The Song of Absence:

Blanchot and Kristeva on Loss, Melancholy, and Imagination

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 'Even then his trembling tongue invok'd his bride;

With his last voice, "Eurydice", he cry'd,

"Eurydice", the rocks and river-banks reply'd.'

Orpheus sings the loss of Eurydice. He sings her absence, and the voice of that absence stirs the shades of Hell, stills the roar of animals, and moves the very rocks to pity. The song of Orpheus is the dream of a poetic diction, of a singing, whose intensity lifts it beyond the crowded complacency of the everyday to uncover a cadence that disrupts the monotonous churning of the world. A song that will force itself even upon the obdurate inaccessibility of stone: such is the dream that has carried the voice of Orpheus beyond the banks of the river Hebrus to echo across the shores of our own turgid and difficult times. That the force of this singing is born of the articulation of an absence – out of pain, out of loss – must render this image of special significance in any speculation on the relations of absence to imagination, of sorrow to song, of melancholy to the libidinal economies of artistic expression. It is with a view to exploring some of these connections that this paper is written. It will move from a discussion of Blanchot's dense and cryptic reflection on the myth of Orpheus from his 1955 volume 'L'Espace Litteraire', to the exploration of a parallel theoretical moment in the idea of 'melancholic imagination' developed by Kristeva in 'Soleil Noir' of 1977.

I

'Allas! Whanne Orpheus and his wyf weren almest at the termes of the nyght (that is to seyn, at the laste boundes of helle), Orpheus looked abakward on Erudyce his wyf, and lost hire, and was deed.'

Blanchot's essay 'Le Regard d'Orphée' is a meditation on the bringing to visibility of absence, as it belongs to the act of writing. Engaging with the complex metaphoric interplays of light and dark, of ascent and descent, as they weave through all aspects of the myth, Blanchot centers his writing on the idea of *loss* . Not, however, the initial loss of Eurydice, nor the desperate journey of recovery, nor still the overwhelming power of the Orphic lament: instead, his focus is on the *second* loss – on the moment, introduced late into the Western mythic legacy by Virgil, of Orpheus' turn, his *gaze* . Whether interpreted as love-madness, as impatience, as doubt, or as forgetfulness, the turning of Orpheus has come down to us as an irruption of human failure into a narrative of loss and recovery, the curiously inexplicable quality of the act echoing the arbitrary rhythms of choice and their consequence. Saturated with regret, the image of Orpheus' transgression - his second loss - has, since Virgil, helped to measure out the geometries of love and betrayal, of hope and loss, of trust and doubt that determine the rhythms of our self-narration, and to raise to the level of mythic inevitability the coil of our uncertainties.

Blanchot sees it as his task to re-inscribe Orpheus' failure into a context which would locate the loss not merely within the litanies of human inadequacy, but as a choice whose paradoxical necessity lies at the heart of the process of writing. To some degree, this involves reviving an allegorical reading of the myth, which would interpret both Eurydice and Orpheus as symbolically complementary aspects of a search for higher Truth. In the Neoplatonic symbolology of Boethius, for example, Orpheus represents *nous*, and Eurydice *epithumia* , and Orpheus' journey the struggle, *within* the individual, between appetite and aspiration. On this reading, the turning back of Orpheus would represent a cautionary failure, a regressive lapse occasioned by identification with the corporeal. 'For whoso that evere be so overcomen', as Chaucer's luminous Middle-English translation has it, 'that he ficche his eien into the put of helle,...al that evere he hath drawen of the noble good he lesith it.'

For Blanchot, too, Orpheus and Eurydice also *represent* : they belong, in other words, to an allegorical order which places them in relation to each other as aspects of a universalized struggle. In this case, though, the struggle is not for the Good, or the True, but for the condition of Writing. Eurydice will be symbolically identified with death, with the night, with the darkness that envelops her, and Orpheus with the alienated condition of the writer (and probably, by extension, with the condition of our modernity) the fulfillment of whose existential need can occur only from out of a tragic grappling with that darkness. The danger of such an allegory is that it might appear to turn Eurydice into a cipher, into a mere moment in the history of the becoming of Writing. This would imply an understanding of the (Feminine) presence of Eurydice as a mere waypoint toward a Romantic ideal of a 'pure' (read Masculine) productivity. But such a quasi-Wagnerian reading would fail to do justice to the central complexity of Blanchot's interpretation. Crucially, in 'Le Regard d'Orphée', it is not the pure pursuit of the 'work' of writing, of rendering visible in words, that entails the tragic inevitability of the encounter with loss, with absence, represented by the loss of Eurydice: there is no sense here of an 'overcoming' of a 'temptation'.

