

The Gaze of Blanchot through the Lens of Heidegger

Blanchot's writing must be approached with Paul de Man's cautionary words in mind: "the conception of literature (or literary criticism) as demystification [is] the most dangerous myth of all, while granting that it forces us, in Mallarmé's terms, to scrutinize the act of writing 'jusqu'en l'origine'" (Blindness 14).¹ Blanchot invents his own modern myths and regards them as demystifications of our habitual way of thinking about literature. A typically Blanchotian reversal: mystifying devices, such as metaphors and reworkings of classical myths, are used to demystify the obvious, the habitual, the real.² We must refrain, however, from believing too easily that the habitual is indeed in need of 'demystification' or that Blanchot's supposedly innocent—because self-aware and too obvious—rhetoric of myths can be taken at face value. De Man argues that the validity of myths "depends on the existence of a privileged point of view, to which the method itself denies any status of authenticity"(10-11). Blanchot's writing, a mythology in its own right, depends on this paradox, too. The myth of the distinction between book and work,³ for example, depends on a privileged point of view (the notion of selfhood, or, more precisely, the belief that there is a self), from which the loss, the dispossession of the self by the work is declared and to which the method itself--the pure impersonality of Blanchot's discourse--denies any credibility. Blanchot's mythologization of literature as an authentic language beyond being and non-being, beyond affirmation and negation, constitutes another aspect of this suspect privileged point of view or what Levinas calls "the Excluded Third Term"(55).⁴ The difficulties in writing about this excluded third

term, the neuter, are the same difficulties the critic encounters when trying to write about Blanchot. Edmond Jabes notes that “Nothingness can only be thought by reducing all thoughts to nothing”(The Little Book 66).⁵ Similarly, one can write about Blanchot only by reducing one’s critical language to Blanchot’s. Blanchot’s critic must act in a way contrary to the essence of literary criticism--assuming a detached point of view and looking at the text--and, instead, proceed from the very heart of Blanchot’s text, *looking through the text toward the outside rather than looking in from the outside*.

Blanchot’s critic finds it simply impossible to write about Blanchot outside of Blanchot’s language. The latter--not quite the noble “plural speech” Blanchot dreams of in The Infinite Conversation⁶--is so oppressive that even if one wants to criticize it, one inevitably finds himself entangled in the lack of clarity, cumbersome style, and nebulous, too eager to be incomprehensible diction that one wishes to attack. Language and style are such an important part of Blanchot’s thinking that occasionally one wonders if some of his images or key terms are coined only because they sound intriguing to a poetic ear. To try to explicate or just read “The Gaze of Orpheus,” for instance, one cannot remain outside the essay and apply one’s own critical language but is instead brutally and uncompromisingly ‘sucked’ into Blanchot’s language. Victimized, the critic can only repeat, against his will, as though hypnotized, Blanchotian mantras, the overfamiliar mantras of postmodernism, which predicate, now almost mechanically, death, absence, or loss to any object of inquiry or, if the postmodern ‘thinker’ happens to be in an unexpectedly affirmative mood, turn every object of inquiry into a ‘dangerous’ supplement. Blanchot’s writing engenders the worst type of criticism: a mere paraphrasing of the original text, an involuntary aping of the author’s style. Since

Blanchot's images or ideas do not have parallels in the critic's language, the critic is forced not only to write in Blanchot's terms but even to think in these terms. My criticism of Blanchot cannot, therefore, but be as elusive as the original text. And since in most cases the critic is not as good a poet as the artist he is writing about, the original text safely keeps the upper hand in this not quite "infinite conversation" between text and criticism. Since criticism—even when it earnestly tries to be open-minded and experimental—always aims at revealing the unity of the text it analyzes, a poetic form of criticism such as Blanchot's will appear to the critic to be filled with inconsistencies. The text condemns the critic to petty quibbling about what might just as well be, from Blanchot's own point of view, really insignificant points. (I am not sure if this is a feeble attempt at self-justification or a sound, factual observation.) The difficulty Blanchot's critical writing poses is further exacerbated by the fact that however poetic it is, it is still a work of criticism, not a fictional work. The uncertain status of Blanchot's critical work--suspended between art and criticism--is problematic for the critic, who cannot decide how much and what kind of authority is to be given to the text. In a work so densely rhetorical, the critic has a hard time distinguishing the parts that really make an argument from those that are pure rhetoric, especially considering Blanchot's almost pathological obsession with paradoxical formulations, which often appear as beautifully wrought urns rather than as critical statements.

So, the critic, now turned into a pathetic linguistic weakling, who can do no better than plagiarize Blanchot's language and thinking even when he most passionately disagrees with them and wants to resist them, finds himself exiled in the Tower of Tautologies and Impotence. What can he do? How can he preserve his dignity in the face

of the Blanchotian avalanche of mythologized negation,⁷ absence, and death? One way is to divert his attention from Blanchot and introduce another text, one less despotic, and, preferably, related to Blanchot's work. Luckily, there is Heidegger, traces of whom can be found in almost all of Blanchot's central claims about literature.⁸ On one side, then, there are Heidegger's questions: the question of the nothing, the ontic-ontological difference, *Dasein's* relationship to the nothing, the distinction between mere negation and the originary not, the distinction between mere thing and the work of art, the idea of the work as truth setting itself to work, the idea of concealment as the very lighting where things come into being. On the other side, parallel to these questions, are Blanchot's: the question of the origin (inspiration, infinity), the 'application' of the ontic-ontological difference to the relationship between the writing subject and the work, the dispossession of the writer by the work,⁹ the attempt to bypass both negation and affirmation through the metaphor of the absolutely other, the distinction between book and work, the transcendence of the work beyond the realm of being, truth, and language,¹⁰ and, finally, the impossibility of the Heideggerian truth as un-truth suggested in a modern rereading of the myth of Orpheus.

A comparative analysis of these points of intersection produces what might, at first glance, appear to be an unlikely conclusion: despite the fact that Heidegger's metaphysics is rooted in the question of the nothing, the implications of his metaphysics and aesthetics are far from pessimistic, especially when set against Blanchot's bleak aesthetic vision. Heidegger's metaphysics and Blanchot's transcendental theory of art proceed from a common concern, the concern for the unthinkable, which Heidegger calls "the nothing" and Blanchot "the work."

However, the project of preserving the unthinkable follows different paths in both discourses and nowhere is this more evident than in the two authors' views of language. Wishing to distinguish himself from Heidegger's notion of language as the saying of being or the work of truth,¹¹ a language that, in its assertiveness and affirmation contains the potential threat of tyranny, Blanchot takes shelter in the language of aporia and indeterminacy where, he seems to believe, language is still "a powerless exchange" (The Sirens' Song 50)¹² or "plural speech."¹³ Presumably, metaphorical language, like Blanchot's, is more indeterminate, hence more respectful of the unthinkable, than a philosophical language like Heidegger's. I have already questioned the "powerlessness" of Blanchot's language and suggested that it is in fact extremely oppressive in its very indeterminacy and elusiveness. More important, however, are the implications of Heidegger's and Blanchot's different views of language, and, accordingly, their approaches to the unthinkable. Whereas Heidegger preserves the question of the nothing by *calling attention to it* in his radical claim that the work of art (and we must remember that by 'work of art' he means, first and foremost, poetry) poses the question of the nothing i.e. the question of being, Blanchot, on the other hand, preserves the indeterminate (literature) *not through revealing its relation to being but through excluding it from the realm of being*, presenting it, instead, as that which does not call, does not compel (evidently, for Blanchot, being is always associated with power and is, thus, potentially threatening). The demand of the work is the most rigorous and super-moral one precisely because it does not demand anything, just as Blanchot's metaphors (of the other night, etc.) are the most transcendental since they do not belong to being.

However, there is a point of saturation where transcendence becomes so elusive that it loses its meaning as such. However marvelous the desire to make room for the unthought—whether it is called “the nothing” or “literature” is, finally, not important—i.e. to leave margins in our thinking, these margins are repeatedly closed by a natural reversal: our thought, even as it withdraws respectfully before the indeterminate, cannot help making the margin itself into its object, so that while we ought to be thinking against our usual way of thinking (which is thinking *about something*), we begin thinking *about the margins*. Thinking the unthinkable turns into thinking *that there is* an unthinkable, which, in turn, makes Heidegger’s truth as un-truth no longer possible.

