THE LIMIT-EXPERIENCE:

FOLLOWING BLANCHOT TOWARDS

THE OTHER IN SPEECH AND IN LITERATURE

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Thesis Abstract

Vanina Berin Kutelas, “The Limit-Experience: Following Blanchot towards the Other in Speech and in Literature”

This thesis examines Maurice Blanchot’s reflections on the human being’s relation with the Other (Autrui) and/or Presence, notions that are impossible to experience and subsume under knowledge. Close readings of Blanchot’s works “The Limit-Experience” and “Literature and the Right to Death” reveal human existence to be based on a duality of presence/absence and investigate two modes of relation to Presence: speech and literature. Blanchot suggests that the human being’s existence is based on exteriority while human life and human truth are oriented towards the reachievement of Unity-Identity. This need for Unity-Idenity causes the denial of the Other as such, manifested as the never-ending denial of Presence that is the basis for human action and knowledge. The limit-experience, Blanchot’s interpretation of Bataille’s “interior experience”, signifies a moment of freedom from representation through which Presence offers itself. As a way of reaching the revelation of Presence, Blanchot proposes the game of “plural speech” wherein the space of attention generated between the interlocutors may allow for a glimpse of the “unlimited play of thought”. Speech in general is postulated as a relation wherein the human being steps out of himself to receive the Other in the mutual space of attention, a space “in-between” two human beings that allows for a glimpse of Presence. Literature, on the other hand, aiming to recreate the Presence of beings that is annihilated in language from nothing, serves to disclose the presence of language that is based on the absence of beings, mirroring the duality of presence/absence at the heart of human existence.

Tez Özeti

Vanina Berin Kutelas, “The Limit-Experience: Following Blanchot towards the Other in Speech and in Literature”

Bu tez, Maurice Blanchot’nun insan varlığı üzerine, Öteki (Autrui) ve/ya Bulunuş ile ilşkili düşüncelerini, deneyimi mümkün olmayan nosyonlar bağlamında incelemektedir. Blanchot’nun yakın okuması yapılan iki metni “Limit Deneyimi” ve “Edebiyat ve Ölüm Hakkı”, insan varoluşunun bulunuş/ yokluk dualitesi üzerine kurulu olduğunu ortaya koyar ve Bulunuşun iki şekli olarak konuşma ve edebiyat üzerine yoğunlaşır. Blanchot insan varoluşunun dışsallık üzerine kurulu olduğunu, buna karşılık insan yaşamı ve gerçekliğinin Birlik-Özdeşlik’in yeniden ele geçirilmesi amacına yöneldiğini iddia eder. Birlik-Özdeşlik ihtiyacı Öteki’nin inkarını gerektirir ve kendini, insan eylem ve bilgisinin temeli olan Bulunuşun bitmez inkarı olarak gösterir. Limit deneyimi üzerinden Blanchot, Bulunuş’un kendini sunduğu haliyle temsilden anlık bir özgürleşmeye işaret eder. Blanchot’nun, Bulunuşun kendini açığa çıkarmasının yolu olarak önerdiği “çoğul konuşma” oyunu, konuşmacılar arasında kurulacak bir dikkat mekanının imkan vereceği “sınırsız bir düşünce oyunu”nun anlık görüsüdür. Konuşma genel anlamıyla, insanların kendilikleri dışına çıkarak Öteki’ne işte bu dikkat mekanında ulaşma ilişkileri olarak postule edilir. İki insan arasında Bulunuşun anlık görüsüne açılan “ara” mekanın olanağını yaratan konuşmadır. Diğer taraftan edebiyat, dil tarafından yok edilen varolanların Bulunuşunu hiçlikten yeniden yaratma amacıyla varolanların yokluğu üzerine temellenen dilin bulunuşunun üzerini açmaya hizmet eder. Bunu yaparken de insan varoluşunun kalbinde yer alan bulunuş/yokluk dualitesine ayna tutar.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

How to move from this equivocal state that is the senseless sense of the world, and that we ought not mistake, to the absolute truth, that pure and total light whose exigency I find in myself?
Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*

There is a sense of equivocality or ambiguity inherent in existence. This feeling of ambiguity may be thought to arise from the human being's tragic state of being in-between: the human being is neither a creature of the earth, merely existing in accord with its natural surroundings, getting on by the urge of his instincts, happily oblivious of its mortality, nor is he a God, infinite, omniscient, all-powerful, immortal and in complete control over earthly and human occurrences.

It is true that the human being has attempted to become God: out of nothing, he has built civilization, he has created his own world, both physically and ideally, a world over which he has established absolute dominion. Moreover, the human being as individual may be subject to death, however man as universal (as being) has so far endured throughout the ages, surviving nuclear wars as well as natural catastrophes. On this account it would not be mistaken to claim that man has, in a sense, achieved immortality, or that he is infinite.

Concerning knowledge, the human being has likewise acquired mastery over every area imaginable in which there is something to know. Scientific knowledge has penetrated the secrets of infinitesimal forms of organic life, of the human psyche as well as of the vast greatness of space. Hence the human being could be defined as omniscient as well.

Being thus godlike with the power to achieve everything however, the human being lacks something essential, and that which he lacks is defined by Maurice Blanchot as the possibility of death. Death is not possible for the human being as an experience, it escapes our consciousness as our consciousness is terminated by it. Yet, even if death is not possible as an experience, it is still inherent in the human being as a 'capacity for dying'. Death is, Blanchot writes, 'our most human quality; it is death only in the world—man knows death only because he is man, and he is man only because he is death in the process of becoming' (*Work,* 337). The human being becomes such on account of his capacity for dying. It may be asserted, then, that the human being or being human is based on a duality, namely that of existence/death, or of being/nothingness, or of presence/absence. Blanchot also employs the terms "possibility" and "impossibility" to designate the dual situation that is particular to the human being, maintaining that human existence bears both the dimension of the possible and the dimension of the impossible.

The experience of death is thus on the side of the impossible. However, Blanchot asserts that presence is impossible to experience as well. Being human entails the loss of presence as it does the loss of death. The human being retains at most 'a senseless sense of the world' as it is. From the vantage point of the human being, presence as such

remains in an ambiguous state manifested by the duality of possibility/impossibility, eclipsed by the world that he himself has created.

In contrast to the shadow of presence stands the ‘pure and total light’ of the absolute truth, the truth the human being ‘finds in himself’. That truth does not reside in the world to be uncovered by the human being but is rather a construction of the human being himself is a view held in Western thinking at least since the Enlightenment. The response to this belief, though, is the continuation of discourse or what Blanchot calls the ‘never-ending movement’ of the subject towards ‘the completion of history’. This movement expresses the endeavor of the human being to ‘assimilate’ all that he perceives into a “whole”, to “totalize” all that he finds outside his “self” by subsuming everything under the categories of his subjective reason. Thus emerges the ‘absolute truth’.

Notwithstanding this proud achievement, it still remains impossible for the human being to ‘move from the senseless sense of the world’. It is impossible in the sense that he cannot die or assimilate death, and it is impossible in the sense that he cannot escape the ‘senseless sense of presence’ which in turn escapes conceptualization and submission to the “whole”.

How is this presence sensed? Where does it reveal itself?

That the “whole” of ‘absolute truth’ should be pierced to allow for ever new formations, for the ‘never-ending’ movement of discourse and action, is a central feature of Blanchot’s thought. History, although a perpetual movement towards its own completion, never achieves its end, just as existence is never completely fulfilled by death. What is it that makes this never-ending movement possible?

In this thesis I have tried to illuminate some of the themes of Blanchot's thought while seeking answers to these questions. I have proceeded by way of close readings of passages from Blanchot's essay 'The Limit-Experience', placed at the heart of his work *The Infinite Conversation.* I came upon 'The Limit-Experience' while doing research on the notion of the sublime and the transporting power of literature. In Blanchot's postulation of the limit-experience I have found the equivalent of the sublime experience which in the texts of contemporary thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy has come to signify the 'touching [of] presentation on its limit, or rather, being touched, attained by it' (Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering", in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 44). In *The Infinite Conversation* I have found a text of such "transporting power" as is uncommon in texts of "theory" as well as in many texts of literature. Blanchot's work changes its form with every chapter, moving from philosophical "conversations" with writers such as Pascal, Nietzsche, Camus and Kafka to reflections of what it means to be human and sliding back into poetical dialogues, anonymous voices arising from nowhere. Blanchot's style of writing enacts what it speaks about, drawing the reader's attention and reflecting to him his innermost nature in a way which can only be expressed as "attentive" and the explication of which would require another thesis. On this account I have chosen another text of Blanchot's (with perhaps less "transporting power", yet equally powerful) to examine and elucidate his view of the work and aim of literature, namely "Literature and the Right to Death".

There is a term that repeatedly appears in Blanchot's work, especially in *The Infinite Conversation*. This term is 'exigency'. Exigency denotes a need, a demand, an urgency or a necessity. What is this exigency for? In Blanchot it is surely the exigency for his own work as well as for writing in general and also, especially, for speech.

Whence does this exigency arise from? To this Blanchot's answer is *friendship*, 'friendship for the impossible that is man' (*Conversation*, 213). This is the context into which he introduces the notion of *Autrui*, the "Other Presence", invisibly manifest in the existence of another human being. The exigency of writing and of speech is a response to presence in the sense that our 'senseless sense' of it continuously urges us towards it, and it a response to the Other Presence as revealed in another human being to whom Blanchot relates through friendship, through writing and speech.

The second chapter of this thesis, 'The Jew, the Other and Speech', a reading of "The Indestructible", a part of "The Limit-Experience", is an attempt to elucidate how Blanchot postulates speech as a certain kind of relation between human beings that brings them together while allowing them to keep their differences. Blanchot sees in the figure of the Jew a human being in his most authentic relation to existence, expressed by the Jew's situation in exile and moreover by his status as the Other. The Mosaic account of creation wherein God speaks to man and man speaks to God signifies the relation that Judaism inaugurates with that which is radically Other, namely a relation of speech. Anti-Semitism, on the other hand, is an attempt to negate the Other (as represented by the Jew), figuring as the obsession of the subject whose power to assimilate everything results in destructive violence. That such an attempt is futile is shown by the perseverance of the figure of the Jew in history: the Other is 'indestructible'.

Chapter Three, 'Towards the Limit-Experience' deals with Blanchot's reading of Bataille's notion of 'interior experience' as laid out in "The Limit-Experience". Here, Blanchot demonstrates the movement of 'negative thought' and reveals how the limit of representation is given in thought. Eliminating all that makes a human being a subject or (in Heideggerean terms) a being-of-the world, Blanchot arrives at an affirmation of

presence as affirmation. This presence as affirmation though is offered to consciousness only as a momentary flash at its limit and is impossible to retain in thought.

Blanchot proposes a way in which presence comes to be revealed in speech, not, however, ordinary speech, but a special kind of engaging in speech which he calls ‘plural speech’. A designation of plural speech and the way in which presence is given through attention and the play of thought is the endeavor of the fourth chapter, ‘The Play of Thought and Plural Speech’.

Chapter Five, ‘Writing, Literature and Meaning’ examines literary writing beginning from the work of literature as expressed in the writer’s experience and moving towards the aim of literature, both of these as delineated by Blanchot in “Literature and the Right to Death”. Here Blanchot shows how literature signifies an attempt to transcend the ambigious nature of language which is based on the negation of beings as they are, that is, existants. As literature sets out to abandon meaning in the hope of recovering existence it turns back upon itself and finds only the presence of language which is as impossible to escape as the absence that it implies.

In this thesis my aim has been to follow Blanchot closely and in view of Blanchot’s reluctance concerning theoretical totalization the chapters of this thesis have emerged as rather separate entities. Although there are in some chapters references to others, and their sequential order generally facilitates comprehension of their contents as Blanchot’s particular way of looking at things and his vocabulary become more familiar in their unfolding, I have tried to retain the chapters as autonomous as possible and to establish the connections they entail in the Conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO

THE JEW, THE OTHER AND SPEECH

The Holocaust, like perhaps the French Revolution, signifies a point in human history in which the everyday is stripped of all ordinary activities of civilized life and becomes a question of bare existence or death. The French Revolution has as its goal freedom and equality for every man, while the Holocaust has as its program the extinction of any man who, by way of his Otherness, cannot be assimilated to a certain ideal subject, the One, perfect in its wholeness. Unprecedented numbers of deaths and living conditions which reduced the human being to a mere bundle of existence in the concentration camps has led the discourse of witnesses to questionings of existence, presence and the Other.

Following in their path, Maurice Blanchot reads the occurrence of the Holocaust in a chapter of "The Limit-Experience" called 'The Indestructible'. Here, Blanchot concentrates on what it signifies to be a Jew in order to give meaning to the program of his destruction that is realized in Anti-Semitism.

