

Talking with Kevin Hart

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SZ: A poet may need some kind of aid to enter a particular state of literary creation. Take Chinese poets Li Bai and Tu Po for example. When they had drunk some wine they would have a strong desire or inspiration to write poems. It is said that some Western poets also did similar things, for instance, drinking wine or taking drugs before they started writing. Obviously, wine or drugs did excite and stimulate them, and help them to reach an excited state or an exalted and poetic mood. I'm curious about what you do to make you become 'the other I' (in Blanchot's words) and enter the state of writing your poems.

KH: I follow no set of rituals when preparing to write poems. Usually, I start to write in the evening, when I am less likely to be interrupted. I go down to my study and close the door. Sometimes I take a glass of red wine with me. What is important is not the time of evening but the condition of not being interrupted: I also write poems on days when I am alone in the house. I can revise poems at most times of the day or night.

SZ: Blanchot, in *The Book To Come*, seems to have said something like this: when Proust was writing there was a kind of 'quadruple metamorphosis' of the writer. That is, when Proust says 'I', it is no longer the real Proust or the writer Proust who has the ability to speak, but their metamorphosis into that shadow that is the narrator turned into a "character" of the book, the one who in the story writes a story that is the work itself, and produces in his turn other metamorphoses of himself that are the different 'I's' whose experiences he recounts". Do you have such a feeling when you are writing?

KH: I do not agree with Blanchot that, when writing, I pass from an 'I' to an anonymous 'one', although I don't simply disagree with him, either. I would say that there is a partial shedding of the empirical or psychological ego. I think Husserl could have been talking about the act of writing when he evoked the *epoché* and the transcendental reduction to the life-world.¹ There is no writing of poetry without a suspension of the natural attitude and all that follows from it: that's one reason why I have found phenomenology congenial.

I would not talk about this passage from the empirical 'I' to the transcendental 'I' in terms of 'feeling'. (Heidegger's word 'attunement' is more appropriate.) Yet there is an awareness of a shift occurring as I write. In some ways the experience of writing poems resembles the experience of prayer. In both states there is an extreme attentiveness (without it appearing, at the time, as 'extreme'), an openness to experience that is also a deep calm.

SZ: St John of the Cross talks about 'night', mystics and negative theologians are interested in 'night', Breton takes advantage of 'night', Blanchot is fascinated with 'night' and you too make full use of the half-sleeping and half-awakening state of 'night' for your poetic creation. Could you clarify the functions and implications of the different 'nights'?

KH: Nocturnal imagery comes from the apophatic tradition of theology, which itself has biblical inspiration. You find it in Denys the Areopagite and St Gregory of Nyssa. It was developed in an original manner by St John of the Cross. Especially in his early years, Blanchot was interested in the Christian mystics, although he thought that they tended to orient themselves to a dogmatic concept of God. Had they not done so, he thought, they would have encountered what he called the Outside or 'the other night'. I distinguish between the darkness of God and the dark night of the soul, between the 'objective' and 'subjective' poles. The darkness of God is a figure for the absolute transcendence of the deity. For St John of the Cross, the dark night signifies both the absence of sensory experience and the absence of spiritual illumination on the part of the disciplined soul. However, it can be brought to an end: a faithful soul eventually will be encountered by God. For Blanchot, however, 'the other night' is a space where no deity can abide. What I chiefly value in Blanchot is put well by Hans Urs von Balthasar in an aphorism from *The Grain of Wheat* that also captures something of my frustration with the Frenchman: 'Atheism can be like salt for religion. It is negative theology posited in the most absolute way. Most of the time, psychologically speaking, atheism represents a disappointment with the narrowness and limitations of a certain concept of God, an impatience stretching into anonymity.'

SZ: Blanchot talks about 'the other'—the impossible—in his books. Derrida does it too. So do Breton and negative theologians. Are there any differences among them?

KH: Yes, there are differences. When Christians talk about the otherness of God, the issue is divine transcendence. God is other than anything created because He is singular, above the categories of being. When Blanchot talks about the otherness of the Outside, he is evoking that which is neither being nor nonbeing but which presses upon us in suffering or pointless waiting. In the late 1920s Heidegger talked about certain states—anxiety and boredom, above all—attuning us to being. Blanchot wrote about being attuned to what is neither Being nor Nonbeing. The Outside is transcendent, but solely in the phenomenological sense of the word, not the religious sense.