Rather, it is precisely the *abandonment* of the work, the refusal, exemplified in the turning of Orpheus, which paradoxically provides the core experience that enables the work to fulfill itself. Blanchot's radically new understanding of 'inspiration' will thus reach beyond the identification of Eurydice with the passive 'inspirational source' of Orpheus' lament, and instead locate the tragic inevitability of Orpheus' loss in a *necessary refusal* of the demands of the work. For Blanchot, there is no 'failing' here, of the kind assumed by traditional readings of the story. The tragedy of Orpheus - our tragedy – lies not within the bounds of a dilemma of choice between the competing demands of sensual experience and the 'work'. Rather, the pursuit of the work – of Writing – is understood as paradoxically dependent on the refusal, the rejection of that pursuit. The tragic condition of the writer is to be bound, like Sisyphus, to the pursuit of a project whose realization depends on its failure.

'Art', writes Blanchot, 'is the power that causes the night to open'. It is the power that carries Orpheus' lament to the depths of Hell. But the purpose of his descent is the retrieval of Eurydice, thus understood as 'the profoundly dark point toward which art, desire, death, and the night all lead.' As such, and this is crucial to Blanchot's thinking, Eurydice is present within a network of concealments – the veiling of death, the impenetrability of her nocturnal habitus. It is towards her non-Being, towards her absence, that Orpheus sets his desire, his song. In this sense, Orpheus' gaze, which betrays the hope that brought him to Hell, *yet* remains faithful to this desire, in that what he is seeking is not 'Eurydice in her diurnal truth', but precisely his beloved 'in her nocturnal darkness, in her distance, her body closed, her face sealed….' What Orpheus seeks, then, is the night, not in a form which might be accessible to the realm of the visible, but 'the *other* night', as Blanchot puts it, the night whose essence can be grasped only in its *in*visibility, in its concealment. His journey is thus locked into the paradox of a darkness whose truth can be made visible, articulated, revealed, only by betraying its nature *as* darkness – 'Orpheus does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of death living in her.' This desire indicates that the moment of

transgression is not Orpheus' turning. Rather, it is the moment of his setting out upon his journey, the moment at which his desire becomes desire for the night, for the truth of Eurydice's absence. In thus moving into the arena of death, Orpheus must confront 'the veiled presence which did not conceal her....infinite absence.'

The gaze of Orpheus represents both betrayal and fulfillment. It is betrayal in that, in turning back, Orpheus 'desires Eurydice beyond the measured limits of song' - the song which is his destiny, the song which is the means of Eurydice's becoming present. But it is also fulfillment, in that to grasp Eurydice's absence, to *be* within the essence of the night that envelops her and of which she is the symbol, he must refuse, must entirely abandon the project of her retrieval.

'To look at Eurydice without concern for the song, in the impatience and imprudence of a desire which forgets the law – this is *inspiration* ', writes Blanchot. It is, precisely, the moment of abandon which destroys the project it initiates, and unleashes the pain of irretrievable loss into a song which can only exist in the wake of that abandonment, eking a half-life among the debris of catastrophe, shedding the half-light of imaginative restoral on the vacancy of lost meaning. Orpheus' gaze, careless or deliberate, but initiated in either case by desire, is the catastrophe that entails the second loss, the loss of Eurydice that is also the loss of hope, the loss of the object of desire, and the loss of the 'essential night' the dream of whose reclamation first guides Orpheus toward the darkness of Hell. It is, in a very precise sense, 'meaningless', because it must refuse the embrace of all that might lend it meaning. But for Blanchot, it thus also can be inspiration, in the sense that it is, paradoxically, only in the abandonment of this project that the profound *absence* of the loved object, and the inaccessibility of night, of darkness, of the death in which the loved object has her Being, can be rendered *present* . 'It is…only in this gaze that the work can go beyond itself, unite with its origin and establish itself in impossibility.' Tortured by its failure, inspiration renders absence present, articulates the voice of impossible desire, and sings the very soul of darkness:

'… around this lament-world, even as

around the other earth, a sun revolved

and a silent star-filled heaven, a lament-

heaven, with its own, disfigured stars…'

