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THE IMAGINATION: DISTANCE AND RELATION
IN MAURICE BLANCHOT AND IBN'ARABI

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Abstract: Blanchot discusses two versions of imagination. The first version, as the copy of an object, is premeditated or provoked by the conscious process of the mind, whereas in the second version, of the image, a thing becomes a complete empty space outside human consciousness and finds the opportunity to shine itself in itself and for itself. The object never resembles anything but itself, the image of itself. This paper argues that with Blanchot, the human in confrontation with the thing in itself in a passive and neutral *relation* becomes the image of itself. Keeping a distance from each other not for the sake of knowing and comprehension, both the object and the human are at perpetual *distance*. While thinking of Blanchot's *relationship* and *distance*, it is argued that Ibn 'Arabi's idea of *barzakh* is the space of imagination, an intermediate reality works through *distancing* and setting *relationship*. In this sense, Ibn 'Arabi goes outside ontological horizons believing in essence or existence.

Key Words: image, imagination, distance, relationship, discontiguous, Maurice Blanchot, Ibn'Arabi, barzakh

Introduction

Maurice Blanchot, the important figure in deconstructive thinking, perhaps more than anyone else has renewed the critical debate concerning the ontological - or non-ontological - status of literature and art in general. Regardless of his concern about literature, he thinks of ontology as non-metaphysical. He locates the question of being in the void before the advent of the human logos or reason. Blanchot brings us back to this more primary question than that which Heidegger claims the West has forgotten. His debate on the nature of the imagination basically involves the question of being. Outside theological considerations and whether he thinks of the death of God, in his reading of Holderlin's hymn on the nature of the divine ipseity or the sacred, the subject transforms into the void space being unable to think of the opposition of essence/existence. According to him, elements constituting an entity's individuality are gathered not in reciprocal or isomorphic relationship homogenizing for the sake of appropriation and unification. The relationship grounds a 'discontinuity' which challenges the dialectics on which ontology is formed. It becomes: "a relation that challenges the notion of being as continuity or as a unity or gathering of beings; a relation that would except itself from the problematics of being and would pose a question that is not of being. Thus in this questioning we would not only leave dialectics, but also ontology."¹ Blanchot takes us to the space of imagination where ontology is not a question of being but of *relation* and *distanciation*.

While thinking of Blanchot's idea of relation, I argue that the mutual influence of spirits implies a *relation*. This *relation* occurs in the world of imagination, a rich intermediary space which is neither physical nor metaphysical in which the human is able to catch a glance of what occurs in reality. Secondly, the *relation* is the very possibility of their creation which occurs within God Himself. In this space, any engendered thing does not acquire individuality; it remains always in the state of the possibility of coming to be. In other words, the *relation* would be the possibility of creation. Thinking about traditional ontological privileges would be impossible.

Austin regards Ibn 'Arabi² as representing a culmination not only of Sufi exposition but also, in a very significant way, of Islamic intellectual expression.³ Through his writings and teachings, Ibn 'Arabi presents an elaborate and cohesive view of the world based on a very intricate ontological structure. His ontology brings together harmoniously a wealth of philosophical, theological, scientific, linguistic, meta-physical and mystical knowledge, developing it into a cohesive and intrinsic multi-dimensional whole. The difficult and complex nature of his texts, however, has kept many of his works, and particularly *Al-Futuhāt*, largely waiting for

new readings. Some profound studies of Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy and mystical experiences are available, however, in European languages, among which H. Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, and W. Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* are the most pertinent to this study. Imagination plays an essential role in Ibn 'Arabi's ontology. It is seen as the creative source of manifestation, the very status of our existence, and the powerful intermediary that enables us to remain in constant contact with the Infinite and the Absolute. For Ibn 'Arabi, imagination is such an essential instrument that one who does not know the status of imagination is totally devoid of knowledge.

In his theology, Ibn 'Arabi believes that everything existing outside God was pure and exalted spirits, which He did create. These spirits differed from each other concerning their location. This means their existence in heaven or on earth, and also with regard to their influence i.e. the fact that they either influence something or are influenced by something.

What is an Image?

What is an image? This question for Blanchot unlocks the space of imagination. He proposes two versions of the image. The first concerns the production of ideal meaning. The first version of the image helps us grasp something formally or ideally. The image holds the thing or situation at a temporal distance in order for it to be comprehended within a system of meaning or truth. According to the ordinary analysis in the first version, we see, then we imagine. After the object, comes the image. In the temporal gap that separates the image from the thing represented, death functions productively to convert the material, the substantial into the ideal. Putting it in somewhat Hegelian terms, the image is thus the life-giving negation of the thing: prolix matter negated into meaning. Blanchot treats this version of the imaginary cursorily.

