

# Poetic Crossings

## *Reading the Philippians “Christ-hymn” Alongside Blanchot’s Orpheus and Kristeva’s Dead Christ*

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*This essay begins by observing that traditional readings of the so-called Christ-hymn, from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, typically support and sustain traditional theological formulations. The problem is that these formulations tend to be more philosophical in character and consequently sideline the poetic dimension/experience of this text. This essay then seeks to interpret the hymn precisely in those poetic terms that are routinely marginalized in scholarship. Reclaimed, this facet of the text proves to be a powerful contributing factor to theological discourse in a way that conditions its traditionally philosophical character. As a point of comparison, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as interpreted by French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot is read alongside the narrative pattern present in the hymn. In his reading, Blanchot links affective “literary” or poetic experience with the “impossible” and ultimately with death. A similar pattern is at work in the hymn, where at the heart of this poetic text, the moment of death is rendered unrepresentable. The reading is further aided by the psychoanalytic theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, particularly her reading of Holbein’s The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb. Ultimately, what becomes clear is that reading the hymn involves playing out the human confrontation with otherness in a way that puts the death of Jesus at the very centre of this psychic drama.*

### 1. THE CHRIST-HYMN: BACKGROUND

The so-called Christ-hymn from Paul’s letter to the Philippians commonly is read as an early and surprisingly sophisticated Christological treatise.<sup>1</sup> A recent survey of the variety of Christological scholarship generated by this text calls itself “Where Christology Began”, paying homage to the Christ-hymn as it “provides a fixed starting point for all later developments” (Martin and Dodd 1998, 3). Of course, Christology generally speaking is not bound to the details, however richly regarded, of this short text from Philippians. Within the New Testament, for instance, Romans is the more eloquent and theologically rigorous account from Paul’s writings.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, scholars find a more sublime expression in the lofty Christological heights of the Gospel of John.<sup>3</sup> Both of these works provide a more sustained sophisticated theological reflection than does the Christ-hymn. Despite its foundational significance, therefore, it would seem that Christology is better served by leaving the Christ-hymn behind and traveling the road through Romans and toward the Gospel of John.

And yet, despite good reasons to move on to other texts, the Christ-hymn remains a prime locus of scholarly attention.<sup>4</sup> This enduring fascination may have something to do with the recognition that the Christ-hymn has, at the very least, a double life, at once theological touchstone and literary treasure. To be sure, the life and significance of the hymn as a literary text appears less visibly as a

signpost along the way to the heady Christology of Romans or John. Even so, its literary significance does become a compelling line of inquiry. The trouble is, scholars often then put this literary dimension into the service of the formal philosophical character of the text. For instance, in attempts to classify this text, critics might identify it as a “hymn”, but in so doing will typically underplay its poetic dimension and qualify the term as something where “hymn” refers to a broad category of literature functioning more correctly as a “creed”. As such, the Christ-hymn’s significance is less as a poetic utterance and more as a repository for dogmatic, confessional, liturgical, political or doxological material.<sup>5</sup> And yet, despite the formative influence of this kind of perspective on hymn scholarship, it seems that there is something about the poetic that remains. For, it is also true that stylistic (poetic) features in “hymnic” literature from this period do get the attention of critics (e.g., rhythmical lilt; *parallesismus membrorum*, couplets; some semblance of metre; rhetorical devices like alliteration, chiasmus and antithesis; unusual vocabulary). In other words, despite the tendency to work our way back towards the traditional philosophically inscribed parameters of Christology, there remains the impression for readers that there is “something distinctly poetic about vv.6-11” (Hooker 1975, 175; see also Fee 1995, 192-193; and Witherington 1994, 56).

This double life, the coexistence of conceptual or theological and literary elements, means therefore that a remarkable set of poetic, lyrical and mythical associations accompany the formative Christological ideas of the Christ-hymn.<sup>6</sup> For traditional scholarship, it appears that the implications of these poetic, lyrical and mythical associations seem to be of interest only in their practical aspects, for instance, in so far as they go towards establishing the provenance of the hymn, or some similar problem.<sup>7</sup> What appears to be missing are readings that acknowledge the capacity for poetic discourse to encapsulate in a certain way the essential themes of the human condition. This is despite the fact that Christology is itself fundamentally concerned with such ultimate questions. What would it look like, therefore, to undertake a reading that draws on the affective dimension of the text and explores the experience of the literary and poetic elements in a way that informs interpretation of the narrative themes, and thus, ultimately shapes the theological significances that can be drawn from this passage?

