

Aesthetic of Estrangement. The Epochal Significance of Friedrich Hölderlin in the Critical Work of Maurice Blanchot

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ABSTRACT

Hölderlin is an important (not to say decisive) and recurrent reference in the critical work of Maurice Blanchot from his early literary article on Hölderlin in 1946 up to his later fragmentary writing in *The Writing of the Disaster* (*L'Écriture du désastre*, 1980). Hölderlin's name is mentioned especially in connection with the epochal transformation of the sacred and the effects of this transformation on the poetic task, the literary work and the experience of writing. According to Blanchot, Hölderlin's famous expression "*Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*" summarizes what is at stake in the epochal transformation of the sacred and expands the horizon of the experience of writing in modern times. The presence of Hölderlin in Blanchot's work has been examined in relation to Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin by Leslie Hill (1997) and in relation to the refiguration of the sacred in France in the 20th century by Kevin Hart (2004). In this contribution, we intend to examine how and to what extent Blanchot re-inscribes Hölderlin in an aesthetic of estrangement. Estrangement is to be understood in a strong sense here: not only as an experience of being separated or disconnected (from a home, oneself, the other, the stranger, the gods) but also as an experience of being upset by something that divides, remains inaccessible, does not speak. We argue that in this perspective a line of thought can be retraced from the epochal transformation of the sacred (that Blanchot describes as a process of interiorization) to the discovery of what Blanchot calls "the outside" and to the exigency of fragmentary writing. By articulating this line of thought, we expect to gain better insight into the historical conditions and the formal features of an aesthetic of estrangement that follows from it.

KEYWORDS

Modernity, the categorical reversal, absence of the gods, separation, strangeness, interiorization, the neuter

1. Introduction

The name of Hölderlin is an important reference in the critical work of Maurice Blanchot from his early literary article on Hölderlin in 1946 up to his later fragmentary writing in *The Writing of the Disaster* (*L'Écriture du désastre*, 1980). Blanchot has dedicated

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four main articles to Hölderlin. The first one, “La parole ‘sacrée’ de Hölderlin”, published in 1946 and reprinted in *The Work of Fire (La Part du Feu, 1948)*, was clearly written under influence of Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (1996 [1944]). This article introduces the notion of the sacred as one of the central themes in Hölderlin’s poetry (“*das Heilige sei mein Wort*”), of which Heidegger has given an original, ontological interpretation in terms of un-concealment. The notion of the sacred, as we will show, is important in Blanchot’s own reflections on the modern condition of literature, but that does not imply that Blanchot just follows Heidegger’s interpretation. On the contrary, even in his first article on Hölderlin, by putting brackets around the word “sacred”, Blanchot is engaged in a discussion with the primacy of the ontological equation of being, nature, un-concealment and the sacred in Heidegger’s approach to Hölderlin, as has been shown by Leslie Hill in his work *Blanchot. Extreme Contemporary* (1997). Blanchot’s second article, “Madness *par excellence*” was first published in *Critique* in 1951 and reprinted as the preface to the French translation of Karl Jaspers’ *Strindberg et Van Gogh, Swedenborg, Hölderlin* (1953). Along with Jaspers’ psychiatric perspective on Hölderlin, it presents a long examination of the appearance of his “madness” in relation to his poetic development around 1800. The third article, “L’itinéraire de Hölderlin”, first published as the article “Le tournant” in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* (1955) and reprinted in *The Space of Literature (L’Espace littéraire, 1955)*, is in a certain way a further development of the previous two. Based upon Beda Allemann’s publication *Hölderlin und Heidegger* (1954), this article also discusses Hölderlin’s poetic development, focusing on his return from the south of France when the first signs of a mental crisis were reported. The central theme is one that Heidegger neglected, namely “the categorical reversal” (*die kategorische Umkehr*). Here, Blanchot focuses on the moment Hölderlin starts to thematize a change in the relation between the poet and the gods because of the withdrawal of the latter. And he is particularly interested in the new interpretation of the poet’s task that follows from this change.