II

Beyond mythic invocation, beyond the allegorization and re-actualization of an ancient and tragic tale, how is the enshrinement of mourning that takes place in Blanchot's text to be understood? How can the confrontation with loss come to be at the center of the experience of writing? To set tragic loss at the cornerstone of poetic and artistic expression must mean more than merely elevating the importance of a 'sad' or 'mournful' character of certain works over their 'joyful' contraries. Still less must such a theory be content with uncovering some kind of 'concealed sadness' in otherwise 'happy' expressions. It must look beyond the character, the mood of individual expressions, to locate absence, loss, void, at the very wellspring of imagination. It must establish the experience of loss as an originary one, as the meeting ground, the common source of imaginative expressions of ecstatic ebullience as much as those of an interiorized regret, of joyous affirmation as much as of tragic collapse. It would trace the lineaments of loss in the very fibres of imaginative production, and seek the melancholy shadows of absence in the fullness of creative exuberance. To serve such a function the loss, the absence, must needs be archaic, primitive, primal. Hence it is not entirely surprising to find the possibility of a theoretical support for Blanchot's meditation within the psychoanalytic arena – specifically in Kristeva's work on melancholy and imagination, 'Black Sun' of 1987.

Kristeva's work engages for the most part with openly melancholic expressions, with creative moments that explicitly foreground the depressive moments of the artist – of Holbein, of Nerval, of Dostoevsky – and her work aims at exploring the paradox of a sullen, depressive posture that, nonetheless, finds in imaginative production a voice, a means of articulating its heavy silence. But it is more than a description of the psychic situation of individual artists. 'If there is no writing that is not amorous, there is no imagination which is not, overtly or secretly, melancholic,' she claims. And it is this claim of approach toward a 'secret melancholy' of imagination that brings her book beyond a 'theory of depression' towards a re-thinking of the whole spectrum of imaginative experience. Such a thinking would locate, in the figure of archaic loss, 'the ultimate thresholds of inscribable dislocation *and jouissance* ' , and its starting and ending-points would be her exhortation that, 'rather than seek the meaning of despair…let us acknowledge that there is meaning only in despair' .

Central to Kristeva's conception of imagination is her re-description of depression as a function of a narcissistic injury far more primitive, more primal, than more traditional notions of depression as internalized anger might allow. Where a traditional approach might see depression emerge out of a frustration, out of an inwardly-turned response to the ambivalence of a disappointed love, Kristeva discovers a depression beyond the possibility of reference to an object. Such a depressive psychic moment, such a sadness, would emerge from beyond the level at which symbolic representation can take place. Unreachable, because it precedes all the forms that might provide the means of its identification or recognition (words, images, etc.), such a moment, such a place (if these words can be used of a psychic area that precedes the possibility of either term) would not be retrievable in terms of the expression of a repressed anger. It would be, instead, an originary absence, for the description of which Kristeva has elsewhere invoked the Platonic ' *Chora* '. 'In such a case,' she writes, 'suicide is not a disguised act of war, but a merging with sadness, and beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere…'

If the libidinal investments of the traditional psychoanalytic subject aim at the recovery of a lost ' *Object* ', the Kristevan subject is oriented around the loss of a more primal construct that, invoking Heidegger as well as Lacan and Freud, she terms 'the *Thing* '. 'Inscribed within us without memory', the Thing is the irretrievably absent, the wellspring from which something like an 'object of desire' can emerge. Lacan, reading Freud, similarly understands the Thing (*das Ding*) as 'the subject's absolute Other…recovered, at best, in regret.' But where Lacan would retain the difficult centrality of the subject's relation to language in his or her engagement with this archaic otherness, Kristeva will insist on the *cry* as the primordial articulation of the anguish of the other, prior to its relation with all orders of symbolic representation. Lacking a relation even with a language that might express a refusal, a negation, a denial, the Thing as primal otherness emerges as the 'borderline' of the self, the inexpressible limit within which, and out of which, the self is constituted. It is within this 'fringe of strangeness' that forms of expression can start to emerge that, in their *devotion* to ambivalence of meaning, to a tangential relation with forms of literal representation, can begin to approach the articulation of this Otherness. Thus song, melody, rhythm, metaphor - the 'semantic polyvalency' of the poetic - would have their force and origin not in relation to the discovery of esoteric 'higher truths', as Romantic aesthetics would have it, but in relation to a primal absence whose contours can be pointed to but never expressed: an *absolute absence* - Blanchot's 'other night', the night of pure loss, of the utter irretrievability of the lost Eurydice. Eurydice - the hidden object of longing – would thus be the embodiment of the absolute other, inscribed within each of us as *loss* : the loss of the maternal object, of a primal wholeness, of a oneness the recapture of which becomes the overpowering goal of the sullen depressive, who can understand only *in-*significance in words, and find only in death the realization of his 'fantasy of untouchable fullness'.

