

The Gospel of *L'Arrêt de mort*

Kevin Hart

University of Notre Dame

(Note: This essay is an excerpt from Kevin Hart's forthcoming book *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot & the Sacred*, from the University of Chicago Press)

Blanchot's readings of Greek myths—Orpheus and Eurydice, Odysseus and the Sirens—are given a central position when trying to come to terms with his understanding of literature. Less familiar, almost unremarked by Blanchot himself, and yet very important, is his use or abuse of biblical material. I have already noted his citation of “Lazare, veni foras”, and I would like to return to it for a while. In *L'Espace littéraire* Blanchot takes one of Christ's miracles, and recasts it as a perfectly ordinary literary event. Reading is a “miracle,” he says, one that allows us to discern “the sense of all thaumaturgies”: the tomb is not only the space of absence but also the means by which presence appears. “To roll back the stone, to obliterate it, is certainly something marvelous, but it is something we achieve at every moment in everyday language.”¹ He has in mind the act of reading, and he develops the conceit: “At every moment we converse with Lazarus, dead for three days - or dead, perhaps, since always. In his well-woven winding sheet, sustained by the most elegant conventions, he answers us and speaks to us within ourselves” (195). We learned at the start of *L'Espace littéraire* that “the writer [is] dead as soon as the work exists” (23; 16). Yet reading is not figured here as a resuscitation of the author but as the bringing forth of “the work” [*l'œuvre*]. The book is not a stone to be rolled away, for the work is hidden in the book. Reading or resuscitation

involves a “violent rupture” (196; 258), and it can never be guaranteed that we have brought literature to light. Some part of it must remain buried in the tomb, the Lazarus “who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life”²

Several years before writing these lines, in “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” (1947-48), Blanchot had quoted the same three words from the Vulgate when making a slightly different point by way of Hegel. To name something, the German philosopher wrote in the *Jenaer Systementwürf* (1803-4), is to annihilate it. Which becomes for his French admirer: “The ‘existent’ was called out of its existence by the word, and it became being.”³ Blanchot continues to paraphrase Hegel, yet now he goes by way of the gospel. “This *Lazare, veni foras* summoned the dark, cadaverous reality from its primordial depths and in exchange gave it only the life of the mind” (326; 316). The name both destroys the absolute singularity of the creature named while preserving what truth it has at the level of the concept. Having evoked the gospel, Blanchot reaches further back in the Bible to Exodus 33.20. The story is familiar. Moses has petitioned God “shew me thy glory”, but the Lord says, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live”. Blanchot comments.

“Whoever sees God dies. In speech what dies is what gives life to speech: speech is the life of that death, it is ‘the life that endures death and maintains itself in it.’” (327; 316)

It is a curious conjunction, for in speaking one does not see God, and as likely as not we will recall that Hegel, whose *Phänomenologie* is quoted here, testifies in the same work to “the divine nature” of speech, its ability to turn “the mere ‘meaning’ right round about, making it into something else”.⁴ For Blanchot, who is writing on behalf of literature, “God” stands for any immediate singularity, since that

which transcends all concepts and that which falls beneath them are both ineffable.⁵ Literature wants precisely what it cannot have, the absolutely singular, and it cannot have it because this singularity is destroyed by the very conceptuality that makes literature possible. It seems that, despite complaints and ruses, literature must content itself with a false resurrection of a “this” into a concept. Far from being a triumph over death, however, the concept, as Hegel shows, is complicit with death. Only because of this allegiance can there be a dialectic at work.

Before saying any more about this situation, I would like to pause in order to note that not only is resurrection a defining motif of the Christian Bible for Blanchot but also a principal site of his contestation of that complex document and the spaces it opens. One can find evidence for this in his narratives as well as in his criticism. In *Thomas l'obscur* the fifth chant ends with an evocation of Thomas as an anti-biblical character, “the only true Lazarus, whose very death was resurrected” (38; 42). Later, when Thomas reflects on Anne’s death, he says, “A body without consolation, she did not hear the voice which asked, ‘Is it possible?’ and no one dreamed of saying of her what is said of the dead who lack courage, what Christ said of the girl who was not worthy of burial, to humiliate her [*pour l’humilier*]: she is sleeping.”⁶ The allusion is to a story told in all the synoptic gospels, Jesus reviving Jairus’s daughter, usually taken to be a tale of faith rather than humiliation.⁷ Let us focus on the version given in Mark 5. 21-43. Since the biblical narrative is important to *L'Arrêt de mort* (1948), Blanchot’s strongest *récit*, I will stay with it for a while. Jairus petitions Jesus to save his child from death: “come [*veni* (Vulgate)] and lay your hands on her” (Mark 5.23). He agrees, and is on his way to the sick house when he is distracted by “a certain woman”. After he has dealt with her, word comes from the house that the girl has died, yet Jesus goes there anyway. Seeing the little girl, he asks those standing about, “Why make ye this ado, and weep? the