He proposes the second version of the image: in the milieu of an imaginary space (*l'imaginaire*) an image of the world is created without the human intentional and intellectual involvement. In this space, the image of an object in the world shakes the object to be deformed and bare of anything: "When there is nothing, the 'image' finds in this nothing its necessary condition, but there it disappears. Image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world; it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed; it tends toward the intimacy of what subsists in the void."⁴ The 'image,' in this definition, is not a secondary copy to the object. The object should be removed from any predicates ascribed to it in the world. In other words, the object has nothing to do with signification or meaningfulness as they are implied by the human intentionality. The imagination (*l'imagination*) "is made possible by the ability to detach, as it were, reality from itself, that

constitutive re-move whereby imagination negates given states of affairs."⁵ The object resembles the corpse, which in turn bears a resemblance to nothing. The corpse shares with the image a propensity to suspend the relation to place. The corpse transforms here and now – present – into nowhere. Death, here, does not represent a productive transformation whereby, according to the first version of the image, meaning always escapes into another meaning. Rather death figures as a bleak substitution of the known and the living for the dead and unknown, of here and now for nowhere. By becoming a complete empty space, a neutral indifferent void, the object finds the opportunity to shine itself in itself and for itself. For Blanchot, the image shares another characteristic with the corpse: it never resembles anything but itself. The corpse has destroyed its relation with humans. In the strangeness of its solitude, "the cadaver is its own image [*sa propre image*]. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transfers it entirely into shadow."⁶ In this sense, the object becomes the 'image' of itself. Any image is normally understood by having a form but the 'image' is paradoxically formless, an image without form. As Blanchot claims, the 'image' "makes of eternity nothing and of nothingness an eternity."⁷ The eternity signifies neither origin nor final destination. The 'image,' now in eternity, begins to be outside time and place.

In the imaginary world (*l'imaginaire*), Blanchot regards the 'image' as an event necessarily involving a semblance of the human and the object coming into relation passively and neutrally. None of them hold a distance from each other to intend one another for the sake of knowing and comprehension, a knower-known relationship. Rather

the image speaks to us, and seems to speak intimately to us of ourselves. But the term 'intimately' does not suffice. Let us say rather that the image intimately designates the level where personal intimacy is destroyed and that it indicates in this movement the menacing proximity of a vague and empty outside, the deep, the sordid basis upon which it continues to affirm things in their disappearance. Thus it speaks to us, a propose of each thing, of less than this thing, but of us, of that less than nothing that subsists when there is nothing.⁸

This is the distance which holds them, since the 'image,' already vague and empty, impersonalizes the human interiority, that is, we no longer identify ourselves by way of interiority, i.e., subjectivity. They have transformed into the 'image,' no longer the object nor the human. They

are not only in a perpetual proximity toward each other without fusion, but also at a distance from within themselves. In other words, they never acquire individuality; they always distance themselves from having an identity. They are lingering in the process of becoming. Hence, Blanchot believes that both the object and the human, like the corpse, are not "the same thing at a distance but the *thing as distance*, present in its absence [my italics]".⁹ As such, the thing detaches itself from its individuality in a self-refusal action and remains in this suspended state. The *distance* signifies the state of lingering between being and non-being, a neutral state. They become other than what they are and completely ambiguous. Any sort of phenomenology is not working here, since the human does no longer hold a consciousness to intend an object. The human and the object while in brackets are reducing themselves to nothingness in order to return in a middle state between nothingness and being. This reduction and return occur perpetually.

The suspended or the neutral state is the negativity of selfhood occurring when the human enters a relation with things themselves (the thing in itself and for itself not for the human consciousness) in a radical passivity. The focus now should be on the act of relationship which makes possible both the 'image' and the world of imaginary:

But when we are face to face with things themselves does it not also sometimes happen that we abandon ourselves to what we see? Bereft of power before this presence suddenly strangely mute and passive, are we not at its mercy? Indeed, this can happen, but it happens because the thing we stare at has foundered, sunk into its image, and the image returned into that deep fund of impotence to which very thing reverts. The 'real' is defined by our *relation* to it which is always alive. The real always leaves us the initiative, addressing in us the power to begin, that free communication with beginning which we are [my italic].¹⁰

The human becomes so radically passive, unidentifiable and indifferent that he is ready to prepare himself to not only allow the thing address him but the thing present itself without the human's imposing of his intentionality on it. Thus he enters into the 'free communication with beginning' in which he begins to come to being without closure, that is, "always alive," and always in the first point. The 'real' stands out by the *event* of the *relation* between the human and the thing. The occurrence of this event is unexpected and unpredictable. One without the other never come to the real. In their passive reciprocal reception of each other, they become what they are becoming. The main point about the 'image' is the *relation itself*, that is, the relation is the very possibility of coming to being.

