

# The Silence of Literature and the Death of God: Maurice Blanchot's Atheism without Atheism

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It would be difficult to find another author in contemporary critical thought as committed to the question of literature as Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003); it would be even more difficult to find another author as determined to *avoid* the traditional question—What is literature?—with as much rigor and dedication as Blanchot. Literature, in Blanchot's understanding, constitutes an *event* rather than a *phenomenon* and, as such, is characterized by a process of perpetual disappearance. By the same token Blanchot's writings consistently bear witness to literary language's refusal of metaphysical logic, which requires an object that can be properly circumscribed, held before it, subjected to formal analysis and, finally, conceptualized by means of a comprehensive definition (even if that definition remains dialectically open to correction). It would not be entirely inappropriate, in this respect, to suggest that Blanchot's concern situates itself closer to the plural question: 'Where/When/How is literature?' Above all, however, this would be a question that neither demands nor expects an answer; hence a question of which it would be more accurate to say that it speaks *toward* literature or, more precisely, toward that very *refusal* which, inscribed within every literary endeavour, is synonymous with what Blanchot refers to as the *silence peculiar to literature*. What is at stake here concerns not only *literary* language; for if, despite his unapologetic atheism, Blanchot is incapable of avoiding the 'question of God'—even as this question remains inseparable, in his work, from the question of the 'death of God'—it is due to the suspicion, implicit in his work, that the silence peculiar to literary language is never far from the silence peculiar to certain kinds of religious discourse. Although Blanchot is never *entirely* certain as to the precise nature of this strange relation (without relation) between literary and religious language, he nonetheless does not simply avoid the exigency of this incertitude but, on the contrary, preserves a place for it in his treatment of literature.

Blanchot's understanding of literary and poetic language cannot be divorced from his thinking concerning the nature of language as such, which has to do as much with a certain 'inadequacy' or 'impoverishment' as it does with a certain 'excess' or 'plenitude'. Language always proves insufficient with respect to the 'fullness' of 'subjective experience' and, simultaneously, always capable of overflowing this experience together with every discourse constructed to bring that experience under control. As far as Blanchot is concerned, the 'sickness'<sup>1</sup> characteristic of language must be affirmed, not cured; this affirmation, coextensive with every literary event, points to the fact that, on the one hand, all speech is inherently *without the last word* and, on the other hand, all speech is only insofar as it is inhabited by an 'other' to which it responds. In this sense, literature also figures as a crucial reminder that silence is never simply synonymous with the absence of speech, but always figures as the innermost feature of speech, one that must be continually put into play rather than being filled in by words or, on the contrary, turned into an aim in itself.<sup>2</sup> Blanchot's eccentric formulations concerning literary writing—'absence of work' or 'absence of the book'<sup>3</sup>—speak to this curious relation that literature maintains with *both* language and silence. Along with other related formulations, such as 'literature of the outside', 'neutral writing' or 'fragmentary writing', they do not designate a concept,<sup>4</sup> but are rather intended to emphasize literature's rejection of the cultural demand for an identifiable product, and aim to attune the reader to the multiplicity of ways in which the literary work overflows and disrupts social expectations, philosophical imperatives, or conceptual schemes, defying any attempt at a single interpretation and slipping away from subjective mastery, whether that of the reader or that of its own author. "To write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking [*désœuvrement*]). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as it *produces*

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1. According to Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known assertion, "If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them. Instead of that, many writers live off this sickness. In many cases, modern literature is a cancer of words [...] made up of vague meanings which are in contradiction with the clear meaning." *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1967), 210.

2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 337.

3. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 259, 417–19, and 423–31.

4. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 429.

itself through the work, traversing it throughout.”<sup>5</sup> Such worklessness inevitably haunts every work and every book, opening in its midst the abyss of an interminable *murmur* which does not allow for an easy distinction between silence and speech, and which deprives the work of the possibility of proper closure, center or resting place.

