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On the Night of the Elemental Imaginary

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Abstract

This essay is a comparison between Schelling's and Blanchot's conceptions of the night of the imaginary. Schelling is the most romantic of the German idealist philosophers and Blanchot the most extreme of the French "deconstructionists." Their historical link is actually indirect, but they offer two complementary views on the "same" impersonal nocturnal experience of the imaginary, the approach of which requires a certain self-overcoming of philosophy towards literature.

Keywords

Schelling, Blanchot, imagination, night, literature

One of the most telling images of the imaginary is that it is *nocturnal*. When the imaginary is described as "nocturnal," it is depicted by an image and not by a proper concept; it is, moreover, a rather disquieting image that evokes ignorance, unconsciousness, deceit, falsehood and illusion—Goya's "night of reason that engenders monsters." The image of the night is more than a simple illustration, for it names an experience that can be regarded as one of the constitutive experiences of art and thinking because it is shared and used in a regular manner by a number of important authors. In the history of art and literature, it generally appears that when the imaginary is "nocturnal," it is not a faculty but a dimension or, at most, a potency; it is not "mine," in the sense of an expression of my power, will, perception, or reason, but is an alien "force" *in me*. To give it a more precise philosophical expression: when the imaginary is understood as a nocturnal dimension, it is understood as an *elemental power*.

Venturing into the night, I will examine the imaginary as an elemental depth. These problematics naturally carry a reference to John Sallis' *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental*.¹ I will approach the subject in a slightly

¹ John Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

different manner by comparing two further thinkers of the elemental night of the imaginary, namely, F. W. J. Schelling and Maurice Blanchot, both of whom have made elaborate descriptions of a nocturnal impersonal elemental experience and given it a central role in the whole of their thinking. For me, the aim of a confrontation of two philosophical positions is not the positing of a common ground in which their opposition would be cancelled but, rather, the discovery within a shared domain of experience of a distinction. Sharing the “same” experience of the nocturnal depth of the imagination, Schelling and Blanchot interpret it from two opposite points of view: Schelling is generally regarded as the most romantic of German idealists and Blanchot as the most extreme practitioner of French “deconstruction” (if I may characterize Blanchot’s writing by this term that actually belongs only to a certain phase of Derrida’s work). This is why I hope that their comparison will allow us not only to sense the philosophical weight of the night but also to shed some light among its shadows.

The historical connection between Schelling and Blanchot is mostly indirect; Blanchot is too fascinated by Hegel to really pay much attention to Schelling.² This is why the following confrontation is less a historical explication of the relation between two authors, than a thematic inquiry into the nocturnal depth of the imaginary itself, with the heuristic help of two writers. My aim is to gain some insight into the domain of the elemental imagination that is obscure by definition and therefore cannot be plainly illuminated without destroying the very matter that is to be approached. This is why it must be approached indirectly, each time by following just some of its figures in order to discover something of their whereabouts, like when tracking dream figures at the bottom of the night. This time, Schelling and Blanchot will be our guides through the dark regions of the imagination, leaving for us the task of comparing the two different maps drawn by their itineraries.

I. Literary Absolutism

The first evident connection between Schelling and Blanchot is their “literary absolutism.” Following a suggestion by Blanchot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

² Blanchot’s quotes of Schelling are rare and isolated, and none of his texts are consecrated specifically to Schelling. See, for example, Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 151, 181; translated by Ann Smock as *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 99, 118; Maurice Blanchot, *L’entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 519; translated by Susan Hanson as *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 353. I will indicate the pages of the English translation after a dash.

and Jean-Luc Nancy have shown that with Schelling, “philosophy as such comes up for the first time against the problem of its presentation in terms of literature.”³ Schelling is far from being the first to give a literary form to philosophical reflections, but he is the first to define *philosophically* the *poetical presentation as the ultimate condition of philosophical truth*. It turned out to be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to meet this condition, and it is reasonable to say that Schelling’s work was ruined by it. However, the idea remains crucial for a whole line of later philosophy in which Blanchot has reached the most radical extreme.

The problem of philosophical presentation and the idea of its solution through art and, in particular, poetry, characterized Schelling’s entire career.⁴ Ever since the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1796), which is

³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le dialogue des genres,” *Poétique*, no. 2 (1975). The importance of the question of literature for the philosophical project of Schelling was underscored by Blanchot in “L’Athenaeum,” in *L’entretien infini*, 519, and developed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in *L’absolu littéraire. Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 40; translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester as *The Literary Absolute. The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). “Le dialogue des genres” is a part of the *Literary Absolute* project. Recently, the idea has been further developed by Jean-Marie Vaysse in *Schelling: Art et mythologie* (Paris: Ellipses, 2004), 55, 66. Schelling’s way of using artistic creation as the ultimate test for any ontology has recently been examined by Patrick Burke insofar as it inspired a contemporary compatriot of Blanchot: Merleau-Ponty (Patrick Burke, “Creativity and the Unconscious in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling,” in *Schelling Now. Contemporary Readings*, ed. Jason Wirth [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005]). We can note in passing that although the first period of Merleau-Ponty’s work is distant from Blanchot’s, in his mature period he comes closer to Blanchot’s approach of an elemental being.

⁴ Although in this paper I examine only Schelling’s idea of a poetic accomplishment of philosophy, I do not claim that art is Schelling’s only solution to the problem of presentation of philosophy: Schelling’s versatile mind actually never tired of trying new conceptual constellations. Robert J. Richards situates Schelling just outside of the romantic circle because, although he called for philosophy to become more poetic in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, both philosophy and poetry actually express the same transcendental truth that philosophy, according to other texts, expresses more adequately. See Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life. Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 160–61, 187–90. In the same line of thought, Xavier Tilliette notes that Schelling is the rationalist philosopher among German Romantics: although he shared with the young German Romantics the desire of unification of philosophy and poetry, he put art in the service of philosophy rather than the other way round, and dreamed of a new mythology of *reason*, exposed in a philosophical epic or poem. See Xavier Tilliette, *Schelling. Une philosophie en devenir I, Le système vivant* (Paris: Vrin, 1992), 451, 455.

probably his text,⁵ and particularly in the last part of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling affirms that “art is the sole, true, and eternal organon as well as a document of philosophy.”⁶ Reason must be accomplished in poetry. Furthermore, this philosophical poetry must be accompanied by a “mythology of reason” addressed to the whole people. A decade later, in the *Ages of the World* project, Schelling hopes: “perhaps the one is still coming who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, and what will be.”⁷ But Schelling backs away from his project, saying that, for the time being, he can only research, and not narrate, the absolute poem. His philosophical epic will never see the light of day, and the rest of his work can be interpreted as aborted ruins of a future poem. Nevertheless, even though he did not publish anything after *Of Human Freedom* (1809), he continued writing, and two works in particular can be singled out as unaccomplished monuments of his project for a literary fulfillment of philosophy: the unfinished novel *Clara* (which is a philosophical dialogue on the immortality of the human soul, following the example of

⁵ That is the hypothesis of Rosenzweig also shared by Fuhrmans in his explication of the text in Schelling, *Briefe und Dokumente*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans 3 vols to date (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1962–), 1:57n3. The hypothesis is also insightfully examined by Jean-François Marquet, *Liberté et existence. Étude sur la formation de la philosophie de Schelling*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 73–80; first published 1973. As Richards says, “however, whoever the real author, the program of the tract does accurately forecast Schelling’s intellectual development” (Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 124).

⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, SW I/3, 627. I use this standard pagination (i.e., division number/volume number, page number) of the original *Sämtliche Werke* edition published by Schelling’s son Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart-Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1856–1861). The pagination is preserved in most editions and notably in the *Ausgewählte Schriften in sechs Bänden*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), and also in the principal translations. Here, I refer to F. W. J. von Schelling, *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, ed. Horst D. Brandt and Peter Müller (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2000), translated by Peter Heath as *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978). See also the 23rd aphorism of *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturphilosophie* (1806): “Auch Poesie ist die Philosophie, aber sie sey keine vorlaute, nur aus dem Subjekt schaffende, sondern eine innerliche, dem Gegenstande eingeplante, wie die Musik der Sphären. Erst sei die Sache poetisch, ehe sie das Wort ist” (SW I/7, 145).

⁷ Schelling, *Die Weltalter*, first version, in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Band 4, WA I/9; citation of the identical passage from the translation of the third version by Jason Wirth as *The Ages of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), SW I/8, 206. (WA I abbreviates the first version of *Die Weltalter* used in *Ausgewählte Schriften*; the Arabic numeral is the original page number. WA was published after the SW edition and is cited differently.)

Plato's *Phaedo*⁸ and the lecture courses on the *Philosophy of Mythology* (explaining how the absolute is manifested in mythology, which is not at all a human projection, but a theogonical process of the self-manifestation of the absolute).

Blanchot has not published any study specifically on Schelling (his access to Schelling's works was probably limited); however, his understanding of Schelling's literary ambition is included in his general interpretation of the early Romantic movement in Germany (*Frühromantik*)—but, on the other hand, his comprehension of the latter is profound, and he actually introduces their literary and philosophical program into the twentieth-century French debates.⁹ As the chapter “L'Athenaeum” of *The Infinite Conversation* (*L'entretien infini*) shows, Blanchot was fascinated by the theoretical side of the Romantics' project, the auto-reflection of literature that ends in a purification of the creative act. The primary excess of early Romanticism is not at all an idle thoughtless fantasy but, instead, an “excess of thinking.”¹⁰ The Romantics' research of a pure poetical act is so unconditional that it ends by destroying the very possibility of the work of art. For Blanchot, however, the ruin and non-fulfilment of the literature of early German Romanticism is not a failure but, rather, an event in the history of literature—although the authors themselves did probably not understand it to be so—consisting of a fragmentation and lack of effort (*absence de l'œuvre*), and of what Blanchot calls “unworking of the work” (*désœuvrement*).¹¹ Finally, Blanchot will also pay attention to the romantic desire of a discontinuous, plural, collective writing which is closely connected to a revolutionary political programme.¹² Together with the idea of the

⁸ I present an overall interpretation of Schelling's *Clara* in “What haunts ‘Clara?’”, forthcoming.

⁹ The principle and the signification of Blanchot's interpretation of early German Romanticism—in particular of Friedrich Schlegel—has been finely explained by Veli-Matti Saarinen in *The Daybreak and Nightfall of Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 57–61.

¹⁰ Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, 518 / 353.

¹¹ Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, 517, 524 / 353, 357.

¹² Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, 520–21, 526 / 354–55, 358. Schelling of course does not have a “political philosophy” in any ordinary sense of the word. In both the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* and the *Stuttgart Lectures*, Schelling criticizes the blind mechanical violence of the state (*SWI/7*, 461–65)—but he also considers it as a necessity that defines any historically existing state as such, and it cannot be reformed or overcome, for instance in a revolution (*Stuttgarter Vorlesung* is translated by Thomas Pfau as *Stuttgart Lectures* in *The Endgame of Idealism* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996]). Instead, Schelling only hopes for an interior spiritual transformation that he describes as a religious event, as a consequence of a new religion that would liberate the humanity of all human beings and make a true community possible; it must be stressed, however, that Schelling's fairly bewildering “coming religion” is not any existing or future church institution but rather the spiritualization of human beings themselves.

“unworking of the work of art,” this idea of a literary community prefigures Blanchot’s own reflections on the “unworking” of the work of literature and of the “inoperative community” resumed in *The Unavowable Community* (*La communauté inavouable*). To sum up, one could say that Blanchot thinks of, and knowingly assumes, the destiny that had unexpectedly crushed the Romantics: “To write: work of the absence of work, production that produces nothing except (or out of) the absence of a subject,”¹³ “writing (and knowing it then) in such a way that the pure product of doing nothing was introduced into the world and into his world. This happened ‘at night.’”¹⁴

Today, I only point to one consequence of this general reading: insofar as the early German romanticism is an intellectual, theoretical, and philosophical project, so its meditations on “the night” (and of its unconsciousness and folly) do not rise from thoughtlessness, but from an excess of thought, in that it explores its own secret roots and ventures beyond its own limits (that had been indicated by Kant). Entering into the night, the romantic spirit researches the reverse side of reason by the means of reason (at least to begin with) or, in fact, by actually proposing a certain deconstruction of reason that these poets were not exactly conscious of but that Blanchot analyses lucidly and continues to an extreme conclusion.

Schelling, however, is not exactly a German Romantic Poet: he is a German *Idealist* philosopher, and his work is guided by the philosopher’s desire for the manifestation of the absolute of *reason*. He abandons the Cartesian starting point of the “I” in the name of reason.¹⁵ While deducing the loss of conscious-

Such a community beyond all institutions that brings together and delivers to the singular human beings their “souls” (that is, their capacities for freedom and its consequences, notably love and art) is actually isomorphic with Blanchot’s project for a *Communauté inavouable*, except that the latter is precisely not a religion. See Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1984), translated by Pierre Joris as *The Unavowable Community* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988). For Blanchot, the source of the community beyond all institutions—which, as though describing the factual community of the young German Romantics, he particularly describes as a clandestine literary community and as a community of lovers—is death instead of freedom, or death at the root of freedom. On Schelling’s political thinking, see Gérard Bensussan, “Schelling—une politique négative,” in *Le dernier Schelling. Raison et positivité*, ed. Jean-François Courtine et Jean-François Marquet (Paris: Vrin, 1994), 71–86, and Franck Fischbach, “La pensée politique de Schelling,” *Les études philosophiques* (2001): 31–48.

¹³ Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 79; translated by Lycette Nelson as *The Step Not Beyond* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1992), 55.

¹⁴ Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà*, 9 / 2.