To put it another way, the 'image' implies the *relation itself*, since, like the corpse, it is bereft of interiority. This is felt by the narrator in Blanchot's other text, *When the Time Comes*, when he contemplates that the thing and the human in their relationship always already repeat creating themselves differently because they return to a new origin in no(w)here every time.¹¹ And they return totally different from what they have been and from anything else. This absolute differentiability never undergoes the social, cultural and even ontological categories. By the absoluteness of difference, I mean neither similarity nor difference, since the thing and the human are absolutely an 'other.' This differentiability is possible by entering a relation. The *relation itself* is the image; it is creation. For Blanchot, this relation figures something outside the horizon of ontology: "a relation that challenges the notion of being as continuity or as a unity or gathering of beings; a relation that would except itself from the problematic of being and would pose a question that is not of being. Thus in this questioning we would not only leave dialectics, but also ontology."¹²

As Thomas Wall explains, "imaginary matter - matter that is its own image and that only appears in poetry (but remains unseen, unobserved, unperceived, silent) - is matter *as such*, in its *ipseity* or origin (What is *ipseity* if not origin, anteriority, something *as itself as such*, prior to its predicative involvements in the world?)."¹³ Here, the imaginary matter is not the synthesis of a dialectic process. Rather, it is the outcome of the *relation* which makes the image to distance from itself. *Ipseity* (according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, as the quality or state of being indivisible) is indeed the act of distancing from oneself as non-originary origin and the function of the *relation itself* here is not to let ascribing any traits to the image. The *ipseity* of the imaginary matter in its inexpressibility is the act of *distanciation* which comes about by the *relation*.

The Sacred and Distanciation

Stéphane Mallarmé asks the question "art or the mystical?" in his poem "The Windows: I see myself and see an angel! And I die and long / - Whether the window be art or the mystical- / To be reborn."¹⁴ The dualism of the real and the ideal is taken up by Blanchot in his essay on Holderlin's hymn "As on a holiday..." in which he critically reads Heidegger's reading of Holderlin's poem.¹⁵ As Kevin Hart explains, for Blanchot the Sacred is "the effulgence not of a transcendent point to which all things aspire but rather of an illusory point below the earth, as it were, which comes into being as one writes and attracts as it withdraws. One approaches that point by an endless contestation of concepts and words."¹⁶ Blanchot gives a poetic reflection on Holderlin's poem. As the poem illustrates the relation between the poet and the Sacred, Blanchot

tries to use this relationship in favor of his own idea of poetry while thinking of the sacred as the power of poetry. He reflects on how the poet is made by the power of poetry as the mystical power. Moreover, the idea of the 'image,' previously discussed, should be understood in its relation with the Sacred understood as the mystical, since an object transforms into the 'image' in this relation. Blanchot's discussion can make a dialogue with Ibn 'Arabi's discussion on the 'image' in its relation with God in the next section, although the Sacred for Blanchot is non-religious.

Blanchot thinks of the Sacred as the illuminating ability of that which illuminates, the one which makes all things unfurl. The manner of illumination and the poet's relation with the Sacred are proposed as an enigma:

if the sacred is a radiant power whose law is scattering burst, the principle of that which appears, one understands that in foretelling the poet is already placed in the heart of a complete presence and that the approach of the sacred would be for it the approach of existence. But, for the present, the enigma takes another form. For at the beginning, the poet is not yet, for he himself depends on Totality in order to exist and the Totality depends on his mediation in order to be a Totality. Now, existing as 'not yet,' he has seized, forecasted the coming of the sacred, which is the principle of this coming itself, which is the anterior coming to every 'something which comes' and by which 'everything' comes, the Totality comes.¹⁷

The power called 'sacred,' a divine 'Totality' whose principle is 'gathering' and 'scattering' at the same time is present anterior to everything; it allows being to stand in a kind of 'proximity' which is never unified in totality. The poet apparently as the mediator who has a 'not yet' existence forecasts the coming of the Sacred. The poet must die and becomes the corpse which resembles itself, that is, the 'image.' As Blanchot writes, the poet enters the state between being and nothingness, incapable of dying and being born.¹⁸ Outside the hackneyed theme of the life after death or the second birth which involves metaphysics, the poet's dying needs the reduction of his being to the state prior to every predicate in the world and arriving into the space where the possibility of invention begins anew. Blanchot comments that the word 'Open' in Holderlin's hymn signifies the mystical which opens everything up. This is the space where the poet becomes the 'image' of itself, the imaginary world.

