

Vigilance in Maurice Blanchot

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Language as the neutre

"Thought of the neutre is a threat and a scandal for thought," writes Blanchot in "René Char et la pensée du neutre." He also cites Char's line, "I am going to speak and I know what saying is, but what is the hostile echo that interrupts me?" The "hostile echo" that interrupts speech is the voice of the neutre. It speaks and changes ceaselessly; it becomes the interminable murmur, a haunting spectre, the opacity that is beyond any opacity. It is the voice that interrupts our voice whenever we speak.

The thought of the neutre not only provides the basis of Blanchot's reflection on language but essentially characterizes his language itself. The neutre names the force of language which interrupts the totalizing force while suspending and effacing its own speech or its own presence. The neutre is that which cannot be assimilated to any genre or any category. It resists appropriation and determination. It refuses to belong to a whole. It also exists as "the suffering of language," "the torment of language" that comes to us as if from the other side of language.

"René Char et la pensée du neutre" is an essay which, instead of pretending to present a commentary on Char, tries to approach the thought of the neutre or the language of the neutre which Blanchot thinks constitutes a crucial part of Char's work. The essay depicts the enigmatic power of the speech of the neutre, and shows that this power is based on the neutre's passivity, which is inseparable from its interrogative force. According to Blanchot, the neutre comes to language through language when sheer passivity speaks -- when "an act qualifiable as passive seems to lack direct relation to a subject who would accomplish it," that is to say, when an action is separated from the subject who acts. The language of the neutre pronounces itself as "an action of inaction, an effect of non-effect." Or the neutre speaks without taking itself into account or the

one who pronounces it. In its passivity that is beyond any passive voice, the neutre allows the unsaid to speak. And the unsaid points to "the interrogative force," and is marked by the *ça*.

"It speaks; it desires; one dies [*ça parle; ça désire; on meurt*]," writes Blanchot. This line could be seen as the manifestation of the speech of the neutre. Here the French *ça*, at once crude and refined, marks the neutre: it is "as though there arose from the 'vulgar' street the murmur of an unmasterable affirmation in the manner of a cry from the lowest depths." In other words, the *ça* indicates "the thrust of a question or questioning," not in the form of a response, but as a withdrawal. "The neutre questions," Blanchot says, but it does so not in an ordinary manner, not by interrogating. But with the interrogative force, it "pushes always further the limits within which this force might still exercise itself, when the very sign of questioning fades and no longer leaves affirmation either the right or the power to respond."¹

The neutre is also depicted as "the refusal not only to choose, but to submit itself to the possibility of a choice between two terms: such as one or the other, yes or no, this or that, day night, god or man. 'Which of the two?' -- 'Neither one nor the other, the other, the other' . . ."² This refusal of the possibility of a choice between two terms indicates an opening of another relation, a relation with "the unknown" which "discloses" the unknown. It is a paradoxical relation, a "relation without relation" with the unknown. Blanchot writes, "To speak is to bind oneself, without ties, to the unknown." It is "a relation in which the unknown would be affirmed, made manifest, even exhibited: disclosed." Yet at the same time, he says, "this relation must leave intact -- untouched -- what it conveys and not unveil what it discloses." The unknown in the neutre is not to be touched. Also it is "the-not-to-be-expected," "the-not-to-be-found," or "the-

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, pp. 449-450; *The Infinite Conversation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 305.

² *Le pas au-delà*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, p.108; *The Step Not Beyond*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 77.

not-to-be-approached." And it is not to be brought to light, for the unknown in the neutre does not belong to light. It is neither visible nor invisible. It "turns itself away from every visible and invisible." It should be noted that Blanchot depicts this relation as a contradictory relation that "discloses the unknown, but by an uncovering that leaves it under cover." This relation of non-presence is a disclosure, but it is not an uncovering. It only "indicates" the unknown. Thus, the language of the neutre, which is based on the refusal to accept the possibility of a choice between two terms, means an opening of the relation which "discloses" the unknown. "To speak the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown."³

Language as Vigilance

It is impossible to separate Blanchot's notion of the neutre from that of vigilance. Vigilance, the wakefulness to what is double or the unknown, is also a "relation without relation" with the unknown: it "relates" the unknown inasmuch as it is unknown. Just as the neutre essentially characterizes Blanchot's language, so vigilance underlies his entire language. Vigilance in Blanchot means that his language "discloses" the danger of the thought of the unknown (i.e. what he names "philosophy"); and it does so by way of the divergence or reversal of what is double which his language seeks to safeguard. Here to "disclose" danger means to affirm, make manifest, exhibit danger, but by an uncovering that leaves danger under cover, or, in a word, to "indicate" danger.⁴ It is also to "relate" to danger as danger.

