

Chapter 6

Fascinations

Some Thoughts after “From Perception to Fascination, from Representation to Image”

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In a state of fascination something overwhelms us, touches us at the most intimate proximity and yet remains distant and strange.¹ We may become fascinated – or remain fascinated, spell-bound – even by what is most intimate to us, by that which most properly constitutes our very being. By language, that is, and not only in an aesthetic experience of bemused contemplation of poetry, or by rhetorical devices that may sometimes mislead us from the “proper” realm of reasoning and intuition. Beauty and the sublime are not the only charms of language.

“To write,” writes Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, “is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination

threatens.”² Here the word “fascination” is obviously not the ordinary synonym of delight or sensation of enchantment; the writer will hardly exclaim “how fascinating” it is to enter where not only solitude but also a menacing presence – of absence – reigns, the realm of fascination. An absence of time and an eternal recommencement, always the first and always unique, commencing, recommencing. *Ren-contre*, most verbatim: solitude as a confrontation with that which never leaves alone, an incessant murmur of language. Blanchot had begun an earlier text by pointing out a paradox: the words of solitude never leave us alone. An author who writes “I am alone,” he then observed, cannot avoid a comical appearance. The writer seeks to confirm his solitude by the very means that prevent him from being alone:³ a community of other solitaries may always repeat his lonely lament in chorus. In the later book, *The Space of Literature*, this tragi-comical paradox receives a more subtle treatment. The emphasis shifts from the farcical impossibility of declaring one’s solitude (and Blanchot makes it clear, in the very first paragraph of the first chapter, that worldly loneliness is a kind of misfortune that the book refuses to ramble on)⁴ to the solitude of the work (*la solitude de l’oeuvre*), the work’s setting-apart of itself: the work of art expresses nothing, it does not speak but *is*. The one whose life is tied by a link of dependence to the work of literature, the writer as well as the reader, belongs to the silent realm of the work’s solitude, the one whose only expression is the word “being.”⁵

It is this realm of solitude and fascination that Outi Alanko-Kahiluoto explores in her article “From Perception to Fascination, from Representation to Image: Textual Encounter in Maurice Blanchot.” She brings out the way Maurice Blanchot uses the word *fascination* thematically in his *L’espace littéraire* to name a very specific experience, a blinding encounter with a text that remains radically separate but to which, at the same time, the reader loses her distance and perspective – something separate and distant, yet most intimate at the same time.

The Blanchotian theme of fascination actually offers one of the points where his itinerary intersects with Heidegger’s, so that this

space of coincidence brings forth, viewing more closely, some very specific distinctions. We happen to come across “fascination” or the participial adjective “fascinated” also in the English translation, by Macquarrie and Robinson, of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, where we can read that *Dasein*’s Being-already-alongside-the-world is proximally (*zunächst*) “not just a fixed staring at something that is purely present-at-hand. Being-in-the-world, as concern, is fascinated by the world with which it is concerned.”⁶ A few pages later, we are reminded that, according to the analyses up to that point, *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world “amounts to a non-thematic circumspective absorption” in a certain “familiarity with the world.” “In this familiarity *Dasein* can lose itself in what it encounters within-the-world and be fascinated with it.”⁷ Here Heidegger also points out that the presence-at-hand of entities is “thrust to the fore by the possible breaks in that referential totality in which circumspection ‘operates’.”⁸ Fascination, or rather *Benommenheit*, a word for which “fascination” may not be the most fortunate translation after all, is a deprivation of an objective gaze, but in a sense different from that of Blanchot’s *fascination*. The mantis’s gaze that captivates Thomas as a reader in *Thomas l’obscur*, Blanchot’s first novel, is something else than this specific “benumbedness.”

