] and thus of catching a hold of [oneself] at the last minute.⁴⁹

This hope is, of course, a vain one; the outside which is death is the

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 63. Additions mine.

impossibility of such a feat. However, with the recognition, in the face, and perhaps because of, the impossibility of this act, of death's universality, comes the infinitely more dangerous hope of purifying death:

...it is a task which consists, not in surrendering to Being's unresolvable ambiguity, but in giving it decisiveness, exactitude and form...in lifting the uncertainty of anguish to the resolution of an exact formulation.⁵⁰

This attempt to give form to death, which is the attempt to make of death a shelter against the demand of the outside, is an indication of what Blanchot, elsewhere in *The Space of Literature*, describes as fascination's threat, the tendency to move determinately to the void, thus threatening its being as indeterminacy. It is easy to recognize the allure of this power to "set a limit upon nothingness," its promise to give the author the ability to tap into the transgressive potential of the void; it is a promise fulfilled, however, only at the cost of this potential -- the work is lost, survived only by the gravity of the book.

The attraction of the work, the fascination proper to the outside, encourages no such expression of power; Eurydice does not call Orpheus to the underworld, demanding that he make it another realm of the world -- he is drawn out of his solitude not by her voice but by her absence. This is the key to the work's demand; to be fascinated is not to be beguiled by the

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 144.

outside, by the power which death seems to proffer; rather, it is to experience the empty presence of the outside while recognizing that one is never present to it or in it. Far from encouraging the writer to overcome the void, the demand of the work is the proclamation of its openness, its "inexhaustible negative depth"; an openness which is the work's complete indifference to the author's power, "Whoever believes he is attracted finds himself profoundly neglected."⁵¹ The work is this marvelous simplicity of an opening which offers nothing but the infinite void that opens beneath the author, the indifference which greets her with silence -- a silence too insistent to be resisted and too resistant to be analyzed. We must look, then, for the experience of this fascination not in the articulations of the author's power, but in her necessarily inattentive movement towards the work's silent demand.

The experience of this fascination proper to the work is the experience of the night. We must be careful, however; there is a difference between the welcoming night of death, the night in which power reigns, and the impenetrable blackness of the void -- the night of the outside. That this difference is discernible should not surprise us; death is, as Blanchot points out, a nocturnal experience:

This is the first night. Here absence approaches -
silence, repose, night...here the sleeper does not
know he sleeps, and he who dies goes to meet real
dying...The first night is welcoming...of it one

⁵¹Ibid., p. 170.

can say, **In** the night, as if it had an intimacy. We enter into the night and rest there, sleeping and dying.⁵²

We are already aware of the dangers of this night, the trap which this welcome hides. It is the night of the day which, with its omnipresent light (the traditional light of reason) promises shelter and Truth. It is this night which threatens the work's exteriority; and yet, it is this night which Blanchot feels it is necessary for the author to enter. Not to dwell within, to make it her own, but to wait, like Thomas in *Thomas the Obscure*, for a call; for it is only here, at this night's most extreme point, that the author, "...hears at a certain moment the *other* night...and the void is now a presence coming toward" her.⁵³ This call is the experience of the absent central point of the work - the experience of the openness of the outside - the work's demand.

It is an experience, then, not of the powerful and determinate silence of the day, the quiet of the book, but of the solitude and silence of the approach of the outside, of the work's interminable murmuring:

He who, having entered the first night, seeks intrepidly to go toward its profoundest intimacy, toward the essential, hears at a certain moment the *other* night - hears himself, hears the eternally reverberating echo of his own step, a step toward

⁵²Ibid., p. 163.

⁵³Ibid., p. 169.

silence, toward the void.⁵⁴

Blanchot labels this night "*nuit blanche*"⁵⁵; it is the white night of the void which the author experiences as a commanding silence. There is still the sense in which we must describe this experience of this silence as a movement toward's the work's absence, and thus, as a response conditioned by a certain impossibility; this is not, however, an impossibility of the interior, but of the outside - it is a movement characterized not by purpose, but by inertia; the author moves towards the outside not because she is lured by the promise of power, but precisely because she no longer has the power to resist. This is the Orphic experience; it is an experience of surrender, of submitting, through the perpetual turning towards the essential, to the work's inessentiality. In this incessant return to the inessential, we recognize the work's demand, the nocturnal experience of the work's impossibility -- a silence which, "...has no power, it does not call, it attracts only by negligence.." ⁵⁶ It is a recognition, however, which remains only partial; the author's response to this demand, though indicated indirectly, needs to be discussed with greater care.

