

Kevin Hart. *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred.*

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*All things conspire to stand between us –
Even you and I*
Judith Wright, “All Things Conspire”

Of all the words Maurice Blanchot has taught his readers to re-evaluate, perhaps the strangest is fascination. With its obviously rhapsodic overtones, this is a term critics and philosophers like to derogate. Thus, in his 1933 book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Theodor Adorno disparages fascination as “the most dangerous power in [Kierkegaard’s] work.”¹ By opposing criticism to fascination, Adorno here seeks to keep the operations of philosophy and criticism separate (and safe) from the operations of poetry. However, no such separation can be safely attempted in relation to the work of Blanchot. Indeed, over the course of his writing career, Blanchot perhaps does nothing other than provide the ‘dangerous power of fascination’ with more and more dignified names: literature, the Outside, the imaginary, the neuter, criticism, community. The immediate achievement of Kevin Hart’s study, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*, is to recognise how Blanchot also gives the dangerous power of fascination the most dignified of all names: the sacred.

With a poet’s sensibility, Hart recognises how metaphor can do the work of criticism and *The Dark Gaze* is a beautiful rendering into English of the metaphor at the heart of Blanchot’s thought. The phrase describes the ontological attunement we experience as a result of entering into a state of fascination. Fascination, Blanchot thinks, puts us in contact with an “anterior reality” which dissimulates our subjectivity by disabling our dialectical or

purposive relation to things. In Blanchot's pivotal account of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is fascination that prevents Orpheus from accomplishing his task of bringing Eurydice back from the underworld. When Orpheus breaks the prohibition of the gods and looks back at his dead wife Eurydice, his dark gaze consecrates the distance between them as ever more sensible, objective and insurmountable. Interestingly, Blanchot does not hesitate to think the production of this interval in terms of the sacred. By sacrificing Eurydice, he writes, Orpheus "gives the sacred to itself" (SL 175). What follows from this, significantly, is that the sacred consecrates the interval between Orpheus and Eurydice as purely human. "The sacred night encloses Eurydice" (SL 175), but only as Eurydice remains in relation to Orpheus rather than to the gods. In this one sense, Orpheus does in fact manage to cheat the gods.

The sacred night encloses Thomas' vision in a similar way in the eerie beginning to Blanchot's 1941 first novel, *Thomas the Obscure*. Blanchot writes: "[Thomas's eye] saw as object that which prevented it from seeing. Its own glance [*regard*] entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed the death of all image." As Hart remarks, this dark gaze "stops Thomas seeing in his usual manner and enables him to see the night as it truly is" (12). What Thomas sees when his sight is so disabled is the dark, imaginary or metaphorical interval at the heart of being which, by keeping each and every thing separate from itself, designates separation as the *telos* of the human gaze.

According to Hart, Blanchot "tacitly accepts that the Latin word *religio* has its root in *religare*, meaning 'to bind'; and so regards religion as bespeaking a deep unity" (16). Blanchot was an avowed atheist; yet, as Hart rightly reminds us, one who has written (in *The Writing of the Disaster*): "We carry on about atheism, which has always been a privileged way of talking about God" (59). What finally distinguishes Blanchot's account of the sacred is that it characterises the human relation in terms of the sacred. For Blanchot, Hart explains: "It is not the human that is wonderfully strange, as Sophocles declared, but the human relation; and what makes it strange is that our relation with others, even friends, involves a reference to the unknown or, if you like, the impossible or the sacred" (121). The sacred is here the last in a chain of counter-spiritual signifiers – no doubt expressing a debt to Blanchot's close friend, Georges Bataille – that is designed to contest the sense of unity bespoken by the religious.

In Chapter 7, "The Human Relation," Hart cites one of the anonymous speakers from Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*:

[The human relation] is most terrible because it is tempered by no intermediary. For in this view there is between man and man neither

god, nor value, nor nature. It is naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation. Can this really be asserted? (191)

If there is a moment in which this formulation of the human relation *can* be asserted, it is surely in the moment of fascination, when the dark gaze converts being itself into an insurmountable yet still human interval. When Orpheus turns to face Eurydice and so transgresses the prohibition of the gods, what he confronts for the briefest of moments is “naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation.”

Combining impeccable scholarship with a lightness of touch, *The Dark Gaze* ably demonstrates Blanchot to be an exemplary thinker of sacrifice and the sacred. In so doing, it enables us to re-approach the story that was the touchstone of so much of Blanchot’s thinking and writing. As Ovid notes with great pathos in his now canonical account of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: “What was there [for Eurydice] to complain of, but that she had been loved?”² As Orpheus turns against the will of the gods, his desire exceeds the bounds of (his) subjectivity, and enables the other (whether Eurydice or ourselves) to experience desire in a pure state, that is, to be loved by him. What his dark gaze gives expression to – what it consecrates – is the irreducibility of the human relation. Orpheus’ is no doubt one the strangest expressions of love in literary or mythical history, especially for those who would seek to identify love with eternal patience (or with the “nearness of the Eternal”). But, as Hart would be the first to remind us, Orpheus’ moment of absolute carelessness also contains coiled within it “tightly folded references to the sacred and faith” (222) – references we can attribute to no one other than Maurice Blanchot.

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NOTES

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 11.

² *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), Bk. X, ll. 60-1.