Next to these three lengthy studies, Blanchot published the one-page article “Hölderlin” in *L’Observateur* in 1950. This means that Blanchot’s interpretation of Hölderlin was mostly formulated between 1946 and 1955. Moreover, Hölderlin’s name recurs in many of Blanchot’s other critical works. Blanchot mentions him in line with authors that figure throughout his entire oeuvre, such as Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Char, Bataille and Bonne-

foy, and explicitly in relation to Celan in the essay “Le dernier à parler” in *A Voice from Elsewhere* (*Une Voix venue d'ailleurs*, 2002 [1992]). Furthermore, Hölderlin appears in his more general reflections on art, poetry and literature, such as in “Littérature et le droit à la mort” in *The Work of Fire*, “Littérature et l’expérience originelle” in *The Space of Literature*, in “Le livre à venir” in *The Book to Come* (*Le Livre à venir*, 1958), in “Le grand refus” and “L’absence du livre” in *The Infinite Conversation* (*L’Entretien infini*, 1969), and in the fragmentary writings of *The Writing of the Disaster*. These references show that Hölderlin has continuing relevance in Blanchot’s own development of thoughts on literature, literary experience, literary work, the imaginary, the neuter, the demand of writing, and the absence of the book. Kevin Hart has related this relevance to the notion of the sacred and its “refiguration” in his book *The Dark Gaze. Blanchot and the sacred* (2005): “By way of what he [Blanchot] calls the Outside, or the Impossible, or the Imaginary, he will try to refigure the sacred, to separate it from the God of the positive religions and their theologians.”¹

Hölderlin is indeed the name closely related to the notion of the sacred in Blanchot’s critical works. The sacred reappears in Blanchot’s broader reflections on art and literature. Therefore, it is necessary to mention the connection between the notion of the sacred and Hölderlin, but we do not think that it sufficiently clarifies the specific relevance of Hölderlin in Blanchot’s critical works.

In this article we will show why Hölderlin was of epochal significance for Blanchot. Moreover, we will argue that this epochal significance is at the origin of the aesthetic of estrangement that Blanchot develops in his own writings. Hölderlin is the poet who, in the name of a “categorical reversal”, makes manifest an epochal turn which opens a new era in the relation between humans and gods and in the relation between poetry and society. We develop our argumentation in three steps. In a first part, we relate the epochal turn to the theme of the disappearance of the gods – the time of distress (*dürftiger Zeit*) – that Hölderlin was the first to address in his poetry and that Blanchot describes as the appearance of the absence of the gods. In a second part, we show how a new understanding of the poetic task follows from the transformation of the experience of the sacred in modern times that Hölderlin was the first to express in his poetry and that Blanchot describes as a process of interiorization and subjectivation. In a third and final part, we demonstrate how this new understanding of the poetic

¹ Hart (2004), p. 5.

task leads to an aesthetic of estrangement in Blanchot's own writings. Here, estrangement is to be understood in a strong sense: not only as an experience of being separated or disconnected (from the home, the other, society, the stranger, the gods, or even from oneself) but also as an experience of being incessantly upset by something that divides, remains inaccessible, does not speak. This kind of estrangement receives its radicality precisely because it remains ungraspable, neutral, undetermined. And Blanchot's reading of Hölderlin as a growing awareness of an absence precisely contributed to the opening towards this impersonal rupture that divides, an estrangement that does not allow an interiority, a "complete whole" or any kind of fusing.