damsel is not dead, but sleepeth” (Mark 5.39). The people standing by mock him, but “when he had put them all out”, he goes to her, “And he took the damsel by the hand, and saith unto her, Taliltha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked . . .” (Mark 5.40-42).

In *L'Arrêt de mort* the narrator himself partly assumes the role of Jesus when his friend J. dies of a sickness that “had made a child” of her (8). To be sure, it is not his only role, and he does not play it fully or in a straightforward manner. Even so, we are hardly prepared for it. J.’s doctor tells the narrator, “I am fortunate enough to have faith, I am a believer.”⁸ He asks the narrator, “What about you?” No answer is forthcoming, and we know he thinks the doctor is a vulgar fellow. Instead, we are told the following:

“On the wall of his office there was an excellent photograph of the Turin Sudario, a photograph in which he saw two images superimposed on one another: one of Christ and one of Veronica; and as a matter of fact I distinctly saw, behind the figure of Christ, the features of a woman’s face - extremely beautiful, even magnificent in its strangely proud expression. One last thing about this doctor: he was not without his good qualities; he was, it seems to me, a great deal more reliable in his diagnoses than most.” (9; 19-20)

One detail here calls for some explication, for at first the narrator seems to have made a simple error of fact. What people venerate as the Shroud of Turin is known in Greek as the *sindon*, meaning “linen cloth”, which is supposed to contain an image, front and back, of the entire body, including the face, of Jesus after his crucifixion. Where Mark, Matthew and Luke agree to speak only of a *sindon*, the fourth gospel also mentions a *sudarium* or napkin which was placed over Jesus’ face (John 20: 6-7). Those who argue for the authenticity of the Shroud have always been troubled by the addition: either the gospel is mistaken or the image of Jesus’ face must have passed through the *sudarium* to the

sindon. At any rate, there may well be a “Turin Sindon” but there is no “Turin Sudario”.

Popular traditions have risen about images of Jesus’s face. One of the oldest stems from the fourth century when word spread of an “Image of Edessa”: a supernatural portrait of Jesus’ face that the Messiah created to help a king who had become a leper. Deriving from this tradition in the fourteenth century is another with even less historical support. Here we are told that a woman called Veronica gave Jesus a cloth with which to wipe his face while he was struggling with his cross along the Via Dolorosa. An image of his face was said to have been imprinted there. Now no one has ever claimed to see a woman’s face on the *sindon* or on the *sudario*, presumably now lost if it ever existed. Yet the narrator is not reporting a confusion on the doctor’s part or confirming an odd interpretation of the Turin Shroud. Once we recognize that Blanchot is resetting the story of the revival of Jairus’ daughter, we are likely to remember that this story, as told by Mark, intercalates another pericope, quite likely from a pre-Markan source. This is the narrative of the woman who distracts Jesus on the way to Jairus’ house in the hope that, by touching his garment, she will be cured of “an issue of blood” she has had for twelve years (Mark 5.25). According to pious legend, this woman’s name is Beronice or Veronica, and she is the same person who will later help Jesus on the Via Dolorosa.⁹ We know that she had “suffered many things of many physicians. . . but rather grew worse” (Mark 5.26). Perhaps it is this suppositious Veronica who truly stands behind the image of Jesus in the photograph on the doctor’s wall, and whose “extremely beautiful” face and “strangely proud expression” are both admired by the narrator. That she has had such trouble with doctors for so long makes us think of J., sick for ten years, whom the narrator also introduces by way of an image, a photograph.¹⁰

Eventually J. dies, and the narrator is summoned by J.’s sister, Louise, to the

apartment. When he arrives, Louise retreats, sensing that “something was about to happen that she knew she did not have the right to see, nor anyone else in the world” (19; 35), and so she takes the other mourners away. The narrator is left alone with J. “I leaned over her, I called to her by her first name; and immediately—I can say there wasn’t a second’s interval—a sort of breath came out of her compressed mouth, a sigh which little by little became a light, weak cry” (20; 36). In the gospel the little girl arises “straightway” and walks, then Jesus sensibly tells those standing around and gawking to get her something to eat. In Blanchot’s narrative, however, another detail is added:

