

THE PERVERSE PLAY OF LITERATURE IN MAURICE BLANCHOT'S
AWAITING OBLIVION AND THOMAS THE OBSCURE

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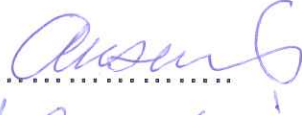
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MAURICE BLANCHOT'NUN *AWAITING OBLIVION* VE *THOMAS THE
OBSCURE* METİNLERİNDE EDEBİYATIN YOLDAN ÇIKARAN OYUNU

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current thesis is to enter into the literary world of French philosopher, literary critic and writer Maurice Blanchot by concentrating on his two narratives, *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure* in order to examine how Blanchot's theoretical approach to literature reveals itself in his works.

The thesis has a twofold goal. First, following Emile Benveniste's and Ferdinand de Saussure's theories, I intend to analyze the way language has been conceived as a system from the structuralist point of view and the way it enables the occurrence of intersubjective communication, subjectivity and meaning. Secondly, the theoretical background of my analysis goes beyond the aforementioned linguistic frame to inquire how Blanchot's two narratives try to grasp what lies beyond the realm of daily language that is used as a means of communication. For Blanchot, literature is not a space in which language enables the occurrence of meaning and of communication that we are well-acquainted with. By examining Blanchot's own approach to the "literary space", I attempt to analyze how and why literature turns into a space of "transgression", in the sense Michel Foucault has emphasized it, and in which way this transgressive writing manifests itself through "negation", "death" and "neutral speech" in Maurice Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure*.

Key words: Literature, negation, death, subjectivity, denial, neutral speech,

immediate

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı; filosof, edebiyat eleştirmeni ve yazar Maurice Blanchot'un edebi metinleri *Awaiting Oblivion* ve *Thomas the Obscure* üzerinden Blanchot'un edebi dünyasına girebilmek ve edebiyat anlayışının bu metinlerde kendini ne şekilde gösterdiğini inceleyebilmektir.

Tezin iki yönlü amacı vardır: ilk olarak, Emile Benveniste ve Ferdinand de Saussure'un teorilerinin yardımıyla, dilin nasıl kurulduğu ve özneler arası iletişimi, öznelliği ve anlamı nasıl oluşturduğunu, yapısalcı bakış açısıyla incelemektir. Daha sonrasında ise, tezin teorik zeminini bu dilsel çerçevenin ötesine götürerek Blanchot'nun iki metninin, iletişim aracı olarak kullandığımız günlük dilin ötesinde var olanı nasıl kavramaya çalıştığını inceleyebilmektir. Blanchot'ya göre, aşına olduğumuz anlamın ve iletişimin var olmasını sağlayan dil, edebiyat alanında varlığını daha fazla sürdüremez. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmada, edebiyatın nasıl ve neden, Michel Foucault'un da kullandığı anlamda, "ihlal" alanına dönüştüğü; "olumsuzlama", "ölüm", "nötür söylem" ve "dolaysız" gibi terimlerin yardımıyla da, *Awaiting Oblivion* ve *Thomas the Obscure* metinlerinde transgresif yazının ne şekilde ortaya çıktığı analiz edilmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: edebiyat, olumsuzlama, ölüm, öznellik, nötür söylem,

dolaysız

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INTRODUCTION

Maurice Blanchot is one of the most challenging and influential literary and philosophical figures of twentieth century post-war European thought. As a prolific writer, in the course of more than five decades, he published countless critical essays on literary and political topics and several novels as well as shorter narratives. Blanchot is considered worldwide as a distinct thinker with respect to his unorthodox approach to literature and philosophy. However, his exact position within the field of literature and that of philosophy is difficult to determine from the way he deals with literature and philosophy, since Blanchot approaches literature from a philosophical point of view and departs from the common understanding of it. As a consequence, it is difficult to strictly categorize Blanchot's writings and place them into any established, distinct category or field. In this respect, one of his well-known works, *The Writing of Disaster* appears to be also unclassifiable from both content and form since it unfolds beyond and between the essay form and that of a narrative. Through his writings and essays, Blanchot formulates crucial questions that concerns the very essence of modern literature. Why does literature have such a crucial place in our life and how could it still attract us in each time we face with it? Where does literature begin? Is literature even possible? Instead of answering these questions with assertive theories, Maurice Blanchot unfolds them with infinite patience, by constantly dealing with these issues in his theoretical works. Blanchot has influenced some important writers and thinkers as Jean Paul Sartre, Jean Starobinski, Emanuel Levinas, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Pierre

Klossowski, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and Jean Luc Nancy who have referred to or mentioned his theories or written about his approach to literature and philosophy. However, in the light of Blanchot's writings, it seems appropriate to say that, as Leslie Hill remarks in her "Introduction" to *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, that instead of producing new concepts or presenting a new theoretical approach to literature, Blanchot, rather, tends to focus on the discourses of other literary theorists, philosophers and to problematize their thoughts: "and what then comes to be inscribed in Blanchot's writing, both within and beyond literature, is the radically ineliminable character of that which -without origin or identity, beyond memory and meaning- enables and disables the totality of thought as its paradoxically simultaneous condition of both possibility and impossibility" (3).

In this present thesis, I aim to inquire the realm of literature with the guidance of Blanchot's theories. However, in the first chapter, I will focus on the nature and "system" of language as it has been acknowledged from a structuralist point of view. Following this perspective, the main theoretical sources on language and linguistics I will be using and referring to are those of Emile Benveniste and Ferdinand de Saussure. Further on, I will focus on the relation between language and the formation of subjectivity. Here, I will refer to the detailed explanation of the nature of subjectivity in Benveniste's *Problems of General Linguistic*, since it provides a meaningful tool to understand how the construction of subjectivity becomes possible through language. By asserting that, "Ego is he who says ego" (224), Benveniste has explicitly posited the function of language in the constitution of the self. Hence, for structuralists, language participates actively to the formation

of the subject, not the reverse. For Blanchot, however, language loses its power to form the subject when it enters into the realm of literature. At this point, the term “neutral”- that has been coined both by Blanchot and Barthes, however with differences, to characterize modern speech and writing- has a crucial place in understanding the realm of literary language as understood by Blanchot both in his theoretical and fiction writings. Blanchot defines the “neutral speech” more particularly in *The Space of Literature* as a speech that has no beginning; it is “neutral” because it refers to nothing and it has no immediate or representational relation to the world.

In the suchapter “The Unifying Silence of Maurice Blanchot”, the difference between the two modes of language will be defined. On the one hand, there is a daily language that enables the construction of meaning and the formation of subjectivity, on the other, there is the literary or “poetic language” in which, following Mallarmé’s poetic revolution, the “neutral speech” occurs. Although such separation within language itself appears to be Blanchot’s interest in his early literary writings -such as *The Space of Literature*-, later, in *The Work of Fire*, he goes beyond that dualism and asserts that it is not possible to separate language in this way, by allowing privilege to one specific mode over the other. Furthermore, Blanchot sees “silence” as a power that is at work in both modes of language.

Blanchot’s *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure* will be analysed in the second chapter, in the light of the theoretical background on language and literature discussed previously. In “The Denial of Negation in *Awaiting Oblivion*” my main intention is to examine the transformation of language from being a means of

building meaning and subjectivity to a medium of passivity; during this conversion, language loses its semantic and linguistic efficiency in building meaning out of “the literary writing”.

In the subchapter, “Phantasy: The Search for the Real”, I will explore the concept of “phantasy” in relation to two terms that are keys in this thesis: the “immediate” and the “Real”. Throughout my research, these two terms will be used interchangeably, and their meaning will be limited to the idea that they refer to a thing that cannot be articulated in language. In *Infinite Conversation*, Maurice Blanchot explains that it is not possible to capture the “immediate” since; “The immediate excludes everything immediate: this means all direct relation, all mystical fusion, and all sensible contact, just as it excludes itself- renounces its own immediacy- each time it must submit to the mediation of an intermediary in order to offer us” (38). The “phantasy” concept has great importance in the inquiry of how daily language is being transformed into a medium of passivity. Therefore, “Phantasy: The Search for the Real” will be a continuation of the former two subchapters; however, it will be analysed from a different perspective.

Finally, in the light of the theories aforementioned, the relinquishment of saying “I” will be considered as the ultimate point that literary language can reach. The reason why the protagonists of both narratives - *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure*-, abandon and avoid to say “I” will be delineated in the light of the structuralist understanding of the relation between language and the subject position of “I”.

I. THE LITERARY SPACE OF MAURICE BLANCHOT

According to Maurice Blanchot, modern literature is characterized by a self-reference and self-reflexivity that enable literature to become its own object; this “intransitive” state of modern literature frees it from traditional representation, thus from the authority of an external truth to “represent”; since Mallarmé, literature represents nothing, nothing but itself, which supposedly allows it to manifest itself from its distant existence. Indeed, “literature” in the Blanchotian sense takes place due to the event of language itself. Here, for him, the literary language develops from itself and departs from the traditional modes of being of discourse- in other words, from the realm of representation. Blanchot asserts that the literary speech forms its own world where the established, well-known meaning of the words disappears. In that perspective, Blanchot attempts to explore the nature of literary language by departing from the linguistic and literary theories of Structuralists; in doing so, he problematizes the structuralist linguistic system that frames language in a system of signs composed of a signifier and a signified which have arbitrary relation between each other. Therefore, I will analyze the Blanchotian understanding of literary language through the scope of the Post-structuralist’s approach which has asserted the indeterminacy of meaning and the infinite possible interpretations of a literary text; especially of Roland Barthes’s theoretical books *Writing Degree Zero*, *The Neutral* and Michel Foucault’s *Foucault-Blanchot*.

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Roland Barthes starts to deal with the literary language from the Surrealists’ perspective and criticises their way they considered literary language as self-destructive. Therefore, Barthes claims that “this self-

destruction teaches us that for some writers language, the first and last way out of the literary myth, finally restores what it had hoped to avoid, that there is no writing which can be lastingly revolutionary, (75) and that “any silence of form can escape imposture only by complete abandonment of communication” (75). He believes that in this kind of language where a writer tries to escape from any representational or immediate relation to the world will fail eventually as within language it is not possible to escape from any signification. He continues his claim by asserting the idea that this kind of art “has the very structure of suicide: in it silence is a homogeneous poetic time which traps words between two layers and sets it off less as a fragment of a cryptogram than as a light, a void, a murder, a freedom” (76). It has the very structure of suicide, since words here, dissociated from technical uses of the writer and from clichés, freed from responsibility from all possible context, appear by declaring its solitude and its freedom from every possible reflections. Barthes presents an example of this poetic language by referring to the writing of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, arguing that Mallarmé’s language is like the one of the mythic character Orpheus “who can save what he loves only by renouncing it, and who just the same cannot resist glancing round a little; it is Literature brought to the gates of Promised Land: a world without Literature, but one to which the writer would nevertheless have to bear witness.” (76) Barthes’s claim can be true for Mallarmé, since Mallarmé uses literary language in his poems in a way that words do not refer to their well- known meanings; however, this very fact about poetic language enables him to say what he wants. The name of Mallarmé has been mentioned here since Barthes emphasizes that the hypothesis of Mallarmé “as a murderer of language” (76) owes to Blanchot. Two years after the

publication of Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, Blanchot wrote *The Space of Literature* (1955), an essay in which Mallarmé holds great importance. Blanchot emphasizes the way Mallarmé has distinguished literary language from daily language and considered literary language as "a rule unto itself"; "it is imposing but imposes nothing. It is also well removed from thought which always pushes the elemental obscurity, for verse 'attracts no less than it designates'" (40). In Mallarmé's poetic approach to language, the term "silence" plays a crucial role in the nature of both daily language and literary language; it also gains materiality and visibility by being allowed space through the blanks of the written poems. In *The Work of Fire* Blanchot resorts to the concept of "silence" in the same way than Mallarmé's approach but he also develops from that very point his own understanding of literature. Blanchot himself stresses that if Mallarmé lets language refer to what is signified by absence, it risks facing an "impasse", in other words a dead end (38). What is crucial, Blanchot argues, is that, "the function of writing whose role is to replace the thing with its absence, the object with its 'vibratory disappearance'. Literature's own language unfolds in this movement toward *something else*, toward a *beyond* that yet escapes us because it cannot be actualized or seized in the present; what we grasp only is what remains: 'the knowing lack' that 'we have'. It is this lack, this emptiness, this vacant space that is the purpose and true creation of language" (39). Although very much inspired by Mallarmé's revolutionary approach to language, literature and poetry that has inaugurated modernity, Blanchot has gone beyond it and developed his own theoretical approach.

“The neutral” is the central concept in Maurice Blanchot’s understanding of literary language. As we have previously said, in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot calls literary language “neutral” since “It states, but does not refer back to something which is to be stated, something silent, like the meaning behind an expression, which would guarantee it.” (50). For him, literary language refers to nothing external and has no immediate relation to the world.

In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes also uses the term “neutral” in reference to writing and literature, by mentioning the existence of a third term¹: which he calls a “neutral term or zero element” Barthes identifies the neuter with the zero degree that he also calls “blank writing”, distinguishing between two different usages of the “neuter”: on the one hand, a political and grammatical form that coincides with the “zero degree” where the neither coincides with nor, on the other hand a disruptive usage that coincides with the heteroclite or irregular. In that sense, Barthes agrees that the “neuter” has the capacity to throw into panic the established system of representation. In Barthes’ view, the terms “neuter” and “neutral” refer to a language that stands beyond the opposition of daily and literary language. According to him, “the new neutral writing takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgements, without becoming involved in any of them; it consists precisely in their absence. But this absence is completed, it implies no refuge, no secrets; one cannot therefore say that it is an impassive mode of writing; rather, that it is innocent” (77). However, Barthes does not think that this third term “neutral” or “zero element” is the utmost point of language that sets itself free of all

¹ In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes mentions that some linguists establish between two terms of “a polar opposition (such as singular- plural, preterite-present)” (76) the existence of third term.

its “mechanical habits”. He has come to the conclusion that “neutral writing” represents in the end a form of aporia. At that point, I quote him at a greater length;

Unfortunately, nothing is more fickle than a colourless writing; mechanical habits are developed in the very place where freedom existed, a network of set forms hem in more and more the pristine freshness of discourse, a mode of writing appears afresh in lieu of an indefinite language. The writer, taking his place as a “classic”, becomes the slavish imitator of his original creation society demotes his writing to a mere manner, and returns him a prisoner to his own formal myths (78).