2. *The Absence of the Gods*

In Blanchot's writings, "absence" is one of the notions that has received a recurrent, troubling, and insistent presence, emptying or withdrawing the evident meaning of that what is said to be absent: absence of speech, absence of mind, absence of death, absence of world, absence of human being, absence of time, absence of work, absence of book, infinite absence, etc. As such, the notion is related to – and, even more, is the condition for the appearance of – these other notions that Blanchot has become well-known for, such as the outside (*le dehors*), the neuter (*le neuter*), the disaster, the fragmentary: "[t]hese names, in a devastated field, ravaged by the absence which has preceded them [...] seem remainders, each one, of another language, both disappeared and never yet pronounced".²

The notion of absence is endowed with a thick, dynamic and phenomenological meaning in Blanchot's works. It is not just the registration of something that is not there; a lack, an emptiness, a failure that Blanchot has in mind when he draws attention upon the experience of an absence. This experience is itself a manifestation, namely the appearance of the event of a disappearance. Absence indicates the event in which the awareness of a disappearance, which comes to pass, emerges. This means that, for Blanchot, the emptiness to which this event leads is not nothing and is not just the same: it relates each time again to the singular meaning of what is disappearing and what is said to be absent (time, book, work, etc.) and it opens a space in which the evanescence of this meaning and what remains of it can be scrutinized and expressed.

² Blanchot (1995³), p. 58.

In this regard Hölderlin's work holds paradigmatic significance for Blanchot. Hölderlin is the poet who at a certain moment in his poetic development thematizes the experience of a radical withdrawal. Hölderlin called it "the categorical reversal", on which Blanchot comments in his third text on Hölderlin, "Hölderlin's Itinerary"³. According to Blanchot, with the notion of the categorical reversal Hölderlin does not just pretend to say that God is death, as he would neither be the first nor the last to state this, but gives expression to the experience of the disappearance of the gods. This experience concerns the awareness that what is called the death of God is not coming to an end. For that reason, Blanchot adds that Hölderlin has "a broader understanding" regarding the theme of the death of God, which is "more foreign to the simplifications which even Nietzsche seems to authorize"⁴. Indeed, it is not exactly the death of God that Hölderlin confirms but rather something else: the withdrawal of the gods. The gods have turned away, they have become unfaithful and no longer address the humans. Therefore, the task of the poet has radically changed. He is no longer the mediator between the humans and the gods, the one who creates the space of their relation and seeks to stand before the gods, receiving the divine rays and transmitting them to the mortals in the language they can understand. The gods have turned away. Now, the poet's task is to bear witness of their withdrawal, to resign the search for a unification with the gods, to respond to the withdrawal of the gods by being unfaithful in his turn, and to reveal the absence that results from this double infidelity. As Blanchot describes, "[i]t is before the absence of God that [the poet] must stand. He must become the guardian of this absence, losing neither it nor himself in it"⁵.

In Blanchot's view, Hölderlin is the first to be confronted with the experience of the absence and to be aware of the challenges, indeterminacies, and ordeals that this experience entails. While this experience concerns the withdrawal of the gods, the reversal that he expresses in his poetry has a strong epochal significance – in the sense of being both a historical turning point and a transformation of time. Hölderlin's poetry opens the time of distress (*dürftige Zeit*), which is the time of the absence of the gods. The expression of this reversal is contemporary with the emergence of modern times and captures one of the main features of the historical transformation of a pre-modern, religious age into a modern, secular age, namely the

³ Blanchot (1982), p. 269.

⁴ Blanchot (1982), p. 273.

⁵ *Ibid.*

ongoing disappearance of the reference to God's presence as the sacred core in which life and death, mortals and immortals, heaven and earth, societal and individual experience are bound together. Yet, the time of distress is also the time which is distress, time in need or time as crisis (*dürftig*), in which the experience of time is changing: the gods are no longer guaranteeing the meaning of time, the eschatological understanding of time is disappearing, time is no longer experienced in relation to its achievement, fulfilment or a given destiny. What remains in this disappearance is the experience itself, the experience of the categorical reversal, or the experience as a crisis which endures without being able to delineate or to guarantee its meaning. In this sense, the time of distress disconnects not only the poet's destiny but also the idea of "work" or the idea of "book" from the orientation and/or expectation of an achievement or a wholeness, allowing for the possibility of fragmentary writing. When considering this, it is telling that Hölderlin leaves different versions of the *Death of Empedocles* unfinished, as well as many other fragments of poetry.