But how does vigilance speak in Blanchot's language? One may well imagine much of what Blanchot says about Heraclitus's language in

³ *L'Entretien infini*, pp. 440-445; *The Infinite Conversation*, pp. 299-302.

⁴ I am here referring to the sense of the verb "disclose[découvrir]" that Blanchot presents in "René Char et la pensée du neutre." He writes that the neutre supposes "a relation in which the unknown would be affirmed, made manifest, even exhibited: disclosed." This relation "discloses the unknown, but by an uncovering that leaves it under cover." *L'Entretien infini*, p. 442; *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 300.

"Heraclitus" applies to his own. For instance, the following remark about Heraclitus could describe Blanchot's own "vigilance": "with the vigilance of a man to whom a knowledge of what is double has been imparted, he watches over the secret alterity that governs difference, but governs it by preserving it against the indifference wherein all contrariety would be annulled."⁵

Blanchot pays attention to the enigmatic power of Heraclitus's language which is inseparable from sobriety, severity, and rigor. He says that Heraclitus's language is "the most attentive," and "supremely balanced between the contraries that it tests." He also depicts Heraclitus's language as the movement that does not advance along the one path, but makes us move, without our noticing it, toward Unity. Though Blanchot does not say it explicitly, he suggests that Heraclitus's language is nothing but the unceasing movement of the scales in which Unity Difference itself speaks. Vigilance in Heraclitus's language is essentially linked to this fact that it is the unceasing movement of the scales -- the movement which makes enigmatic Difference speak, in brief, the movement of the neutre.

Indeed, recalling René Schaerer's book *L'homme antique*, Blanchot presents a striking image of scales, the golden scales in the eighth book of the *Iliad*. He is describing Zeus's gaze. In order to end the Trojan conflict, Zeus ascends to Mount Ida and surveys the battlefield with his divine gaze. This gaze at first belongs to an empirical eye which observes "with a nonpreferential equanimity the exactly equal forces up to the moment when the decisive action is taken: setting up the scales, placing the two mortal fates in the balance, Zeus raises justice up by the middle." Blanchot cites Schaerer: "it is at this instant that Zeus's gaze moves from the battlefield to the scales, and that empirical observation gives way to speculative vision; vision still contemplating the conflict, but this time formalized, reduced to pure alternative." This is the highest moment of divine affirmation in which "the scales pronounce." The scales reveal themselves as "the essentially unstable composition of two differences,"

⁵ Ibid., p. 128; trans. p. 90.

the horizontal difference ("an equalization," "the horizontal plane of the arm that oscillates with the scales' two pans") and the vertical difference ("the duality of the divine and the human"). In other words, the movement of the scales obeys and affirms the Difference of the "All-One."⁶ The indefatigable movement of the scales preserves "the secret alterity" against the suppression of all contrariety. Here Blanchot implicitly suggests that the image of the scales in the eighth book of the *Iliad* epitomizes Heraclitus's language.

In fact, if we keep this image of the scales in mind when reading Blanchot's comments about Heraclitus's language, we understand them much more readily. For example, Blanchot says that Heraclitus's language is "faithful to double meaning, but only out of fidelity to meaning's simplicity." To be faithful to double meaning is to be faithful to "the secret alterity," "the secret relation between contraries that is beyond contrariety" which is based on tension, discord and accord, unceasing reciprocity between contraries. This "secret alterity" makes a sign in the direction of "meaning's simplicity," "Unity." It is only by way of this "secret alterity" that "Unity" is disclosed. Blanchot holds that what speaks essentially in Heraclitus's language, in "the crossed or harmonious passage" from things to words, or from words to things (that is, by way of their divergence ["between-two"]) is Difference itself. Heraclitus's language does not immobilize the divergence or secret alterity. It is always alert to the enigmatic Difference of the "All-One" by "harboring two thoughts at once," "unfolding this duality -- forcing it in its reserve and never leaving it at rest."⁷

Vigilance in Heraclitus's language, the ceaseless movement of the scales, corresponds to vigilance in Blanchot's language. What fundamentally speaks in Blanchot's language is also the enigmatic Difference, "Unity," "simplicity," "the limit." Just like Heraclitus's language, his language "discloses" the enigmatic force of "Unity." And it exists as the

⁶ Ibid., p. 130; trans. p. 91.

⁷ Ibid., p. 131; trans. p. 92.

awareness of its own danger.