As we have seen, the orphic movement toward the work's absent center, the author's reply to the call of the outside, has as its goal not the impossible task of sustaining the outside, of somehow ensuring its

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁵Blanchot, "Discours sur la patience" p. 22. Quoted in Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 244.

⁵⁶*Space* , p. 170.

exteriority (a task which we recognize is as unnecessary to the work as it is impossible,) but of giving a form, through language, to this absence, "To write is to produce the work's absence (worklessness)"⁵⁷ Unlike the impossible sustaining of the work's exteriority, this is a task which seems to be within the author's power; as the example of Orpheus indicates, it is possible for the author, through her artistry, to approach the central point of the work (and this is perhaps more important) to bring it with her into the definitiveness of the day. It is a return, however, which is possible only with a certain inattentiveness, "...only by turning away from it. This turning away is the only way it [the work's central point] can be approached."⁵⁸ In this inattentiveness we recognize a subject stripped of her presence by the non-space and non-time of the work; in the place and time of the work's endless silent murmuring - the white noise of this white night - there is no production, "It is the depths of being's inertia [*desoeuvrement*]."⁵⁹ In this turning away of the author, her "can't work," is the limit of the possibility to even talk of an author; no longer a subject, the author is nameless, powerless, in the presence of the work's absence. And yet, despite this, Blanchot indicates that there remains a certain necessary movement which the work demands the author make.

The orphic experience, then, describes not only the turning away which is the author's impossible response to the work's demand, but also an

⁵⁷Blanchot, *La part du feu*, from Laporte, "White Night" p. 61.

⁵⁸*Space*, p. 171. Additions mine.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 46.

expression of power which the work's impossibility demands: the incessant return, despite the outside's effacing power, to the work's central point - a return which necessarily takes the form of an interruption. Orpheus, having risked his own life in the descent, had impossibly succeeded; remaining faithful to Pluto's demands, he led Eurydice out of the perpetual night of Tartarus. In the end, however, he could not resist the pull of her absence and, turning to look at her, he lost her to the night forever. It is in this failure that Blanchot positions the author; like Orpheus, the author cannot resist the demand of the outside, the demand that she move ever towards it. She cannot resist it because it is precisely this return which the work's exteriority necessitates. The gaze of Orpheus, the writer's return to the work, is, at the same time, the betrayal of the work -- the abandonment of the essential inattention which the work, if it is to approach the day, requires -- and the work's salvation -- that which recognizes the needs of the work's exteriority and, by moving ever closer, propels the work ever farther outside:

Orpheus's gaze is Orpheus's ultimate gift to the work. It is a gift whereby he refuses, whereby he sacrifices the work, bearing himself toward the origin...and whereby unknowingly he still moves toward the work, toward the origin of the work.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 174.

This is the doubled demand of the work: that the author write in order to proclaim the work's absence, to form an absent meaning, but that she form it in such a way that its impossibility, this whitest night, shines through.

Thus, it is exactly at the point where the work's absence makes work impossible that the author is commanded to the greatest impossibility; the author, denuded, shorn of every sign of her power, is nevertheless condemned by the work's need to a certain determinateness. Blanchot speaks of this exertion in terms of a certain powerlessness; however, as we have seen, it is exactly an expression of power which this determinateness requires, "I bring to the incessant speech the decisiveness, the authority of my silence."⁶¹ Its expression may be necessarily sheltered, the language may be halting, lame, "essentially inessential," but the work compels the author to a certain formalism, demands that she impose a silence upon the interminable murmuring of the outside. In Bataille's words:

This is how I finally reach the end of language, which is death. Potentially, the question's still one of language, but the meaning of this language (already meaning's absence) is implicit in words that put a stop to language. But these words acquire meaning only to the extent that they take place immediately before silence - a silence that puts a stop to them.⁶²

⁶¹Ibid., p. 27.