Blanchot begins by proposing that the poet is the mediator like a river that is nothing but movement and passage. He continues to explain what mediation is: "not only is poetry supposed to accomplish this

mediation and, by accomplishing it, accomplishes itself, but it must first make the mediation possible. It is not simply the instrument that elements and men make use of to meet each other; it expresses and forms the very possibility of this meeting, and this meeting is the basis and the truth of what meets."¹⁹ The basis of meeting is not that man and the Sacred meet each other but the 'meeting itself' is the truth. The poetry is an event which brings things into relationship. The poetry "has connections with what, undoubtedly, allows it to be connection itself."²⁰ The mediation is, thus, the act of meeting or connection. This reminds us of the *relation itself* or the *distance*. The 'connection itself' needs the erasure of the Sacred and the creatures considered as identified individuality. Neither is the Sacred a source of light which illuminates or creates individual things, nor the poet is the passage through which this creation occurs. The poet's being is sacrificed to be in the 'proximity' of completion, that is to say, being as such, self-present as such, that which escapes from every mediation.²¹ There remains only the *relation*.

The Sacred or All, as Holderlin calls, and the poet are in reciprocal absence of prior interiority. Their absence is their very presence, since in this absence they open communication up. The act of communication or the *relation* erases them in order to transform into the imaginary matter:

The poet's solitude is only apparent, for it is presentiment, presentiment of solitude, and already affirmation of something that is beyond itself, of a 'later' that is enough to break the boundary of isolation and open up communication. In the same way, nature's rest belongs in appearance only to an empty presence, empty of poetic existence, in which it rests; it rests, undoubtedly, because it still lacks the movement of communications, but by this very rest, by this emptiness full of presentiment that is, in it, the actual form of the poet's existence, it already escapes rest and soars up, foreseeing its all-presence, its presence as All.²²

Before any communication, the All, the poet and nature are in the empty state waiting for futurity. In order for the movement of communications to occur, they depend on their solitude or rest. This is understood as the act of making simultaneously their disappearance to bring them back into relation in the imaginary space where they distance from what they are to explore the futurity, the unknown which is unexpressed. This act neither ends in appearance nor disappearance, neither closing nor separating. It is the characteristic of the imaginary space that time or place before and after the communication is not locatable. In answering the question "what is the Sacred?," Blanchot quoting Heidegger writes: "it is immediate, the immediate that is never

communicated but is the principle of all possibility of communicating.²³ The 'immediate' makes the act of communication occur in an instant, at once, without going under time or the place classification. Thus, the 'immediate' implies the 'proximity' by which neither coming together nor separating occur. In this 'proximity,' the Sacred and the poet are not only closing to and distancing from each other, but also distancing from within, whereby they do not configure a unified being. The constancy of this proximity reminds us of what Blanchot writes about the second version of the image: the *thing as distance*, is present in its absence. The 'image' in a discontinuous flux refuses and accepts its selfhood. It is always attaching and detaching itself from existence. This is the act of *distanciation*; as Blanchot writes, it is the transmission of its own impossibility meaning the exploring of what is impossible. In other words, exploring the unthinkable and saying the unsaid is the state of the Sacred and the poet, which have now been transformed into the 'image.' If we define the real as something which occurs, the act of *distanciation* is the reality.

Ontologically, the act of *distanciation* leaves no place to think of being/non-being or existence/non-existence or physics/metaphysics. Perhaps we have to think of what Blanchot quotes from Heidegger: "Chaos is the Sacred in the self."²⁴ The act of *distanciation* and Chaos become synonymous.

Ibn 'Arabi and Discontiguous Image

Ibn 'Arabi thinks of two states of the imagination: contiguous and discontiguous. The first version of the imagination, „contiguous,” according to Ibn 'Arabi in *Al-Futuhāt Al-makkiyya*, disappears with the disappearance of the imaginer.²⁵ As long as the viewing subject exists, the first version remains. It is manifested in the microcosm "where the human soul considered as a reality distinct from spirit and body pertains to imagination."²⁶ Ibn 'Arabi also reflects on the first version as one of the several faculties of the soul along with reason, reflection, and memory. For him, "contiguous imagination derives from the discontiguous kind."²⁷ Ibn 'Arabi studies the first version as the faculty which cannot give the human the true knowledge of the nature of things, since, as Corbin writes, it is "premeditated or provoked by conscious process of mind."²⁸ The real situation of things has to be sought in the second state of the imagination.