We can also regard vigilance in Blanchot's language or writing as the vacillation between trust in language and distrust of language, or the seasawing between the two. His writing allows a switching between trust in language and distrust of language, and vice versa. "To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely," writes Blanchot.⁸ Writing maintains the indecision between complete trust in writing / language and absolute distrust of it. He also depicts writing as "the detour that would disqualify the right to any language at all." This echoes Blanchot's thought that what the writer risks in belonging to the demand of the work is not just his / her life or the world but "his /her right to death" ("son droit à la mort").

But what does Blanchot exactly mean by "absolutely distrustful of writing"? How can the writer be absolutely distrustful of writing while entrusting himself / herself to it entirely ?

Blanchot thinks that in order to have trust in language writing has to return to the point of defiance of language where language itself is distrusting itself. "Trust in language is the opposite -- distrust of language -- situated within language. Confidence in language is language itself distrusting -- defying -- language: finding in its own space the unshakable principles of a critique."⁹ Trust in language means language itself distrusting language prior to our trusting language or our distrusting language. Language is always already defying language as its own critique from its de-centering center. This exactly corresponds to Lévinas's line which Blanchot cites in "Notre compagne clandestine" and *L'Écriture du désastre*: <Le langage est déjà scepticisme>. In "Notre compagne clandestine," referring to this line, Blanchot says that an emphasis can be placed on "déjà"; he holds that this is not because language would be merely insufficient or essentially negativity, or because it would exceed the

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980, p. 170; *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66; trans. p. 38.

limit of thinking, but because language sustains "le rapport avec l'excès" -- the trace of what has already passed without presence, the trace which is always already effaced.¹⁰ So the word "déjà" indicates that language bears a relation with what defies language -- defiance of language, skepticism of language situated within language.

For Blanchot, to write is to entrust ourselves to this defiant force of language, skepticism of language, which has been confided to us. This means that writing entrusts itself to an aleatory force in its center.¹¹ "Confident of language -- of language understood as the defiant challenge which has been confided to us, just as we have been entrusted to it."¹²

Language as Danger

What makes vigilance in Blanchot's language possible is the reception of the danger of "philosophy." In other words, vigilance is always what is double: danger and vigilance. Vigilance is what it is only insofar as it lets in and welcomes danger. In this respect, vigilance corresponds to patience in Blanchot. He writes, "Patience is the endurance of impatience, its acceptance and welcome, the accord which wants still to persist in the most extreme confusion."¹³ Patience accepts and welcomes impatience in its endless intimacy with impatience. "Impatience must be the core of pro-

¹⁰ "Notre compagne clandestine," p. 84. Also see a fragment in *L'Écriture du désastre* where Blanchot recalls the same line; p. 123; *The Writing of the Disaster*, pp. 76-77.

¹¹ Blanchot hints that Heidegger's writing guards against destructive chance ("se détourner de l'aléa destructeur") -- it does not entrust itself to chance; *Ibid.*, p. 142; trans. p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 202; trans. p. 133.

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1955, pp. 161-162; *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 127. Also speaking of the impatience of Orpheus who turned back to see Eurydice, Blanchot writes, "true patience does not exclude impatience. It is intimacy with impatience -- impatience suffered and endured endlessly. Orpheus's impatience is thus at the same time a proper movement: in it begins what will become his own passion, his highest patience, his infinite sojourn in death"; *Ibid.*, p. 228; trans. p. 173.

found patience.”¹⁴ Likewise danger should be the core of vigilance.

But what exactly is danger? It is the “facileness” of thought. Or it is the inattentiveness of thought in which all contrariety is annulled. And it is by way of the relation with Heidegger’s thought (“the between the two”) that Blanchot’s thought “discloses” the danger of thought.

The “facileness” of thought fundamentally belongs to the movement of “the limit” itself (i.e. “death,” “Difference,” “Unity”) rather than to the thought process of an individual thinker.

The “facileness” here (inseparable from what Blanchot calls “impatience”) is not something that we can recognize easily, certainly not what our customary conception of “facileness” designates, but perhaps what “appears” as something like an excess itself which completely escapes our knowing and grasping.

In Blanchot’s thinking, the “facileness” lies in the movement in which “the limit” (or death), which is constantly divided into two, tries to return to itself or meet itself. So the “facileness” is the movement of “the limit” which seeks to unify its own duplicity. It corresponds to what Blanchot calls “la facilité de mourir” in “La facilité de mourir,” that is, facileness in the sense of a movement of attraction to the force of death without any interruption or interference.¹⁵ Death attracts and evokes “l’envie de mourir” in our mind. It leads us to what Blanchot calls “mastering death” or “suicide” in *L’Espace littéraire* -- an act of seeking to impose one’s goal -- “I die” -- on something that escapes all aims and action; yet this does not necessarily mean what we generally understand as “suicide.” What should be stressed about the “facileness” of “suicide” in Blanchot is the facileness of the movement of “the limit” which seeks to impose meaning on what completely escapes meaning, the impatience in wanting to know (“vouloir savoir”). It is the movement of “the limit” which seeks to unify its doubleness.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 232; trans. p. 176.