Barthes pursues his inquiry into the forms and the nature of “the neutral” during the courses he gave at the Collège de France between 1977-1980 and which have been later assembled and published under the title, *The Neutral*. Barthes states that the frame of his courses on “the neutral” is not language since he sees the neutral as “the occasion for a divagation” (XXIII). For him, “the neutral” manifests itself “not in language but in discourse” (211), this is why his interest consists in finding out “who” speaks the neutral and “how” the neutral speaks. Although Barthes’s perspective is distinguished from, if not in opposition to Blanchot’s, Michel Foucault unveils in his essay² upon Blanchot the point where Blanchot and Barthes’ respective approaches meet, stressing that Blanchot’s language does not use negation dialectically but rather uses negation on discourse;

To negate one’s own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak. It is to leave it where it lies, far behind

² Michel Foucault- Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside”. *Foucault- Blanchot*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (New York: Zone, 1990)- p.22

one, in order to be free for a new beginning- a beginning that is a pure origin because its only principles are itself and the void, but that is also a rebeginning because what freed that void was the language of the past in the act of hollowing itself out. Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but contestation that effaces; not reconciliation. (22)

In Foucault's view, language must be proceeded not toward any inner affirmation, in other words, not toward a kind of central, unshakable certainty- but toward an "outer bound" where it must constantly contest itself. In that way, "when language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel" (22). So, negating one's own discourse will prevent literary language from falling into the "impasse" mentioned by Blanchot. At that point, Foucault makes it clear that "literature" is "superficially an interiorization", it is "far more a question of a passage to the 'outside'" (12). For Foucault literature is not language approaching itself, it is rather language getting as far away from itself as possible. And in this setting "outside of itself", it reveals its own being, "the sudden clarity reveals not a folding back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but dispersion" (13). Here the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the sovereign subject and the withdrawal of subjectivity. For Foucault, literature achieves this through a form of thought that he calls as "the thought from outside" (16) this kind of thought excludes itself from subjectivity. It sets its limits as if from without telling its ends but still stands at the point of all positivity. However, it is

not for grasping the foundation or justification of literature but it is for regaining the space of its unfolding.

Here, language is presented as no longer having the power to inexhaustably produce images, but rather having the power to opening them and setting them free of their historical loads till language forms a discourse that constitutes its own space as “the outside”. In order to strengthen his theoretical view upon literature, Foucault resorts to Blanchot’s fiction writings where, to him, literature reveals itself as “a thought from outside”. In this respect, I would like to conclude this reflection upon Blanchot’s fictions by quoting Foucault himself:

Blanchot’s fictions are, rather than the images themselves, their transformation, displacement, and neutral interstices. They are precise; the only figures they outline are in the gray tones of everyday life and the anonymous. And when wonder overtakes them, it is never in themselves but in the void surrounding them, in the space in which they are set, rootless and without foundation. The fictitious is never in things or in people, but in the impossible verisimilitude of what lies between them: encounters, the proximity of what is most distant, the absolute dissimulation in our very midst. (24)

Therefore, fiction for Blanchot comprises not in showing the invisible, but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible can be invisible. The fiction of Blanchot wipes itself out in the void where it loses its forms that end up forming a discourse occurring with no conclusion, no affirmation and free of any center. So, this discourse where words continually murmurs could be defined as the discourse of Blanchot’s “novels” and “narratives”.

1.1. A Brief Look on Language from a Structuralist Point of View

At this point of my reflection, I will briefly turn to the structuralist approach to language as a system in the light of Ferdinand de Saussure's and Emile Benveniste's linguistic theories, in order to better understand and examine in which way Blanchot has profoundly departed from this established system. Ferdinand de Saussure who has exerted profound influence on twentieth century linguistics, proposed the title "Language as a System of Signs" for Part I, Chapter I of his *Course in Generale Linguistics*; however, for some reasons, his suggestion was disregarded by the editors of the book. Nevertheless, we can consider that the original title has prime importance since it embraces a central point in Saussure's theory; a theory that establishes language ("langue") as a system of signs forming a clear-cut, homogeneous object and a self-contained whole that can be examined independently from the other aspects ("langage", speech, and "parole") of language. For Saussure, and for following linguists of the first half of 20th century, language is a system that can be envisaged in and of itself, since, according to them, it has its own structure that is centralized on the "sign"; the "sign" can be defined as the representative of reality in language, in other words, a "sign" symbolizes reality by means of language.

For structuralists, the symbolizing capacity of language lies at the bottom of its conceptual functions. At that point, it is crucial to examine the construction of "thought" itself by having recourse to the other eminent structuralist linguist, Emile Benveniste. In the chapter "A Look at the Development of Linguistics" of his *Problems in General Linguistics*, Benveniste states that "thought is not a simple

reflection of the world; it categorizes reality and in that organizing function it is so closely associated with language that from this point of view one could be tempted to equate thought and language” (25). Therefore, in structuralist terms, thought is considered as the power to construct representations of things in general. In this system, it seems impossible to separate language from “thought”.

However, Benveniste questions where language properly belongs to and he further connects his question with two following problems that he sees in the core of Saussure’s teaching: what are the basic data on which linguistics are based, and what is the nature of human speech?³ The answer to the first question comes from John E. Joseph who in his essay on *Saussure*, quotes Saussure’s opening lines of *Mémoire*, where Saussure propounds not the “...speculations of a transcendent order, but the research for elementary data, without which everything floats, everything is arbitrariness and uncertainty” (268). Saussure seeks for an “elementary data” of language without which everything is arbitrariness and incertitude.⁴ He even examines the pre-historic times in order to follow the historic development of language and to find out its moments of evolution.

When it comes to answering the second question regarding human speech, Saussure claims that human speech is always a *double entity*, formed of two interdependent parts in the sense that one means nothing without the other. In Saussure’s own terms, *a* is ineffectual to designate anything without the presence of

³ *Problems in General Linguistics*, “Saussure After Half a Century” (30), Benveniste takes Ferdinand de Saussure as a basic reference for his own reflection upon the nature of language.

⁴ For further information on that issue it would be better to read *Mémoire on The Primitive System of Vowels in The Indo-European Languages* by Ferdinand de Saussure where he clearly explains how he diverges from the comparative approach of Indo-European linguistics at the time.

b; the claim is also true for *b*, since without *a* there is uncertainty and meaninglessness. In short, both have no value outside their mutual relationship.

In Saussurian view, human speech is composed of signs whose nature is “arbitrary”. What does arbitrary mean then? In *Course in Generale Linguistics*, in the very first chapter of his book “Nature of Linguistic Sign” the definition of arbitrariness is explained in quite simple terms. Saussure calls defines the “sign” as “the total resultant of the association of a signifier [= sound image] and what is signified [concept]... The idea of ‘sister’ is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French” (66). This explanation aims at showing that “the bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary” (67) or more ingeniously, that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (67). “Arbitrary” refers here to what is unmotivated; arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.

Saussure repeatedly acknowledges that the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a *concept* and a *sound image*; in that way, the linguistic sign is merely the composition of *sound image* and *idea*. However, Benveniste asserts that, “between the signifier and signified, the connectit concept (the ‘signified’) “boef” is perforce “boef” is identical in my consciousness with the sound sequence (the ‘signifier’) “böf”. How could be otherwise? Together the two are imprinted on my mind, together they evoke each other under any circumstance. There is such a close symbiosis between them that the concept of “boeuf” is like the soul of the sound image “böf”. The mind does not contain empty form, concepts without names” (45). Against Benveniste’s claim that “mind does not contain empty form” and his thoughts on the necessary relationship between the signifier and the signified,

Saussure makes the following counter-argument in the chapter entitled “Linguistic Value”:

Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words-is only a shapeless and indistinct mass.philosophers and linguists have always agreed that in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no preexisting ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. (111)

The signifier is the phonic embodiment of a concept; the signified is the mental twin of the signifier. This coincidence of the signifier and the signified ensures “the structural unity of the linguistic sign”. Here again we resort to Saussure himself for his claims on language:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought in the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought, nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology. (112)

In “Immutability and Mutability of the Sign”, Saussure also makes evident the “mutable” and “immutable” nature of the sign; because of its arbitrary nature, it is the mutable thus open to change, and immutable on the other hand, since its arbitrary nature cannot be challenged in the “name of a rational norm” (75). As Saussure asserts, “Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign” (75).

However, Benveniste emphasizes that the change of relationship (that remains unchanged at the same time) doesn’t occur between the signifier and the

signified; it occurs, instead, between the sign and the object; that is, the designation based on object depends on the influence of different historical factors. In that way, he underlines the fact that what Saussure has demonstrated remains true as long as it is the truth of signification, not that of the sign.

Saussure repeatedly mentions the fact that language is the product of social forces. And this is one of the main reasons of its mutability; since, each society goes through historical changes and language adapts itself accordingly. This possibility of mutation that occurs in language in terms of signification is very crucial in my analysis of Blanchot's theoretical approach to literature. Indeed, in Blanchot's view, the mutability of language which, according to Saussure, normally takes place in time and through the historical processes of society, takes place in the realm of literature without a lapse of time and immediately.

1.2. Language as an Instrument of Intersubjective Communication

According to the Structuralists' point of view, language enables each individual to constitute him/herself as "subject" since language institutes the concept of "ego". The "subjectivity" that is discussed here is actually the potential of the speaker/utterer to posit him/herself as "subject". "In Subjectivity of Language", Emile Benveniste argues that "'Ego' is he who says 'ego'. That is where we see the foundation of 'subjectivity', which is determined by the linguistic status of 'person'" (24). However, the only way for someone to build him/herself as subject is to experience the differentiation between "I" and "You". "I" can use the pronoun "I" as far as I speak to my interlocutor who is designated as "you". This differentiation allows the constitution of dialogue. In return, "You" designates him/herself as "I" when s/he speaks to the former "I" who becomes reciprocally a "you". This principle that can be applied to discourse in general; in that sense, language in its communicative aspect is possible only because each speaker can constitute him/herself as subject by referring to oneself as "I" in the course of his discourse.

Therefore, during the act of speaking I posit another person as "you" and in that way my address becomes completely exterior to "me". However, in Benveniste's terms, the interlocutor becomes an "echo" of myself, hence I say "you" and "you" says "you" to "me" in return. This "polarity of persons" consists for Benveniste the essential condition of discourse and is inherent to itself as Benveniste says, "It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere as outside language. This

polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: 'ego' always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to an 'interior/exterior' opposition and, at the same time, they are reversible. If we seek parallel to this, we will not find it. The condition of man in language is unique" (226). Therefore, the so-called antinomies established between "I" (the same) and "the other" or "self" and "society" are no more valid. Their mutual relationship forms a "duality" rather than an "antinomy". This relation may remind us Arthur Rimbaud's famous formula "I is another"⁵ where he underlines the "false significance of Self" and emphasizes the fact that I cannot exist without the existence of the other.

When we look at the nature of these two pronouns, it becomes clear that they are distinguished from all the other designations existing in language, in that they do not refer to one determined and specific concept or an individual. When we think of the nature of the "I" we see that "I" doesn't have any concept that integrates all the "I"'s that are commonly uttered by all speakers. The "I", then, does not name any "lexical entity". Benveniste says that language forms a set of "empty signs" that does not refer to anything pertaining to reality. These signs become "full" as soon as they are uttered by a speaker in the instance of his/her discourse. Each speaker says "I" in the course of a discourse and through this designation, constructs

⁵ *Je est un autre*- taken from Arthur Rimbaud's Correspondence (The letter written to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871). Rimbaud's formula has many interpretations, and apart from the interpretation below, it can also be read as the expression of a self-alienation since it is paradoxical in essence; on the one hand it blurs the duality between "I" and "other" and on the other hand it keeps sustaining this duality.

him/herself up and is being constructed up at the same time as a “subject”. In the chapter “Nature of Pronouns” the identity of “I” is delineated by Benvenistes such: “Language institutes a unique but mobile sign, I, which can be assumed by each speaker on the condition that he refers each time only to the instance of his own discourse. This sign is thus linked to the exercise of language and announces the speaker as speaker. It is this property that establishes the basis of individual discourse, in which each speaker takes over all the recourses of language for his own behalf” (219).

The foundation of subjectivity can be settled only in the exercise of language. However, a person could refer to his own self only in the instance of the discourse; outside of it, it is not possible for the subject to form itself or to actualize an identity to itself. “I” indicates “the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I” (218). It signifies “the reality of discourse” hence, it cannot be defined in terms of objects as a “nominal sign” but in terms of “locution”. The concept “instance is very crucial for the constitution of subjectivity since “I” has no value except in the instance it is articulated.

However, the other point related to the “instance” is the “instance of form”. It means that the “I” has its own form like any other signs that signify objects, but “I” has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is produced (218). Therefore the process that is at stake actualizes a “double instance”; the instance of the “I” as a “referent” and the instance of the “I” as a “referee”. In other words, I is “the individual who utters the present instance I” (218). Eventually, we can talk about the position of “address” here, and then “you” can be said to be “the individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic

instance you” (218). The time in which the speaker speaks can be solely indicated by the discourse he articulates. That is to say, there can be no other criterion in indicating the instant of someone’s speaking except “the time at which one is speaking” (227). Benveniste emphasizes that this time is always the “present moment, although it never relates to the same events of an ‘objective’ chronology because it is determined for each speaker by each of the instances of discourse related to it... Ultimately human temporality with all its linguistic apparatus reveals the subjectivity inherent in the very using of language” (227). This relationship between subject and language has crucial place in Blanchot’s theoretical writings about language since, according to him, language’s own being only appears for itself with the means of the disappearance of the subject. And, it could be possible to gain access to this strange relation through a form of thought that eliminates subjectivity. The purpose of this kind of thought is not to find out its foundation but to unfold itself perpetually. Blanchot is the one who has witnessed this thought since in his fiction writings such as *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure* the potagonists lose their authoritative voice in every aspect. In the place of authoritative subject the works begin to speak for themselves as a result of the fact that in both narratives, the subject “I” transforms into “He”.

Till now, I have discussed the nature of the personal pronouns “I” and “you” and observed how subjectivity is being constructed in the system of language; however, there is also the third personal pronoun “he” or “she” that needs to be examined to for our analysis to be complete. Although it is called third person, we may ask whether “s/he” refers to any subject and what its position is in the relationship between “I” and “you”. “Third person” pronouns are by function and

by nature different from “I” and “you” considering that the “third person” symbolises “the unmarked member of the correlation of person. That is why it is not a truism to affirm that the non-person is the only mode of utterance possible for the instance of discourse not meant to refer to themselves but to predicate the process of someone or something outside the instance itself, and this someone or something can always be provided with an objective reference” (221). Thus, we cannot put the “third person” in the same category than that of the “I” and the “you”. We must be aware that the “third person” does not refer to an actual person since it refers to an “object” (someone) which is situated outside direct address. However, it enables its existence through its opposition as “I” of the speaker utters it and locates it as “non-person”. The third person, “he” gets its importance from the fact that it takes part in the discourse uttered by “I”. In short we can say that “he” is the third person which does not refer to any person as it is mentioned just as an object in the instance of discourse occurring between “I” and “you” and at the same time “he” stays outside of the “present time” of “I” and “you”. So analysing the nature of especially “I” and “he” is important for me as I will try to explicate why the characters in Blanchot’s narratives transform into “he” or call themselves at certain point “he” instead of “I” and in what terms this transformation is related to his attempt to reach the “immediate”.

