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The Experience of the Limit: Approaching the Unknown in Maurice Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* in Light of Kristeva's Chora

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ABSTRACT

This study will inquire into Kristeva's notion of alterity and attempt to examine the "dialectic" relationship that Kristeva refers to between the semiotic and symbolic in language. I bring into play Maurice Blanchot's notion of "Absence" based on the analysis of *La folie du jour (The Madness of the Day)* and try to approach Blanchot's "Impossible" (l'Impossible) in light of Kristeva's "semiotic chora." I suggest to find a point of intersection, which distinguishes two different but not necessarily opposing approaches to speak the unspeakable. Kristeva's chora helps to illustrate the alterity within the subject, but the effort to work the semiotic chora into the symbolic would be doomed to failure from Blanchot's standpoint. The failure of the subject's intention will constantly call into play the limit of the subjective power. For Kristeva, the subject is what he has successfully materialized in language. For Blanchot, what interests him is the frequency and the rhythm of failure or silence which fashion what the subject "is not." The common ground that links while separating the two discourses would be the concept of "the third term" which opens up the space of literature by calling into question the notion of communication.

KEY WORDS

Kristeva
Chaos
subjectivity
transgression
alterity

chora
Blanchot
postmodern ethics
transferential
madness



Will we ever, then, come to pose a question such as: what is impossibility, this non-power that would or be the simple negation of power. Or will we ask ourselves: how can we discover the obscure? How can it be brought out into the open? What would this experience of the obscure be whereby the obscure would give itself in its obscurity? (*The Infinite Conversation* 44)

The unknown provokes fear; and the alterity, the anguish of losing control. The experience of “the madness” (*la folie*) in Blanchot’s récit *The Madness of the Day* (*La folie du jour*) illustrates the very impossibility of experiencing the unknown. The narrator “I” finds himself incapable of telling his experience of the accident which caused his temporary blindness. I read this récit as an allegory—to “experience” the limit of subjective experience. For Blanchot, the pursuit of the alterity and the unknown only leads to the limit of the subjective power of naming.

Before the accident, the narrator “I” seemed to be as normal as any one else. For him, the vision equaled the power: “I am not blind, I see the world—what extraordinary happiness! I see this day, and outside it there is nothing.” [“Je ne suis pas aveugle, je vois le monde, bonheur extraordinaire. Je le vois, ce jour hors duquel il n’existe rien”] (FJ 20). The power of vision in the light of the day constituted for “I” the coherence of meanings. We can also say that the day/light always guaranteed the reality and the subjective consciousness of “I”: “And when this day fades, I will fade along with it—a thought, a certainty, that enraptures me.” [“Et ce jour s’effaçant, je m’effacerai avec lui, pensée, certitude qui me transporte.”] (20) Thus, the loss of vision

signified in fact, the loss of “reason” and “intelligence” for the subject “I.” Because of his temporary blindness, “I” had met for the first time the end of his power of seeing:

“I was asleep! I had to hold my own against the light of seven days—a fine conflagration! Yes, seven days at once, the seven deadly lights, become the spark of a single moment, were calling me to account.”

[“Je dormais! J’avais à tenir tête à la lumière de sept jours: un bel embarrasement! Oui, sept jours ensemble, les sept clartés capitales de ennues la vivacité d’un seul instant me demandaient des comptes.”] (FJ 25)

When “I” woke up, “I” realized that he had been unconscious for seven days, and while trying to recall the accident, all that he could remember was the darkness, the absence, and the blindness which separated him forever from the “real” of the event.

The absence of the consciousness in the middle of the light constituted the experience of discontinuity: the interval between the existence and the non-existence. The light that “I” had held for the truth of the life became suddenly problematic. Behind the light/the truth hides the origin of the truth; outside the law of the day, reigns the madness of the day, which appeared only by chance. This experience of the “non-experience” struck hard on “I,” who was forced to “see” face-to-face the “madness of the day.”

After the accident of the madness, “I” was not the same normal person anymore. He was not “master of himself,” capable of writing whatever he thought he had seen with perfect coherence and continuity, because he had “seen,” during his temporary blindness the discontinuity of the day/the law. He was no longer capable of writing according to the law of the day in a coherent and logic way.

