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Blanchot's Windows

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Abstract: This article intends to analyse the presence of the window in Blanchot's fictional work. The window, or window pane, can be considered a central topos in Blanchot's approach of the literary space, not only because it recurs in different stories but moreover because it relates to the event of the story. I have a double claim as regards this topos. First, the topos foregrounds the importance of the perceptual basis in Blanchot's approach to the image in his own fictional writings. Second, it functions in the transformation of the narrative in his fictional writings and in this regard reveals the importance of the literary space in Blanchot's approach to the image. As concerns the first claim, I will show how different meanings of the window metaphor, as understood in the theory of the pictorial image since the Renaissance, remain present in Blanchot's use of the metaphor. As regards the second claim, I will establish how the meaning of the window pane in Blanchot's fictional writings is connected to specific narrative constraints, for instance as expression of intentions, or as metaphor for the narrator's experience, or as means to relate the event of the story. In the first part of this article, I recall the pictorial definition of the image in terms of window and its transformation in Romanticism and Surrealism, and show that it is possible to situate Blanchot's approach to the image in terms of "fascination" within this legacy. In the second part, I analyse the different meanings associated with the window pane in Blanchot's fictional work, exploring to what extent they repeat the Romanticist and Surrealist interpretations and how significantly they move beyond this legacy. This comparative investigation leads to an articulation of Blanchot's theory of the image as evidenced from the perspective of his own fictional writings.

Keywords: Maurice Blanchot, the metaphor of the window, theory of the image, literary fiction, the visibility of the imaginary

1 Introduction

In Maurice Blanchot's fictional work, the window holds a significant presence. The window pane recurs as a topos throughout his short stories and in his third novel, *Le Très-Haut* (1948). Blanchot describes a distinctive experience as "the phenomenon of the window" ("le phénomène de la vitre") and this expression reappears in *L'Arrêt de mort* (79) and in *Au moment voulu* (88, 89). In *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, the narrator recalls – three times, and in the same words – an experience of estrangement that relates to the window pane (cf. 33–34, 36–37, 101–102). In *L'Écriture du désastre*, in the fictional fragment that Blanchot called a primitive scene ("Une scène primitive?"), the window returns as the very condition of the related event: the scene presents a boy of seven or eight years standing before a window and looking through the pane (117). In this article, I will examine the different meanings of this recurrence; in particular, I will analyze how the topos of the window contributes to the narrative transformations in Blanchot's fictional work.

There are two main reasons for examining this topology. First, it expresses an important feature of the space of literature as described in Blanchot's own narratives. Second, it refers to (and requires inclusion of) the general question of the image, a central issue in Blanchot's work and reception. The main reference text on this issue is the well-known essay "Les deux versions de l'imaginaire," at the end of *L'Espace littéraire*. Blanchot scholars have commented on the essay primarily to note Blanchot's ambiguous understanding of the image, which is as much the presentation of an absent object as it is the appearance of its dislocation and disintegration. For that reason, the image is time and again considered in relation to what Blanchot called the outside or the neuter. Marlène Zarader, in her book *L'Être et le neutre: A partir de Maurice Blanchot*, speaks of the image as "the extremity of the neuter" ("la pointe du neuter," 215–7; cf. Antonioli 70–93). In particular, the far-reaching analogy between the dead body and the image, which Blanchot elaborates in the essay, has critically influenced more recent publications. The French art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman comments on the analogy in order to discuss the ungraspable problem of resemblance in the visual arts (Didi-Hubermann). The German art historian Hans Belting, in his *Bild-Antropologie*, refers to the analogy in showing the intrinsic anthropological connection between the image and the deceased person on the basis of ancient death masks and painted skulls (144–145). Blanchot's description of the dead body is also an important source of inspiration for understanding the new visual presence of death in contemporary art and media.¹

1 Cf. Macho and Marek. This publication entails translation into German of Blanchot's essay "Les deux versions de l'imaginaire."