SZ: It is clear that the 'men from the other side' in your poem entitled 'The Discoverers' are the other of 'us', and what they talk about is the 'other' language, and what they worry about is 'the cyclone which is about to hit, only what they have heard in stories and from old folk'. Do you think what they worry about is just the subject matter that any 'strong poet' should worry about? Is what they talk about a kind of 'silence' or 'murmur of dying'?

KH: 'The Discoverers' is a translation of a poem by René Char. I would say that the men of the other side are absorbed with work, with dialectic, and with meaning, while the narrator is more closely attuned to the radiance of what is.

SZ: There are several poems entitled 'Your Shadow' in your book, *Flame Tree*. Can those 'shadows' be regarded as a kind of others of 'me' or 'us'? Do they have any links to Plato's emanating theory?

KH: Without a doubt: the shadows draw from Plato's parable of the cave in *The Republic*. People have pointed out that they seem to draw on Jung's psychology, though I had not read Jung when I wrote those poems. I was more attentive to the theory of shadows developed by St John of the Cross.

SZ: In the book, *The Dark Gaze* you regard 'the other person, Autrui' as 'the Most High'. Is it possible for people to misunderstand you as a pantheist? If so, how can you help people get rid of the misunderstanding?

KH: I distinguish sharply between the other person, Autrui, and God as the Most High. Blanchot and Lévinas do not, and you are probably thinking of places where I am explicating one or the other. Unlike those writers (and also unlike Derrida), I am not an advocate of 'religion without religion': I insist on a distinction between adoration and ethics. I regard adoration as primary, and ethics as a consequence of adoration.

SZ: Blanchot once said something like this: a Christian cannot be a writer, but somewhere he also says that a person cannot be an atheist. Can you explain this?

KH: I don't recall that Blanchot says that a Christian cannot be a writer. On the face of it, the position would be absurd: is Dante, for example, not a writer? Yet, for Blanchot, the writer *as writer* cannot be a theist, because to write, on his understanding, is to be approached by the Outside, a space in which no deity can abide. Blanchot does say that no one can rigorously proclaim himself or herself to be an atheist. For him, the 'I' and 'God' are strictly co-ordinate notions, because both derive from a prior sense of unity, and so to say 'I am an atheist' is covertly to make a theological proposition.

SZ: In an interview (by Stephen Watson) you were asked to explain 'how the religious manifests itself in poetry'. Your answer appears to be rather abstract and esoteric. Could you please explain it a bit more?

KH: I seldom use the language of 'religion'. I think, as others have done before me, that Christianity is not essentially a religion. The religious impulse seeks to reunite humans to God, but Christianity tells another story, that God goes in search of us in our fallen condition. So Christianity, at heart, is a radically non-religious affirmation. In its historical instantiations, however, Christianity has a great many religious adhesions. I think that George Herbert was correct when he wrote that so few poems 'are writ that look towards God'. Along with Hopkins's poetry, it is the strongest collection of Christian lyrics in English by an identifiable person. (So many beautiful Christian lyrics in Middle English are anonymous.)

I think that the highest poetry exhibits a profound simplicity, which is quite capable of sustaining a richness of meaning. I also think that the highest poetry is utterly lucid, and that lucidity conducts mystery (as a wire conducts electricity). In this I differ from the tradition of aesthetics that comes to us from Edmund Burke and that prizes the link between mystery and obscurity. The poems that move me the most are at once utterly clear and wholly mysterious. I do not think that they have to be

resolved into a meaning; rather, what intrigues is a relation of 'experience' and 'meaning', a relation in which the two terms never quite achieve equilibrium. In poems such as these—George Herbert's 'Love (III)' and Arthur Rimbaud's 'Eternité'—the reader is inducted into a mystery that overflows all propositions.

SZ: When mysticism is mentioned, people usually think of Kabbalah, Hassidim, Martin Buber's doctrines and so on. Some of your poems attest to your profound understanding of mysticism.

KH: I read widely and deeply in the Christian mystics after I graduated from the Australian National University. I still do, and they have led me to follow the spiritual discipline that I practise. It is the practice that probably most influences the poetry.

SZ: In the book, *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot says: 'Art is something of the past'. Do the poems like 'Nineteen Songs', 'Nights', 'A Little Air' and some others belong to this sort of experience about 'the past'?