¹⁵ See for instance the conclusive 44th and 46th aphorisms of *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturphilosophie* (1806): “44. Das Ich denke, Ich bin, ist, seit Cartesius, der Grundirrhthum in

ness of the Cartesian and Kantian type of subjectivity, he tries to be as conscious as possible of the emerging unconsciousness—or to follow the event of consciousness becoming unconscious. In this sense, Schelling marks the fulfilment of the epoch of subjectivity¹⁶ only on the paradoxical condition of overcoming it, because he reflects on and thinks of the collapse of subjectivity into its own unknowable, nocturnal ground.¹⁷ Yet, on the other hand, the subject enhanced by its loss of self is primarily not a modern human mind but the absolute subject itself. In the last instance, it has the serenity of an eternal life that has traversed the individual human being's death without being troubled by it. Blanchot, conversely, thinks precisely on the loss of self and the death of the human being in a world without any absolutes. Although he, like Schelling, abandons the Cartesian starting point of the “I,” he does not refute it by the impersonality of the Absolute, but by the anonymity of everyday life, which is sometimes intensified as the neutral “il.”¹⁸ Instead of revealing the Absolute, his ultimate aim is, on the contrary, a “dis-writing” and a “de-scribing” of a “dis-aster” (“*le désastre dé-crit*”¹⁹) (which is essentially the disintegration of the possibility of unity or, philosophically speaking, the Unitotality of the Absolute or, in literature, the coherence of the work of art). This is why Blanchot does not call himself a “philosopher”—although he also refuses the romantic epithet of “poet.” He would not aim at a fusion of philosophy and poetry; wishing to situate himself on a different ground, he would never say that his writing is the manifestation of the Absolute, as he simply calls what he does “writing,” i.e., writing “stories” (*récit*) and “research” (*recherche*).

aller Erkenntnis; das Denken ist nicht mein Denken, und das Seyn nicht mein Seyn, denn alles ist nur Gottes oder des Alls.” “46. Die Vernunft ist kein Vermögen, kein Werkzeug, und läßt sich nicht Brauchen: überhaupt gibt es nicht eine Vernunft, die wir hätten, sondern nur eine Vernunft, die uns hat. Die Vermögen aber zur Erkenntnis Gottes in sich aussuchen und zählen oder wägen, ist die äußerste Gränze der Verwirrung und der innern Verfinsternung des Geistes” (SWI/7, 148–49).

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809)* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995), 112–16, 119, translated by Joan Stambaugh as *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Schelling's way of thinking of self-overcoming and even the disintegration of the subject has been finely explained by Jean-François Courtine in “Schelling et l'achèvement de la métaphysique,” which, incidentally, also illustrates the insufficiency of Heidegger's critique of Schelling's supposed subjectivism (Jean-François Courtine, *Extase de la raison. Essais sur Schelling* [Paris: Galilée, 1990], 169–99).

¹⁸ Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà*, 10 / 3; Blanchot, “La parole quotidienne,” in *L'entretien infini / “Everyday Speech,”* in *Infinite Conversation*.

¹⁹ Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 16–17, 50, 85, 87 / 6–7, 28, 51, 52.

This is why Schelling's most obvious intention cannot be shared by Blanchot. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental ambiguity in Schelling's work, in particular during his middle and mature periods, that brings another aspect of his work very close to the latter. This aspect is connected to the *experience of negativity*.

In philosophy, Blanchot dialogues in particular with Hegel and Heidegger, insofar as they include a fundamental experience of negativity (and death) in their thinking (Nietzsche is equally important but leads ultimately to other problematics). Like Bataille, Blanchot considers that Hegel could not bear to the end the sight of the very negativity that he discovered himself, when "enduring the sight of death" in its various figures developed in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although Blanchot considers that Heidegger thinks nothingness and death more radically, Blanchot also criticizes the latter's question of the *sense* of being—of a *logos*, an *Ereignis* that, from Blanchot's point of view, risks the closure of the dimension of nothingness and, therefore, of the space of literature.²⁰ From Blanchot's standpoint, both Hegel and Heidegger back away from the experience that they had discovered and, thereby, close the space of literature. Like the Hegelian system, the Heideggerian *Ereignis* is also alien to writing, and this is why Blanchot keeps his distance from both rational and ontological *logos*.

It could be said that Schelling provides a connection between Hegel and Heidegger, insofar as Schelling and Hegel started their work together (after all, the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* is handwritten by Hegel, and Otto Pöggeler even attributed its paternity to him), until an insurmountable breach separated when Hegel published the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.²¹ While turning against Hegel, Schelling actually sketched a way towards Heidegger, particularly in the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* that Heidegger later celebrated as the masterpiece in which German Idealism surpasses itself.²² Schelling's proximity to Heidegger was noted already

²⁰ But Blanchot also turns away from what he, after Derrida, calls Heidegger's insistency of the "proper," considering that it refuses the "spending which disturbs every event" and which is the very condition of writing (Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 153 / 98).

²¹ Xavier Tilliette gives a piquant account of their breach in "Hegel et Schelling à Iéna," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, no. 2 (1968). Frank Fischback made a very detailed comparison of Hegel and Schelling in *Du commencement en philosophie. Étude sur Hegel et Schelling* (Paris: Vrin, 1999).

²² Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1975); translated by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt as *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

in 1955 by Walter Schultz, who underscored the isomorphy between Heidegger's thinking of being in function of nothingness and Schelling's thinking of the marvel *that* is—that there is being—instead of *what* is.²³ Precursor of an onto-phenomenology, Schelling is, above all, the thinker of the pure act of coming-to-presence of being, without the postulation of a separate creator, and purely against a groundless, abysmal nonbeing. This comes down to thinking being in function of pure nothingness, which is also what Blanchot admires in Heidegger.

At first glance, Blanchot would seem bound to reject Schelling's "logocentrism" by the same token as Hegel's and Heidegger's. It seems to me, however, that Schelling has a deeper understanding of nothingness than Hegel and Heidegger, and that it is even possible to think that, in his philosophy, *logos* really emerges from the abyss of nothingness, instead of contradicting and closing it. Precisely because Schelling penetrates surprisingly far into the problematic inner space of nothingness, we can imagine a greater proximity of Blanchot to Schelling than to Hegel or Heidegger, although Heidegger initially seemed to be the link uniting the deconstructionist to German idealism. The connection between Schelling and Heidegger is real, but it also assumes the existence of something like "Schelling's philosophy" and ignores Schelling's writing, in which the ruin and the non-fulfilment of the whole of his later philosophy takes place. Recently, Jean-Marie Vaysse has conversely proposed that the project of "achieving the speculative in narration" amounts, in Schelling, to a "liberation of a space of literature which is the place of an impossible novel and whose term is constantly delayed." In this sense, writing would also be the experience of what flees from the speculation: it would be the experience of the night that goes from Novalis and Mallarmé to Blanchot.²⁴ Consequently, Schelling's ambiguity is also the possibility of reading in him either the accomplishment of onto-theology or, contrarily, the premises of a deconstruction of logocentrism.²⁵ If we follow the second option—which is clearly only one interpretative option, but in this case an interesting one—Schelling comes surprisingly close to Blanchot. Both would be prey to an experience of night that fragments and unworks the narration, which has become the only way of exposing the fundamental negativity of being.

²³ Walter Schultz, *Die Vollendung der deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Stuttgart und Köln: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1955), 287–90.

²⁴ Vaysse, Schelling, art et mythologie, 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

For the second evident connection between Schelling and Blanchot is the fascination and a kind of an impersonal experience of the “*night*.” I will now present the nocturnal aspect of Schelling’s thinking in order to compare it with Blanchot’s nightly interpretation of the imaginary.

