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Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004. x + 301 pp. Notes, index. \$22.00 U.S. (pb.) ISBN: 0-226-31811-7.

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Kevin Hart opens his work with a question Maurice Blanchot posed in a 1963 review: “Is man capable of a radical interrogation? That is, finally, is he capable of literature, if literature turns aside and toward the absence of the book?” These themes—the ontological possibility of “man” and “his” limit in a literature enabled only by absence—drive Hart’s masterful and learned reading of Blanchot’s writings from the 1940s to the 1980s. Hart argues that Blanchot’s concerns—the erasure and possibility of the self, the nature of literature, the interplay of absence and presence, and the ghost of death—are to be understood as instances of a rigorous attempt to engage in a “counter-spiritual life.”[1] For a Roman Catholic like Hart, the “absence of God” as read by Blanchot, which has become the mark of French intellectual culture since the Enlightenment (p. 3), is to be taken seriously: it is central to Blanchot’s delineation of being, experience, otherness, and literature. This might be a surprising assertion considering Blanchot’s own atheism, but Hart explains that this fact matters precisely because Blanchot was never interested in saving or recovering the sacred or “endorsing any spirituality that directly derives from the positive religions”(p. 19). In that paradox, Hart argues we can still formulate a notion of the sacred and the possibility of a spiritual life, indeed a faith without religion. Blanchot’s theorization of the subject shows how a “religion without religion” can be developed and how faith is possible without succumbing to metaphysics (p. 142-143).

Maurice Blanchot himself recently passed away, and his death only served to remind readers of both the mystery surrounding his life (he was a notoriously secretive writer who refused most interviews and photographs of himself to be published), and the admiration surrounding his work comprised of essays, fiction, and criticism.[2] For most of his commentators, he has first and foremost been read under the general rubric of “post-structuralism” and “deconstruction.” Both philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault admired his work, while he quickly became in his lifetime a revered literary reference whose prose was notoriously difficult. Blanchot’s writings have found many interpretations: in Hart’s study, we are able to see how Blanchot has also been appropriated by theologians and philosophers of religion.

The Dark Gaze is exemplary of an intellectual field that has taken deconstruction seriously in order to think the possibility of a “religion without religion” and a “God without Being” as suggested by one of its most important proponents, Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion.[3] Interrogating the nature of faith is not a new enterprise: philosopher Paul Ricoeur himself explored this question at length with a concern with the self, ethics, and morality.[4] Indeed, taking their cue from Heidegger and Derrida, noted contemporary philosophers such as Marion, as well as Mark C. Taylor and David Tracy, explore how Western theology can be sustained in post-Enlightenment modernity. They argue that theology and postmodern philosophy logically engage one another by challenging classical religious assumptions. Since deconstruction has provided a “hermeneutic of the death of God,” they offer a religious theory beyond metaphysics.[5] For Hart, who believes that “a philosophical experience can lead to a religious experience,” Blanchot offers similar possibilities for a radical re-reading of Scripture and experience of faith.[6]

Kevin Hart's assertion might seem foreign to many contemporary historians of twentieth century France. While religion is a familiar feature of the nineteenth century, few contemporary studies linger over its role in post-World War One French society, and even fewer consider how faith or the presence of God might have constituted central concerns to contemporary and often secular French philosophers and literary theorists. Hart displays a breadth of knowledge of both the theological and philosophical canon but his learned references to religious concepts or doctrines—the Godhead, Gnostic Dualism, Augustinian Revelation—and philosophical principles—the Neuter, Being, Nothingness—do at times prove obscure for those of us less versed in these fields. Nonetheless, Hart offers a fascinating reading of Blanchotian philosophy of literature and being, “crossed by a thought of the sacred and which seeks to rethink religious faith [...] in the register of ethics” (p. 9). This study shows how modern secularism has remained “haunted by the sacred,” and disrupts traditional intellectual genealogies sharply separating the secular and the religious in accounts of the French “republic of letters.” It provides a refreshing and engaging approach for those impatient with the ways Blanchot has been recently reduced by some intellectual historians to a lineage of thinkers (from Nietzsche to Heidegger) involved in “an intellectual romance with Fascism.”[7]