Insofar as the central question in Blanchot’s critical writing, the question of literature, is a reworking of the central question in Heidegger’s metaphysics, the question of the nothing, Blanchot’s theory of literature is metaphysical: it asks the question of the origin. **In the essay “The Song of the Sirens” Blanchot writes: “in [the Sirens’] region of source and origin music itself had disappeared more completely than in any other place in the world” (The Gaze 105).¹⁴ The question of the origin of literature in Blanchot—which is also the question of inspiration and infinity—harks back to Heidegger’s analysis of the Nothing. Blanchot’s idea of the origin of literature as its own failure to originate poses another question, of which Blanchot is himself aware: “is there ever a work?”(The Space 174).¹⁵ If the origin of writing is the search for that origin, writing never really begins. Then it makes no sense to ask “What is literature?” given that we do not even know whether literature is. The same paradox operates in Heidegger’s investigation of the nature of the nothing in “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger writes: “Interrogating the nothing—asking what and how it,**

the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object”(98). Similarly, interrogating literature turns literature into its opposite, into something that is accessible to the understanding, something that is. Heidegger’s warning that the nothing must be left unthought, pure, that it cannot be interrogated without being compromised, turned into a mere something, cannot avoid the paradox that even to say that the nothing is unthinkable is already to think it *as such*, as unthinkable. Heidegger is certainly aware of the insurmountable obstacle the nothing puts before thinking: “For thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing”(99). The only way to get around this obstacle is to regard it as a *formal* problem and ignore it. Once “we do not let ourselves be misled by the formal impossibility of the question of the nothing,” we must accept that “it must be given beforehand”(100). Reasoning retrospectively, Heidegger concludes that if “[t]he nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings,” then this totality of beings “must be given in advance so as to be able to fall prey straightway to negation”(100). By the same logic, if literature is its own failure to originate, the origin must be given in advance so as to fall immediately to negation

The question of the nothing is the question of the origin, which, in turn, is the question of inspiration. Inspiration is the unconcern for the destiny of the work, for its law. The law says that the truth of the work must be pursued for its own sake, since it does not come forth by itself but is revealed through its concealment in the work: “The depth does not surrender itself face to face; it only reveals itself by concealing itself in the work” (The Gaze 99). The artist is called upon to respond to an impossible demand: he must search for the truth since it won’t reveal itself on its own but, at the same time, he

must let the truth conceal itself in the work. He must look for the truth of the work in order to miss it. Moreover, he is not the one who can conceal it but merely lets it conceal itself. No, not even that for that would mean that he had already found it and generously lets it slip back into self-concealment. Then, if he has no power over it, it must be that what conceals itself does so absolutely independently of him and of his search. But why is the law of the work in opposition to the call of inspiration? Why is inspiration a lack of concern for the work? It is because inspiration is an impulse toward unconcealment whereas the work is constituted as concealment. It is not, however, that the former conceals the latter but, rather, inspiration presumes to unconceal concealment *as such* thus compromising the work. Orpheus's desire to bring Eurydice back into the daylight is the desire to bring concealment *as such*—Eurydice as the veil rather than as what is veiled—into the daylight. Inspiration and the work do not share the same object—although their formally similar operations of concealment and unconcealment might suggest that—but, instead, inspiration has the work's law as its object, an object it tries to negate. The problem posed by Orpheus's gaze is how to negotiate the mutually exclusive demands of inspiration and the work.¹⁶ But they are mutually exclusive only because of the assumption that they must be logically connected in a causal relationship between an origin and a subsequent development. It might be useful to think the banal relationship between origin and development in terms of the (perhaps equally banal) relationship between subject matter and medium. The artist desires the object of his desire (subject matter) but he can only speak/write/sing *about* it. Strictly speaking, what he desires can never be the object of his desire but merely the object of a certain artistic medium (language). Thus, language as desire is only a mediated version of a more primary desire

which is not aesthetic desire. Blanchot acknowledges the artist's power over the object of his desire only within the limits of the song, but, at the same time, within the song, the object is already lost: it has already been transformed from an object of an originary, pre-linguistic desire into the object of the mediated aesthetic desire. Orpheus has power only over a surrogate object of desire or over the object of a surrogate desire. He has power over the lost object of desire, the power to mourn the lost object. Yet, it is precisely because the object is lost that there can be a work to mourn the loss. In this sense Orpheus's transgression is "a correct impulse"(101). Blanchot falls into a circular argument: Orpheus cannot possess Eurydice and that is why he mourns her loss and thus engenders the work, and, on the other hand, there would not have been a work had there not been a loss. The artist's powerlessness consists in his inability to possess the object of desire whereas his power consists in being able to mourn the loss of the desired object. Perhaps this mourning constitutes Blanchot's desired powerlessness as opposed to the violence of a language that would be capable of possessing its object. However, how would Blanchot reconcile his belief that language is a form of murder—to say "this woman" is to kill her—with his notion of the work as mourning? The paradox of the limit is relevant here. In "The Narrative Voice" Blanchot argues that language as such—while it exists only of sentences, not yet making up a *recit*—runs the risk of obscuring or forgetting the limit as limitation of meaning since it tends to privilege the power of the language to un-limit the limit. Supposedly, when such sentences are made part of a *recit*, both aspects of the limit are preserved: its power to un-limit and its powerlessness to resist the limitation of meaning. Language is violent only on the level of sentences, on the level where no work is yet produced. Language becomes mourning in the work. Naming

things, when it occurs outside the work, is murder, which implies that, in this case, language actually possesses the thing it names/kills for otherwise why would it be considered murder? Naming within the work is powerlessness, failure, the loss of the object. But is this a real loss or an imposture? How can one view the work as mourning if the work is defined as a “neutralization” of the world (The Gaze 134)? Neutralization and mourning are mutually opposed insofar as neutralization implies power, mastery, ability to do without the world, while mourning implies pure powerlessness, failure. What was a loss then is not really a loss since it becomes the main--and perhaps only--justification of the artistic act. It is a fortunate loss as it makes mourning--Orpheus’s “infinite sojourn in death”(101) or the work--possible.

In a sense, this mourning is voluntary. The artist pretends to mourn (to lose Eurydice) so as better to kill her. He chooses the absent object so as to kill it once again, to make it even more absent, which is achieved by revealing it as absence, disclosing its concealment. Mourning (writing) merely repeats the original death: in mourning, as in the *other* night, death appears *as such*. The work’s need of self-justification becomes obvious in Blanchot’s language when he explains why the work does not judge Orpheus’s transgression: “And everything happens *as if*, by disobeying the law, by looking at Eurydice Orpheus was only yielding to the profound demands of the work, *as though*, through this inspired gesture, he really had carried the dark shade out of Hell, *as though* he had unknowingly brought it back into the broad daylight of the work”(101 italics added). Everything takes place as if Orpheus’s desire for the impossible object were in fact necessary for there to be a song at all. Although this ties in with the preceding discussion of the circularity of Blanchot’s argument about the artistic act as a

form of ritualized mourning, the *as if* and *as though* seem to undermine the absolute necessity of the loss or of the transgression, a necessity--hence, authenticity--this statement tries to prove. Supposedly, the statement suggests that Orpheus's transgressive desire to render concealment visible is necessary for there to be a work at all i.e. for there to be concealment. But Orpheus's error conceals [pun intended] a double gesture. His *failure* to make concealment visible *exposes* concealment: the failure makes it visible that concealment cannot be made visible. Concealment is unconcealed, though in an indirect way, through Orpheus's very failure to unconceal it. Blanchot cannot step out of the optical realm, which is also the realm of tautologies. He cannot avoid the paradox that the fact that concealment cannot be revealed *signifies or reveals that* concealment cannot be made visible. Yet a curious reversal now takes place: whereas before it seemed that the *as if* undermined the absolute necessity of Orpheus's error, now it seems that the *as if* undermines the idea that concealment is made visible precisely in the movement which insists on the impossibility of making it visible (unfortunately, though not surprisingly, a typical Blanchotian circularity affects like a virus the present analysis). If this is the case, we would have to say that Orpheus's gaze only *seems* necessary for the revelation of the impossibility of making concealment visible, whereas, in fact, the essence of concealment remains concealed at all times, never becoming the object of Orpheus's gaze, never revealing its own resistance to unconcealment. But this would render Orpheus's gaze absolutely superfluous, which would, in turn, run counter to Blanchot's argument that without the gaze there is no work. So, whichever of the two interpretations we choose, Orpheus's gaze will always appear somewhat suspect as a justification of the work's existence.¹⁷