“At that moment, her eyelids were still completely shut. But a second afterwards, perhaps two, they opened abruptly and they opened to reveal something terrible which I will not talk about, the most terrible look [*le regard le plus terrible*] which a living being can receive, and I think that if I had shuddered at that instant, and if I had been afraid, everything would have been lost, but my tenderness was so great that I didn’t even think about the strangeness of what was happening, which certainly seemed to me altogether natural because of that infinite movement which drew me towards her, and I took her in my arms, while her arms clasped me, and not only was she completely alive from that moment on, but perfectly natural, gay and almost completely recovered.” (20; 36)

What is this “terrible look”? Earlier, when the narrator was not in her apartment, J. had asked her nurse, ““Have you ever seen death [*la mort*]?”” The nurse replied, ““I have seen dead people, Miss””, only to hear the ominous rejoinder, ““No, death! . . . Well, soon you will see it”” (16; 30). It is tempting to read J.’s dark gaze as death itself looking at the narrator, rather than the nurse; and, as we will see, this is in fact what occurs. Yet when J. suffers a fatal relapse, the narrative forbids us to yield to that temptation in order to explain J.’s remark. Let us return to that episode. It begins with J. declining a shot of morphine, and ends with J. fulfilling her

promise to her nurse. “Then she turned slightly towards the nurse and said in a tranquil tone, ‘Now then, take a good look at death [*la mort*], and pointed her finger at me” (28; 48). If the narrator, half-accepting a silent prompt from Louise that perhaps originates in him, comes to be a latter day Jesus, the role of death is explicitly assigned to him by J. He is *la mort*. Does it matter that the noun is female and he is male? In one sense, no, not at all; and yet, once raised, the question opens another dimension of the *récit*.

Far from enjoying good health, the narrator had earlier revealed that J.’s doctor had told him that by rights he should be dead. But J. indicates *death* with her finger, not a man who should be dead. Perhaps she remembers that he had agreed with her proposal to kill herself—“I can see how bitter she had felt when she heard me agree to her suicide” (5; 13)—and perhaps this is sufficient for him to represent death. It needs to be recalled that the narrator does eventually help J. to die: “‘Quick, a shot’”, J. instructs him, without exactly imploring him to help her die. “I look a large syringe, in it I mixed two doses of morphine and two of a sedative, four doses altogether of narcotics” (30; 52), we are told, and several minutes later J. dies again. Keeping all that in mind, we must admit that the *récit* tells a more complex story than has been suggested thus far, for the narrator is called to the apartment when J. is dying. “Come, please come [*Venez, je vous en prie*], J. is dying” (17; 31), pleads Louise (and maybe we recall “I pray thee, come [*veni* (Vulgate)] and lay thy hands on her” (Mark 5.23). Yet the narrator does not at first arrive as healer. We learn a little later that “the receiver had hardly been hung up when her pulse, the nurse said, scattered like sand” (19; 34). Before J. identifies the narrator as death, the narrative leaves open the possibility that he is suited to that very role. Yet when J. points her finger at him, and indicates to the nurse that *he* is death, she has already been saved from death by the narrator. We know that J. was not aware of having died, but perhaps there is more at work here than her inability

to experience her own demise. In yet another meditation on “Lazare, veni foras”, this time in *L’Entretien infini*, Blanchot makes an observation that helps to explain this strange state of affairs. He suggests that the force that brought Lazarus back to life “is no doubt admirable” but that it is “precisely a force” and that it “comes in this decision from death itself”.¹¹ In reviving J., the narrator is colluding with death considered as a force, the very death that Hegel assimilated to the negativity of the dialectic.

Is there a death other than the one that reveals itself in negativity? There is, Blanchot assures us, although it cannot show itself in the order of phenomena, and therefore Hegel bypasses it in the *Phänomenologie*. It is not death in its dialectical guise, because this darker side of death “manifests existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end”.¹² This is not death as a force, which would mark a clean break with life by way of either nothingness or an afterlife, but death as radical passivity: an endless dying that cannot be experienced but that no experience ever quite eludes. Blanchot regards this aspect of death, *le mourir*, as the neutre or the “he” [*il*]. And this, I take it, is what is revealed to the narrator when J. raises her eyelids: the reluctant withdrawal of “the *He* of Sovereign Death [*le Il de la Mort souveraine*]”.¹³ This is not the death that, for Hegel, conspires with negativity in order to constitute the “I” [*Je*] but the death that cannot be suborned by negativity and that undoes the “I”. It is “a death that no individual death satisfies”.¹⁴ The narrator glimpses the *il* before J. is once again *elle*; it is “something terrible which I will not talk about, the most terrible look [*le regard le plus terrible*] which a living being can receive” (20; 36).