I suggest to read this incapability of narrating as the limit of the subjective power of interpretation. “Experience,” in Blanchot’s own terms, not only stands for the accumulation of subjective knowledge,

force “work itself into” the symbolic dimension? How does a speaking subject “open oneself to the symbolic dimension” after the “experience of the semiotic force”? As entity of conflictual nature, how does a subject “respond” to the norm/limit/prohibition as a way to “posit” his identities? How much freedom and how many choices does a subject dispose of? Finally, I will bring into play Maurice Blanchot’s notion of “Absence” based on the analysis of *La folie du jour* (*The Madness of the Day*) and try to approach Blanchot’s “Impossible” (l’Impossible) in light of Kristeva’s “semiotic chora.” My interest is to find a point of intersection, which distinguishes two different but not necessarily opposing approaches to speak the unspeakable. The common ground that links while separating the two discourses would be the concept of “the third term” which opens up the space of literature by calling into question the notion of communication.

I. Transgression as the Revolt against and/or the Reconstitution of the Norm

In her project to explode the monadic structure of the Hegelian subject, Kristeva posits the maternal body as the abjected Other, and recasts the Lacanian pursuit of the phallus within the framework of the purification of the Other. What interests us most is not Kristeva’s emphasis on the ideal father-figures, but rather her insistence upon the importance of the “third party” in between the abjected mother and the symbolic father.

Chora as the third term indicates a space of “transitional activities,” which helps to find the expressions for the abjected Other. Kristeva insists upon the therapeutic value of the third term, and argues that it is the analyst’s role to occupy this position of the third party to bring into light what cannot be spoken in the symbolic language. In analysis through the transference, the analyst has to first identify her/himself with the patient’s depression, which can only be communicated at the infra-verbal level of tone, modulation or vocal gesture. Involved in the patient’s pre-verbal realm of expression, the analyst then has to provide a framework to bring symptoms and ineffabilities

into speech. “Abject subjectivity can then cross the boundary from the enclosure of a pre-oedipal, fusional relationship with the mother’s body to the relative tranquility and distance of an idealizing kind of love, for the father, in the symbolic” (Smith 51-52).

The transference as a transitional activities is thus a transgression in two reversal ways: in one way, a revolt against the rules which repress the subject’s bodily drives toward the fusion with the archaic mother; and in the other way, a force pulling the subject back to the norm, directing the drives toward the symbolic laws which structure the socialized individual.

I would like to point to a revealing remark by Anne-Marie Smith that transference imitates falling in love, love in the sense of the Greek *eros*, violent, painful love, and at the same time the Christian *agape*, love tending towards the Platonic ideal (51). According to Kristeva, a writer is “good” while capable of assuming the role of the third party—playing both the victim and the analyst of his own depression. Writing the abject, as speaking the unspeakable “implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play” (PH 16). “[l]es écrire suppose la capacité d’imaginer l’abject, c’est-à-dire de se voir à sa place et de ne l’écarter que par les déplacements des jeux de langage” (PH 24). The entire writing process can thus be seen as an imaginary matricide. The act of killing the maternal body demands the separation of the subject from his condition of being. A subject can only emerge from the essential struggle that he engages in with the horror of being—be it the obverse of his own being or the other sex that torments and possesses him (PH 208). A subject is always a subject of and subject to abjection.

Smith further elucidates that writing and art for Kristeva embody as well the cure through transference:

In literature the writing of Joyce embodies the transferential process of identification for it reveals the writer’s capacity to cross the boundaries of sexual and generational identity and to represent pre-verbal experience poetically, through

but also points to a space of void, where the subject “I” confronts the limit of his power and knowledge. The unknown, as the absolute alterity, or the “Real,” constantly seducing the subject’s desire of naming, is always beyond the grasp of subjective power. The experience of the unknown revealing the limit of the subject’s cognitive knowledge stands for a space of void, a space of “disaster.”