Of course, any examination of the window in Blanchot's narratives will encounter the ambiguity of the image in its own way. We will therefore have to return to Blanchot's reflections on the image. However, the perspective chosen from the recurrence of the window pane in his narratives introduces something new. The dead body and the window can both be considered as metaphors of the image – the former, because Blanchot, in his essay “Les deux versions de l'imaginaire,” explicitly establishes an analogy between the image and the dead body; the latter, because of a long tradition in which the window is viewed as such a metaphor. While descriptions of dead bodies are rare in Blanchot's fictional work (it is the experience of dying which is at stake in the scene of the father's death in the first version of *Thomas l'Obscur* or in the scene of J.'s death in *L'Arrêt de mort*), the window pane recurs in various stories as a constitutive element of the narrated events. The window pane can thus be considered a case in which Blanchot's reflections on the image and his approach to the space of literature remain connected. In this regard, the window allows for examining how the ambiguity of the image is at stake in Blanchot's own practice of writing fiction. Moreover, whereas the metaphor of the dead body is more adequate for investigation of the ontological status of the image as an object, the metaphor of the window focuses more on the visual experience of the image. The metaphor of the window has had a perceptual basis and visual relevance in the theory of painting since the Renaissance. It was used to define the pictorial image as a representation of an event or a matter of facts in the world in accordance with (and on the basis of) the experience of visual perception. I will show that these aspects remain present in Blanchot's reflections on the image and in his fictional work, even when transformed, destabilized, and dislocated by a narratively construed condensation of multiple meanings.

The goal of this article is thus twofold: I will analyze the different meanings and appearances of the window pane in Blanchot's fictional work, showing how they are implicated in the narrative's transformation; and I will re-examine Blanchot's approach to the image from the perspective opened by the metaphor of the window. In order to achieve these two goals, I first summarize the historical interpretations of the window metaphor, whose origins lie in a theory of painting, and thematize a displacement of its meaning in Romanticism and in Surrealism. In the second part, I examine, on the basis of this comparative view, the horizon of experience involved in the presence of the window pane in Blanchot's fictional work, elucidating the interconnection of visual experience, intentions, and narrative transformations.

2 The Metaphor of the Window as the Expression of a New Theory of the Image

One cannot say that Blanchot formulated an original philosophy of the image, or that he engaged in the discussions of the theories of the image. Moreover, in the totality of his critical work, explicit comments about the visual arts are scarce, and his fiction include few remarks on paintings and photography. Interestingly, it is only in his fictional work that the window is mentioned not only as the site of the narrated event, but moreover as an element of the event itself, as the name of the experience which the narrator confronts. In his use of the term, Blanchot includes a specific visual experience; in doing so he recalls a central feature of the classic metaphor of the window as understood in the visual arts.

The window has been a well-known metaphor in the theory of painting since the Renaissance. Its meaning differs in many ways from the classic metaphor of the mirror. The latter was originally used to define the ontological status of the work of art. It expresses the relation between the work of art and the world in terms of depiction, and the relation between the act of creation and the created object in terms of mimicry. The former, however, relates to visual perception and captures the visual field, defined by the relation between the eye of the beholder and the fragment of the world visible to this eye. The act of creation, intended by this metaphor, is more a showing than a representing. The difference between the two metaphors is based upon the philosophical opposition between idealism and realism, an opposition that arises from the respective ontologies of Plato and Aristotle: the image, as mirror, reflects the ideal forms (as per Neo-Platonism); as window, it gives access to the empirical, visible part of the world.