Neither belonging to this world nor to some transcendent, metaphysical realm, the ‘space of literature’ is *outside* any clear designation and, indeed, outside any clear dichotomy between absence and presence, here and there, or inside and outside: a (neutral) place *without* place akin to the silent interval that constitutes a conversation, where every speech encounters the speech of the other. “To write: the relation to the *other* of every book, to what in the book would be [. . .] a scriptuary exigency outside discourse, outside language.”<sup>6</sup> According to Blanchot, literary or poetic language constitutes a “Saying that never coincides with a Said”<sup>7</sup> or, what amounts to the same, a speech that defies the laws of discourse, or a writing that cannot be contained within the bounds of a book. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous here to position the silence of literary language in direct opposition to philosophical language, as though Blanchot were seeking to construct an impenetrable wall between their respective ‘neighbourhoods’. While, without a doubt, literature in Blanchot’s writings constitutes a kind of radical emptiness or incapacity of thought and, as such, resists philosophical appropriation, this incapacity, in the end, “is a summons to a more profound thought.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Blanchot attempts to radicalize Heidegger’s notion of thinking as piety, whereby philosophy’s own proper task involves taking a step back —renouncing thought as mastery. In Blanchot’s words, “thinking is always learning to think less than we think, to think about the lack that thought also is—and, speaking, how to preserve this lack by bringing it to speech [. . .].”<sup>9</sup> In this respect, philosophy has something essential to learn from poetic speech:<sup>10</sup> an experience with language, to be sure, but an experience that simultaneously marks the *impossibility* of experience,

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5. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 424.

6. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 427.

7. Leslie Hill. *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 120.

8. Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 39.

9. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 249.

10. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 354.

an eccentric experience of self-effacement whereby nothing is gained or grasped and yet everything is at stake—beginning with the central non-place occupied by the ‘I’, and the perpetual crisis that characterizes this non-place.

Subject to the peculiar relation without relation that defines literary or poetic language, the writer’s own position is also characterized by radical frailty or powerlessness,<sup>11</sup> so much so that Blanchot characterizes his or her experience as an impossible ‘ordeal’ or ‘trial’ that, properly speaking, is not *experienced*, but rather *undergone* in the sense of an affliction.<sup>12</sup> The innermost exigency of the poet’s speech is to relinquish the power to say ‘I’ and, sacrificing herself for the sake of the work, to “become no one, the empty and animated space where the call of the work resounds.”<sup>13</sup> Exposed to the inexplicable strangeness of this space, the poet communicates nothing that can be defined simply as a ‘self’, an ‘idea’, or a ‘truth’, and the work, in turn, gives no communicable answers and accomplishes nothing final. Here, “language does not speak, it is” or, rather, it “speaks without speaking”<sup>14</sup>—a peculiar circumstance for which even the word ‘literature’ is too much of a conceptual imposition, expressing the demand for a culturally recognizable and fully accessible product.<sup>15</sup> According to Blanchot, what goes by the name of ‘literature’ in fact continually strives toward its disappearance and demands its own shattering.<sup>16</sup>

By the same token, literary language embodies an exigency beyond traditional oppositions between ‘choice’ and ‘necessity’, ‘author’ and ‘work’, or ‘literary’ and ‘everyday’ language. And yet, if the writer’s speech is a wandering speech deprived of fixed meaning, it also entails, beyond nihilism, the fundamental imperative that *I speak*—an imperative that constitutes me as a subject in the proper sense, i.e., *by way of another speech*. “I have to speak, having nothing to say, nothing but the words of others. Not knowing how to speak, not wanting to speak, I have to speak.”<sup>17</sup> The literary or poetic event hence constitutes the movement of a *ghostly* speech that, in its very

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11. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 199.

12. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 34–35.

13. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 215–16.

14. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 196, 216, 258.

15. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 348–49.

16. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 195, 201, 204 and 359; *The Infinite Conversation*, 258–59.

17. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 214.