In *Black Sun (Soleil Noir)*, Kristeva criticizes Marguerite Duras’s work as non-cathartic, since Duras explored the interior crisis of the void without proposing any way out of the depression. From a therapist’s point of view, it is crucial that at the dangerous border where signification and identity is threatened, a subject is capable of translating sensations, perceptions and traumas into the language of cognition. For Kristeva, the Duras-Blanchot period was too close to anguish and death: “La mélancolie devient le moteur secret d’une nouvelle rhétorique: il s’agira cette fois de suivre le mal être pas à pas cliniquement presque, sans jamais le surmonter” (SN 232). Kristeva’s concern is to find a symbolic reformulation—another speaking/writing style—to “discharge” the burden caused by the chaotic bodily experience. In Kristeva’s terms, the chaotic semiotic force has to constantly work itself into the symbolic structure, so that the subject can be reestablished as a “signifying process” (sujet-en-procès) within the social realm.

Kristeva’s substantial contribution to development of a postmodern ethic lies precisely in the fact that she recognizes the conflictual nature of the subject in her formulation of the signifying practice. Displacing traditional sorts of ethics that seeks a rational foundation for morality, Kristeva speaks of ethics as a “signifying practice” which activates the existence of heterogeneity within signification, within the very notion of subject:

The fundamental moment of practice is the heterogeneous contradiction that posits a subject put in process/on trial by a natural or social outside that is not yet symbolized, a subject in conflict with previous thesis. (RPL 203)

The “heterogeneous” or “material contradictions” that Kristeva recognizes as the “semiotic force” triggers the movement of negativity, which threatens the symbolic element within the symbolic order (the social realm). As the “other” of the symbolic element of language, the semiotic force, irreducible to grammatical and logical structures, disturbs identity, order and system.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conceive the semiotic force simply as the negation of identity, order or system. Kristeva points out that if the symbolic element of language is the domain of position and judgment associated with the grammar or structure of language, “chora” is not to be conceived as a sign nor “a position that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not a signifier)” (RPL 26). Borrowing the term chora from Plato’s *Timaeus* (1), Kristeva makes explicit the stage of chora as “essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (RPL 25):

Let us therefore not speak of primacy but of the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect—the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo). Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (*Timeus* 48-53), a *chora*, a receptacle. (*Power of Horror* 14)

According to Kristeva, the chora is not a “primacy,” an essence or a position, but a “strange mobile space” revealed by the prohibition placed upon bodily drives. Following Kristeva’s line, if what causes the instability of the subject’s identity in the symbolic realm is the vicissitude of drives despite of prohibitions, the necessity of prohibition and the failure of this necessity will be essential in the construction of the subjectivity.

I will inquire into Kristeva’s notion of alterity and attempt to examine the “dialectic” relationship that Kristeva refers to between the semiotic and the symbolic in language: How exactly does the semiotic

the use of the semiotic in a symbolic creation. (Smith 53)

By “the use of the semiotic in a symbolic creation,” Kristeva means that “pre-verbal experience takes the form of color, sound and gesture, which enter the text as a transgression of the coded boundaries of syntax, grammar and sexual identity.” Smith further points to Kristeva’s remarks upon the extraordinary “plasticity” of Joyce’s writing; the malleability and multiplicity are characteristics of his polymorphous subjectivity and polyphonic text (54).

Although the poetic language, including the rhythms, pacing of breath, and polyvalence of speech seems to recall the subject’s relation to the abjected body, the function of the abject in Kristeva seems to be stressed only to restore the necessity of the internalization of the incest taboo, the norm. While the subjectivity finally emerges as a result of the internalized repression, the subject’s unity is actually purchased at the expense of his bodily drives. In other words, the importance of the semiotic chora or the in-between site is only emphasized by Kristeva to secure the functioning of the symbolic order.

We could thus question that, the alterity in Kristeva never presents itself in terms of the body “proprement dit,” but rather in terms of patterns of the symbolic. The body is always already symbolic. Since the so called “transgression of the coded boundaries of syntax, grammar and sexual identity” or the “plasticity” of writing has to be demonstrated, after all, within the terms of language, I would suggest that what or how the abject is verbalized is maybe not the fundamental key to the cure of the depression. The intriguing “truth of the alterity” probably still lies in the dark tunnel where certain semiotic elements resist to be brought into light. This presumption will lead us to stress more accent upon the third term itself—the transitional space where the singularity of the subject emerges throughout his personal struggle against the symbolic norm.