If the work of art, for Blanchot, cannot disguise itself as mourning but is, as we have suggested, a second murder, the work of art in Heidegger's account appears somewhat simpler. It is suffused with the work of truth and with a certain kind of materiality. Its truth is intimate, warm, almost cozy like *the earth*. Whatever negative aspects it has, they concern it only formally: truth is unconcealment, which, for Heidegger, is a refusal, but a refusal that makes affirmation possible, a refusal that is the very luminosity of being. There is no mourning since, if the origin of the work is art and if art is the unconcealment of truth, there can be no loss. Moreover, dissimulation, illusion, appearance are subsumed under truth and treated as manifestations of the nature of truth as un-truth i.e. as merely temporary delays in unconcealment, delays which are, in fact, welcome since they suggest that there will be more to be unconcealed, that truth will never be exhausted: a great Promise. Because of this mourning—or even the pretense of mourning—is impossible. What is concealed—what would be a potential cause for mourning—will be unconcealed, because this is the nature of Heideggerian truth. Heidegger's metaphysics and aesthetics is oriented toward a bright future promising new unconcealments, an inexhaustible *reservoir* of truth.

Just as Heidegger has to ignore the formal impossibility of the question of the nothing, Blanchot's writing reveals the question of Orpheus's gaze as a metaphor dramatizing the formal impossibility of the question of the origin of literature. Heidegger does admit the formal impossibility of situating the unthinkable before thought just as Blanchot has to admit that the failure of literature to originate cannot precede a certain origin or the thought of a certain origin. This thought already compromises the 'failure' so that the failure itself becomes an equally valid origin. Literature lacks origin but not in

the usual sense of lack, which presupposes the opposite alternative of having an origin but rather in the sense, in which time's absence is not "a purely negative mode" but 'a time without negation'(The Space 30). In his desire to escape the strong pull of dialectic, not to allow the thought of the origin as lacking, Blanchot makes that lack itself independent of what it lacks (of its object) and thus turns lack into an origin itself. The impossibility of an origin becomes the origin just as "the impossibility of making any presence real" is itself "an impossibility which is *present*"(31 italics added).

It might seem that Heidegger is privileging the totality of beings over its negation in the nothing but his positing of the totality of beings as given beforehand is only the result of logic, an effect of "the formal impossibility of the question of the nothing"(100). He insists that the nothing precedes any kind of formal logic: "We assert that that the nothing is more original than the 'not' and negation"(99). On the other hand, to reach the conclusion that the nothing is not an operation of the intellect, thinking (negation) was required. We deny that the nothing obeys the logic of the intellect, yet the denial depends on this very logic. Heidegger himself suggests that the nothing is possible only as an imaginary nothing or "a formal concept," at which we arrive through a negation of our idea of a totality of beings, which suggests that the nothing is not more originary than the totality of beings: "But the nothing is nothing, and if the nothing represents total indistinguishability, no distinction can obtain between the imagined and the 'genuine' nothing. And the 'genuine' nothing itself—isn't this the camouflaged but absurd concept of a nothing that is?"(101) The nothing is imaginary but this in no way compromises it since to say that there is a 'genuine' nothing is to sacrifice the nothing to our habitual way of thinking (perhaps our *only* way of thinking) in terms of being and non-being. In

the same way, Blanchot can deny the idea of the origin of literature only *through* the idea of the origin. In order to argue that literature is a response to the infinite, to what cannot be exhausted (The Gaze 101), Blanchot has to posit the infinite and thus make it into a limit, giving it a certain degree of definitiveness. For the habitual notion of the origin as something stationary, stable, and singular, Blanchot substitutes the notion of infinity, which, though it seems to be a negation of origin, is merely a metaphor substituted for it. Blanchot can think that this changes our understanding of literature only because he conflates the *meaning* of ‘infinity’—infinity as signifying inexhaustibility and limitlessness—with the *function* of the notion of infinity as it is used in his system, where infinity has a strictly determined role not really different from the role of the origin in the system of thinking Blanchot is trying to overturn. To claim that the origin of literature cannot be named—because it is infinity—does not mean that it cannot be named *qua* origin i.e. as that which plays the role of origin. But just as in the case of Heidegger’s nothing, the fact that all we can have is a “formal concept” of it does not make this nothing, as it were, ‘inauthentic’, so in the case of Blanchot’s infinity as origin, the fact that we can only point to its function—i.e. we can only talk about an imaginary origin—does not mean that we cannot consider it as the ‘formal concept’ of origin. Both Heidegger’s and Blanchot’s discourses originate in a hypothesis, the hypothesis that the formal impossibility of the central questions in their discourses—the question of the nothing and the question of literature—can be bypassed, perhaps precisely because it is a formal impossibility i.e. a logical one, whereas neither being nor literature are subject to any kind of formal logic since they are both transcendent.

In both discourses, the question of the origin is always connected to the question of essence, though it is developed in significantly different ways. Paul de Man might have been talking about Blanchot's notion of the origin-essence relationship when he examines the work of Ludwig Binswanger on the "pathological" nature of the poetic personality. De Man notes that for Binswanger "the thematic content of a work of art must reveal the state of consciousness to which the author has been brought by the very act of inventing the work" (Blindness 47). This remark should be situated in the context of de Man's general critique of a certain arrogance in the deconstructive approach to the work of art, a critique especially poignant in de Man's reading of Derrida's reading of Rousseau. What is intriguing, however, is that Blanchot may be guilty of Binswanger's error. By arguing that the artist cannot but betray the call of inspiration and thus, by opposing inspiration to the work, Blanchot suggests that the work exists only as a sacrifice of an originary, authentic (because imprudent) impulse i.e., the work becomes a kind of false consciousness from the point of view of inspiration, a fall from authenticity. Blanchot creates an irreversible split between the origin of literature (inspiration as transgression) and the work's essence, a split underscored by Blanchot's idiom of the *as if* (The Gaze 101). On one hand, the *as if* connecting inspiration to the work can be interpreted to mean that inspiration (the transgression of the work's law) is not, in fact, obeying the work's law but is instead really transgressive and only appears to be the artist's response to the work's demand. On the other hand, however, the *as if* can be interpreted to mean that inspiration actually serves, though indirectly or discreetly, the needs of the work and however transgressive it may appear, it is actually necessary for there to be a work at all. Its transgressiveness would be revealed as purposeful, lawful,

obeying the law of the work and in fact constitutive of that law (by the same logic as that of the supplement). The first interpretation is what creates the split mentioned above. Orpheus's gaze—the origin of the work or inspiration—is associated with the inessential: “under [Orpheus's] gaze, the essence of the night reveals itself to be inessential”(The Gaze 100). On the other hand, the work is associated with essence, particularly in the notion of the *essential* solitude of the work. The origin does not coincide with the essence of the work¹⁸ because the former, belonging to the realm of the inessential, is isolated from being and truth. Thus, Blanchot problematizes Heidegger's major claim in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “The origin of something is the source of its essence”(149).¹⁹ For Blanchot, the origin of the work of art is not art, but the inessential, the inhuman, indeed what is *not art at all* (but not in the sense of that which is not *yet* art i.e. an unactualized potential). In the work of art, then, art itself is at stake.²⁰ (Lyotard develops this point at length in The Inhuman: Reflections on Time.²¹) At the origin of the work of art is the question “What is a work of art?” In Heidegger, too, art is at the origin of the work but *not* in the form of a question. Art is here already defined, a known entity: it is truth setting itself to work. The essence of art is already given in the origin, whereas for Blanchot the essence is at stake in the very origin of the work of art. How is this split between origin and essence manifested in Blanchot's central metaphors such as the metaphor of the *other* night? In each of these dichotomous pairs, the term associated with absence (whether it is the absence of place, from which one could be exiled or of a self that could be solitary) is thought as the origin of the other term, which is, in turn, associated with the plenitude of essence. Unconcealment of concealment (the absence of

self, place etc.) precedes concealment (self, place etc.), compromises it and compromises truth, which appears now as an *exhausted reservoir*, a finite thing.