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Amitié*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, pp. 172-191; *Friendship*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 149-168.

For Blanchot, danger disclosed in Heidegger also appears as the danger situated within "philosophy." Here "philosophy" means less what we regard as an academic discipline of thinking than a relation to the movement of "the limit," a relation to "the unknown" itself. In "Notre compagne clandestine" (published in 1980) Blanchot holds that we are all philosophers insofar as we radically call thinking into doubt. "Whether shamefully, gloriously, mistakenly, or by default, we are all philosophers; especially when we submit whatever seems philosophical (a term chosen to avoid emphasizing "philosophy" as such) to a questioning so radical that the entire philosophical tradition would have to be called forth in order to sustain it."¹⁶ And at the same time, he says that his friendship with Lévinas led him to think that philosophy is our clandestine friend, an intimate friend with whom we nevertheless cannot have a relation:

Philosophy would henceforth be our companion day and night, even by losing its name, by becoming literature, scholarship, the lack thereof, or by standing aside. It would be the clandestine friend in whom we always respected -- loved -- what did not permit us to have a relation with her -- all the while sensing that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, which we didn't owe to her difficult friendship.¹⁷

Philosophy shows itself as what belongs to the movement of the limit, the limit which Blanchot thinks is uncrossable precisely because it has been always already crossed. We are already philosophers: we have already crossed the limit. But simultaneously and precisely because of that, philosophy is unreachable to us as the uncrossable limit: philosophy is our clandestine friend, a secret to which we philosophers cannot form a relation. And we can reasonably suppose that "philosophy" can manifest itself

¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, "Notre compagne clandestine" in *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980, p. 80; "Our Clandestine Companion" in *Face to Face with Levinas*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80, trans. p. 42.

as danger. In fact, it is possible to read the sentences quoted above with the word "philosophy" substituted for "danger."

In "Connaissance de l'inconnu" in *L'Entretien infini*, which begins with a question --"What is a philosopher?"-- Blanchot writes in a conversational form, tentatively, "philosophy -- or anything you wish to imply by this name -- is essentially knowledge of the not-known, or more generally, relation with the unknown."¹⁸ Since for Blanchot philosophy belongs to the movement of the limit, "the unknown" here can be regarded as philosophy's own secret, the unknown which is situated within philosophy, but to which philosophy cannot be related. So philosophy is "difficult friendship" with its own secret. That is to say, philosophy is a paradoxical relation ("a relation without relation") with its own danger, with its own "facileness" which can, at any time, lead back to the unbearable disaster or violence that has already happened to it. Philosophy as this paradoxical relation with danger reveals itself as fear of fear. Hence the following words between two speakers in "Connaissance de l'inconnu":-- The philosopher. . . would be someone who is afraid of fear. -- Afraid of the violence that reveals itself in fear and that threatens to transform him from a frightened man into a violent man; as though he feared less the violence he suffers than the violence he might exercise."¹⁹ Also we recall what Blanchot says about Jean Paulhan's confession in his letters (Blanchot thinks that we are asked to witness a formidable experience which always fails itself and anyone who claims it as their own): "And this confession: *'It seems to me that what I feared, for a very long time, was much less death, than wanting to die (which I felt capable of from one moment to the next). One can scarcely talk about it.'* A confession, no doubt, but one which touches the innermost secret of the experience."²⁰

Danger revealed in Heidegger is the facileness of the movement of "the limit" that "philosophy" and its language carry within themselves as the unknown. The "facileness" exists as a secret of "philosophy" which is

¹⁸ *L'Entretien infini*, p. 72; *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72; trans., p. 50.

²⁰ *L'Amitié*, pp. 183-184; *Friendship*, p. 160.

unknown to even "philosophy" itself.

To think of Blanchot's relation to Heidegger, we could say that Blanchot's writing regards Heidegger less as an individual philosopher whose thinking is separate from Blanchot's writing than as the proximity of danger which his writing has to endure and watch over within itself. That is to say, for Blanchot, the danger revealed in Heidegger's thought is inseparable from the danger in his own thought. It is in the relation of "the between" (between Heidegger and Blanchot) that the danger of thought "appears."

In this respect, Blanchot's writing points toward *another* kind of criticism. It serves not simply to criticize Heidegger's writing with vigilance *against* the danger disclosed in his philosophy, but to safeguard and preserve Heidegger's writing with vigilance *over* that danger. That is to say, vigilance against danger and vigilance over danger are one and the same. Blanchot is *neither* criticizing Heidegger *nor* not criticizing Heidegger. But Blanchot's writing tries to accept and watch over the danger hidden in Heidegger. One might say, further, that the danger hidden in Heidegger watches over Blanchot's writing from the core of Blanchot's writing.