Who or what is the Jew? 'The Jew is uneasiness and affliction' (Blanchot, *Conversation*, 123). As far as we can look back in history, and in every culture and society, Jews have been the accused and the persecuted, never allowed equal rights for living. As this circumstance never fails to make any of us slightly uneasy in their presence, 'the Jew' still bears a 'negative' significance: the Jew is always 'the Other'. It

must be properly understood, though, what this 'negative significance' further entails. If our attitude towards the Jew serves only to integrate him into our Sameness ('A Jew is nothing but a man like any other!' (124)), the result is to disavow the Jew ('Why speak of the Jews?' (124)), negating his right to be different, to be an 'Other'. Even post-war accounts like Sartre's which read Anti-Semitism as a projection of own weaknesses ('injustice', 'stupidity', 'base meanness', 'fear') onto the 'enemy' fail to recognize the significance of being a Jew by focusing on its negation (in Anti-Semitism). Instead, Blanchot invites us to consider a different meaning of Judaism, a meaning he calls the 'positive'.

What does 'being Jewish' signify? Being Jewish, Blanchot maintains, bears in its meaning an implication of a certain relation, or a certain manner of relating, of one human being to another. This essential meaning of being Jewish is based neither on religious nor on cultural interests; it must be sought in historical reflection upon how man became a Jew. Blanchot reminds us of those ideas that have from the very beginning defined Judaism: *exodus* and *exile*. Across history, the Jew has always at a point departed from where he had established himself, migrated, answered, as Blanchot puts it, to 'the summons of a movement' (125). Abraham was the man who broke with civilization, who relinquished his dwelling. Their movement of migration, their 'exodus', was what turned the Jewish people into a people. Moreover, this migration does not lead the Jew to another place, in the sense that a place denotes a dwelling-place. Rather, their movement throughout history leads them to the condition of a 'hunted existence' that denotes exile.

We must further consider the significance of the terms 'dwelling' and 'movement' to understand all the implications of 'exodus' and 'exile'. Dwelling entails

paganism: the pagan is the expression of man being in a fixed relation with the earth; he is defined by permanent dwelling and the possession of a ground. However, there is another side to man, another 'exigency' that denotes a different kind of relation to the earth and to himself, 'a relation that possession cannot satisfy' (125). This relation is expressed in nomadism, in displacement and movement, in groundlessness, in exodus. Blanchot draws attention to the fact that 'exile', although a term usually associated with burden, also has a deeper significance: the choice of departure, taking off, breaking with a place is an act of renouncing 'every fixed relation of force with *one* individual, *one* group, or *one* state – […] dispersion, faced with the exigency of the whole, also clears the way for a different exigency and finally forbids the temptation of Unity-Identity' (126). This assertion is highly significant and deserves more thought. What exactly is the 'temptation of Unity-Identity'? As implied in the quotation, it is the need to identify with another human being, or with a certain group of individuals, or with a whole nation based on the conviction that we are all the same, a line of thought necessarily resulting in such beliefs that what is true for the self is true for everyone else, and furthermore what is the *truth* of the self is the truth of the world, the truth even of the universe. This is the temptation of Unity-Identity, a line of thought which in our era finds it most powerful expression in Hegel's philosophy of the Absolute that realizes itself through the Subject and perhaps in the recently emerging reality of capitalist (and scientific) globalism. Another feature of the temptation of Unity-Identity, closely tied to the need for Sameness, is the need to build a 'fixed relation of force' with any individual, group or state, a relation which will assure a state of control that is 'fixed' or *sedentary*. This fixed relation of force would then extend to encompass everything that is true along with *truth* itself. The picture which is thus given through the ideal of Unity-Identity

circumscribes a collective, sedentary state, nothing other than what we understand under the term ‘pagan’. This is the state which from a romanticist perspective of truth denotes our original state of unity with nature, lost once more with a mourning that in turn originates the truth of modernism. Perhaps we may say that the whole of the history of thought is never-ending movement, going back and forth, constantly changing sides in its relation to this ‘state’ which is the ideal of Unity-Identity.

Is it possible to regard this ‘state’ which is considered sedentary and which is tied to the temptation of Unity-Identity in terms of what is called the *origin*? Let us return to Blanchot’s account of the Jew to seek an answer. Blanchot writes: ‘The Jewish man is the Hebrew when he is the man of origins. The origin is a decision; this is the decision of Abraham, separating himself from what is, and affirming himself as a foreigner in order to answer to a foreign truth’ (126). Abraham (the Hebrew) by deciding to break with the established world (the ‘fixed state’) of Sumerian civilization in order to depart, to move towards a ‘foreign truth’, becomes the Jew. In this sense, it is not his place within the Sumerian state that is the Jew’s origin, but rather his first step away from his unity with the established world. And this is what makes a man the man of origins: his stepping out of unity by his own accord and will, exercising what Blanchot calls his ‘human right to beginning, the only true creation’ (126). Thus, in the figure of the Jew a different kind of relation to the origin is inaugurated: he is the man who is created in his departure from the origin, he begins his journey towards a ‘foreign truth’. It should be clear by now that Blanchot’s account of the Jew reveals what makes the latter an Other as well as what makes him a human being, one of whom we may say that he has kept the most authentic relation with his origin by remaining, or was forced to remain, the one in exile. The double meaning (or the un-fixed meaning) expressed

through the terms exodus and exile should perhaps be articulated once more. The Jew, or man, is the one who decides to leave his point of origin, to depart. This act of initiating his own movement or exodus is at the same time what gives him his identity as a Jew: he has chosen his right to begin and thereby created himself. It is true that at the same time he becomes the one who is different than those who have remained in the 'fixed state of Unity-Identity': by way of his choice, he has become the Other. This Otherness may be regarded as a choice, however it is also what makes the Jew a stranger, someone different than anyone and anything that surrounds him, forever apart from Unity-Identity, forever in exile. Thus Blanchot reads in this double condition of exile-exodus that belongs to the Jew the existential condition of man in relation to his origin: 'The Jew is the man of origins; he who relates to the origin not by dwelling but by distancing himself from it, thus saying that the truth of beginning is in separation' (126). A few lines later he asserts:

> If one must set out on the road and wander, is it because, being excluded from the truth, we are condemned to the exclusion that prohibits all dwelling? Or would not this errancy rather signify a new relation with 'truth'? Doesn't this nomadic movement (wherein is inscribed the idea of division and separation) affirm itself not as the eternal privation of a sojourn, but rather as an authentic manner of residing, of a residence that does not bind us to the determination of place or to settling close to a reality forever and already founded, sure, permanent? As though the sedentary state were necessarily the aim of every action! As though truth itself were necessarily sedentary! (127)

Having thus established the 'positive meaning' of 'being Jewish', namely the essential or existential condition of the human being, we should continue our inquiry into the kind of relation between one human being and another which Blanchot discerns in this meaning. Here, we should perhaps return to a previous quotation to concentrate on its further implications:

> […] the decision of Abraham, separating himself from what is, and affirming himself as a foreigner [is made in order to] answer to a foreign truth. The Hebrew passes from one world (the established Sumerian world) to something that is 'not yet a world' and is nonetheless this world here below; a ferryman, the Hebrew Abraham invites us not only to pass from one shore to the other, but also to carry ourselves to wherever there is a passage to be made, maintaining this between-two-shores that is the truth of passage' (126).

What is the 'foreign truth' to which Abraham's departure is the answer? Another reference to this enigmatic term follows a few lines later: 'the relation with the Unknown one can know only through distance […]' (126). We had previously concluded that the 'foreign truth' of the 'Unknown' refers to a certain view of the origin, but what exactly is meant by 'origin'?

Centuries of monotheistic tradition make it tempting to associate the 'foreign truth', the 'Unknown' and the idea of the origin (as that from which we come) with the idea of God. Before Christianity introduced 'the disavowal of the here below, an abasement of life, a scorn for presence' (127) and before the Greeks expounded 'the primacy of the world of ideas—a primacy that is nonetheless simply a way for the visible to reign invisibly' (127), the Jew postulated a relation with *that* which 'excludes all relation' (127) through *speech*. The Jewish tradition sets itself up and apart through this simple proposition: 'God speaks, and man speaks to him' (127). In this context, Blanchot mentions Hegel's interpretation of Judaism as a relation with God which expresses 'the highest separation, [excluding] all union' and the 'Jewish spirit' as bearing 'an insurmountable abyss' (128). Perhaps we may take a detour to the Hegelian account of the sublime to clarify Hegel's view of the subject. Hegel discerns in the Jewish scriptures 'sublimity in its first original character' (*Hegel's Aesthetics,* 373). In fact, he considers sacred Hebrew poetry as the sublime art *par excellence*.

Hegel maintains that in this art form, the positive immanence of the Absolute in its created phenomena is cancelled and the *One* is put explicitly apart as the 'Lord of the world' (373). The entirety of his creatures stands in contrast to this God, and in comparison to him, are powerless an perishable. The entire mundane sphere is distinctly established, in relation to the Absolute, as the '*inherently negative*' (371) while the most splendid objects are used only as a mere adornment of God and serve as the proclamation of his magnificence. In sublime art, external existence in which the Absolute is brought before contemplation is degraded in comparison with the Absolute, 'since this degradation and servitude is the one and only way whereby the *one* God can be illustrated in art' (372). This is also due to the fact that the Absolute as God is '*explicitly without shape*' (372). The *meaning*, the content of the Absolute, on the other hand, is clearly intelligible, is in fact brought *nearer to reason*; but what can come into representation is only its transcendence and superiority over the external, namely over form. This kind of expression of the sublime in the Jewish scripture Hegel explains thus:

> God is the creator of the universe. This is the purest expression of the sublime itself. for the first time, that is to say, ideas of procreation and the mere natural generation of things by God vanish and give place to the thought of *creation* by spiritual might and activity. 'God said: Let there be light; and there was light'; this Longinus quoted long ago as in every way a striking example of the sublime. The lord, the one substance, does proceed to manifestation; it is the word, the manifestation of thought as the ideal power, and with its command that the existent shall be, the existent is immediately and actually brought into being in silent obedience (374-374).

In fact, even according to this quote, there *is* something that overcomes the 'insurmountable abyss' between what Hegel identifies as the 'created phenomena' or the 'existent' and 'the one substance' or the 'Absolute' which he apprehends to be manifested in the Jewish God. Hegel himself states it implicitly when he writes that

'the lord, the one substance does proceed to manifestation' and 'it is [by way of] the *word*, the manifestation of thought as the ideal power' (my emphasis). However, as is well-known, Hegel's whole philosophical program is constructed on an achievement of Unity by way of the notion of the Absolute, and this is contrary to the perspective of Judaism wherein, 'in fact, there is infinite separation' (Blanchot, *Conversation, 128).* Yet, and this is the notable point of Blanchot's analysis of Judaism, 'if, in fact, there is infinite separation, it falls to speech to make it the place of understanding; and if there is an insurmountable abyss, speech crosses this abyss' (128). The Jew's relation to his 'Unknown' is marked, not by abolishing the distance or the difference in-between, that is by using the 'power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I' (127). On the contrary, by crossing the distance through *speech*, the 'insurmountable abyss' is, in all its clarity, maintained. This 'revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation' (127) may not be acknowledged by Jewish thought as such, nonetheless for Blanchot it is of the highest significance for the Jew's relation to God as well as to his relation with another human being.

Here we should perhaps stop to ask: what exactly is speech?

According to Blanchot, it is precisely the Jew's relation with the Unknown that reveals the pure meaning of speech:

> speaking inaugurates an original relation in which the terms involved do not have to atone for this relation or disavow themselves in favor of a measure supposed to be common; they rather ask and are accorded reception precisely by reason of that which they do not have in common. To speak to someone is to accept not introducing him into the system of things or of beings to be known; it is to recognize him as unknown and to receive him as foreign without obliging him to break with this difference. Speech, in this sense, is the promised land where exile fulfills itself in sojourn, since it is not a matter of being at home there but of being always Outside, engaged in a movement wherein the Foreign offers itself, yet without disavowing itself (128).

The relation between those who engage in speech is thus the equivalent of the relation between man and God in Judaism: nothing is known of the other who is 'infinitely distant' and who by way of his 'foreign truth' cannot be assimilated, identified and brought back to the I. The Other by his very definition is 'Outside', in exile. Yet, through speaking, he steps outside of his own 'foreign truth' to 'engage in a movement' which affords him a temporary place, a 'sojourn' to be shared with whomever he addresses in speaking *within speech itself*. This is the magical quality of speech which maintains and crosses distance at the same time. Blanchot continues:

> To speak, in a word, is to seek the source of meaning in the prefix that the words *exile, exodus, existence, exteriority,* and *estrangement* are committed to unfolding in various modes of experience; a prefix that for us designates distance and separation as the origin of all 'positive value' (128).

Thus, speech is the expression of what we have established as the existential human condition of being in exile, being outside of the origin that is expressed by Unity-Identity, being in existence through being in exodus. The prefix 'ex' which designates exteriority is the condition for our experience as human beings, for all 'positive value'. And each time we speak, we step out of ourselves, our identity and our truth to enter into this exteriority which in speech we can share with the Other whose identity, truth and self is foreign, infinitely distant. Blanchot's brilliant linguistic exemplification demonstrates the extent to which this experience of exteriority has permeated language and even the creation of words which refer to this experience itself.

It remains to understand how Blanchot moves from the Jew's relation to his God to the relation between human beings that being Jewish signifies.

