

**The *Other* Night:
The Archaeology of Myth in the Writing of Mallarmé and Blanchot**

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Abstract: In twentieth century Mallarmé scholarship there are two books which famously deal with 'le drame solaire' as a key element of Mallarmé's literary production. The first is Gardner Davies's *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, and the second *La religion de Mallarmé* by Bertrand Marchal. Davies provides readings of poems by Mallarmé which stage the solar drama and is guided in these readings by his interpretation of the principle of *transposition* in Mallarmé's work,¹ which is seen for instance in 'Théodore de Banville', where the poet speaks of '*La divine transposition, pour l'accomplissement de quoi existe l'homme*' which '*va du fait à l'idéal*'.² According to this reading the sunset is a central motif in Mallarmé's work because it enacts the movement of negation through which natural phenomena are destroyed in their existence and subsequently resurrected ideally in the poetic work. The poetic Absolute would correspond to the success of this transposition.³

In Maurice Blanchot's readings of Mallarmé this conclusion is fundamentally put into question. The work of the negative cannot arrive at a final resolution and the work turns to an interrogation of its origin.⁴ Blanchot does not explicitly deal with 'le drame solaire' as a motif in Mallarmé's work, but he does make an interpretation of the myth of Orpheus the 'displaced centre' of *L'espace littéraire*⁵. Of interest in this essay is that this reading takes the Orpheus story as a kind of solar myth, and 'littérature', in the particular sense he understands this word/activity, is confronted by the *other* night, the night which the Orphic text contemplates as it fails to resolve itself in the calm of the *first* night.⁶ In this essay, I will begin by turning to *La religion de Mallarmé*, the second book dedicated to 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's work, in order to suggest a proximity with Blanchot's reading of the myth of Orpheus. By

¹ This interpretation can be found in the introductory pages to *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* (Paris : José Corti, 1959). See also 'Mallarmé's commitment to "Transposition"', Gardner Davies in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 26 1989 Jan-April pp 52-70.

² *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1945), p. 522 (emphases original). For further comments on 'transposition' see especially 'Crise de Vers', pp. 360-68 (p. 366ff.).

³ Cf. the sonnet 'Victorieusement fui le suicide beau...' *Œuvres complètes*, p. 68.

⁴ On this subject see Ian Maclachlan, *Roger Laporte: The Orphic Text* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), p. 7: 'In this failure of self-coincidence, the reflexive moment of the Orphic text no longer consolidates its integrity as a work, but becomes instead a movement towards the other'.

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris : Gallimard, 'essais', 1955). Cf. the prefatory remark: '*Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l'attire: centre non pas fixe, mais qui se déplace par la pression du livre et les circonstances de sa composition. Centre fixe aussi qui se déplace, s'il est véritable, en restant le même et en devenant toujours plus central, plus dérobé, plus incertain et plus impérieux. Celui qui écrit le livre écrit par désir, par ignorance de ce centre. Le sentiment de l'avoir touché peut bien n'être que l'illusion de l'avoir atteint; quand il s'agit d'un livre d'éclaircissement, il y a une sorte de loyauté méthodologique à dire vers quel point il semble que le livre se dirige; ici, vers les pages intitulées Le regard d'Orphée.*'

⁶ Blanchot does not refer to the Orpheus myth explicitly in these terms, i.e. he does not call it a solar myth. The linking of the Orpheus myth with the disappearance of the sun at the end of the day is, however, clear from the first paragraph of 'Le regard d'Orphée': see *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 225.

making this rapprochement I hope to suggest another perspective from which to consider both Blanchot's writings and 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's texts. If we see 'le drame solaire' as the site of the recollection of an ordinary trauma repressed until its resurgence in the work of Mallarmé (and if we pay attention to Blanchot's reading of Orpheus as a solar myth) then we can use it as a means to account for Mallarmé's significance in Blanchot's work. From this perspective, it will be argued, we can gain a fuller understanding of Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé as a site of passage to what he calls the 'l'autre nuit'.