The importance of the third term in Kristeva lies in the fact that it provides the point of the objective vision to restore the narcissistic identification of the subject with the object of desire. In the following paragraphs, I would like to compare Kristeva’s third term of the “ob-

jective vision” with the invisibility of the “in-between” in Blanchot.

The “in-between” or the “third terms” for Kristeva marks moments of differentiation; while for Blanchot, the “in-between” stands for an absolute separation, a detachment of the subject from his desire. The Kristevan transgression, indebted to Bataille’s notion of transgression, favors the interactive relationship between “I” and the “Other”; while Blanchot assumes an absolute distance between the two—the “in-between” space that lends the ground to infinite dialogues. In the context of the Hegelian tradition, Leslie Hill elucidates that the Hegelian dialectic of spirit is rewritten by Blanchot as a series of discontinuous and incompatible demands rather than a progressive ascent towards absolute knowledge (Hill 108): “more like a logic of paralysis than of progression” (109). For Blanchot, Kristeva’s intention to assimilate the alterity into the subjectivity would only be indispensable for the subject to experience the failure of this very intention. The subject would find himself incapable of signifying the alterity and thus learned to draw the limit of his desire to name. By revealing the impossible “il,” Blanchot suggests another mode of communication which calls into question the very notion of representation—not to transform the semiotic element into the symbolic, but to respond to, to echo from a distance the “unknown,” by approaching the border that is impossible to be transgressed.

II. In-between Blanchot’s Impossible and Kristeva’s Semiotic Chora

Susan Hanson points out in her translation of Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation* (*L’Entretien infini*, 1969) that the thematization of *autrui* in this collection signals the intrusion of otherness with an urgency that is not heard in the earlier volumes of Blanchot’s writing (xxvi). In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot defines three different kinds of human relationships (IC 94). In the first kind reigns the law of the Same. The Unity is the only truth and value that determines every movement, including struggle and work. One fights and works in order to bring the Different back to the Same. The second relationship demands also the

Unity, but the Unity that comes back to itself after having been self-divided. In this dialectical relationship, the Subject-I, either by self-dividing, or by dividing the Subject, reduces the Different to the truth of the Subject. In other words, the Different is nothing but the split Same. The subject comes back to itself by detour of the Different. For Blanchot, in this relationship, the Different other remains after all the substitute of the Same.

The relationship that Blanchot proposes is the third kind of relationship, which does not tend toward the Unity. It is a thinking that tries to think of the Other without reference to the Same. Blanchot writes: "between man and man there is an interval that would be neither of being nor of non-being, an interval born by the Difference of speech—a difference preceding everything that is different and everything unique" (69). A contact with the Impossible does not depend on "communication," but on "the approach of proximity." The approach reveals *difference*, and difference demands distance. We can also say that distancing is the very way of approaching the unknown. What founds the third kind of relationship is the strangeness between us—between the "I" with "myself" (*moi*) and the Other/the impersonal "II"—the "II" that brings into play the "neutre." And it is only in language that we can maintain this relationship.

Blanchot's idea of evoking the unknown and the alterity without imposing any interpretation seems to contradict with Kristeva's effort to symbolize the semiotic force. By trying to work the semiotic chora, the unknown back into the symbolic element, does Kristevan transgression (or communication between the Other and "I") carried out by bodily drives actually fall into the second kind of relationship—that is, the other is nothing but the split same—described by Blanchot?

It is interesting to note that Kristeva's concern in language is to proliferate the dimension of cultural norm and symbolic representation; while for Blanchot, writing is an "act" which inevitably pulls the subject away from his preoccupation of meaning. While Kristeva reinstates the alterity in the construction of cultural subject, Blanchot seeks to do away with any cultural representation of the "subject" by calling into play the notion of "absence"—the absolute Alterity in language.