Being “fascinated” or rather benumbed by one’s world of “circumspective concern” actually deprives *Dasein* of another kind of fascination, an aesthetic kind for instance. Duchamp’s ready-mades would be a case in point. “The Fountain” comes forth as a fountain and an artwork precisely because it – or its “material,” or the object in it – ceases to function as part of a familiar instrumental totality, as a *pissoir*. We might also mention Magritte who insisted that there are no “symbols” in his paintings, but to the contrary, everyday objects are deprived of their “symbolic” value, their functioning as a part of a symbolical totality, when their proper oddity is restored to them in an artwork. According to Heidegger’s well-known example, a hammer comes forth as an object, not when it’s used for hammering, but when it gets broken and cannot be utilized any longer. In order that something can become present-at-hand as an object, such a deprivation

and abstraction must take place. In other words, “breaks” must happen in the “referential totality” of which the world of *Dasein*’s “concernful circumspection” consists.⁹

As a matter of fact, what is most “proper” to *Dasein* itself only appears through a certain “break in the referential totality,” namely the experience of *Angst* which collapses the world into an indifference of sorts, taking place “in the clear night of nothingness [*das Nichts*],” and what is more, “bolts in the word.” Only a breaking apart of speech shows me what words can be, only an aphasia or an apophatic experience of sorts can show what *apophansis* (*logos* as showing) can be, only a fundamental solipsism may reveal what being-together with others could be.

An “aesthetic” experience (even while we know how little Heidegger admired “aesthetics,” an originally metaphysical, “Platonist” enterprise as he understood it) is not totally different from the experience of such withdrawal. This might be one way art, as a suspension of the business-as-usual (or a break in the “symbolic order” as Magritte saw it), can be a matter of ethics and politics (while it must be noted, at the same time, that an aesthetic, ethical or political “halt” is never unproblematic when ethical decisions and political actions are urgently required).

While *Benommenheit* is hardly “fascination” in a sense that would correspond to all the “idle talk [*Gerede*]” about what we moderns usually consider “fascinating,” or to Blanchot’s certainly more unusual and infinitely less “idle” talk of fascination, it does not belong to the core of *Sein und Zeit*’s “technical” terminology. It is not a “term” in the same sense as for example *Sorge* or even *Umsicht* or *besorgende Umsicht* (“concernful circumspection”), which are explicitly formulated concepts, or the very name of *Dasein* itself whose nonce-use in Heidegger’s early work amounts to an extraordinary “performative speech act” indeed, as Derrida has amusedly pointed out. Rather than a term that has a fixed use or “position,” the verb *benahmen* serves many contrasting purposes in largely the same way as in the “natural language” of everyday discourse. We notice the tension between

being “fascinated” – or rather “benumbed” or “captivated”¹⁰ – by one’s world of circumspective concern and the more “abstract” attention paid to objects “present-at-hand,” deprived of their usual “coherence” (belonging together) in a referential context. But this is not the only way of being *benommen*, and this variety is the very fact that makes it difficult to translate this verb and its derivatives by a corresponding group of words. Much later on in the book, what is translated as fascination (*Benommenheit*) appears to be in direct contradiction with the previous usage of the term. Now *Dasein* is said to be *benommen* in a sense that seems totally opposite to the “fascination” or “captivation” by an everyday world of circumspective concern and “immersion” into it, opposite also to being “fascinated with the ‘hubbub’ of the manifold ambiguity which idle talk possesses in its everyday ‘newness’.”¹¹ This fascination is a sort of counter-fascination, an antidote in regard of the previous uses or functions of this term:

In this [mood of anxiety, *die Stimmung der Angst*], *Dasein* is taken all the way back to its naked uncanniness, and becomes fascinated by it [*völlig auf seine nackte Unheimlichkeit zurückgenommen und von ihr benommen*]. This fascination, however, not only takes *Dasein* back from its “worldly” possibilities, but at the same time gives it the possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being [*Diese Benommenheit nimmt aber das Dasein nicht nur zurück aus den »weltlichen« Möglichkeiten, sondern gibt ihm zugleich die Möglichkeit eines eigentlichen Seinkönnens*].¹²

In the mood of anxiety *Dasein* is not only “taken back” from its “worldly” possibilities (it is Heidegger himself who bestows the quotation marks, cautious of the theological resonances of the adjective “worldly,” no doubt) but also, in this very withdrawal and privation, in this very “benumbing” state that also “bolts in the word,” the “authentic” possibilities of being-there are granted at the same time. This “fascination” appears as diametrically opposed to the previous fascination, namely to the spell-binding influence of the world of concerned

circumspection, first of all, but also of the “hubbub” and “idle talk” of everydayness.