For that reason, it is not difficult to understand why Blanchot does not hesitate to mention Hölderlin in line with writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Franz Kafka, who both have a primary reference in his critical works and especially in his reflections on fragmentary writing, however different the meanings related to each of them may be. Hölderlin is mentioned at the beginning of Blanchot's approach to Mallarmé's *Igitur*, this other unfinished *récit* of a crisis in which he seeks to explore the absence of death. The reason for this connection is given with the heading under which this approach to *Igitur* is started: "The Exploration and Purification of Absence"⁶. And again, in his "Kafka and the Work's Demand" – Kafka, of whom Blanchot wrote that his "main stories are fragments, and the totality of [Kafka's] work is a fragment"⁷ – Blanchot mentions Hölderlin three times in order to establish a direct connection with the poetic task in times of distress: the indefinite experience of writing and despair in Kafka's diaries as an expression of Hölderlin's "pure poetic passion"⁸, the conflict of life's duties in relation to the demand of writing⁹, and the experience of exile as an expression of the time of distress. As he states: the writer Kafka finds himself in "the situation of someone who has lost himself, who can no longer say 'me', who in the same

⁶ Blanchot (1982), p. 108.

⁷ Blanchot (1995²), p. 6.

⁸ Blanchot (1982), p. 56.

⁹ Blanchot (1982), p. 81.

movement has lost the world, the truth of the world, and belongs to exile, to the *time of distress* when, as Hölderlin says, the gods are no longer and are not yet”¹⁰.

3. *The Poet's Task in the Time of Distress*

As these literary references suggest, Hölderlin's significance in Blanchot's critical work is not limited to the epochal opening of the time of distress. In thematizing the experience of the absence of the gods, Hölderlin has already started to explore and express the poet's new condition that results from this experience. For Blanchot, Hölderlin is also one of the first to reveal some essential features of literature in modern times. In his interpretation of Hölderlin, Blanchot gives particular attention to the connection between the poet's new condition and the sacred that Hölderlin explicitly establishes when he writes “*das Heilige sei mein Wort*”: the poet's task is to address the sacred. This connection is specific for Hölderlin. Blanchot mentions the notion of the sacred in his critical work almost exclusively in relation to Hölderlin. Yet, the meanings related to the sacred – or what remains of it after the categorical reversal – describe the new condition of literature in modern times and recur in Blanchot's own writings as well as in his approach to other writers. Addressing “the sacred” after the categorical reversal means redefining the poetic task in relation to what manifests itself as withdrawing and what remains inaccessible in this withdrawal. In the time of distress, the sacred has not just been replaced by the manifestation of the secular age. In the event of its disappearance, the sacred still relates the human to the absence of the gods. Thus, Hölderlin introduces a new understanding of the sacred, disconnected from its orientation to and protection by the divine presence, and he announces the way the sacred survives in modern times.

In his interpretation of Hölderlin, Blanchot retains three main features to describe the displacement of the sacred that will also be distinctive for his own understanding of literature in modern times. First, the sacred is expressed in terms of a separation. The sacred is what is “separated” (*le séparé*): it is no longer the space which ties the humans to the gods and in which the presence of the gods can be experienced. On the contrary, it is the space that separates the humans from the gods and in which this separation – the absence of their relation, the withdrawal of the gods – is experienced. When

¹⁰ Blanchot (1982), p. 74.

Hölderlin redefines the task of the poet as a response to this withdrawal by reversing the movement towards the gods into a turning away from the gods and becoming unfaithful towards the gods, this means that the poet “has to” endure the separation and “has to” keep distance. He “has to” keep the separation between gods and human beings empty. He “has to” accept that he cannot join the event of the withdrawal, that this event itself remains inaccessible, incommunicable and impossible to accomplish, and he “has to” express this impossibility.