We have established that the Jew's existential position or relation in regard to fixed origins that are always infinitely distant (the Unknown, God) marks him as the one in exile, the Other and at the same time the human being in his existential authenticity. However, once Abraham has received the word from God and the Jew thus comes into being, what further function remains there for God in Judaism? Blanchot draws attention to the fact that, as it happens, God's name is omitted in Jewish religious discourse whenever possible. While in Greek humanistic discourse gods are invariably present as the main characters, Jewish humanism concentrates exclusively on the human being and his relations even when God is nominally present. One example Blanchot gives from the Genesis is God's question to Adam after the latter has fallen: 'Where are you?' (128) So, Blanchot maintains, God is there only to ask the foremost question concerning man's existential situation ('Where is man'). The significance of this example is rather that there had to be the idea of God for this questioning to begin, and that through the idea of God the marvel surrounding human existence is delivered into language. Another example provided by Blanchot further underlines the Jewish concern with human relations: the words of Jacob to his brother Esau asking the latter for forgiveness: '[…] I have seen your face as one sees the face of God' (129). Blanchot interprets this utterance as meaning: 'I see you as one sees God', that is, Jacob sees his brother as one sees the 'infinitely Distant', the 'absolutely Foreign'. To see another human being as one sees God means to recognize that he is distant and foreign, that he is the Other (*Autrui*). Ultimately, the 'foreign truth', the Unknown, is found in human presence, 'this Other Presence that is *Autru*i—no less inaccessible, separate, and distant than the Invisible himself (129). There is something terrible about such an encounter with another human being, something we forget in the

blindness that the crowded cities of modern civilization afford us. The other human being is completely different, distant, foreign, strange, unknown. If we were to meet him in the desert, this encounter would not be much different from meeting God himself: the full force of his presence would frighten us to death. This is what makes the other human being godlike in my relation with him: he has the power to kill me, and he has the power to receive me (through speaking). Thus, an encounter with him could have only two outcomes: either mortal violence, or relating to him 'through the gift of speech by receiving him' (129).

We have arrived at the positive significance of being Jewish: the Jew, by way of his thought and his history, expresses the human condition of being the Other and the human relation of speech which arises from what Blanchot calls the 'exigency of strangeness': a 'pure relation' between one human being and another based on 'pure separation' (129).

In this sense, Anti-Semitism signifies a relation to the Other that is based on fearing him and results in mortal violence:

> Anti-Semitism […] gives a figure to the repulsion inspired by the Other, the uneasiness before what comes from afar and elsewhere: the need to kill the Other, that is, to submit to the all-powerfulness of death what cannot be measured in terms of power (129).

The Anti-Semite, so Blanchot, is not satisfied with simply 'excluding' the Jews and 'exterminating' them; he further engages in a 'limitless movement of refusal' (129) by taking action to erase them from history, burning their books, annihilating every instance of 'inscribed speech' (130) that calls to us from over millennia. The Holocaust is nothing other than a condensed movement of what man is capable of in his relation with other men and of what man has undertaken since the beginning of

history, namely the destruction of the Other. Blanchot calls this movement a ‘denial’, which, as in the case of the Holocaust where it reaches unprecedented heights, reveals itself to be the more futile the more it is exercised:

> A denial so absolute, it is true, that it does not cease to *reaffirm* the relation with the infinite that being-Jewish implies, and that no form of force can have done with because no force is able to meet up with it (just as one can kill a man who is present, and yet not strike down presence as an empty, ever-present presence, but rather simply cause it to disappear). (129)

The presence of the Other (*Autrui*), or what we apprehend simply as presence, escapes and transcends seizure through human power, for if one tries to bereave the other of it through, for example, killing him, presence would still prevail even if the other has disappeared. The Holocaust, an enormous program of appropriating the Other through his extermination, a program resulting from the need to ‘assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I’, fails by way of its very basis: the assertion that there is an Other that needs to be exterminated, and the reestablishing of the Jew as the figure of this Other.

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARDS THE LIMIT-EXPERIENCE

'The limit-experience is the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically into question' writes Blanchot (*Conversation*, 203). This movement of self-questioning is achieved by way of the 'passion of negative thought' (204). It is perhaps noteworthy that in this chapter on the limit-experience, Blanchot himself arrives at a delimitation of this experience not through 'positive thought', namely the scientific or philosophical method of identifying a certain meaning through its symptoms, but rather proceeds by carefully describing what this experience is *not*. The starting-point for such an endeavor, however, must be a point of ending from which it is possible to *return* (by way of negative thought) to a point of beginning, and this point of culmination Blanchot postulates as the end of history.

When starting to think about the movement of negative thought, it must be asserted, firstly, that negative thought is *not* merely reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is negative in the sense that it traces back the thinking processes which have produced 'positive thought', namely knowledge, for example, of the sciences. However, as long as such reflective thinking works within patterns of conceptualization, such as Descartes' methodical doubt or Hegel's program of the Absolute , the point of arrival is bound to be the subject himself (Cogito) or reflective thinking will '[close] up into a

system' (Dialectics) and the passion of negative thought will not be completely realized to reach the limit-experience.

Each time a human being puts himself in question, he will arrive at a point in which he can claim that 'the exigency of being all is fully realized in man. At bottom, man is already everything!' (203) The 'exigency of being all' denotes the need of the human being as subject to 'assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I'. Once the human being becomes such by stepping out of an original state that we have expressed as 'Unity-Identity', once he comes into ex-istence which is defined by his ex-teriority, he spends his whole life or all of history in view of returning to that lost state. Creating his own 'world' as a subject by way of his capacity to reason is nothing but the manifestation of this desire to recover the lost Unity-Identity. Not only civilizations and societies, but every type of knowledge and discourse, everything physical and ideal that the human being holds to be true, his whole 'universe', is his own creation, the creation of his subjective reason. As the human being realizes this state of affairs, is it not possible to think, Blanchot asks, 'that now and henceforth history is in some sense at its point of *completion*?' (204) It might be argued, however, to what extent the particular human being can reach such a universal understanding. The idea that history is now and henceforth moving towards completion

> does not mean that nothing more will happen, nor that man, the individual man, will no longer have to endure the suffering and blindness of the future. But man, man as universal is already master of all the categories of knowledge; he is capable of everything and he has an answer for everything (though it is true, only for everything, not for particular difficulties; and to this he also responds by prompting the particular to renounce itself, for the particular has no place in the truth of the whole). (204)

It seems as though for man as the universal being of reason the aim of history is attained in that he is able to think of himself as the creator and master of all of his 'categories of knowledge' and has in this sense unified and identified himself with his world, but for man as the individual subject who has to deal with his own everyday particularities and needs and who, as a separate ego, cannot identify with the needs of those around him, the sufferings of an 'exterior existence' do continue. Still, Blanchot argues, the response of the individual to his exteriority does not differ in aim from that of the universal: the particular man either throws himself 'into the complacent torments of absurd existence' (which is nothing but suffering through bearing evidence that meaning and therefore history has come to an end) or prepares himself 'for hope of another life' (204) in which he will be unified with God (which is nothing but the anticipation of the completion of the self's individual history) . Thus, Blanchot can maintain once more that at each point in time, 'for all of us, history, in one form or another, approaches its end' (204). Naturally, this end is never completely given in experience; however, 'we all live more or less from the perspective of a terminated history' (204).

This result signifies for Blanchot the proud achievement of negative thought. Here, however, one must not neglect that this result, namely the thought of the completion of history is itself the result of the *work* of negative thought still active notwithstanding the completion. The human being *works* towards his own completion, the completion of history, the attainment of Unity-Identity. The freedom of man from his natural state, his 'negating' himself as a natural being who dwells in a state of Oneness with his origin, is his freedom of action, his freedom to work. Through 'his bondage to work' he 'produces himself in producing the world' (205). This thought should be clarified further.

The human being negates his natural state of Unity-Identity and assumes exteriority by way of his subjective consciousness, thereby coming into existence. This is his work. His work, in turn, continues with the aim of achieving his completion in a state of Unity-Identity with what is outside him. He works to create categories of knowledge, he works to create meaning with the view of applying these to the outside world as well as to himself. And ultimately it is by way of his work that he recaptures his completion, his state of Unity-Identity with the whole that he himself has created through his subjective reason.

Now, Blanchot asks, is it not possible to maintain that man thus '*transforms into action* all his negativity?' (205) The meaning of this question is whether the human being does not actually complete history by way of working towards it in his exteriority, whether the aim is not attained as in a Hegelian realization of the Absolute, the unity of man with the whole? However, it is precisely this question that expresses that this is not so, that such a completion is never attained as there can still be its questioning, and that there can still be this questioning is the manifestation of the 'passion of negative thought'. Hence, Blanchot professes, even 'more extreme' than the passion for the Absolute, the completion of history by way of subjective reason, is the passion of negative thought:

> [For] faced with this response, negative thought is still capable of introducing the question that suspends it, and faced with the accomplishment of the whole, still capable of maintaining the other exigency that again raises the issue of the infinite in the form of contestation. (205).

Thus, whenever history approaches its completion, each time man is capable not to stop at 'the sufficiency he has attained' (205), the passion of negative thought interrupts the

whole by once more putting it into question. We are now in the realm of the limit-experience:

> The limit-experience is the experience of what is outside the whole when the whole excludes every outside; the experience of what is still to be attained when all is attained and of what is still to be known when all is known: the inaccessible, the unknown itself. (205)

The 'inaccessible', the 'unknown itself'—these terms are reminiscent of the 'infinitely distant', the 'absolutely foreign', the 'Other Presence that is Autrui' by way of which we had explored Blanchot's reading of the significance of being Jewish as expressive of a certain kind of relation with the Other when the Other is taken as the presence of another human being. How is it possible to attain the inaccessible which by its very definition escapes attainment? Is it possible, here, to speak of 'possibility'?

Here Blanchot reveals the origin of negative thought, the putting into question of the whole and the basis from where the limit-experience might be approached: 'there belongs to man, such as he is, such as he will be, an essential lack' (205).

Thus, Blanchot continues, the human being is defined by a lack, a residue of negativity that he does not consume in work or action. And when the human being who has accomplished everything puts himself to rest in this interior excess of negativity, when he allows himself to exist without action in this state of, as Blanchot quotes Bataille, 'negativity without employ', he is ready for the limit-experience. Bataille calls this experience the 'interior experience': it is the way in which this excess of negation, having run out of something to negate, no more negates, but *affirms* itself.

At this point in his reading of Bataille, Blanchot's text gives itself over to expenditure (one of the critical notions of Bataille's work) as he swiftly outlays the following premises:

> One might well say that man has at his disposal a capacity for dying that greatly and infinitely surpasses what he must have to enter into death, and that out of this excess of death he has admirably known how to make for himself a power. Through this power, denying nature, he has constructed the world, he has put himself to work, he has become a producer, a self-producer. Nonetheless, a strange thing, this is not enough: at every moment he is left as it were with a part of dying that he is unable to invest in activity. Most often he does not know this, he hasn't the time. But should he come to sense this surplus of nothingness, this unemployable vacancy, should he discover himself to be bound to the movement that causes him, each time a man dies, to die infinitely, should he allow himself to be seized by the infinity of the end, then he must respond to another exigency—no longer that of producing but that of spending, no longer that of succeeding but of failing, no longer that of turning out works and speaking usefully but of speaking in vain and reducing himself to worklessness: an exigency whose limit is given in the 'interior experience'. (206)

The surplus of negativity that resides in the human being after he has 'produced' everything and 'produced' himself, his inherent 'lack', is nothing other than his infinite capacity for dying, as infinite as being itself. This capacity for dying expresses itself in the human being's negation of his nature, signified by action, work, and the 'passion for negative thought'. Death is something that escapes assimilation; it belongs to what is infinitely distant, absolutely foreign, it belongs in a sense to the Other Presence, that which the human being cannot conceptualize and assimilate. The shadow-truth of the completion of history, the true aim of exteriority that for subjective reason is signified by Unity-Identity is nothing but nothingness itself. The human being who discovers, who 'comes to sense' this 'capacity for dying' in himself enters the realm of expenditure, that is, he retraces the path of negativity (a movement manifested in un-acting, un-producing, un-succeeding, un-working, un-saying) in order to carry himself towards the limit-experience.

There is a danger to carrying oneself to 'these states' (as Blanchot calls them) which is the danger of being carried away: 'A man becomes ecstatic' (206). Bataille, he reminds us, has apprehended the situation offered by the interior experience under the thought of 'sovereignty'. Let us try to imagine this state: a human being has arrived at

the conclusion that every possible action, every possible work and every possible word is said and done. He thereby frees himself of all obligations requiring action, work or thought. He realizes that everything he has done so far has been the result of his negating his nature. He attains a state in which he is conscious of himself as the author of his actions. Through this state, he feels himself to *be* 'to a greater degree than are beings'. The human being has in a sense returned to his pure consciousness of his Self, the point from which the Self will extend once more to assimilate all that he deems outside of himself. It is a state which Bataille can only impart through the notion of sovereignty. Blanchot warns us that the state which we are thinking about might easily be labeled 'mystical' on account of the feeling one can only describe as 'ecstatic transport', afforded by the state of being a pure Self. We are reminded that mystics have always had a relation to organized religion, whether they are considered inside or outside of it. The mystic as a figure continues to 'participate in and contribute to the ultimate act, the unification of being, the fusion of "earth" and "heaven"' (206). Blanchot maintains:

> Whoever has bound himself through the most firm decision to the passion of negative thought will at the very least begin by not stopping at God any more than at God's silence or absence, and more importantly still, will not let himself be tempted by the repose offered by Unity, no matter what form it may take (206).