The language is never for Blanchot an expression of the "self" (*le "moi"*). When we read "I" (*Je*) in the *récit*, "I" stands for nothing but a pronoun which materializes itself into the image of being; the word "I" does not incarnate any real person (neither the narrator of the *récit* nor Blanchot himself). To be able to say "I," the writing subject is obliged to see himself effaced from the word, which lends its place to multiple impersonal "II." The writer "dies," for he abandons himself completely in the force of language, by which he detaches himself from what he "is." This effacement of the writing subject or this forgetfulness of oneself is the only way for the subject "I" to approach the "real" of his condition.

Kristeva's chora, as the in-between site, deconstructs the unity of the subject in favor of a reconstruction of the subject within the social norm. The signifying process is after all functioning in the context of the Same. Blanchot's impossible "II," as the third term in between real object and linguistic representation, deconstructs the unity of the subject by radically detaching the literary representation from the reality. Blanchot rejects any possibility of reducing the alterity to the notion of the Same and the Unity (Being, Truth, God, and even The "Differentiation" as a general economy). By doing so, Blanchot posits the impersonal "II" as the absolute Alterity that constantly draws the subject outside the symbolic realm.

The "Outside" is a non-place, "il y a," radically detached from the social, historical norm. Literature, as the configuration of the "Outside," annihilates the cultural political reality all together with its norm. The total freedom of literature is "revolutionary" by its "oppositional force" against the reality of responsibility and judgment. It is clear to see Blanchot's concern for the ontological condition of man, beyond any cultural, historical construction of subjectivity. Writing becomes the space where the subject "experiences" the limit of his subjectivity: his power and the destruction of this very power.

Up until now, it seems that Blanchot has pushed our quest for the alterity to the extreme point where the alterity can only be conceived as "Impossible." However, several scholars have analyzed Blanchot's work in terms of the return of a repressed political past. Steven Ungar

(1995), Jeffrey Mehlman (1983) both set out to reveal Blanchot's far-right political writings of the 1930's to the extent that almost all Blanchot's theoretical and literary texts are read as some sort of repressed trauma. Philippe Mesnard also interpretes *The Madness of the Day* as an account of the day when Blanchot escaped execution at the hands of the Germans (1994). If Blanchot's writing demonstrates the "aftereffect" of the political trauma, we can probably say that he is trying to assimilate the political trauma as an alterity into the literary symbolic reformulation. Nevertheless, whoever takes into consideration Blanchot's concept of language will hesitate to draw any conclusion ad hoc. As Philips Watts writes in his thorough study of "How literature responded to the postwar trials of writers and intellectuals in France" (1998), Blanchot had certainly initiated literary modernity in criticism for his writings actually gave rise to both passionately apolitical and aggressively historical readings because of ambiguities and paradoxes (Watts 87).

Watts points out that Newmark, on the other hand, stressed on the essential question raised in Blanchot's *The Madness*. By reproaching Mehlman's attempt to turn a certain form of "French literary modernity" into a direct and easily recognizable offspring of "French fascism in the 1930's," Newmark emphasizes on the "collision" and eventual undoing of the specular relationship between the metaphysical (light, clarity, reason, theory) and the empirical (a true event) in Derrida, de Man's way of reading Blanchot. I am interested in this "collision" between the "passionately apolitical" and the "aggressively historical readings" of Blanchot as the "third term" where literature and politics intersect. Can the true political trauma on the empirical level be retrieved or voiced out in language as a return of the repressed past—or in Kristeva's terms, be purified or discharged as the abject alterity in the verbal play? For Blanchot, is it about retrieving traumatic images and proliferating the realm of the subjective power, or resisting against any consolidation of social/political norms by way of the "rhetorique blanche" (SN 229)?