1.3. The Unifying Silence of Maurice Blanchot

In the chapter “Mallarmé’s Experience” of *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot resorts to the definition that Mallarmé has put forward to reveal the nature of literary\poetic language, that “the sole act of writing” discloses. Mallarmé acknowledges a “double condition of the word, crude or immediate on the one hand, essential on the other” (38-39). In characterizing each, he uses the term “silence”. The “crude word” is silent because there is nothing real other than the movement of exchange. In Blanchot’s view, language occurs when negativity takes place; and negativity occurs when a “thing” enters into the realm of language and loses its existence. So, what is expressed here is a sheer absence of the thing. In other words, what is expressed is not presence but absence. However, it may be possible to be in the world through negativity: the crude word puts us back to life, helps us to communicate. The crude word is nothing, yet it is “nothingness in action: that which acts, labors, constructs” (40). Blanchot stresses that the crude or ordinary language is silent but “beings speak in it as values”. The crude\ ordinary language serves primarily to connect us with objects. Therefore, it could be also named “immediate language” in a way that it has an immediate relation with the world which is directly close to us, our environs; “The crude or immediate speech, language as language is silent. But Being speaks in it. And, as a consequence of the use which is its purpose – because , that is, it serves primarily to put us in connection with objects, because it is a tool in a world of tools where what speaks is utility and value—beings speak in it as values” (40). However, Blanchot

considers that the crude word is in reality neither crude nor immediate, it rather gives the illusion of being so;

It is extremely reflective; it is laden with history. But most often—and as if we were unable in the course of events to know that we are the organ of time, the guardians of becoming—language seems to be the locus of an immediately granted revelation. It seems to be the sign that truth is immediate, always the same and always at our disposal. Immediate language is perhaps in fact a relation with the immediate world, with what is immediately close to us, our environs. But the immediacy which common language communicates to us is only veiled distance, the absolutely foreign passing for the habitual, the unfamiliar which we take for the customary, thanks to the veil which is language and because we have grown accustomed to words' illusion. (40)

For Blanchot, the communicative power of language conveys the illusion of immediacy; since in reality, it expresses only “the habitual”, and makes us believe that the immediate is familiar. The essential language on the other hand, which can be considered as the poet's word, is the opposite of the crude word. While the crude word, although it comes from absence, imposes the presence of the object and constructs an immediate relation with the world, the essential word imposes nothing. Although it no longer refers back to the world, at this point it is impossible to escape from the affirmation of what it denies. For this reason, language speaks as absence. However, in his later writings such as *The Work of Fire*, Blanchot points out that the distinction between these two conditions becomes blurred, even in Mallarmé's way of considering “silence” as a key concept in each mode. Blanchot goes beyond Mallarmé's approach and claims that silence has a double function that the essential word or the poet's word applies in the space of literature and that this literary language silences even silence itself. Since, according to Blanchot, the

crude word uses silence to create the illusion that it responds directly to the immediate world; the literary language creates the illusion that it silences even what silence achieves in crude language. In that way, the literary language refers to something totally new. Therefore, Blanchot designates literature as an “imposture”.

These two modes of language constitute a recurring and crucial theme in Blanchot’s various discussions upon Mallarmé’s own approach to poetry and language, especially in the 1950s with the publication of *The Space of Literature*. After this essay, Blanchot published *The Work of Fire* and *The Writing of Disaster* in which his main subject matter of interest is that of the book itself, in relation to the art of worklessness and “fragmentation”, and to the nature of writing as an affirmative disaster. If we turn back to these two modes of language, it seems more appropriate to focus on what Mallarmé himself says about them in “Crisis in Poetry”: “One desire of my epoch which cannot be dismissed is to separate so as to attribute them differently the double state of the immediate or un-refined word on one hand, the essential one on the other.” In “Mallarmé and Blanchot”, Leslie Hill stresses that for Mallarmé, ordinary words serve as a vehicle for the “exchange of ideas or information” which Mallarmé calls ‘reportage’ (894). Analogously, in *The Myth of Mallarmé*, Blanchot mentions that Mallarmé compares the common word to the “currency of exchange” by quoting his own words that assume ordinary language as “to take or place a coin in another’s hand in silence” (29). However, we deal with very different aesthetic realms when language becomes essential. In this realm: words lose their functional dimension and prevent the occurrence of words’ well-known meanings. Leslie Hill states that for Blanchot, the “poetic act” where essential language takes place, is the only space where “it finds a world rather than

giving voice to an already extant universe” (892). In that way, language is not a “subordinate tool” for the expression of the surrounding world and becomes instead the experience of its own existence.

The French philosopher and poet Paul Valéry also deals with the question of duality within language. However Valéry gives priority to the “poetic act” and distinguishes poetic language from prose by claiming that there is a “mastery” applied to the poetic act; hence it is according to him a “heightened moment of self presence and possession” (29). In that way, Valéry separates prose and poetry into two different activities. For him, prose writing is a means to express ideas and in this endeavour the words disappear in a short time so as to create mental images. As Blanchot says, “Valéry’s commentary indicates, that this language is worthless because, by being in the service of understanding, it disappears completely in the idea it communicates or in the action it announce” (29). In the realm of poetry, via musical components, the words of poetry are irreducible to simple ideas and poetic writing turns out to be a self-legitimizing act. However, regarding Valéry’s analysis of prose and poetry, Leslie Hill focuses on Blanchot’s commentaries upon this discussion and draws attention to the unquestioned assumption that it is possible to apply conscious mastery over language apart from exercising musical elements.

Besides Valéry, Mallarmé too considers prosaic language as a means of expressing ideas and also, of allowing poetry to occur. So, what remains obfuscated in Valéry’s commentaries on verse and prose is abundantly displayed in Mallarmé’s stretch on the founding role of language. In “Crisis in Poetry”, Mallarmé acknowledges that “Only, we must realize, *poetry would not exist*; philosophically, verse makes up for what languages lack, completely superior as it is.”, Mallarmé also mentions the

experience of a “vibratory disappearance” of the actual object in language as a marvel since, with the play of the word, the pure notion comes forth as a result of this disappearance. Mallarmé continues as, “I say: a flower! and outside the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from every bouquet”. In “The Myth of Mallarmé” Blanchot grounds his understanding of everyday language on Mallarmé’s approach and Blanchot explains that “Mallarmé was struck by the characteristic of language to be both meaningful and abstract” (30) as the word gains its meaning only if it eliminates the object it names, so speech has a function that is not only representative but also destructive. It causes the object to vanish, it makes the object absent, it annihilates its actuality but renders the meaning to occur.

We can assume that in “The Myth of Mallarmé”, Blanchot’s aim was to deconstruct the binary relationship between prose and poetry that had been claimed by Valéry, and to challenge the “dialectical-hierarchy that privileges linguistic mastery” over poetic experience, and eventually give equal importance to prosaic norms. Hill stresses that Blanchot achieves his intention by simply indicating “the double role of silence” in Mallarmé’s poetic theory. Blanchot explains that “What is striking in Mallarmé is the feeling that a certain arrangement of words might in no way be distinct from silence” (33). Silence is the destination of both the immediate and the essential modes of language in Mallarmé’s poetry. The “language of reportage” as Mallarmé calls it, represents only the absence and not the presence of real objects; but poetic language too demolishes real objects and ends up in silence. The poetic language brings no real presence to light, instead “an absent fiction”.

Blanchot reminds Mallarmé's own words as "To evoke, in a purposeful shadow, the silenced object, by allusive words, reducing themselves to equal silence, comprises an attempt close to creating... So that an average stretch of words beneath the comprehending gaze, arranges itself in definite lines, and silence therewith" (33).

However Blanchot stresses that if Mallarmé makes language refer to what is signified by absence, it endangers itself in entering into an "impasse", in other words a "dead end". Image comes forward when only the "defined void" which is created by the disappearance of the object is made eligible. Nevertheless, Blanchot emphasises that "allegory" is the first step toward absence; as soon as an indirect expression is clarified by the hearer, the object recurs and imposes itself with its unchanged meaning. Therefore, the emancipation remains illusory. However, Blanchot argues that Mallarmé's goal is totally other than depiction; it is instead a "transposition". He explains Mallarmé's approach as such:

That is why the world of images that Mallarmé seeks is a flight, a negation rather than an affirmation of images... If I say, "the absent one of all the flowers," undoubtedly I momentarily erase the flower that I would otherwise have to see, but in order to direct my gaze and my mind toward the presence of another thing, no less cumbersome, no less heavy: this must vanish in its turn, under pressure of a more unstable image that will push it away, and thus in succession from figures to figures, anxious images, acts rather than forms, transitions of meaning rather than expressions. (31)

Since Mallarmé finds silence also crucial for the poetic act, he, then, does not make any clear separation between essential language and immediate language as Valéry does. However, this does not mean that their respective approaches are the same. If poetic language results in the embodiment of silence, for Blanchot, it does

so in a more radical way than ordinary language. This is because poetic language first transforms the world into an abstraction, then destroys this abstract power or “the sensual evocative power of the word.” What is crucial Blanchot argues, is that “the function of writing whose role is to replace the thing with its absence, the object with its ‘vibratory disappearance’. Literature’s law is this movement toward *something else*, toward a *beyond* that escapes us because it cannot be, and of which we merely grasp ‘the knowing lack’ that ‘we have’. It is this lack, this emptiness, this vacant space that is the purpose and true creation of language” (39). In that respect, for Blanchot, poetic or essential language is not concerned with mastery but enacts and notes “loss and destruction”. Poetry becomes an experience of the destruction of the being which eventually turns out to be without essence and “subjective truth” that before what poet loses his subjectivity as well. Blanchot describes the poet’s situation as such: “Poet... his task to utter everything and to reduce everything to silence, even silence. But silence thanks to which we speak leads us back to language to a new language that is never the last. That is why the poet, like any man who speaks and writes always dies before he has attained silence; and that is why, always his death seems premature to us, the lie that crowns an edifice of lies” (41). Blanchot emphasises that we owe this “impersonal character of language” to Mallarmé. Indeed, Mallarmé wished to explore in and by poetry this empty, vacant space through the page’s materiality as well. In his poem “A Throw of a Dice”, spatially separated group of words become analogous with a musical score. In “A Dice Throw At Any Time Never Will Abolish Chance’: The Musical Score” the poet says: “Let me add that, for anyone who would read it aloud, a musical score results from this stripped-down form of thought... or from its very

layout. The difference in type-face between the principal theme, a secondary one, and adjacent ones, dictates the level of importance when uttered orally and the position on the stave, intermediate, high or low on the page, will indicate how the intonation rises and falls” (xx vi).

According to Blanchot who follows the path opened by Mallarmé, poetry becomes akin to the exploration of this empty, vacant space. However, Blanchot realises that poetic language too deceives, in a different way, when it engenders the possibility of the work of art. Blanchot offers very different explanations to negativity in comparison to Mallarmé’s. For Blanchot, the dialectical approach fails in the face of the work of art’s worklessness. The power of the negative cannot be revived by the presence therefore its movement has no foundation and no essence to be brought into light at its center:

The book is the symbol of this autonomous subsistence; it surpasses us, we can do nothing beyond it, and we are nothing, almost nothing, in what it is...It is a kind of awareness, without subject, that separated from being...But it is also an incarnate consciousness, reduced to the material form of words, to their sonority, their life and giving us to believe that this reality opens up who knows what path to us into obscure heart of things. Perhaps that is an imposture. But perhaps that trickery is the truth of every written thing. (42)

So, what may have started with Mallarmé, culminates with Blanchot’s approach to poetic language through the conclusion that no clear separation between poetic language and everyday language is possible. The poetic act can be actualised only by a logic of oscillation that disposes the act of writing from any foundation and signals the ruin of the book. This is precisely the question we will be examining through his two narratives *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure*.

1.4. Writing, The Unnamable and The Real

In the light of what I have tried to explain above, as soon as we are open to “the field of possibility” with regards to language, the exigency of force that creates meaning becomes inevitable. However Blanchot wishes to move beyond this field of possibility since poetry or writing are not considered as the means of restoring what naming has made disappear. In this sense, this is not the way to reach “the immediate”; this kind of poetic aim would be “the torment of immediate” (36) as Blanchot calls it in “Great Refusal”. Why is there no way to seize the immediate? This is because “the immediate excludes everything immediate: this means all direct relation, all mystical fusion, and all sensible contact, just as it excludes itself- renounces its own immediacy- each time it must submit to the mediation of an intermediary in order to offer us” (38). This amounts to saying that the immediate is what exceeds possibility itself, what resists to any dialectic relationship and moment.

In other words, if possibility has its source in our end that it achieves by using power, it is from this source that impossibility originates but rejects all sources at the same time. This is because impossibility cannot be part of any dialectic relation. In impossibility, time cannot refer to past or future; it rather always disperses in the present, it is the incessant. Impossibility is what cannot be escaped from and, at the same time, what cannot be grasped since its reign cancels any movement toward unity. The experience of impossibility is a non-dialectical movement where contradiction has nothing to do with opposition or reconciliation and the other never turns into the same.

Blanchot builds a relationship between the impossibility and the outside in a way that the experience of impossibility takes place only where there is a “radical other”. What does this other refer to and what kind of experience appears with it in impossibility? In impossibility, the relation with the other is not a mediate relation of dialectical or objective identification as it is the case in everyday language. The relation with the other is a relation that cannot access immediate unity. It always escapes from any proximity and remains foreign beyond negation and affirmation. But it is still a relation where “distance represents what, from man to man, escapes human power- which is capable of anything. This relation founded by a pure lack in speech is designated there where my power ceases, there where possibility falls away” (68). According to Blanchot, “impossibility is the relation with outside” (46). Since it is as such, neither negation nor affirmation can indicate what in being has already preceded being and hence, the impossibility cannot yield to ontology. It could be said that in it, one is engaged in an experience which escapes negativity, that this experience ruins the negativity and prevents any possibility from occurring.