In this essay, I wish to consider the Christ hymn in precisely the terms that are routinely marginalized in traditional scholarship. While remaining in dialogue with the philosophical theological traditions of interpretation, the Christ-hymn will thus be explored primarily as a poetic text that depicts the descent of God into human experience, centering on the encounter with death but in a way that goes beyond the traditional philosophical terms of conceptualization. As a way of opening up the hymn’s poetic dimensions, the work of Maurice Blanchot provides an important and elegant theoretical discourse. Blanchot’s work on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, as an “allegory” charting the encounter with the literary “sacred”, is a particularly illuminating parallel with its corresponding pattern of descent and encounter with death. For Blanchot, this literary dimension, a dimension that is intimately allied with notions of death, annihilation and impossibility, poses a vexing challenge to all attempts at understanding, categorizing, systematizing and interpreting the hymn. And yet the value of Blanchot’s perspective is its regard of the hymn from a vantage point situated far from the panoptic view of Romans. It provides a way to appreciate the hymn that attends to what has largely been marginalized in traditional scholarship up until now.

Blanchot’s account takes us only so far, however, and the far reaching implications of the affective invite consideration of psychic drives and bodily processes dealt with more adroitly in psychoanalytic theory. Consequently, this paper will conclude with a consideration of Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic work on Holbein’s “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb”. With her interests in the poetic, in the semiotic and the *chora*, Kristeva offers an intriguing juxtaposition to Blanchot’s investigations. Not only does Kristeva’s work share an appreciation of the impact and presence of the “unpresentable”, but she provides an analysis that at once focuses the discussion more overtly

on the figure of the dead Christ, so central to the hymn, and explores further implications of death and affect that go beyond Blanchot's treatment.

To be clear, what is *not* being proposed here, via Blanchot and Kristeva, is a way to uncover the original meaning or provenance of the text. Instead, what is being proposed is an intertextual reading that more closely resembles allegoresis. In fact, that is a fitting strategy, since both Blanchot and the psychoanalytic model are themselves allegorical, after a fashion. I should also add by way of clarification that, despite the mention of allegory, I am *not* arguing that the Christ-hymn is a type of Orpheus myth whereby the pattern of Orpheus' descent can be overlaid in every detail over the hymn. What I am arguing is that the implications of Orpheus' quest as interpreted by Blanchot can be developed alongside the themes of the hymn in a way that considers the story as poetic "literature" rather than as philosophical "theology".

## 2. MAURICE BLANCHOT AND THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS

Blanchot holds the literary, which includes writing and poetic language, in special regard. Poetic language affords the possibility of a particular kind of experience, an encounter that puts one into touch with the "outside" of experience and, as such, is an encounter with truth and with death. Truth here is not understood as the verifiability of a particular claim or a specific content. Truth for Blanchot is the challenge or the "demand" of literature to resist hegemonic interpretation and complete understanding – a recognition that literature at once springs from experience but is fundamentally unable to account for it.<sup>8</sup> Such a notion of truth, and correspondingly, of death as the content of this truth, is at the heart of Blanchot's work.<sup>9</sup> Early in his career, Blanchot used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a way of allegorizing the conflicting nature of this experience of literature as both impossibility and necessity. While in his later work, his characterization of death was no longer associated with the ominous and threatening vision of Hades, it continued to occupy a central part of his thought; and he came back to this myth on a number of occasions. The importance of Blanchot's reading of the Orpheus myth for my purposes is that it demonstrates a particular regard for the affective, the poetic and literary and the corresponding implications for encountering death.

The basic outline of the myth is doubtless familiar to many: Orpheus' beloved Eurydice falls victim to a snake's poisoned bite and dies. Relying on the beauty and power of his song, Orpheus sets out, determined to find Eurydice and bring her back from the land of the dead. Descending into the underworld, he finds Eurydice there among the dead, and gets permission to lead her back up to the surface. Hades insists on only one condition: that on his journey to the land of the living, Orpheus not look back. Tragically, at the last minute, in an inspired moment of careless impatience, Orpheus does look back, only to see the shadowy form of Eurydice receding into the darkness, lost forever.<sup>10</sup>

According to Blanchot's interpretation, Orpheus' quest represents the eternal quest to drag the "otherness" of death into the bright light of day. The means promising success in this endeavor is the work of the artist: specifically for Blanchot, certain types of poetry, literature and song. For Blanchot, death cannot be experienced, all that is possible is a prolonged state of dying. Thus, despite being the fate of every individual, death is always beyond conscious awareness, experience and comprehension. Literature and the act of dying are connected by virtue of literature's desire to summon and hold within it the inaccessible realms of experience that are encountered but not known.<sup>11</sup> By means of his work, his beautiful and beguiling song, Orpheus enters death's night in search of the ghostly essence of his beloved Eurydice.

Leading up to his discussion of Orpheus, Blanchot speaks of the night and day existing as binarisms, each depending on the other like two sides of the same coin.<sup>12</sup> He quickly moves beyond

this closed structure, however, introducing what he calls the “*other* night”, a place beyond the categories of night and day. This “*other* night” is a place of nothingness and annihilation and as such it can not really be considered a “place” at all. The “first night” is the day’s night, the inverted image of the day which is governed by the law of the day. The second or “*other* night”, by contrast, is something altogether different from the day, and yet is not “some *thing*” at all: it is an impoverished lacking, pure and ungraspable absence. In seeking Eurydice, Orpheus enters the familiarity of day’s night and descends to the depths in an impossible effort to retrieve something elusive and absent.