Blanchot moves to actual history to 'represent things in still another way' (206): With the advent of modernity, subjective reason has realized and further comprehended itself as being 'within [a] closed circle of knowledge' (207). Still, as Blanchot's text and even our own text bears witness to, the Other Presence is yet again taken up by human activity, by 'Action and Discourse', only to reveal itself once again in the human being as Other. The Holocaust, as we have established in the previous chapter, is an example

for this, the work of any post-war thought (such as existentialism) or endeavor (such as psychoanalysis) is another. There seems to be no end to discourse, to the discourse of discourse, to the never-ending game of the unifying movement. What remains is the question: 'how can the absolute (in the form of totality) still be gotten beyond?' (207) How can the human being as such continue to put himself in question?

That fact that the question remains alone testifies to the interior experience:

> And yet the interior experience insists upon this event that does not belong to possibility; it opens in this already achieved being an infinitesimal interstice by which all that is suddenly allows itself to be exceeded, deposed by an addition that escapes and goes beyond (207).

The interior experience signifies the possibility that the circle of the never-ending movement of unification in action and in thought is pierced. There is a remainder outside of the circle that allows for questioning to continue. How is it possible that there is such an excess 'whose measure is not given by the [human being's] power that is capable of everything'? (207) Here, Blanchot offers us Bataille's answer: this remainder is *the impossible*.

How can we understand or give meaning to a term that in its proper meaning remains outside of all our categories of knowledge? Blanchot helps us thus: we must apprehend that 'possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence', which comes to mean that we experience more than we deem possible and categorize under our comprehension. 'It is perhaps given to us' to live our lives 'by way of a double relation' (207), namely the double relation expressed by the possible and the impossible:

> We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master (even if we do so painfully and with difficulty) by relating it to some good or some value, that is to say, finally by relating it to Unity; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape (207).

The human being is defined by exteriority which is the expression of all of his achievements including his identity. However, there is another dimension to the human being the achievement of which in the sense of assimilation is impossible. As opposed to, though also accompanying, *exteriority*, this dimension of impossibility is given in the *interior* experience. The interior experience is neither measurable nor attainable in terms of human *power* (which stands for physical as well as intellectual power, that is, knowledge). It can only be given if the human being should reach what Blanchot calls 'the infinite heart of the passion of thought' (207).

This rather poetic sentence expresses at once 'the intellectual importance' of the limit-experience, the movement that leads up to it, as well as the fact that this experience cannot be separated from that movement. We may perhaps imagine this movement thus: from negative *thought* one moves "backwards" to the cause of the thought (the *passion* of negative thought) which in turn is based on what Blanchot terms *the infinite heart*. Such a movement can only happen 'as a kind of flash', whereby the only 'truth' to be attained or retained from this experience is the infinity of thought, 'the infinite of putting into question', as consciousness touches the limit of the infinite heart and immediately returns to the passion of thought: 'This is what first must be said again: the ecstatic 'loss of knowledge' is nothing but the grasping seizure of contestation at the height of rupture and dispossession. The experience is not an outcome' (207).

We may imagine that at the limit of thought (or, perhaps, of questioning or of consciousness), consciousness is lost *and* this loss is contested at one and the same moment. The ecstatic feeling that results from such an experience may in turn be

attributed to the fact that 'it frees all human possibilities from their meaning: every knowledge, every speech, every silence, every end, and even this capacity-for-dying from which we draw our last truths'. (207-208) In and through the interior experience, what is given to us is *freedom* from all possibilities of meaning.

However, when we speak of a loss of meaning, Blanchot warns us not to attribute to the limit-experience some relation to irrationalism or to the absurd: 'it is only beyond an achieved knowledge that non-knowledge offers itself as an exigency to which one must respond' (208). Non-knowledge must be understood not as something still to be comprehended as, for example, the questioning or denial of meaning that takes place in the absurd, but as something *beyond* knowledge. At the limit of knowledge, Blanchot explains, one keeps oneself in a relation with what is 'impossible' to relate to, be it only by way of *mere existence*. Moreover, this experience is not something to be *attained* in the sense that knowledge is attained; it is rather *given*, or *offered*, at the limit. This is what Blanchot means when he writes that the limit-experience is said to '*communicate ecstasy'*. Nothing is grasped by the subject in this experience, the experience does in a sense *communicates itself*' (208).

What exactly is signified by 'ecstasy'?We had established earlier that an excess in negation such as is found in negative thought which no longer has anything to negate turns into *affirmation*. This affirmation is what is at stake in the limit-experience, a state which Blanchot has also expressed as 'contestation'. Yet, nothing is affirmed in the sense that something other than affirmation or contestation is affirmed. What is affirmed is rather affirmation itself. This is not to say that the limit-experience affirms *itself*. Rather, in the limit-experience affirmation is affirmed. We may think of this state as the limit of negation by which the human being as a subject, as a Self, emerges. It is the

state of the ‘decisive Yes, Presence without anything being present’ (209), prior, that is, to representation. Perhaps we can see now how this experience is manifested in the term ‘ecstasy’. Ecstasy is the state of standing *outside oneself.* The self is the basis of the human being as such who is defined, exists and thinks by way of his exteriority. The limit-experience affords a momentary flash of ‘standing outside the self’ and standing in Presence without representation. Blanchot calls the limit-experience ‘something *like* a new origin’ for thought, as what is offered here to thought is the ‘prodigality of affirmation’ (209). Thus the intellectual importance of this experience lies in the fact that, in being given an awareness of Presence without representation, one is given a momentary sense of being *outside one’s own consciousness* which is in a sense the *beginning* of consciousness. Blanchot evokes Bataille’s notion of ‘authority’ which we may posit here alongside the term ‘sovereignty’. In and through the limit-experience, all notions of authority vanish as the ‘moment of authority’ (209) offers itself, not in the sense of power, as here power has been negated until one has gotten beyond power, but in the sense that it is a moment in which the authority to exist, to think, to negate one’s nature in favour of becoming a human being gives itself. In a sense, it is the human being himself who authorizes himself to *become* a human being, although this act cannot be termed a conscious act and thereby in turn not entirely attributed to the self whose ex-teriority and ex-istence is defined by consciousness.

Perhaps we should return to the question as to what extent such an experience can be considered to be within the realms of possibility. We mentioned earlier that Blanchot asserts that experience is based on a double-relation of the human being to possibility-impossibility. What is possible for the human being to be given in experience is representation, all that by way of consciousness he builds his world upon. What is

*im*possible for the human being to experience is nothingness, not the term 'nothing' that may be integrated by way of the unifying movement into the universe of human concepts, but the complete darkness of the absence of experience, that which the human being conceptualizes as 'death'. The limit-experience, then, signifies a moment *in between* these two states of being and nothingness, at the utmost limit of existence and representation the shadow (the 'other side') of which is nothingness. What gives itself in this moment is pure presence expressed in affirmation: like the first affirmation that leads us out of the darkness of nothingness into the light of representation. Blanchot conveys it thus:

> Through this affirmation, an affirmation that has freed itself from every negation (and consequently from every meaning), that has relegated and deposed the world of values, that consists not in affirming, upholding and withstanding *what is*, but rather holds itself *above and outside* being, […] man sees himself assigned—between being and nothingness, and out of the infinite of this between-two that is entertained as a relation—the status of his new sovereignty: *the sovereignty of a being without being in the becoming without end of a death impossible to die* (209, my emphases).

Thus, Blanchot continues, 'the limit-experience is experience itself' (209). It is experience itself as 'being without being', in the sense that 'being' denotes exteriority and therefore representation. It is 'being without being in the becoming' in the sense that one exists but still holds himself outside the process towards completion that is existence. It is 'being in the becoming without end' in the sense that it is infinite presence, the 'infinite heart'. It is 'becoming without end of a death impossible to die' since it is 'above and outside being', infinite becoming, coming from nothingness but without the possibility of returning to this nothingness in experience. It is impossible to represent and impossible to put into language. It can only be expressed in a sentence like Blanchot's which, by way of its manifold meanings each of which escapes grasping as

another one seems to emerge, that is, by way of its random 'play', signifies it as the double-relation of possibility and impossibility, and plays on what can only be called the reader's intuition, or idea, of infinity. Blanchot indicates this when he maintains that the limit-experience

> [appears] to be in play on the side of the multiple, and in what Georges Bataille names "chance"; as though in order to put it *into play*, one not only had to attempt to give thought over to chance (an already difficult gift), but also (in a world in principle unified and stripped of all accident) had to give oneself over to the sole thought that would issue another *throw of the dice* by thinking in the only affirmative manner and at the level of pure affirmation: that of the interior experience (209).

The ultimate feature of this experience is that it cannot be maintained, or rather it cannot maintain itself, neither in representation nor in language. Blanchot warns of the risk inherent in this experience to '[place] itself in the service of force [and] of turning against the sovereignty of man by becoming an instrument of his domination' (209). The limit experience is not something experienced by an 'I', by the totalizing part of the human being that is his self. It is therefore not possible to reach this experience and grant it to one's self as a sort of 'enlightenment' which gives one ascendancy over other beings. The limit-experience is, first and foremost, not an experience in the sense that one can say that one has *undergone* it. That is why Blanchot calls it the *limit*-experience 'at which, perhaps, the limits fall but that reaches us only at the limit: when the entire future has become present and, through resolution of the decisive Yes, there is affirmed the ascendancy over which there is no longer any hold' (210).

The conclusion that there can be no conclusion in the sense of assimilation or totalization as well as in the sense of finitude when the limit-experience is at stake, the

sensation that ‘the entire future has become present’, these are what Blanchot leaves us with at the end of his chapter on the limit-experience. Conclusively, a reading of a few final lines should once more evoke an impression of the interior experience that is impossible to represent as well as of Blanchot’s peculiar style of expression which is especially fitting to give us this impression:

> The experience of non-experience.
> Detour from everything visible and invisible.
> If man did not in some sense already belong to this detour that he most often employs to turn himself away from it, how could he set out along this path that soon disappears—having in view the attainment of what escapes both aim and sight, advancing as though backward toward a point he only knows he will not reach in person, a point at which nothing of him will arrive and where, forever absent, he will not even find the night as his repose (the night with its nocturnal privileges, its vanishing immensity, its calm empty beauty) but rather the *other* night, false, vain, eternally restless and eternally falling back into its own indifference? How could he desire this? How, desiring it with a desire that is without hope and without knowledge, making him a being without horizon, a desire for what cannot be attained, a desire that refuses all that might fulfill it, a desire therefore for this infinite lack, this indifference that desire is: a desire for the impossibility of desire, bearing the impossible, hiding it and revealing it, a desire that, in this sense, is the blow of the inaccessible, the surprise of the point that is reached only insofar as it is beyond reach and where the proximity of the remote offers itself only in its remoteness—how could thought, supposing that it might for an instant have affirmed itself there, ever return from such a blow and bring back, if not a new knowledge, at least what thought would need in order to hold itself, at the distance of a memory, in its keeping? (210)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLAY OF THOUGHT AND PLURAL SPEECH

> And yet—beyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know.
> Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

Death or nothingness is the impossible in the sense that it is impossible for us to experience and thus to represent. Presence, on the other hand, is equally impossible to represent since existence or being human implies exteriority, that is, a negation of presence on account of our power of negation which is nothing else than our capacity for dying. According to Blanchot, however, there is a space which by virtue of its being a state *in between* offers us an experience of presence: this is the space of speech. Suspended between two interlocutors, speech becomes the space wherein the limit of thought may be reached and presence gives itself.

Blanchot's reflections on 'plural speech' are doubtlessly the most mystifying and 'experimental' parts of "The Limit-Experience", and while we try to examine them as accurately as possible, we must remember that what they mean to impart cannot be entirely grasped and subsumed under the 'totalizing' movement of knowledge but remains partly on the side of 'the multiple', of 'chance'.

At the beginning of these reflections Blanchot maintains that he owes his apprehension of speech to Georges Bataille whom he has witnessed practicing the kind of speech we are concerned with. However, is it truly possible to think of different *kinds* of speech? What Bataille has shown by example and what Blanchot is following in his reflections may rather be termed a different kind of *approach* to speaking which reveals speech as the space in which 'the impossible and the incommunicable' (Blanchot, *Conversation*, 210) can be traced.

What is speaking? Speaking is on the hand a 'grave thing'. The moment we speak, there is something 'unmeasured'; something strange 'always waiting in the reserve of familiar discourse' (211) is at stake immediately. This is due to speech being a kind of, according to Blanchot the only kind of, relation that is 'immediate'. Speaking, we enter into an immediate relation without measure with our interlocutor. The capacity for such a relation is the great fortune of the human being, it is the first 'gift' that speech affords us.