After Jesus raises the little girl to whose deathbed he had been summoned, we hear no more of her. The gospel narrative moves along briskly, “And he went out from thence, and came into his own country; and his disciples follow him” (Mark 6.1). We

know without having to be told that Jairus' daughter must eventually die again. In Mark's narrative, her resuscitation foreshadows Jesus' resurrection. Blanchot rewrites and redirects the biblical story by adding the completion that Mark omits. As he tersely puts it in another work, "The dead came back to life dying."¹⁵ The first part of *L'Arrêt de mort* is not simply a resetting of Mark 5.35-43; it twists the narrative beyond belief, and not only because it involves the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.¹⁶ The story of J. ends with the narrator reflecting on what has happened:

"I myself see nothing important in the fact that this young woman was dead, and returned to life at my bidding, but I see an astounding miracle in her fortitude, in her energy, which was great enough to make death powerless as long as she wanted. One thing must be understood: I have said nothing extraordinary or even surprising. What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it." (30; 52-53)

The passage progresses by coding the extraordinary as the ordinary and vice versa. One event, the narrator's judgment that J.'s fortitude is "an astounding miracle", can be explained naturalistically: it comes as a change in perspective, and is a characteristic modern response to the world of the Bible. Also we need to remember that, for the narrator, J. had already lived another life before dying the first time: "for her those few minutes had been a lifetime, more than that eternity of life they talk about" (19; 34). Yet when the narrator regards J.'s return to life as unimportant, his judgment is itself extraordinary precisely because our response to it is shaped by the Bible. Think of Mark 5.42, for example. When those who mocked Jesus for saying "the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth" saw her brought back to life, "they were astonished with a great astonishment". In denying the importance of J.'s resuscitation, and in saying "I have said nothing extraordinary or even surprising", when he himself has described it as "the miracle that I had brought about" (27; 47), the narrator moves away from the gospel,

but in which direction it would be hard to say.

Resurrection, for Blanchot, is both beholden to death and utterly ignorant of what death truly is. It draws its force from death considered as negativity, while disregarding its obscure dimension: a dying that never begins and never ends but eternally repeats itself and therefore dissimulates "itself". To affirm resurrection from the dead would be not to acknowledge the eternal return of dying. This anterior or impossible death never offers itself to comprehension, although one can become vaguely aware of it when suffering or pointlessly waiting. We cannot experience dying, for we come upon it only when there is no ground, no traction, for consciousness to take hold. Yet its sheer alterity dangles before us the thought of having an experience *par excellence*. The thought is delusory; at most, dying interrupts us, puts us to the test, but it can never be lived in the present. Indeed, it disperses the present and undoes any assurance we might have in the unity of the "I". Frightful as this dying might seem, it is to be affirmed, Blanchot tells us in a *récit*, for it announces "the renunciation of mystery, the ultimate insignificance of lightness".¹⁷ If death enters into the life of the concept, dying declines any invitation to take part in either comprehension or history; it does not abolish the particular but, as it were, hails its singularity while not being able to speak of it.

There can be no gainsaying the fact that for Blanchot the Christian Bible is an invitation to enter mystery, an affirmation of significance, and a commitment to weight. This is one reason why critics have tended to read his work wholly by way of Greek mythology, especially the story of Orpheus and Eurydice which is, in its own way, an account of a failed resuscitation. That this story is central to Blanchot is not to be disputed: the author himself has underlined its importance, and rightly so.¹⁸ Yet the Greek reference need not exclude a biblical equivalent. Before J. dies she murmurs, "Quick, a perfect rose [*une rose par*

excellence]" (25; 44), later echoed in a macabre way by "Quick, a shot" (30; 51-52); and anyone who reminds us that the rose is an Orphic symbol is of course entirely right.¹⁹ However, one should not thereby forget that the rose, along with the lily, is the pre-eminent biblical flower in European translations of the scriptures. Nor should one automatically exclude the pertinence of Christian tradition for a writer brought up as a French Catholic. Chances are that Blanchot would have known the medieval tradition of giving a perfect rose in order to honor royalty, and a reader with such cultural knowledge might well find in J.'s final words an allusion to "sovereign death".