1. *The Origins of Mythology*

In 1988 Bertrand Marchal put forward a striking thesis.⁷ He focused his attentions on one of Mallarmé's marginal works which, being a translation from the English of a work of Comparative Mythology, had been subjected to little critical analysis. The work in question is *Les Dieux antiques*, a translation and subtle transformation of the Rev. G. W. Cox's *A Manual on Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer*.⁸ The *Manual* is animated by the enthusiasm of a neophyte discovering and spreading the deep truth of a new science evangelically. The new science is Comparative Mythology and the deep truth is the revelation of a single root for the overlaid and disparate mythologies of the Indo-European cultures. Marchal summarizes this discovery as follows: 'tous les mythes, dans leur complexité contradictoires, sont réductible à quelques phrases primordiales qui évoquent l'éternel conflit de l'ombre et de la lumière, du jour et de la nuit, ou les amours contrariées du soleil et de l'aurore'.⁹ The new science, undertaking a kind of archaeology of mythology, had, when it brushed away the dust, uncovered a unique source in the eternal battle between light and dark, and the forgotten origin of all myths was recalled in its truth as a solar

⁷ In *La religion de Mallarmé* (Paris : José Corti, 1988).

⁸ *A Manual of Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867). *Les dieux antiques* is included in the *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 1157-1278. Cox's work is an introduction to mythology in which he drew on and vulgarized the ideas of Friedrich Max Muller. Marchal frequently refers to the book in terms of a vulgarization of more sophisticated, scholarly, ideas. For Marchal's attitude towards Cox see the section 'Un certain George William Cox' in *La religion de Mallarmé* (Librairie José Corti, 1988), pp. 136-38, where we read, for example: 'Cox n'est rien d'autre qu'un habile vulgarisateur' (p. 136).

⁹ *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 114.

drama. So, for example, the story of Orpheus' descent into the underworld is easily reinterpreted to disclose its primordial meaning:

We see the lovely evening twilight die out before the coming night; but when they saw this, they said that the beautiful Eurydike (Eurydice) had been stung by the serpent of darkness, and that Orpheus was gone to fetch her back from the land of the dead. We see the light which had vanished in the west reappear in the east; but they said that Eurydike was now returning to the earth. And as this tender light is seen no more when the sun himself is risen, they say that Orpheus had turned round too soon to look at her, and so was parted from the wife whom he loved so dearly.¹⁰

For Cox, therefore, the Orpheus story allegorizes the primordial existential situation of man confronted with the death of the sun at the end of the day. This meaning has, however, been lost as the mythological figures themselves take on life and obscure this reading. We might say that in this movement allegory is lost to drama.

In *La Religion de Mallarmé*, Marchal's argument develops as a complex interrogation of Mallarmé's writings. He takes Mallarmé at his word when, in a prefatory note to *Divagations*, the collection of prose poems and journalistic contributions published in 1897, he remarks that 'les Divagations apparentes traitent un sujet, de pensée, unique'.¹¹ Marchal coordinates these writings with *Les Dieux antiques* to argue that Mallarmé's œuvre can be properly understood as an obsessive return to the originary anguish of man confronted by the eternal tragedy of nature.¹² If we add to this that Christianity has, Marchal argues, served only to 'sublimate' this anguish,¹³ then we feel his argument lock step with some of the most powerful and

¹⁰ *A Manual of Mythology*, p. xv.

¹¹ *Igitur/Divagations/Un Coup de dés*, S. Mallarmé, ed. B. Marchal (Gallimard, 2003), p. 79. Translations from this work are my own.

¹² It should be noted that Marchal marks a departure here, within the work of translation itself, from Cox's text. While Cox tends to see the history of mythology as a groping towards the true God of Christianity, Mallarmé's focus on the trauma of an original anguish consecrates it as a primordial sacred experience toward which Christianity blocks a return passage (*La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 161).

¹³ See *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 160: 'Or si la religion tend de plus en plus à se confondre, aux époques modernes, avec une conscience morale qui identifie la divinité au souverain bien, Mallarmé rappelle ici que la fiction religieuse n'est pas d'abord ni essentiellement une morale, mais un dispositif

influential discourses of the twentieth century. The reading deploys Freudian strategies as it attempts to indicate the site of the reawakening of an originary trauma.¹⁴

The second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were marked and, in some ways characterised by, an archaeological tendency in the human sciences. When, in the latter half of the nineteenth century archaeology was constituted as an academic discipline, the famous excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Arthur Evans on Crete were motivated by an overwhelming desire to interrogate the mythic origins of the West. These obsessions motivated other discourses as well, and so the Comparative Mythology of Max Muller and Cox sought to uncover a primordial experience which was hidden and distorted by the very stories which it had inspired. Marchal's argument in *La religion de Mallarmé* tends to inscribe Mallarmé in this archaeological tradition. He frequently suggests this tendency throughout the book.¹⁵ This archeological/psychoanalytical return to an originary trauma repressed or covered over by the myths which would represent it may be understood in a more general context of concern for the origin in the human sciences. I would suggest that this concern did not disappear as the twentieth century progressed, but if anything it was further aggravated. I would argue therefore that Marchal's reading of Mallarmé is not in conflict with Blanchot's, and that the evocation of the solar myth of Orpheus in *L'Espace littéraire* tends to add weight to

imaginaire, naturellement inconscient, qui a pour fonction de dériver ou de sublimer une angoisse originelle que l'homme est incapable de supporter.'