On the other hand, speaking is 'levity itself'. There is a 'feeling of discomfort' attached to speech which arises after someone has spoken, be it us or another person. Having spoken of important things, we are not quite sure whether our way of speaking has done justice to the seriousness of the subject. And speaking of insignificant things, in turn, is accompanied by a sense of uneasiness at having 'betrayed the seriousness of speech itself' (212). Bataille, we are told, handled these peculiarities of speech in a special manner. He did so by *acknowledging* the 'malaise' of speech whenever either of the aforementioned poles of speaking arose and turning it into the other. Thus, 'speech's lack' when talking of important things 'interceded on speech's behalf' when speech was engaged in frivolous matter. This movement from one pole of speech (its seriousness) to

the other (its lightness) has the effect of recognizing speech as a *presence*, of bringing forth the presence of speech. Speech occurs between its two limits, 'just as the eminence of being, [of which the] height cannot be separated from its decline' (212).

This is in fact what Blanchot wishes to convey in regard to speech, namely that speech can be or is a space in which presence reveals itself. This presence in speech, however, 'is rare' and 'is not to be confused with the traits of a particular physical reality':

> Even the visage in its unforgettable, visible affirmation is not manifest as speech can be when presence announces itself in it. The theatrical magic of the voice, the premeditated viles of expression, and even the immediate manifestation of any perceptible movement must be excluded here. What is present in this presence of speech, as soon as it affirms itself, is precisely what never lets itself be seen or attained: something is there that is beyond reach (of the one who says it as much as of the one who hears it). It is between us, it holds itself between and conversation is approach on the basis of this between-two: an irreducible distance that must be preserved if one wishes to maintain a relation with the unknown that is speech's unique gift (212).

Speech is a way of relating to another human being while still acknowledging him as the 'Other'. As a self, our existence is defined by exteriority. Speaking to another we step out of our situation of exteriority to create a space of dwelling where we meet the other human being who in turn does the same when engaging in speech with us. In this sense speech is a space 'in between' two selves. Moreover, speech on account of this 'stepping outside' is for the speaker a state of being 'in between' the self and the Other (manifested in the other human being with whom a relation of speech is entered into). What reveals itself in speech, namely presence, is there precisely on account of this state of 'being in between two' that speech affords and that Blanchot calls its 'unique gift'.

This gift of speech would be disregarded should we decide in speaking to employ 'the violence of reason that wants to give proof and be right' or 'the violence of the

possessive self that wants to extend itself and prevail' (212), while certainly it is impossible to communicate without making use of either. What restores to speech its special capacity is *attention*. In speech, 'in each word uttered everything is already in play' (212). Through attention, the direction that speech takes is followed, including its risks of losing the relation with the other by asserting the self as well as its 'allusion to a movement towards the unknown' (212) revealed to the speakers bound by the essential quality of speech. Therefore, attention must be appealed to for an apprehension of speech as revealing of presence. Blanchot calls this appeal to attention a 'precaution'.

A question poses itself: 'Why speak rather than write? What comes to thought by way of this exigency that is carried out or missed when one speaks in a manner that involves thought directly?' (213)

The answer lies in the relation between thought and speech which is partly evident from the question itself, namely the *immediacy* of thought in speech. Something more must be attended to, though, and that is what Blanchot means when he writes that 'for thought, there is no familiarity' (213). Thought is always concerned with what is non-familiar in the sense that it never knows what it is aiming for. Each time we think, with every thought, there is a new beginning as we offer thought to what is not known. Thought, in this sense, is *play*. Speech preserves this non-familiar, this 'strange' quality of thought (as opposed to writing). This non-familiarity of thought is retained in speaking by way of its immediacy in speech. Blanchot calls this quality of the immediacy of thought in speech 'intimacy'. This is the intimacy of thought, 'implicit' in the space between human beings engaged in speech. The space between two human beings speaking which enables the non-familiarity of thought retained in speech, in turn, is attention. Blanchot terms the space of attention an 'other space' as opposed to or

beyond the space between two interlocutors that is ‘known and frequentable’ (213). In and through attention, the distance or the difference between the two human beings, their exteriority as well as their mutual exteriority is affirmed, while they step out of their exteriority to meet in that self-same space that is attention: ‘This attention is between the one and the other: center of the encounter, sign of the between-two that brings close as it separates. Attention empties the site of all that encumbers it and renders it visible’ (213).

Thus, by way of the space of attention, speech is emptied of all that is deemed familiar between the interlocutors to render the strangeness of thought in its immediacy. It is by way of this ‘absence’ in the space of attention that speech is revealed as presence, a presence between the two human beings who are engaged in speech. This attention that generates such a space cannot be said to be the particular attention of any of the two speakers, it is ‘impersonal’. Yet, this space of attention can only be generated by the ‘accord between two beings’, the ‘mutual promise’ of waiting for the *play of thought*. On account of its offering such a space in which a relation can be maintained (through the play of thought) to what is not known Blanchot calls speech a ‘game’. ‘What is at stake in this game’, he declares, ‘is the essential: the reaching of an infinite affirmation’, the infinite Yes that is presence. However, although the movement of speech can be likened to a ‘game’ and the speakers to ‘players’, it must be remembered that in such a game there is never a question of winning for the players. ‘Winning’ implies dialectics, it implies a dialogue with rules and regulations ‘of arguing or giving proof in view of some truth to be known’ (213). The players of the game of speech, on the other hand, enter the game to be offered at most a momentary sense of the unknown. The players are in fact barely such; they are themselves ‘in an unforeseeable manner’ played by this game that opens up the space for the play of thought. Speaking, then, is

different from writing in the sense that through this game that is the game of speech a space opens up that links thought to *chance*. Speech is bound to 'the humours and fatigues' of existence, and an exhausted player, for example may be more in tune with the attention the game requires than a 'brilliant player who is master of himself and of his attention' (214). And, of course, 'speech is perishable'. The instant something is said it vanishes, it is 'effaced, lost without recourse. It forgets itself' (214). Speech is forgetting in the sense that it is fleeting and perishable. Speech arises out of forgetting, and through speech the infinite forgetting which is nothingness speaks. Thoughts arrive from nowhere and fleet on the immediacy of speech. Speech means forgetting moreover in the sense that 'whoever is speaking is already forgotten', in speaking, the self is effaced. Speech also means forgetting in the sense that someone who speaks without a plan of what he is going to say has forgotten reflection and has given himself over to the play of thought which is the gift of speech.

Having thus outlined the special character of speech, Blanchot proceeds to delineate a special mode of speech he deems very 'rare': 'a speech that reflects while expressing itself' (214). How is a speaking and reflection at the same time possible? Reflection would seem to require silence as well as time, preferably spent in solitude. Blanchot, however, proposes a kind of dialogue in which speech is 'divided and doubled', and thereby generating reflection at the same time that it speaks:

> What is said a first time on one side is said again a second time on the other and is not only reaffirmed, but also (because there is repetition) raised to a new form of affirmation whereby, changing place, the thing that is said enters into relation with its difference and becomes sharper, more tragic: not more unified, but, on the contrary, tragically suspended between two poles of attraction (214).

The postulation of a speech *that reflects while it speaks* is highly complex, bearing and interweaving many thoughts of Blanchot's we have considered thus far. A thorough examination of the above passage is in order.

In this postulation of speech, two human beings who are separated in their exteriority, in their 'selves', are bound by the game of speaking. They are bound by speech which nonetheless recognizes their difference since to speak to someone, as we have seen, is first and foremost an acknowledgement of his otherness. As a spontaneous movement in which thought takes place in its immediacy, speech excludes reflection. Speech, if it is not used as an instrument of the Self, as a 'power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I' (127) expressed in the examples of rhetoric or of dialectical speech, is a space in which we can reach a space wherein thought is in play. This point is beyond knowledge, beyond any thought or activity that is aimed at unification, and in this sense beyond the 'whole'. The play of thought offered to us in the space of attention within speech is nearer to the movement of affirmation than it is to thought and work as the expressions of negation. Thus, within the play of thought, we may chance to touch the limit of representation, the point of affirmation as such, the 'decisive Yes', Presence.

Reflection has to be viewed as different from speech; reflection is a movement that arises in and from consciousness (the Self) and deals with representation. Posited thus within the unifying movement, reflection belongs to negation, the negation that defines the human being's exteriority expressed by consciousness and the Self. Reflection is a part of the No of the human being who has posited himself into existence through exteriority. In a mode of speaking where reflection could exist simultaneously with speech, the movement towards the Yes and the movement resulting from the No

would come together while their difference would be recognized. In the same instance, this difference may offer itself as the difference within the human being who simultaneously bears both the movement towards the 'decisive Yes' and the movement resulting from the No, 'tragically suspended between two poles of attraction'. As a Self in speech with the other whose difference is recognized by way of his reception within speech, the human being, simultaneously engaged in speech and in reflection, may recognize the obscure Other in his interlocutor as he chances upon the limit of representation at which there is pure affirmation, that is, Presence.

Blanchot maintains that this mode of speech should be called 'plural speech' rather than a dialogue. This plural speech is the simple 'seeking of an affirmation' which while 'escaping all negation', does not 'unify' or 'allow itself to be unified', 'always refers to a difference always more tempted to defer' (215). As a speech it is 'essentially non-dialectical' as it speaks the 'absolutely other' which it is impossible to bring to the whole and assimilate, to *make Same*. The gift of speaking allows for a plural speech as the space in which affirmation can be pursued without difference being lost in the mutual recognition of the two *different* interlocutors. The situation plural speech affords is generated by there being *two* in the game:

> One could say of these two speaking men that one of them is necessarily the obscure "Other" that is *Autrui*. And who is *Autrui*? The unknown, the stranger, foreign to all that is visible or non-visible, and who comes to "me" as speech when speaking is no longer seeing. One of the two is the Other: the one who, in the greatest simplicity, is always close to that which cannot be close to "me": close to death, close to the night. But who is me? Where is the Other? The self is sure, the Other is not—unsituated, unsituatable, nevertheless each time speaking and in this speech more Other than all that is other (215).

Within plural speech, 'what is said one time by "me" is repeated another time by "*Autrui*"', so that what arises in speech (by chance, by the play of thought) is given back

to its ‘essential Difference’ and vice versa. Through this mode of dialogue, speaking turns into something other than the mere exchange between two Selves and *Autrui* comes to speak “in between the lines” of the Presence that is the space of attention.

Blanchot designates this kind of speech (this plural speech) as *neutral*. The neutral is the Other, that which escapes all conceptualization and with which no relation can be entertained whatsoever. On this account, this speech in which the Other comes to speak cannot be regarded as communication in any form: nothing is communicated nor is there any community between the speakers, ‘even by the intermediary of the unknown’ (216). The Other appears in speech not as an intermediary between the two speakers but through the space of attention wherein the point of infinite affirmation is reached. Having neither equality nor reciprocity as its end, this speech is not a simple dialogue; the speakers do not speak at each other, they ‘respond to *Autrui*, whose speech at times coincides with the speaking of the one and at times with that of the other’ (216). Speaking by chance and speaking chance, there is each time they speak and ‘infinite difference’ between them, the space of *Autrui* that cannot be measured in terms of ‘superiority’ or ‘predominance’. Still, it is mandatory that there be two players for this game so that difference comes to be reflected to allow for its emergence. Blanchot likens this kind of speech to the throwing of dice:

> To state this still more precisely, one could say that the conversation [the interlocutors] hold, this movement of turning together toward the infinite of affirmation, is similar to the dialogue that occurs between two persons throwing dice: they dialogue not through the words they exchange—they are passionately silent, but through the dice each casts in turn, facing the immense night of unseizable chance that each time responds to them unpredictably. Here the two partners are not playing against each other; rather by way of a game that separates them and brings them still closer, each plays for the other. (216)

Speech is the dice that are tossed in this game, thought plays with speech, and the only gain is '*the very possibility of playing'* (216), a possibility independent of the human being's power or capacity to achieve anything. What the game of plural speech thus brings into play is the 'unlimited in thought', what Blanchot calls, 'the immense night of unseizable chance' (216). What comes to reveal itself through the game is *Autrui*.

CHAPTER FIVE

WRITING, LITERATURE AND MEANING

But above and beyond
there's still one name left over,
And that is the name that you will never guess;
The name that no human research can discover—
But The Cat Himself Knows, and will never confess.
When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.
T.S. Eliot, *The Naming of Cats*

Why write rather than speak, why abandon the light gravity of speech with its blessing of forgetting and entrust speech (for what is writing if not speech) to the book, to civilization, to history and to the future? We shall however, not concern ourselves with writing as disourse, since we have seen that Blanchot holds discourse to be the never-ending movement of totalization, the work of negation which the human being as self or consciousness employs to negate in turn his exteriority with the aim of Unity-Identity. Our question shall regard literature and whether for Blanchot writing serves a different goal once it becomes literary.

For this endavour, I propose to leave “The Limit-Experience” and return to an earlier text of Blanchot’s, namely “Literature and the Right to Death”. This article deals

precisely with the question as to the special position and significance of literature while also touching on many of the reflections we have thus far outlined. Beginning from the writer's experience 'Literature and the Right to Death' arrives at the aim of literature which in Blanchot's expression is to become a space in which 'language is *the life that endures death and maintains itself in it*' (*Work*, 322).