KH: Blanchot is citing Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics. Hegel says that, for us (that is, for people at the turn of the nineteenth century when Romanticism was in full flower), art is indeed a thing of the past. *Geist* no longer embodies itself in art, as it once did for the Greeks; now it embodies itself in religion, which is often disguised as art.² Hegel believed that *Geist* was in fact beginning to embody itself in philosophy, especially his own system. I accept none of this. I am neither a classicist nor a romanticist (nor a modernist nor a postmodernist). So far as I can tell, I draw on all these movements while standing to the side of them. I feel closer to the anonymous medieval lyricists than to any movement that I have named. Very few of my poems, if any, seek to record the past; rather, they mark a space in which experience and meaning engage one another.

SZ: Reviewers have said that some of your poems, especially those in the later part of the book *Flame Tree*, are your personal experiences when you were a young boy or man. Do you agree with this?

KH: All my poems are experiences, but I would not want to limit 'experience' to events that have actually happened. Even *Erlebnis* involves a possible reference to what has been imaginatively lived. For me, the German word *Erfahrung* best captures what I mean by 'experience'.³ Not all my poems have the same relation to my life as it has been concretely lived, although several of the poems in the final section of *Flame Tree* are autobiographical. But I should say that I find the word 'autobiography' at once enticing and frustrating. The 'bio' is not always what one wants to write about.

SZ: In your poem 'The Hall', the people in the hall appear to be very pious and religious, and God is highly respected. However, as soon as the people go out of the hall they (even the preacher himself tends to have some kind of desire for sex with the lady) become less pious and religious—doing something naughty. Is it a negative way of treating 'God'? Can that sort of experience (or sex experience if you like) be regarded as the 'original experience' in Blanchot's sense?

KH: The 'original experience', for Blanchot, is an encounter with death as dying. In the period of *L'espace littéraire* he believed that, in the act of composition, writers have a privileged relation with death as dying, what he calls a 'relation without relation'. I do not think that there is any such 'original experience', although I would wish to retain the notion of 'relation without relation'. (Blanchot offers a powerful revision of an idea that goes back, so far as I can see, to St Augustine.) Religious desire and erotic desire are neighbours, and 'The Hall' explores that in a very particular manner: 'Protestant' and 'adolescent'.

SZ: In your book *The Dark Gaze*, you quote Blanchot that 'the imaginary is "an ever changing absence uncluttered by events, unobstructed by presence, an incessantly reborn vacuum"'. It is a place 'where psychology is redundant because here there is no psychology ...'. Can you expand on this?

KH: I think that Blanchot and Lévinas elaborated an original notion of the imaginary. In some respects it recalls the arguments about anti-iconoclasm in the ninth century. There is no psychology in the imaginary for Blanchot because the imaginary is a space in which no 'I' can be sustained.

SZ: It seems that Blanchot's concerns of literature are 'incompatible with any species of humanism', and that 'he completely eschews study of literature in terms of "culture", "art" or "society"', but mainly with something 'ethical' and 'moral'. Is this correct?

KH: Yes.

SZ: When reviewing on your book *Peniel*, a reviewer in *Voices* says: '... it is uneasily trapped in a purgatory in-between; Hart can neither face the abyss of meaninglessness, through which he might establish his relationship with things, nor re-establish his relationship with God. Even "Facing the Pacific"—the beautiful poem in which he names his longing—is a description, rather than a habitation, of inner experience. Many of the poems are satirical descriptions of the obsessive behaviors of this purgatory: the map of death which takes over the house and which no one can refold, the collecting of impossibly exotic objects—ashtrays on giraffe legs or imitation medieval thrones—in "The Philosophy of Furniture", or with "a will that staggers the human mind", the endless, absurd creation of a rat.' How do you respond to this?

KH: I don't know that review—I hardly ever read reviews of my books—so I cannot respond in any detail. Reviews are written, or should be written, for prospective buyers of the book under discussion, not for the author. I can respond only to the point about a relationship with God. A relationship with God is founded in prayer and, before that, by God's desire for a relationship. Prayer is, as Blanchot puts it in a powerful phrase, an 'infinite conversation', a relation without relation because there is a gulf between the one who prays and the One who is adored. Only God can cross that infinite distance and allow human words to be heard by Him. This is what theologians call 'prevenient grace'.

SZ: In *Flame Tree*, there are several poems, which appear to be rather 'absurd'. The absurdity in your poems like 'Map', 'The Philosophy of Furniture', 'Making a Rat' and some others make me think of Beckett's absurd plays, especially 'the dead body' in one play. Understanding Beckett's theory of the absurd could help the reader understand those poems, couldn't it?