Leon Battista Alberti, in his book on painting (1435), compares the image with an open window, but in doing so he was cognizant of introducing a new definition of the image, a definition based upon geometrical analysis of the visual field, with its starting point in the eye. The visual representation of this analysis implicitly offers the pattern of a window. Alberti's use of the metaphor was therefore inspired less by the importance of visual representations of windows in Renaissance paintings than by the presence of a geometrical pattern, which enabled a new techniques of painting. The art of painting was no longer defined by the given forms and ideas of the spiritual world; it was now "nichts Anders als die auf einer Fläche mittelst Linien und Farben zu Stande gebrachte künstlerische Darstellung eines Quer-(Durch)schnitt der Sehpyramide gemäß einer bestimmten Entfernung, einem bestimmten Ausgangspunkte und einer bestimmten Beleuchtung" (68). The metaphor of the window brings the

image in relation to the eye of the beholder, considered to be the original point of view from which the world becomes visible. In this theory, the visible is defined in a new way, namely, as a visual perceiving from a distance which can be exactly determined in a mathematical way, starting from the eye of the beholder.

At the end of the introduction of *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot, addressing the question “qu'est-ce que l'image?” (32), clearly embraces the tradition of a theory which understands the window as a basic metaphor for the image, a theory that takes the visual experience of the beholder as a starting point. Interestingly, he does not examine the image-creating capabilities of narrating when he tries to answer the question of what an image is. His examination goes straight to the main problem of visual experience. He does not consider a kind of object in his analysis of the image – whether artwork or representation – but rather a particular kind of perceiving: “Voir suppose la distance, la décision séparatrice, le pouvoir de n'être pas en contact et d'éviter dans le contact la confusion. Voir signifie que cette séparation est devenue cependant rencontre.” (28) As with Alberti over 550 years ago, the image is defined as a visual perceiving from a distance and the distance is measured from the eye of the beholder. The gaze, the eye, and the act of visual perceiving are critically important issues in Blanchot's fictional work. They are present from the opening line of his first novel, *Thomas l'Obscur*: “Thomas s'assit et regarda la mer.” (7) Yet there is a decisive distinction from Alberti's definition of the image: whereas Alberti defines the visual perceiving from a distance as an activity of the mind, which can be exactly determined on the principles of a mathematical method, Blanchot describes the act of perceiving as a passivity, as being touched: “saisi, touché, mis en contact avec l'apparence” (*L'Espace littéraire* 29). The act of visual perceiving, even when its starting point is in the eye of the beholder, does not imply any spiritual activity of the mind. The visual is no longer correlated to a view on the world; rather it is a pure appearing which penetrates the eye. Blanchot calls this being touched by the visual a “fascination” and from this semantic displacement he introduces a new definition of the image: “Ce qui nous est donné par un contact à distance est l'image, et la fascination est la passion de l'image.” (29)

This transformation must be kept in mind when analyzing the recurrence of the window in Blanchot's fictional work. Let us first consider how Romanticism and Surrealism attended to and transformed the window theme; each, as will be seen, had considerable influence on Blanchot's use of the window. It is Romanticism that starts to explore the distance of visual perceiving as a field of subjective experiences. The window is painted here in order to focus upon the beholder's inner experience, itself symbolized by the spatial separation between the interior

of the painter's room and the world outside, which appears through the window. This separation is often seen as the expression of a yearning for the world outside, with its events and brightness, from which the beholder is set apart. The human figure sits near the window or leans over to look through it, or the room is empty and the separation between the dark interior and the brightness of the world outside is accessible only to the eye of the beholder. Romantic paintings of interiors with windows do not break with the realistic representations of the empirical world. The window demarcates an enclosed place; it reveals the room's intimacy and meanwhile attracts the gaze to the outside. Whether open or closed, the window is transparent; the light from outside breaks through the window, penetrating into the interiority of the room. And romantic paintings excel in expressing the different nuances of this light that passes through the window, yet never reflect the medial function of the window.