¹⁴ Marchal's reading constantly uses psychoanalytic vocabulary to diagnose 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's work as the return of a repressed, originary trauma. Cf. p. 364 : 'Par rapport à la nature où l'homme moderne peut se retremper au mystère de l'origine, la société apparaît, nous l'avons vu, comme une instance de refoulement'. Cf. also pp. 245, 390.

¹⁵ On this subject see for example p. 242: 'La critique théâtrale de Mallarmé a donc une fonction archéologique qui en fait le complément nécessaire d'une poésie essentiellement vouée à élucider [...] le mystère de l'homme' and p. 297: 'Toute l'entreprise mallarméenne est bien une entreprise de récupération', 'il y a donc un trésor à exhumer, sous les ruines d'une religion à l'abandon.' See also p. 331.

Marchal's argument.¹⁶ It is in the context of an aggravation of the problem of the origin that I would like to approach the work of Maurice Blanchot.¹⁷

2. *The Turn/Towards the Other Night*

'Pourquoi cette tendance?', Blanchot asks in 'La littérature et l'expérience originelle':¹⁸

Pourquoi Mallarmé [...] ? Pourquoi, au moment même où l'absolu tend à prendre la forme de l'histoire, où les temps ont des soucis et des intérêts qui ne s'accordent plus avec la souveraineté de l'art, où le poète cède la place au littérateur et le littérateur à l'homme qui donne voix au quotidien, au moment où par force des temps, l'art disparaît, pourquoi l'art apparaît-il pour la première fois comme une recherche où quelque chose d'essentiel est en jeu [...] ?

These remarks come at the end of a passage in which Blanchot reflects on the end of art as it was famously announced by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*¹⁹. What does it mean to say that 'through the force of time art disappears'? For Hegel it means that Spirit has attained a level of historical development such that the artwork is no equal to the task of containing the content it would be required to communicate. Art has reached its internal limit and the very thing which it cannot do without as an art-work, its sensuousness, now makes it incapable of fulfilling the spiritual task of the age. It is left to philosophy to articulate the historical development of Spirit as it becomes the only sphere able to comprehend the age, attaining historical completion in Absolute Knowledge. This passage to the Absolute may be coordinated with one experience of

¹⁶ Cf. The discussion of the night and the *other* night in 'Le regard d'Orphée'. For more on Blanchot's distinction see 'Le piège de la nuit' in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 219-24.

¹⁷ For more on the question of the 'origin' in Blanchot's work, see the chapter entitled 'La question de l'origine: la loi, l'œuvre, le langage, l'imaginaire' in Michel Chantal, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée* (Saint-Genouph : Nizet, 1997).

¹⁸ Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 292

¹⁹ See the *Aesthetics*, Vol. I. G. W. F. Hegel, trans. by T. M. Knox. (Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 11

the night.²⁰ We may take here, to illustrate this, another of Hegel's famous declarations, this time from his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: '... the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk';²¹ the passage to philosophy takes place at the end of the 'great Day's work of Spirit' which, Hegel says, progresses in its development, like the sun, from East to West.²²

Now, Blanchot does not simply contest Hegel. What is remarkable for him is that on this limit, where the art work *should* withdraw, where by rights it is exhausted, something else *happens*. This is the fascination of 'littérature'.²³ Earlier in the book, in a section entitled 'Approche de l'espace littéraire', Blanchot wrote of Mallarmé's experience:

Il semble que l'expérience propre de Mallarmé commence au moment où il passe de la considération de l'œuvre faite, celle qui est toujours tel poème particulier [...] au souci par lequel l'œuvre devient la recherche de son origine et veut s'identifier avec son origine [...] Quand Mallarmé se demande 'Quelque chose comme les Lettres existe-t-il?', cette question est la littérature même, elle est la littérature quand celui-ci est devenue le souci de sa propre essence.²⁴