II. Schelling and the Weight of the Imagination

Independently of interpretative choices, it should first be noted that imagination is a key concept of Schelling’s so-called “identity philosophy.” The term makes a brief but decisive appearance at the conclusion of *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) when Schelling, precisely when explaining why philosophy culminates in an artistic presentation, refers both philosophy and art to the same capacity of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), which is defined as a capacity of comprehending contradictions and presenting them in a finite product.²⁶ According to Jean-François Marquet, the term “imagination” becomes the central concept of identity philosophy since the 1801 texts “Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy” and *Bruno*.²⁷ It is notably the key term of *The Philosophy of Art* (1802–1804).²⁸ The term remains central until *On Human Freedom* (1809), but, in Schelling’s mature philosophy, “imagination” gives way to “freedom” and “creation,” which allow a new kind of approach to similar problematics.

The originality of Schelling’s concept of the imagination is that it is not a faculty of the human mind but a primordial ontological force that constitutes the absolute subject itself (we can note, therefore, that Schelling also prefigures Blanchot because both understand imagination as a nonhuman force, although Blanchot of course does not attribute it to any “absolute subject”). Schelling generally thinks that the aim of philosophy is neither the subject nor the object but the absolute “subject-object,” the “original ground of all harmony between

²⁶ Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, SW I/3, 473. See also, for instance, Schelling, *Fernere Darstellungen aus der System der Philosophie*, SW I/4, 423; translated by Michael Vater as “Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy,” *The Philosophical Forum* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2001).

²⁷ Marquet, *Liberté et existence*, 213. In this paragraph, I refer generally to Marquet’s detailed study of the transformation of Schelling’s uses of the term “imagination” in the second part, “L’existence,” of *Liberté et existence*.

²⁸ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, §8, I/5, 377 and §§22–23, I/5, 386; translated by Douglas Scott as *The Philosophy of Art*, in *The Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 58 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

the subjective and the objective,”²⁹ which is not a superior substance, however, but the *activity* of synthesizing the two. This activity is called “imagination.” Schelling refers the term to Kant’s “transcendental imagination,” which is the “secret activity of the human soul” combining the contents of intuition and the forms of understanding, but Schelling transfers the idea from the human soul onto the “world soul,” that is to say, onto the absolute subject itself. An analogical use of the term *Einbildungskraft* as God’s power of overcoming contradictions can actually be found in the old, esoteric tradition of German philosophy in Rhenish mysticism, Paracelsus, and Böhme, but although Schelling becomes familiar with this tradition at least since 1802, his understanding of the term is, since the very beginning, most deeply influenced by Plato’s idea of the *χώρα*.³⁰ Schelling’s conception of an absolute, *χώρα*-like imagination is also the secret force of combining two incommensurable elements of the experience, which for him are ontological elements and not merely the elements of knowledge posited by Kant. Schelling’s imagination combines the “subject” and the “object,” that is to say, “thinking” and “being,” and it presents their *infinite contradiction* in a *finite product*. The task of philosophy is to think the infinite contradiction between thinking and being, that is to say, the very functioning of the absolute imagination—which can only be apprehended by the peculiar mode of philosophical knowledge that Schelling calls “intellectual intuition.” Imagination is an absolute creative and figurative force, the onto-logical productivity as such, the dazzling truth of which can be comprehended by philosophy and expressed only by art: in this sense, the work of art is the finite expression of the infinite. Schelling thinks that the Absolute appears in different forms: in philosophy, it appears as the ontological productivity contemplated by the intellectual intuition; in history, it appears as mythology and as the theologonical process; and in art, the functioning of the absolute imagination is properly presented.

Notwithstanding the ideas of the overstepping from philosophy into art and of the fundamental role of an impersonal imagination, Schelling’s identity philosophy does not really resemble Blanchot’s approach to the imagination. This is because, during this period of his work, Schelling mainly uses the

²⁹ Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, I/3, 476.

³⁰ The influence of Plato’s *χώρα* on Schelling’s reinterpretation of Kant’s transcendental imagination, which finally determines Schelling’s *Grund* has been impeccably demonstrated by John Sallis in *Chorology. On Beginning in Plato’s “Timaeus”* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 155–67, and by Jason Wirth in *The Conspiracy of Life. Meditations on Schelling and his Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 87–92. For an important modern interpretation of Plato’s *χώρα* see Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

imagination in order to explain the functioning of a Platonic or Neoplatonic metaphysics according to which “God is the archetype (*Urbild*) that becomes beauty in the copy (*Gegenbild*), and this is how ideas of reason become beauty when they are intuited in copies; and the relation of reason to art is the same as the relation of God to the ideas.”³¹ At this stage, the essence is an infinite archetypal model of finite things, which are conceived according to the theological idea of the Fall. Schelling’s contribution to Platonism is hardly anything more than the interpretation of the problem of participation as the *act* of imagination, so that the *idea* is presented as a *relation* between the infinite essence and the particular form, and this relation as an instant of *lightning*, instead of a stable link.

Schelling’s proximity to Blanchot is palpable in the texts in which Schelling starts to examine imagination in terms of an experience of existence, instead of a dialectic of archetype and image.³² The shift towards a new framework of thinking begins already in 1805. Progressively, Blanchot gives up the reference to the Fall and abandons the Platonic theory of ideas, with its fiction of a transcendent heaven of ideas separated from the phenomenal reality. From now on, truth is for him nothing *else* than the real world itself, insofar as it is “posited,” that is to say, contemplated in terms of essence. On the one hand, investigating the very *experience* of truth, the philosopher now pays attention to the “invisible” and “nocturnal” quality of the absolute imagination and asks *how* can we actually think of the invisible ground—or, more specifically, the unthinkable non-ground—of thinking and being. On the other hand, such a question comes to the fore when the philosopher does not ask “what is,” but, instead, confronts the wonder “that there is being” (*Daß-sein* instead of *Was-sein*). For instance, in *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* (1807), Schelling starts from the wonder of the singular being’s pure, groundless existence, which appears as the “eternal night of what is in and of itself non-manifest”: the “divine imagination” is now the “source of all sensible existence, that also beats in visible nature like its heart.”³³ From now on, the idea arises *from* being, instead of being imposed on it: it is the visibility and the think-

³¹ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, I/5, 385.

³² As Félix Duque says, the “platonizing parenthesis between 1801 and 1804” is a crisis through which Schelling will reach the fundamental conviction of his mature system: “‘God itself is no system at all, but Life.’ But Life is nothing but putting existence to the test—not its reality (*Realität*), then, but its effective realization (*Verwirklichung*)” (“Nature—in God, or the Problems of a Dash: Schelling’s *Freiheitschrift*,” *Research in Phenomenology* 37 [2007]: 63).

³³ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, SW, I/7, 198, 202.

ability of the singular, rather than a copy of a pre-existing universal.³⁴ The nocturnal, invisible productivity of the Absolute is both the mysterious source of existence and the chaotic source of forms, which are no more eternal, immobile archetypes but living and changing processes of figuration. Imagination is now the invisible formation of forms or the sketching of visible images.