Surrealism develops the romantic legacy of the window paintings. As André Breton remarks in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (*Surrealism and Painting*), he is not capable of considering an image in another way than as a window.² His first concern is to understand the view opened by the window. In his Manifest, he gives a detailed description of a dream in which an image of a walking man appears. A window pane divides the figure perpendicular to the axis of his body. The realistic painting of a man who looks through the window is transformed by a surrealist, fantastic image. The window as the place of a separation between inside and outside symbolizes a separation between two worlds: one which is real, recognizable; the other fantastic, imaginary. Each is estranged through the window. What passes through the window undergoes a dreamlike metamorphosis. Meanwhile, the medial function of the window is revealed: the window's specific materiality becomes visible and its surface appears to be non-transparent and reflecting. In short, Surrealism grants the window metaphor a new symbolic function. The window is no longer transparent. Its materiel presence has an encrypted meaning. The painting must be deciphered, as is the case in René Magritte's (window) paintings. However, the painting is still submitted to the eye of the beholder: the act of deciphering is a visual process. It is only in the margins of the Surrealist movement, leading beyond its meaning, that the non-transparency of the window pane begins to reveal the opacity of the visible and of visual perceiving. Robert Delaunay creates *Les fenêtres simultanées sur la ville* (1912), a series of paintings in which the transparency of the window manifestly is put in

² “[I]l m’est impossible de considérer un tableau autrement que comme une fenêtre dont mon premier souci est de savoir sur quoi *elle donne*, autrement dit si, d’où je suis, ‘la vue est belle,’ et je n’aime rien tant que ce qui s’étend devant moi à *perte de vue*.” (2)

question. Yves Tanguy, who becomes a companion of the Surrealist movement, paints the sky in *The Big Window* (1950) as a window pane obscured by a dark, greasy layer which has been partially scratched away: through these scratches a bright lightening tries to penetrate. It is correct to say that these paintings begin to question the transparency of the visible as such. They still submit a view on the world to the eye of the beholder, yet the visual experience is challenged by an opacity it can no longer clarify or decipher.

In her article on the Surrealists' window paintings, Susan Harris Smith summarizes the different meanings of these paintings as follows:

Surrealists added four new ways of looking at a window to the already rich tradition that they had assimilated and mocked. First, windows often signal metamorphosis and movement. Second, a window may serve as the reconciling touchstone for disjunctive images. Third, a window may or may not be a window at all; it might be opaque or reflective. Here the very function of the window is re-examined. Finally, [...] the window in Surrealist work is frequently the aperture through which a face peers into, rather than out of, a room. In these instances the window represents the introspective, self-examining process essential to the Surrealists. (57)

As will be seen in the second part of this article, these meanings, not only of the Surrealists' but also of the Romantics' windows, return in Blanchot's literary work, although transformed and displaced by different narrative procedures.

It should be noted, however, that the window as a metaphor of visual experience is not appropriate for literary creation. Does it make sense to use the metaphor of the window in order to explain how literary texts describe visual experience? Nevertheless, it is surprising to realize that the form of the window, although widely represented in various ways in paintings since at least the end of the 19th century, was not taken up in any significant way by literary creations. Charles Baudelaire mentions in *Spleen de Paris* (*Paris Spleen*) the windows of Parisian apartments, which he desires to penetrate with his gaze and behind which he imagines the sceneries and destinies of quotidian life (288). Here, the window is not only the place which separates the room's private intimacy from the public street, but moreover the entrance to Baudelaire's imaginary world. In the work of the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the window receives a fundamental meaning, as metaphor for artistic transformation. "Que la vitre soit l'art," he writes in his poem "Les Fenêtres" (32–33), which includes elements that the Surrealists would adopt, for instance the window as the magic place of metamorphosis. Jean-Paul Sartre, in contrast, in his essay "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" employs the metaphor of the window on the basis of its transparency, in order to establish the distinction between the prosaic and the poetic use of language. The poet is confronted with the opacity of language and considers words as objects.

The prose writer, however, intends to engage him or herself in the world and is directed through language to the world.³ In prose, words refer to the real objects and facts in the world and they never lose this evidence of denotation.