Blanchot's dichotomies--the first night and the *other* night, exile and exile from exile, solitude and essential solitude--echo Heidegger's ontic-ontological difference as manifested, for example, in Heidegger's oppositions of "genuine" or "profound boredom" and ordinary boredom (101) or fundamental anxiety and mere anxiousness(102). What distinguishes anxiety from mere anxiousness is that the latter always has a specific object; it is always anxiousness "for this or that" (103). Blanchot's essential solitude is an elaborated version of Heidegger's anxiety,²² both of which do not belong to or proceed from the subject: "We 'hover' in anxiety....[W]e—men who are in being—in the midst of being slip away from ourselves. *At bottom therefore it is not as though 'you' or 'I' feel ill at ease; rather it is this way for some 'one'*"(Heidegger 103 italics added). Blanchot's theory of literature attributes to writing a status similar to that which Heidegger attributes to *Dasein*. The ground of the essence of *Dasein* is transcendence: "*Dasein* is being held out into the nothing"(105). This "being held out into the nothing" is what makes possible all relationships, including that to oneself, selfhood: "Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom"(106). The transcendence of *Dasein* holds it suspended in the abyss between the originary lack of relation—what Blanchot calls "naked correlation" (The Sirens' Song 50)—and the possibility of relations. Similarly, in Blanchot's theory of literature, the possibility of selfhood is locked precisely in the deprivation of the subject of any relation to himself or to the work. Writing dispossesses the subject, holding it out into the nothing, and at the same time, without this dispossession, no self-possession would ever

be possible, no subject. In dispossessing the subject, literature brings it back to what has made it a subject in the first place. The loss of subjectivity is selfhood *par excellence*, the self reduced to its immanence. Accordingly, in “Two Versions of the Imaginary” Blanchot makes the point that the imaginary—and we can substitute here “writing” as the work of the imaginary and, therefore, as the dispossession of the subject by the imaginary—in fact “seems to deliver us *profoundly to ourselves* [for]...the image is intimate”(The Space 262 italics added).

The work’s solitude is not an absolute isolation from the self but actually delivers the self back to its pure immanence. The self is not negated but merely purified. The notion of the work’s essential solitude is similar to Georg Lukacs’s idea of the work as “a windowless monad.” In Blindness and Insight Paul de Man summarizes Lukacs’s view, explaining that the monadic structure of the work “is not due to the objective nature of the aesthetic entity but...to the subjective intent that stands at the outset of its elaboration,” the intent of “the constitutive self to reduce itself to its own immanence”(42). Perhaps this accounts for Blanchot’s inability to do away with the notion of selfhood, a failure de Man does not fail to notice. What he says about Poulet is equally applicable to Blanchot. The central paradox in Blanchot’s writing about the origin of literature is that it denies the subject access to the origin despite the fact that language itself has access to it if only to negate its possibility: “what is...claimed to be an origin always depends on the prior existence of an entity [the work] that lies beyond the reach of the self [and that ‘for all its impersonality and anonymity, still tends to be designated by metaphors derived from selfhood’], though not beyond the reach of a language that destroys the possibility of origin”(Blindness 105). Just as with the work of

art, the self is defined as that, in which the self is at stake. In all these cases, the essence of a 'thing' is precisely the putting into question of essence, and, for Blanchot, what puts essence into question is the origin. However, this putting essence into question is not a mere negation of essence.

Heidegger insists on a distinction between "mere negation" and a more originary "not"(108). Mere negation is a kind of "nihilative behavior"(108) which is merely a symbol of the originary nothing: "The saturation of existence by nihilative behavior testifies to the constant though doubtlessly obscured manifestation of the nothing that only anxiety originally reveals"(108). Blanchot's distinctions between the two types of exile, silence, and solitude have to be put to a Heideggerian test in order to determine whether they are manifestations of a mere negation or of an originary not. The loaded term in each of Blanchot's pairs has the other term of the pair for its object. Thus, all loaded terms constitute a separate language, which is meant to say something about the other group of terms, something, which cannot be said in the idiom of the other terms. There is not reason for Blanchot to stop with the metaphor of the *other* night. In "Wittgenstein's Problem" he himself admits that there cannot be one final, absolutely other language but that there is always an infinite series of languages for saying what cannot be said in a particular language: "the Other of all speech is never anything but the Other of a given speech or else the infinite movement through which one mode of expression...forgets itself, exalts itself, challenges itself or obliterates itself in some other mode" (The Gaze 130-131). There cannot be one *uber*-language, which would not need another language to contextualize it. Obviously, Blanchot's series of dichotomies are based on this logic. The question is this: why does Blanchot stop with the notion of the

other night (the *other* solitude, etc.)? Is he justified in suggesting that the *other* night does not need an *other other* night as a framework? Radicalization of difference requires an essential similarity to be given in advance. The incommensurability between the level of world and work is possible precisely because of what, allegedly, is present in one (world) but not in the other (work)—the subject. Speaking about the dispossession of the subject, Blanchot cannot but speak in metaphors of selfhood thus undermining his own argument. The shadow of the subject remains even at the level of essential solitude and it *has* to remain because the subject's absence can be signified only through the presence of absence. Blanchot turns the work into a kind of monstrous, tyrannical presence (or rather absence, since Blanchot revels in negativity and finds it hard to write at least one somewhat affirmative sentence) which sucks into it both the reader and the writer. The writer cannot read his own work, but if the reader has the same status as the writer (the writer does not occupy a privileged position in relation to the reader), then is there a reader for the work? Blanchot gets himself into self-contradictions as a result of his 'radical' claims: the writer is "dismissed" (The Space 21) by the work but, at the same time, he "belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing but the word being" (22). Thus he belongs most truly to the essence of the work precisely in his dismissal from it. To use Blanchot's terminology, the writer is dismissed from dismissal. He is rejected on one level but happily welcomed and affirmed on another, even more essential level. Although Blanchot wishes to establish the work's solitude as something absolutely foreign to the notion of selfhood, he can only reinstate the rejected self.²³ Thus the solitude of the work is defined as "the absence of any defining criteria" (22) or as infinity, but this infinity is "just the mind's infiniteness" (22). Or else, 'work' becomes

interchangeable with ‘writer’ since both belong to being. The dismissal of the self is not its destruction but the overcoming of the forgetfulness of being in the self. The *writer* is dismissed to salvage the *being* of the writer: the act of ‘righting the wrong,’ of rehabilitating the forgotten being, is attained at the expense of alienating being from the subject and thus repeating the gesture that was supposed to be exposed. But even this rehabilitation is suspect since the work does not say being but only the *word* being (22). Blanchot’s painstaking efforts to distinguish between two types of solitude are unjustified. De Man observes that “it follows from the rhetorical nature of language that the cognitive function resides in the language and not in the subject”(Blindness 137). In the context of this already overfamiliar point, Blanchot’s distinction becomes superfluous. Blanchot starts from the naïve assumption that the difference between the two types of solitude must be *proved*, whereas, in fact, the rhetorical nature of language, having already evacuated the subject, allows only for *one* solitude, what Blanchot calls “essential solitude.” Blanchot’s notion of the dispossessed subject might turn out to be just an act of bad faith, a fear to admit that the self is irrevocably divided, a reluctance to see poetic consciousness as “an essentially divided, sorrowful, and tragic consciousness”(Blindness 241). After all, it is easier to declare the loss of self in literature—in order to preserve it at least outside literature—than to face a tragically divided self.²⁴