⁶²Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 8.

It is with this silence, finally, that we understand the demand of the work and the author's response. The work's demand, in *The Space of Literature*, is a demand for an impossible expression of power on the part of the author; a demand which, while seemingly reinforcing the work's flight outside, actually subverts this exteriority. The impossibility of the author's response becomes all too possible. What we are left with, then, is not the silence of the void, the white noise of the work's outside, but the commanding silence of the author - her inattention transformed to a perhaps fatal, attentiveness.

The problem of silence remains in *The Writing of the Disaster* ; however, rather than discussing the silence necessary to the work in terms of inattention, a discussion which has at its base an economy of power, Blanchot speaks to the outside's impossible demand for a witness in terms of passivity. We have, of course, seen this shift before; as I indicated in the last section, there is an important difference between the description of the work's demand in *The Space of Literature* and in *The Writing of the Disaster* -- it is a difference which revolves around the presence of the disaster itself. Blanchot leaves behind the analysis of death and the night which never seemed to escape their traditional roles as disguises of the author's subjectivity, replacing them by the writing of the disaster, "...writing [which] continues by discontinuity; it is the lure of silence which, in very absence, has already delivered us to the disastrous return."⁶³ Thus, Blanchot also leaves behind the doubled logic of the

⁶³*Writing* , p. 56.

work's demand, upon the articulation of which *The Space of Literature* seems to stumble. Yet, as the "lure of silence" indicates, we have not left behind the demand; if anything, the author experiences the demand of the disaster as a more complete effacement -- the disaster pushes beyond the author, beyond the point where it is even possible to speak of a response, to the other side, the outside which is the before of any interiority or exteriority. This is passivity:

Passivity is measureless: for it exceeds being; it is being when being is worn down past the nub -- the passivity of a past which has never been, come back again. It is the disaster defined -- hinted at - - not as an event of the past, but as the immemorial past (*Le Très-Haut*) which returns, dispersing by its return the present, where, ghostly, it would be experienced as a return.⁶⁴

Thus we see the promise of passivity; in the face of the disaster there can be no power no activity -- the author can do nothing but witness the disaster's unreachable exteriority.

There is, thus, an impossibility of disaster, an impossibility of passivity -- an impossibility not of response, of a certain necessary expression of power, but an impossibility of passivity:

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 17.

Accept this distinction: 'it is necessary' and not 'you must' -- perhaps because the second formula is addressed to a *you* and the first is an affirmation outside law, without legality, an unnecessary necessity. All the same, an affirmation? a manifestation of violence? I seek a passive 'it is necessary,' worn out by patience.⁶⁵

This "wearing out" is the key to passivity; with it, Blanchot hopes to describe an impossible witnessing which evades the seemingly necessary violence of the author's response. It differs precisely from the response described in *The Space of Literature* in the effacing power of the void; it is still possible, from the outside of the work's space and time, to discern an author. Such a perspective is impossible in the presence of the disaster; the disaster is the rejection of any such privileged position. And yet, despite the disaster's depersonalizing power, Blanchot still seeks to leave room for Orpheus; the question becomes, "How is it possible to think of the witness whose witnessing, whose passivity, the disaster seems to demand?" - it is a question whose necessarily indeterminate answer cannot be found in a discussion of the author's response, but must instead be looked for in the commanding presence of the outside.

In a distinction which owes much to Levinas, Blanchot links this worn out "it is necessary" which is passivity, with the other:

Through patience, I take upon myself the relation

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 44.

to the other of the disaster -- the relation which does not allow me to assume it, or even to remain myself in order to undergo it.⁶⁶

In the proximity of the other, a proximity which, for Levinas, precedes any unity of consciousness,⁶⁷ Blanchot locates a demand which, coming before the self, radically opens the author, drawing her outwards, making her responsible for this otherness; it is a responsibility for a certain witnessing, an answer to the work's outside:

...when passivity idles and destroys me, I am at the same time pressed into a responsibility which not only exceeds me, but which I cannot exercise, since I cannot do anything and no longer exist as myself. Such responsible passivity would be *Speaking*. For before anything is spoken, and outside of being...Speaking gives and gives the response, answering to the impossible and for the impossible.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 14. It is impossible, within the confines of this paper, to elaborate on the connections between Levinas and Blanchot, not to mention the difficulties of attempting to summarize the work of as profound a thinker as Levinas. At best, I can hope to indicate some of the important consonances; consonances which hopefully illuminate Blanchot's notion of passivity.