For Kristeva, the establishment of a system of symbolic representation – language, for instance – occurs from out of a denial of this primal loss. This denial is represented symbolically through the emergence of the

father, whose 'function is precisely to guarantee the establishment of the signifier.' Sadness, as mood, as affect, is the operation within the subject of the primal loss constituted as *separation* , in the first instance separation from the mother. Paradoxically, though, it is precisely this separation, this loss, which first enables the possibility of the formation of symbolic equivalence, of signifier, of sign: after all, as Kristeva points out, 'a *lack* is necessary for the *sign* to emerge.' Writing, on this account, would be always at its core a tragic condition, saturated with the pain of a loss, a separation, whose denial is its very condition of possibility. The enactment of language in discourse would require, then, beyond (prior to) the supposition of a dialogic partner, a more archaic form of relation: a relation to the primal object. In speaking, in writing, in forming sentences, the subject is held in relation to primal loss in such a way that its absence is always also present in the lack for which symbol and sign struggle to compensate; and in the denial that gives them sway: 'Our gift of speech, of situating ourselves in time for an other, could exist nowhere except beyond an abyss.'

The dialogue with absence - the mourning of the primal loss - that language represents, is a process prone to a certain incompleteness. Noting the Greek sense of '*metaphorein*' as 'to transport', Kristeva claims that 'language is – from the start – a translation:' a mode of communication to which belongs, of necessity, the threat of inadequacy. It is in the interstices of this incomplete mourning that the desire emerges for a language 'alien to itself', a language that stops in its tracks the flow of translation of primal affect, and turns back on itself to 'capture the unnameable' , to render present the loss. Such a language would dwell on rhythm, on sound, on the alliterative, on multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning. It would be a language that undercuts the stability of the signifier - the monolithic singularity of referent - to open up a space in which the blank absence of the lost Thing, its nothingness, might become palpable. It would be, in short, a *poetic* language:

'It is…the level of the imagination – the level of writing – which bears witness to the hiatus, the blank or spacing that constitutes death for the

unconscious.'

Occupying a space at the borders of the self, the language that seeks to address primal loss will always hover on the edge of collapse into non-meaning. It will work always at the edge, at the limit, at the line of separation between word and cry, expressive speech and inarticulate shout. It will run the risk, always, of severing its connection with the father, and folding inward into a paroxysm of tears. Or further still, into the blank emptiness of silence:

'If I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die.'

III

'Dessauer wondered "Whether the song might not be too sad, too melancholy?" Schubert replied: " *Do you know any happy music* ?"'

Schubert's question has long caused consternation among musicians. What might he mean by this, the composer whose music is always most intimately bound up with *song* , that curious ecstatic heightening of language that appears at some level always to express an *elevation* of the human? Whence, this insistence on melancholy?

Wherefore is this rejection of the 'happy' installed at the core of an oeuvre which does not in any way decline the expression of a radical ebullience, a wild joy? Too often explained by a simplistic recourse to a psychologistic interpretation that would contain the danger of the remark by referring to the composer's supposed 'state-of-mind', Schubert's remark has rarely been treated with the absolute gravity it deserves.

Perhaps, then, it is possible, in the light of Kristeva and Blanchot, finally to look with seriousness at Schubert's question, to release it from the margins of psychological disturbance, and, ignoring the proscription implied in its rhetorical form, to actually - tentatively - proffer an answer.

In reading Kristeva, we have discovered in the poetic imagination a form of speaking which, in pushing against the tyranny of the literal, forces a breach in the circuit of signification, opening a chasm in which the shadowy form of a primal loss can be glimpsed. In this way language – and writing in particular – contains always within itself the seeds of a possible engagement with the absent Thing such that loss, and the melancholy that attends it, hangs over them like a sign of an incipient mortality. It is the negation of this loss that is revealed as the condition of intelligible utterance. The fate of a *poetic* discourse would be forever to hover on the brink of non-meaning, the beckoning of which is at once the subject's greatest fear, and his deepest desire. But in negotiating this precipice, a poetic language must turn back on itself to reflect its origin as pure *sound* : it must reclaim for itself the limits of language at the point at which the intelligible word collapses into the pure unintelligibility of the exclamation, of the cry. The medium of this reclamation will be the *musical* – the realm of phonic consonance and dissonance, of rhythm and form, the raw material of a language still connected with the symbolic artifice of its origins. And it will be always, above all, *beauty* – the beautiful - *that* provides, in its very transience, the concrete form of a resistance to the encroachment of a mortality that is at once its dark underside and its constant companion.