²⁰ In a section of *L'Espace littéraire* entitled 'Le dehors, la nuit', Blanchot gives a brief sketch of how he understands this first night: 'Dans la nuit, tout a disparu. C'est la première nuit [...] là s'achève et s'accomplit la parole dans la profondeur silencieuse qui la garantit comme son sens' (p. 213). And further on: 'Dans la [première] nuit [first night], mourir comme dormir, est encore un présent du monde, *une ressource du jour*: c'est la belle limite qui accomplit, le moment de l'achèvement, la perfection', p. 215 (my emphasis). The first night is the still, silent, space in which language recovers its meaning, and as such it is a resource of the 'day'. The Hegelian resonances of this stage of Blanchot's argument are clear.

²¹ *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23

²² *The Philosophy of History*, G. W. F. Hegel, trans. J. Sibree. (Dover Publications, 1956) p. 103. I have written at greater length on these issues in an article published in *Parrhesia* 09 (2010), pp. 80-93. 'The Tragedy of Nature: The Sunset and the Destruction of Metaphor in the Writings of Mallarmé and Derrida'.

²³ 'Fascination' is Blanchot's word and it plays an important role in his writings as he analyses the predicament of the modern writer. On this subject see Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot; Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): "'Fascination" is the name Blanchot gives to the movement of writing that, withdrawing from determinations of space and time, draws the reader, by virtue of its very powerlessness, into that *other* or literary space. There it affirms itself 'in the indeterminate milieu of fascination' (p. 137). See also Michel Chantal, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée*, p. 25

²⁴ *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 43-44.

When Blanchot notes that as art disappears it in the same movement appears for the first time as ‘une recherche où quelque chose d’essentiel est en jeu’, the essential he speaks of is art’s own essence, that is to say, with ‘littérature’ art has begun to interrogate its own conditions of possibility, to be tormented by the question of what it *itself* is. For Blanchot, this is extraordinary and contradictory, and it forces the artwork into impossible and paradoxical movements. He describes this situation through a reading of the Greek myth of Orpheus.

3. *Orpheus*

For Blanchot the myth of Orpheus strangely describes the torment of the modern writer, despite its great antiquity. Reading the section entitled ‘Le Regard d’Orphée’ we should remember that the ‘day’ of which Blanchot speaks is the inter-subjective space of human action.²⁵ It is the place where actions have meaning, a meaning generated and guaranteed through their inscription in a historical context. The first night, as it was encountered above, belongs to this day, it is the rest that comes at the end of the day and it is complicit in the meaning through which the day contemplates and comprehends itself, in its *history*. As has already been noted, this night is coordinated with the historical accomplishment of the Absolute, it is the dialectical resolution of the day at the end of human history. When Orpheus descends to the underworld, into the calm of the first night, he follows his love who he may bring back with him to the ‘day’ provided he does not turn to look at her. Orpheus is therefore tormented by an unquenchable desire. He *must* have Eurydice and bring her back to the ‘day’ but he *must not* turn to contemplate her, he cannot have her

²⁵ For Blanchot’s comments on the ‘day’ see ‘La littérature et la droit à la mort’ in *La Part du feu* (Paris : Gallimard, 1949), pp. 291-331.

according to the strictures of the day; that is to say he cannot ascribe meaning and inscribe her in the historical context. She disrupts this context, and this is why Blanchot says that: ‘She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night.’²⁶ The *other* night ‘appears’ as the ever receding, ungraspable origin of the work; impossible to integrate in the work, it works towards its disintegration, or *désœuvrement*, to use Blanchot’s term.²⁷

The modern writer, at least the modern writer who is attentive to the essential demand of the work, finds himself in Orpheus’ predicament.²⁸ In an earlier essay, ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort,’ Blanchot made more specific use of Hegel’s work to indicate this Orphic obsession. ‘Literature’ uses language; this is an extremely obvious statement, so obvious that it can very easily go unquestioned, but what happens when ‘littérature’ begins to become aware of this and to wonder what is going on when it uses a word to name something? In an early section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wrote of people who consider that they have an unmediated access to the sensuous world:

They speak of the existence of *external* objects, which can be more precisely defined as *actual*, absolutely *singular*, *wholly personal*, *individual* things... this existence, they say, has absolute certainty and truth. They *mean* ‘this bit of paper on which I am writing – or rather have written – ‘this’; but what they mean is not what they say. If they actually wanted to *say* ‘this’ bit of paper which they mean, if they wanted to *say* it, then this is impossible because the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal.²⁹

²⁶ *L’Espace littéraire*, p. 171

²⁷ ‘Appears’ is a problematic word in this context as the one thing the *other* night does not do it is to appear as such. It only appears in its disappearance and this is its terrible torment for the writer.