How can we name such a relation over which there is no longer any hold? Blanchot designates it with the term “passion”. This passion is the desire of poetry itself. However, poetry is not concerned with naming or representing the impossibility. Indeed, trying to designate impossibility and drag it into the space of possibility would be a futile attempt. Poetry rather actualizes the relation with impossibility by solely responding to it. Blanchot designates the task of poetry as “naming the possible, responding to the impossible” (48); this designation corresponds to the state of being in between. Poetry does not express or name what is addressed to us within impossibility or represent it in the field of language, but

rather responds to it. Moreover, poetry responds to what is not heard yet; it is a waiting for the unknown and a hope for presence affirmed. For Blanchot, this is precisely the speech of the “neuter”.

In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou deciphers the nature of poetry in terms of the Lacanian concept “The Real” and asserts that as “Every regime of truth is grounded in The Real by its own unnamable. . . . Every poem brings a power into language, the power of eternally fastening the disappearance of what presents itself that it cannot name” (23). Here, Blanchot’s approach seems to propound a similar reflection than Badiou’s by suggesting that poetic language opens a neuter space that does not refer to signification anymore but instead becomes the idea itself. In that sense, poetic language transgresses the limit of signification and accesses the space of the unnamable.

To start with, I will try to explain what Lacan means by “the Real”. In *Jacques Lacan*, Sean Homer claims that the difficulty of understanding “the Real” is partly due to the fact that it is not a “thing” in the sense that it is not a “material object” posited in the world or the human body or even “reality”. For Lacan, our reality is constructed with the means of symbols and through the process of signification. Therefore, what we call reality is associated with the symbolic order or “social reality”. The Real is the unknown that exists “at the limit of this socio –symbolic universe and is in constant tension with it” (81). As Homer mentions it, the Real is essentially a philosophical concept that designates ‘absolute being’ or ‘being in itself’. As ‘being-in-itself’, The Real is beyond the realm of appearance, of semblance and images. “The Real is the place from which the need originates and is pre-symbolic in the sense that we do not have any way of symbolizing it” (82). At

that point, if we turn back to the space of poetry, Badiou claims that the effect of poetry lies in its capacity to manifest the power of language itself. “Every poem brings a power into language, the power of eternally fastening the disappearance of what presents itself. Or, through the poetic retention of its disappearance, the power of producing presence itself as Idea” (24). Nevertheless, this power of language is precisely what the poem cannot name. It can only actualize it by drawing upon its “infinite resource”, upon “the novelty of its assemblage”. But poetry cannot adhere to this infinite in all respects because “it is to the infinite of language that the poem addresses itself in order to direct the power of language toward the retention of a disappearance” (25). Therefore we can say that language, as an infinite power devoted to presence, is precisely the unnamable of poetry.

In order to better understand the relation between literary language and “The Real” in terms of the transformation of language from signification to “being in itself”- or as Badiou calls it being an “Idea”-, it is crucial to remember how essential language gains its autonomy. As Badiou asserts, poetry has “the power of producing presence itself as Idea” beyond being a signification; at this point, the actual thing changes into a pure presence; “the present thing...changes into pure presence, the presence of the Other in its strangeness, that is to say, also radical non-presence” (219). In the same way, like Giacometti’s sculptures, poetic language creates its own totality, that turns out to be pure presence regardless of the writer’s subjectivity.

Hölderlin’s verses, that Blanchot himself has analysed in *Infinite Conversation*, can help us understand how poetic language can approach the immediate:

But now the day breaks! I waited and saw it come,

And what I saw, the holy be my word.

These two verses reveal the form of relation with the immediate, which takes place through the poets's desire or passion to respond to the impossible. What exactly stands as impossible here? It is the holy itself, the sacred that language cannot grasp or draw into designation. The usage of language as an instrument of power to create meaning come to the light when Hölderlin writes "but now the day breaks!": the meaning that occurs in the instant will soon fall into obscurity. Blanchot stresses that from the time referred to as "now" in which the dawn occurs, Hölderlin moves to the past where the action of waiting and seeing belong to. "I waited and saw it come, and what I saw, the holy be my word". As Blanchot stresses it, everyday speech, in which affirmation and negation take place, creates meaning; it is the realm of the possible, which means that we can name the things which are familiar to us. However, we cannot name the immediate which belongs to the impossible, in other words, which actualizes the unnamable. In a sense, the immediate remains an infinite other. The immediate remains as an absence since it always escapes the potentiality of possibility. At this point, "neuter speech" occurs and there is no more affirmation and negation. The speech can no more refer to a thing. "I waited and saw it come": from this point the meaning seems to become obscure. What does one wait for and what comes? This remains undetermined in the poem. However, as Blanchot explicates, Hölderlin reveals that what comes is the pure desire of responding the immediate. Blanchot names this pure desire "hope", because "hope" refers to that which has not come yet. Hope is actualized by the utterance "the holy be my word". This is the moment when the language of passivity occurs because

what comes is hope itself and hope turns out to be speech. Blanchot names this point as a poetic desire in its highest form. Because speech turns to be “being in itself”, thus an “Idea” itself.

Therefore, poetry or literary language is no longer in the service of speech or idealist thought. However, writing with its self-liberating force seems to dedicate itself to itself as something that remains without identity and therefore it brings slowly the possibilities that are completely other – the unnamable. This may be the reason why Lacan claims that “The Real” is linked to writing.

1.5. Death as a Possibility

*An Impossible necessary death: why do these words
[impossible necessary death, thus] – and the unexperienced
experience to which they refer— escape comprehension?
Why this collision, this refusal? Why erase them by making
them into a fiction specific to an author?⁶*

Maurice Blanchot

In order to be able to actualize “thought”, language re-creates and reflects reality through the act of symbolization. This is what I have tried to elucidate in the preceding pages. However, Blanchot goes one step forward in attempting to get closer to the “beings” that remain outside language and that are transformed into concepts by means of it. But firstly, I intend to inquire “death” as a source of language’s power.

In the chapter “The Great Refusal” of *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot claims that “we have lost death” (34). The loss of death that occurs with naming and in the movement of conceptualization is a loss of “the immediate”, a loss of the presence of “what is”, which is thus present only in its disappearance through death. However, for Blanchot, what is striking is not the disappearance of “beings” by means of naming; it is rather the idea and the meaning that take forms by such disappearance. This changes the very concept of death which, instead of being an immediate dissolution into which everything disappears, becomes “the beginning of the life of the mind” (34). So what is lost in terms of death itself is the opacity of its conception. By means of language, death is no longer a singular act. For Blanchot, the fact that death is being comprehended, and is deprived of its common meaning,

⁶ Maurice Blanchot- *The Writing Of The Disaster*, transl. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986)- p.67

first forms a power of negation within language and then affirms itself as a power of being through language in which everything is determined, everything unfolds as possibility. The death that is being interiorized becomes a power, a movement “through which meaning comes toward us and we toward it” (35). From this perspective, our relation to the world through language becomes a relation of power too and this implies that language uses violence. Through power, speech exerts violence upon the objects that are named by the word and withdrawn from presence at the same time: “—a sign as we have seen, that death speaks when I speak” (42).

In “Literature and the Right to Death” Blanchot discloses language’s intimate relation with death as “the impossibility of dying”. In this text, Blanchot calls language the “Reign of Terror” (321) because its ideal moment in history is the moment when “life endures death and maintains itself in it” (322). Blanchot sees language as a system that affirms and negates simultaneously. When we speak, we gain control over things, and this enables us to reach at things and order our world. To illustrate this point, Blanchot focuses on the specific utterance “this woman”. He stresses that with this utterance the object of speech “this woman” becomes available to the speaker: he could bring her closer or push her away, she becomes everything he wants her to be. In that perspective, speech is “life’s ease and security” (322). The act of naming is “disquieting and marvelous” (322) since, in order to provide meaning, first, it must suppress what it represents. To be able to say “this woman”: “I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her” (322). Words enable the emergence of the being within language but does so by taking away its concrete existence. Therefore, the word is the absence of that being, it is nothingness, what remains -when it has

lost being – is the very fact that it does not exist anymore. In this approach to language, Blanchot resorts to Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in which comprehension is equivalent to murder, in order to explain the process that lies in the “act of naming”: “Adam’s first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)[Hegel]” (323). According to Blanchot’s emphasis, Hegel means that from that moment on, in the act of naming, the cat has ceased to be a uniquely real cat and has become an idea. And when one says “a woman”, death is being actualized and is already present in language; language expresses that the one who is here right now, can be separated from herself, removed from her actual existence as such, language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction and becomes as Blanchot stresses “a deferred assassination”: “Of course my language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is” (323). Therefore it seems accurate to say that when a person speaks, death is speaking in him/her. At the time speech occurs, it is the moment death manifests in between the person who speaks and the thing he addresses. Speech establishes distance between the speaker and the thing he refers to: it separates them and yet, at the same time, this distance prevents them from separation as it is the very condition of all understanding. Death alone allows to seize what one could access through language. Hence, death is the source of meaning and without it everything would be meaningless⁷. In the chapter “Death

⁷ In *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, Rodophe Gasché stresses that in Blanchot’s

as Possibility” of *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot affirms that no one knows what death is. In this way, trying to conceive it becomes pointless and vain. Analogously, in *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida deals with the issue of apprehensibility of “death” and stresses the fact that one can not apprehend or appropriate it from within life itself;

The approach or apprehension of death signifies the experience of anticipation while dissociably referring to the meaning of death that is suggested in this apprehensive approach. It is always seeing coming what one can’t see coming, of giving oneself that which one can probably never give oneself in a pure and simple way. Each time the self anticipates death by giving to it or conferring upon it a different value, giving itself or reappropriating what in fact it cannot simply appropriate. (40)

In that way, whoever lives with negation cannot use actual death as an action but rather, comprehend it as a power of negation that render the occurrence of meaning possible.

reflection, death is not the utmost negation but rather an opening for the emergence of an other possibility, which remains ambiguous; “within the meaning that it renders possible, death remains as the affirmation of its negation, and as the possibility of an always other possibility. Death is the power of an always other or alternate and hence the cause of ambiguity” (64).

II LITERATURE AND THE REALM OF THE NEUTER

In “Literature and the Right to Death”, Maurice Blanchot stresses that language is formed in a way that “its meaning derives not from what exists but from its own retreat before existence and it is tempted to proceed no further than this retreat, to try to attain negation in itself and make everything of nothing” (324). Blanchot thinks that language can start only with void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in each person who is expressing him/herself. According to him, language derives its value from the fact that it is the achievement of this negation. However, unlike common language, literary language’s ideal is to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing. Blanchot considers this stage as the first slope of literary language. For him, literary language refuses to name; when it renders the word an obscure, insignificant thing, the meaning of the word has indeed been destroyed, but has been replaced by signification in general, so that although the precise meaning of the terms has faded away, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, “the empty power of bestowing meaning a strange impersonal light” (329). However, Blanchot sees this stage as the tragic endeavor of literature since, here, literature attempts to discover what has vanished within the act of naming. In “Orpheus’s Gaze”, Blanchot illustrates the poet’s frustrated attempt to discover what lies behind the word with the gaze of Orpheus. In Blanchot’s account, Orpheus is actually not concerned with taking Eurydice back to daylight and life. He has the capacity to do everything except looking into the face of Eurydice, he could descend into the place, into the night as the poet goes into the realm of writing, yet, to approach her

and to be close to her, he must turn away from her. But Orpheus forgets the work he must achieve, instead he wants to see what is invisible and has disappeared before his eyes. Blanchot explains the situation of Orpheus as such:

Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her day time truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face—wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of familiar life but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her plentitude of her death. (171)

In his essay “Il y a – holding Levinas’s hand to Blanchot’s fire”, Simon Critchley uses the term “prosopopeia” to illustrate the myth of Orpheus and the Sirens in the light of Blanchot’s approach. Prosopopeia “etymologically means to make a face” (108). When death is considered as the impossibility of dying, it could be considered as a death mask “a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which represents it” (109). Critchley claims that the mythic figures such as Eurydice and the Sirens have a prosopoetic function: their death face is not a face because these figures indicate “the necessary inadequacy of our relation to death” (109). They lack the fact of actualization of death in a way that they lack being. The sirens’ song attracts sailors with its mysterious, remove not-here, not-yet but near sounds; however it stops while being approached to its source. The desire to hear the not-here song of the Sirens and to behold the invisibility of Eurydice can be said to be the literary language’s incessant

and interminable attempt to discover what is murdered by the act of negation of language.

Blanchot states that if language stopped at this point, its attempts would be all in vain. However, what it achieves in the second slope lies in the actualization of language's materiality. Blanchot affirms that literature's effort to refuse to say is not in fact tragically undermined. The metamorphosis in itself has not failed. It is quite true that by means of metamorphosis that words go through, material weight of words could come into light. By abandoning meaning, every physical thing like paper, ink and shape gain importance. In literature, words at this point represent nothing, since there is nothing behind or beyond them. In his short essay "Traces"⁸ Blanchot acclaims Italian sculptor Giacometti's sculptures due to their unique identity and mentions the interpretation of Jacques Dupins:

The gesture of Giacometti: its repetition, its renewal, refutes the disfiguring brutality of every particular invention. Doing and undoing incessantly amounts to diminishing, deadening each gesture . . . Thus the figurine that I see being sculpted first seems indifferent to the cruel attentions that Sculptor inflicts on it...The destructive assaults it endures only bring imperceptible modifications to its graceful being. Their multiplication immunizes and protects it. . . . It lends itself to it and becomes accustomed to it Its autonomy and its identity proceed, in fact, from such torture, on condition that it be without limit. (218)

In these sculptures, presence occurs as presence at a distance and this distance is incessant. At this point, the thing that is present is transformed into a pure

⁸ Maurice Blanchot- "Traces", *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. (California: Stanford University Press, 1997)- p. 218

presence. "The presence of the Other in its strangeness, that is to say, also radical non- presence" (219). In the same way, for Blanchot, literature creates its own totality, becomes pure presence regardless of the author's subjectivity. Literature is not beyond the world but as it does not have any reflection in the world, it is not in it. Literature cannot be death either, as it lacks existence of being, it has no beginning no end, it turns out to be "death as the impossibility of dying". Christopher Fynsk, in his essay "Crossing the threshold: On Literature and the right to death", illuminates this excessive aspect of literature with the image of the "cadaver". This image is in all respects analogous to that of the "corpse" that Blanchot refers to. Like the corpse, the cadaver no longer attracts our interest or the world of names and identifications. It is present within absence. The cadaver is self-reflexive and self-representative in a way that it only resembles itself: "the cadaver is its own image. It no longer has any relation with this world, in which it still appears, except those of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow present at all times behind the living form and that now, far from separating itself from this form, transform it entirely into shadow" (81).