Le danger veille sur nous

We have seen that vigilance in Blanchot's language means that his language "discloses" the danger of "philosophy," or the danger of the thought of the outside. This also means that his language "discloses" the fact that "danger watches over us [le danger veille sur nous]."

In "La facilité de mourir" he writes, "*The ease of dying*: such would be the danger watching over us [*La facilité de mourir*: tel serait le danger qui veille sur nous]." It is danger that watches over us prior to our watching over danger. Or it is through the proximity or familiarity of danger that vigilance is maintained. Speaking from another angle, Blanchot says, "the only means of being reasonable is not to claim to be free from all unreason, nor yet (supposing this could be) to remove ourselves from it in effect, but rather to make unreason so close to us, so accessible, so familiar that we constantly pass through it, lightly, without

lingering or dwelling on it." We become "reasonable out of a negligent practice of unreason," or we are "saved by the speed of the shipwreck."²¹ What Blanchot tries to stress is that it is unreason, the rapidity of death, or danger that keeps watch. According to him, danger, whether it leads us to die or permits us to live with inattentiveness, is a double danger. On one hand, danger means that we feel its attraction and are drawn by the force of this attraction -- our "longing [envie]" for death. On the other hand, danger means that "in this inattentiveness we are not able to perceive that the distraction is the very touch of death."²² Later in the text Blanchot says, "an easy death [la mort facile] . . . remains . . . the evidence of the secret by which we are always questioned."²³ The secret here indicates the possibility that danger might turn into vigilance.

To experience danger as what watches over us means to bear the unbearable and safeguard what is almost impossible to safeguard. The almost-impossible-to-bear is the "moment" of reversal ("retournement") of danger into vigilance, of impatience into patience -- the essential ambiguity between the two. This exactly corresponds to what Blanchot says about "mastering death" and Orpheus's impatience in *L'Espace littéraire*: the possibility that an act of "mastering death" is always oriented toward a radical reversal ("retournement"), toward the redoubling of death, or that in Orpheus's profound patience always originates in his impatience. In *L'Écriture du désastre*, he refers to this exact "moment" of turning as the undemonstrable that suicide paradoxically demonstrates. In a fragment which begins, "Impossible necessary death: why do these words -- and the experience to which they refer (the inexperience) -- escape comprehension? Why this collision of mutually exclusive terms?"²⁴ Blanchot suggests that, rather than thinking that suicide necessarily fails death in its attempt to transform death into an active possibility, rather than determining its meaning, we should pay attention to "the undemonstrable" that suicide

²¹ Ibid., p. 184; trans. p. 161.

²² Ibid., p. 184; trans. pp. 160-161.

²³ Ibid., p. 189; trans. p. 166.

²⁴ *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 110; *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 67.

demonstrates. Here "the undemonstrable" means that in death nothing comes to pass. It means the very movement of "reversal [retournement]" in which "the possibility of the impossibility" comes up *against* "the impossibility of every possibility" -- the extreme point which safeguards the essential ambiguity between "the possibility of the impossibility" and "the impossibility of every possibility" as a collision. In this respect, what the word "necessary" in the first phrase "impossible necessary death" shows is not at all that suicide is necessary, but that preserving "the undemonstrable," the movement of "reversal" or the collision itself is what is necessary. This necessity is nothing but the demand of vigilance. The unbearable weight of "the undemonstrable" that suicide demonstrates, the sheer contrariety of "the possibility of the impossibility" and "the impossibility of every possibility," is precisely what language/writing has to endure in order to sustain itself.

Thus, that "danger watches over us" remarks the fact that danger of "la mort facile" (or the facileness of thought) is always already oriented toward the "moment" of radical reversal into vigilance. The "essence" of language that Blanchot's thought on language shows is to "disclose" this exact "moment" of reversal, "the undemonstrable" of "la mort facile." And his language itself, which always exists as the strange force that affects us, seeks to "disclose" or affirm this "moment" of reversal or collision, "the undemonstrable," without touching it, without uncovering it by throwing light on it. That is how the neutre or vigilance speaks in Blanchot.