⁶⁷Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Cambridge, MA.: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989) p. 90.

⁶⁸*Writing*, pp. 19-20. See also Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, p. 83. Crucial to the understanding of this responsibility is the recognition that both Blanchot and Levinas are concerned with the possibility of speaking after the Holocaust. In the silence imposed by the Holocaust, the silence of six million deaths, it is unclear that speech is ever again going to be possible. And yet, this silence is so horrible that it requires just that; Levinas (and more indirectly, Blanchot) trace a post-Auschwitz ethics: a critique of traditional, logocentric thought which recognizes subjectivity only as a hostage to the other -- the face of the other as the face of the murdered, the face which

The presence of the other, the presence which is the coming before of the work, is a weight which the author cannot escape. The demand of the disaster is the demand for this speech, a speech which, in its speaking, stands testimony to the effacing presence of the outside; it is a demand for speech which the other's proximity makes impossible to refuse, but whose force makes it impossible to speak. For, it is a speech without a speaker, a witnessing without a witness; the impossibility of the disaster is the impossibility of the writer writing -- the impossibility of Orpheus.

It is with this notion of the other, then, with the wearing, wearying presence of the disaster, that Blanchot seeks to escape the necessity of the work's demand. In the disaster, there is no longer any room to discuss the author's response -- impossible of not -- no room to write; there is only writing, writing which the transgressive presence of the other erases:

Writing is per se already (it is still) violence: the rupture there is in each fragment, the break, the splitting, the tearing of the shred -- acute singularity, steely point. And yet this combat is, for patience, debate. The name wears away, the fragment fragments, erodes.⁶⁹

In this paradox Blanchot locates both the needs of the work, the needs of the outside -- a transcendence without an interior -- and (this is the paradox

refuses to be incorporated or thematized.

⁶⁹*Writing*, p. 46.

which gives the first one its force) the needs of the writer. What remains to be discussed is the gravity of this paradox: whether it has the catastrophic, excessive energy necessary to propel Blanchot outwards or whether, in his need to write, he falls prey to the obscene fascination of exteriority.

II

All letters give form to absence.

Edmond Jabès

Thus Jabès, in *The Book of Questions*, gives expression to the act of writing -- an expression in which we can recognize Blanchot's non-answer to the question about which both *The Space of Literature* and *The Writing of the Disaster* circulate: "What is it about the void, about the 'inexhaustible negative depth' of language, about the disaster, that moves, and in a sense compels, a person to write?" For Blanchot, this expression indicates both the author's dangerous power and that which allows her to escape it; for, the power of letters, the formalism which leads to a necessary re-interiorization on the absent presence of the work's exteriority, is also the possibility of writing. In this possibility lies the presence of the demand, the effacing presence of the outside which, coming before the author, calls her into writing. It is for this reason that Blanchot, recognizing the dangers writing poses to the outside, still writes: he feels the need to write, the demanding presence of the otherness of exteriority, too strongly; he must, in the end, forget the inactivity necessary to the exterior. Because of this sensitivity to the work's call, however, Blanchot cannot resist the work's gravity; opened by the exterior's demand, he is also opened to the attraction of exteriority: an attraction which produces a certain violence, an affirmation which threatens

to overcome the outside.