For Blanchot, the "essential word" imposes nothing; it no longer refers to the world. It is literature's space therefore it does not have the power to tell. It is never the language one speaks, there is no possibility to express yourself and it does not address you. All these features are negative in form. And yet, it is the essential fact of literary language, even though it no longer refers to the world, at this point it is not possible to escape from the affirmation of what it denies. For this reason, language speaks as absence. What it utters turns out to be opaque because it destroys and abandons the well-known meaning of the words. For Blanchot, being

wordless, it speaks already since it murmurs. It is not silent because silence speaks in it. In ordinary language, listening lets the occurrence of understanding. However in the context of literary language's space, the act of speaking cannot be heard. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot calls this language "neutral speech" considering that it speaks without having any origin, any beginning;

It states, but does not refer back to something which is to be stated, something silent, like the meaning behind an expression, which would guarantee it. When neutrality speaks, only he who silences it prepares the conditions for hearing; and yet what is to be heard is this neutral word, which has always been said already, cannot stop its saying, and to which no hearing is given. (50)

In this sense, literature or writing for Blanchot is no longer in the service of speech or thought. However, thanks to its self-emancipating force, writing seems to dedicate itself to itself as something that remains without identity. In the "Note" of *Infinite Conversation* Blanchot mentions that (modern) literature abandons all the preconceived principles and, in this way, "writing supposes a radical change of epoch: interruption, death itself – or, to speak hyperbolically, 'the end history'" (xii).

1.1. The Denial of Negation in *Awaiting Oblivion*

In the light of this theoretical background, I will focus on Blanchot's fragmentary narration *Awaiting Oblivion* (*L'Attente l'Oubli*) in order to examine and indicate how language as an instrument of power turns into a language of passivity when it denies its sheer power; negativity. In this sense, death that takes place in everyday speech turns into an "impossibility of dying" in the realm of writing. What has begun with Mallarmé's attempt to indicate the distinct separation between poetic and everyday/ordinary language culminates in acknowledgment for Blanchot as making such sharp separation is impossible. Poetic language is conceivable only in terms of a "logic of oscillation" that deprives the act of writing of any foundation and brings forward the ruin of the book. Although poetic language destroys the foundation of the book that we are well-acquainted with, it renders the occurrence of a book such as *Awaiting Oblivion* possible.

Awaiting Oblivion was published in 1962 and bears special place in Maurice Blanchot's writings since it presents a fragmented narrative form. The book displays a setting, characters and a plot but all elements are reduced to minimum. The setting of *Awaiting Oblivion* is a hotel room where the entire plot takes place. The room is described as simply furnished with a bed, an armchair and a table. The plot is reduced to the relationship between the two interlocutors/characters—a man and a woman— who spend countless time together talking, making an effort to remember what might have happened to them and waiting for something to happen in their lives. On a formal level, the novel consists of three basic categories. The one consists in direct discourse; this is where the interlocutors' speech takes place.

The second category consists both in the direct discourse of interlocutors and the indirect discourse of the narrator that are combined together; the last and main category consists in the indirect discourse of the narrator.

The story begins with this sentence: “Here and on this sentence which was perhaps intended for him he was obliged to stop” (1). The outset of the story announces from its very beginning the end of something unknown. Something which is already over when the story begins. For a reason that is unknown to us, the protagonist/writer is obliged to stop writing. However we do not know when he stops writing or if he even does. From the following sentence, “It was practically while listening to her speak that he had written these notes” (2), we understand that he continues writing. Blanchot’s theoretical approach to writing as an incessant activity becomes clear from the very beginning of the story. However, before examining this question, I will first concentrate on the transformation of language from an active toward a passive state to understand how writing becomes “the space of an impossible dying”.

The opening pages of the book unfold the anonymous encounter of a man with a woman in a hotel room. The man’s purpose is to write their first encounter and their relationship. However, when he shows the woman his notes about the circumstances of their first encounter, she cannot figure out who says what and asks “who is speaking? (Qui parle)” (1). While the woman reads the notes, “the first paragraph seemed to her to be the most faithful and so did the seconds somewhat, especially at the end” (1). Taking her advice, the man starts his story from the point where she finds him the most faithful, “he could see her when she reclined on the spacious balcony, and he had made signs to her shortly” (2). If we refer to these

notes, we understand that the man beckons the woman and they meet in his room where they spend measureless time talking.

Sometimes, the writer's companion instructs him about what he should do, "Act in such a way that I can speak to you" (1) as if the language he uses is an instrument of power. A description of the hotel room and of the setting in which their conversations take place is what she demands from him and what enables them to start a conversation. "It was as if she had waited for him to give her a detailed description of this room which however, she was occupying with him" (6). In another occasion we are informed that "she did not stop asking him, with a silent persistence to describe it to her again, as if for the first time" (3). The task of the writer seems to all appearances simple and straightforward: he has to write what he sees, what surrounds him. He starts writing with a certain self-confidence: "with his youthful vigor he had not hesitated then to respond, it was a brilliant period when everything still seemed possible and when he threw caution to the wind, randomly taking note, always with sovereign rectitude of essential detail and entrusting the rest to his flawless memory" (6). In this part the character is depicted as someone who has complete mastery over his task and who holds power of language: the object of writing depends on what the eyes see.

Although the man's description of the room serves as the point of departure for the relationship between the two protagonists, what the woman really expects of the man is to write their story: "that she would make it his obligation to carry through to the end and that must have as its outcome its progressive movement toward a goal" (8). The characters assume that the story will lead somewhere, that they will gain a new awareness about what happened between them before, after the time of

discussion. However, they are never successful in reaching such “destination”. The real “action” takes place elsewhere. Their discourse is unable to actualize the object of their waiting, it cannot transform it into something that can be named. On a narrative level, nothing is revealed to the reader about the characters’ identity and life experience; instead the disclosure happens on a meta-narrative level with the occurrence of the language of passivity itself. While, in the absence of temporal marks, the narration and consists in ; what happens as an event, is the recurrent subversion of one form of speech by another, in other words, the emergence of the language of passivity. Everyday speech carries inherently the possibility of its own destruction, a condition that Blanchot calls “secret law” in *Infinite Conversation*. It can be said that *Awaiting Oblivion* is governed by a similar “secret law” which is responsible for transforming one story (the chance encounter of two strangers in a hotel) into another, namely language’s incapacity to content itself with the narration of the first story, and its inability to limit itself to a telling of the facts. In this sense, language is being deprived of its assertive power.

Since the characters’ own “story” is never being told: their narrative is instead replaced by a very different “story” of what happens to language. The protagonist/writer’s author-itative speech, which is at work in his descriptions of the circumstances of their encounter gives way to a language of passivity in the fragments where he reports or rewrites the contents of their conversations. It is apparent to the narrator that the female interlocutor’s unusual way of speaking involves a radical break not only from “conventional linguistic patterns and codes” but also from life itself. Indeed, for the most part, her utterances have little if anything to do with everyday life and with tangible world: “Although she was

apparently not very learned, she always seemed to prefer abstract words, which evoked nothing” (8).

The dialogues of the interlocutors are dominated by abstract words and formulations that do not refer to; in fact, the only section where reference is made to concrete surrounding objects is the writer’s descriptions of the hotel room. On the other hand, their conversations lack of words that would refer to things or situations that can be easily named, conceptualized and deciphered. In this way, the usual and common communicative function of the everyday language has been eliminated since reference to the real is erased. Their exchanges are so abstract that their mutual speech undoes the ties that normally bond words to objects. Things cannot be conveyed into any direct relation with the notion they normally refer to in daily language so they cannot be transmitted into acts through comprehension.

The words of the interlocutors are not uttered in the aim of accomplishing something. In her statement “Well, there in lies the secret, I had already told you everything” (35), the female character sets forth the condition that allows their mutual speech of worklessness to emerge: it can come about only when everything has already been told. The language of negativity of their speech has gone as far as it can go, when all has been told and done. Their fragmentary conversations preserve the shadow or the ghost of a language of authority. It is not completely dead, for it continues to be spoken in spite of the fact that it is rendered inoperative. But it is not completely alive either as its function has been eradicated. This situation corresponds to the position of in-betweenness we have referred to before. Such as in the image of the “cadaver” or that of the “corpse”, language is no longer

efficient in the realm of names and identifications; it is from now on solely self-referential in a way that it is its own object and only resembles itself.

The condition of utterance undoubtedly explains why nothing really happens in the course of the narration. From the perspective of “action”, everything is already over before it even starts; in other words, everything has been given in advance. This has an important effect upon the reader and the reading experience, since we are also suspended to the wait for an event that should happen sooner or later, and yet such a moment never arrives because the event we expect to take place has already occurred at distance of our grasp. “What happens” both at the level of narration and language is disclosed in the following passage: ‘it is not a fiction, although he is incapable of pronouncing the word “truth” in connection with it. Something happened to him; and he can neither say it was true, nor the contrary; Later, he thought that the event consisted in this manner of being neither true nor false’ (4). In this passage, the speech of neutrality, characterized by the fact that is neither true nor entirely false, comes to the surface (of words and writing) from deep within the language of negativity; it is the event accounted in *Awaiting Oblivion*. What the unnamed characters say cannot be reduced to either of these qualifications such as falsity or truth; their conversations express neither undoubtful truth nor complete nonsense; “Through the words a bit daylight still passed” (19). Posited in a situation of in betweenness like their speech is, they never speak just the language of truth and comprehension nor that of passivity. Meaning manages to creep into the language of passivity just as murmur can always be heard at the surface of language of discursive knowledge.

Till now, I have focused on the passages where the narrator comments on the transformation of the language of the interlocutors into language of passivity in which neuter speech occurs. However, the crucial point is where the narrator is deprived of his authority and where he is no longer able to comment on their conversation. At that point, where plural speech occurs, narrator loses control on the language he utilizes and consequently, the writing turns out to be an incessant act that cannot end.

As I have mentioned above, the narrational fragments fall into three main discursive categories; direct discourse, combination of direct and indirect discourse and indirect discourse. In the passages of direct discourse, the male protagonist/writer and his female companion speak respectively for themselves and in some parts they become a single entity by being referred to with the pronoun "we". In these fragments, it is impossible to determine the singular identity of the interlocutor and to distinguish who says what; in other words, the subject of the utterance remains unknown. In the combination of indirect and direct discourses, the narrator intervenes in their conversations and makes comment on them as an external eye. The third category, which rules over most part of the novel is constituted by an indirect discourse that conveys the narrator's speech only. There are small fragments contain the personal pronoun "I" which indicates a sudden authorial intervention of the narrator.

For the most part, both protagonists' speech is uttered from within a standpoint of ignorance. During their ongoing exchange of questions and answers, they nevertheless attempt to arrive at a clear understanding of their experience. On the other hand, the shift from direct discourse to objective narration implies a change of

perspective. The narrative passages that intervene during the abstract and somehow sometimes incomprehensible conversations of the interlocutors hold an authority upon their speech. For the most part of the novel, the narrator clarifies and makes comments on what is intriguing both characters. At first, the female character speaks from a position of superiority to her interlocutor. She seems to know more about their relationship than he does. The economy of their exchange (dialogue) is structured upon the order-execution: She gives him an order, he on the other hand asks her how he can execute what he has been told to do. This situation posits him in a position of inferiority within the frame of their relationship. He is being reduced to the role of asking questions as he tries to understand what happening between them. In this exchange where he wonders why she is so interested in the description of the hotel room, he asks: "In your words there is something that speaks constantly of this place where we are, why? What happens there? You must say" (36). As he can't get from her any direct answer to his questions, she says; "it is up to you to know, since it is already said in my words that you are alone hearing" (36). However, she cannot always occupy the position of superiority over him since her utterances only gain voice through his transcriptions. Hence, the male character also accesses in some parts a position of superiority: "'Who are you really? You cannot be you, but you are someone. Who?'... 'Don't have any doubts', he said softly. 'I choose to be that which befalls me. I am indeed what you have just said' –'who?' she is almost shouting. 'Yes what you just said'" (29). There is a third instance in which the conversations take place in a situation of ignorance and where none of the interlocutors speaks from a position of superiority. This ignorance that is common to both fragilizes/disturbs the hierarchies established

by their respective positions within the economy of speech. Although their respective ignorance has various degrees, it prevents their mutual wish to understand their relationship and dooms their efforts to failure. First, she asks him to act in a way that she can speak to him. Accordingly, he obeys her demand to tell their story or describe the circumstances of their encounter. To do so, the woman character uses language as an instrument of power. However the man's hesitation regarding the nature and the object of the woman's demands drags them both into ignorance: "'You ask it of me because it is impossible.' - 'Impossible but possible, if I was able to ask it of you.' - 'Everything thus depends on that, if you really ask it of me?' - 'Everything depends on that'" (42).

The transition that occurs from direct discourse to impersonal narration brings forward a change of voice and perspective. The interrogative forms of speech that take place in the direct speech fragments are replaced by the more authoritative and self-confident voice of the narrator. The narrator has an omniscient position which gives him direct connection to the (protagonist) writer's mind and allows him to see and convey how it functions; "He realizes that...", "He perceives that...", "He has always known that...", "He wonders if...", "He often had the impression that..." At that point, position and the "voice" of the narrator him\herself within narration is as the participant of the story. The recurrent utterances indicate that the narrator has first hand information regarding what the writer thinks or feels. The narrator's position of omniscience, thus of superiority reaches an utmost point when he predicts what the protagonist/writer will think before he actually does. This is the case in the following indirect fragment which informs us about the writer's initial reaction of fear upon hearing the woman speak and which anticipates the ending of

their story before the writer could be possibly be aware of it: “When he understood that she was not trying to tell him how things had transpired... he felt afraid for the first time. To begin with, he would know nothing (and he saw how much he had wanted to know); moreover, he would never perceive at what moment he would be on the verge of finishing. What a serious, frivolous existence would be the consequence; as for his relationship with her, a perpetual lie” (6).

However, the function of the narrative voice is not restricted to that of providing the reader occasional glimpses into the writer’s subjectivity by reporting or describing his doubts, fears and aspirations. Indeed, the narrator also often engages into the commentary of the conversation that takes place between the interlocutors, by pursuing the topic they have initiated and by explaining the sense of their exchange in a theoretical claim. In some passages, direct and indirect discourses are combined. In the part which depicts the task given to the writer-taking notes of the conversation that occurs in the hotel room between the woman and himself-, a self-confident voice: “And yet, with the patience particular to him, he thinks that if he could respond to her, elicit from her the measureless regularity of the murmur and master it, a kind of measure of regularity would be established between their utterances capable of making more expressive and more silent, to the point of quieting it, the incessant affirmation” (80). Here, the narrative voice seems to stage and state what Blanchot asserts in his theoretical writings about the writer’s relation to the incessant murmur.