The worldly solitude of the smug ego, the mere exile that is not yet the absolute absence of place, the merely essential first night—all of these presented as impostures—are necessary pointers, without which it would be impossible to understand Rimbaud’s renunciation of poetry or Kafka’s exile from exile. The question is this: is the imposture

outside these distinctions or within them? Are Rimbaud's renunciation of poetry and Kafka's exile from exile impostures, examples of mere "nihilative behavior" or originary, ontological acts? If the work is an originary act, if it has *Dasein's* transcendence, if its essence is the origin as the unconcealment of truth (according to Heidegger), is it possible for the subject to renounce the work? For Blanchot this is possible because the origin does not coincide with the essence of the work, and so, to renounce the work is not to renounce essence. But is not it arrogant to claim that he who has no mastery over the work and can never attain the work, can nevertheless turn away from it? Blanchot asserts that mastery "consists in the power to stop writing" (The Space 25), thus granting the subject power over the work. It might be objected that to stop writing involves only the book, not the work. However, Blanchot's analysis of Rimbaud's gesture insists that the empirical negation (stopping writing) concerns the work—which is, supposedly, transcendental—not the book. If the work dispossesses the self, if in the essential solitude of the work, the "I" cannot find itself, then the *renunciation* of the work would announce the restoration of the "I", its coming into self-possession again. Death would then become possible (it was impossible in the work), which means that death would *belong* to the subject (25). Thus, renunciation—an act of negation—would restore the possibility of the *I* to die. But since it is the subject who consciously renounces the work, it appears that the subject precedes negation i.e., it is a question of a mere nihilative behavior, not an essential not. It is a question of negation as an intellectual faculty, not as an originary ground (such as Heidegger's nothing). Another proof of the merely nihilative nature of Rimbaud's gesture²⁵ is found in Blanchot's idea of the relationship of silence to writing. In writing, the writer who writes silences that, which precedes language in order to draw

attention to it. But there is another type of silence—that of the writer who stops writing and this silence Blanchot calls “the source of [the writer’s] mastery”(The Space 27). But if writing, as silencing, bears witness to being by expressing the forgetfulness of being, then the decision to stop writing is not mastery but a betrayal, a forgetfulness of forgetfulness.²⁶

Blanchot’s distinctions between the ontic and the ontological rely precisely on the claim that the *other* in each of his pairs of oppositions (or rather supplements) is a scandal of negation, a truly transcendental negation, a special kind of power that only Rimbaud’s renunciation possesses, a special kind of doom that is proper only to Kafka’s exile. Thus, the sheer impossibility of bypassing the notion of self—a linguistic and ontological impossibility—shatters the poles of Blanchot’s metaphorical system. Blanchot’s *other* terms (which are always meant to reveal something about the origin) are merely a “nihilative behavior” namely because in Blanchot’s aesthetic the origin is not identical with the essence of the work and, therefore, renunciation or exile do not—cannot—concern the essence of the work.

In his analysis of the origin of the work of art Heidegger constructs a hermeneutic circle: the origin of the work of art is art but art is itself an origin, the origin or the unconcealedness of truth. Both the artist and the work are preceded by something more originary than either of them: art (Heidegger 149). By the time Heidegger reaches a sort of definition of art, he has already fallen into a series of inconsistencies and self-contradictions. First, he tries to distinguish the work as a being from what he calls “mere things.” A mere thing “designates whatever is not simply nothing”(152): a mere thing is rather than not. (Curiously enough, this is Lyotard’s definition of the sublime object—

which is hardly a “mere thing” for him—in The Inhuman.) The work, by contrast, has “the mode of being of a work,” not “the mode of being of a thing”(152). In “What Is Metaphysics?” Heidegger had argued that the basic question of metaphysics is the question of the nothing: “ ‘Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?’”(112). Are we to assume then that, since the work is not a mere thing and we cannot say of the work that it is rather than not, then the work of art is not the province of metaphysics since it does not pose the question of the nothing? Is art outside metaphysics? No, because in “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger comes back to this point and in fact affirms that the createdness of the work, which, unlike Blanchot, he does not deny, consists exactly in this “something is rather than not”: “a work is at all rather than is not”(182). He goes on to distinguish it from a mere thing by arguing that the *quod* of the work differs from that of mere things in that the *quod* of the latter has fallen into oblivion whereas the work of art brings it forth and preserves it. What makes the work of art extraordinary is that the more strongly it emphasizes its own event character, the more difficult—and eventually impossible—it is for us to establish a relationship to it, “the more strange and solitary the work becomes”(183). A curious paradox: the more the work bears witness to being by bringing it forth from its oblivion, the more it makes presence present, the less able are we to relate to it. The more it *is*, the less it is *for us*. Lyotard will develop this line of thought into the claim that the work of art makes man present, but in Heidegger there is yet no trace of such a bridge between the being of the work—the rehabilitation of its forgotten being—and man’s own being/presence. The work is a mere thing in that it is rather than not, but it is also more than a mere thing in that the *quod* is not forgotten in it and in that we cannot access the

work. The paradox in this formulation is obvious: how can the Being of a being be forgotten if the subject has no access to that Being in the work: “the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passage way that destroys itself in the creative process”(167)? If art is the setting to work of truth or the unconcealedness of Being, the coming forth of the origin, if this is an event in the course of which the artist destroys himself, we must situate the time of forgetfulness of Being before the work and thus also before the artist. But then whose forgetfulness is it? It cannot be the artist’s since he belongs to a “later” time, that of conservation and rehabilitation of Being. Heidegger wishes to talk about concealedness and unconcealedness *as such*, apart from a subject, but is bound to fall back, just like Blanchot, into anthropological metaphors.

Blanchot’s distinction between book and work is a rewriting of Heidegger’s distinction between “mere thing” and “work,” with the same pejorative connotations of “mere thing” now applied to “book.” For Heidegger, the thingly character of a work is always guaranteed whereas its workly character can be threatened and even destroyed, as, for instance, by the art industry (168). Heidegger writes: “the most immediate reality of the work, its thingly substructure, does not belong to the work”(165), and “[a]s soon as we look for such a thingly substructure in the work, we have unwittingly taken the work as equipment, to which we then also ascribe a superstructure supposed to contain its artistic quality”(165-66). Similarly, in Blanchot’s interpretation of Rimbaud’s gesture of renunciation, the work is not merely an aesthetic object but encompasses the artist’s entire life: “[...] what Rimbaud asks of poetry: not to produce beautiful works, or to answer to an aesthetic ideal, but to help man...to be more than himself...to make literature an experience that concerns the whole of life and the whole of being”(The Work of Fire

154-155).²⁷ Heidegger's argument that "the road toward the determination of the thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work but from work to thing"(166) is reflected in Blanchot's idea that the artist aims at the work but writes only a book as well as in the notion of the work as a road toward inspiration rather than the inspiration as a road toward the work (The Space 186). For Heidegger, the work is not merely an object to which aesthetic values are predicated, nor is it a piece of equipment (created and useful) but is the very happening of truth. The work says being: "Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of beings" (185). By contrast, Blanchot's work says only "the *word* being "(The Space 22). To write is to silence the "giant murmuring upon which language opens"(27). To give voice to that originary silence which is being, one must silence it. Just as to communicate one's solitude is to compromise it, so to say being one must make it into what it is not. Being is that which makes silence possible. The only way to say being—which is before silence—is to silence it.²⁸ The act of writing is an act of concealment which aims at the unconcealment of being. Writing cannot really say being, but it can, through concealing being, unconceal the forgetfulness of being, the being "which language shelters by concealing it"(22). For Blanchot, literature can only say *that* being is—the *word* being—i.e. *that* being is concealed, but it cannot unconceal it. Heidegger's view of art as the work of truth is clearly more optimistic. Blanchot, on the other hand, wishes to separate the work from any sort of relation. His list of "enemies" is long and includes: history, truth,²⁹ action, self, time, reason, even language. The work is a sort of death: where the work is, I am not and vice versa. Where the work is, language is not for it "disappears into the silent void of the work"(22). The presence of language signifies merely the presence of the book. Levinas captures the bleakness of Blanchot's

vision when compared with Heidegger's: "The Neuter of Blanchot is foreign to the world—with a strangeness beyond all strangeness....Completely different from the being (*sein*)—itself also anonymous—of Heidegger, which...is the very luminosity of the world, the place, the landscape, and peace"(55-56). In the context of what Edmond Jabes writes in The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion--"What we don't see is what allows us to see"(61)--Blanchot's belief that what we cannot cease seeing is the invisible implies that we are deprived of that, which makes vision possible, deprived of the possibility of concealment, which is what makes unconcealment—truth—possible. If concealment itself is made visible, we do not really see, because vision demands depth. Blanchot's aesthetic hollows out any notion of depth with the unconcealment of concealment in Orpheus's gaze.