For, what is the "need to write," the need felt by the author, stripped of her subjectivity, to silence the "incessant and the interminable," but the halting of language's spread outwards, the bounding of discourse by the authority of the author's silence which, no matter how lightly or transparently it defines, necessarily creates of the outside merely another mode of the interior? The passive activity of the author in the presence of the absence of the work, the extent to which the otherness of the work creates, while obviating, the solitude of the other, is the mark not only of the work's indeterminacy, of its never-ceasing flight outwards, but also of its final, fatal completion. The *Noli Me Legere* is not only the sign of the work's fundamental difference from the author, but its inescapable, *de trop*, sameness; in its incomprehensibility, the work stands as the only monument to the author's denuded subjectivity, it is an accretion of her power. As such, it is a positivity that, while a response to the demanding presence of the work's absence, can respond only by negating this absence. The fascination felt by the author, the allure of the image, is the need to write; a need that, in the exertion which attempts to satisfy it, threatens the work's exteriority.

It is a threat which Blanchot is all too aware that he can not avoid. Though, as he recognizes, this attempted satisfaction, the circularity of fascination, serves to reinforce the work's flight outwards, in the end the author's power, as concretized in the work, overcomes her deterritorializing influence. Blanchot recognizes that even in his work there is a certain determinateness which haunts it:

I believe that these texts, with an obstinacy that today astounds me, have not refrained from seeking to respond even to the book's absence that they designate in vain.⁷⁰

In this observation of the work's perversity, we seem to have come to a limit beyond which it is no longer possible to write: the stubborn formalism of the work seems to condemn writing to the interior. This recognition, however, inspires in Blanchot not the renunciation of writing, but a certain cautious resolve. Even in the face of the author's seemingly inescapable power, both *The Space of Literature* and *The Writing of the Disaster* evidence a certain optimism; not the Panglossian optimism of Reason, sure in its ability to find truth -- an optimism which the horror of the disaster, the "suffering such that I could not suffer it,"⁷¹ renders impossible -- but the optimism of the author, the hope that she can be faithful, that with caution, she can be true to the demands of the work while also respecting its exteriority.

This is not thus an optimism of an eventual production, the hope that somehow the author, escaping the work's gravity, can complete the work, encircle it with her witnessing; Blanchot's hope is the hope of inertia, of the desperate return to the work's central point. When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity which contradicts it, a productivity

⁷⁰Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, p. 637. Though the texts of which Blanchot speaks are *The Space of Literature*, and the fictional and critical works preceding and immediately succeeding it, despite the more careful treatment of the question of the work's demand in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the observation of this obstinacy extends to this work also.

⁷¹*Writing*, p. 14.

which will somehow give it foundation, but the void that effaces it. It is an optimism, then, of despair, of the incessant return to the work's indeterminacy, the hope that finally, at the work's before, the author can escape the work's gravity. We see this optimism in *The Space of Literature* in the experience of Orpheus, in Orpheus's gift to the work -- the inattentive attentiveness -- the force necessary to the circle of fascination which ultimately, is insufficient to the work's exteriority. We see it also in *The Writing of the Disaster*, in the assertion that despite writing's violence, despite "the rupture there is in each fragment," still, "the fragment fragments;" that is, that the exteriority of the work, its solitary being, overcomes the formalism which this being demands.

As expressed in *The Writing of the Disaster* then, it is an optimism which exceeds this notion of a gift; exceeds it with the disaster -- with the impossibility of passivity.⁷² In this "It is necessary" Blanchot locates the absent author -- an author from which no response to the work's demand is possible. We are still left, however, with the question of Blanchot's resolve, a resolve which despite the fragmenting power of the outside, its demand that language enter the void, consenting to be undone in the interminable murmuring of an outside where words endlessly unravel, remains the attempt to impose a certain silence upon the "spreading outwards" of language. To

⁷²This discussion of the gift brings to mind Bataille's use of the term "expenditure" to designate unproductive, transgressive forms of production. Though this strays somewhat from the question at hand, it seems necessary to indicate that, though Blanchot was heavily influenced by Bataille and most likely understood Orpheus's gift as just this sort of non-productive sacrifice, the activity which he would like to reserve for the author in *The Space of Literature* seems to preclude such an expenditure. This sense of transgression does, however, have a place in *The Writing of the Disaster* in the work's gift to the author -- the pre-original rupture which is her responsibility.

negate one's own discourse as Blanchot does, is to cast language ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment of the very ability to speak; and yet, the demand of the outside is a demand for just that -- speech about the disaster, speech without a subject, perhaps, but testimony nonetheless.