It is quite likely that Blanchot was familiar with these texts and with these different meanings of the metaphor of the window. But the presence of the window metaphor in his own fictional work is still very different. Sartre mentions the metaphor of the window only once in his article on literature; likewise, in Mallarmé's poetry the theme of the window does not recur or lead to reorganization of the poetical space. In Blanchot's fictional work, on the contrary, the window recurs and engages the narrative, and this distinguishes his fiction: he experiments with the meanings which are evoked by the metaphor of the window and transforms the window into a means of (dis)organizing the narrative. Moreover, in line with developments from Surrealist paintings, he thematizes the ambiguity of the (non-)transparency and (in)visibility of the window pane. Thus, the question now is: what are the meanings and the distinctive features of the topos of the window in Blanchot's fictional work?

3 The Narrative Displacements of the Metaphor of the Window in Blanchot's Fictional Work

Expressing the displeasure of the experience of separation, Blanchot's metaphoric use of the window pane in his stories *L'Arrêt de mort* and *Au moment voulu* initially seems to join a romantic interpretation of the window. The spatial separation, marked by the window pane, between the interiority of the room and the outside world symbolizes the subjective feeling of an insurmountable gap within the lived experiences of the narrator. This experience of distance, provoking the experience of isolation and solitude, preludes his joining the events of the world; it is expressed by phrases such as "behind the window pane" ("derrière la vitre", *L'Arrêt de mort* 98; *Au moment voulu* 53, 80), "through the window pane" ("à travers la vitre", *L'Arrêt de mort* 72, 73, 89; *Au moment voulu* 75), and "under a window pane" ("sous une vitre", *L'Arrêt de mort* 79, 88). For example:

3 "[L]'attitude poétique (qui) considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes. Car l'ambiguïté du signe implique qu'on puisse à son gré le traverser comme une vitre et poursuivre à travers lui la chose signifiée ou tourner son regard vers sa *réalité* et le considérer comme objet." (64)

L'étrangeté consistait en ceci que le phénomène de la vitre, dont j'ai parlé, s'appliquait à tout, mais principalement aux êtres et aux objets d'un certain intérêt. Par exemple, si je lisais un livre qui m'intéressait, je le lisais avec un vif plaisir, mais mon plaisir lui-même était sous une vitre, je pouvais le voir, l'apprécier, mais non l'user. (*L'Arrêt de mort* 79)

And from *Au moment voulu*:

Cela dura, antique farce: le dernier moment, heureux, au point de n'être jamais le dernier. Je le reconnus, toujours parfaitement heureux, avec sa clarté qui est la plus joyeuse et la plus libre, mais à présent joyeusement lointain derrière la vitre, repris par le cours du monde, sans rancune pour avoir été joué comme moi. (53)

These descriptions reveal that seeing, as thematized by Blanchot in his literary works, not only concerns the visual experience of an object in the world starting from a given point of view, but also acquires a reflexive meaning. The narrator's own lived experiences are perceived from a distance. This is the strangeness that the story witnesses and that the window metaphor seeks to address. It provokes another visual perceiving, for the distance to the perceiver can no longer be fixed. The metaphor of the window combines precisely these two aspects: the visual perceiving from a distance and the impossibility of measuring this distance inherent to the experience. For this reason, the metaphor of the window expresses the experience of a malaise. This malaise is first described in romantic terms, as a desire to break the window pane into pieces and by this act to release oneself from separation and solitude. In the short story "Le dernier mot," the act of smashing the window pane is presented by the narrator as a fact. The act of violence results in a bleeding wound: "Je cassai la vitre, mes mains se déchirèrent, le sang, goutte à goutte, coulait dans le ciel par cette déchirure." (77) In later short stories, the narrator mentions only the representation of this desire, whose realization is no longer taken for granted. For example, in *Au moment voulu*:

J'aurais pu me lever et, comme l'on dit, casser les vitres: je pense que j'avais assez de force pour cela. Sûrement, dans cette patience terrible qui me maintenait au point mort d'un désir furieux, il y avait cette tentation de parler, une terrible, une dramatique tentation de prononcer sur ce calme une parole dénonciatrice, un mot [...]. (83)