However, the work is not identical with or exhausted by language. Since language belongs to the thing or the book, it is only one aspect of the work: Rimbaud's renunciation is not just the renunciation of language but more than that. In contrast, Heidegger sees language as truth setting itself to work: "All art...is as such, in essence, poetry"(184). Language is identified with the work, and "the linguistic work, poetry in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts"(185). Language is not a thingly thing, is not a material that is used, and used up, in the artistic act. The work of art "does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time"(171). Heidegger wants to prevent the work from doing violence to itself by disparaging itself as mere use of its material, and thus disparaging language as well by treating it merely as material: "[n]owhere in the work is there any trace of a work-material"(172). Heidegger is optimistic: for him the great work of art is capable of

inventing its material. Literature for Heidegger is a sort of auto-affection: literature wonders at itself, language wonders at its own possibility. Although inherent in this wonder is the threat of impossibility, Heidegger seems to emphasize the possibility. In contrast, Blanchot stresses the threat of impossibility, the fragility of the work's existence. Despite this difference, however, Heidegger and Blanchot think possibility and impossibility, respectively, in a strikingly similar way, as an essentially moral law. Blanchot's idea of the work as that which "requires no attention be paid to it" (The Sirens' Song 47), which "possesses him [the artist] entirely and rejects him entirely, requires of him more than it is possible for any moral code to require of any man, and yet does not compel him in any way" (49), recalls Heidegger's argument in "What Calls for Thinking": "Most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking" to the extent that "[e]verything thought-provoking *gives* us to think" (346).³⁰ Similarly, for Blanchot what is most demanding is that, which does not demand anything from us, does not call upon us.

Heidegger's understanding of the origin of the work of art must be situated within the context of his metaphysics, in which being, essence, and truth are always double gestures of concealment and unconcealment. His notion of truth as un-truth rests on the double gesture of concealment as a refusal and a dissembling (176). The origin is both a limit and an openness of a possibility: "Concealment as refusal is not simply and only the limit of knowledge in any given circumstance, but the beginning of the lighting of what is lighted. But concealment, though of another sort...also occurs within what is lighted....Here concealment is not simple refusal. Rather, a being appears, but it presents itself as other than it is" (175-176). The limit of the work is already contained in its origin,

and this limit is exactly its possibility, its coming forth into the lighting. It may appear that Heidegger's notion of truth is not really a radical departure from classical metaphysics, especially given the conventional terminology of truth and un-truth. The idea of truth as unconcealment, the idea that "denial in the manner of concealment belongs to unconcealedness as lighting"(176) is not particularly original or challenging. What is radically new in Heidegger is the second movement within truth as unconcealment, that of dissembling. Error, illusion, or appearance are not situated outside truth but within it: "Truth occurs precisely as itself in that the concealing denial, as refusal, provides the steady provenance of all lighting, and yet, as dissembling, metes out to all lighting the infeasible severity of error"(177). Dissembling belongs to truth but it is not that which makes truth un-truth, and this un-truth itself is not falsehood (176). Truth is un-truth in the sense that it is never fully and finally unconcealed. The refusal as both the limit and the possibility of lighting determines truth as un-truth: "truth is un-truth insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet-revealed, the un-covered, in the sense of concealment"(180). This should not be understood in the negative sense—something is *not* yet unconcealed—but in the positive sense of a possible future, an openness (hence the word "reservoir"), an infinite possibility for truth to set itself to work. Because Heidegger incorporates dissembling into truth, for him there can be nothing else but truth. All things are concealed (and thus unconcealed since concealment as refusal is the very lighting into which the Being of beings comes forth), and although some may be (un)concealed as others than they are, they still *are* (true). Imposture or appearance is merely a result of the impossibility—to put it bluntly—of all things to be unconcealed to exactly the same degree and at the same time. Heidegger decisively warns

against the conflation of truth as un-truth with the idea of truth as inherently false or of truth as containing its dialectical opposite (176).

Blanchot, on the other hand, is not so clear in the distinctions he makes between his nebulous key terms. Blanchot's discourse obeys a certain economy of thinking, the economy of gift and sacrifice, limit and limitlessness. It is as if he cannot tolerate vacancy but must always move from emptiness to fullness, balancing out his series of extreme terms so that, in the final analysis, even what appear to be mutually exclusive ideas or statements are happily reconciled. The paradox of Blanchot's writing is precisely this: a purely metaphorical, highly personalized form of writing and thinking constitutes an extremely elaborate and well regulated *system*, which functions in accordance with one basic law, that of substitution. Blanchot's key terms are constructed through alternative substitution of possibility with impossibility and vice versa³¹. He defines the valorized term in each pair as the *other* of the other term. Since this would make it very easy for us to argue that anything which is not solitude could be called the *other* of solitude, we must assume a certain intimate connection between the opposing terms. The absolutely *other* in every pair of terms is the particular absence of the most characteristic feature of the *basic* (first) term. The solitary subject is not yet solitary since he can still refer to himself as an "I." The first night is not yet the real night since it does not reveal the impossibility of death. Exile is not yet real exile since it is still a place. In each case, the loaded term—toward which Blanchot is biased—is defined as the absence of the condition of possibility of the basic term: essential solitude is the absence of a subject, which, however, is exactly what determines the essence of solitude; the *other* night is the absence of death; Kafka's exile is the absence of place from which one can be exiled. The

other, in each case, is not merely the intensification of the basic term but its absolute impossibility.

Essence—and truth—are determined, in Blanchot, through negation. Is this negation—essence as impossibility—the same as Heidegger’s concealment as refusal? Not quite. Heidegger’s concealment as refusal is an openness; it is necessary for possibility to emerge *as such*. Blanchot’s impossibility, however, does not open up space.³² It is not clear if it is an ontological one or merely a failure of the subject. The latter seems more likely since all of Blanchot’s writing on the subject of literature proceeds from the assumption that the origin of things—of art—must be searched for, that it will not reveal itself. Orpheus’s gaze as a metaphor for the artistic act turns on this assumption as well: the work is sacrificed in *the search for the origin*. For Heidegger, on the other hand, *truth is not cast as a search for truth*. Rather, truth has always already exposed us to the lighting so that even if we decide to search for the origin of the work, as Heidegger does, the search is protected and its success guaranteed by the unconcealedness of things: “With all our correct representations we would get nowhere...unless the unconcealedness of beings *has already exposed us to*, placed us in that lighted realm in which every being stands for us and from which it withdraws”(174 italics added).

The book belongs to the first night, the work to the *other* night. The book’s connection to the artist is an intimate one. The book is the night, into which the artist exiles himself from the world. The book is a night since in it the world has disappeared. In the work, the disappearance of the world appears. The work is the impossibility of the world ever disappearing absolutely, the impossibility of concealment to remain invisible.