*affirmation of language*, belongs to no one and is foreign to every name.<sup>18</sup> At once “nowhere, everywhere [. . .] this secret speech without a secret”<sup>19</sup> carries the reader and author alike to a neutral place “where the work is silent.”<sup>20</sup> As always, Blanchot’s words do not correspond to the simple, habitual meanings we assign to them; aware of their own frailty, these words attempt to indicate the peculiar manner in which the literary or poetic event refers to an absence *without* absence or a silence *without* silence.

“[T]o speak in order to say nothing”:<sup>21</sup> this Rilke-inspired conviction concerning literature’s final aim, expressed by Blanchot already in the late 1940s, is affirmed in a variety of ways throughout his work and can easily leave the reader with the impression that, as far as Blanchot is concerned, literary language entails a solitude so essential, an enigma so radically removed from any meaningful experience that the only genuine response it can trigger is silent bafflement. Blanchot’s thought does, indeed, suggest this on more than one occasion; but it also does not allow us to remain conveniently entrenched in this suggestion. If literature speaks *nothing*, it is due to the fact that its speech resonates with a constant ‘not yet’, with what is always ‘still to come’;<sup>22</sup> and if it contains a silent void in its midst, which can never be mediated or communicated, and which must be preserved precisely as unknown,<sup>23</sup> this void nonetheless bears within itself a (silent) *call* which demands perpetual response.

It is poetry’s existence, each time it is poetry, that in itself forms a response and, in this response, attends to what is addressed to us in impossibility (by turning itself away). Poetry does not express this, does not say it, does not draw it under the attraction of language. But it responds. Every beginning speech begins by responding; a response to what is not yet heard, an attentive response in which the impatient waiting for the unknown and the desiring hope for presence are affirmed.<sup>24</sup>

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18. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 108, 162, 227, 249; *The Infinite Conversation*, 429.

19. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 218–19.

20. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 385–86; *The Book to Come*, 220.

21. Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 324.

22. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 112; *The Book to Come*, 239; and *The Infinite Conversation*, 259.

23. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 342, 385.

24. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 48.

This ongoing tension in his thought places Blanchot closer to Heidegger than he himself is able or willing to recognize, for both authors undertake the difficult task of avoiding any convenient dualism between 'orphic' and 'hermetic' dimensions of poetic language, maintaining an irresolvable dialogue—a relation without relation in Blanchot's terms—between revelation and concealment, presence and absence, being and non-being. Hence Blanchot's insistence that, "there is a speech in which things, not showing themselves, do not hide. Neither veiled nor unveiled: this is their non-truth [. . .]. Nothing is explained, nothing laid out, rather, the enigma is again bound up in a word [. . .]. Speaking without either saying or being silent."<sup>25</sup> Blanchot nevertheless seeks to move beyond Heidegger's highly problematic attempt to link poetic language with the task of historical mediation, which, in Heidegger's postwar writings, seems to be refocused around the themes of 'dwelling', 'listening for the call' (which apparently can be *heard* by the chosen poet), and 'naming'. In this respect, Blanchot responds to Heidegger's privileging of the works of Hölderlin and Trakl by reading authors whose sensibilities are, in his view, more quintessentially modernist (René Char, Mallarmé, Rilke, Kafka, or Bataille) insofar as their writing carries within itself dispersal rather than gathering, chance rather than destiny, bafflement rather than comprehension, renunciation rather than appropriation, and worklessness rather than work. In Blanchot's reinscription of Heidegger, therefore, the poet communicates nothing, unless it is the very incommunicability of Being; and if, according to Heidegger's famous formulation, the role of the poet is to maintain the possibility of *naming* (beings and gods) by means of an *essential speech*, for Blanchot the poet affirms nothing more and nothing less than the very *impossibility of naming* that characterizes his or her art. Blanchot's poet speaks the language of the desert, a language that disrupts authentic dwelling and, depriving the world of its habitual semblance of familiarity, turns us into foreigners in our own land: "The poem is exile, and the poet who belongs to it belongs to the dissatisfaction of exile. He is always lost to himself, outside, far from home [. . .]."<sup>26</sup> This idea is repeated in Blanchot's later work, albeit in a more affirmative tone:

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25. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 30–31.

26. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 237.

Being out of one's element does not mean simply a loss of country but also a more authentic manner of residing, a habitless inhabiting; exile is an affirmation of a new relation with the Outside. The fragmented poem, therefore, is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens another manner of accomplishment [. . .] irreducible to unity.<sup>27</sup>

The eccentric intimacy between Blanchot and Heidegger is perhaps most explicit in their respective readings of Hölderlin. While in Heidegger's work, Hölderlin's poetry affirms the possibility of the impossible (Being or God), Blanchot's concern remains with the impossibility of possibility—an impossibility to which poetic language can only respond in an appropriate manner if it acknowledges that its response can never be entirely sufficient. “It is necessary to speak, that is the only thing that is appropriate. And yet it is impossible to speak [. . .].”<sup>28</sup> In fact, it is the very recognition of the *unspeakability* of its ‘object’ that, in Blanchot's reading, seems to constitute the *sacredness* of Hölderlin's speech;<sup>29</sup> indeed, “there would be no poet if he did not live out this very impossibility.”<sup>30</sup> This experience of impossibility appears to have been partially missed in Heidegger's attempt to answer the question—“What are poets for in a destitute time?”<sup>31</sup>—by linking poetry to the task of naming the ‘holy’. If, in Blanchot's account, Hölderlin's poetry does *not* name the Sacred, it is because, properly speaking, it aims to inaugurate (again and again) the movement of a response toward an inexplicable *namelessness* at the heart of all speech,<sup>32</sup> a namelessness that does *not take place* and is *not experienced* by the poet, for it is always yet to come.<sup>33</sup> Blanchot alludes to this neutral movement that *neither names nor refrains from the task of naming*—and that seems to be the only task proper to poetry—when he draws a comparison between poetic speech and the oracle at Delphi, which, as Kevin Hart puts it in his study, “neither speaks

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27. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 308.

28. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 127.

29. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 126.

30. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 117.

31. Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 87–139.

32. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 131; *The Space of Literature*, 274; *The Book to Come*, 7 and 9; and *The Infinite Conversation*, 39–40.

33. Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 94–95.

nor remains silent but indicates.”<sup>34</sup> In Blanchot’s words, the poet’s task is, in a crucial sense, to recognize him or herself as presenting an enigma without enigma: “Sphinx without a secret.”<sup>35</sup>

Blanchot’s critique is certainly not always fully attuned to all of the nuances contained in Heidegger’s ongoing attempt to engage poetic language beyond dialectics, as well as to his increasing emphasis on the poet’s *lack* of direct access to the holy that s/he speaks or names; nonetheless, whereas Heidegger’s thinking around poetic language continues to be permeated with a rather mystical longing for the ‘lost gods’—together with the hope of preparing a new opening for the God to come via poetic speech—Blanchot, echoing Mallarmé, regards this loss as crucial to the emergence of modern poetry and literature and irremediable by any kind of ‘spiritualism’, poetic or otherwise. Writing as the experience of the ‘absence of work’ and religion as the experience of the ‘absence of God’ are, in a sense, synonymous for Blanchot,<sup>36</sup> as though poetic speech carried within itself—within the very abyss of its fragmented language—the irreducible, disorienting abyss created by the ‘death of God’ and, in this manner, maintained continuity with certain aspects of religious language. By the same token Blanchot affirms, almost in spite of himself, a kind of eccentric intimacy between poetic and religious discourse. This intimacy manifests itself, for instance, in the way poetic and prophetic speech mimic one another: in both cases we encounter a speech that “announces an impossible future” over which it assures no grasp,<sup>37</sup> a nomadic, desert-like speech that sounds like a cry of affliction,<sup>38</sup> a powerless speech whose only real possibility is to indicate that which does not present itself. The poet, to be sure, is a messenger without a message, uncertain of who sent him; yet the poet’s affliction resembles the madness of the prophet lost in the midst of a Biblical desert<sup>39</sup> and, indeed, the estrangement of the religious seeker deprived of the consolation of a divine presence organized around calculable, mass-marketable, ‘spiritual’ answers. This affliction shared by poetic and religious speech is simultaneously a

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34. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 95.

35. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 90.

36. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 64 and 146–47.

37. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 79.

38. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 82 and 85.

39. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 91.



shared double-task: "Poetry is not there in order to say impossibility: it simply answers to it, saying in responding. Such is the secret lot, the secret decision of every essential speech in us: *naming* the possible, *responding* to the impossible."<sup>40</sup> In this way poetic speech appears to bring religious speech into its own, preparing the way "for a new, for a first hearing,"<sup>41</sup> a hearing that has renounced its claim over divine revelation and for which, in the end, even the word 'Sacred' presumes too much: "*Das Heilige*, the Sacred, an august word charged with lightning and as though forbidden, serving perhaps only to conceal with the force of a too-ancient reverence the fact that it can say nothing."<sup>42</sup>

We encounter yet another curious paradox in Blanchot's thought. On the one hand, beyond the strange affinity between poetic and religious speech, Blanchot's references to religion tend to be dispersed and occasionally baffling in their abruptness, as well as in the manner in which they hover on the brink of an unapologetic atheism: "The gods? Returning, having never come."<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, religious questions remain inseparable from Blanchot's concern with language and its relation to the 'unknown'. Indeed, if Blanchot privileges poetic language because of its proper relation with the unknown—that is, a relation in which the unknown remains an *irreducible alterity*,<sup>44</sup> "A strange relation that consists in there being no relation"<sup>45</sup>—all of Blanchot's writings bear witness to the fact that, insofar as such unknown is at stake, it is impossible to draw a simple, convenient distinction between literature and religion; to treat them as though they were two entirely self-enclosed and mutually exclusive kinds of language, even if they must necessarily be granted their respective 'place'. If literary or poetic language today carries within itself the question of the 'unknown' that has emerged in the wake of the 'death of God', religious language must therefore necessarily maintain an opening for the question of literature. By the same token, Blanchot's engagement with writing cannot be regarded as a refusal of religious thought, even (and especially) when we find him

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40. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 48.

41. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 366–67.

42. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 36.

43. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 310.

44. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 77.

45. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 51.

asserting: “Let us leave aside God—the name is too imposing.”<sup>46</sup> Properly speaking, Blanchot is interested in a certain radical reserve within language and thought<sup>47</sup>—a reserve with respect to what has traditionally been taken to be the ‘object’ of that thought, for instance: God, Truth, the Book. In a sense, we can speak here of a certain reinscription of the Heideggerian notion of *Gelassenheit* beyond the possibility of appropriation—a reinscription marked by Blanchot’s emphasis upon a particular aspect of the mysticism of Simone Weil, expressed, at one point, in this strange affirmation (without affirmation): “(I am) a being who is without relation to God and incapable of doing anything to approach him on my own.”<sup>48</sup> In other words: a peculiar form of desire without desire, an impossible desire<sup>49</sup> permeated with the passivity of a non-possessive longing whose aim is not so much to seek the ‘mystery’ that eludes its grasp as to commit itself fully to a vigilant waiting, in which the experiences of passivity, patience, and passion become indistinguishable. If thought is closely related to desire, it must nevertheless remain so in the sense of a radical receptivity and radical renunciation: “Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something [. . .] [but the act of] leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, the horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it.”<sup>50</sup> Whether our concern lies with literature, religion or, for that matter, with philosophy, for Blanchot—as much as for Heidegger—“Language is the place of attention,”<sup>51</sup> at least insofar as it does not become a relation of power;<sup>52</sup> as such, language is the embodiment of the necessary “reserve that is the first need of the other.”<sup>53</sup>

Blanchot’s discussions of the ‘Other’, while heavily indebted to Levinas, also attempt to radicalize the latter’s insistence that “the other is what exceeds me absolutely,”<sup>54</sup> and leave little doubt as to Blanchot’s

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46. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 50.

47. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 119.

48. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 111.

49. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 53.

50. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 121.

51. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 122.

52. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 303.

53. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 122.

54. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 52.

rejection of the association between 'God' and 'Autrui' as another person.<sup>55</sup> Blanchot regards this association as 'too imposing' in its correspondence to metaphysical logic; my relation to the Other must, in his reinscription, become a relation without relation beyond any simple division between subject/object, human/divine, or immanence/transcendence—hence a relation whereby neither 'I' nor the 'Other' correspond to any essential identity, unity or presence.<sup>56</sup> In the midst of this non-place of infinite separation and radical difference, "language is the transcendent relation itself."<sup>57</sup> All proper speech, including religious speech, "recalls the separation by which it speaks"<sup>58</sup>—that is, its own essence as *response*, always attuned to that impossibility which must remain nameless and ungraspable, even if it can never be abandoned as a fundamental concern.<sup>59</sup> "Such then would be my task: to respond to this speech that surpasses my hearing, to respond to it without having really understood it, and to respond to it in repeating it, in making it speak."<sup>60</sup>

In this manner, too, Blanchot's central imperative begins to resonate with a certain undecidability with respect to the *name* of 'God'—a name which is never merely a *possibility* for us as speaking beings, but which also does not allow for a merely indifferent silence: "To *name* the possible, to *respond to the impossible*. I remember that we had designated in this way the two centers of gravity of all language."<sup>61</sup> Blanchot's work maintains, as it were, an opening for an intimate, if inexplicable, affinity between the name of 'God', which marks a profound absence, and that 'impossibility' whose innermost feature is precisely the impossibility of *ever being done with anything*<sup>62</sup>—whether it be truth, reason, literature, silence, theism, or atheism: "everything repeats itself, everything returns: the limit of thought. To think or to affirm this law is also to speak *at the limit* [. . .]."<sup>63</sup> As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, the name of 'God' in Blanchot's *Infinite Conversation*

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55. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 214.

56. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 70–71.

57. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 56.

58. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 63.

59. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 45 and 65.

60. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 65.

61. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 65.

62. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 203–204.

63. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 275.

serves as a kind of constant, elusive hint or sign for a certain impossibility contained in all nomination, for the fundamental (and *neutral*) namelessness that marks the non-place around which all meaning revolves—and which refuses both theistic idolatry and atheistic nihilism.<sup>64</sup> God is not simply denied here, but rather erased as an ‘object’ of speech or a ‘subject’ of analysis, with God’s name reconfigured as a kind of ‘limit-experience’, a word for that which otherwise must remain secret, set apart: “Ce n’est pas qu’il y a ou qu’il n’y a pas de Dieu. C’est, bien différemment, qu’il y a ou plutôt qu’il se prononce le nom de Dieu. Ce nom répond à une *déposition* de la question, qu’elle soit question de l’être (quoi?), question de l’origine (par quoi?) ou question du sens (pour quoi?).”<sup>65</sup> Here Nancy suggests quite correctly that the very refusal of proper meaning embodied in God’s name simultaneously signals the infinite abundance of meaning, together with the *call* to participate in this abundance. Hence, “Presque malgré lui et comme sur la limite extrême de son texte, Blanchot n’a pas cédé sur le nom de Dieu—sur l’inacceptable nom de Dieu—car il a su qu’il fallait encore nommer l’appel innommable, l’appel interminable à l’innommation.”<sup>66</sup> On intimate terms with his notion of the *neuter*, the name of God in Blanchot’s thought marks precisely that which, being *intrinsic* to the religious discourse of monotheism, is simultaneously always already *outside* it: God as *Personne* or *No One*, deprived of proper identity, neither an entity nor a non-entity, not *one* and not *not-one*;<sup>67</sup> ‘God’ as the name that bears within itself an infinite void, which cannot be filled by means of any designation and which demands, rather, the patience of an infinite vigil.