Vigilant Friendship

Vigilance is that which calls for friendship and requires a community. In *L'Écriture du désastre*, just after referring to the dangerous leaning toward a sanctification of language, Blanchot says, "répétons avec Lévinas . . . <le langage est déjà scepticisme.>" Like this sentence, Blanchot's writing shows how vigilance is inseparable from friendship -- how it is possible only between the two. In the case of his own writing, vigilance is inseparable from his friendship with Lévinas. He writes in

“N’oubliez pas” (1988):

The great debt I owe to Emmanuel Lévinas is, I believe, well known. He is today my oldest friend, the only one I feel entitled to address in the *tu* form. It is also known that we met at the University of Strasbourg in 1926, where so many great teachers made philosophy anything but mediocre for us. Was this encounter the result of chance? It could be said. But our friendship was neither hazardous nor fortuitous. Something profound drew us together. I won’t say that this was already Judaism, but rather, in addition to his cheerfulness, a sort of solemn, noble way of envisaging life by investigating it without a trace of pedantry. At the same time, it is to him I owe my first encounter with Husserl, and even with Heidegger, whose lectures he had attended in a Germany already stirred up by perverse political impulses.

Then he adds “[Lévinas’s work] must be studied and meditated with the utmost vigilance. That is what it teaches us before all else: reading is not enough, understanding and absorbing are not enough; what matters is to be watchful and to be wakeful.”²⁵ The responsibility of being watchful and wakeful underlies the long-standing friendship between Blanchot and Lévinas. This suggests that vigilance is only maintained between two hands. Between two hands which form the movement of “l’un contre l’autre.” In other words, vigilance is possible insofar as two hands interrupt each other’s movement, and in this very interruption, interrupt the movement of the limit (the movement of death) which seeks to unify itself. Thus vigilance over danger is an incessant interruption of danger. That is in this movement where interruption maintains (“main-tenir”) danger (danger disclosed in Heidegger in the case of friendship between Blanchot and Lévinas), two hands “experience” the imminence of death as the “experience” of “contre” -- the “experience” of anonymous death which

²⁵ “Do Not Forget” in *The Blanchot Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 244-245.

has already happened in the distant past and at the same time is still to come at any moment. What two hands touch while being touched is the "moment" of "retournement" in which "nothing at all happens" appears. They safeguard this extreme "moment" of turning.

La communauté inavouable (published in 1983) shows how vigilance or the neutre is only made possible or affirmed in the relation with the Other. Vigilance is the exigency for a community. We could also say that this work depicts how vigilance is the basis of a community, the basis of an ethics. Basing his thought on that of Lévinas, Blanchot writes:

An ethics is possible only when -- with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat -- an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself.²⁶

An ethics supposes a relation in which the self is radically called into question by the Other or is contested by the Other; so it is not a relation in which the self recognizes itself in the Other. The notion of "community" presented in this work has nothing to do with collective fusion. What founds the community is the experience of being contested by the Other. "A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it." This means that in this relation with the Other, the self "exists." It experiences itself as "an always prior exteriority, or as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence."²⁷

To put it another way, what lies at the core of community is the

²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, Paris: Minuit, 1983, p. 73; *The Unavowable Community*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988, p. 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16; trans. p. 6.

sharing of solitude -- not my own solitude, but the solitude of the Other who dies. It is exposure to death -- no longer my exposure but someone else's. It is not my consciousness of impending death but my proximity to "another who dies" that calls me into question most radically. It puts me beside myself and opens me to "the Openness of a community." "The mute conversation which, holding the hand of 'another who dies,' 'I' keep up with him, I don't keep up simply to help him die, but to *share* the solitude of the event which seems to be the possibility that is most his own and his unsharable possession in that it dispossesses him absolutely."²⁸ In this sense, a community is not a place of protection from solitude, but it is that which exposes each being to solitude. Solitude here excludes "the complacent isolation of individualism": in *L'Espace littéraire*, discussing "the solitude of the work" to which the artist belongs, Blanchot says, "It seems that we learn something about art when we experience what the word solitude is meant to designate." We can say the same thing about Blanchot's notion of "community": It seems that we learn something about community when we experience what the word solitude is meant to designate.

The close link between vigilance and community, or between vigilance and friendship, reveals itself in "the convulsive movements of beings in search of each other." Citing Bataille's line, "If this world were not endlessly crisscrossed by the convulsive movements of beings in search of each other. . . , it would appear like an object of derision offered to those it gives birth to," Blanchot implies that these movements should be linked to a movement that resists being named, a movement that can be named neither love nor desire, a movement that "attracts the beings in order to throw them towards each other (two by two or more, collectively), according to their body or according to their heart and thought, by tearing them from ordinary society."²⁹ This movement is the force that detaches us from any world while revealing itself as the relation to the world.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 21; trans. p. 9.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 78-79; trans. p. 47.