Blanchot looks to fascination, to the compelling call of the outside, to explain this resolve. The call faithful to the outside is less than a certain attentiveness to the call of Eurydice, a turning towards the forbidden face that has already concealed itself. It is instead an attentiveness which, not merely forsaking of the world for transcendence, is the realization of a space at the other end which, glittering darkly, is another language, a language without an assignable subject, a personal pronoun without a person. Recognizing that it is too much⁷³ to rely on this orphic experience; Blanchot looks instead to the other, to the experience of a pre-original presence, which, opening up the author, both commands and repels her. The other acts both as a demand to which the author is never equal and a weight of which she would like to be rid. And yet, the author is bound to the other by a responsibility which is impossible to bear, but which she must draw ever closer to herself. For, the other is, herself, speechless; she is the nameless limit language reaches -- she can speak only through the author. The call to witness is the call to let the other speak; this finally is the sense of the disaster's demand. "To read, to write, the way one lives under the disaster:

⁷³This is the "too much" of the author's excessive power, a power which establishes not an economy of expenditure, but of a certain dangerous conservation. See Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) pp. 118-119.

exposed to the passivity that is outside passion...It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you..."⁷⁴

There is a certain ethical necessity to this call, the voicelessness of the outside commands in a way that we cannot refuse; it is to this necessity that Blanchot points as the source of his resoluteness:

In the relation of *myself to the Other*, the Other exceeds my grasp...But, in the relation of *the other to me*, everything seems to reverse itself: the distant becomes the close-by, this proximity becomes the obsession that afflicts me, that weighs down upon me, that separates me from myself. And then, the other becomes the Overlord...he who overwhelms, encumbers, undoes me, he who puts me in his debt no less than he attacks me...by charging me with measureless responsibility...when passivity idles and destroys me, I am at the same time pressed into a responsibility which not only exceeds me, but which I cannot exercise, since I cannot do anything and no longer exist as myself. Such responsible passivity would be *Speaking*.⁷⁵

In this tyranny of the other, then, Blanchot seeks that which would remove the author from her power, but would remove her in such a way that writing is still required of her. Levinas, in an analysis upon which Blanchot

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 4.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 19-20.

draws,⁷⁶ describes this removal in terms of an "an-archical" responsibility. Before consciousness, before intentionality, there is a direct sensuous contact with the Other; a contact which Levinas expresses as the "face-to-face." Thus, before ontology, before the thematizing act which is the erasure or overcoming of exteriority, there is an original openness, an openness which is the face of the other -- an openness which is the demand for responsibility:

Prior to the unveiling of Being in general, as the basis for knowledge and meaning of Being, there is a relationship with the existent which is expressed; before the ontological level, [there is] the ethical level.⁷⁷

For Levinas, the face of the Other calls to us, demands our attention -- demands it in such a way that no response is possible. The relationship with the other is asymmetrical; the call the author feels obligates her insofar as that other is infinite vulnerability -- a suffering which is beyond the author's power.

In this asymmetricality, Blanchot recognizes a call which, beyond the author's possibility, nonetheless commands her. It is the annihilated and annihilating presence of the outside which demands a witness; a testimony which, coming from the author's before, is never discourse, but is always

⁷⁶See *Writing*, p. 25. and the Translator's Notes, pp. 148-149.

⁷⁷Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 48.

somehow ahead of it. This is the writing of the disaster; it is a language which, instead of attempting to represent the outside, to give form to it, flees from it, becoming in this flight exactly this rupturing presence. This is the language of *Le souci de l'oeuvre*, a concern which is much less an activity than a certain subjectless, powerless, response to the void. The call for a witness, the concern for the work, is not then a call for an author as much as a call for passivity, for a responsibility which, exceeding the author, draws her outward into testimony.

There is, however, a certain danger to this concern, the danger of erasing or overcoming the very absence which calls one to speak. The concern for the work encourages a certain seriousness, a seriousness which the annihilating suffering of the other seems to demand, but which all too closely resembles the seriousness of Reason, of the tradition of interiority; it is the severity of a thought which locates its necessity within itself, finding in this totalizing gaze its unity and its difference. This is not of course to suggest that Blanchot's notion of witnessing shares in the bloated, self-important, gravity of interiority; however, the violence demanded by the "need to write," the silence which this witnessing commands, threatens exteriority with its necessity, with its undeniable call.