III. Narcissistic Crisis or Sign of Impatience

In his book *Proximity: Blanchot, Bataille, Levinas and Communication*, Joseph Libertson accuses Blanchot for "positing alterity as undifferentiation, rather than as a principle and a modality of differentiation—and then to describe this alterity as an inaccessible other of unicity, rather than as an instance involved with and conditioning unicity" (Libertson 136). According to Libertson, to determine the alterity as undifferentiation radically other than "I" would separate the alterity and the subjectivity into two opposing elements, and by doing so, Blanchot risks to fall into the same old fashion of the dialectic thinking. Since Libertson's theory comes close to Kristeva's discourse on the notion of alterity, I would like to refer to Libertson's comments on Blanchot in the hope to shed some light on our comparison between Blanchot and Kristeva.

Libertson, in the chapter entitled "Literature and the Exigency" of his book, talks about what he calls "a contradiction" in the arguments of Blanchot on the problematic notion of silence. The critique of Libertson takes as point of departure the notion of "two hands" that Blanchot develops in the section "Tyrannical Prehension" ["la préhension persécutrice"] of *L'Espace littéraire*. Libertson quotes Blanchot:

Sometimes, when a man is holding a pencil, his hand won't release it no matter how badly he wants to let it go. Instead, the hand tightens rather than opens. The other hand intervenes more successfully, but then the hand which one might call sick makes a slow, tentative movement and tries to catch the departing object. (SL 25)

[Il arrive qu'un homme qui tient un crayon [dans l'acte d'écrire], même s'il veut fortement le lâcher, sa main ne le lâche pas cependant: au contraire, elle se resserre, lion de s'ouvrir. L'autre main intervient avec plus de succès, mais l'on voit alors la main que l'on peut dire malade esquisser un

lent mouvement et essayer de rattraper l'objet qui s'éloigne."] (EL 18)

According to Libertson's interpretation, the other hand that intervenes to stop the writing hand introduces in the Blanchot's text, the notion of "mastery," "power" and "negation" in the act of writing. The subjectivity conceived by Blanchot would be an intentionality that exercises the power in order to master, control alterity. That is, the subject writes in the hope to apprehend the alterity, which escapes from his comprehension, and this linear project of the subject will be interrupted by a moment of negation, which rejects the movement of intention:

Subjectivity's approach to the exterior or dehors in Blanchot will describe the following progression: intentionality, conceived as a linear trajectory, will be interrupted at an indeterminate "point" by an instance in the real which throws this intentional movement back to the point prior to its initiation. (44)

For Blanchot, when the subject starts to write, the activity renders him passive, because the language transforms everything into images that refer to nothing. Libertson is partially right to see in the act of writing of Blanchot a movement of intentionality. Speaking more precisely, writing for Blanchot is a movement in which the trajectory of intentionality is constantly rendered futile. The writing subject finds himself caught in a struggle between two exigencies: on the one hand, he strikes to bring into light the alterity, to impose his name and his title of author on "his" work; on the other hand, he always ends up seeing himself replaced by images, a pronoun, or the impersonal "il."

The writer seems to be the master of his pen; he can become capable of great mastery over words and over what he wants to make them express. But his mastery only succeeds in putting him, keeping him in contact with the fundamental pas-

sivity where the word, no longer anything but its appearance—the shadow of a word—never can be mastered or even grasped. It remains the ungraspable which is also unreleasable; the indecisive moment of fascination. (SL 25)

[*"L'écrivain semble maître de sa plume, il peut devenir capable d'une grande maîtrise sur les mots, sur ce qu'il désire leur faire exprimer. Mais cette maîtrise réussit seulement à le mettre, à le maintenir en contact avec la passivité foncière où le mot, n'étant plus que son apparence et l'ombre d'un mot, ne peut jamais être maîtrisé ni même saisi, reste l'insaisissable, le moment indécis de la fascination."*] (EL 19)

Let us associate now the hand that writes in Blanchot's text with Kristeva's drive of negativity, which works toward the symbolic order. In the context of alterity, the subject is attracted by the unknown, writes only in the hope to bring the alterity into light. For Kristeva, the intrusion of the alterity posits a "narcissistic crisis" which interrupts the identification of the ego with its objects of desire. This rupture marks the discontinuity of the signifying process and interrupts the establishment of the subject by pulling it back to the chaotic chora. Thus, for the "well-being" of the subject, the alterity as the excessive object has to be "purified," "discharged" in the verbal play, so that the subject/object dichotomy can be reinstated.