In the proceeding pages of the novel, the narrator not only comments the characters’ experience from the outside but also implicates him\herself in their experience by discussing the effect his\her observation has had upon the writer:

“what you have written holds the secret. She doesn’t have it any more; she gave it to you and because it escapes you, you were able to transcribe it” (37). This is the moment when the narrator reaches his utmost degree of superiority upon both characters. From this passage, the writer to whom the narrator addresses by the means of “you” appears as his double and the narrator grasps what the writer himself is unable to figure out. The narrator knows that the secret is harbouring in what the writer writes. And since this secret remains concealed, unrevealed and stays outside the text, it allows him to continue writing. This is the secret that the the book which is being written unconceals to its author.

However, there is a continual process of shifting that is at work in the novel: perspectives are constantly reversed and the situation enables the formation of a plural speech. The narrator’s voice is double or rather split in two since he embodies and conveys the voice, thoughts, acts of both characters of both genders - he and she-, goes back to what is passed and has control over what is being written by the male character. Another splitting, or “doubling” takes place, within narration, from the perspective of the couple who split into another one. The man and the woman start to talk by using the preterite tense to confirm what they have experienced but cannot arrive at a conclusion. At this point, the woman starts asking questions that can no longer refer to herself and seem to designate some other woman: ““She is therefore no longer turned toward you?”... ‘But you, where are you?’... ‘At what moment did you decide to go over there?’... ‘And weren’t you afraid of frightening her’... ‘When you grabbed her by the shoulders, didn’t she stiffen?...‘Weren’t you too sure of yourself?’” (65). While the protagonists experience a self-alienation, the narrator loses his position of superiority. The

narrator turns out to be the one who asks questions: “Why would he have suddenly been surprised to hear her? And why was he certain that she demanded of him a confidence that he succeeded in returning only with difficulty, in spite of his attentiveness?” (66). The direct discourse of the interlocutors turns out to be the speech where it becomes impossible to distinguish who says what: “‘There is still a long road ahead’- ‘But not one that will take us far away.’- ‘One that will take us to what is nearest.’- ‘when that which is near is farther away than the farthest place’”(60). The identity and the singularity of each speaker cannot be determined anymore, and the question “who says what” is no longer relevant. Their exchanges are completely indifferent. Their speech no longer refers to something; instead, it drags the reader toward the “language of fascination”; according to Blanchot, this happens when the language of passivity takes place. The opening words of the following fragment on forgetting seems to be uttered by the same self-confident, assertive voice; but it quickly becomes clear that this assertive speech has been infected by the very phenomenon it describes: passivity: “The event that they forget: the event of forgetting. And thus all the more present insofar as it is forgotten. Giving the forgetting and giving itself forgotten, but not being forgotten. Presence of forgetting and in the forgetting. The power to forget without end in the event which is forgotten. Forgetting without the possibility to forget. Forgetting-forgotten without forgetting” (40). In this passage, the authoritative narrative voice has been transformed into the passive entity of transgressive writing.

Blanchot’s interpretation of the myth of Orpheus in *The Space of Literature* might help us understand the title of his book *Awaiting Oblivion*. Blanchot stresses that Orpheus undertakes a mission with the status of a self-assured poet and savior

who is supposed to walk patiently while Eurydice follows his foot steps from underground to the earth to exit the kingdom of Hades. However, Orpheus forgets about his task and falls into the fascination of his own music, which is actually supposed to protect him from any dangerous distraction. He feels the desire to look back at Eurydice who follows him: “to see her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance. . . and wants not to make her live, but to have living in her plenitude of her death” (171). His desperate attempt to possess Eurydice in her nocturnal reality is very similar to the despaired attitude of the writer who wants to grasp “the immediate”. Whenever a writer forgets what his task consists in like the writer/protagonist of *Awaiting Oblivion*, s/he is bound to fall into the realm of passivity where speech no longer refers to something and has no longer any object. Whereas Orpheus is mesmerized by his own music, the writer falls into the fascination of his own act of writing. Therefore, the writer cannot face his own death since, during the act of writing he loses his control over what he wants to assert and this situation leads to the incessant split of the self. Thus, as Blanchot says, it is possible to make a double speech in the sole act of language. This is not the contemplation of the nature of poetry or that of prose; instead, it is the departure of language from itself. Therefore, in Blanchot’s view, Mallarmé’s poetic gesture no longer enlightens the nature of literary language but witnesses its limitless duplicity.

1.3. Phantasy: The Search for The Real

In my previous chapter, I have argued that the desire of the poet or the author is to reach “the immediate or the Real”. In Lacanian theory, “the mediation of an intermediary” is part of the Real (or the immediate) that is articulated in the Symbolic order- the space of language. The Real can not be symbolized or translated into the Symbolic order as Lacan distinguishes “Lack”, “Desire” and “Need”. According to him, while lack is excluded from any access, it exists in the space of the Real; desire remains in the Symbolic because it has an inextricable connection to language and need abides within the realm of imagination. The relationship between lack, need and desire leads to “phantasy”, which is theorized by Lacan in his seminar on *The Logic of Phantasy* (1966) and in this subchapter, I will focus on the concept of “phantasy” whose importance is undeniable to the search for the immediate or for the Real in Blanchot’s *Awaiting Oblivion* and whose importance is proportional to value assigned to the “object petit a” (a partial object that appears at the point of the loss of the signified) in *Thomas the Obscure*.

Before analysing in detail *Awaiting Oblivion*, we can already place the novel in the category of phantastic writing since phantasy constitutes a central concept in the double estrangement of language that comes back with a “surplus cognitive/semantic value”, as Bülent Somay states it in his article upon “The Fantastic and the Mimetic”. In the article it is mentioned that for Lacan, desire is an transposition of a lack through a need into Symbolic order. It is also emphasized that the entire process of this transposition is called “phantasy”; “the self-alienation of an awareness of a lack” into a presentation as a need and through the second

alienation finding a symbolic expression as desire. So phantasy in art follows these two steps as it is explained below;

The phantastic in art follows these two steps (this double self-alienation or negation, so to speak) by way of two estrangements, but it traverses the course backwards: it first estranges what is considered familiar, self evident, well located in the Symbolic order and represent it as something alien, foreign, ancient, totally new, uncanny or supernatural, and then through a second estrangement, brings it back to the symbolic order, but this time with a surplus cognitive/ semantic value, a new and disturbing meaning. (16)

In the previous subchapter “Writing, The Unnamable and The Real”, I have analysed the work of poetry or literary writing from the Blanchotian perspective of the writer’s or poet’s “passion” for the immediate, arguing that a literary work intends to repond to the lack of the immediate. In the light of the explication of the concept of “phantasy” within the triad of lack, need and desire, I will now analyse *Awaiting Oblivion* from the perspective of language and writing, by focusing on how Blanchot estranges everyday language and transforms it into something totally new, present it yet in Symbolic order with surplus value; a new and disruptive meaning. As we have already seen it, Blanchot’s fiction novel presents fundamental narrative elements which seem quite conventional: characters (a man, a woman, a narrator), a story line (the man and the woman meet and experience a relationship) and a setting (a hotel room). The man is a writer and his aim is to write their first meeting in the hotel and their relationship. At the very first page of the book, the man and woman are discussing about the reliability of the male protagonist’s writing. She demands from him to write the truth about their first meeting, as if she believed that language was the means and the vehicle for the depiction of reality.

However language transforms into passivity as each page proceeds and in the end, language remains with its new and disruptive meaning. When the woman character reads their own story, she realises that the story does not tell what has really happened. Even more, her reality is shattering before her eyes, “But everything before her eyes was spinning: she had lost the center form which the events had radiated and that she held onto so firmly until now” (1). She comments on what she reads: “And now you have taken something away from me that no longer have that you do not even have” (1). She knows that what is written is not her reality, moreover, it does not even correspond to the writer’s reality either. The book becomes an autonomous being deprived of a writer. Nevertheless, she finds the courage to continue speaking as she still thinks that speech can save something. For her, “the first paragraph seems the most faithful one and the second paragraph somewhat, especially at the end” (1). For her, the story does not seem faithful to reality; however, she has the constant desire to restore what has vanished before her eyes. Her longing for reviving what is “lacking” is revealed by her utterances: “Act in such a way that I can speak to you” (1). She waits for him to give her the detailed description of the room that she occupies with him. The lack of the immediate engenders the desire to conquer it by the means of language; a desire to which the writer responds “with self confidence”.

However, for Blanchot, writing cannot operate as everyday speech even if it is merely an account or a depiction of some furniture pieces in an ordinary hotel room. A reversal occurs within language. Instead of being subjected to vision and description, language contributes to the creation of a state of fascination in which seeing ceases to be the sheer faculty to see; so, at one point she questions his ability

of seeing her: “But I would not want you to see me for the simple reason that I am visible” (37). The protagonist has difficulty in following her and the commentary of the narrator does not help him in bringing to light what she means. However, the narrator’s intervention enables the reader to understand her to some extent: “if we are visible by means of a power which precedes us, then he saw her outside this power, by a right without light which evoked the idea of a transgression, an extraordinary transgression” (38). The comment of the narrator seems to make a direct reference to Blanchot’s own claim- “speaking is not seeing”- which has a significant role in his theoretical concern regarding writing. In *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot explains that, in the realm of writing when responding to the immediate (“The Real” in Lacanian sense, which because it is beyond any possible relation cannot be seen), the relation of the self with the radical Other is beyond affirmation and negation. This is why the other “comes to me as speech when speak is not to see. The Other speaks to me and is only this exigency of speech. And when the Other speaks to me, speech is the relation of that which remains radically separate” (69). When we turn back to *Awaiting Oblivion*, the language of the protagonist’s description is susceptible to experience the same kind of transformation than the one his companion desires, “because she had the feeling that this description would call forth this same room inhabited by someone else” (6). The descriptive passages accomplish more than setting the scene where their story can take place. These passages also involve the characters in a relationship with alterity, with the unknowable appearance of a “man without horizon”, as Blanchot calls it in *Infinite Conversation*.

The characters are not only “without horizon” but also “without history” since we know that their story is never being told. Instead, it is replaced by the story of what happens to language itself. In that way, language becomes its own object. She employs language in a manner that is far removed from everyday speech: “She gave the impression, when she spoke of not knowing how to reestablish a bond between her words and the richness of a preexisting language. They had no history, no connection with the past of everyone else, not even a relationship to her own life or to anyone else’s” (10), “She always seemed to prefer abstract words, which evoked nothing” (8). Things they attempt to name can no longer have any meaning in the Symbolic Order.

The characters’ ongoing desire to bear witness to their first encounter with the means of language falls into state of fascination. “Well, there in lies the secret, I had already told you everything” (35). The text gains meaning only if we forsake any attempt to situate it in the Symbolic order. The text has already transgressed the realm of meaning, and is posited in the “non-existent spacetime between not anymore and not-yet⁹”. Whenever the writer forgets his task which is well defined by the narrator in *Awaiting Oblivion*, he is bound to fall into the language of passivity where speech no longer refers to any signified. Something totally new emerges from the alienation of language and finds its place in the symbolic order with its “surplus meaning”; its new and disruptive meaning that does not refer to anything outside the space of literature. The opening statement of *Awaiting Oblivion* gains meaning in the light of this alienation: “Here on this sentence that was perhaps also means for him, he was obliged to stop” (1). The character of the

⁹ Bülent Somay- “The Fantastic and the Mimetic”- p.16

writer must stop writing because in the realm of writing, the desire of the writer will always push him to the urgency of responding the immediate (lack). Since he can no longer cling to his initial task, he will fall into the endless repetition of the act of writing in which he creates his own phantastic world through a language that has no reference out of itself.

In *Thomas the Obscure*, the realm of phantasy is revealed when “the incarnation of little o” is realised in connection with the feeling of “horror”. In his Seminar upon *Identification*, Lacan considers Blanchot as; “the poet of our literature, who has certainly gone further than anyone in the present or the past along the path of the realisation of the phantasy” (309). Lacan makes this comment especially in considering *Thomas the Obscure* as he mentions Blanchot’s novel in his analysis regarding the realisation of phantasy. He claims that the narrative achieves the realization of phantasy, since in *Thomas the Obscure*; “Something is encountered there which incarnates the image of this object o, in connection with which I spoke about horror” (309).

However, before examining Blanchot’s novel, it is necessary to focus on Lacan’s conception of *object little o* (*objet petit a*). Lacan identifies *object little o* (*objet petit a*) as an “object of castration”. This means that it is an object that appears “at the point of failure of the Other, at the point of the loss of the signifier” (307). For Lacan, “The Other” is the one or the thing that is beyond all identifications, norms or the self itself. But *object little o* emerges at the point of failure of the Other, at the point of failure of the signifier because it refers to the loss of the object itself, “of the never rediscovered member of the dismembered Horus” (307). Yet, something rises out this loss. During the first stage of ego

construction, the subject essentially splits this object in order to constitute an ideal ego. To exemplify this, we can refer to the initial incarnation of *object little o* which happens when the infant witnesses his/her ideal-ego image for the first time. What Lacan designates as “the mirror stage” takes place when the infant identifies him/herself with his reflection on the mirror or with his/her mother (primary caregiver) and assumes him/herself as a part of her. This alienation from the real self enables the infant to enter into the Symbolic order (language) as this stage gives rise to the infant’s emerging perceptions of selfhood. However, as the image of a unified body does not match up with the underdeveloped infant’s physical weakness, this image is established as an “Ideal-I” or “Ego Ideal” toward which the subject will incessantly strive throughout his or her life. Therefore this stage signifies the first of the sequence of desires felt for the Other or for an “idealized self”. In the most general sense, *object little o* could be seen as a key concept in Lacan’s theory of desire which abides in the realm of the symbolic order but it is also an expression that can be used for “the lack” in human beings. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains the relation between *object little o* and lack as such: “The objet a (object little o) is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as an organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack” (103). In *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans explains that the object little o is the object of desire and it is represented by a “variety of partial objects in different partial drives” (38). He also states that “The *OBJET PETIT A* is not the

object towards which desire tends, but the cause of desire. Desire is not a relation to an object, but a relation to a LACK” (38). This desire first occupies the social realm of the Symbolic, but then becomes a desire for the Other’s desire, which the *object little o* represents as inaccessible and not satisfactory for our own need to know. As Lacan states it in his article “The Mirror Stage As Formative Function of the I”; “it is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through desire of the Other” (5). We can understand from Lacan’s theory that any of our endeavour for knowledge is mediated by our desire to get the desire of the Other. However, our desire to get the desire of the Other remains perpetually unfulfilled, and this failure of desire leads to the occurrence of the impossibilities (the object little o). So the *object little o* is a phantasy that proceeds as the cause of desire.