The article begins with the seeming intention to discover, as a writer, the reason why one writes, and before plunging into the many situations a writer finds himself faced with when questioning why he would write Blanchot maintains: 'Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question' (300).

Engaging in a dialogue with Hegel's assertions on creative writing and artistic creation in general Blanchot proceeds to delienate a portrait of the writer. An initial question in this direction might be: how does one come to write? If one wishes to be a writer, one must firstly determine if one has the talent to write. However, it is impossible to determine whether one has a gift for witing *before* one writes. Before one puts his gift to work and creates a work, one cannot ascertain if one has what it takes to write. This in turn implies that the writer becomes *only such through* his work, that he 'exists only as a function of the work' (303). He realizes himself through his work and before the existence of the work he is nothing. Yet, this implies that the writer has nothing in mind when he first begins his work, that he has not planned out or even thought about the work he sets about to create. Would that be possible?

'Let us suppose', Blanchot writes, 'that the work has been written, with it the writer is born' (305). The writer has written a book and thereby realized himself as a writer. He is the author of the book while at the same time he is an author because of his book. He feels joy at having realized himself through his own creation, he feels joy at

the perfection his creation is, he finds himself perfectly reflected and realized in his work. Yet it must be understood that his work is perfect on account that *it* realizes *him*, that it is a perfect reflection of himself and has created *him as the writer*. The accompanying joy is attributed to the fact that the work (and this refers to any kind of artwork)

> is the perfect act through which what was nothing when it was inside emerges into the monumental reality of the outside as something which is necessarily faithful, since the person it translates exists only through it and in it (305).

Thus the joy generated by the work of art is seen, so Blanchot, as 'the pure joy of passing from the night of possibility into the daytime of presence' (305). Here, however, the question poses itself whether there exists for the writer who is said to be thus realized by his work anything other than his work. He may have realized his pure Self in the work, but as soon as the work is out in the world there are others who take part in it and make the work their own, namely the readers. The writer may come into existence through his work, but his work itself only has existence if it emerges into the world and is read by others. The work now changes from something in which the writer had realized his Self into a work that is the property of other people who have the right to give it or withdraw from it value by comparing it to other works in the 'marketplace of the world' (306). The writer who finds himself in this situation is faced with two choices: he either refrains from making his work public to keep it in the privacy of the 'splendour of [his] pure Self' (306). Or he discards his Self in favour of the work and allows the work to become the property of the reader as the only one who matters. This

would mean, though, that the writer ceases to write for himself and, the reader in mind, writes solely for the public. This, in turn, would be nothing other than presenting the public with themselves, their own speech, whereas the reader is always interested in a reality that is different from his own. And, of course, a writer cannot retreat into himself completely since then he would have to abandon writing:

> As he writes, he cannot sacrifice the pure night of his own possibilities, because his work is alive only if that night—and no other—becomes day, if what is most singular about him and farthest removed from existence as already revealed now reveals itself within shared existence. (307)

Another way out of this dilemma is the supposition that the writer concerns himself merely with writing as a technique, 'the simple operation of writing' (307) that makes the work come into being. Still the work that emerges will be taken over by the world and what the world does with it is still a part of its making. There is however something noteworthy in such a perspective according to Blanchot: the writer abolishes his Self while writing, he writes 'as nothingness', and having written the work he submits it to history so as to make it disappear (as *his* work). What remains is the work as the actual 'Thing', realized or brought into existence through the disappearance of the writer's work, the 'Thing Itself' (in Hegel's terms) thus coming to existence *as* it disappears. In such a procedure, the writer is not concerned with the work as such but with the 'truth of the work', with the meaning it assumes in history. Here, the self that writes whom Blanchot calls a 'force of creative negation' (308) (creating something that negates the world by having created a world of its own) merges with the work's movement in history, with the 'work in motion' (308), which is the expression of this force of negation as well as of the surpassing of the writer's self. In this perspective, the aim is

not the work that the writer creates as such but that which is seen as the work's authenticity, its 'essence', its 'spiritual truth'. The writer bound by such a goal is perceived as a disinterested self, an '*honest man*' (308). But here a problem arises. How can 'honesty' be maintained when what is at stake is literature? Literature is defined by the choice of creating something that is untrue, it is the product of "bad faith" *per se*. Thus, the writer's postulating himself as an honest conscience having only the spirit of the work in mind does not seem an honest position with regard to literature. Such an honest conscience may in the end not even manage to produce the work, consoling himself with the thought that in fact 'silence and nothingness are the essence of literature' (309)! And should the work be produced but regarded as a failure by the world, he will find consolation in the fact that the spirit of the work has meaning for himself alone. Hence, should the writer see all the value of his work in the *meaning* that it bears, it will not make any difference whether the work is produced or not, whether it pleases the reader or not. Imagining still another scenario, how will a writer who has produced a work without any intention or hope of fame react if his work does turn out to be a success in the world? Naturally he will take credit for the successful reception of his work and will see his Self reflected in it. Thus a writer may fool himself and believe that while he is writing literature (to fool others) he has only the reader in mind and not himself. But as soon as he is writing, *he himself is writing*, otherwise there would be no one writing the work, and no work would be written.

Let us suppose that the writer has fooled himself into believing that he is writing for others as he, for example, is writing to support a Cause. By the very fact that he is *writing* about it, that he is putting it into literature which 'by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents' (310), he fails to support that Cause which is an active

reality. He is committed to literature, and not to the Cause. Should he deny this and be committed to the Cause as action, he would not be writing literature. However, should he in turn isolate himself from everything in the world and in his periphery to write a work that is born purely from his own Self, the work that thus comes into the world would still be in relation with the world and with other works, its viewpoint however private still concerning everyone.

It seems like there is no way out for the writer who sets himself the task of creating a work of literature. Which of these contradictory positions is ultimately the proper one for the writer? According to Blanchot, the writer is not in any single one of these positions, nor can he be said to pass through these stages successively. The writer is rather 'the action which brings [these stages] together and unifies them (311). When the writer assumes or is dragged into any of these states he is bound to change positions and assume another. As he shakes and shifts from one position to another, he becomes 'someone who is perpetually absent' (311) while at the same time this shifting determines the 'extent of his presence' (312) as a writer who bears risks and responsibilities. Laboring under each of these necessities

> he must oppose himself, deny himself even as he affirms himself, look for the deepness of the night in the facility of the day, look in the shadows which never begin, to find the sure light which cannot end. He must save the world and be the abyss, justify existence and allow what does not exist to speak; he must be at the end of all eras in the universal plenitude, and he is the origin, the birth of what does nothing but come into being (313).

Let us note here that the duality of presence-absence, negation or denial-affirmation that characterizes Blanchot's thought has already entered the picture in the figure of the writer. However, is it the writer as a person that all of those notions in the above passage can be attributed to? It is not the person who is all that, Blanchot maintains, but

literature. Literature is all that in the writer. However, many could be found who degrade literature which is supposed to be 'all that', saying it is 'nothing'. A statement like 'All that is only literature' illustrates this viewpoint according to which the written word ('passive expression on the surface of the world') is opposed to action ('concrete initiative in the world' (313)). Is literature really that different from action?

We had established in the previous chapter how Blanchot apprehends action or work as the negation of the human being of nature with the aim of creating a world which expresses Unity-Identity with his Self. Here, Blanchot lays out this perspective in even more lucid terms to determine the place of literature within work.

Work, he asserts, can be seen as the 'force of history' which 'transforms man while it transforms the world' (313). A man who works does so out of a passion (the passion of negation) to create something which was not there before. At first this creation is an idea, an unreal plan, but once it is carried out a creation is realized and an object comes into being. The work that is created affirms the reality of the new object while at the same time it denies the plan that was there before the creation, its idea. Supposing that the object of the work is created from some materials, those materials are denied and destroyed while the object is affirmed. Through his creation, man has changed the state of the world before his work and has prepared the future of the world in which something new might be created in turn through the denial and destruction of this particular object. And as the state of the world is changed, man is effected by this change and is changed himself. 'Thus is history formed' says Blanchot, attributing this view to Marx and Hegel, 'by work which realizes being in denying it, and reveals it at the end of the negation.' (314)

Is it possible to claim, then, that literature is different from action? In fact, literature could be said to be everything that work is, and even to a much greater degree. The writer produces his work by 'transforming natural and human realities' (314): when he starts his work he is situated at a certain point in language, in culture, defined by certain books and employing certain objects (paper, pen, etc.). Writing itself begins by negating language as it appears in other books to create a new book which is different than the other books. The new book that emerges from the work is a new reality, it is the creation of what beforehand existed only as an idea, and it is a new reality even in the sense of being a tangible object. And it is a kind of object whose potential to change the future, whose influence, is impossible to predict, and possibly immense. Moreover the writer himself is changed by the work he has produced, not only through having negated his idea and created the new reality of his work but also in the sense that the work itself is nothing but the writer's self become *other*, namely, a book. Thus, the work of literature cannot really be seen as being of less consequence than 'concrete' action, on the contrary, the writer's power to act is incalculable, limitless, as he can create anything and his work can exert influence far beyond any other work. Yet, it is precisely this position of the writer as the bearer of limitless influence that constitutes the problem of literature as work. A writer is, on the hand, capable of *everything*: he can negate any of the actual circumstances he is in and freely create a free world such as humanity has never seen before. He is the only human being who through his work has the freedom to negate *everything* that he is and thereby create and become everything he is not. However, as his work entails that he gives himself this freedom *immediately* (in writing), he is omitting to do the *actual* work that must be done 'so that the abstract idea of freedom can be realized' (315). Blanchot calls the negation of the writer '*global*': as

well as negating the situation he is in, he negates *time* as he neglects the passing of time he is subject to as well as the time he is in, while simultaneously he also negates the negation of time by creating a make-believe world and not working in the world within time to change his time. And he negates limits as in his creation everything is possible while he also negates the negation of limits as he is not concerned with transforming the actual limits through 'concrete' action. In the end, his work is a negation that negates *nothing*:

> in the end [...] the work in which [this negation] is realized is not a truly negative, destructive act of transformation, but rather the realization of the inability to negate anything, the refusal to take part in the world; it transformed the freedom which would have to be embodied in things in the process of time into an ideal above time, empty and inaccesible (215-316).

Thus, we have come back to the duality ascribed to literature by Blanchot: literature, as work, is *everything* as both its possibilities and its influence are limitless, yet in a sense it is also *nothing*, as its negation is directed to the actual world and actual time only to the extent that it denies them completely. The writer is 'only master of everything, he posesses only the infinite' (316) and thus is deprived of the *finite*. In the infinite, it is impossible to speak of work; accomplishment can only be carried out in the world of limited, determined reality. Through producing an object that is a book, the writer is negating all other work as he is substituting for the world of definite action a work wherein '*everything* is *instantly* given' and the enjoyment of which in turn requires inactivity. Furthermore, what the writer gives us is *all* of a reality instead of particular realities which make up the reality of the world. The realm of the imaginary from which all creation begins and which then is presented to us in the literary work is unreality, and this unreality starts with the negation of *everything*, the negation of the whole. What is

created in its stead, the literary work, then, becomes the whole: the reader negates all of reality to affirm the whole reality of the book he is reading. Blanchot explains it thus: the literary work realizes the 'absence' of the whole as it is itself a product of this absence. Absence (the lack that is negated) is the starting-point of *everything*, and thus literary creation can be thought of as beginning from the whole it negates and proceeding to see and name individual characters and thereby producing a world. And still, this starting-point is also the absence of everything (the whole world) and thus it is *nothing*. Literary creation begins from nothing, but it also begins from everything. It offers the whole, but this whole is also the negation of the whole and thus nothing.

Blanchot invites us to consider literary creation from still another aspect. Let us see the the writer's work as movement which proceeds continuously from nothing to everything without ever arriving. As in every human being, there is in him that negation which, as we have seen, is the human being's passion for realizing himself. The writer's negation, though, is not satisfied with the unreality in which it exists in the world and it wishes to realize itself in his work as the negation of the world. The writer's negation can only be realized in this sense by negating something real. What he negates has to be 'more real than words, more true than the isolated individual in control' (318): he thus advances towards worldy life and public existence to conceive how, even as he writes, he can, by negating it, turn into that existence. At this point, as he puts worldy life and public existence into question, he is faced with those great moments in history when everything, history itself, is put into question. These moments are the moments of *Revolution*: those moments when everything falls back into nothingness, when history has become a *void* in which anything can happen. Such is the state of the mind of the writer (who after all is a product and an extension of history like everyone else) when he

is in the process of negating reality. The moment of revolution, of being posited in the void from where anything is possible, expresses *freedom*: 'At this moment, freedom aspires to be realized in the most *immediate* form [which means that] *everything* is possible' (318) writes Blanchot. And: 'Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute' (319).