Schelling's idea of such a fecundity of the night is clearly akin to Blanchot's approach of the imaginary. Schelling discovers the experience of the "night" because he insists on examining the absolute as an act instead of a substance: the Absolute shows itself in its very *productivity* instead of any of its *products*. The intellectual intuition aims not at a conceptual construction presenting truth in a definitive, intemporal, positive form but at the absolute *life*, including both day and night, life and death. During his long and changing career, Schelling has presented the Absolute productivity in many ways, but its general structure is fairly constant: it is the production of beings from the "night" of nonbeing towards the "light" of sense. Schelling's most detailed descriptions of the original "night" are somewhat later than his writings on art: on the one hand, they belong to the last writings of his philosophy of nature that culminate in "On Real and Ideal in Nature,"³⁵ while, on the other hand, "night" haunts the great metaphysical texts of this middle period, the most important of which are the treatise *On Human Freedom* and the *Ages of the World* project.

³⁴ On the background of the latter philosophy, it is also possible to reinterpret the identity philosophy of Schelling in an anti-Platonic direction as the celebration of the singularity (after all, the nineteenth-century "Aphorism on Philosophy of Nature" says that Schelling is particularly proud of having proclaimed the divinity of the singular *SW* I/7, 134–44). Marcia Sà Cavalcante Schuback defends this kind of an interpretation of Schelling's notion of the imagination in her beautiful essay "The Work of Experience," in *Schelling Now. Contemporary Readings*, 73. I have examined the possibilities of the singular in Schelling's early philosophy of nature in my "The Legacy of Schelling's Philosophy of Nature in 20th Century Phenomenology of the Elemental," published in *Das Elementale: Erde, Pan und Fleisch*, ed. Annette Hilt and Anselm Böhmer (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2008).

³⁵ "The Relation of Real and Ideal in Nature, or the Development of the First Principles of the Philosophy of Nature Following the Principles of Light and Gravity" is the wonderful introduction to *On the World Soul. A Hypothesis on Higher Physics to Explain the General Organism*. These are published in German as "Über das Verhältnis des Realen und Idealen in der Natur, oder Entwicklung der ersten Grundsätze der Naturphilosophie an den Prinzipien der Schwere und des Lichts," in *Von der Weltseele, eine Hypothese der höheren Physik zur Erklärung des allgemeinen Organismus*, *SW* I/2, 348–583.

Schelling's most important conceptual image of the transcendental productivity is the movement from "gravity" to "light." Gravity and light are concepts that originate from a debate on Newton's philosophy of nature and that gradually acquire a precise metaphysical sense. Schelling regularly qualifies gravity as being "nocturnal": "night" is not really a concept but an image that also arises from a contrast with the concept of light. Schelling examines the opposition of gravity and light in different settings (nature, metaphysics, theology), but the principal point is always that it is impossible to convert gravity entirely into light: "this is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the irreducible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in the understanding but remains eternally in the ground."³⁶ Gravity names the irreducible remainder that refuses the (Hegelian) "*Aufhebung*" into the daylight of the concept and, in this way, precisely keeps the Schellingian dialectics of ground and sense active. In this sense, gravity is productive.³⁷

³⁶ Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, SW, I/7, 359–60.

³⁷ In his classical study *L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*, Vladimir Jankélévitch describes the abysmal ground's resistance to the light of reason, for instance, as follows: "The idea of a refractory Grund [foundation] expresses a concern for realism which always characterizes Schelling's romantic thinking. The Grund survives its defeat and stays, so to say, as a reminder of the mediocrity of the origins of the actual being and of the fragility of its triumph. In Schelling's conception of the duration, the past refuses to be absorbed by a conscience which would assimilate the succession of new things as soon as they reach it. The past remains, but as a living accusation, as a mute witness of a victory that remains precarious, contested and provisional. Schelling has reacted against the pride of the idealist spirit by naturalizing the spirit and by weighing against its most sublime victories with the warning of the obscure elementary forces that gave birth to it and that lie in waiting for its slightest failures. Although the spirit may be extremely reasonable, it is not immaculate; a very ancient savage principle is awake in it, and it bears witness of the origin of times which perpetually threatens our internal civilization. In the most well-ordered spirits there is a wonderful evil aspect which sometimes declares itself by imposing silence to the pacific forces. Necessity subsists in freedom, nature in spirit and the non-I in the I: the barbary of the irrational principle resists the invitations of the spirit. . . . This is why the universe cannot be entirely converted into simple notions, although dogmatism would like it to be so: between our laws and reality there is always a kind of a margin that indicates the protests of the nocturnal principle; and it is well known that, in his later philosophy, Schelling has become very attentive to this intimate contingency of things, to their venerable chaos that is in a constant rebellion against the discipline of concepts" (*L'Odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005], 44–45 (my translation). First published in 1933.

In Schelling's early philosophy of nature, the nocturnal obscurity of gravity characterizes the notion of "matter," which is the heart of all nature,³⁸ insofar as it is impossible to penetrate into this heart with the means of simple understanding (i.e., it is impossible to deduce the existence of matter from the principles of reason). Matter is, for Schelling, the elemental ground of being, "the visible profundity, the mediation between light and obscurity,"³⁹ where "light" can never suppress "gravity's" retiring into the "night" of its "eternally obscure ground."⁴⁰ Matter is the "rebellious remainder" that the *Ages of the World* will describe as a "nocturnal," "blind and obscure," "dionysian," "insane": it is the famous "barbaric principle"⁴¹ that also inspired Merleau-Ponty. In terms of the philosophy of nature, matter is characterized by *gravity*, which is the invisible "heart of things"⁴² that both poses the determinate existence (*Dasein*) of each singular being and binds the material bodies together. In other words, gravity determines the absolute as finite and plural nature. Gravity is the nocturnal and mysterious ground of existence of the singulars' existence, its "groundless ground"⁴³: it is the "flash of the infinite affirmation" that determines *that* the singular *is*. Later, in *On Human Freedom*, Schelling reinterprets gravity in an explicitly metaphysical way, as the obscure nonground or "abyss," the "eternally obscure night," the terrifying chaos of nature also described as the thought of what, in God, is not God.⁴⁴

Contradicting the gravity of things—rising from it and against it—things also possess their own *light*. Light is another term that comes from physics but to which Schelling gives a metaphysical sense. Light is the ideal element of

³⁸ "The most obscure of all things, some say the obscurity itself, is matter. And, nevertheless, it is the unknown root of all figurations and living phenomena of nature" ("Über das Verhältnis des Realen und Idealen in der Natur, oder Entwicklung der ersten Grundsätze der Naturphilosophie an den Prinzipien der Schwere und des Lichts" [Schelling, *SW*, I/2, 359]) (my translation).

³⁹ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, *SW* I/7, 211.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *Freiheitsschrift*, *SW* I/7, 358. The possibility of interpreting Schelling through a certain materiality and elementarity has been signaled by David Farrell Krell in "Three Ends of the Absolute: Schelling on Inhibition, Hölderlin on Separation, and Novalis on Density," *Research in Phenomenology* 32 (2002): 61. An inquiry into Schelling's philosophy of nature fully confirms his claim.