The experience of a malaise has yet another origin, namely, the incessant continuation of visual perceiving from a distance. The window pane is not only the place that separates and where this separation becomes visible. It is also the place of a penetration, the gaze being exposed to that which penetrates through the window. "Le phénomène de la vitre jouait ici un jeu étrange. La neige ne s'y arrêta pas, elle pénétrait réellement dans la chambre, mais était-ce la neige? seulement son côté pervers, un rien éhonté et trompeur, quoique vivant." (82) Or, as in *Le Très-Haut*: "une lueur plate, froide, plus terrible que le feu, oui une

peinture du feu [...] [qui] se colla à la vitre.” (105) In these descriptions of what Blanchot calls the phenomenon of the window, the visual experience acquires the meaning of a seeing, a seeing which is also a fascination, as Blanchot elucidates in *L'Espace littéraire*: “La fascination est [...], le regard de l'incessant et de l'interminable, en qui l'aveuglement est vision encore, vision qui n'est plus possibilité de voir, mais impossibilité de ne pas voir [...].” (29)

However, Blanchot's window pane is not the site of a passage to the world outside, as in the Romantic tradition. It neither joins two worlds nor establishes any connection between a real world and a surrealist, fantastic world. The world, which appears through the window, is not encrypted or fantastic. On the contrary, Blanchot's windows let disappear the possibility of understanding visual perceiving in relation to the world and of elucidating it from a determined position. What penetrates through the window is not delineated in its visibility. It neither has the meaning of a symbolic transformation nor does it provoke introspection: both meanings still enable the narrator to bridge the distance of visual perceiving and to submit the visual experience to a particular (albeit encrypted) meaning, for they do not put into question the position of the perceiver, but instead summon it. Indeed, the visual perceiving, as described through Blanchot's use of the window metaphor, detaches itself from the perspective of the perceiver and destabilizes the possibility of delineating its distance. Moreover, in Blanchot's metaphor, it is not possible to pass through the window. The window does not lead into another world or invite transformation in a new, unknown world. Although it provokes a desire to break the window pane into fragments, such a transgression or liberation in this sense never becomes effective. The narrator's representation of smashing the window does not let disappear or transform the experience of malaise, which Blanchot relates to the phenomenon of the window. Blanchot's narrative displacements of the window sketch another possibility, namely, examining the presence of the window pane, inventing new metaphoric uses, and experimenting with its function in the development of the story.

Let us summarize the main features of Blanchot's approach to the image that we could articulate until now, starting from the metaphor of the window. What Blanchot calls, in several short stories, “the phenomenon of the window” expresses a particular experience of visual perceiving. It is a seeing from a distance, without being able to measure the remote space in relation to the perceiver. This kind of visual perceiving is not intended to be trained towards a delineated object in the world, nor is it correlated to any perspective on the world. What distinguishes this kind of perceiving is a reflexive modality in which all experiences are lived from a distance. The window pane functions in this respect as a place where the distance of perceiving becomes itself visible. It symbolizes a separation between inner experience and the outside world from which the visible inces-

santly penetrates; it expresses the experience of a malaise in which the visible detaches itself from the capacity of the perceiver to see and recognize his own world. In this respect it de-subjectifies and de-personalizes visual perception.

These are not all features of Blanchot's windows metaphor. It remains unclear why and how the window pane becomes a fundamental metaphor for literary creation in Blanchot's fictional work. The window is a condition of a particular appearing, yet its own reality remains concealed in the experience of visual perceiving. The window pane is transparent yet not visible. Through its surface there continuously appears that which comes from outside or is reflected from the inside. Here the fictional space of narration opens a possibility which supersedes the limits of visual perceiving; indeed, this possibility gives Blanchot's windows descriptions their most singular features. In fiction, windows are typically a banal place where a particular event (a perception, an action, an emotion, a matter of fact) is located. This is the case in a fragment that Blanchot termed a primitive scene ("Une scène primitive?"). The presence of the window pane seems at first glance indifferent and subordinate to the narrated event. It seems to function merely as an instrument by which to locate the event and create an effect of realism in the story. Yet, in the imaginary space of the narration, it is possible to destabilize this function, to foreground the presence of the window pane, and also to reflect it as a condition of the narrated event. In this scene, as I will argue, this happens, via recurrence of the window's presence, in such a way that the window's transparency is put into question, in letting the window appear as "broken": "comme à travers la vitre brisée" (*L'Écriture du désastre* 117). It is not evident from the description of the scene why the window suddenly appears so; clearly, however, the function of the window pane from the first to the second token has been changed. In what follows, I will examine more closely Blanchot's narrative displacements of the window and I will show how his narrative techniques succeed in relating the window to the event of narrating.