In its enchanting lyricism and poetic beauty, Orpheus’ song is such that the “first night” welcomes him and opens to the power of his (artistic) work. Orpheus’ song reflects the qualities and sentiments of the night and holds it enthralled. He captures the night’s remoteness, its obscurity and its mystery with such vividness and truth, they seem like old friends. Orpheus descends to the darkest reaches of the night where the power of his song proves so great that he even succeeds in holding the “*other* night” mesmerized by his sumptuous strains. It is his song that makes possible the retrieval of Eurydice’s shadowy form from the underworld and it accompanies him back towards the surface. Blanchot qualifies Orpheus’ motivations here. He is not necessarily seeking to lead Eurydice from death to life so much as to use his lyrical powers to behold the reality of her death in the light of day. Throughout his descent, the power of Orpheus’ work is great indeed and it seems nothing is beyond his capabilities. It is a surprise and shock, therefore, when he fails.

At the last possible moment Orpheus abandons the power of his song and the intimacy of the night. He ignores the conditions and limits of his art and turns to look toward Eurydice. He has been forbidden to look back, not simply as some test of his conviction, but because of the impossibility of this look. In looking back, Orpheus betrays his art in a moment of madness: the power of the song is forgotten, cast aside as he attempts the impossible and struggles to catch a glimpse of the sacred essence which the “*other* night” contains. Orpheus abandons the richness and splendor of his song, and the grand possibilities of the “first night” in his desire for an “other”, a vanishing shadow, a ghost of a presence that promises none of the plenitude of his art. In one careless glance, Orpheus loses everything: his beloved Eurydice, the magnificence of his song, the intimacy of the night and his very self.

One could say that Orpheus is betrayed by his impatience. If only he had resisted his urge to look beyond what his work could ensure. But Blanchot argues that this is no failure on Orpheus’ part. Orpheus’ impatience and final betrayal is a proper movement, not a failure. Orpheus is simply fulfilling the demand of the work (of art) which insists upon the gaze that ultimately betrays it. “Thus it is only in that look that the work can surpass itself, be united with its origin and consecrated in impossibility” (Blanchot 1982, 174). In this way, Orpheus demonstrates the paradoxical relation between impossibility and art. For Blanchot, literature is always double: the poet creates and writes, prompted by the need to express and bring to light the experience of the inexpressible. But this impossible encounter, the source and generative moment, is ultimately lost as the poet’s gaze, which measures the poem with its inspiration, inevitably involves discarding the work as a failure. Hence, literature is always “at once experience and nonexperience” (Hart 2003, 199).

And so, for Blanchot, Orpheus’ betrayal of the work is his “inspiration”. Orpheus betrays the work, but in doing so, he succeeds in taking it beyond its own limitations, beyond what it assures. It is only at the moment of his transgressive look that Orpheus is able entirely to forget the work which up until that moment means everything to him. With a forgetful glance, Orpheus “gifts” the work, because it is only in that look that the work can be taken beyond itself and be united with its origin and its own impossibility. Orpheus gifts the work with his desire for the “*other* night”, the outside and origin of the work. Even in forgetting and betraying the work, in disrupting his song, Orpheus still moves towards it. He moves towards the point of the work’s simultaneous possibility and impossibility. The only certainty Orpheus is left with is the failure of the work. Orpheus’ gaze succeeds in unbinding the “sacred” essence he seeks in the night, but by freeing this essence he also

loses Eurydice. The loss of Eurydice is an ironic indication of success where Orpheus fleetingly encounters the “*other night*” and the “*sacred*” which lies within.

Now how does this relate to the poetic? Blanchot is speaking here about a specifically poetic enterprise that involves the effort to capture and communicate an irreducibly expansive reality – an account of the infinite. This elusive reality always remains out of reach, however, and yet at the same time it impossibly reveals itself within the poet’s work. The infinite becomes particular through the mediation of the poem, and while it recedes from view, a paradoxical, symbiotic relationship is nonetheless struck. It was always going to be impossible for Orpheus to retrieve Eurydice and behold her in the light of day. And yet, Eurydice is recognized, and in a sense, liberated (communicated/acknowledged) by this impossibility.

Through his reading of the Orphic quest, Blanchot presents us with his own account of the structure of meaning. The structure is non-linear, at odds with a metaphysics of presence and finds a close ally in Derridean deconstructive logic. For example, Blanchot claims that “...in order to descend toward this instant (i.e. the sacred “*other night*”), Orpheus has to possess the power of art already” (1982, 176). In other words, Orpheus must have already finished his quest in order to begin it.<sup>13</sup> To look for Eurydice, one must have already experienced the consequences of this look. That final failing look towards the “*other night*” is inscribed in the subject from the very beginning and is in fact the very condition that makes setting out on the quest possible.