⁴¹ Schelling, *Die Weltalter*, *SW* I/8, 337, 343.

⁴² Schelling, "Über das Verhältnis des Realen und Idealen in der Natur, oder Entwicklung der ersten Grundsätze der Naturphilosophie an den Prinzipien der Schwere und des Lichts," *SW* I/2, 371; Schelling, *Aphorismen zur Einleitung in die Naturphilosophie*, *SW* I/7, 177.

⁴³ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, *SW* I/7, 198.

⁴⁴ Schelling, *Freiheitsschrift*, *SW* I/7, 375.

beings, their intelligibility.⁴⁵ Light makes things “visible”; but their visibility is neither a sensible nor a rational visibility, for it does not depend on our senses or our understanding but on the engendering of the thing’s own reason that is reflected in us. This is why light is each singular’s own light.⁴⁶ According to Schelling, *gravity engenders light*. This means that matter, determined by gravity, is not like a *hyle* that the ideal form could imprint. Instead, Schelling now understands “idea” as the “bond between gravity and light.” Of course, light is also, for Schelling, the Absolute’s presence in nature. But the Absolute as light is not present as a completed image of the totality of being or as a reserve of images but as the imagination that produces the ideality of *what is*.⁴⁷ Later Schelling uses the terms “gravity” and “light” in a metaphysical sense and defines gravity as nonbeing and nature, light as ideality.

It seems to me that Schelling’s distinction between gravity and light corresponds surprisingly well with Blanchot’s famous distinction between the first and the second imagination. Both thinkers contrast night and day, obscure nonground and the clear images of consciousness. Neither thinks that there are two distinct ontological regions (nature/ideas, night/day) but that there is one imagination that opens in the two directions of ideal clarity and obscure ground.

Furthermore, as Schelling and Blanchot share the experience of the night, they both likewise encounter the same difficulty of thinking of such an evasive dimension. Both answer by a relative suppression of the thinking I: “night” is not accessible to my consciousness, inheritor of Descartes’ and Kant’s I, because it is, by definition, its absence. This is why it must be approached in an abandon of the individual conscious self so that the “night itself” can “think” or, rather, engender its images, *in me*. This is how thinking gets momentarily close to mysticism, but neither Schelling nor Blanchot let go as radically as a mystic. Both of them finally turn against total ecstasy by testing the utmost limits of thinking with the help of art, poetry, literature, or, simply, “writing.”

III. The Two Nights of Blanchot

What is the function of the image of the night in the philosophical inquiry into the imagination? Schelling uses it in a recurrent and regular way, although

⁴⁵ Schelling, *Freiheitsschrift*, SWI/7, 361–62.

⁴⁶ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, SWI/7, 233.

⁴⁷ Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, SWI/7, 202.

he does not thematize it. Blanchot uses it in the same sense and explicitly points out that “night” does not only name a specific experience of the withdrawal of the consciousness, but it is also an ancient image that goes back to Heraclitus and Hesiod, who give it a place in the genealogy of elemental divinities: “Chaos” begot “Earth” and “Night,” “Night” begot “Death” and “Sleep,” etc.⁴⁸ This history is self-evident for someone like Schelling; in fact, German Romanticism, and in particular Novalis, started the characterization of the space of the imaginary by the image of the night. Blanchot uses these names—and certain others, like “the outside,” “the neutral,” “the disaster”—as important, maybe inevitable, *images* of the literary experience, but underscores that they cannot be ordered in a *systematic* exposition.⁴⁹ Hence an important consequence: one can only speak about the imaginary via the use of images.

For Blanchot, “night” is double. During the “first night” we sleep: the “first night” gives rest and therefore serves the day without requiring any attention to itself. The “second night,” rather, begins with the experience of insomnia, in which it is not *I* who is awake but the *night* itself.⁵⁰ Blanchot’s “second night” is completely “outside” and therefore neutral, untrue, and impure. “Night is this apparition: ‘everything has disappeared’. It is what we sense when dreams replace sleep, when the dead pass into the deep of the night, when night’s deep appears in those who have disappeared.”⁵¹ If sleep belongs to the first, useful night, dreams belong to the second, deceitful, dangerous night. “The dream touches the region where pure resemblance reigns. Everything there is similar to another and yet another, and this still to another. One seeks the original model, but there is none. The dream is the likeness that refers eternally to likeness.”⁵² The second night is the space in which nothing is truth and everything is likeness and resemblance: the space of pure image. In the sense that

⁴⁸ Blanchot’s main reference in Greek mythology is Clémence Ramnoux. See *L’entretien Infini*, 120 / 85, and Blanchot, *L’amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 212–13; as translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 302, 120. See Clémence Ramnoux, *Héraclite ou l’homme entre les choses et les mots* (Paris: Collection des études anciennes, 1959) and *La nuit et les enfants de la nuit dans la tradition grecque* (Paris: Collection “Symboles,” 1959).

⁴⁹ Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre*, 95 / 57–58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 82 / 48–49.

⁵¹ Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 213; first published 1955; translated by Ann Smock as *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 165. See also the chapter “Le sommeil, la nuit” / “Sleep, night” in the same book.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 362 / 268.

the second night is outside of the world of the living, its imaginary space is inhabited only by the dead.

The duplicity of the night is also the duplicity of the imagination. The first form of the imaginary allows for us to seize the things by their ideas, thereby actually negating the things themselves and having an ideal world at our disposal. This is the world seen through our daily projects—as Heidegger might say, we hardly *see* it, although we quite easily use it. The second form of the imaginary is much more interesting (for the writer) because its images rise in us in such a way that we—passive, but nevertheless fascinated and captivated by them—relinquish ourselves and are drawn to an outside in which “I” does not recognise ‘itself.’”⁵³ When an image belongs to the second form of the imaginary, it has no truth or value, nor does it function in a world. “The pure, formal virginity of the image is originally linked to the elemental strangeness and to the formless weight of being, present in its absence.”⁵⁴ If the first form of the imaginary is still a *formal* game, the second form is “attached to the *depth* [fond], to the *elementary materiality*, the still indeterminate absence of form . . . the formless prolixity of indetermination.”⁵⁵

Now, it seems to me that Blanchot’s two forms of the imagination function almost like Schelling’s light and gravity. Like the first night, light is the visible and/or thinkable figure of singular things. Like the second night, gravity is a nocturnal, insane, blind, dionysian principle that does not give a *reasonable* ground to beings but that makes them produce their own reason or light.

I now describe Blanchot’s second imagination through four decisive features.

1. In its second form, the imaginary appears as *elemental matter*. For Blanchot, only the ideas of reason (like Plato’s ideas) are formal, while pure images are material. The images are not material in the sense of a ὕλη that a formal μορφή could seize: they are not resources or raw materials of literature and thought. Instead, the materiality of the imaginary is elementary, or as Blanchot sometimes says, it belongs to the “Earth.”⁵⁶ The term “elemental” charac-

⁵³ Ibid., 354 / 262.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 347 / 258.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 342 / 255 (my translation).