However, in his *Seminar upon Identification*, Lacan asks “Can we make of this desirer purely and simply the agent of desire?” and continues as;

Let us not forget that at the second stage of the graph d, desire is a ‘who’ who responds to a question, which is not aimed at a ‘who’, but a ‘*Che vuoi?*’ To the question: ‘*Che vuoi?*’ the desirer is the response, the response which is not designated by the who of ‘who wants?’, but the response of the object. What I want in the phantasy determines the object from which the desirer that it contains must avow himself as desirer. (311)

In this way, Lacan’s main issue concerning desire is not about the self’s own object of desire (what I want) which is grounded on lack but rather about that of the Other (what the Other wants from me) The question about what the Other can desire from the subject leads to the occurrence of *object little o*; “It is from the side of the Other that the object little o comes to light, not so much as lack but as to be” (311). As it

is not possible to present what lack is, here, *object little o* manifest itself not as lack but as “variety of partial objects in different partial drives”.

In Lacan’s view, *object little o* always corresponds to that which has no specific form or necessary existence. It can be said that it is symbolised by the subject’s desire to enter in the symbolic realm of language. Desire drives the subject to think that the *object little o* can be expressed or symbolised in language. However, this belief ends up with the frustration of one’s ability to know what the Other wants from him. There is no coincidence in the fact that Lacan sees the realisation of phantasy unveiled in *Thomas the Obscure*, since Thomas tries to respond to The Real by symbolising the void or lack of meaning that occurs while he is reading a book. From within the realm of the symbolic, he faces The Real where signification and meaning disappear; as a consequence, Thomas is rendered incapable of interpreting or ascribing meaning to the essence of the situation he is in. In this way, meaning turns into images, since the chain of signification in the book he is reading is formed by a broken series of signifiers that do not correspond with any signified. Thomas cannot merge with the meaning of the words; at the same time, he cannot understand what he is reading or posit himself in the center of the system where reading takes place. As a consequence, he enters in a strange relationship with the words, as it takes place in the following passage;

Those who came in thought he was pretending to read, seeing that the book was always open to the same page. He was reading...In relation to every symbol, he was in the position of the male praying mantis about to be devoured by the female. They look at each other. The words, coming forth from the book which was taking on the power of life and death, exercised a gentle and peaceful attraction over the glance with played over them...So

Thomas slipped toward these corridors, approaching them defenselessly until the moment he was perceived by the very quick of the word... he perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living being, and not simply by one word, but by all the words that were in that word, but by all those that went with it and in turn contained other words, like a possession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute. (25)

However, Thomas is not satisfied with this relationship, where he can only represent himself as a male prayer mantis in “the eyes of the Other”. He desires to go further to see what he really is for the Other. In *Book IX Identification*, Lacan calls this stage the realisation of desire and explains it with the same image of “male mantis” that Thomas, in Blanchot’s novel, uses for himself. Lacan states that while the Other with big O is involved, the subject cannot be satisfied in the affair with representing his\her image as a male mantis in the “faceted eye of the Other”. He thinks that in the apprehension of the desire of the Other as such, the subjects fails to recognise his\her “insignia”; “namely that I am deckedout in the skin of the male. I do not know what I am as object for the Other” (164). At first, Thomas assumes that he is looking at himself from the eyes of the Other and sees himself “in the form of the text he was reading”;

Rather than withdraw from a text whose defenses were so strong, he pitted all his strength in the will to seize it..He was seized, kneaded by intelligible hands, bitten by a vital tooth; he entered with his substance to them, establishing their relationship, offering his being to the word “be”. For hours he remained motionless, with, from time to time, the word “eyes” in place of his eyes: he was inert, captivated and unveiled and even later when, having abandoned himself and reading his book he recognised himself with disgust in the form of the text he was reading. (26)

The following extract inquires the confrontation between I and the Other and the incarnation of *object little o*. Here, *object little o* cannot be restored in the Symbolic realm of language, therefore it presents itself as an ideal image of the Other which Thomas is tempted to know more about; ultimately, it becomes the point where each symbol of the Other's desire meets with obscurity or vanishes. Thomas experiences anxiety while he meets with an unknown figure that remains entirely mysterious to him because it cannot be constituted as an object that can be defined in the common words of the symbolic order; however, as Lacan stresses, it is "where all the same I can sense sensations of a type which make up the whole substance of what is called anxiety, of this unspeakable oppression through which we arrive at the very dimension of the locus of the Other in so far as desire can appear there (164)". In the following passage, Thomas experiences the same kind of anxiety that separates him from himself. However, on the other hand, this feeling of anxiety still preserves its "luring" threat that forces him to follow it;

The first time he perceived this presence, it was night... The book was rotten on the table. There was no one walking in the room. His solitude was complete. And yet, sure as he was that there no one in the room and even in the world, he was just as sure that someone was there, occupying his slumber, approaching him intimately all around him and within him... He wanted to flee. He threw himself into the corridor. Gasping and almost beside himself, he had taken only a few steps when he recognized the inevitable progress of the being coming toward him... He saw it, a horrifying being which was already pressing against him in space and, existing outside time, remained infinitely distant. Such unbearable waiting and anxiety that they seperated him from himself. A sort of Thomas left his Body and went before the luring threat. (27)

When the subject confronts with the unknown figure, the feeling of anxiety appears as the mysterious figure s/he meets cannot be explained with the common words of our language. Therefore, the reason why Thomas identifies what he sees as a “horrifying being” and a “horrible beast” is due, in Lacan’s terms, to “the distance between this object and the signifier”. Lacan claims that “hysterics” are those who see this distance and try to get closer to the signifier; “this distance which I defined by the lack of the signifier but implying its relation to the signifier. In effect, it is to this that the hysteric identifies herself when, Freud tells us, it is the desire of the Other with regard to which she orientates herself and which started her hunting” (312). In the following extract, like the “hysteric” hunting the signifier, Thomas struggles with the horrible beast for an “immeasurable time”;

The end of the night came. The light which shone through the shutters went out but the struggle with the horrible beast, which had ultimately shown itself possessed of incomparable dignity and splendor, continued for an immeasurable time. ..The moment, the one thought he had triumphed and, with uncontainable nausea, saw the word “innocence”, which soiled, slipping down inside him. The next moment, the other was devouring him in turn, dragging him out of the hole he had come from, then tossing him back, a hard, emptied body. Each time, Thomas was thrust back into the depths of his being by the very words which had haunted him and which he was pursuing as his nightmare and the explanation of his nightmare. (29)

According to Lacan, there is no way to reach the Other, except through something that makes allusion to it; the Other takes place in order to give it a meaning. In that way, each metaphor we use to make it emerge in signification

leads to the proliferation of meanings that never manage to seize the loss that is at core. This can be what regulates the relationship between the subject and the Other, and it regulates it in a way that it is as effective as the relationship between *object little o* and the imaginary reflection that overcomes it. What we can conclude from Lacan's thoughts is that the feeling of alienation disturbs the subject in the system of comprehension; however, that feeling of disturbance leads to the conception of *object little o* to occur. Although the alienation (that occurs with the recognition of one's own image) is being reproduced, this may not lead the subject to disengage himself from the situation or remove the *object little o* from its place or from his attempts of identification. Accordingly, despite his feeling of alienation, Thomas identifies himself with the assumed desire of the Other and does not deny what he has become;

Horror alone penetrates me. I turn round and round crying the cry of the terrible beast. I have a hideous affliction: my face feels large as a spirit's face, wit a smooth, insipid tongue, a blind man's tongue, a deformed nose incapable of prophecy, enormous eyes without that straight fame which permits us to see things in ourseves. My coat is splitting. That is doubtless the final operation... I am already darker than the shadows. I am the night of the night. Through the shadows from which I am distinguished because I am their shadow, I go to meet the overcat. My body, which is just like the body of a man, the body of the blessed, has kept its dimensions, but my head is enormous... I am manifestly no longer myself. (34)

We can argue that in *Thomas the Obscure*, Thomas estranges what is considered familiar in the Symbolic order and represents it as something unfamiliar. However, during the second alienation that occurs within the course of narration what has been estranged turns back to the symbolic order, "but this time with a surplus

cognitive\ semantic value, a new and disturbing meaning” (16) as Bülent Somay mentions in his article “Phantastic and Mimetic”. So, it can be claimed that Thomas, who is in contact with the *object little o*, is himself the image of what appears beyond the limits of the Symbolic order. Thomas is, or rather becomes, the “Obscure” because although he is still the same Thomas, he has now a surplus semantic value.

1.4. Relinquishing The Power To Say “I”

In the subchapter “Language: An Instrument of Intersubjective Communication”, I have tried to explain how language establishes the “subject” through “ego” or how one is being author-ized as “subject” according to Structuralists’ point of view. The “subjectivity” which is discussed here is basically one’s potentiality to posit him/herself as “subject” with the means of language and discourse. However, the issue of “subject” extends far back to Descartes’s “cogito”¹⁰ where Descartes’s subject demonstrates and asserts the certainty of its own existence from his/her ability to think and doubt (“I think, therefore I am). Descartes’ and Structuralists’ point of view have a crucial place in Blanchot’s understanding of “subject” since Blanchot mentions or explains their approaches in his theoretical writings to clarify his understanding of “subject” and to show in which way he has profoundly departed from their established system. In this chapter, in emphasizing the construction of “subjectivity” within the realm of language, I aim to inquire the reason why Blanchot de-subjectifies the main

¹⁰ Known briefly as “the cogito” ; *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am or I am thinking, therefore I exist) in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) originally appeared in French as *je pense, donc je suis* in Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* (1632). The simple meaning of his phrase is that thinking about one’s own existence confirms that “I” exists to actualise the thinking or as Descartes explains “[W]e cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt, and that this is the first knowledge we acquire when we philosophize in order”. This phrase became a principal element of Western philosophy, as it was considered to constitute a foundation for all knowledge. In Meditation II, he continues as such “But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I, too, do not exist? No. If I convinced myself of something [or thought anything at all], then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who deliberately and constantly deceives me. In that case, I, too, undoubtedly exist, if he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I think that I am something. So, after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that the proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (16–17). In his belief in his own existence, he reasons that it is out of question to doubt that he exists. Even if there were a deceiving god, one’s belief in their own existence would be safe, since it could not be possible for one to be deceived unless one existed in order to be deceived.

characters of *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure* by operating a shift from “I” to “He”, that is from direct to indirect discourse.

In the first pages of *Thomas the Obscure*, the transformation or rather the alteration of Thomas’ subjectivity *takes* place when he happens to read a book in his hotel room. The words he comes across within the book start to take hold of him and Thomas finds himself in a situation where he is being rather “read” by the words instead of reading them; thus, the subject changes places with its object. It is not a coincidence that the first transformation occurs when Thomas is reading a book at night. Indeed, concepts of “work”, “writing” and “obscurity” bear special place in Blanchot’s literary theory and are tightly connected to each other. Because it is intransitive, the literary work can only give birth to its own worklessness, in other words, a work ends up in becoming an absence of work since it cannot refer to anything that daily language designates. Therefore, it employs a “foreign” language that comes from within the familiar one, and, in that way, it creates its own realm. Since the words Thomas is reading do not signify the things he has known before, he enters into the space of the book and experiences the dissolution of his own subjectivity. As a consequence, “I” is being emptied out of meaning and certainty and loses significance. “Night” is another key notion, since it introduces a realm that precedes all starting points but from which nothing ever begins. Night forms the region in the work that is concerned by the search of its origin faces the dissolution of given foundations. In “Igitur’s Experience” Blanchot expresses the relationship between the work (the book as a literary work) and the night in terms of coincidence and sameness as such; Night is the book: the silence and inaction of a book when, after everything has been proffered, everything returns into the silence

that alone speaks -- that speaks from the depth of the past and is at the same time the whole future of the word" (113). In that perspective, Thomas's experience seems to "exemplify" the intimate relationship that Blanchot sees and builds between "work" and "action", language and death, the book and silence. It is as if words were emancipating from their given meaning at night when "silence alone speaks"; when night carries the voice of the past/ and celebrates the "absolute future", that is death itself speaks from the depth of the past and runs toward future, Thomas becomes a stranger even for himself and comes across with the inevitable "foreign being" that he has never seen before,

For hours he remained motionless, with from time to time, the word "eyes" in place of his eyes: he was inert, captivated and unveiled. And even later when, having abandoned himself and, contemplating his book, here recognized himself with disgust in the forms of the text he was reading, he retained the thought that (while, perched upon his shoulders, the word He and I were beginning their carnage) there remained within his person which was already deprived of its senses obscure words, disembodied souls and angel of words, which were exploring him deeply. The first time he perceived this presence it was night... he saw it, a horrifying being which was already pressing against him in space and existing outside time, remained infinitely distant. Such unbearable waiting and anguish that they separated him from himself. (26)

Thomas experiences his own desubjectivation several times towards the end of the book, and he gradually realises that he is not in the field of "possibility"¹¹ anymore. Therefore, he enters progressively into obscurity in order to discover who he really is and there, he discovers the strange face of "him". He does not say "my" (face) but

¹¹ Here, "the field of possibility" refers to daily language where the idea and the meaning take forms by means of the disappearance of the signified.

instead “the strange face of him”, because “he had nothing in common with an already dead man or with a man yet to be born”; daily language does not define his “self” anymore, however he knows that in this state, he will be born not destroyed. So, he expresses his further transformation as such:

Now, far from achieving as a complete man, as an adolescent, as protoplasm, the state of the possible, I made my way toward something complete, and I caught a glimpse in these depths of the strange face of him who I really was and who had nothing in common with an already dead man or with a man yet to be born: a marvelous companion with whom I wished with all my might to blend myself yet separate from me, with no path that might lead me to him. How could I reach him? (97)

In his writings, Blanchot distinguishes “thinking” from “speaking” and refers to the possibility of a subject who remains outside of daily language. In that way, Blanchot’s subject contradicts Descartes’s “cogito” since Blanchot’s subject exists only to the condition of dissolving and fading away while Descartes’s subject ensures his/her own existence from his/her ability to think and doubt (“I think, therefore I am). Blanchot tries to find any other possibility for subjectivity as he sees that the existence of the subject is conditioned by the language which prioritises thinking. In *The Writing of Disaster*, Blanchot explains that the Cartesian ontological certitude which is expressed in *Discourse on Method* by the formula “I think therefore I am” is peculiar since it is only presented itself by speaking” (54). In the chapter “Death as a Possibility”, I have tried to indicate how language actually operates by means of destroying the “immediate”. Hence, from the moment a word is being articulated, it alters its very own object; the “thing” language refers

to and murders at the same time. Considered that language and speaking go hand to hand with thinking and conceptualizing how can we assert the existence of the subject provided that language assassinates its very possibility at the same time? Blanchot is well aware of this fundamental cleavage that binds language and self within possibility and loss, rise and fall at once and elaborates the situation out of the problematic legacy of the Cartesian "Ego" as such:

What is strange in the Cartesian certitude "I think therefore I am", is that it is only presented itself by speaking, and that speech precisely, caused it to disappear, suspending the ego of the cogito consigning thought to anonymity without any subject - to the intimacy of exteriority - and substituting for living presence (for the existence of the I am) the intense absence of an undesirable and attractive dying. Thus it would suffice that the ego cogito be pronounced in order that it ceased to be announced and that indubitable, without falling into doubt, and remaining free of doubtfulness, be, while intact, ruined invisibly by the silence that cleaves language into its loss. That is why one can say that Descartes never knew he was speaking, any more than that he was keeping still. It is on this condition that the lovely truth is preserved. (54)

While in Cartesian certitude, we cannot doubt of our existence even while we doubt, Thomas becomes well aware of the fact that there is a constant gap between the language he is given as means and he uses and his own being. Conscious that at the moment he thinks, he abstracts himself from being, he nevertheless carries the illusion that no changes happen to him. Within the realm of language and reason, Thomas expresses himself and grounds his presence as if he was obeying to what language demands from him. However, what he says about his own presence with the means of language and from within the realm of language and reason does not coincide with his own "being". While in Descartes' cogito (I think therefore I am) subjectivity is undoubtedly constructed by means of thought and doubt, in Thomas'

formula, language and thereby thought witness and render the disappearance of the “subject”. Thomas puts forward the instance of the “flaming lens” to explain this cleavage of subjectivity where it becomes clearer to see how language creates the illusion of “being”;

I think therefore I am not. These words brought me a delicious vision. In the mids of an immense courtyardside, a flaming lens received the dispersed rays of the sun and, by those fires, became conscious of itself as a monstrous I, not at the points of at which it receives them, but at the point at which it projected and united them in a single beam... I think it said, I am the subject and object of an all- powerful radiation... I think: there at the point where thought joins with me I am able to substract myself from being without diminishing, without changing, by means of a metamorphosis which saves me myself, beyond any point of reference from which I might be seized. It is the property of my thought not to assure as a tragic certainty, at the center of the living Thomas, the inaccessible proximity of that Thomas which was nothingness, and the more the shadow of my thought shrunk, the more I conceived of myself in this faultless clarity as the possible, the willing host of this obscure Thomas. (99)

In Blanchot’s understanding, the “subject” places him/herself in the void that opens between the signifier and the signified. The subject is carried away along with all origins and beginnings that have already begun before the grounding of his supposedly self. Language unfolds and brings about the subject who, therefore, can not be its own creator of it but only the one who is “at the mercy of its chance unfolding” as Foucault explicates in *The Order of Discourse*;

I wish I could have slipped surreptitiously into this discourse which I must present today, and into the ones I shall have to give here, perhaps for many years to come, I should have preferred to be enveloped by speech, and carried away well beyond all possible beginning, rather than have to begin

myself. I should have preferred to become aware that a nameless voice was already speaking long before me, so that I should only have needed to join in, to continue the sentence it had started and lodge myself, without really being noticed, in its interstices, as if it had signalled to me by pausing, for an instant, in suspense. Thus, there would be no beginning and instead of being the one from whom discourse proceeded, I should be at the mercy of its chance unfolding, a slender gap, the point of its possible disappearance.
(50)

Thomas's achievement towards the end of the novel is to access "a consciousness without being"; he achieves this by refusing to say "I", thus by departing from the self-grounding power of everyday language; rather than using and articulating it, he uses the literary language that instead of extending the mastery of the subject upon its objects, actualizes loss and destruction. What is lost or destroyed is the insight of being, and the literary language becomes an experience of this fundamental loss of being- that is, an experience which is eventually without essence or subjective truth. As Blanchot describes it in *The Space of Literature*, this form of consciousness is a withdrawal and a challenge, an endless power to create the void, as long as it is separated from being, and to take position within lack itself. Thomas declines all origins and images, including his own; in that way, he does not "create" himself but gets closer to himself because he shatters the very illusion of self. Thomas belongs to the night; he is obscure and this obscurity forms his space of existence;

O night, I make you taste your ecstasy. I perceive in myself the second night which brings you the consciousness of your barrenness... Could the effort to expel myself from every created thing have made of me the supreme creator? Having stretched all my strength against being, I find myself again at the heart of creation. Myself, working against the act of creating I have

made myself the creator. Here I am, conscious of the absolute as of an object I am creating at the same time I am struggling not to create myself. That which has never had any principle admits me at its eternal beginning, I who am the stubborn refusal of my own beginning. It is I, the origin of that which has no origin. (108)

In Maurice Blanchot's fragmented narration, *Awaiting Oblivion*, the writer falls into a state in which "With what melancholy and yet what calm certainty he felt that he would never again be able to say 'I'". Thus, the protagonist is unable to assume and embody the "I" that results from the writing gesture. Speech no longer serves as an instrument of author-ity that compensates for the loss of presence or of "the immediate" as Blanchot calls it. However, what is the relationship between melancholy and the embodiment of the "I"? The issue is explicated by Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun*, her essay upon melancholy, where she stresses that melancholia ends up in "asymbolia, in loss of meaning; if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die" (42).

Kristeva also stresses that discourse is being acknowledged in all branches of linguistics a dialogue; it requires the presence and the respective utterances of two persons in order to be actualized. For her, this precondition explicates that substitution of transposition for the "primary object" which is the only way for the occurrence of verbal sequences. This transposition is the reconstitution that gives form to the "primal Thing". In account of saying, from the start, language is a translation as Kristeva calls it, as long as it is the space where renunciation, loss and break take place: "If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her" (41). The negation of the loss opens up the realm of signs. Kristeva goes further and asserts that the mourning process is often incomplete since the mourning

“drives out negation and revives the memory of signs by drawing them out of their signifying neutrality and it loads them affects, and makes them ambiguous, repetitive or simply alliterative, musical or sometimes nonsensical” (42). At that point, translation terminates, it faces with a speech that is foreign to itself, a “total word, new, foreign to the language’ (Mallarmé)” (42). Here, the purpose is to seize that which stands as the unnamable. She suggests that this is the realm of poetry with its rhythm, sonorous and melodic qualifications where translation and translatability face the threat of becoming impossible: “Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die (42). In that sense, we can stress that melancholia occurs where mourning remains incomplete and translatability becomes impossible.

Kristeva’s quotation of Mallarmé’s is no less important related to language. In my previous pages, when I have dealt with *The Space of Literature*, I have mentioned Mallarmé’s acknowledgement of a “double condition of the word, crude or immediate on the one hand, essential on the other”. (38-39). In characterizing each, he uses the term “silence”. Kristeva stresses that Mallarmé’s claim related to language occurs when negativity takes place. However, where negation of everyday speech is denied (I mention Kristeva’s theory above), the essential word which can also be considered as poet’s word emerges in opposition to the crude word in respect that, while the latter, though coming from the absence, imposes the presence of the object and constructs the immediate relation with the world, the essential word imposes nothing. It is never the language one speaks, there is no possibility to express yourself and it does not address you. All these features are negative in form.

And yet, it is the essential fact of literary language, even though it no longer refers back to the world, at this point it cannot escape from affirmation of what it denies. For this reason, language speaks as absence. What it utters turns out to be opaque because it transforms meaning. It murmurs. Being wordless it speaks already. It is not silent because silence speaks in it. In ordinary language, listening is its very nature that lets the occurrence of understanding. As Kristeva stresses, it depends on a dialogue between the interlocutors. However at the point of literary language's space, it cannot be heard. Blanchot calls language as "neutral speech" considering that it speaks without any beginning; neutral because it refers back to nothing and it has no immediate relation to the world.

Kristeva explicates that signs are arbitrary because language starts with the negation of loss. She exemplifies this process as such "I have lost an essential object that happens to me, in the final analysis, my mother," is what the speaking being seems to be saying; "But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language"(43). This is actually what happens in daily language. However, Kristeva underlines that melancholic individuals, on the contrary, disavow the negation that takes place: "they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically falls back on the real object(the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted" (41). The denial of negation would thus be the exercise of an impossible mourning because semiotic foundations that underlie linguistic signs are being denied, and the semantic value of the signs is consequently annihilated. In Kristeva's claim, the consequence is that traumatic memories (such as the loss of the primal/originary object) are not repressed by the

means of language; instead, they are constantly evoked since the *denial of negation* precludes the work of repression. As a result, the representation of the repressed does not bring the symbolic equivalent of loss, because signs are unable to bear/carry the primary inscriptions of the loss that is caused by the negation. On the contrary, they helplessly keep repeating it turning it over in an endless act. This is a crucial moment to understand why the narration of *Awaiting Oblivion* cannot find an ending either.

Everyday speech carries within itself the possibility of its own destruction, a condition I have referred to before as a “secret law” by quoting Blanchot. *Awaiting Oblivion* is governed by the same sort of secret law which can be compared to what Kristeva calls the “secret” and unnamed characteristic of the melancholic. The only traces of the object constancy that melancholics maintain are in “affect” that denial of negativity makes on subjective identity itself. Kristeva asserts that denial causes melancholic people to feel worthless and empty.

In *Awaiting Oblivion*, meaning falls into obscurity; the new realm of language becomes the realm of poetry, as Kristeva stresses in relationship to melancholy: “With what melancholy and yet with what calm certainty he felt that he would never again be able to say ‘I’” (16). Therefore, the direct relationship of the writer to himself is lost when “the plurality of speech” takes place. This is well expressed in the opening statement of *Awaiting Oblivion*: “Here on this sentence that was perhaps also means for him, he was obliged to stop” (1). S/he must stop because in the realm of writing, the desire of the writer will always urge him/her responding to the immediate where s/he can no longer hold on to his initial task; consequently, this desire to fill the lack will drag the writer into the endless repetition of a writing

that knows no end. The desire of the writer to continue writing and ward off the ending takes us to Kristeva's claim that, in the work of art, the appearance of the "depressive affect": and its verbalization brings about an "ambiguous source of pleasure" that "fills a void and evicts death". This can be viewed as the melancholic writer's Orphic attempt.

Conclusion

The main aim of this current thesis is to enter into the literary world of the French philosopher, Maurice Blanchot by concentrating on his two narratives, *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure*. The reason to focus on these narratives is to indicate how Blanchot's literary theories and his understanding of literature are embodied by his own fictional literary texts and thus can be analysed through the scope of his own writing "gesture". In his early theoretical writings, Blanchot dealt with the two separate modes of language- daily language on the one hand and poetic language on the other hand- as they were coined by Stéphane Mallarmé. While the daily language assassinates "the beings" which stay outside of language in order to create meaning, poetic language posits language as its own object and seeks to find out what lies beyond its power. Although very much influenced by Mallarmé's revolutionary approach to language, literature and poetry, however; Blanchot has gone beyond it and developed his own subversive theoretical approach. In his later writings, such as *Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot goes beyond this binary understanding of language and departs from Mallarmé's conception of poetic language, by conceiving literature as a space where language never overcomes its double character and remains even unfamiliar to its own words.

"The neutral" is the central concept in Maurice Blanchot's understanding of literary language. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes also uses the term "neutral" in reference to writing and literature, and identifies the neuter with the zero degree that he also calls "blank writing". In Barthes' view, the terms "neuter" and "neutral" refer to a language that stands beyond the opposition of daily and literary language. However, Barthes does not think that this term "neutral" or "zero

element” is the utmost point of language that sets itself free of all its habits. He has come to the conclusion that “neutral writing” represents in the end an “impasse”; “The writer, taking his place as a “classic”, becomes the slavish imitator of his original creation society demotes his writing to a mere manner, and returns him a prisoner to his own formal myths” (78). However, in *The Neutral* where the courses he gave in respect to the nature of “the neutral” at the Collège de France between 1977-1980 has been collected, he states that “the neutral” manifests itself “not in language but in discourse” (211), this is why his interest consists in finding out “who” speaks the neutral and “how” the neutral speaks. Although Barthes’s perspective is distinguished from, if not in opposition to Blanchot’s, Michel Foucault unveils in his essay “Michel Foucault- Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside”, the point where Blanchot and Barthes’ respective approaches meet, stressing that Blanchot’s language does not use negation dialectically but rather uses negation on discourse: “To negate one’s own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak” (22).

In *Foucault-Blanchot*, Michel Foucault quotes Blanchot in order to dig in his understanding of literary language. For him, literary language develops from itself and escapes the modes of being of discourse- in other words the world of representation. He believes that the literary speech builds its own world where the well-known meaning of the words withdraw, and becomes;

Not speech, barely a murmur, barely a tremor, less than silence, less than the abyss of the void; the fullness of the void, something one cannot silence,

occupying all of space, the uninterrupted, the incessant, a tremor and already a murmur, not a murmur but speech, and not just any speech, distinct speech, precise speech, within my reach [Blanchot] (23)

According to Blanchot, who follows in that the path opened by Mallarmé, poetry becomes akin to the exploration of this empty, vacant space. In that sense, the dialectical approach fails in the face of the work of art's worklessness, the power of the negative cannot be revived as a presence and there is therefore no foundation to the work's own movement or no essence to be brought into light at its center. However, Blanchot realises that poetic language too deceives, yet in a different way, when it gives way to the possibility of the work of art. The idea of "phantasy" becomes crucial at that stage to clarify how language achieves the state of being an "imposture". Lacan explains phantasy as a realm where language could go under the double estrangement and come out with a "surplus value"; a new and subversive meaning. The surplus value of language is what separates it from daily language. It achieves this double estrangement by following two steps; it first estranges what is considered familiar and present it as something unfamiliar but later through the second estrangement brings it to symbolic order with "surplus value". For Blanchot, this trickery may lie at the center of modern literature since, in his perspective, modern literature creates its own meaning that does not refer to anything outside of itself. The particular work of art simulates being but its rule is not in its affinity of poetic language with origin of the being but the absence of being that gives the work of art its paradoxical possibility. In other words, the work creates its own meaning; an immanent meaning that that does not refer to anything outside itself anymore. In this way, Blanchot's own literary works are undergoing a

radical transformation, marked by the presence of *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Thomas the Obscure* where we could witness the perverse play of literature on language.

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