The Secret and the Neuter: 
On Heidegger and Blanchot

Pascal Massie  
Miami University of Ohio

Abstract

Blanchot’s thought has often been understood as a critique and a reversal of Heidegger’s. Indeed, many formulas of the former are construed as mere inversions of the latter. Yet, the philosophical problem raised by the encounter between Blanchot and Heidegger cannot be sufficiently accounted for in terms of ‘inversion’ or ‘reversal’. Focusing on the question of the secret (Blanchot’s term) in its relation to Geheimnis (Heidegger), this essay starts with a discussion of the notion of secrecy in relation to mysticism and argues that (a) this difference should not be construed in terms of a disjunction. Blanchot’s relation to Heidegger is not on a par with Levinas’ critical account of the latter; (b) that to acknowledge the centrality of the secret does not commit one to mysticism; and (c) that Blanchot’s ultimate claims about the neuter commit him to a position that is much closer to Heidegger’s than his apparent disavowal of the latter would seem to entail.

Keywords
Heidegger, Blanchot, secret, neuter, mysticism

The intent of this essay is to elucidate the difference between what Heidegger names ‘being’ and what Blanchot names ‘the neuter’ and to do so by focusing on the notion of the ‘secret’. It is my contention that this notion is pivotal—in the sense that a pivot designates a hinge, a point on which everything else revolves. One could say that Heidegger arrives at a thought of the secret (das Geheimnis) while Blanchot departs from it. This, at least, seems to be the case. Just as the proximity of Blanchot to Heidegger has often been noticed (in particular with respect to the question of death), Blanchot’s apparent reversals of Heidegger’s formulas has often been interpreted as a rejection of these formulas. And indeed Blanchot often presents his reader with what

---

1) For instance, Ullrich Haase and William Large note that “the idea of authentic death, as the origin of my knowledge [Heidegger] is transformed [in Blanchot] into the infinite passivity
appears to be a mere inversion of Heidegger. For instance, while Heidegger understands death as the utmost "possibility of impossibility," Blanchot answers in terms of the "impossibility of possibility." While Heidegger rejects the inauthentic understanding of death exemplified by the commonsensical saying: "one dies [man stirbt]," Blanchot answers "I’ never dies but ‘one’ dies" (L’Espace littéraire, 124). As a consequence, on Blanchot's account, death can never be "my own." Similarly, Blanchot stresses passivity in a way that seems explicitly opposed to Dasein’s 'resolution,' and his insistence on 'the night' seems to contrast with Heidegger’s 'clearing of being'.

And yet, Blanchot’s relation to Heidegger is not sufficiently understood if we simply classify the former along with the critics of the latter. In what follows, I shall argue that their relation (and therefore their difference) is best captured in one of Blanchot’s sayings (albeit about two other figures, namely: Joubert and Mallarmé); it is a matter of “a mere nothing [that] separates here two infinitely different experiences…. It is essential but difficult to always hold firmly this nothing that separates thinking.” More specifically, the question concerns the difference between two types of silences: a silence that would be pregnant with a revelation in waiting (which, on a certain reading at least, could characterize Heidegger’s Geheimnis) and a silence that has nothing to say (Blanchot’s neuter).

The critical nature of Blanchot’s remarks on Heidegger is not a matter of ‘critique’ in the academic sense of the term; rather (to use one of Blanchot’s phrases), it is a matter of experience, or more precisely, of “limit experience,” keeping in this expression the ambiguity of the objective or subjective genitive: it is an experience of the limit and the limit of experience. In this dual sense, a limit experience is at stake in the difference between Heidegger’s "Abgrund" (the abyss) or "das Nichts" (the nothing), and Blanchot’s "la nuit" (night) or "le neutre" (the neuter). For "das Nichts" (which Blanchot links to