First, the experience of estrangement, as discussed earlier in relation to the "phenomenon of the window," concerns the I-narrator. His narration searches for elucidation of this experience which continues to insist. Second, the transparency of the window is put into question because of its inaccessible materiality, which is being highlighted through other senses, namely, touch and hearing. These other senses enable the narrator to establish a direct relation between the window's inaccessible materiality and the activity of writing, as is the case in *Le Très-Haut*:

Je frottait l'enduit qui épaississait les carreaux; je pris l'un des papiers et, après avoir gratté avec l'ongle, je réussis à amener sur la vitre une légère transparence. [...] A la longue, en examinant mieux le jour de trois doigts que j'avais ouvert dans la vitre, je reconnus qu'il ressemblait à une inscription, laquelle, par cet interstice, semblait donner le même nom à tout ce que je voyais. (149, 152–153)

In another passage from *Le Très-Haut*, the materiality of the window becomes audible in the vibration of the pane, and the I-narrator identifies himself with this vibration: “Pendant toute une nuit, j’avais entendu vibrer la vitre, c’était une vibration, neutre, toujours plus rapide, toujours plus près de la brisure: et maintenant, c’est moi cette vitre qui vibre.” (78) Finally, in *Celui qui ne m’accompagnait pas*, the window pane is itself the central event of the story. The I-narrator describes an intense experience of estrangement; a penetrating gaze looks inside/outside through the pane and this event distresses the narrator:

En regardant par les grandes baies vitrées – il y en avait trois – je vis qu’au-delà se tenait quelqu’un; dès que je l’aperçus, il se tourna contre la vitre et, sans s’arrêter à moi, fixa rapidement, d’un regard intense, mais rapide, toute l’étendue et la profondeur de la pièce. [...] Je crois qu’il y a quelqu’un. – Quelqu’un? Ici? – Tout à l’heure quelqu’un regardait par la vitre. – Par la vitre? (33–34, 36–37, 101–102)

The event is narrated three times throughout the story, each time in exactly the same words. It is important to note that the narrative recurrence of the event includes the different aspects of the experience of visual perceiving: seeing from a distance, the experience of estrangement, the visual experience of the I-narrator. Moreover, the narrative description of the event brings to the fore the window pane, which is the condition of the event of a double seeing. On this side of the pane, the gaze of the I-narrator looks through the window, to where another undefined and undefinable figure appears; on the other side, the gaze of this latter figure looks through the pane, and thus the space of the inside room appears in a new light. However, the nature of the double gaze remains uncertain: it may be that the narrator is confronted with an impersonal gaze from the outside, just as he may be confronted with the reflection of his own gaze on the window’s surface. This uncertainty appears because the event of the gaze is immediately put into question (“Quelqu’un? Ici?”), as is even the window pane which makes the event possible (“– Par la vitre?”). The exact repetition, followed by a question mark, destabilizes the I-narrator and allows his narration of the event to appear from a distance. Consequently, the experience of estrangement no longer correlates only to the experience of a visual perceiving, but also to the possibility of narrating the estrangement and even to the use of language in general. It is in this respect that the narrator ends up being confronted with (and urged to scrutinize) the reality of the window pane: “Ce qui m’effraya, c’est qu’il semblait répéter mes mots sans tout à fait les comprendre, et j’eus cette pensée: Sait-il ce que c’est une vitre?” (34)