We could also say that vigilance or the neutre appears as, if not speech, "the supplication to speak." This supplication which comes from the limits of being is only made possible by the other who affirms it. In other words, the speech of vigilance (or "the supplication to speak") occurs only in the relation with the Other, in community.

Repetition

Vigilance, the wakefulness to the fact that "danger watches over us," is only made possible in the movement of repetition, ceaseless repetition of "veille" outside of sleep, outside of security. It directs us toward a point where language meets its limit, toward the language of the other always other. As Blanchot writes, "It is thus toward another sort of language entirely -- the language of writing, the language of the other always other whose imperative does not develop at all -- it is in the direction of this other language that, outside of everything, outside consciousness and unconsciousness, in the element that vacillates between waking and reawaking, we know ourselves (not knowing this) to be always already deported."³⁰ Indeed we find Blanchot's writing itself to be a ceaseless repetition of "veille" which is directed toward another sort of language. And we see it in his repetition of Heidegger. Some of his writing could be regarded as an attempt to repeat Heidegger's writing so that the language of the other, the defiance of language preserved in Heidegger's language, will speak. When I say Blanchot repeats Heidegger, I think of the idea of repetition not as mere borrowing of Heidegger's ideas and concepts but as the repetition of the unknown or danger at the heart of Heidegger's writing. It is repetition in the sense of "To repeat what one has not heard and what has not been said."³¹ In other words, I regard Blanchot's repetition as an attempt to let the outside repeat itself or affirm the repetition of the outside ("re" of "ex"); which is to say, I follow what Blanchot himself says about repetition.

³⁰ *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 127; *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 79.

³¹ *Le pas au-delà*, p. 123; *The Step Not Beyond*, p. 89.

The "re" of the return [retour] inscribes like the "ex," an opening of every exteriority: as if the return, far from putting an end to it, marked the exile, the beginning in its rebeginning of the exodus. To come again [revenir] would be to come to ex-center oneself anew [S'ex-center], to wander [errer]. Only the *nomadic* affirmation *remains*.³²

For instance, it is possible to consider *L'Attente l'oubli*, a book written in the interval between reflection and fiction, as a repetition of Heidegger's writing. Significant motifs in *L'Attente l'oubli* such as waiting, forgetting, conversation, being on the way, steps, arrival and withdrawal, appearance and disappearance, the movement of going outside of all willing, the temporality of "not yet" and "no longer," turning, gift, are important motifs of Heidegger's thinking. Moreover, we could say that *L'Attente l'oubli* repeats Heidegger's idea of "waiting" in Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*; *L'Attente l'oubli* was apparently developed from Blanchot's earlier text "L'Attente," which could be regarded as a repetition of the idea of "waiting" in *Gelassenheit*. "L'Attente" is a fragmentary text that Blanchot contributed to a book celebrating Heidegger's seventieth birthday published in Germany in 1959, Martin Heidegger *Zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag*.³³ "L'Attente" consists of fragments about "waiting" which were probably written as an attempt to repeat Heidegger's ideas on "waiting" presented in "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit: Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken," published in *Gelassenheit* in 1959.³⁴ This text of Heidegger is written in the form of a conversation between a teacher, a scientist, and a scholar. In that conversation, "waiting" is revealed as

³² Ibid., p. 49; trans. p. 33.

³³ "L'Attente" in *Martin Heidegger Zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag*, pp. 217-224; trans. Michael Holland, "Waiting" in *The Blanchot Reader*, pp. 272-278. The other contributors include Jean Baufret, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Georges Braque, René Char, Ernst Jünger, etc.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1959, pp. 27-71; "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" in *Discourse on Thinking*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, pp. 58-90.

"Gelassenheit" -- release from metaphysical re-presentational thinking into the openness of the region of language, to what Heidegger calls "that-which-regions" ("Gegnet").³⁵ And "waiting" (or "Gelassenheit") underlies the conversation not only as the subject of the conversation but also as what is indistinguishable from the conversation which is also revealed as "walking on the way." Thus it is possible to suppose that *L'Attente l'oubli* repeats "waiting" in *Gelassenheit* with "L'Attente" as an intermediary.