Concerning the "discontiguous" imagination, unlike his past and contemporary thinkers, Ibn 'Arabi senses generally the presence of the imagination as a creature created by God:

God created another creature. If you say concerning it that it is existent, you will have spoken truth, and if you say it is nonexistent, you will have spoken truth. If you say that it is

neither existent nor nonexistent, you will have spoken truth. It is imagination, and it has two states: a state of contiguity, which it possesses though man and certain animals, and a state of discontiguity. To the latter outward perception becomes connected while remaining separate from it in actual fact, as in the case of Gabriel's appearance in the form of Dihya, or a jinn or an angel which become manifest from the world of curtaining.²⁹

The word 'creature' draws the attention to the non-metaphysical nature of the imagination. At the same time, it is not physical per se. The two versions of the imagination, contiguous and discontiguous are thought outside the category of existence/nonexistence. The first version is manifested through the physical realm and the second version through the world of curtaining, i.e., metaphysics. But it does not mean that imagination belongs to metaphysics; it is a third creature besides physics and metaphysics. Only the loci of its manifestation are both through physics and metaphysics, since it is neither existent nor nonexistent and simultaneously both. The real situation of the imagination will have to be sought in 'both/and' and 'neither/nor.' The ambiguity of the imagination is fundamental because our knowledge of the nature of existence comes from the attributes we designate to everything, but imagination is outside these existential attributes. At the same time, imagination does not approach the essence of anything in the world. Thus, it does not involve itself with essence/existence where the former is unknowably at the heart of the latter.

Ibn 'Arabi describes the situation of the possible things which are in the state of nonexistence before being brought to existence by God:

Just as God accepted to manifest Himself to His servants in diverse forms, so also at first He did not create, then He created. He had the ability to bring the possible thing into existence, but it was up to Him whether or not to become manifest in the form of bringing it into existence. He became manifest by bringing the form of the possible thing into existence whenever He willed.³⁰

By the command of God, the possible things are brought into existence from the state of nonexistence, although the latter state is not nothingness; they are manifested as forms within the Being of Real or God. As Ibn 'Arabi considers the imagination neither existence nor nonexistence, it is not a creature waiting to come to be within the Being of Real.

The second version of the imagination, for Ibn Arabi, belongs to both the level of meaning which is the reality of the world of intelligible things without any outward form and the level of sense which belongs to the external world of corporeal bodies. Imagination takes meaning and gives it a sensory form. Dreaming, for instance, is a function of the imagination in which a person sees corporeal things which are not corporeal things. The thing in the imagination loses its contact with the corporeality in the sensory and intelligible worlds: the thing becomes the image of itself:

Among the possible things there are three levels of known things: (1.) A level that belongs to meanings disengaged from substrata; the characteristic of meaning is that rational faculties perceive them through proofs or a priori. (2.) A level whose characteristic is to be perceived by the senses; These are the sensory things. (3.) A level whose characteristic is to be perceived either by the rational faculty or by the senses. These are imaginal things.³¹

The locus of the imaginal things is within the corporeality of the possible things while they are bereft of any specific existential attributes. They are specified neither rational nor sensory; simultaneously both are rational and sensory. For Ibn 'Arabi, this mutually contradictory power of the imagination combining the two is its strength. The work of the imagination is "the closest thing to a denotation of the Real. For the Real is "the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest (Koran 57:3)."³² The Real is what occurs irrespective of the physic/metaphysic. The Real, he believes, is the impossible existent. Could we not conclude that the existence/nonexistence or the being/non-being makes an illusory distinction concerning the Real?

Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi claims that the cosmos itself consists of nonexistent meanings displayed or embodied in Manifest Being, so the cosmos as a whole is nothing but the imagination:

None of the strata of the cosmos makes known the situation as it really is except this imaginal presence, for it makes contraries come together, and within it the realities become manifest as they are in themselves.... So every entity qualified by existence is it/not it... God has brought no engendered thing into existence as it is in itself except in this [imaginal] presence.³³

Phrases like "as it really is," "as they are in themselves," and "as it is in itself" suggest that Ibn 'Arabi thinks phenomenologically to see cosmos as such preceding any transcendental or philosophical interpretations. A

thing "as it is in itself" resembles itself; the thing is doubled in its appearing, being both itself and its own image. The thing is neutral with respect to what is presents itself for-no-one but the sheer that *there is*, anteriority as such. The sheer that *there is* exposed by the Levinasian *il y a* implies that the thing is ungraspable. It is neither subjective nor substantive.³⁴ According to Hutchens, "we are encouraged to imagine all things returning to nothingness, which results in an indeterminate 'something,' the fact that *there is*."³⁵ "It eludes every present yet it is that without which there will never have been any possibility as such. The thing presents possibility itself as that eludes everything – possibility as (the) nothing, as immediate."³⁶ The thing itself becomes a *possibility* not an *ipseity*: the thing is not an existent brought into being by the divine ipseity but an always already *possibility*. Hence, imagination in his phenomenology is "it/not it." The human must be so close to any engendered thing that he could inhabit within it to see it as it is in itself, i.e., what occurs. In this encounter, the human himself must become the *possibility*, ungraspable, the sheer *there is*. This co-inhabitation implies to be one with others. The cosmos as a whole becomes the *possibility*. Perhaps Ibn'Arabi's idea of oneness of Being implies the *possibility*.