The night—death—appears exactly in the disappearance of the world. In the work, death is and, therefore, it is never “dead enough”(163). For Heidegger the possibility of something is a function of an originary concealment, a refusal which is also a coming forth into the lighting. For Blanchot, however, everything seems already unconcealed, including concealment itself. There is no originary refusal as reservoir of truth as untruth; instead, “the invisible is what one cannot cease to see”(The Space 163). The visible and the invisible collapse into each other. The work, in Heidegger, is solitary but it is not completely dissociated from the subject: “The attempt to define the work-being of the work purely in terms of the work itself proves to be unfeasible”(179). Although Heidegger distinguishes between *techne* as “a mode of knowing”(180) and the mere act of making, he still keeps the notion of a self. He suggests a kind of progression of the solitude of the work where “[t]he more solitary the work...and the more cleanly it seems to cut all ties to human beings, the more simply does the thrust come into the open that such a work is”(183). The privileged status of art—of poetry in particular—consists in the wonder art provokes at its sheer being. However, there seems to be, in this progression of increasing degrees of solitude, a point beyond which the wonder at the work’s quod is no longer possible. Heidegger never reaches that point since for him the possibility of the work is at least as much as its impossibility. But should the impossibility start outweighing the possibility, the work can no longer be defined in terms of privation. This is what happens in Blanchot’s writing. His *other* night carries to the extreme the Heideggerian solitude of the work, to the point where the work becomes so absolutely other, so solitary that the idea of a reservoir of truth can no longer be sustained. The other night is the impossibility of concealment, and thus, of truth as un-

truth, as a margin of possibility, as a remainder, a possible future. For Blanchot, everything is already given, out in the open, unconcealed. The *other* night, although it seems to be an ontological depth, is in fact the flattening out of depth. Blanchot deprives himself of the Heideggerian concealment as the condition of possibility of truth and, thus, of art. If there is no originary limit or horizon (Heidegger's refusal), there is no guarantee that there is something asking, calling, waiting to be unconcealed. Blanchot cannot define the work of art—like Heidegger and like Lyotard—in terms of privation, as pure wonder, as the remembering of Being, since being can be remembered only from the point of view of an originary concealment, which, however, is lacking in Blanchot. If everything is already given, nothing could have been forgotten or, if something has indeed been forgotten, this forgetfulness has itself fallen into oblivion: “this other night is...the forgetfulness which gets forgotten”(The Space 164). The *other* night, as the impossibility of concealment, is also the impossibility of origin. Blanchot's bias toward the *other* night makes the impossibility of the work greater than its possibility and thus cannot allow the Heideggerian optimistic definition of the work as the remembering of Being. Blanchot's *first* night is a corollary of Heidegger's truth to the extent that the first night is negation as *pouvoir* in the same sense, in which Heidegger's originary refusal or concealment is actually a reservoir. The first night still obeys the day's laws; it is a productive negation, one that leaves a meaningful remainder, one still “permeated with humanity”(The Space 165). The first night is the possibility of death, death serving as an appropriate background, against which the day shines even brighter. This night repeats Heidegger's movement of unconcealedness as the origin of truth: “In the first night it seems that we will go—by going further ahead—toward something essential”(168). The *other* night,

however, does not have any parallels in Heidegger. It is almost as if Heidegger's metaphysics is too positivistic to even allow for such an absolute and inexpressible negativity as is found in Blanchot's notion of the *other* night.

While both Heidegger and Blanchot start from the common necessity to ignore the formal impossibility of the central questions of their metaphysics/aesthetics, Blanchot takes the question of literature not only beyond the point of its independence from formal logic, but beyond the realm of ontology itself, implying that the question of the origin of literature is even more originary than Heidegger's question (the question of metaphysics)—the question of the nothing.³³ However, Blanchot fails to present this radical claim convincingly in what can be considered his central essay on the origin of the work of art, "Orpheus's Gaze," in which the myth of Orpheus, as a metaphor for the origin of the work of art, does not constitute a strong case for a pre-ontological, trans-metaphysical notion of the work of art. Literature exists as the silencing of its origin. What precedes literature is what precedes its essence, and that is the origin, *not*, as Blanchot would have us believe, something *before* the origin, *before* the quod, *before* ontology. Because of the split between the origin and the essence of the work--the split between the *quod* and the *quid* of the work--Blanchot's metaphors for the *other* cannot have an originary significance but are gestures of "mere negation,"³⁴ in Heidegger's terms, which do not concern the essence of the work of art but are mere perversions of the ontic-ontological difference.

Notes

¹ Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2nd ed. ed. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983).

² Sarah Lewall also notes Blanchot's peculiar methodology, "a metaphorical or allusive approach [which]...takes abstract existential notions and gives them emotional impact as 'death,' 'absence,' or 'space'," "Negative Consciousness," Critics of Consciousness (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1968) 243.

³ The distinction between book and work raises a lot of questions that Blanchot does not really answer. If the writer knows that there is a difference between book and work, on the basis of what criteria does he judge that he has fallen short of the work? Failure presupposes knowledge of the standard (of the supposedly unattainable work) after which one is striving and of which one falls short. Is the work as an aim different from the work as the solitude of the work? If what the writer affirms "is deprived of self" (The Space of Literature 26), doesn't he thus attain the work unintentionally? Could it be that the only reason he doesn't arrive at the work is that he deceives himself that he's written the book? Perhaps it is just a matter of ignorance—he doesn't know that he is dispossessed but precisely in his ignorance he has already arrived at the work, at solitude. Isn't the work solitary only because the writer *does not know* of his dispossession, i.e. he doesn't know that the work is solitary?

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "About Blanchot: an Interview," SubStance 14 (1976): 54-57.

⁵ Edmond Jabes, The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

⁷ See Levinas 56. Levinas notes that "one can't talk of an 'experience of literature' in Blanchot, "there where, literally, for Blanchot, there is no longer anything. Except the very void of absence and the prolonged yawning of its gaping." Blanchot's writing becomes automatically suspect given that his key terms participate too willingly in the currently fashionable discourse of nihilism and privation. On the other hand, Bataille would characterize Blanchot's view of literature as a manifestation of "inner experience" insofar as "in experience, what is stated is nothing, if not a means and even, as much as a means, an obstacle; what counts is no longer the statement of wind, but the wind." See Georges Bataille, Inner Experience, trans. Leslie Ann Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 13.

⁸ Just as many of Blanchot's ideas are reworkings of Heidegger's, Blanchot's writing is "plagiarized" by Edmond Jabes in the latter's The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion. Jabes repeats all of Blanchot's key images, and sometimes his language does not even make an effort to disguise the debt: "Nothingness, our eternal place of exile, *the exile of Place*"(17 italics added), "The writer's despair is not that he cannot write a book, but that he must *forever pursue a book he is not writing*"(29 italics added), "Could we then maintain that certain solitudes are pledged to *the night*, others, to *the day*"(31 italics added), "Solitude cannot be uttered without immediately ceasing to be"(32), "Solitude of a word, then, solitude of the word before the word, of *the night before night*"(34 italics added), "The question creates, the answer kills"(37).

⁹ See Timothy Clark, Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 65. Clark traces Blanchot's impersonal voice back to the Romantic notion of poetic voice, which also "incorporated non-subjective elements of a sort now more closely associated with writing, namely, a relation to the daimonic or non-human element in poetry."

¹⁰ See Joseph Libertson, Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille, and Communication (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982) 138. Libertson 'derives' Blanchot's notion of art as 'existing' beyond the realm of being and truth from a Levinasian reading of Blanchot's "The Gaze of Orpheus." Libertson argues that the impossibility of the *oeuvre* is a function of the impossibility of communication in an ontological sense and reads Orpheus's gaze as a failure to enter into communication with alterity, a failure which takes place in the very desire to possess the Other (Eurydice) i.e., even *before* Orpheus's descent into the underworld.

¹¹ See Leslie Hill, Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary (London: Routledge, 1997) 87. Hill, too, remarks that "Blanchot refuses the moment of reconciliation between *Dichtung* and Being."

¹² Maurice Blanchot, The Sirens' Song,

¹³ For a comparison of Blanchot's idea of 'writing' as opposed to Heidegger's *Dichtung*, see Clark 64-107.

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, The Gaze of Orpheus, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982).

¹⁶ For an insightful analysis of the paradoxes of Orpheus's myth, see Michael Newman, "The Trace of Trauma," Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996) 153-173.

¹⁷ Certain passages in The Step Not Beyond, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) confirm—intentionally or unintentionally—the suspect status of Orpheus's desire as transgression. Blanchot writes: "*The hope of transgressing the law was tied to the deception* that, in the very moment of transgression, led him to pose an equal law, although of a higher power, which he then had to transgress anew, without any hope of being able to do so except by posing a new and always higher law, which made of this infinite passage from the law to its transgression and from this transgression to another law *the only infraction that upheld the eternity of his desire* (23-24 italics added). Transgression has always already occurred insofar as desire desires "only in view of the prohibition"(24), and has, therefore, always already crossed the line. The only transgression is the artist's persistent self-deception that there is yet another, higher law to be transgressed i.e. , that desire is infinite. However, Orpheus's desire cannot be infinite since it is a desire for the lost Eurydice, whereas *the lost Eurydice* is guaranteed, attainable insofar as the loss of the object is the *raison d'être* of art.