As a coda to this brief discussion of *L'Arrêt de mort*, I would like to say that, for all the passion that the primal poet has for his wife, the myth of Orpheus, as Blanchot reads it, speaks of the relative powers of art and death. And to this I add that Blanchot has also pondered the biblical conceit "for love is strong as death" (Cant. 8.6). Some Christian exegetes have seen this as an adumbration of the resurrection, although, to be sure, Blanchot takes it quite differently.²⁰ Nonetheless, it would be a weak reader who does not find Blanchot's novels and *récits* to be as profoundly about love and death as they are about art and death. ■

Notes

1. Blanchot, 'Reading', *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 195; *EL*, 257.

2. Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 327; *PF*, 316.

3. Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', 326; *PF*, 315-16. Hegel remarks, 'Der erst Act, wodurch Adam seine Herrschafft über die Thiere constituiert hat, ist, daß er ihnen Nahmen gab, d.h. sie als seiende vernichtete, und sie zu für sich ideellen macht [. . .] Im Nahmen ist die für sich seyende Realität des Zeichens vernichtet', *Jenaer Systemwürfe*, I, ed. K. Düsing-H.

Kimmerle, *Gesammelt Werke*, 6 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1975), 20.

4. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. and introd. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 1□

5. See Jean Hyppolite, 'The Ineffable', in his *Logic and Existence*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). The original French volume appeared in 1953, several years after the first publication of Blanchot's 'La littérature et le droit à la mort'. Later, Blanchot thinks the Other by way of God. See 'Being Jewish', *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and foreword Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 129; *EL*, 188.

6. Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lambertson (New York: David Lewis, 1973), 89; *TO(2)*, 100.

7. A summary of patristic commentary on the passage is given by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Catena Aurea*, 4 vols (Albany: Preserving Christian Publications, Inc., 1999), II: *St Mark*, 97-104.

8. Blanchot, *Death Sentence*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1978), 9; *AM*, 19.

9. See Gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate, 7, in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. and notes M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924). The woman's name is Beronice in Coptic and Veronica in Latin. In terms of the tradition of Veronica's image of Jesus, the chances are that the name occurs as a corruption of *vera icon*, 'true image'. Also see Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticus*, trans. T. W. Crafter (New York: Macmillan, 1919), I, 31.

10. Leslie Hill develops an intriguing political reading of the dates in *L'Arrêt de mort* in *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 145-47. The two readings are not mutually exclusive.

11. Blanchot, 'The Great Refusal', *The Infinite Conversation*, 36; *EL*, 50.

12. Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', *The Work of Fire*, 328; *PF*, 317.

13. Blanchot, 'Glances from Beyond the Grave', *The Work of Fire*, 255; *PF*, 248.

14. Blanchot, 'Pascal's Hand', *The Work of Fire*, 263; *PF*, 255.

15. Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion*, trans. John Gregg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 28; *AO*, 56.

16. Jacques Derrida argues that the *récit* does not take the gospel as a paradigm but rather is a 'seriality without paradigm'. See his 'Living On: Border Lines', trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 130. For Derrida, J.'s revival is a 'resurrection'. See 'Living On', 117, 125, 149.

17. Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1993), 43; *CQMP*, 83. Also see the comments on mystery in *Awaiting Oblivion*, 56; *AO*, 108.

18. See Blanchot's author's note at the beginning of *The Space of Literature*, and also his letter, cited in Evelyn Londyn, 'L'Orphique chez Blanchot: voir et dire', *French Forum* 3: 3 (1980), 261-67.

19. See Blanchot, 'Rilke and Death's Demand', *The Space of Literature*, 157; *EL*, 206. A quite different reading of the rose, based on Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, is offered by Jeffrey Mehlman in 'Iphigenia 38: Deconstruction, History, and the Case of *L'Arrêt de mort*', *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82-96.

20. Blanchot, 'Gazes from Beyond the Grave', *The Work of Fire*, 253; *PF*, 247. Blanchot misquotes the verse so that it reads, 'love stronger than death [*l'amour plus fort que la mort*]'. La Bible de Jérusalem renders the verse as follows: 'Car l'amour est fort comme la Mort'. Also see Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), 45; *CI*, 75.