The pattern of Jesus’ death in the Christ-hymn can be read as a similar journey towards that which exceeds the work. In this case, it is a matter of what Blanchot calls “*true death*”. Similar to his understanding of the “*first night*”, Blanchot sees death as life’s opposite and as such the extension of life into its own negative. This is a “*false death*” which is governed by the rules of life and contrasts with what Blanchot regards as “*true*”, authentic “*death*”, a notion that is not the inversion of life, is not dependent on a notion of life and consequently is totally unknowable. We can’t “*know*” or experience death. All we can know is an interminable dying.<sup>14</sup>

Reminiscent of but also quite different to Heidegger, Blanchot explains that “*true death*” is unknowable, for consciousness is necessary to “*know*”, and if consciousness still exists to know, the “*truth of death*” is not yet manifest. One can delve into the mystery of death and feel one’s way around, but in doing so, one is merely furnishing the space of a “*false death*” with the materials of life. Because we cannot know our own “*true death*”, we cannot pursue it. We can pursue a false death but a true death will always elude our understanding. “*True death*” cannot be anticipated. It will come only if it is not actively sought. Only if like Orpheus, we turn our backs on “*true death*” will it remain close. In this way, “*true death*” resembles the “*other night*”.

Just as Orpheus must turn his back on his lover to lead her from the night, Jesus must never look towards the “*Father*” as his goal. Although the figure of Jesus is the focus of the first half of the hymn, his actions are remarkably passive. He doesn’t “*reach*” or “*grasp*” (*harpagmos*) for equality with God, but instead, relinquishes this power driven desire, beginning instead a journey characterized by obedience and increasing weakness. Jesus moves from divine form, to human form (*morphe*), to slavery and ultimately ends his journey in death. And not just any death, but death on a cross. Jesus exhibits an obedience and subjection that we are told doesn’t have him “*reaching*” or “*grasping*” for God nor for death, but allows him patiently to endure his journey until the cross is raised and death overwhelms. Jesus walks backwards towards the end of his journey from divinity to humanity, submitting even to the “*extremity of death*” (*mechri thanatou*).

Although still subject to debate, if the Christ-hymn is divided into two separate stanzas, the first ending at verse eight with Christ’s death on a cross, and the second ending in verse eleven with Christ’s glorification, we see that there is no clear central point of the hymn – the centre being the space between these two stanzas. In the conflicted space between “*true*” and “*false*” death, death proves to be an absent presence. The cross is the moment of Orpheus’ gaze where Orpheus betrays

the work and looks beyond it towards the “other night”. Christ’s death is not just any death, but a death which lies at the intersection of “false death” and “true death”. Strangely, the death of Christ, occupying as it does the centre of the hymn and pivotal both structurally and thematically, is underplayed. Indeed death appears to be missing from the heart of the hymn.

Structurally, then, Jesus’ journey finishes at this midway point, for it is in this moment that there is a change of emphasis in the hymn. Up until verse 9, the hymn focuses on the self humbling obedience of Christ.<sup>15</sup> All of a sudden in verse 9 there is a decisive shift of emphasis and the Father becomes the active figure of the hymn. This intervening activity of the Father issues forth from the intersection of the “crossed death”, so that the Father becomes the personification of the “other night”, of “true death” and the “sacred”. However, the Father needs the son. As the hymn continues, the son is raised up and named above all other names. He becomes a vivid representation of the moment of Orpheus’ inspired and forbidden gaze. Jesus is named as the closest intimacy which can be experienced and known between “false death” and “true death”, between the work, and the “other night”. Between Orpheus and Eurydice.

Jesus in effect becomes both Orpheus and Eurydice. He follows Orpheus’ descent, but rather than looking back, he disappears into death, only to reappear as the Father’s image. The otherness that Eurydice represents remains lost and invisible, just as the Father remains inaccessibly transcendent, and yet, the death of Jesus reveals the glory of the unrepresentable and unknowable Father. In the moment of death, Jesus remains both present and absent and it is in this ambivalence, this doubling, that Jesus is glorified by the Father.

Jesus shows the way, as does Orpheus, towards an encounter with something other than life and the day. This encounter takes life and the day beyond what they guarantee, towards their origin in the freedom of the betraying gaze and the powerless death. Christ’s experience of “death on a cross” is an experience of the limit between “false death” and “true death”. This experience is presented at the end of a failure where Jesus gives up his divine form and takes on the powerlessness of a slave-like humanity, humiliated in the face of death. The hymn points to the real power contained in the “other death”, but a power that depends on Jesus’ powerlessness. This combination results in Jesus being glorified, named as the “Christ” by God.