Hart is interested in the ways Blanchot's interpretation of the relation between subjectivity and language is sustained by a religious register, and how one can move from a fragmentary and divided subject to an ethical community. His reading is motivated by the fact that Blanchot “will argue that community is dispersed by what it holds together.” Hart asserts that, “If [Blanchot] urges us to think a new community, one that cannot be avowed by a sovereign individual because it is grounded in the death of the other person, he also invites us to abandon all hope that it can be unified or perpetuated.” According to Hart, Blanchot's definition of community “by way of what he calls the Outside, or the Impossible, or the Imaginary” is, in effect, an attempt to “refigure the sacred” (p. 5). This question should be considered because, Hart argues, negating the presence of God does not necessarily mean denying transcendence or the mystery of life but instead exploring where it finds new locations; for Hart, “it is to recognize that the human relation is mysterious” (p. 5). This is why, Hart insists, Blanchot's entire work is driven by his desire to take “the measure of an exteriority [to being] that is not divine” (p. 7) now that God is dead. This study therefore suggests different interpretations of familiar Blanchotian themes (his obsession with the motifs of death and nothingness, or the centrality of absence in his theory of literature) offering insights into the profound way Blanchot actually reworked philosophical challenges to the subject and, in doing so, offered theologians a way to think about faith.

Hart first suggests, in chapter one, that mysticism permeates Blanchot's early writings and, because it speaks to the nature of art, helped him define “experience” in order to attend to the possibility of being. For this purpose, he examines his intellectual relationship with Bataille.[8] Their mutual influence—a familiar theme—should not obscure, according to Hart, the profound differences in these two men's notion of the sacred, the mystical, and experience. Yet, confronting these differences helps understand Bataille and Blanchot's understanding “of the divine.” Hart defines Bataille's vision of “inner experience” as “an experimental attempt to touch the indefinite reality that abides outside the self; when the attempt succeeds it is intensely pleasurable but also anguished (a taboo is violated) and strictly pointless (no knowledge of the Outside can be distilled)” (p. 23). Bataille's spiritual interest was hardly surprising considering his Catholic upbringing and the larger context of theological renewal that occurred in interwar French Catholicism, where there was “a return to Church fathers and the scholasticism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (p. 37). This spiritual interrogation underscores Bataille's fascination with Blanchot and his claim that Blanchot's most ambitious attempt at a novel, *Thomas L'Obscur* (1941), “reveals a new theology though hidden” (p. 24). Hart explains that this “new theology” recalls the great mystics from the Pseudo-Dionysus to Meister Eckhart (p. 30). Indeed, Hart suggests Blanchot must have been drawn to Eckhart's “insistence that the affirmation of life requires no appeal to a ground other than itself” (p. 31). He points to a covert mysticism he identifies in the ordering of *Faux Pas* (1943) where Blanchot reviews four religious thinkers before turning to Bataille (p. 35). Mysticism asks

whether language allows access to a “non-experience” or “limit-experience” as Bataille would call it. Hart argues that Blanchot was then obsessed with the kind of thinking that gives “rise to the sense of mystery in literature” (p. 45), and that drives one to ask “how experience is possible” (p. 46).