The second feature is the subjectivation, or, in stronger terms, the interiorization of the sacred in modern times. The sacred becomes the individual poet’s “affaire”. It takes place in “the interiority of the poet, in his heart”¹¹, as Blanchot formulates it in his first article on Hölderlin in clear opposition to Heidegger’s ontological recuperation of the sacred. In his second text on Hölderlin, Blanchot repeats this in a more decisive way regarding the “literature to come” in modern times: “[t]he poet is the intimacy of distress; he lives the empty time of absence profoundly, and in him error becomes the deep of derangement”¹². And in his third article, the intimacy of the sacred is even more generalized: “it is rather in the heart of man, symbol of crystalline purity, that the truth of the reversal can be fulfilled. It is man’s heart that must become [...] the intimacy where the echo of the empty deep becomes speech”¹³.

However, what is situated here in the heart of man, is not a common ground that may have the power to provoke a social enthusiasm as it has been postulated so many times in modernity. On the contrary: it is the separation, the inaccessible, the absence without even the promise of a unification that becomes the personal “affaire” of the individual. The interiorization of the sacred thus gives rise to the experience of a split – a heartbreak (*déchirement*) – impossible to overcome and impossible to have access to: “the intimacy of the breach which is the sacred”¹⁴, “ruin, dispute, pure division [...] because [the poet] is now no more than absence and destruction”¹⁵.

Finally, the sacred as the insisting experience of a radical separation in the interiority of the individual leads to a third feature: a terrible ordeal, that Blanchot describes as an ordeal of the terrible. Within himself, the poet is confronted with the appearance of the impossible, the inaccessible, the inexpressible that he cannot escape. Meanwhile, he is no longer protected by the gods and he can no

¹¹ Blanchot (1995²), p. 122.

¹² Blanchot (1995¹), p. 122.

¹³ Blanchot (1982), pp. 274-5.

¹⁴ Blanchot (1982), p. 273.

¹⁵ Blanchot (1995²), p. 129.

longer invoke his relation to the gods. Deprived of the means and the support to create a mediation with the impossible, he is exposed to “the savage deep”¹⁶ (*profondeur sauvage*) or “the threat of nocturnal savagery”¹⁷, which he cannot clarify and from which he cannot liberate himself. This savage deep is the experience of the split within himself “that escapes, without there being any means of escaping it”¹⁸.

In other words, with the interiority of the sacred, the poet enters the time of distress which transforms his experience into an ordeal of the abyss and the indeterminate from which arise no forms, no orientations, no meanings, no limits, no bridges, no worlds but in which the absence, the gap, the divide, the multitude, the elemental, the underworld keep on persisting. This ordeal imposes different contradicting tasks upon him: he not only “has to” endure the separation, but also live in the world; he not only “has to” keep the separation pure and empty, but also keep himself safe from it; he not only “has to” express it, but also give it the highest form, etc. These are contradicting tasks which Blanchot describes in his second article on Hölderlin “as the destiny of the poet, who becomes the mediator of the sacred, who is in immediate relation with the sacred and envelops it in the silence of the poem in order to calm it and communicate it to men, a communication requiring that the poet remain upright yet be stricken nonetheless, a mediation which does not merely result in a torn existence, but is this very division of the poet, the effacement at the heart of the word which, existence having disappeared, continues, affirming itself all alone”¹⁹.

4. *The Aesthetic of Estrangement*

For Blanchot, the later poems of Hölderlin, especially the verses and the changes in formulation related to the absence of the gods that becomes manifest in the categorical reversal, are the expression of literature to come. The generalizations already mentioned in the previous descriptions of the poetic task are thus not accidental: they arise from Hölderlin’s own relationship to poetry: “he himself belongs to what he expressed and discovered, not as his, but as the truth and the affirmation of the poetic essence”²⁰. Therefore, it would be wrong to underestimate the significance of Hölderlin in

¹⁶ Blanchot (1982), p. 274 (translation modified).