The implications of Orpheus’ gaze and its link to death and negativity are explored further by Blanchot as he considers the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.<sup>16</sup> Blanchot observes that when Rilke looks to the negating instant of Orpheus’ gaze, he looks at a moment that is oriented towards the “sacred”. Rather than attempting to name it or speak it, Rilke seeks instead a relation to it which puts an end to this struggle. It is an affirmation of impossibility where to speak is not to name or to tell, but to celebrate. And in celebrating, it is to welcome that which is nameless, invoking it, glorifying it. For Rilke, this language of exaltation is the only language “where night and silence are manifest without being interrupted or revealed” (quoted in Blanchot 1982, 159).

The Christ hymn therefore rightly ends in exaltation, and yet the exuberance and fervor of exaltation seem strangely missing from Blanchot’s account. Moreover, even in his interpretation of the Orpheus myth, we hear less about outpourings of Orpheus’ grief and sorrow, less about his desolate loss and overwhelming melancholy, than about the paradigmatic nobility of his quest. We are left, thus, with a host of more concrete affective responses that, given the experiential dimension advocated by Blanchot, remain under-determined. Similarly, a number of questions remain unanswered: the actual figure of Jesus is still somewhat lost within the hymn. Is he alive or dead in the concluding verses? His presence (on earth) or absence (in heaven) remains in doubt. Furthermore, where is the figure of Eurydice within the themes and developments of the hymn? As a way of attending to these remaining questions, a change of tack is required – a move from the Blanchotian literary possibility to the psychoanalytic dramas of subjectivity.

### 3. KRISTEVA, THE “DEAD CHRIST” AND THE “GAP” OF DEATH

As we saw, Blanchot’s investigations focus on the demand of literature, that experience which leads beyond experience and subjectivity, ultimately confronting us with our own impossibility. For the Christ Hymn, this means dwelling at the point of ambivalence and contradiction marked by the cross and resisting the urge to resolve this moment too neatly.<sup>17</sup> With its treatment of desire, loss, hysteria and love, psychoanalytic theory provides a number of ways of exploring the themes of the Christ hymn a step further, while maintaining a focus on Blanchot’s notions of the unrepresentable and the literary experience. For psychoanalytic theory also investigates impossibility and the limits of subjectivity. In fact it pays particular attention to how these great “dramas” of the ego are played out within the constraints of consciousness. In both Blanchot’s terms and the psychoanalytic framework, the distinction between reader and text is broken down and the text becomes a mirror reflecting the anxieties of a fragmented self.

Like Blanchot, Lacan was interested in the Orpheus myth as an allegory for human experience. In his plotting of the Mirror Phase, he used the literary structure of the Orpheus myth as an important topological model (Lacan 1978, 53). Unlike Blanchot, however, Lacan’s modeling of the Orpheus descent/ascent ends up privileging language as a system of representation (the Symbolic) and in so doing, underplays the ongoing impact of those unrepresentable and unspeakable elements that contribute to the experience of subjectivity. Kristeva critiques Lacan on precisely this basis, developing a notion of the *semiotic* as a way of demonstrating how “*other elements*” continue to feature powerfully and in an integral way within the *symbolic* realm (Kristeva 1983, 37). In doing so, Kristeva shifts the focus toward experience and hence can be aligned more closely to the issue of “impossible” or “unrepresentable” experience that so pervades Blanchot’s overall project.<sup>18</sup>

Even more importantly for this essay, Kristevan psychoanalytic theory brings an overt and specific application of theories of the unrepresentable to the Christian tradition and the figure of Jesus. Kristeva has made a number of forays into the Christian cultural legacy, but particularly relevant is her consideration of Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. Kristeva’s work on the *Dead Christ* provides a valuable bridge between Orpheus and Christ and via psychoanalytic theory, introduces an alternative discourse through which to explore the implications of what it means to encounter the Christ-hymn. Further, her attention to melancholia, caesura, and the subtleties of the semiotic, represents a further unpacking of the implications of the experience of death for mainstream biblical studies scholarship.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva takes Holbein’s *Dead Christ* as a vivid depiction of the moment of death. Holbein’s painting of the entombed Christ presents an unflinching vision of nauseating decay. The lifeless eyes are half open in a blank and sunken stare; the skin, thin and taut, clings coldly to stiff, still limbs; a putrefaction hand juts out from the painting, almost falling from the slab, its fingers contorted by rigor mortis; the middle finger extends beyond the others, its tendon having been severed by a nail; the grey-green hue of the wounds, gaping but not bloody, indicate their gangrenous horror. With such acute detail, Holbein appears to be stressing the sheer miracle of the Resurrection and its immanence, since the minutely observed level of decay suggests that we see Christ’s body just days after death.