²⁸ It is not every writer who would find themselves in this torment. It is perfectly possible to write without being troubled by this turn, to write in and for the light of the ‘day’.

²⁹ *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. G. W. F. Hegel, trans. J. N. Finlay. (Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 66.

‘Le langage’, says Blanchot in ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort’, ‘sait que son royaume, c’est le jour et non pas l’intimité de l’irrévélé’.³⁰ But what happens when language turns round on itself to search for that which precedes the ‘day’? Blanchot’s reply is that ‘littérature’ happens : ‘Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède’.³¹

4. Conclusion

(404) What is the pilgrimage of Orpheus?

The journey which during the hours of night the sun was supposed to take in order to bring back the dawn in the morning, which he does only to destroy her with his dazzling splendour.³²

The Comparative Mythology of Max Muller, vulgarized in the work of Cox, attempts to reveal an archetypal myth underlying the scattered stories of Indo-European culture. Hidden and distorted by the dust, there lies, just beneath the surface, a Solar Drama, and the multiple, overlaid, myths are opened to a true reading which shows them to be variations on the one theme which obsesses the mind of primitive man, the eternal battle between light and dark. Mallarmé, Marchal argues, penetrates through the sedimented layers, overcomes the Christian sublimation, to rediscover this primordial conflict.³³ The trauma of the disappearance of the sun at the end of the day, repressed by the myths and dreams that it had engendered, rushes back to modern consciousness in Mallarmé’s writings. Mallarmé does not, of course, attempt to reinstate any primitive mythology in his work. It is rather that in his acute attention to what he is doing when he writes, he rediscovers this primordial myth, indicating the

³⁰ *La Part de feu*, p. 329.

³¹ *La Part de feu*, p. 329.

³² *A Manual of Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer*, p. 107

³³ Mallarmé’s short critical essay ‘Hamlet’ is exemplary in this regard. For Marchal’s reading see *La religion de Mallarmé*, pp. 220-222 and 236-244.

existential situation of man confronted by the death of the sun, and along with that his own mortality. For Marchal it is in Mallarmé's texts that the repression disintegrates and this originary trauma, obscured by the very myths which related it, comes back in an incessant recollection and inscription in his writings.

We saw above that Blanchot's work can be approached as an aggravation of the problem of the origin. I hoped to show during the course of the essay that 'littérature', for him, is tormented by an obsession with its own essence, that it is constituted through a turn inward towards an infinitely elusive origin which it will never be able to bring to the light of 'day'. If the 'day' is meaning and history, then 'littérature' brings us back, through an interrogation of its own essence or possibility to an obscure region which precedes the 'day'. 'Littérature' is the 'madness of the day' because it is obsessed by the 'day's' precondition which cannot appear in the 'day'.³⁴

The strangest thing is that this turn towards the *other* night happens at nightfall. That is, it is only with the passage to the Absolute that that the problem of the origin becomes infinitely aggravated. Hence Blanchot's insistent questioning – 'Why Mallarmé?' The archaeological work of the late nineteenth century raised the problem of the origin and this, according to Marchal, became acute in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. I have indicated above how, for Marchal, Mallarmé's text is involved in an incessant evocation of this repressed trauma. It was Blanchot's peculiar ability to be confronted in his reading by the contradictory movement of the modern text, and to show how this could be understood as a profound turn. It is in 'littérature' that the modern text becomes tormented by the impossible demand of the *other* night. If Davies's reading of 'le drame solaire' suggests an accomplished resolution, a sunset

³⁴ *La folie du jour* is the title of a short *récit* by Maurice Blanchot (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973). It was an important text for Jacques Derrida in his reading of Blanchot, See the essays collected in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

which leads to a victorious resurrection in the poetic absolute, then Marchal's reading perhaps suggests something else; the return of a trauma which destroys that accomplishment. We have here then two sunsets, an end which doubles itself in its own movement of closure, one of these ends leads to rest and repose at the end of the day, and one opens an entirely *other* space.