¹⁷ Blanchot (1982), p. 275.

¹⁸ Blanchot (1993), p. 45.

¹⁹ Blanchot (1995¹), pp. 119-20

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Blanchot's own understanding of literature: Hölderlin is the poet who opens the time of distress, who redefines the relation to poetry and the poetic word within this horizon, and who describes the essential features of this new condition of literature.

Hölderlin is the poet who enables Blanchot to develop what we have called an "aesthetic of estrangement". We use the notion of estrangement to highlight the difference with a mere logic of alienation. In a logic of alienation, the experience of being alienated is considered in negative relation to an authentic origin which is lost and/or to the promise of a reconciliation which is out of reach. Negativity is the concept that distinguishes a logic of alienation: an aesthetic perceived from the perspective of a logic of alienation is dependent on the power of resistance with which the poet or artist opposes or with which the work of art negates the actual state of the world and society. The logic of alienation presupposes the idea that all alienation is made by man and that man can overcome alienation by acting. In this logic, the representation of a lost origin or the promise of a reconciliation qualifies as the legitimation for acting. As is well-known, the logic of alienation is a core element of the Hegelian and Marxist traditions of philosophy and has given rise to a variety of aesthetic theories in the continental tradition of philosophy, including the post-Auschwitz aesthetic theory of Adorno and the contemporary postcolonial approaches to aesthetics. Blanchot's attempts to draw towards a different kind of strangeness than this logic of alienation, can be understood as an overarching endeavour of his thought and can be traced back to his early reflections on art and society in his journalistic publications of the thirties and his first collection of reviews in *Faux Pas* (1943).

With the notion of estrangement, we want to draw attention to a strangeness that is more fundamental and undermines any dialectic recuperation. The strangeness that an aesthetic of estrangement reveals is not made by man and is not a consequence of man's actions. It upsets man. It is the insistent pressure of an unsoundable deep within the human condition. Man has no access to it, yet man cannot escape it. It does not solicit a fusion with an origin, because it withdraws from the origin. While it endures as an incessant murmur, it does not make any promise of conciliation audible. It cannot be reworked by the logic of alienation and put at work in the dynamics of negativity and revolution. No sense can be related to it, no synthesis can be construed with it, and no possibility is given to overcome it. Yet it is part of the world as the other of any world – an underworld, a disappearance of the world that breaks open the familiarity of the world. Such a strangeness cannot be ap-

propriated and cannot be located in the world and cannot be made operational as a starting point of any kind of project. It reveals a radical displacement making us strangers to the world, to the other and to oneself, before and beyond any identity claim, without an 'us' or a 'me' that seeks to control it or to catch it in distinctions based on gender, sexual orientation, skin colour or nationality – however subtle they may become.

Blanchot's aesthetic is concerned with this strangeness and Hölderlin is the poet who, in Blanchot's eyes, has expressed it. The withdrawal of the gods leaves an empty space open that man cannot traverse and cannot colonize. In thematizing this withdrawal and in his growing awareness of the absence of the gods that follows from it, Hölderlin pointed at a radical separation that man cannot escape and cannot overcome. At the core of the human condition, in the intimacy of the heart of man, he discovered the sacred not as what binds man to the divine presence, but what separates man from an unfathomable absence, which even death cannot solve, eradicate, or do away with. And he has related the appearance of this separation to the task of the poet in that he has to express it ("*das Heilige sei mein Wort*"): "[f]or the sacred is this very void, the sheer void of the interval [by the double infidelity of men and gods] which must be kept pure and empty"²¹. In *The Book to Come*, Blanchot calls the space of literature, entirely in line with this view, "separate, and sacred"²², and in *The Infinite Conversation*, with regard to Kafka's unfinished story *Das Schloß*, he calls "the space of the Book [...]" a space that is sacred, dubious, forgotten, and at the same time a space of unlimited questioning"²³.