Blanchot’s critique constitutes a crucial reminder that religious language cannot speak *about*, only *toward*, the enigma that, as far as Blanchot is concerned, presents no oracle that can be explicated once and for all.<sup>68</sup> This ‘non-place’ or ‘non-experience’ constitutes for Blanchot the only truly proper ‘place’ or ‘experience’ of religion today: i.e., religion constituted around an impossibility that allows for no simple distinction

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64. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le nom de Dieu chez Blanchot,” *Magazine Littéraire*, Octobre 2003: 67–68.

65. Nancy, “Le nom de Dieu chez Blanchot,” 67.

66. Nancy, “Le nom de Dieu chez Blanchot,” 68.

67. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*, 163 and 168–71.

68. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 28–30.

between negation and affirmation, an impossibility that involves a double task whereby language is at stake. Thus, on the one hand, religion must become the movement of a constant, interminable (re-)reading: a movement that, beyond the theological-cultural concept of the 'Book' (or 'Bible')—which, with its demand for presence and unity remains linked to God as a metaphysical concept—must affirm the essential discontinuity or fragmentariness of writing<sup>69</sup> and recognize in the Bible an invitation to the plenitude of a radical dispersal. Reading, in this sense, can no longer be merely an attempt to grasp God's 'message'; instead it must constitute a response to the radical plurivocality and ungraspability of that 'message', to the manner in which this 'message' constantly *unworks* all attempts at making it work solely within humanity's own limited conceptual schemes and for its own limited purposes. xAs such, *The Infinite Conversation* may indeed be seen as a text that "contests, reworks, displaces, and yet perpetuates the Bible."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Blanchot's critique emphasizes the priority of the Jewish model insofar as it entails, in a fundamental sense, the movement of an interminable *dialogue*, which refuses conceptual mediation and which involves, in essence, a 'relation without relation'<sup>71</sup>—echoed in Blanchot's notion of *infinite conversation*. Blanchot's appreciation, in this regard, situates itself *between* theism and atheism: "what we owe to Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God, but the revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign. God speaks, and man speaks to him. This is the great feat of Israel."<sup>72</sup> And again: "if, in fact, there is infinite separation, it falls to speech to make it the place of understanding: and if there is an insurmountable abyss, speech crosses this abyss. Distance [...] is maintained, preserved in its purity by the rigor of the speech that upholds the absoluteness of difference."<sup>73</sup> In this respect, religion does not constitute an *experience* of God as a human *possibility*, but rather a *conversation* with God as a human *impossibility*.<sup>74</sup> religion as plural

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69. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 427–28.

70. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 190.

71. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 180.

72. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 127.

73. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 128.

74. See also Kevin Hart's comments in *The Dark Gaze*, 179–80.

speech, as a strange, fragmented fellowship united only in its anonymous, dialogical relation (without relation) to the unknown *as unknown*—that is, neither subject nor object, neither one nor many, neither god nor non-god, neither present nor absent and, above all, never simply “the not yet known.”<sup>75</sup>

If, therefore, Blanchot's writing is permeated by atheism—if writing itself, writing as plural speech, constitutes atheism for him—it is nonetheless an atheism without glory,<sup>76</sup> an atheism that, deprived of nostalgia for the dead God, nevertheless remains profoundly aware of the fact that its language continues to be haunted by His ghost—and that, in a sense, it cannot cease being haunted in this manner. In Kevin Hart's words, Blanchot's atheism remains marked by a fundamental recognition that all of its attempts at thinking are forever bound to “something inaccessible from which we cannot extricate ourselves,” something that “cannot be found and therefore cannot be avoided.”<sup>77</sup> By the same token, Hart is quite correct when he asserts that Blanchot “indicates more fully and more rigorously than others of his generation what it means to experience the absence of God. And he attends more carefully than they do to the complexity of this experience.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it would be more appropriate to regard Blanchot's peculiar experience of atheism as ‘atheism *without* atheism’: “an atheism that cannot quite be affirmed,”<sup>79</sup> an impossible atheism that remains inseparable from the persistent impossibility of what goes by the name of ‘theology’.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, what is most essentially at stake in Blanchot's thought—the ‘unknown’—is, strictly speaking, neither properly theistic nor atheistic; first and foremost due to the fact that the ‘death of God’, announced most prominently by Nietzsche, corresponds to a certain crisis of language (as *logos*) rather than to an actual event<sup>81</sup>—and to a certain crisis of thought rather than to the dissolution of monotheistic faith, whether in its Jewish, Christian, or Muslim manifestation.