The word or word family translated as “fascination” or “fascinated,” *Benommenheit*, *benommen*, is thus not “fixed” in the way that it could be indexed as one of the key terms of *Being and Time*, one that serves always the same function. Its function is neither positive nor negative in regard of such pairs of concepts as “authentic” and “inauthentic,” and therefore it could be called a “neutral” term. This “fascination” is indifferent as to who is fascinated and by what, where and when, deported from what level of possibility into which other realm of potentiality. Such an indifferent “fascination” is almost like a “shifter” in the linguistic sense.¹³

To complete this route of reversal by making another one, let us return to Blanchot, who is referring to Heidegger when he writes as follows: “When I am on the level of the world, where also things and beings are, being remains deeply covered [*Quand je suis au niveau du monde, là où sont aussi les choses et les êtres, l'être est profondément dissimulé*].”¹⁴ The ambiguity of the French noun infinitive *être* could not be displayed any more concisely. When I stay close to beings in the middle of my diurnal concerns, being itself remains “for the most part” hidden. When I am in the midst of my works and days, I remain displaced from my ownmost domain as a “*lieu-tenant du néant* [*Platzhalter des Nichts*].”¹⁵ Yet, according to Blanchot, I am only free to say “I am” when standing apart from being, when involved with its negation (a negation of this fundamental negativity which is being, *das Sein als das Nichts*) that is also called “work [*travail*]” or “action.”¹⁶ This situation appears diametrically opposed to the realm of fascination in which the work (*oeuvre*), literary artwork, has nothing to express except “that it is” or the word “being.”¹⁷ Here we arrive at the border zone where Blanchot’s thought of fascination is very close to Heidegger’s, but this is also where subtle, yet clear and critical differences emerge. Encountering death is the stumbling block: Blanchot refuses to submit to the thought that the ever imminent “possibility of Dasein’s impossibility,” or being-towards-death, is the essential relation

that individualizes *Dasein*, constitutes *Dasein*'s "ever-mineness [*Je-meinigkeit*]" and "gives it the possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being." For Blanchot, even the mood of anxiety belongs to the "first night," the still soft and reassuring night of the world, whereas this first night is just a trap (*piège*) of the second night, which is the realm of the proper impersonality of death. If death "belongs" at all, it belongs to "the They [*le On*],"¹⁸ and it is thus by no means "always mine." Blanchot does not disagree with Heidegger on the fact that "in death the possibility which is death dies too"¹⁹ – indeed, death is possible for "being-there [*Dasein*]" only as an imminent possibility of the impossibility "to be there" – but on the analysis of our relation to death. "One sooner or later dies," *man stirbt*: Blanchot stresses, with an obvious point of reference, that this formula (*on meurt*) is not a reassuring way to turn away from the authentic possibility of death which is "always mine," but on the contrary, a most literal way of addressing the impersonality and anonymity of death.²⁰ In regard of this, Blanchot affirms the very opposite of Heidegger's insistence on an authentic relation to death: every attempt to personalize death, every attempt to reassure oneself that death properly belongs to me and no one but me, is a sham. To affirm death as one's own, an authentic death, is a way to escape the inescapable inauthenticity of death, and therefore a most inauthentic way to relate to death. Even when we affirm, at the same time and with Heidegger, that the only possible death "for me" is my living relation to "my own" death, my death as an imminent event that never properly happens to me, we tend to escape to the paradoxical security of the "first night." The night which still grants us, as a moment of rest from the day's activities (even the mood of anxiety amounts to being set apart, in a profound way, from the world and its concerns, from the society and from the "naturalness" of day's language), the possibility of work and activity.

To write is a way to enter the realm of fascination where death is encountered as someone's death (*la mort de quelqu'un*), which is neither a personal death nor "death in general," but something deeply and inescapably anonymous, neutral, indifferent and impersonal.²¹

Notes

¹ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, cop. 1955, repr. "Folio Essais," 2000), p. 30; cited by Outi Alanko-Kahiluoto in her article in the present volume.

² Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 33.

³ "Un écrivain qui écrit : ' Je suis seul ' ou comme Rimbaud : ' Je suis réellement d'outre-tombe ' peut se juger assez comique. Il est comique de prendre conscience de sa solitude en s'adressant à un lecteur et par des moyens qui empêchent l'homme d'être seul. Le mot seul est aussi général que le mot pain" (*Faux pas* [Paris: Gallimard, 1943], p. 9).