KH: I greatly admire the French prose of Beckett's final maturity as a writer, especially the prose of the second trilogy and related texts. But the poems you cite are consequences of my sense of humour.

SZ: There is no such term as 'book' in Derrida's lexicon but 'text', and the 'writing' or 'narrative' by Blanchot is regarded as '*récit*'.⁴ Are there any differences between the two terms? Can we regard your poetry as 'text' or '*récit*', or both?

KH: So far as I can tell, Ramon Fernandez is the critic who distinguished between *récit* and *roman*. Blanchot develops the distinction in his own way. For my part, I have tried to keep in play a notion of *récit* in the writing of lyric poetry.

SZ: Generally speaking, there are various kinds of 'gaps' between two predicates: one is abstract (like the one between man and God, the one between man and nature, the one between this life and the other life or this world or the other world, and many others); and the other is concrete 'gaps' (like the one between this shore and the other shore of a river or this side and that side of an ocean, the one between this side of space and the other side of space, and so on). Can we use another term 'space' in Blanchot's sense (of the space of literature) to indicate the 'gap'? If so, the space of your poems would appear to including many things. Is it right?

KH: In writing, I am most concerned with the gap between 'experience' and 'meaning' (or, if you like, between 'experience' and 'sense'). Blanchot is interested in that gap as well, although we differ in our understanding of that gap. He is an atheist, and I am a Christian.

SZ: It is said that time and space cannot be separated, for time contains space and vice versa. You are preoccupied with time, as the clocks can be seen almost everywhere. And these clocks can be transformed into some other things like faces and cups. Are there any religious senses?

KH: All talk of time is religious if it presupposes a distinction between time and eternity.

SZ: The durations of some actions described in your poem like 'The Pleasure of Falling out of Trees', 'The Hammer' and some others appear to be a fleeting moment. Why is this?

KH: All time is fleeting. Especially fleeting moments are exemplary.

SZ: In a review entitled 'In the Mirror' by Gary Catalano, he mentions that Laurie Duggan finds the imagery 'rather banal' in your poem 'Flemington Racecourse' and later you did change some of the lines of the poem which appears in *Flame Tree* and you became 'an admirer of Duggan'. Could you tell me something about this?

KH: I think that Laurie Duggan pointed out a simile that didn't work in 'Flemington Racecourse'. He was correct, and I changed it. I always liked some of Laurie Duggan's lyrics, even though he's not someone to whom I feel especially close as a poet.

SZ: It is asserted in your book *The Trespass of The Sign* that negative theology is a mode of deconstruction. Can we regard Blanchot's negative theory as a mode of deconstruction?

KH: Deconstruction has been formulated in various ways, from Denys the Areopagite to Luther to Derrida. Blanchot identified one way, *avant la lettre*, in his review of George Bataille in *Faux pas*.

SZ: Some questions keep haunting me, like: What is the relationship between Blanchot and Derrida? How can we distinguish the two persons' theories which appear so close? Do you have any plan to write a book to compare the two masters' works?

KH: Derrida was greatly influenced by Blanchot, not just at one stage of his writing career but in at least two (in the 1960s and again in the 1980s and beyond when he started to take account of Blanchot's *écrits*). You are right: I would like to write on Blanchot and Derrida, although I'm not sure what form it would take.

SZ: In more than one place you seem to have declared that you are 'an Orphic poet', regarding Blanchot as one of your favourite writers. In the Introduction to your new book, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the sacred*, you state '... I do not follow either Blanchot or Levinas here: in the Christian religion, adoration and prayer precede and inform ethics'. Can I know your definition of an Orphic poet? And also, could you let me know if you are not in accordance with Blanchot on anything else, besides religion or faith?

KH: An Orphic poet is one who sings things into being, not reports on things that have happened.

I did not encounter Blanchot until about 1980 by which time the vanishing points of my literary space were already firmly established. My reading of Blanchot has been a mixture of admiration and disagreement. I admire the *écrits*, and think that Blanchot is the most powerful French writer since Proust. I admire much of the criticism as well, though my critical assumptions do not always converge with Blanchot's.

Endnotes

1. *Epoché* (ἐποχή) is a Greek term which describes the theoretical moment where all belief in the existence of the real world, and consequently all action in the real world, is suspended.
2. *Geist* is a German word meaning mind or spirit.
3. *Erlebnis* is usually considered to be a more superficial sense of experience, while *Erfahrung* is more profound.

4. A *récit* is a brief form of expression, usually with a simple narrative line. Genres include autobiography, fiction and poetry.