The *possibility* at the heart of the imagination can be understood with his idea of "an intermediate reality," *barzakh*. In explaining *barzakh*, Ibn 'Arabi regards it as the imagination. The imagination or the *barzakh*, for him, is an intermediated reality not between two things or within one thing. Its situation can be understood as neither/nor:

A *barzakh* is something that separates two other things while never going to one side, as, for example, the line that separates shadow from sun light. God says, "He let forth the two seas that meets together between them a *barzakh* they do not overpass" (Koran 55:19); in other words, the one sea never mix with the other. Though sense perception might be incapable of separating the two things, the rational faculty judges that there is a barrier between them which separates them. The intelligible barrier is the *barzakh*. If it is perceived by the senses, it is one of the two things, not the *barzakh*. Any two adjacent things are in need of a *barzakh* which is neither one nor the other but which possesses the power of both.³⁷

The passage suggests that the *barzakh* is neither existent nor nonexistent, or both. Engendered things seem to be both rationally individual identities and sensorily inseparable; they are both separable and inseparable. The *barzakh* is between and within them, everywhere and nowhere, as the power of the presence of sense and meaning. However,

the *barzakh* has not been mentioned as the underlying cause of things or essence and it has also been distinguished from God's Essence in another volume.³⁸ Rather, it is characterized as "between" and "within." Thus, the thing is not an individual independent ipseity but only a *barzakh*: the thing is itself the *barzakh*. The word *barzakh*, in the Persian dictionary Dekhoda, means "between." This meaning relates to the word "distance." Jili in his note on Ibn Arabi describes the *barzakh* as interval.³⁹ Hence, a thing is a *distance* or an *interval*. The thing as the *distance*, is an intermediate reality which holds no ipseity. Ibn 'Arabi writes:

No engendered thing remains in this world, the hereafter, and what is between the two, neither spirit, nor soul, nor anything other than God – I mean the Essence of God – upon a single state; rather, it undergoes continual change from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this.... So cosmos only became manifest withinimagination. It is imagined in itself. So it is it, and it is not it.⁴⁰

The continual changes within engendered things do not let us see the discontinuity occurring constantly. This falsifying presence of continuity makes form but in reality no form is configured; the things are in an always intermediate state. As Derrida argues about time and space, "the line is a continuity of points. And each point is both an *end* and a beginning for each part. Thus one could be led to believe that the now is to time what the point is to the line."⁴¹ Any form is both an end and a beginning; it never constitutes a distinct figure. This state is identical with the *barzakh* or the *distance* where a homogenous series of point-limits does not unfold in space. In this sense, existence within time and space never comes to presence. As the cosmos is manifested within the imagination, it is neither this nor that. The verb "to be" never complete itself; it remains discontinuous and intermediary or "discontiguous" as Ibn 'Arabi calls. The thing known as the discontiguity or the *distance* is the image of itself when Ibn 'Arabi writes "it is imagined in itself."

Ibn 'Arabi by looking at one of the Prophet Mohammad's saying that "God came to be in a cloud, neither above which nor below which was any air."⁴² tells us that there are five instances in which God "comes to be" according to the Koran and the Hadith. The last of these instances tells that God comes to be all-inclusive, since He says that He is with you wherever you come to be. God comes to be entirely within the Cloud which is the imagination giving forms to all engendered things. The *barzakh* is taken to be the Cloud:

The Cloud is the Barzakh standing between meanings – which have no entities in existence –

and luminous corporeal bodies and Nature. Take, for example, [meanings] "knowledge" and "movement," the first within souls and the second within corporeal bodies. The meanings becomes corporealized in the presence of Imagination, like knowledge in the form of milk. In the same way, relationships become entified, even though they have no entities, whether in the soul or in corporeal bodies. Thus a thing's "corporeality" is a relationship in terms of that which is constant within the thing, but this constancy becomes manifest in the form of a sensory cord within the presence of contiguous imagination. In the same ways spirits become manifest in the forms of bodies having shapes, such as Gabriel in the form of Dihya, or those angels which became manifest as dust on the Day of Badr. All these takes place in discontinuous imagination.⁴³

Apparently, a thing's corporealization and spirits' manifestation take place within the discontinuous imagination. However, the Cloud, the *barzakh* and the imagination, while being the same, lose their meaning to be a mediator standing between two things, since the corporeality itself is the "movement" or a relationship, rather than an individuality or ipseity. The sensory form only is manifest within contiguous imagination not in the discontinuous imagination. Thus, the meaning does not transform one form to another form in the discontinuous imagination; the form is the *movement* itself or the *relationship* itself. All is the *movement itself* or the *relationship itself*. In this respect, the discontinuous imagination is the *relationship itself*. This relation is of a third kind: an anarchic relation that binds nothing together, loosens everything; it neither begins nor ends. Neither is it interrupted. It is rather that it itself is an endless interruption. Blanchot writes about this relation: "there is no longer the proposition of a God, the mediation of a world or the subsistence of a nature."⁴⁴ All is the constant interrupted relation not the separate self-identified entities. Blanchot never thinks atheistically; God, the human and the world, in this third kind of relation, are not in a unitary relation being reduced to measurement.