⁴ "La solitude au niveau du monde est une blessure sur laquelle il n'y a pas ici à épiloguer" (*L'espace littéraire*, p. 13).

⁵ Cf. *L'espace littéraire*, pp. 13–15, passim.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), §13, p. 88 [61]; we shall use the standard pagination of the later German editions that is also indicated in the margins of the English translation, here p. 61, given in square brackets. *Being and Time*, p. 107 [76].

⁷ *Being and Time*, p. 107 [76].

⁸ *Being and Time*, p. 107 [76].

⁹ Heidegger's talk of such *Benommenheit* could be seen also as one indication of the fact that we should not read his notion of "fallenness" and its adjuncts (i.e. other notions that really or apparently "cohere" with *Verfallenheit*) as a moral issue. Observing objects in their presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) instead of their apparently "proper" readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) is by no means an "error," and least of all a "moral" error. The abstraction of a certain readiness-to-hand, its privative retreat into the other mode of being as "merely" present-to-hand, may reveal what the original readiness-to-hand actually meant. Even being "fascinated" or "benumbed" by one's world or environment can be seen as a way of fallenness in regard of other "ways of seeing." The conception that "authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*]" and "fallenness [*Verfallenheit*]" constitute a simple dichotomy and are, as such, matters of moral choice, is misconducted. Both "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" are "equiprimordial [*gleichursprünglich*]" for *Dasein*. "Inauthenticity," writes Heidegger, "amounts to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world – the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein-with of Others in the 'they'. Not-Being-its-self [*Das Nicht-es-selbst-sein*]" functions as a positive possibility of that entity which, in its essential concern, is absorbed in a world." As Heidegger himself insists, "fallenness" is by no means to be taken as a "bad and deplorable ontical property," as if sinfulness to be uprooted, while it is something that belongs to the very constitution of *Dasein*. (*Being and Time*, p. 220 [176]; translation slightly modified;

the word “rather” removed; emphasis in the original: “... sie gerade ein ausgezeichnetes In-der-Welt-sein ausmacht, das von der ‘Welt’ und dem Mitdasein Anderer im Man völlig benommen ist.”)

¹⁰ See *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 101: “We seek to eliminate being left empty by being occupied with something . [...] Being occupied gives our dealings with things a certain manifoldness, direction, fullness. But not only that: we are also taken [*hingenommen*] by things, if not altogether lost in them, and often even captivated [*benommen*] by them. Our activities and exploits become immersed [*aufgehen*] in something.” (Italics and additions in square brackets in the original translation.) Cf. *Being and Time*, p. 149 [113]: “Proximally and for the most part Dasein is fascinated with its world. Dasein is thus absorbed in the world [*Das Dasein ist zunächst und zumeist von seiner Welt benommen. Diese Seinsart des Aufgehens in der Welt ...*].”

¹¹ *Being and Time*, p. 316 [271] (“...benommen ist vom ‘Lärm’ der mannigfaltigen Zweideutigkeit des alltäglich ‘neuen’ Geredes ...”).

¹² *Being and Time*, p. 394 [344]. Emphases in the original. Cf. also the translators’ footnote, p. 394n1.

¹³ See Esa Kirkkopelto’s essay in this volume for a discussion on “shifters.”

¹⁴ *L’espace littéraire*, p. 337.

¹⁵ *Lieu-tenant du néant* is my own (P. R.) translation suggestion for Heidegger’s *Platzhalter des Nichts*.

¹⁶ Cf. *L’espace littéraire*, pp. 337-340.

¹⁷ Cf. *L’espace littéraire*, pp. 15, 255.

¹⁸ I do not personally approve of the translation of “*das Man*” (or “*le On*,” for that matter) by “the They.” The phrase “*man stirbt*” (or “*on meurt*”) is not equivalent to “they die,” but rather to “one dies,” in the sense that “sooner or later everyone dies,” “we all die some day,” “each one of us dies one day – but that is not yet my concern.”

¹⁹ *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 261, cited in Outi Alanko-Kahiluoto’s essay.

²⁰ Cf. *L’espace littéraire*, p. 323.

²¹ *L’espace littéraire*, p. 324.