However, my object here is not to prove that Blanchot's writing is influenced by Heidegger and thereby repeats Heidegger's ideas. It is to pay attention to the sense of repetition as such and suggest that Blanchot, in repeating Heidegger, lets Heidegger's thought err from itself toward its own outside where the outside of his thought announces itself and shows itself as repetition -- repetition of the extreme, exhaustion of Being. In other words, Blanchot safeguards the unknown or the non-manifest in

³⁵ In "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit: Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken" "waiting" appears as "releasement" or "a relation to that-which-regions" ("ein Verhältnis zur Gegnet"). Waiting means to release oneself from re-presenting ("das Vorstellen"), that is, from all metaphysical representational thinking and its language, to "the openness of that-which-regions," to the region which is itself "a movement" ("die Bewegung"). And this region is "the region of the word, which is answerable to itself alone," the realm of words in which we can move ("bewegen") freely. The conversation, which is itself releasement and waiting, shows itself as the movement of leading the participants back to this "region of the word." Indeed at the end of the conversation the participants return to a Greek word of Heraclitus which Scholar translates as "moving-into-nearness" ("In-die-Nähe-gehen"); he says that "this word might be the name, and perhaps the best name, for what we have found." Thus this conversation reveals its wish to trust in the force of language; it wants to show that out of language understood as "the region of the word" or as "Bewegung" comes conversation itself, that is to say, waiting, releasement, and thinking.

³⁶ The following words of Blanchot are related to the sense of repetition discussed here: "To write is perhaps to not write in rewriting--to efface (in writing over) that which is not yet written and that rewriting not only covers over, but restores obliquely in covering it over. . . ."; *Le pas au-delà*, p. 67; *The Step Not Beyond*, p. 46. Also he writes, "And such is the

Heidegger's thought by repeating it.³⁶

To look at Blanchot's repetition of Heidegger from a broader viewpoint, one could say that it is a movement of displacing "Being" in Heidegger. Blanchot not only repeats Heidegger's terms (as in the case of "waiting") but also replaces Heidegger's "Being" with his own words. For example, we could say that in *L'Espace littéraire* "Being" is replaced by "l'oeuvre," detached from the philosophical horizon and brought into the space of literature, or that in *L'Écriture du désastre* Heidegger's appeal to "Being" under the sidereal sky or constellations is replaced by "le désastre," the separation from the star, a fall beneath disastrous necessity. Further, we might be able to regard the notion of the neutre which grounds Blanchot's thought on language as what rewrites Heidegger's notion of *Schwingung* which is inseparable from that of "Being."³⁷ This replacement or displacement of "Being" in Blanchot is parallel to Lévinas's displacement of the trajectory of phenomenology which he himself had introduced to France with "the relation with autrui."

Repeating means safeguarding the vigilance of danger, danger which watches over us prior to our watching over danger. It preserves a voice

responsibility of writing--writing which distinguishes itself by deleting from itself all distinguishing marks, which is to say perhaps, ultimately, by effacing itself (right away *and* at length: this takes all of time), for it seems to leave indelible or indiscernible traces"; *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 58; *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 34.

³⁷ In *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, Leslie Hill considers the emergence of the neutre in the texts of the 1960s as an important turning point in Blanchot's thinking. According to him, the thought of the neutre "allowed Blanchot radically to re-examine some of the longest-standing philosophical underpinnings of his own discourse," that is, his readings of Heidegger and Lévinas. He thinks that "one of the first topics against which the thought of the neutre comes to be deployed" is the question of Being itself. Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 136. To push this observation further, we might regard Blanchot's thought of the neutre as a critical rewriting of Heidegger's thought of the *Schwingung*. To put it another way, it is the reception of danger carried within Heidegger's notion of Being (inseparable from the notion of *Schwingung*) that grounds Blanchot's notion of the neutre.

which incessantly interrupts us and asks whether we are not too strong. We recall here the repetition of an extraordinarily weak impersonal voice in *L'Attente l'oubli* which flows from "her" to "him" -- "*Make it so that I can speak to you [Fais en sorte que je puisse te parler].*" In order to listen to the voice coming from "her," "he" has to cut himself off from all movement which seeks meaning, including the movement which tries to recognize something remarkable and interesting in a story. "He" has to detach himself from everything, including his detachment. "He" has to be faithful to his own weaknesses: "There was a point of weakness and distraction in him which he had to relate to everything that he thought and said. Otherwise, he would commit what seemed to him to be the essential infidelity."³⁸ We can consider this point of weakness as vigilance that we have seen "appearing" between Heidegger and Blanchot -- vigilance as incessant vacillation between danger and vigilance, between impatience and patience, between strength and weakness.

Describing a scene where "her" weakness appears more clearly to "him," the narrative voice says: "he saw better what an extraordinary state of weakness she was in, from which she derived the authority which sometimes made her speak. And what about him? Wasn't he too strong to hear her, too convinced of the extensive meaning of his own existence, too carried away by its movement?"³⁹ Every writer or every reader has to repeat this question ceaselessly in order to entrust himself or herself wholly to writing. This is the demand that we hear *between* Heidegger and Blanchot.

³⁸ *L'Attente l'oubli*, Paris:Gallimard, 1962, p.33; *Awaiting Oblivion*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,1997, p. 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26; trans. p. 11.