Ibn 'Arabi explains each creature is a word of God. He quotes Koranic proof for this point that the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary was His word that He cast into Mary. He writes that God's word is His breath by analogy with the human breath. Through God's speech the human becomes manifest. God and His speech are the same. The Breath defines the interrelationship between God as the Nonmanifest and God as manifest:

The Breath of the breather is none other than the nonmanifest of the breather. Then the breath becomes manifest as the entities of letters and words. It does not become manifest through anything super-added to the nonmanifest, so it is identical with the nonmanifest.⁴⁵

Somewhere else Ibn 'Arabi takes the Cloud or the imagination and the breath to be identical. God as the Breath or the Cloud is both manifest and nonmanifest. Before and after He creates, the nonmanifest and the manifest are identical." There [in the imagination], anything which comes to be by Him is nothing except Himself, then He creates the same."⁴⁶ Samer Akkash in "The World of Imagination in Ibn 'Arabi's Ontology" argues that "God produced the world the moment He imagined it, and not according to an eternally imagined "Form" or "Model." And prior to their existence in the Cloud, the forms of the world did not exist as forms in the Divine Self, nor has God imagined them in His Mind prior to their production."⁴⁷ As we witnessed the thing's corporeality or its form is the movement and the nonmanifest and manifest are identical, the act of imagination in the Cloud is nothing but the *movement itself*. Nothing (no form) added to the nonmanifest when it becomes manifest. The form visible even in the contiguous imagination is the *movement itself*. Ibn 'Arabi explains the relationship between the manifest and nonmanifest by the analogy with the image in mirror:

Hence He is a locus of manifestation for our entities, so they become manifest just as forms become manifest in mirrors. The forms are not identical with the viewer, because they have something of the property of the locus of disclosure. Nor are they identical with the locus of disclosure, because they have something that opposes its property. There is no third, outside affair upon which perception falls. Yet perception has occurred.⁴⁸

For Ibn 'Arabi, the manifestation is these affairs of the Real, a relation for both the seer and the seen. To response "who are we? Who is He?", he describes that this is "taking away" and "transferral." "Thus he transfers you or takes you away from one state to another state, even though your entity exists in both states, and from one place to another place, even though your entity exists in both of them and between them."⁴⁹ The *relationship* is our entities; nothing is manifest or non-manifest outside this relation. There remains neither manifestation nor non-manifestation but the *relationship*.

Conclusion

As final comments, through the argument that Blanchot thinks of the image as the establishing of *relationship* by having perpetual *distancing*, we can argue that Ibn 'Arabi thinks of the *barzakh* as the discontinuous imagination mostly to shed light on ontology. Having tried to accomplish this task by looking at the Koran, he may seem to explore the metaphysical characteristics of ontology and leave the physical distinctiveness of ontology. However, his studies take ontology outside metaphysical or non-metaphysical schools. He brings us into contact with real, which I take it as 'what occurs in the world.' The real, here, would be outside the traditional opposition of real/truth already perceived in religious or philosophical schools. His notion of the discontinuous imagination questions both physical and metaphysical ontologies inviting us to ponder what really occurs. In the neither/nor way of approaching the holy texts, he takes us nowhere, to what we have not been waiting for and what the waiting never attains. The 'nowhere' signifies neither transcendental nor secular. He introduces us to the impossible as the very possibility of coming to being. He opens us to the irruption of the outside which is within us, an anteriority within the anterior. The world of imagination characterizes God's *creatio ex nihilo*. God could be a void which opens Himself in which the world can take its place. God-void empties Himself of world. Creation is an emptying of world. God is converted into world through the discontinuous imagination.⁵⁰

According to Ibn 'Arabi, God is present in all things, i.e. God manifests Himself through each thing. God manifests Himself as the One. God as *Wujud*, though multiplied by the entity of the thing, is still one, since the thing has unity and equals one reality. In terms of things' multiplicity in the cosmos, the human sees multiplicity not unity. In the first case, we see the One and, in the second, we see many. By using Koranic verses to explain the relation between God and His created entities, Ibn 'Arabi refers to the term 'couple' which can mean spouse or one of a couple; Koran makes the term's twoness completely explicit by using it in the dual. Coupleness can be looked upon as the root of all relation. The *barzakh* which I argued to be the discontinuous imagination stops us to accept the idea of one/many. *Wujud* and created entities would not be in the one/many position. In the *barzakh* or the discontinuous imagination only relationships occur. "Relationships are non-entities within entities, since they have no entities, but their properties rule over existence."⁵¹ The situation would be: entities have the relationships within themselves; the relationships have some properties from within. This would be a labyrinthine relationship.