Hart then turns in chapter two to the ways Blanchot developed his theory of a literature that “divides and disperses the writer’s ‘I’” (p. 57), beginning with an early piece by Blanchot included in *L’écriture du désastre* (1980) and intriguingly titled “(une scène primitive?)”: a young boy is enthralled by a solitary vision allowing him to experience “the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, [...] nothing beyond” (p. 51). Hart suggests that the interrogation of the impossibility of death—through this primal scene—reveals how Blanchot is invested in dismantling the unified subject. Hart argues for this text’s mystical dimension, invoking St-Augustine’s vision at Ostia, “the primal scene of Christian mysticism” (p. 55). Hart insists this “primal scene” does not just hint at the realization of the absence of God, but instead speaks to transcendence. It shows the self is irredeemably lost. If the self is made impossible, then this scene constitutes “non experience” (p. 60), and reworks Bataille’s idea of inner experience as “communication with the Outside” (p. 61). This uncertainty of the self is what allows literature to emerge: telling the story of a lived event is impossible as it can never be recaptured in consciousness. Thus, such realization “will inaugurate the artwork and render it interminable, at least in principle” (p. 64). Further, according to Hart, Blanchot’s definition of literature characterizes the text as always denying “what it represents” (p. 61). In this, Hart perfectly illustrates the *paradoxical* thinking so characteristic of Blanchot which insists on impossibility precisely because event, consciousness, and phenomena always deny themselves at their very moment of emergence.

Hart examines, in chapter four, Blanchot’s own challenge to modern philosophies of the subject which have emerged in the wake of Descartes’ *Cogito*. Here Hart looks at the relationship between speech, language, and the possibility of being as defined by Blanchot: the “I” cannot be found to be the source of knowledge and thought. Hart dates Blanchot’s suspicion about the *Cogito* to his reading of Heidegger’s 1927 *Sein und Zeit*, which was for him an “intellectual shock” (p. 107). Blanchot does not simply subvert the *Cogito*; he first explains that language “is left with a negative charge in excess of what is required of it” (p. 109). Because “language unsettles both absolute knowledge and transparent verbal communication” (p. 113), it carries with it the question of the subject—a constant reminder of its ontological uncertainty. Hart thus suggests reading Blanchot not solely through Bataille’s interpretive framework but to understand Blanchot’s focus on a “metaphysics of the subject” through philosophers Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (p. 112), for it is rather “the possibility of death [that] determines how the self is to be conceived” (p. 112). He insists this does not mean Blanchot says there is no subject possible, but that, in his writings, this “I” does not “precede the community to which it belongs. It exists merely in terms of realizing possibilities and in doing so generates effects of subjectivity” (p. 124). In Hart’s eyes, this highlights the possibility of transcendental knowledge, and whether literature provides a privileged access to a different relationship between self and Other.

Of particular interest is Hart’s penultimate chapter where he shows how the Bible functions “as text and as idea” in Blanchot’s writings (p. 165). Taking his cue from “the motifs of call and response, creation and apocalypse, law and exile, mystery and suffering, death and resurrection” (p. 162) in his texts, Hart argues that Blanchot the atheist, while refusing biblical theology, significantly and consistently returns to the Hebrew Bible of Judaism, as evidenced by his prose in *Le Très Haut* (1948) or the novel *Aminadab* (1942). He explains this fascination in two ways: the Bible features for Blanchot as “the Book of all books” and Judaism offers a model for an ethical relation. Hart suggests turning to philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas in order to understand this stubborn presence in Blanchot’s writings. Hart argues that this reading highlights how Blanchot will challenge unity (embraced by Lévinas as an alternative to the impersonal totality characteristic of modern Western thought) and refuses it through most of his writings by turning to ethics (p. 185). Blanchot’s enduring return to Judaism in his post-1945 writings makes sense, according to Hart, because Blanchot then recognized the horror of Auschwitz and showed

remorse regarding his youthful writings. Jews are, for Blanchot, most exemplary of an ethics “beyond good and evil” (p. 186) because, as Hart concludes, “The otherness that fascinates Blanchot is that of the Outside, and it enters history through the Jews. They have grasped the truth of revelation in the Talmud” (p. 189). This ethics will, in turn, allow Hart to claim that, the “human relation” for Blanchot “remains close to what Lévinas calls, simply, ‘religion’ ” (p. 20).