Is it perhaps thus, that *song* can be understood? As a language which displaces the rhythms of everyday speech, which distorts their cadence, lifting them into a contact with their origin as pure sound, elevating them into a harmony, creating for them a new destiny as *beauty* ? And is it here, perhaps, that we can address Schubert's difficult and disturbing question… " *Do you know any happy music* ?" It is Death, the dark handmaiden of Song, working its spectral presence into a sound whose

sole line of defense is its beauty, the evanescent glimmer of hope on the threshold of a silence which is its absolute origin, and to which it must, in the end, return.

Orpheus sings the loss of Eurydice. But not merely is it the loss of his beloved companion that he mourns. The song of Orpheus is, in its very being, riven by absence, shot through with longing, with loss, such that, for the song, Eurydice's death is the mere progression, the extension, of an otherness that already belonged to her living presence. Otherness walks with the song, it is its belonging, its home. Thus, as Blanchot understood, the pursuit of Eurydice into death is not the project of the wresting from darkness of a living being. It is the pursuit, even unto the depths of hell, of the lack, of the absence that frames always in advance the living essence of the beautiful, of the beloved. Song is the space in which originary loss intrudes on the visible, on the diurnal. Stretched across the divide of meaning and word, word and sound, sound and silence, song threads its way through the passage between primal separation - the ' *other* night' of Blanchot's text – and the visible, the expressible, the *shared* . The journey into Hades, in that sense, *is* the song of Orpheus, and the glance back toward Eurydice not a chance and tragic error. It is a response to the call of primal loss, of primal object: a response that understands that it is only in absolute inaccessibility that absence can be encountered; a response situated within the song, as its very condition of utterance. Orpheus cannot refuse the backward glance toward his beloved. He must turn, *because he has always already done so* .

And yet, as Blanchot knew, there is, in this sudden glance, the seed of something other than loss, other than the embrace of absolute night. For Blanchot, Orpheus' act is inspiration, and is so exactly as a forgetting, as an abandonment. The gaze, in which the careful project of retrieval is at once jettisoned and absolutely fulfilled, has nonetheless within itself – perhaps in its very suddenness - a moment of refusal. It is the

catastrophic incaution of a gesture that rejects the *purposive* . Refusing, if only momentarily, the demands of the law, Orpheus' glance is an outrageous abandonment of the meaningful. It does indeed lead Eurydice into a second loss, into the absolute irretrievability of death. But in its very refusal, in the radicality of its desire – perhaps even in its failure – one discerns the seeds of a hope. A hope that originary loss, the separation that haunts our dreams and our loves, might finally be extinguished in something other than the embrace of death: that we might, after all, find our way back to a lived experience of uncompromised meaning, of beauty…and of joy:

'It happened as he expected. He turned his head

And behind him on the path was no one.

Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds.

Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!

How will I live without you, my consoling one!

But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees,

And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth.'

Virgil, *trans*. Dryden – Georgics IV, 762-4

Chaucer, *Boece* , III, 12, 55-60

Blanchot, trans. Lydia Davis, *The Gaze of Orpheus* (New York: Station Hill, 1981) p.99-104

Chaucer, *Boece* , III, 12, 63-68

Rilke: *Orpheus*. *Eurydike*. *Hermes,* trans. S. Mitchell

Kristeva, *Black Sun* . trans. Roudiez . (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.6

Ibid. p.6 (my emphasis)

Ibid. p.6

See, for example, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.13-15

Black Sun , *op cit* . p.13

Quoted in Kristeva, *op cit* . p.263 n.10

Kristeva, *Black Sun* , op cit. p.14

Ibid . p.20

Ibid . p.45

Ibid . p.23

Ibid . p.43

Ibid . p.41

Ibid. p.42

Ibid . p.26

Ibid. p.42

Otto Deutsch, *Schubert: Die Erinnerungen Seiner Freunde* Leipzig : Breitkopf und Hartel, 1957

Czeslaw Milosz, *Orpheus and Eurydice* , from *Second Space* (New York : Ecco, 2004) p.99-102