In considering this stark depiction of the death moment, Kristeva comments on the “caesura” or discontinuity identifiable in this painting which, in psychoanalytic terms, provides a metaphor for the many separations or cataclysms the individual experiences in his or her psychic formation. Such experiences, Kristeva suggests, are “an indispensable condition for autonomy” and she points to a number of examples of this series of splittings including “birth, weaning, separation, frustration, and castration” (Kristeva 1989, 132). For Kristeva, Holbein’s painting is a depiction of the moment of severance caused by death – indeed, the death of God.<sup>19</sup> Her claim is that severance is the truth of the human psychic life and is represented by death in the imagination (1989, 137). In his work,

Holbein depicts what can be termed the “limit”, so that by gazing on his depiction of the rupture or severance of death our eyes are filled with visions of the invisible (1989, 138).

For this reason, Holbein’s *Dead Christ* affords a vision of the *impossible*, an encounter with the “pre-symbolic” object that is mourned by the melancholic,<sup>20</sup> a moment “when meaning was lost, when the meaning of life was lost” (Kristeva 1989, 133). Although in its movement towards glorification, the hymn goes beyond the point of Christ’s death, Holbein’s painting reminds us that it is important not to pass over this moment too tritely. The moment of death is easily undermined, if in the course of the hymn it becomes merely a portal or transitional point the dying Christ passes through as the grand trajectory of the narrative arcs towards the exalted conclusion of the hymn.

Obviously, the crucifixion is in itself not in danger of losing its place at the centre of the Christian tradition. Kristeva recognizes Christianity as having brought to consciousness the essential dramas of the internal becoming of the subject in terms of Christ, its absolute subject. Given that the crucified Christ forms the very heart of Christian theology, there exists in this heart incredible cathartic power. But Holbein’s *Dead Christ* demonstrates to Kristeva that, because Christian theology is focused on death as such, the cathartic centre remains in the realm of the unrepresentable or the repressed. Indeed, such is the artist’s skill at depicting the bleakness and chasteness of the scene, that Kristeva notes the difficulty faced by spectators who wish to identify with the image that confronts them, except, that is, as a premonition of their own death. In the desolate realism of this work, there is a refusal to transcend death, to offer the usual symbols and signs which would help co-opt this vision into the more comfortable and meaningful richness of the symbolic order. Thus Holbein’s representation of Christ’s death constitutes a fundamental discontinuity.

This same discontinuity is found within the Christ-hymn. The gap of death which so interests Kristeva is not overtly depicted in the hymn. The hymn takes us to the “point of death” (vs. 8), but no further before the perspective changes. But it is around this absent locus, this timeless moment between stanzas, that the hymn is hinged. Thus, as I indicated earlier, we find at the heart of the Christ-hymn that death is situated at a point of structural absence. As it was for Blanchot, this moment of “crossed death”, the intersection between “false” and “true” death, proves to be crucial for Kristeva.

In the Christ Hymn, the cross is as close as one gets to the “gap” – the point at which the sign caves into its own impossibility. The “gap” of the hymn is the “gap” of death and the central term of the hymn. Death, as the absent high-point of the hymn, is the point of definitive alienation, the moment of complete isolation, the total absence of relationship. Jesus’ death is the point of his own absolute alienation. However, it is at this point that he is named by God, his annihilation being the source of his identity. Jesus, once named, exists in a relationship with God the “Father” who has suddenly becomes the active figure.

As previously mentioned, with the gap of death at its “centre”, the hymn can be divided into two distinct phases: those events leading to and culminating in the death of Jesus (vss. 6-8) and the establishment of the final set of relations (vss. 9-11).<sup>21</sup> In the final phase of the hymn, an active God “raises” a dead and as yet unnamed “Jesus”, and names him. Jesus is brought forth from death transformed. All beings from within the phenomenal realm, that is “in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld” (vs. 10a) are set towards this name, acknowledging it as “Lord” (vs. 11).

The naming of Jesus propels him from death’s unrepresentable absence back into the realm of the symbolic, and as “the name”, Jesus takes his place as the pivotal point between the intelligible and the impossible. Jesus becomes the named point of both discontinuity and continuity; of meaning and non-meaning; of distortion and clarity. The hymn places Jesus in a uniquely pivotal relational status. Jesus is acclaimed as “Lord” by “all beings”, and God assumes the relational title of “Father”. Both of these titles are relational due to their necessary reference to an *other*: the Father to his son and the Lord to his subjects. Jesus thus is involved in a two-fold relationship: Jesus to God as son,

and Jesus to “all beings” as “Lord”. A further, third relation is formed, one that holds together the possible and impossible, spanning life and death. In such a position, Jesus is the non-identical signifier, always linked to the death from which his name was born. This relation from death to life is a significant addition to Blanchot’s theory where, according to Kristeva’s terms, Orpheus may well possess melancholic tendencies. Kristeva insists upon the necessity of maintaining the realm of the “name” in addition to its outside. In other words, Kristeva resolves melancholia in the dynamics of love where, despite their limitations, speaking and naming are as important as the impossible lost experience they mask and obscure.