The writer starts writing on an empty page with the same explosive force action is taken in a revolution. Just as a revolution sees itself not as a finite task undertaken to reach a limited goal but as the 'ultimate act' of total freedom, so does the writer view his work in which everything is negated to create everything anew from nothing. To further elucidate this parallel, Blanchot draws on the example of the French Revolution. During such an event, regarded in its time as the ultimate event of history, the only possible motto beomes 'Freedom or Death'. The 'Reign of Terror' comes into being as each individual is stripped of the neccesity of private work, forced to abandon his private life and, ultimately that which makes him a being of civilization: his sense of self. The only right left to him which defines him as a citizen is his most essential right: the right to death. Thus death is no longer apprehended as such but becomes the basis for man being a citizen. From the atmosphere of the French Revolution we should get a feeling for the void in history from which nothing passes into everything and man passes from nothingness into being: 'it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes [the human being] to be born' (319). The human being becomes such only through his right to death, he realizes himself on account of his inherent 'capacity for dying'. Blanchot's expression reveals by the succession of terms the essential movement of the human being who through nothingness by an act of freedom comes to posit himself in existence,

and, in turn, exists, and as the ultimate act of freedom is freed of existence and disappears. Thus also the writer passes from the negation of the whole, nothingness, through the void, into the being of his work that becomes everything, and in this movement experiences the freedom of unlimited possibility which characterizes a revolution. Death or nothingness is the basis from which this freedom moves, and death or nothingness are also the ultimate point of unlimited freedom. In a chapter of "The Limit-Experience" where he reflects on humanism and the (im)possibility of atheism, Blanchot asserts that the ultimate point of humanism ("God is dead") simply expresses the passing of sovereignty from God to death. He writes, quoting Bataille: 'the sovereign is no longer a king: he is hidden in our great cities, he surrounds himself with silence' (*Conversation*, 248). Sovereignty over existence belongs to death. The desire for freedom, as the example of the French Revolution shows us, is the achievement of sovereignty. Thus the idea of freedom is ultimately tied to the idea of death as utmost freedom would denote freedom from existence. 'Death [is] the achievement of freedom' (Blanchot, *Work*, 320), however, death is not something that can be realized for the human being (dying cannot be said to be an experience); it is on the side of the 'impossible', and freedom remains an abstract idea in the world that the human being has created through its negation.

The writer's experience is akin to the revolutionary's ("I am the revolution, only freedom allows me to write" (321) as he moves through the freedom of nothingness towards everything. Literature corresponds to the experience of revolution because 'its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when "life endures death and maintains itself in it" in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech' (321-322).

The possibility of speaking and the truth of speech are made possible by death. To elucidate this even further, we should now turn to the truth of language which is the essence of speech as well as, of course, literature. What is the significance of language, how do words work?

Words, Blanchot claims, give us mastery over things. We name a thing so that we can, in language, do anything we want with it. At the same time, as soon as we name a thing, we lose all relation with that thing *qua* thing (Kant's "thing-in-itself") and retain only its idea. It is, in turn, this absence of relation with the reality of a thing that makes words and thus language possible. Language works through the *ideas* of things. Thus, for example, Blanchot maintains that the language of mathematics is the most perfect of all languages as it has no relation to any entity outside itself.

A word gives us the meaning of a thing, but not before it supresses that meaning. When we call a cat a cat, we have taken away the cat's physical reality and replaced it with a word. 'The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being', Blanchot writes (322). Thus, 'the word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist' (322). From the moment the cat is named "cat" it stops being a real cat and turns into an idea. Man, in order to be able to speak, has to annihilate all living things so as to turn them into meaning. Hence it is in order to say that language arises, and man creates his whole world of meaning, out of death, absence, out of nothingness. What remains in this world are no longer beings or, as Blanchot says, 'existants', but only "being" as the *meaning* of existence:

> [...] man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create. He saw that he was enclosed in daylight, and he knew this day could not end, because the end itself was light, since it was from the end of beings that their meaning—which is being—had come (323).

The metaphor of meaning as light might remind us of the Mosaic account of creation: "God said: Let there be light, and there was light". Through Blanchot's passage we see the appropriateness of such an account of creation for man: the human being is created (or rather, creates himself as such) as he passes from the night of nothingness into the daylight of meaning. Moreover, in this movement he annihilates all living beings *as* living beings so that they can exist for him as ideas over which he then assumes sovereignty.

Such is the violence of language which is possible only through the death of beings. Words may not kill someone, but language on account of its negation of beings as such implies the capacity of the human being to kill as well as to die. The existence of words depends on the nothingness whose traces reside in everyone, on the living being's capacity for dying: 'Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me.' (323). Death or nothingness is the condition for the possibility of meaning.

What are the consequences of this situation for myself? It seems like, for myself, 'the power to speak is also linked to my absence from being' (324). When I say my name, I disengage myself from my being and

> I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name [...] When I speak, I deny the existence of what I am saying, but I also the deny the existence of the person who is saying it; if my speech reveals being in its non-existence, it also affirms that this revelation is made on the basis of the nonexistence of the person making it, out of his power to remove himself from himself, to be other than his being. This is why, if true language is to begin, the life that will carry this language must have experienced its nothingness, must have "trembled in the depths; and everything in it that was fixed and stable must have been shaken". Language can begin only with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself (324).

It is the essential lack that belongs to the human being, the void left by his having become a human being, having become exterior existence, his capacity for death which makes possible his giving meaning, his expressing himself. The negation which makes the human being such as he is, then, is essentally tied to language.

Blanchot asserts that literature's aim, expressed in its work as the negation of negation, has been 'to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing' (324). Language, as it recognizes that its meaning arises not from what exists but from the denial of existence, attempts in literature to dwell in this denial so that it can create everything back from nothing. Everyday language accepts the fact that naming things has made them nonexistent as it retains the being of the thing in its idea and in speaking refers to its meaning which in language bears the same certainty as the thing does in the world. Thus when we call a cat a cat, writes Blanchot, we may hold on to nothing more than the idea of a cat, its meaning rather than its physical reality, but at least we can be certain that "cat" refers to the actual cat and not, for example, a dog. The same certainty is not in effect where literary language is concerned. Literary language deals only with the meaning and thus the absence of a thing, it deals with this absence in or for itself, aiming to achieve as whole the infinite movement of giving meaning, of comprehension. Literary language, moreover, in literature acknowledges the deception it undertakes when the word it uses does not stand anymore for the nonexistence of a thing but makes of the nonexsitence of the thing a *word.* Thus, while literary language sets out to grasp the infinite movement of comprehension, what it accomplishes instead is nothing more than reversing 'the unreality of a thing into the reality of language' (326). The deception of language which attempts to posit a reality for unreality is in fact not surmountable,

neither in literature nor in speech: language ‘is not sufficient for the truth it contains’ (326). In each word, ‘nothingness is struggling and toiling away’ (326), and as groups of words come together and intertwine, ‘endless slidings’ and ‘turns of phrase’ emerge, always ‘more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence’, designating a movement which does not lead anywhere near the reality of beings. Literary language then produces the ‘image’, no longer identifying a thing but what the thing is not; thus a cat becomes a dog. As this movement continues, literary language tries to recapture all words to negate them all in their entirety so that they will signify the void, ‘this void which they can neither fill nor represent’ (326). And literary language goes even further still. Knowing that it derives its existence from the lack of something other, knowing that for the ‘day’ of meaning to begin, ‘something [had to] be left out’ (326), it goes in search for ‘this moment which precedes literature’ (326). This lack is usually expressed in language as “existence” or “*presence”*. Literature desires ‘the cat as it exists’, the thing while still on the side of things, brought back to life, that which is designated by “the abyss”. Literature then tries to summon things as they exist by employing the ‘materiality of language’, and, leaving the realm of meaning, it concentrates on such ‘physical’ devices like ‘rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book’ (327), objects and things in which the ‘reality of the earth continues to exist’ (328). In this way literature tries to achieve a language in which the word does not act as an ‘ideal power’ but as an ‘obscure force’, an ‘incantation’ meant to make things ‘*really* present outside of themselves’. As literature takes such a turn with the desire to conjure up presence, language becomes autonomous since there is no longer any need or desire for the writer to negate the reality of the world and thus “the death of the author” comes into effect. In its quest for

the presence of things before the world comes into existence, literature leaves the world itself, but it cannot achieve to take place *beyond* the world. It strives to become a consciousness of the night before the light of meaning, but it does not become the night itself. Even if it negates the day, the furthest point it can arrive at is 'the side of the day that day has rejected in order to become light' (328). Literature does not become night, it does not become absence as it still works. It works with the aim of achieving presence without being (meaning)—infinite presence which is the absence of being, 'death as the impossibility of dying' (328).

In this way, literature, by transforming itself into an inability to reveal meaning, an 'obscure force', ventures to become the 'revelation of what revelation destroys' (328), that is, it attempts to be presence which however cannot be revealed since revelation (or bringing out in the light of meaning) is based on the negation of presence. This aim of literature Blanchot expresses as : '"I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present."' (328). Literature wishes to be a thing, hiding itself 'behind the fact that it is visible' (329). The impossibility of this tragic endavour of literature to restore what it lacks as language is captured by Blanchot thus: 'If [literature] were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind that stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse' (329).

The allusion to ancient civilizations reveals the impossibility inherent in literature to become presence by way of absence which, however is at the same time the possibility of literature itself: with the first representation that marks the beginning of civilization, presentation is already lost as it is negated by meaning, and the presence of literature itself even as it tries to efface meaning stands as the symbol of this loss. The

presence of literature as it negates the representation of being expresses nothingness as the possibility of its presence, death does speak through it, the writing on the stone is there on account of the invisible presence of the corpse behind the stone, reminding us of the corpse. Even if literature becomes the corpse itself, it cannot become the presence that is the nothingness of the night before the daylight of meaning and representation. What it achieves by negating the day is only the recreation of the 'day in the form of fatality' (329), day that is based on fatality.

In answer to the question which is the beginning of literature, the quest after the nothingness of words and the presence of things, literature thus becomes 'the life that endures death and maintains itself in it'. It may be asserted that this phrase is also an accurate description of the human being's existence as Blanchot conceives of it. The human being as individual dies, but being as such maintains itself in the nothingness which it bears (the lack) and from which it has come about. And thus, if the passion of man is the negation of his nature with the aim of recovering what he lacks in the freedom from existence which is death, an aim which he can never achieve, literature is the space which expresses this 'obsession of existence', 'the very impossibility of emerging from existence' (332) which it sets out to negate only to find itself thrown back into it by way of the presence of language that is at the same time the absence of beings as they are.

CONCLUSION

It was the aim of this thesis to illuminate certain features of Blanchot's thought while revealing how the duality of being/nothingness or presence/absence is manifested in human existence. Moreover, Blanchot's notion of the Other, *Autrui*, was to be approached regarding the relation the human being postulates with the Other and thus with presence by way of speech and of literature. It remains to restate what we have gathered from Blanchot's reflections to present a coherent picture of the signification of presence/absence for existence as well as the manner in which man comes to relate to the Other.

According to Maurice Blanchot, human existence is defined by exteriority. Being human implies a break from a fixed relationship to the earth; the human being is one who has employed his right for beginning, has separated from the origin and thereby created his own world and his own truth. Blanchot asserts that the figure of the Jew stands as a good manifestation of the human being's situation. In his view, the notions of 'exodus' and 'exile', both signifying the Jewish condition throughout history, express the human condition in general. This is revealed by the religious mythology as well as the history of Judaism. The Jew comes into being with Abraham's decision to leave his point of origin and migrate towards the unknown. This movement of migration perfectly echoes the human being's journey of existence. Coming into being, the human being has left his point of origin and is moving towards the 'foreign truth' of nothingness, or death.

Moreover, he has created civilization, his own world, based on a decision to move from his pagan wholeness with the earth. Thus the human being is defined by exodus and exile.

However, the Jew has been persecuted or at least excluded throughout history, an occurrence which has reached its peak in the Holocaust. This has happened on account of the Jew being the one in exile, being the 'Other', wherever he has settled. If one considers that individual existence in general entails this 'Otherness' by being excluded from the earth, from all beings and things, it is difficult to understand why a certain type of man should be oppressed due to his being 'Other'. Blanchot draws attention to the fact that human existence entails 'the temptation of Unity-Identity' (Blanchot, *Conversation*, 126), that is the need of subjective reason to 'assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring back everything to our I' (127). Thus the subject works to subsume everything outside him under his self, be it by way of thought, constructing systems of truth, or by way of action, constructing his world. Within such a system, the Other, threatening the ideal of unity, may inspire 'repulsion' or fear, and the urge to 'do away with him' as Blanchot sees exemplified in Anti-Semitism. Yet there is another way of relating to the other than mortal violence, and that way is through *speech*. Speech inaugurates a relation of one human being to another which recognizes and preserves the distance and the difference in-between while requiring the speaker to step out of his self by speaking and the listener to step out of his self by paying attention. In this way, speech provides a temporary common dwelling place for the speakers in which they nonetheless maintain their mutual Otherness. The special significance of speech, Blanchot maintains, has been recognized in Judaism: in the scriptures, man speaks to

God and God speaks to man. Moreover, the Judaist account of creation ("God said: Let there be light, and there was light") entails speech as God's instrument for creation.

God may be viewed as the postulation of the 'Other' *par excellence.* The thought of an encounter with God would seem horrifying precisely on account of his Otherness. Such an encounter would in fact result either in death, or, as the scripture reveals, in speaking to him. Judaism thus reveals how recognizing another human being as an Other Presence can be thought the equivalent of being faced with God.