⁵⁶ “And the poem likewise is not made with ideas, or with words; it is the point from which words begin to become their appearance, and the elemental depth upon which this appearance is opened while at the same time it closes. . . . Here, however, where we seek only to take cognizance of the principal features of the work, let us remember that it is turned towards the elemental deep, toward that element which would seem to be the depth and the shadow of the elemental. . . . For when the work takes place, certainly the elemental is illuminated and the deep is present, as if attracted toward the daylight (even though the work also pushes this deep down

terizes not the substance of the imaginary but its mode of appearing as the withdrawn reverse side of a given horizon. The elemental depth of the work contains not only what we ordinarily understand by “images” but the whole materiality of language: voices, rhythms, “all the scattered ores unknown and floating” (Mallarmé); the elementary depth is “the wordless rhythm and the voice that says nothing but does not cease to speak, must become a power to name.”⁵⁷ Being “elementary,” all of this *is there*, but not as bluntly available tokens: the elementary matter of the imaginary is there as pure *possibilities* that also appear as practical *impossibilities*, as when one needs to say something but cannot find the right words among all the words of a familiar language. But the elemental does not simply subsist: it is active; it attracts and repels; it is not just a possible word but a possibility and an obligation of *saying* it. It is not an obedient matter but an active force which haunts, attracts, seduces, frightens . . . its presence is never immediate but always *affective*. The voice of the element requires the writer to say something, but does not say what or how, and this is why it is the voice of the origin (and not the first word that actually allows one to *begin* to write a book). In such an elementary profundity, language is voice and not sense, element and not matter, obliging law and not a compelling rule.⁵⁸

deeper by resting its full weight there)” (Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 297–98 / 223–24. After these passages, Blanchot criticizes overtly mythological interpretations of the elemental Earth.

Blanchot finds the word “Earth” in Martin Heidegger’s “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”; translated by Albert Hofstadter as “Origin of the Work of Art,” in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), and in *Space of literature* he also refers it to Char, Hölderlin, Rilke and van Gogh.

⁵⁷ Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 299 / 225, 301 / 226.

⁵⁸ In a monumental work on the elementary materiality in literature, Gaston Bachelard has shown how fire, water, air, and earth function like Jungian archetypes in a number of works of literature. According to Bachelard, there are two imaginations, the formal and the material one: in the night of the matter there are direct images of the matter (Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: Librairie José Corti 1942 / Livre de poche 2003, 7). The “elements” are not scientific objects but social ones, as, for example, in Jung (Gaston Bachelard, *La psychanalyse du feu* [Paris, Gallimard, 1949 / folio essais 2005], 47). Nevertheless: “the imagination is nothing but the subject transported onto things: the images carry the mark of the subject” (Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries du repos* [Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1948 / Corti massicotés, 2004], 9). Unlike Bachelard, Blanchot does not think that the elementary imagination is a projection of the *human spirit*: the nocturnal elementary imagination does not *articulate* the world in a primordial way but, on the contrary, dismantles and obscures it. Instead, Blanchot’s conception of the elementary depth of the imagination is very close to the problematic of *being* according to Heidegger (*es gibt*) or Lévinas (*il y a*), only it does not claim to be the

2. The elementary imagination functions by *resemblance*. In fact, there are not two forms of imagination but one imaginary that opens in two directions. On the one side, it gives in to the elementary depth, which is a bottomless chasm destroying the very possibility of sense, while, on the other side, it can stabilize itself into a clear image which can be the origin of a work.⁵⁹ The elementary depth of the imaginary functions by resemblance and repetition, as, for instance, in dreams, in which “the similar eternally refers to the similar,” but it is impossible to end the chain of associations by a conclusive figure or by a rational principle. Against the dispersion in endless repetition, the other aspect of the imaginary is the possibility of fixing a single, identifiable image. Such an image does not re-present a more truthful articulation of the world—how could it, since there is no such thing at the elemental depth of the image that is the origin of the image—but it can *present a sense* by itself and hand it over to new repetitions through which the image can orient an experience. To a certain extent, the image functions like Schelling’s tautology: both explain themselves without exterior references. Blanchot’s “image” is weaker, however, because it does not claim to present a truth, a myth, or a system but is, instead, just a momentary, still, image bound to disintegration, fragmentation, and disaster. In *Space of Literature*, Blanchot “illustrates” the two faces of the imaginary by the myth of Orpheus: the luminous surface of the imaginary is the beautiful face of Eurydice that Orpheus hopes to glimpse when fleeing Hades; its depth is the frightful sight of the dead woman that she really is, already lost among the shadows of the dead. The junction between the two is the look at the cadaver that Blanchot describes in the chapter “The Two Forms of the Imaginary” of *Space of Literature*: the dead body is, according to him, the presence of an absence, a *pure image* of nothing else but itself, a pure instant of the imaginary that punctures ordinary space and time.

3. Being repetitive and bound to the law of similarity, the elementary imagination is *plural*. Schelling’s gravity was characterized by the plurality and finitude of *nature*. The plurality of Blanchot’s elemental imagination is not exactly natural, although it sometimes opens onto wild spaces of the sea or the

truth of being nor even a *myth* of its origin but, rather, the fragmentation and the dispersion of all such unifying principles.

⁵⁹ Another name for the imaginary is the *neuter*. As Pascal Massie tells, “The neuter, as the secret of the secret (‘which is no secret’) is beyond meaning, pointing both to limitlessness of language and to the limit that gives rise to meaning. . . . For Blanchot, the neuter cannot be subordinated to being’s unity and totality. Any act of naming . . . presupposes a ‘condition of original namelessness’ that, at the same time, it strives to cover up” (“The Secret and the Neuter: On Heidegger and Blanchot,” *Research in Phenomenology* 37 [2007]: 49.)

night. Fundamentally, Blanchot describes it as the quasi-natural outside of the human world, which he sometimes fills with formless crowds and sometimes with the impersonal “*il*” (in order to avoid comprehending the plurality as a “we,” through which the plurality is absorbed in a superior subject). Often he describes it as if it were inhabited by *inhuman* beings, like the shadows of the dead in Hades, or diverse feminine, half-animal spirits of nature, like the Sirens⁶⁰ or the Erinyes (who are the mythological “Daughters of the Night”).⁶¹ His principal aim is to prevent the closure of this domain under any unitary figure—a figure of the cosmos, an idea of reason, a myth of a people. This is also why he would be closer to a thinking of the formless *χώρα* than of an establishment of a new *φύσις* (like the Presocratic air, earth, etc. that were reinterpreted by a number of his contemporaries, such as Eugen Fink, Luce Irigaray, Gaston Bachelard, and Kostas Axelos). Fundamentally, however, Blanchot avoids all *substantial* descriptions of the second imagination, preferring instead to speak of it as an exterior *region* that sometimes appears to be inhabited by a faceless, scarcely human, crowd.