Yet, in being exposed to this radical separation, Hölderlin expresses the sacred as "the immediate"²⁴, as an "'immediate' presence"²⁵, and the contact with the immediate, which is incommunicable, unsayable, as an experience of impossibility: impossibility of addressing it without a mediation (a turning away), impossibility of expressing it without being unfaithful, impossibility of receiving it in the intimacy of the poet without being destroyed by it, impossibility of having access to it without oneself disappearing, such as in the moment of dying. In fact, Blanchot mentions it each time when he refers to Hölderlin. In his first article on Hölderlin, he writes:

Das Heilige sei mein Wort, it makes it so that the Sacred is speech and speech

²¹ Blanchot (1982), p. 244.

²² Blanchot (2003), p. 206.

²³ Blanchot (1993), p. 392.

²⁴ Blanchot (1995²), p. 123.

²⁵ Blanchot (1993), p. 37.

is sacred. But how can that be? How can the Sacred, which is “unexpressed”, “unknown”, which is what opens provided only that it is not discovered, which reveals because unrevealed – how can it fall into speech, let itself be alienated into becoming, itself pure interiority, the exteriority of song? In truth, that cannot really be, that is the impossible. And the poet is nothing but the existence of this impossibility [...].²⁶

And in his second article, he writes that “[t]he poet is now the relation with the immediate, [...] which is the impossible and the forbidden, to men and to gods: the Sacred.”²⁷ He recalls this notion in his third article: “[t]he immediate is impossible”²⁸ and in “The Great Refusal”, which was reprinted in *The Infinite Conversation*:

There cannot be an immediate grasp of the immediate (Hölderlin says this with the dreadful force that is his in the fragment entitled “The Most High”). 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 access²⁹.

In line with this view, Blanchot approaches the space of literature in terms of an experience of the impossible and, in particular, he describes the experience of the writer, as in the case of Mallarmé, Kafka, Rilke, Char, as an experience of and in relation to the impossible.

In Blanchot’s view, literature thus arises from an experience of impossibility and is itself the expression of an impossibility: it translates the indeterminate and the unsayable into the determination of some words, the excessive and measureless into the measures and the rules of a syntax. How this translation is possible remains “obscure”, “enigmatic”, “a mystery” – not only with regard to Hölderlin, Blanchot explicitly and at different occasions relates the possibility of literature to a mystery. Yet, in his commentaries on Hölderlin, he is particularly attentive to the verses where the poet thematizes the moment “between day and night”³⁰, when “day breaks”³¹, and the poet witnesses the arrival of poetic speech: “and suddenly, she comes, she swoops upon us, / the Stranger, / the Awakener / the voice that forms men”³². Referring to *Empedocles*, he seems to retain from Jasper’s examination of Hölderlin’s “madness” the following observation: “That which is without language,

²⁶ Blanchot (1995²), p. 126.

²⁷ Blanchot (1995¹), p. 123.

²⁸ Blanchot (1982), p. 272.

²⁹ Blanchot (1993), p. 38.

³⁰ Blanchot (1995²), p. 128.

³¹ Blanchot (1995¹), p. 123; cf. Blanchot (1993), p. 36, p. 39.