Historicizing is not Hart’s purpose. Yet one might ask how historicization may have shaped Hart’s account. One could argue that Blanchot’s turn away from religion may have also had to do with his ambivalent relationship to politics, which also haunts Blanchot’s writings, especially in his concern with the idea of “community.” As a young man, Blanchot was heavily involved in nationalist and Catholic circles and spent much of the 1930s writing in far-right and conservative newspapers. If Hart is to be commended for having read some of these 1930s and 1940s writings, one wishes for greater consideration of the intellectual influences that came to bear upon Blanchot as he began theorizing about literature. Blanchot read Heidegger then and presumably encountered Nietzsche through some of his far-right companions such as Thierry Maulnier. If Blanchot was concerned “*like many of his generation*” (p. 5, emphasis mine) with the absence of God, one might wonder how much this may have had to do with that young far-right generation’s refusal of traditional far-right oppositional politics embodied by ultra-nationalist leader Charles Maurras and attempts to offer a new “Humanist Christianity.”[9]

Critics need to hold Blanchot accountable for the more problematic moments in his philosophizing (without ascribing homogeneity or intentionality to a body of work). For instance, Hart reluctantly admits that Blanchot “almost allegorizes the Jews out of history” (p. 188), but he only elaborates upon this theme a little, despite the possibility of other interpretations of Blanchot’s characterization of Judaism (p. 181, p.189). Considering the enduring controversy around Blanchot’s far-right writings and accusations of antisemitism, one might ask how such a dehistoricization of the “Jewish People” in his narratives coupled with a fascination with Judaism may have been read differently.[10] Could one not see this as a remainder of Catholicism’s inability to account for its theological (and political) relationship to Judaism embedded in a history of tense and conflictual cohabitation? How does it affect our reading of Blanchot’s concern with Otherness and the impossibility of a “community”? If Blanchot reworked his obsession over time, how would a consideration of his pre-1941 intellectual influences inflect our interpretation of Blanchotian religious motifs and his turn away from historicity? Despite these questions (which remain unexamined), Hart’s rich and dense textual analysis will offer fascinating insights for those unfamiliar with the sacred and divine as objects of thought.

NOTES

[1] See Kevin Hart’s illuminating “The Counter-Spiritual Life,” in Kevin Hart and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 156-177.

[2] The only substantial and “serious” biography is Christophe Bident’s recent *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible. Essai biographique* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1999).

[3] Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

[4] While Ricoeur is often best known for his hermeneutics of understanding, on history, time, and narrative, he has engaged—before the formal emergence of the field of postmodern theology—with

Christian theology, the meaning of biblical narrative, the question of religion and the sacred, and the conditions for morality.

[5] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Post-Modern Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), pp. 6, 15.

[6] Lee Cole, "Interview with Kevin Hart," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 31. Hart is also the author of *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

[7] Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[8] For an account of this "encounter," see Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Verso, 2002).

[9] Blanchot wrote for several years in *Combat*, a well-known and respected "far-right" monthly magazine edited by Thierry Maulnier and Catholic intellectual Jean de Fabregues, who broke off from Action Française leader Charles Maurras in his search for a renewed Catholicism. See Véronique Auzepy-Chavagnac, *Jean de Fabregues et la Jeune Droite Catholique: Aux Sources de la Revolution Nationale* (Villeneuve d'Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2002).

[10] As was demonstrated by the controversy surrounding Jeffrey Mehlman's *Legacies of Antisemitism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). In this work, Mehlman argued that Blanchot's earlier works were undeniably antisemitic. He further argued that Blanchot's own trajectory flirted in the 1940s with "collaboration." Mehlman's claims provoked a huge scandal in France where most French literary theorists fiercely contested this account. Blanchot himself (uncharacteristically) publicly responded to Mehlman's "accusation." For a sensitive and nuanced account of the controversy, see: Steven Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

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