However, what is called "sick" (*malade*) for Blanchot is the writing hand that cannot stop naming, since it is "affected" by the "infinite parole" ("*la parole incessante*" which can be compared to Kristeva's notion of drives) and can thus be considered as the "symptom" of an irrepressible desire seduced by the unknown. Taking up again the "other" hand that stops the writing hand in the name of "authority" and "mastery," we can say that the act of negation for Blanchot is both a determination to stop the naming desire and a sign of impatience that manifests the anxiety to "get over with" ("*en finir*") the interminable drives.

IV. The Return of the Abject or the Ton of Silence

The hand which stops the movement of the writing hand symbolizes the gaze of Orpheus, who turns his head to see Eurydice in the dark. This gaze turns the poet from his project and prevents him from bringing his work to the light. When the other hand intervenes, at the moment where Orpheus looks over his shoulder, all laws are broken, the poet is liberated from his preoccupation of the work and loses himself in the agony, in what Blanchot calls "liberty," or "inspiration." Blanchot writes:

The look of Orpheus unbinds it, breaks the limits, breaks the law that contained and that restrained essence. His gaze is thus the extreme moment of liberty, the moment when he frees himself from himself and, still more important, frees the work from his concern, frees the sacred contained in the work, gives the sacred to itself, to the freedom of its essence, to its essence which is freedom. (SL 175)

[“Le regard d’Orphée la délie, rompt les limites, brise la loi qui contenait, retenait l’essence. Le regard d’Orphée est, ainsi, le moment extrême de la liberté, moment où il se rend libre de lui-même, et événement plus important, libère l’oeuvre de son souci, libère le sacré contenu dans l’oeuvre, donne le sacré à lui-même, à la liberté de son essence, à son essence qui est liberté.”] (EL 231)

What is affirmed here as authority, is not the power of the subject who stops writing, but the nature of the absence which is radically not to be comprehended. The force of the gaze is thus associated with the impatience of Orpheus’s desire to bring the absence into light to be seen, or possessed. Moreover the impatience of the desire which forces Orpheus gaze does not lead to any accomplishment of the project, but to the contrary, condemns the work to the failure, to the detour. This failure, for Blanchot is nevertheless indispensable to push Orpheus back to

the infinite pursuit of the absence. What the gaze really affirms is just the nature of the absence which escapes our control, and which arouses eternally, by virtue of its inaccessibility, the desire of the poet to name.

The subject’s relationship with the unknown is compared by Blanchot to our relationship with death, which is beyond our control. Death “supervises” us, but we can never see death face to face in full consciousness. Every one dies his own death, and we can never decide to die or not to die. The “authentic” death, like a foreigner, is uncontrollable and inaccessible. For Blanchot, it is the relationships of the writer with his own death, which determines the silent “tone” that we appreciate in the work. Blanchot writes:

When we admire the tone of a work, when we respond to its tone as to its most authentic aspect, what are we referring to? Not to style, or to the interest and virtues of the language, but to this silence precisely, this vigorous force by which the writer, having been deprived of himself, having renounced himself, has in this effacement nevertheless maintained the authority of a certain power: the power decisively to be still, so that in this silence what speaks without beginning or end might take on form, coherence, and sense. (SL 27)

[“Lorsque, dans une oeuvre, nous en admirons le ton, sensibles au ton comme à ce qu’elle a de plus authentique que désignons-nous par là? Non pas le style, ni l’intérêt de la qualité du langage, mais précisément le silence, cette force virile par laquelle celui qui écrit, s’étant privé de soi, ayant renoncé à soi, a dans cet effacement maintenu cependant l’autorité d’un pouvoir, la décision de se faire, pour qu’en ce silence prenne forme, cohérence et entente ce qui parle sans commencement ni fin.”] (EL 22)

We need to distinguish in Blanchot the alterity within the subject and the absolute Alterity that is radically exterior to the subject. Kristeva’s chora helps to illustrate the alterity within the subject, but the

effort to work the semiotic chora into the symbolic would be doomed to failure from Blanchot's standpoint. The failure of the subject's intention will constantly call into play the limit of the subjective power. For Kristeva, the subject is what he has successfully materialized in language. For Blanchot, what interests him is the frequency and the rhythm of failure or silence which fashion what the subject "is-not."