It is clear now why the presence of the window pane in the description of the scene in *L’Écriture du désastre* is not simply accidental. The recurrence of the window pane in the same scene, although it is described in a slightly displaced

way, as if it is broken, is proof enough to state that this presence resumes every aspect of the event of a particular experience, an experience that Blanchot in earlier fictions labeled the phenomenon of the window. It is indeed easy to identify in this scene the different functions of the window pane that were mentioned above: the condition of the event of a disorienting visual perceiving (the young boy looking through the window pane and recognizing the garden where he plays, the empty sky penetrating from the outside and submerging the boy's inner world); the transparency of the window pane being put into question (appearing in a new way, as if broken); the experience of isolation and estrangement resulting from this event (the young boy crying, unable to bear witness to his experience in another way). It is perhaps for this reason – because the window in this scene resumes a reflection which recurs in his fictional work and which reveals an essential aspect of its literary imagination – that Blanchot has termed this scene “primitive.”

4 Concluding Remarks: the Image as Literary Event?

The preceding examination of the window pane in Blanchot's fictional work has highlighted its particular significance in his short stories. From this examination, it follows that Blanchot not only clearly recalls the perceptual basis of the window metaphor, which defines the visible as a visual perceiving from a distance, but also joins the Romantic and Surrealist re-interpretations of this metaphor. These re-interpretations respectively qualify the visibility opened by the window as a separation between the inside and the outside, and bring to the fore the reflective and even opaque modality of the window pane. However, in Blanchot's fictions, the window has yet another function as a condition for the event of the story and as a reflection on the experience of the narrator. The window pane thus reveals something about Blanchot's approach to the image as such. It could be said that Blanchot transforms, in a double way, the theory of the image according to which the window is a basic metaphor appropriate to explain the particular perceptual experience of the image. He transforms the definition of the image's visual perception via liberating seeing from its submission to pre-given concepts and ideas and by revealing the ungraspable distance inherent to visual perceiving. This change originates in the remark that, precisely as regards the image, the experience of visual perceiving is not sufficiently clarified by determining the distance inherent to this experience in relation to the position of the beholder. Consequently, the visibility of the image, as evoked by the metaphor of the

window in Blanchot's fictions, is no longer correlated to the object-oriented intention of a visual perception. In this way, Blanchot, as noted earlier, calls the image "fascination" and points to the persistence of the imaginary in any visual perceiving. However, Blanchot also reconsiders the presence of the image and the persistence of the imaginary within the field of his fictional narratives. In this examination, the meaning of the window is enriched and destabilized as a metaphor of pure visual perceiving, by new meanings and metaphoric displacements which intend to express as well the narrator's experience of estrangement; in doing so, these meanings and displacements render visible the persistence of the imaginary. As such, the metaphor loses its transparency and becomes a linguistic means to construe the event of the narration. This narrative transformation of the metaphor of the window is not as such a break with the experience of visual perceiving: the description of visual perceiving is part of the narrative. Yet, it adds to this description a new dimension, one which articulates the metaphor of the window as a symbolic form of the narrative, the narrated experience and event. The traditional, perception-based meaning of the metaphor of the window is confronted with, and destabilized by, a sign-oriented meaning, on the basis of which the visual presence of the image appears to be non-transparent, inaccessible, and recurrent.

It is interesting to note how, by this double transformation, it is precisely the metaphor of the window that is able to reveal the essential features of the imaginary space as approached by Blanchot and which leads him to the extreme of the neuter and the outside. As elucidated here, the spatial meaning of the window pane entails seven elements: a separation between the outside and the inside; the experience of being touched (contact across a distance); the experience of estrangement (a malaise related to the narrator); an insurmountable distance within the experience of the narrator ("the phenomenon of the window"); the inescapable exposure to an undifferentiated mass from the outside; the inscription of a recurrence; a material and inaccessible presence; and the event of the narration (and its de-stabilization). As this suggests, it would be erroneous to omit Blanchot's fictional work when approaching what he called the neuter.

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