Hence, the Hymn presents the “name” of Jesus inextricably tied to the undifferentiated meaninglessness centred on the gap of death. It is our relation to this name which supports the existence of the particular, and thereby the chain of meaning. Jesus’ role here is pivotal in its quality where he is the link or mediator between “all beings” and God. Jesus, in the gap marked by the cross, becomes the linking factor between two irreconcilable but necessarily connected modes.

As the pivotal link between the present name and absent death, Jesus establishes an additional set of relations. Thus far, the parallel struck between Blanchot’s Orpheus myth and the Christ-hymn has largely been between Orpheus and Christ. Given Kristeva’s associations of gender with the lost (m)other, not to mention the conspicuous absence of Eurydice from the hymn so far, despite the prominence of death, it may in fact prove more reasonable to parallel Christ with the figure of Eurydice. While Orpheus and Eurydice are bound together as lovers, their relationship as such does not figure very largely in Blanchot’s reading. Blanchot appears to be more interested in the way the figure of Eurydice stands in for “true death” and the “other night”. With her reading of the melancholic’s desire for the lost mother and for death, Kristeva may perhaps be more inclined to associate Eurydice, as the feminine element, with a (feminine) caesura marking the gap of death. Situating the deathly shade of Eurydice at the point of death acknowledges a gendered element, a physical and affective dimension that is absent not only from Blanchot’s reading, but from Christian theology on the hymn as well. In theological formulations of Father, Son and All, the figure of death is not granted the same kind of “presence” and certainly the feminine aspect is not used as part of this allegorizing. Finding Eurydice within the hymn may offer some curative to this issue lest the Christ-hymn be rewritten as a dirge or lament for what, in its current form, it represses and obliterates: the unrepresented other, as aligned with femininity.

Of course, melancholia is a disorder for Kristeva and ideally, the subject in “love” is striving for union with the named Jesus as “object” within the symbolic realm. Yet, art for Kristeva has the function of opening up the psyche in such a way that it remains responsive to the “outside”. Thus the tension between Jesus as the “name” on the one hand, and Jesus as Eurydice in death on the other, are able to be maintained. To situate Eurydice at the heart of the Christ hymn is to situate her in the moment of death, a moment that is absent, undermining and impossible. But this moment is also the locus of relationship, of determination and of inspiration. Such a relationship provokes anguish, desire, loss and melancholy, but also love in the Kristevan sense. For her, the maintenance of such a paradoxical relation is of course challenging but, in the end, life affirming. The relationship of the subject to their own impossibility bridges the gap to the “other” and allows something of that (non)experience to be brought into the light of day. This something has no content, but exists as pure paradox, both a point of departure and a chastening, and as such, an enduring and necessary challenge for further theological inquiry.

The further constellations of relationships that are forged within the hymn make possible Jesus’ status as the life affirming “name”. These relationships also serve to implicate the reader of the hymn. The reader is provided with a space that allows the possibility of identification to remain open to change and to growth. Such an encounter has implications for scholarship also. To concentrate only on the “life” of the hymn, the “name” without the corresponding “death” of Jesus, is to close off the hymn’s central element.

In following Orpheus, through Blanchot's reading, into the centre of the Christ-hymn and towards Kristeva's *Dead Christ*, this paper has travelled an alternative path, one that has conditioned the traditional rule of Romans. When the Christ-hymn is viewed from this perspective, it becomes apparent that traditional interpretations of this passage emerge subsequent to the experience this hymn affords. If anything, the road travelled throughout this paper authorizes the possibility of adding to the traditional conceptions of Christology from non-traditional vantage points, ones that take into account the experience and identity of the interpreter as much as the details and themes of the text. What becomes clear is that reading the hymn involves playing out the human confrontation with otherness in a way that puts the death of Jesus at the very centre of this psychic drama.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hawthorne characterizes it as "... unquestionably a Christological gem unparalleled in the NT" (Horthorn and Martin 2004, 106). Fee writes: "Because of its sheer grandeur, it has assumed a role both in the church and in private devotional life quite apart from its original context, as a piece of early Christology" (Fee 1992, 29).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in his commentary on Romans, Douglas Moo begins by quoting Thomas Draxe, a seventeenth century English Puritan who describes this letter as 'The quintessence and perfection of saving doctrine' (quoted in Moo 1996, 1).

<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging that theology is still in its formative stages in John's Gospel, Francis J. Moloney nonetheless points to the preeminence of this Gospel when he observes that "(t)he christology and theology of this gospel provided the raw material out of which the great Christian doctrines were forged" (Moloney 1998, 20).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph P Martin summarizes the enduring appeal of the hymn in the original 1967 preface to his influential work: *Hymn of Christ* (1997, vii).