4. Blanchot discovers the elemental imagination in a very specific *experience without experience*. In all senses, it is an experience of an absence, since, in it, both the “I” (who is supposed to be the subject of the experience) and the “world” (that is supposed to be the place or the object of the experience) are absent. Far from being void, however, it is the experience of the “origin of literature”—in other words, of the elemental imaginary itself, insofar as it cannot ever be immediately present but always acts from a distance. In such an experience, however, the imagination “calls”—it calls forth a new language and a new thought. The calling of the new language is described, for instance, in “La bête de Lascaux,” according to which the origin of a literary work is not its genealogical past but its prophetic future—prophetic not in the sense that it would predict future events but because it is a language that has not begun yet. It is the future impersonal language to come.⁶² The calling of a new writing and thinking is described in particular in the extreme formulations of *L'écriture du désastre*. In this book, Blanchot describes a total “extenuation of

⁶⁰ See Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959 / folio essais, 1995), translated by Charlotte Mandell as *The Book to Come* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), chap. 1, “La rencontre de l’imaginaire” / “Encountering the Imaginary.”

⁶¹ I explain Blanchot’s use of this image in “Les Filles de la Nuit,” in *L’Œuvre du féminin dans l’écriture de Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Éric Hoppenot (Grignan: Les éditions complicités, 2004), 81–94.

⁶² Blanchot, *Une voix venue d’ailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard 2002), 57–58, translated by Charlotte Mandell, *A Voice from Elsewhere* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007).

the subject” in a “time without present, an I without I.”⁶³ This “thinking of the outside” “shirks from all possibilities of experience”: “there is no experience of the disaster because there is no ‘I’ to whom it could happen”—yet, nevertheless, the disaster is there. At this point, Blanchot is, at once, very close to Schelling and very far from him. Close, because, while being outside of ordinary experience, the disaster is not outside of *thought*, and the thinking of the disaster precisely calls forth a new kind of thinking. And far, because the thinking of the disaster does not seek the living unity of thought, but on the contrary, it is a thinking without questions that rather consists in fragments. Hence the necessity of a very specific writing: “le désastre dé-crit”: it describes and dis-writes and nevertheless goes nowhere outside of the text.⁶⁴

I hope that these succinct remarks suffice to show why Blanchot thinks that the “deconstruction” of the pure, ideal figures of the first imagination is not an end of thinking and of art, as in a certain Hegelianism, but the manifestation of a second imagination that allows another kind of a thinking and writing: it may be a disastrous dis-writing, but, for Blanchot, it takes the measure of the extremities of our world better than any other (after all, *L'écriture du désastre* is a book about concentration camps).

IV. Towards a Shared Experience of Dissolution

At this point, we should know the general outline of the nocturnal region explored by Schelling and Blanchot.

Notwithstanding the slight discrepancy between the terms “imagination” and “the imaginary,”⁶⁵ both Schelling and Blanchot envisage the space of the imagination as an *impersonal element* and not as a human faculty. Both describe it as a *nocturnal force* that goes in two directions. On the one hand, it produces the diurnal images that let things appear and permit us to think and orient ourselves in the world. On the other hand, these images do not reflect any

⁶³ Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 29–30 / 14–15.

⁶⁴ In a thorough examination of the figure of the night in Blanchot’s work, Marlène Zarader concludes by rejecting his experience of the night, insofar as it disintegrates the very subject itself. I think, however, that Blanchot’s “disaster” is less an end of thinking than a passage from the classical and the phenomenological *logos* to another kind of thinking, which acknowledges its need of an impersonal imaginary. See Marlène Zarader, *L'être et le neutre. À partir de Maurice Blanchot* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001).

⁶⁵ Schelling’s term is “imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*), which ordinarily names a faculty, whereas Blanchot prefers the term “the imaginary” (*l'imaginaire*), which evokes a space or a region.

solid reasons or clear ideas, but they rise from and sink to a nocturnal bottomless chasm, which is not a reserve of images but the continuous activity of the production and the loss of the sense of singular beings. This chasm distorts the venerable question of being by replacing “being” by the quasi-ontological element of the “imagination.” When being only appears through imagination, it becomes difficult to question it “as such” (as, for instance, Heidegger would have it), and it becomes imperative to investigate its appearing also by the means of art and literature.

Facing such an obscure domain, both Schelling and Blanchot ask how *thinking* could be an *exposition to the night*. Both of them know that such an exposition to the imaginary really characterizes the “poet’s genius” (Schelling) or the “writer’s inspiration” (Blanchot), insofar as it is not the author’s self-expression but the expression of the impersonal imagination in and through him or her. But Schelling and Blanchot are not (only) writers, because they are so keen on *reflecting* on the event of “inspiration.” Finally, Schelling calls “ecstasy of reason” the act in which the philosopher’s self-consciousness gives way to the absolute that thinks in him or her. This resembles Blanchot’s image of the “second night,” in which *I* am not awake, but the *night* itself becomes the subject of the insomnia, which opens the way towards the obscure regions of the imaginary.

Even though Schelling’s and Blanchot’s experiences of the night are similar, they disagree on its origin and the destination.

Schelling ultimately studies the Absolute in view of an image of the totality. In his early philosophy of nature, the principle of unity is the cosmos (figured by the system of gravitation or by the universal organism), and in his mature philosophy, it is the God (God is, for Schelling, a principle that matures in the philosophy of mythology—in which God develops through the theologonical process consisting of a succession of gods—but that ultimately aims at a monotheist philosophy of revelation). Blanchot conversely considers that our world cannot accommodate a unitary principle anymore. In *Writing of the Disaster*, he specifically says that the very principle of the cosmic order has withdrawn; the “disaster” has dismissed all sovereign orders and left us with the empty desert of nothingness, of empty, outside and anonymous noise.⁶⁶ Because since Nietzsche people tend to call such an experience “nihilist,” it might be useful to specify that Blanchot describes the dismissal of great transcendent orders as a *joyous* revelation.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Blanchot, *Écriture du désastre*, 100–101, 125, 139–40 / 61, 78, 88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 176–77 / 114–15.

But it is maybe impossible to maintain a rigid opposition between Schelling's totality and Blanchot's fragmentation. Schelling thinks in terms of the totality, but he does it by thinking of the process in which an ideal totality is gradually engendered within a plural, multiple, real world. Thinking the *process* of finding the unity of a multiple world, Schelling does not suppress the real plurality or reduce his thinking to the product of thought (like a system or a myth). Correlatively, he thinks that the coming of the unique God passes by thinking the theogonical process of diverse mythologies. Instead of defending either the pure unity of God or a totally fragmented experience of the world, Schelling and Blanchot actually share a thinking of *myths* and *images* that mediate between the two extremes. Both use mythological images—for instance, the image of Night, daughter of Earth—in order to express their fundamental thought, but they use them in different manners. At least in his youth, Schelling looked for a “new mythology” that could give sense to the political community. Mature Blanchot is strongly opposed to the political utilization of myths and uses the mythological images as pure images instead. No truth shines forth from them, and this is why they are even more tautegorical than Schelling's own myths. This is how Blanchot and Schelling, sharing the “same” double conception of the imagination, use it in two senses. Schelling rises towards the clear idea (but cannot ever suppress the night from which the idea rises); Blanchot follows the multiplication of more and more truthless images and descends towards the obscure un-ground (but he is still oriented by the fascination of images). We are left not with a choice between clarity and obscurity, but with a rhythm of a unique imagination that sways between unification and fragmentation, between figuration and defiguration, like the respiration of a sleeper.