Jean Baudrillard, in his book *Fatal Strategies* makes a distinction which resonates interestingly with the differentiations I have made between the dominating tendencies of the interior and this inescapable gravity of exteriority. Baudrillard, standing witness, from his peculiar, descriptive theoretical position, of the flight outwards of language, discusses the flows of interiorization in terms of obscenity. For Baudrillard, the obscene is the,

"....loss of illusion, play and scene;" that is, the loss/negation of absence in favor of the "reality" of the interior. This loss takes two forms, corresponding to the logic (or anti-logic) of its realm of expression. In the interior, according, then, to traditional discourse, "The obscene is what is neither visible, nor representable, and thus possesses an energy of rupture, of transgression, and a hidden violence."⁷⁸ The obscene is the disguised presence of the metaphysical tradition at the roots of language, the hidden violence of which extends beyond the elements of language to the forms of expression which the language takes.

In the exterior, "Our own radical obscenity is no longer that of the hidden and the repressed, it is the transparency of the [exterior] itself."⁷⁹ Obscenity, then, is the "more visible than the visible." This is the obscenity of the careless response to the fascination of absence:

Obesity of naming systems, of information stocks
that are henceforth no longer treatable -- obesity,
the saturation of a system of nuclear destruction
now exceeding its own ends, excrescent,
hypertelic.⁸⁰

An obscene writing characterized by a cancerous excess; a writing which

⁷⁸Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, Trans. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990) p. 64.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 64. Additions mine.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 25.

escapes into the ellipsis of forms and movements -- movements from growth to excrescence, from finality to hypertely. This is also the obscenity of the need to write, of a writing frantic with its own need, "Everyone must deliver his secret, cross the threshold of silence and enter the immanent space of communication..."⁸¹ In this space of communication is the presumption of the book, its claim to Truth and completion. There is then, a "white obscenity" which constrains the witnessing of the exterior, threatening always to revert this witnessing to the logic of the 'black obscenity' of the interior. These are the dangers of writing; the danger that all writing succumbs to the gravity of the obscene, has the same tendency to erase difference and re-interiorize on the presence of absence -- dangers which even the most careful witness of exteriority must risk.

It is this white obscenity, the possibility that the author's need to write will overcome the work's exteriority, relegating it to the communicative, which threatens the work's *nuit blanche*. It is a possibility which Blanchot acknowledges, but never without holding out the quite possibly vain hope that the commanding presence of the outside will circumvent it. Indeed, in the rupturing address of the other Blanchot seems to find that which would support this hope: the recognition that witnessing re-inscribes the work's gravity, that in its fragmentation, it is this address:

The fragment, as fragments, tends to dissolve the
totality which it presupposes and which it carries

⁸¹Ibid., p. 59.

off toward the dissolution from which it does not (properly speaking) form, but to which it exposes itself in order, disappearing to maintain itself as the energy of disappearing: a repetitive energy, the limit that bears upon limitation -- or the presence of the work of art's absence (to say it all again and to silence by saying it again).⁸²

And yet, it is this address only in its silencing power, its necessary violence. This is a hope of desperation, the hope of a person who, exposed to the solitude of the outside -- its pain -- , "...can no longer appeal to any ethics, any experience, any practice whatsoever -- save that of some counter-living, which is to say an un-practice, or (perhaps) a word of writing."⁸³ Though it seems that writing, even the subject-less witnessing which is Blanchot's most careful treatment of the work's demand, necessarily re-interiorizes on the work's absent presence, the risk of this white obscenity is one Blanchot willingly takes. For, not only is it the possibility of writing, but silence would be a greater violence:

...language can only indefinitely tend towards justice by acknowledging the violence within it...if light is the element of violence, one must combat it with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which preceded or presupposes discourse.⁸⁴

⁸²*Writing*, pp. 60-61.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸⁴Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 117.