<sup>5</sup> See summary in Hawthorne and Martin 1993, 421-423

<sup>6</sup> Critics detect a host of influences at work here and give cursory nods to the Hebrew Bible (notably the Isaianic Servant of the Lord and Jewish Wisdom literature), Greco-Roman Orphic influences, Jewish Gnostic archetypes and even Iranian religious influences among other less than verifiable traces (Fee 1992, 35).

<sup>7</sup> Provenance remains an important question for scholars who hold that it is unlikely that Paul was the author of this hymn. Paul seems to have appropriated it because it suited his sensibilities and enabled him to affirm his message using a text probably in use by, or at least familiar to, the Philippians community. The effort of critics to reconstruct a pre-Pauline text and trace it back to its original form and context has been revealed to be inconclusive at best. "The very diversity of these proposals suggests something of the futility (dare one say irrelevance?) of this exercise" (Fee 1992, 35). No one influence seems to be responsible for the construction of this hymn and maybe this is why when interpreting it, commentators tend to limit their efforts to trace its origins to that of a preamble to more anticipatory theological interpretations. For example, speaking of vs. 8, Fred B. Craddock demonstrates how issues are typically resolved when he writes: 'The phrase is awkward literarily in its present location but so central to Pauline thought that the apostle chose theology over poetry' (Craddock 1985, 39).

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Hart articulates this central insight as "... literature is produced by contesting what enables it" (2003, 189).

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent introduction to Blanchot's theoretical oeuvre, see Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> This is Blanchot's particular characterization of Orpheus's backward glance. He explores in particular this gaze as the locus for connections between insouciance, impatience and inspiration (1982, 173-175).

<sup>11</sup> Blanchot develops his appreciation of the paradoxical quality of literature in his essay "Literature and the Right to Death" (1995, 300-344). He concludes this essay with a short summary of view that literature is grounded in its capacity to hold within it both the possible and the impossible, both life and death: "This original double meaning, which lies deep inside every word like a condemnation that is still unknown and a happiness that is still invisible, is the source of literature, because literature is the form in which this double meaning has chosen to show itself behind the meaning and value of words, and the question it asks is the question asked by literature" (344).

<sup>12</sup> This notion of an “other night” is developed in *The Space of Literature* (1982, 167-170).

<sup>13</sup> Blanchot extends this paradox to encompass the process of writing: “one writes only if one reaches that instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write, one has to write already” (Blanchot 1982, 176).

<sup>14</sup> “One never dies now, one always dies later, in the future – in a future which is never an actuality” (Blanchot 1982, 164-165)

<sup>15</sup> Previous to verse 9, Jesus is the subject of the finite verbs and participles as well as the reflexive pronouns of vv. 7 and 8.

<sup>16</sup> Rilke composed the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1922 (Rilke 2000).

<sup>17</sup> While Blanchot’s writings on literature and the encounter with the “other night” have typically been regarded as atheistic, more recently his explorations have been interpreted in theological terms, most notably by Kevin Hart (see Hart 2004). Because Blanchot does not comment directly on Christian tradition and doctrine, Hart’s work aligns Blanchot’s contribution to a certain kind of mystical discourse, one that holds to its own atheistic, counter spirituality. In a more recent paper on contemplation in the Christian tradition, Hart explains that the Christian mystic seeks that which transcends discourse (Hart’s term, via Jean Wahl, is *transcendence*). By contrast, Blanchot’s quest corresponds to that which precedes discourse, even passing underneath it, rather than transcending it (hence *transdescendence*; see Hart 2009). What seems most fascinating about Blanchot in theological terms is his ability to chart a radically non-conventional aspect of human (religious) experience – one that is intimately related to experience and yet absolutely absent from it. Blanchot shows that this kind of impossible experience serves both to orient and subvert human identity and purpose. In his later writing, Blanchot explores the practical implications of this (non) experience in terms of ethics and relationship (Blanchot is heavily influenced by Emmanuel Levinas here and this ethical turn is first evident in essays collected in *The Infinite Conversation*, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Consider for instance, Kristeva’s essay “Stabat Mater” where she runs parallel discourses on the tradition of the Virgin Mary and her own poetic account of the experience of childbirth (Kristeva 1987, 234-264).

<sup>19</sup> Where God represents the entire transcendent realm of the “symbolic”.

<sup>20</sup> Melancholia, for Kristeva, is a condition whereby the subject laments the loss of the pre-conscious (m)other. Such an object is always prior to understanding and representation and thus, while half remembered, is eternally lost. For Kristeva, art and literature have the power to present this lost object and in this regard Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, with its vivid depiction of human death, is exemplary (Kristeva 1989, 137).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example John Reuman’s summary of “shape” of the passage in *Philippians*, particularly the “*katabasis-anabasis*” pattern (Reumann 2008, 334-335).

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