In conclusion, to be or not to be, Kristeva and Blanchot finally converge at the point of the limit, which is an essential element that helps to fashion the subjectivity. The motion of the drive as the alterity to the settlement of the ego is, according to Kristeva, "centrifugal" (PH 14); in other words, the movement of drives actually directs itself to be repressed by the sign—"coming into being as sign so as to produce meaning" (14). We can thus distinguish chora in Kristeva's theory as the ephemeral passage where drives make their way into desire regulated by repressions/prohibitions: mirror stage as the first thetic break and castration as the second thetic break. The signifying process is thus the process of the drive towards its symbolic existence motivated by the struggle to purify the abject. Following Kristeva's logic, the return of the abject in the experience of trauma or depression will call into presence the hidden space of chora, or chora as a hidden reservoir of drives. We can also say that, to each prohibition, or to each naming of the abject, a space of chora will be revealed. Chora, prohibition, abject are thus "concepts" inseparably intertwined. Hence, the heterogeneous semiotic chora is to be conceived as an alterity activated by repression/prohibition/limit in the construction of the subject.

For Kristeva, the subjectivity is itself an economy of alteration, its structure is in fact the resultant of the differentiation of the alterity; while for Blanchot, the absence or the unknown is the alterity on which "I" do not have any control. This unknown is radically "other" than me because of its inaccessibility. For Kristeva, the unknown in terms of the abject provokes the limit, and by assimilating the abject, the limit restores the meaning/the closure of the subjectivity. For Blanchot, the subject breaks the limit/the law of the meaning by holding back oneself from naming the unknown (or any event at the empirical level), and that very point of "unconcern" starts the real writing or the communication.

"The power" that remains for the subject in his relationship with the Other, is simply that of an "exigency."

But what exactly is this "exigency"? For Blanchot, it is our relationship with death, entering into contact with the unknown by virtue of a distance that is impossible to be transgressed; entering into contact with the space of disaster where the subject is totally fascinated by the gaze of the absolute alterity. Fascinated and powerless, the moment of the contact with the Impossible is precisely the experience of the limit at the space of disaster: "This moment, which is the moment of 'encounter,' at the same time precedes the encounter and situates itself at the moving limit where, from the bottom of the non-originary depths—a region always other, a space of emptiness and dispersion—this void and this nudity become the naked visage of encounter and the surprise of the face to face" (IC 183). ["Ce moment qui est celui de la 'rencontre,' la précède en même temps, se situant à la limite mouvante où, du fond de la profondeur non originelle, région toujours autre, espace du vide et de la dispersion, ce vide, cette nudité devient le visage nu de la rencontre et la surprise du face à face"] (EI 274). This encounter is the very experience of the madness of the narrator "I" in the *Madness of the Day*, an event that confront the limit of the subjective vision: "But there was no witness to my madness, my frenzy was not evident; only my innermost being was mad." "[Mais ma folie est restée sans témoin, mon égarement n'apparaissait pas, mon intimité seule était folle]."

NOTES

¹ Plato distinguished three forms of reality in *Timaeus*: "on the one hand an intelligible and unchanging mode and on the other a visible and changing copy of it," the third one, "difficult and obscure" is what Plato called the receptacle, "the nurse of all becoming and change" (67). Although not clearly specified, the receptacle stands for an instance of movement, a movement that elaborates the relationship between the first model of reality and the second copy of it. I would thus suggest to locate Kristeva's chora in between the semiotic and the symbolic as a third term which limits while separating the two elements in the con-

struction of the subjectivity. Kristeva also borrows the notion of space implied in the term "chora" from Plato: "the receptacle compared to a mass of plastic material upon which differing impressions are stamped. As such it has no definite character of its own" (69). The receptacle is thus a "material" which provides the ground for the imprints of the reality. The receptacle as a space is "invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp" (70).

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