By definition escaping assimilation, the Other, *Autrui*, is unknown, foreign, infinitely distant. It manifests itself in presence, the presence of, for example, another human being, or the presence of things and other living beings. It is the side of these beings which escapes conceptualization, which defies the 'bringing back to the I'. It manifests itself as absence as well, absence being the lack of presence. Absence is as ungraspable as nothingness or death. It is the unknown, the foreign, the infinitely distant. It can never be experienced or attained in the way knowledge is attained; yet it can come to the human being, it can be 'offered' to him in speech. Moreover, Blanchot maintains that the human being himself bears this Otherness expressed in the duality of presence/absence. To say that human existence is delineated through separation from its origin entails that the human being has lost something in order to come into being. Blanchot maintains that human existence as well as history are defined by *negation*. The human being comes into being by negating his 'fixed relation' to the earth. Once in existence, though, his whole endeavor becomes the recovering of unity. In Blanchot's terms, the human being turns his loss into a power to achieve what he lacks. Thus his activities, work and thought, are oriented towards 'Unity-Identity' (as manifested in civilization, the crafting of the human being's own world, and in discourse, the

construction of the human being's own truth). However, in such a view, the human being as universal and man as individual seem to have attained their aim and history seems to be in completion at each point in time as the human being becomes universal in creating and identifying with his own universe. These thoughts on the human being, on the other hand, are, according to Blanchot, reflections which lead the human being 'back to [his] I', back to the subject and, as we have seen, back to man as universal. However, as Blanchot's text itself demonstrates, thought does not stop at this point and continues questioning, just as existence continues and the human being does not vanish from the face of the earth. Thus history enters another cycle in the movement towards Unity-Identity. That residue of questioning that still remains after a cycle of reflection concerning the human being has been completed, after all has been attained in action and in knowledge, Blanchot attributes to 'the passion of negative thought'. Negative thought is the residue of negativity that does not exhaust itself in work and in thought. This negativity denotes an exigency in the human being not for production but for expenditure. Blanchot ascribes negativity or negation in general to the lack inherent in the human being, the loss he suffered by entering into an exterior existence. As negation expresses itself as the human being's power to create and produce with the aim of Unity-Identity, the lack which it attempts to fill must be presence. Blanchot maintains that the absence of presence inherent in the human being is the basis for negativity, and the passion of negative thought. This absence which the human being bears is in fact nothing other than his capacity for dying. And thus it is his capacity for dying which the human being turns into a power, the power to create and to achieve. Hence Blanchot establishes that human existence is based on the duality of presence/absence, his presence as a being and the absence of presence he carries within himself that is his

capacity for dying. The aim of the completion of history by way of negation (producing work and knowledge) is in fact the attainment of death, or of nothingness, that which can never be given in experience is thus never attained. Whenever a cycle completes itself, the residue of negativity, the 'passion of negative thought' asserts itself and turns into positive thought and a new cycle begins.

It is through this 'passion of negative thought' that human consciousness may chance to be given a glimpse of presence, the part of himself negated to achieve an individual consciousness, that which may perhaps be called the Other in him. By way of negative thought, the human being can reverse the process of positive action and thought and arrive at the limit of the 'first' negation. The arrival at this limit Blanchot calls the 'limit-experience'. The limit of negation is affirmation, the contestation of what lies on the other side of the limit, namely nothingness, and at this limit lies the gift of presence. Blanchot maintains, though, that even if negative thought should thus arrive at the limit of representation and consciousness should touch presence, this experience cannot be retained in thought since affirmation is immediately followed by negation, the basis of human consciousness. This experience is not a real experience as its aim cannot be said to be attained by the human consciousness. What happens is that at the limit, presence gives itself, is offered. The experience of presence as such, then, remains impossible. The limit-experience thus may be said to be a momentary state at the limit of the impossible, a state between possibility and impossibility, at the limit of presence which gives itself as an affirmation but turns into its absence (negation) at the same time. That such an offering occurs moreover bears witness to the fact that 'possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence' and that in fact impossibility belongs to the human being by way of the absence inherent in him.

The limit-experience thus affords a glimpse of presence, an experience of which nothing can be retained in thought, which, however, would render an awareness of the fact (which nonetheless cannot become a fact of direct knowledge) that *there is presence*.

Blanchot proposes that one can trace the duality of presence/absence that defines the human being in the space of speech. Speech provides, as already mentioned, a certain kind of relation with the Other by receiving him while also acknowledging his difference. However, if speech is utilized to argue in view of a dialectical victory or in any other form which furthers the assertion of the self, this relation between the two speakers will not be fulfilled in the deepest sense. For speech to become a relation between one human being and another, mutual *attention* is required which serves for speech not to fall back into argument or self-assertion. The special trait of speech is that thought comes to pass in it in an immediate manner, thought that is non-familiar in the sense that it is always aimed at what is unknown, thought that is in 'play'. In the space generated between two interlocutors through attention, the play of thought occurs. This space of attention, as it is a space in-between two, between myself (my Self) and another (an Other) is an *other* space that is different from what is familiar and habitual to both selves. It thereby allows for speech to become a shared *presence*. Within the presence of speech, immediate and without measure, thought in its play aims at the unknown, that is, at absence. an additional quality of speech is that it is perishable, forgettable: the moment it comes into presence, it fleets back into absence. Thus the duality of presence/absence reveals itself in speech with another human being as a sign of the difference between the interlocutors, their Otherness, since their difference is precisely what renders speech and the space of attention possible.

Blanchot furthermore postulates a kind of speech wherein reflection and speaking are made possible at the same time so that one of the speakers may become aware of the Other, of presence. He calls this speech a 'plural speech' and likens it to a game of dice. In this game, what is said one time by one of the speakers is repeated another time by the other. Whether the game is successful depends on the space of attention generated by the interlocutors. As speech is thus doubled, the presence of speech gets more sharper while simultaneously the difference between the interlocutors becomes more intense. Here, it may happen by chance that one of the two momentarily recognizes presence within the space of attention that has opened up to the play of thought, the infinite space of limitless possibilities, the 'night of unseizable chance'. Again, this chancing upon the Other is no more than a momentary flash, it is the limit-experience, not to be retained in thought, forgotten immediately. Yet it is a gift that such a possibility of being offered a sense of presence is open to the human being, and this is the gift of speech and attention which necessarily involves the Other.

Another area that requires attention and a space of its own is literature. Literature may belong to the human being's movement of negation as it is a kind of work, something produced, yet literature may also be viewed as occupying a special place within that movement as literature is also in a sense speech, a conversation between the writer and his reader, spoken through the written word. Approaching the space of literature from the perspective of the writer through whom this space is created, Blanchot reveals how the writer assumes a number of apparently conflicting positions which render him 'perpetually absent' as he disappears as a self to recreate himself in the work or as the work is realized by the world it is presented to. At the same time, though, these shifting states that the work requires of him determine his presence. The

duality of presence/absence that comes to be seen in the figure of the writer is in fact a quality of literature: more than any other work, the work of literature arises through the negation of what *is* to affirm its own presence. The work of literature has to negate *everything* (the world which itself comes to being through negation), and the force and influence which it will have in the world once it is present is unpredictable, therefore limitless. Yet there is also a peculiarity inherent in literature as while it negates the world in its totality to create its own world, the work of literature falls short of concrete action within determined reality and thereby comes to be seen as negating *nothing*. Thus the work of literature by way of its creation as well as by way of its enjoyment negates *everything*, yet as it negates the actual work and actual time entirely and offers in its stead a complete world of its own it simultaneously negates *nothing*. Insofar as literary creation begins from the absence of the whole, it begins from the *void*, that is, the starting-point of all there is. Inasmuch as the work begins from the starting-point of everything, the absence of the whole, it begins from nothing. Blanchot compares the movement of literary creation from everything to nothing and, in turn, from nothing to everything to the movement of a historical revolution such as the French Revolution, a moment in which history becomes nothing, a void in which anything can happen. The writer experiences the same sense of freedom as the revolutionary who negates everything in order to create everything anew. The desire for freedom that comes to be expressed in a revolution manifests death as the human being's ultimate right, as his first right in existence which in turn determines him as a human being. The French Revolution is a good example because there death becomes the only authority in the form of the Reign of Terror, all citizens are stripped of their worldly rights and are determined solely by their right to die, and in fact under those circumstances many

actually chose to die. It may be asserted of the human being that his right to exist is based on his right to death, an echo of what Blanchot had established regarding existence in “The Limit-Experience”: existence is based on negation, the human being bears within himself a lack, a nothingness which is his capacity for dying, in existence, presence goes hand in hand with absence. The movement of the coming into being of the literary work is akin to the revolutionary’s who attempts to maintain life at the void, at the nothingness that everything has fallen into, so that everything might come to be anew. The ideal of literature, thus, is to create presence from absence, precisely that which according to Blanchot occurs in speech.

To determine as to which extent literature accomplishes this aim one might consider the peculiar quality of language. As words indicate a relation with things based on the *absence* of their actual beings and the presence of an idea of them, their *meaning*, language entails absence or nothingness as the condition of its presence. The stamp of nothingness that language bears points to its inherent violence: language inaugurates a relation with presence (with the Other) which is based on its having annihilated that presence by turning it into meaning. It is in this sense accurate to claim that ‘when I speak, death speaks in me’. Yet, as we have seen, speech is the side of this relation to the Other in which one steps out of oneself and from the space wherein meaning is created through annihilation to meet the Other halfway and to employ language in a light and fleeting manner in the immediacy of thought. Due to its fleeting quality speech also bears the advantage of being forgettable and does not exert influence with the same violent and limitless force as does writing. Blanchot asserts that literature expresses the recognition of the absence of things in language as literature, through a double-negation (negating the negation which is the world or language) attempts to restore to things their

life, their presence. On this account literature abandons meaning and evolves to become more ‘material’ in, for example, poetry wherein the ‘physical’ properties of language such as rhythm, weight and shape, take precedence. However, in this attempt literature in fact accomplishes no more than the persistent presence of language, akin to existence which bears nothingness yet never perishes, the human being who can never experience death, ‘death as the impossibility of dying’. The quest for presence which is annihilated in language brings forth presence as the space of literature wherein thus ‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’. Still, the space of speech remains as the sole kind of relation to the Other wherein presence may reveal itself due to the generation of the space of attention which in turn is based on the difference between the two speakers.

It might be asserted that Blanchot’s reflections on the relation to presence or the Other have special relevance today as the idea of globalism is taking shape in the world. An inquiry into which extent the ideal of globalism (“everybody is the same”) that translates into relations of forced and violent imposition between the East and the West takes into account the reality of presence might be interesting. Another direction such an investigation could take might be how the civilized human being keeps his relation to presence as manifested in natural beings and the earth and how the presence of nature comes to announce itself in threatening realities such as global warming.

Maintaining relations with the Other that receive and recognize his different presence is also relevant to the present reality of Turkey where nationalism (unity of the same, exclusion of the other) announces itself as a protest of globalist capitalism while ‘mellow’ fundamentalism defines itself as embracing difference and at the same time encourages women to conceal the attributes that differentiate them from men.

In his approach to the Other as presence, Blanchot postulates an ethics almost *ex nihilo*, based solely on the difference between human beings which might be relevant for contemporary debates on ethical relativism.

Regarding Blanchot's formulation of the human being's need for unity-identity, a research into love relationships and the contemporary trend of remaining single (which goes by the name of "commitment-phobia") might prove an interesting cultural study.

Thoughts on the absence of being inherent in language are the subject of discourse at least since Nietzsche and have been explored and developed widely in structuralism as well as poststructuralism. The failure of literature to achieve its aim of materializing as presence might be brought into the context of the diminishing importance of poetry today. In this context Blanchot's style of writing, a style between philosophical discourse and poetry, might be worthy of analysis in terms of the manner in which it conveys its content.

It is interesting to note, moreover, that literature is once again becoming more visual and that generally visual presentation (cinema) has gained precedence over written and spoken presentation. It might be asserted as well that language is getting more visual in the sense that words are being replaced by symbols (such as emoticons or street signs) which are meant to convey the meaning of a full sentence ("I feel happy" or "Do not trespass"). In view of Blanchot's postulation of the violence of language, could it be that we are getting more immune to the signs of absence as our reality turns into a hyperreality? And as we are getting used to the absence of presence, we tend to ignore the violence generated in civilization by which presence is turned into absence.

On the other hand, as visuality acquires primacy in forms of communication, this development points to an acceleration in our ability of communication which might pave

the way for other types of communication we might be capable but yet unaware of. The relations of various theories of communication might be brought into relation with Blanchot's reflections on how the human being generates meaning by way of annihilating presence. Moreover, the diminishing space of speech as the site of difference in favor of internet communication could lead to a discussion on how globalism is an expression of Blanchot's postualtion of the need for Unity-Identity.

Thus Blanchot's thought remains relevant today. Inasmuch, though, as Blanchot is concerned with presence as the Other and the human being whose existence is based on the duality of presence/absence, and as long as presence prevails, Blanchot's thought remains timeless.

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