³² Blanchot (1995¹), p. 125.

in him becomes language; that which is general and remains in the form of the unconscious, in him takes the form of the conscious and concrete, but that which is translated into words is for him what cannot possibly be said' (*Empedocles*)³³. This goes to the core (which at the same time cannot be a core, because of being completely unstable and ambiguous) of Blanchot's reflections on literature: literature rests upon an intrinsic contradiction. Its possibility, the possibility of writing, the appearance of the poetic expression, depends on an impossibility of language and of expression. The poet and the writer are those who traverse the experience of this contradiction and become aware of an irreducible division within themselves: they cannot just disappear in the deep of the abyss or stay mute being struck by the immediate, yet they cannot avoid being exposed to the immediate and the unsayable. Hölderlin, according to Blanchot's interpretation, refers to this ordeal in his last poetical fragments and letters, before the development of his illness puts an end to his writings, expressing a double awareness: an awareness of the absence and the immediate, to which Blanchot also refers when he writes about "the savage deep", "the savagery of what Hölderlin calls the anorgic"³⁴, and an awareness of the emergence of the poetic word and the appearance of a transcription that mediates the unsayable.

In this way, Hölderlin is the poet who leads Blanchot's own reflections on literature to the formulation of notions such as the outside, the impersonal and the fragmentary. These notions have their origin in "the time of distress" that Hölderlin has addressed. What Blanchot calls the outside concerns the exteriority of the immediate and refers to the experience of the impossible: "[w]e have no access to the outside, but the outside has always already touched us in the head, for it is the precipitous"³⁵. The theme of the impersonal arises from the mediation that is required with regard to the experience of the impossible. Hölderlin expresses this as his own personal affaire ("*das Heilige sei mein Wort*"), but the poetic word that emerges "is not his own"³⁶, is not the expression of an "I" that masters it. It "demands of his personal reason that it becomes pure impersonal transparency whence there is no way back."³⁷ Hölderlin is certainly not the only one to mention here in relation to the appearance of the theme of the fragmentary in Blanchot's writings, yet he might be the poet who reveals the epochal

³³ Blanchot (1995¹), p. 124.

³⁴ Blanchot (1993), p. 431.

³⁵ Blanchot (1995³), p. 6.

³⁶ Blanchot (1995¹), p. 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.* (translation slightly modified)

meaning of fragmentary writing by thematizing the transformation of the sacred and its consequences in modern times, or as Blanchot formulates it: "Hölderlin, also, says the Unique that is the Christian god, and says the sacred that is the shaking [l'ébranlement] that ruins [s'abîme] the Unique."³⁸ After the categorical reversal, Hölderlin turns away from a philosophy that seeks to relate all thought to an original unity and breaks with the idea that desire aspires to a fulfilment in a fusion with a unique presence. In one of the fragments of *The Writing of the Disaster* and in line with this reversal, Blanchot seems to attribute to Hölderlin the following fundamental questioning: "Hölderlin: 'Whence comes, then, among men the sickly desire that there be only the one, and that there be nothing but as part of the one?'"³⁹

In other words and in order to conclude, in Blanchot's critical work, the name of Hölderlin announces a new understanding of literature as a space no longer defined by given forms, but opened by the demand of writing, a space that is at the same time singular (in that it is the unique concatenation of words expressing the most personal and intimate experience of the immediate), impersonal (in that it is not mine and erases my experience) and sacred (in that it is separated and withdraws from the relations to the world). Or, as Blanchot expresses it in "The Disappearance of Literature", in a reflection that seems to depart from the latest itinerary of Hölderlin:

It is a preoccupation [of writing] in which, it is true, what is called into question is perhaps literature, but not as a definite, certain reality, an ensemble of forms, or even a tangible mode of perceptible activity: rather as that which never directly reveals, confirms, or justifies itself, which one only approaches by turning away from it, which one only grasps when one goes beyond it, through a quest that must not be preoccupied with literature, with what it "essentially" is, but which on the contrary is preoccupied with reducing it, neutralizing it, or more precisely, with descending, through a movement that finally escapes it and neglects it, to a point where only impersonal neutrality seems to speak.⁴⁰

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³⁸ Blanchot (1993), p. 296-7 (translation modified).

³⁹ Blanchot (1995³), p. 140.

⁴⁰ Blanchot (2003), p. 141 (translation modified).

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