One of the major ideas of Ibn 'Arabi, the perfect human being is qualified by the twoness and the one/many. The perfect human contains

all of God's names or attributes which are opposite one another. However, the theory of relationship in the *barzakh* qualifies the perfect human differently. He/she does not include all of God's attributes but experiences living in the *barzakh*. In this sense, when Mahmoud Gharab explains that the perfect human located between one and many or between God and the created entities, it can be understood that the state of betweenness characterizes the *barzakh* in which the perfect human enters relationship within him/herself.⁵² The idea of perfection in mysticism will be thought differently in this view. The human should make relationship among God's attributes within him/herself. He/she should not try to acquire more attributes as much as possible.

Notes

¹Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 10.

²Abu Bakr Muhammad b. 'All b. Muhammad Ibn al-'Arabi al-Hatiml al-Ta'T, known as Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi (abridged as Ibn 'Arabi), is probably one of the most prolific and influential figures in the history of Islam. Born in Murcia, Spain, in 560/1165, Ibn 'Arabi is also known among Sufis as al-shaykh al-akbar (the 'Greatest Master').

³R. W. J Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 14.

⁴Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 254.

⁵Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, and Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 77.

⁶Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 257-258.

⁷Blanchot, 254.

⁸Blanchot, 254.

⁹Blanchot, 255.

¹⁰Blanchot, 255.

¹¹Maurice Blanchot, *When the Time Comes*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1985), 71.

¹²Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 10.

¹³Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 69

¹⁴Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé: The Poems*, trans. Keith Bosely (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 7.

¹⁵Blanchot reflects that Heidegger's commentary on Holderlin's poem does not add anything to the text but it is borrowed from the text.

¹⁶Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2004), 23.

¹⁷Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 122.

¹⁸Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 216.

¹⁹Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 115.

²⁰Blanchot, 115.

²¹Joseph Suglia, *Holderlin and Blanchot on Self-Sacrifice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 68.

²²Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 118.

²³Blanchot, 120.

²⁴Blanchot, 120.

²⁵Ibn 'Arabi. *Al- Futuhat Al-Makkiyya: Selected Text*, trans. M. Chodkiewicz, W. C. Chittick, Ch. Chodkiewicz, D. Gril, and J. Morris, vol. 2 (Paris: Sindbad, 1989), 311.

²⁶William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 116.

²⁷Ibn 'Arabi. *Al- Futuhat Al-Makkiyya: Selected Text*, vol.2, 311.

²⁸H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1969), 219.

²⁹Ibn 'Arabi, *Al- Futuhat Al-Makkiyya: Selected Text*, vol.3, 442.

³⁰Ibn 'Arabi, vol.3, 254.

³¹Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 66.

³²Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 4, 325.

³³Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 379.

³⁴Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 56-57.

³⁵B. C. Hutchen, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 43.

³⁶Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 28.

³⁷Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 1, 304.

³⁸Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 313.

³⁹Ibn 'Arabi. *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, trans. R. T. Harris, A. K. Jili Notes (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions International, 1989), 83.

⁴⁰Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 313.

⁴¹Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 59.

⁴²Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 310.

⁴³Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 311.

⁴⁴Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 68.

⁴⁵Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 2, 396.

⁴⁶Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus Al-Hikam*, ed. A. Afifi (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Arabi, 1946), 153.

⁴⁷Samer Akkash, "The World of Imagination in Ibn 'Arabi's Ontology." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24, 1 (1997): 109.

⁴⁸Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 4, 330.

⁴⁹Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 4, 300.

⁵⁰For reading more on the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* and void, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. Francois Raffoul (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007). Here, Nancy's idea of God-void explains how Ibn 'Arabi's imagination is the void in which creation occurs from nothing. God is transferred into world through the imagination. In other words, God enters relation with Himself within Himself.

⁵¹Ibn 'Arabi, vol. 3, 362. Ibn 'Arabi, in discussing the relation between two concepts, majesty and beauty, uses one concept within another one. He writes "the beauty of majesty." This stresses the relativity of the concepts: each sort of

attribute is found in the other. Beauty pre-dominates majesty. Hence the 'majesty' we think of in the cosmos is in fact the majesty of beauty, not pure and simple majesty. See Ibn 'Arabi, "On Majesty and Beauty," trans. Rabia Terra Harris, *The Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 8, (1989): 5-32. Chittick explains Ibn 'Arabi in this sense: "Know that the Koran contains both the majesty of beauty and beauty." See William Chittick, *The Self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 176.

⁵²Mahmou Mahmoud Gharab, *Insane Kamil*. trans. Golbaba Saiidi (Tehran: Nil, 2010), 116-118.

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