¹⁸ See Paul Davies, "The Work and the Absence of the Work," Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing 91-107. Davies draws attention to Blanchot's problematization of Heidegger's aesthetic, observing that according to Blanchot (especially in Blanchot's reading of Holderlin), "the work silences the question 'what is the work?' by always transposing it into the logically derivative 'where or when is the work?'"(105).

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964), ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

²⁰ See Hill 60. Hill seems to think along similar lines when, analyzing Blanchot's "Orphic logic," he comments that the object of art is the most (im)proper object, that which puts art itself into question: "according to this Orphic logic, possibility is only ever a function of prior impossibility, and an object only ever grasped at the very moment of its ineradicable loss, the unnameable night before night constitutes the only (im)proper object (or absence of object) that literature may claim as its very own, even though for it to do so is for literature to be reminded all the while that what counts as its own is also that which is irrepressibly alien to it."

²¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, trans. Geoffrey Bennigton and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity P, 1988).

²² Heidegger's anxiety as the ontologically privileged state of mind is the basis for Blanchot's notion of dread as the writer's originary impulse to language, an idea developed in The Gaze of Orpheus.

²³ Blanchot wants to abolish the work of art as an intentional object since for him intentionality necessarily presupposes a self. However, de Man has argued convincingly that "the concept of intentionality is neither physical nor psychological in its nature, but structural" and that intentionality actually makes the created object autonomous: see Blindness 25-28. Blanchot tries to make the work into a *natural object* trusting that only this way its autonomy can be guaranteed. However, the act of creation determines the work's mode of being and, therefore, cannot be bypassed. Perhaps Blanchot's resistance to consider the work as an intentional object is prompted by what de Man calls the New Critics' reluctance to admit the intentionality of a work for fear of compromising the work's 'integrity' or 'organicity'.

²⁴ See Maureen DiLonardo Troiano, New Physics and the Modern French Novel: an Investigation of Interdisciplinary Discourse (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1995) 189-197. Troiano approaches the issue of selfhood and experience from an interesting, scientific point of view, arguing that expression in Blanchot is a "property of the entropy of [the linguistic] system." In this context, the essential solitude of the work becomes an aspect of "the positive function of entropy" rather than a solitude still dependent on the notion of selfhood.

²⁵ Rimbaud's renunciation is suspect for the same reasons that Rousseau's decision to write and thus denounce life, is suspect to Derrida. Paul de Man summarizes Derrida's argument in his essay on Derrida in Blindness and Insight: "The writer 'renounces' life, but this renunciation is hardly in good faith: it is a ruse by means of which the actual sacrifice, which would imply the literal death of the subject, is replaced by a 'symbolic' death that leaves intact the possibility of enjoying life, adding to it the possibility of enjoying the ethical value of an act of renunciation that reflects favorably on the person who performs it"(113). Rimbaud's gesture becomes meaningful because Rimbaud must believe in the validity and worth of what

he renounces. In addition, he must also believe that he is already writing something more than a book—the work—if his gesture is to have any seriousness.

²⁶ Georges Bataille suggests various reasons for Rimbaud's renunciation of poetry and although he never really takes a clear stand on whether Rimbaud's act was an imposture or an act with ontological significance, he seems to suggest that this act is not really radical and fails to attain the extreme limit insofar as it is an essentially ascetic gesture whereas, Bataille asserts, "the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want [asceticism, renunciation]" (21). Not only does Rimbaud fail to attain the extreme limit, but his act of renunciation is probably prompted by sheer vanity, which, Bataille argues, is intricately connected to the extreme limit: "Men are such—so wretched—that everything seems worthless—unless it surpasses....And at times....one tears oneself apart with the sole aim of satisfying this pride: everything is ruined in an all-absorbing vanity"(44). Rimbaud's gesture, after all, has only a personal significance: "Rimbaud having by his flight extended the 'possible' for himself, at the same time....suppressed this 'possible' for others"(148), i.e. his act is merely 'original'.

²⁷ Maurice Blanchot, The Work of Fire, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

²⁸ See Rodolphe Gasche, "The Felicities of Paradox," Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing 34-70. Gasche points out the tragic nature of the essence of literature as that which is at stake in literature, the attempt to discover "what had been put to death for language to come to life," a "quest for the moment anterior to language." This is a tragic quest, Gasche asserts, because even if literature manages to isolate that which was excluded, thus discovering the meaningless, what remains from this phenomenological reduction is not, finally, a transcendental signified that escapes signification but the very possibility of signification as such, "an inescapable degree zero of meaning to which even the meaningless must bend."

²⁹ See Clark 64-107 for a detailed analysis of Blanchot's divergence from Heidegger's notion of *aletheia*.

³⁰ This is made explicit in Blanchot's essay "The Power and the Glory" in The Gaze of Orpheus: "In our 'intellectual poverty,' then, there is also the wealth of thought, there is the indigence that gives us the presentiment that to think is always to learn to think less than we think"(120).

³¹ The problematic nature of the *other* terms comes to the front in a remark Blanchot makes in "The Absence of the Book," The Gaze of Orpheus, concerning the relation of the absence of the book to the book, a relation which is the same as that between the two terms in Blanchot's pairs of oppositions. Blanchot writes: "The 'absence of the book'...does not form a concept any more than the word 'outside' does, or the word 'fragment,' or the word 'neuter,' but it helps conceptualize the word 'book' "(154). The statement can be read in the context of another essay by Blanchot, "Wittgenstein's Problem" insofar as the two terms—the absence of the book and the book—relate to each other precisely as two 'languages.' Each of the *other* terms represents a non-conceptual, metaphorical language, whose aim is to conceptualize the basic term (solitude, exile, night etc.). The problem is that it is unclear whether the metaphors conceptualize the non-metaphorical terms (*can* they?) or the non-metaphorical terms (the concepts) serve to express the otherwise inexpressible, absolutely *other* metaphorical terms.

³² And yet, in a certain sense the impossibility to satisfy the demand of the law, in Blanchot, can also be thought as a kind of 'reservoir,' a perverse promise of indefinite impossibility structurally similar to Heidegger's notion of truth as un-truth, a 'reservoir' of truth.

³³ Gasche believes that indeed for Blanchot literature has a privileged ontological significance insofar as "[i]t is in literature that death asks this question [the question of an always other possibility, a question that makes death an affirmation], the silent question of the possibility of literature"(66). By putting the possibility of nothingness and the possibility of literature on the same plane, Gasche seems to suggest that the question of the nothing *is* the question of literature. I think, however, that these two questions are formulated somewhat differently in Heidegger and Blanchot, respectively. The question of the nothing is "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Asked this way, the question concerns only the possibility of something; it does not concern the relationship between the origin and the essence of that something once its possibility is affirmed. The question of literature Blanchot asks, however, concerns not only its possibility but, 'within' that possibility, the question of the split between origin and essence. Blanchot himself draws attention to this split in "Literature and the Right to Death," The Gaze of Orpheus: "How can I recover it [the origin], how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*"(46). See also Christopher Fynsk, "Crossing the Threshold," Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing 70-90. Fynsk reaches a different conclusion about literature's attempt to recover that, which precedes language. Fynsk argues that for Blanchot, literature's hope for recovering what has been excluded from language "lies in the materiality of language," "in the physical character of

the word.” However, Fynsk’s reading does not tie in with Blanchot’s own reading of the Orpheus myth, which distinguishes the following parallels: the day is associated with the world; the night with the disappearance of the world and thus with the materiality of language; the *other* night with the appearance of the disappearance of the world, with the relation word-world and, thus, as Gasche rightly notes, with the general law of signification. The Eurydice that Orpheus desires is not the night (the materiality of language), as Fynsk suggests, but the *other* night (Gasche’s “degree zero of meaning”).

³⁴ See, however, Steven Shaviro, Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory (Tallahassee: The Florida State UP, 1990) 143. Shaviro reads Blanchot’s penchant for indeterminacy as a form of *affirmation*: “The oxymoronic intensity of a language that erases its own postulates, problematizes its own conclusions, and thereby asserts nothing and denies nothing—this is not the undecidable suspension of affirmation but its positive and necessary condition.”

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