In a crucial sense, the question of the ‘death of God’ is equally at stake in *both* theism and atheism. As such, too, the ‘default of God’ which

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75. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 300–301.

76. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 201.

77. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 150.

78. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 5.

79. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 10.

80. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 252–53.

81. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 271.

concerned Heidegger signals, in Blanchot's work, a necessary *suspension* of *both* theism and atheism as two distinct, self-sufficient kinds of discourse: "So that, seeking the true atheists among the believers (always necessarily idolatrous) and the true believers among those who are radically atheist, we will, perhaps, exchanging the one for the other, happily come to lose the two figures they perpetuate."<sup>82</sup> At the heart of Blanchot's intriguing assertion here is the suggestion that the very opposition between theism and atheism is a residue of metaphysical thinking—an opposition that, in and of itself, has little to do with 'God': theism and atheism are, as it were, inscribed within one another, and today we can avoid the exigency of *neither of the two*. Blanchot is placing atheism at the very heart of religious discourse—not merely as a denial of the validity of that discourse, but rather as religion's own impossible possibility, a possibility that haunts all religious 'affirmation' in the same manner in which the impossible possibility of God haunts all atheistic 'denials'. Regarded in this manner, atheism turns out to be religion's own innermost *concern* (perhaps, too, its own innermost *experience*): that which, more than anything else, belongs to religion and must necessarily "cross [. . .] the most devout faith;"<sup>83</sup> so much so that, in its most profound manifestation, theism appears to involve a certain mimicry of atheism, renouncing any *possible* grasp of the 'God' who constitutes, as it were, the infinite silence of its discourse. And, conversely, atheism in the proper sense—i.e., atheism insofar as it refuses the temptation of nihilist indifference and remains profoundly *afraid*—is coextensive with a certain mimicry of theism, preserving within itself, in the manner of an infinite conversation, a concern with the question that, in Blanchot's schema, figures as the question of 'God-Man'. Blanchot's words echo in several directions at once:

I do not know whether atheism is possible, but I assume that insofar as we suspect [. . .] that we are in no way done with the 'theological,' it would be of great interest to seek whence this possibility of atheism that always eludes us might come to us, and from whom. Let us note that the contrary is also true; the Churches continue to fear that under the thought of Transcendence a foreign affirmation is introduced—a decisive heresy that makes an atheist of the very one

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82. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 253.

83. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 230.

who thinks he 'believes in God'. And, in the church's view, it is always closest to the thought of God that danger threatens [ . . . ].<sup>84</sup>

The infinite undecidability between the demands of theism and atheism manifests itself in Blanchot's appropriation of Rilke's expression: *Nirgends ohne Nicht*, or 'Nowhere without No'.<sup>85</sup> If the question God poses to man in the Genesis story—"Where are you?"<sup>86</sup>—remains meaningful today it is, in Blanchot's view, only insofar as it figures as a reminder of the spiritual non-place that humanity presently occupies: a place where, properly speaking, 'God' is neither present nor absent, dead nor alive, distant nor near, vanished nor to come, affirming nor denying anything—all categories that operate only in accordance with humanity's own calculable measures. In this manner, too, the 'default of God' is inseparable from the 'default of Man', at least to the extent that the God of metaphysics and the Cartesian Subject are intrinsically linked.<sup>87</sup> This inseparability constitutes the heart of Blanchot's eccentric, paradoxical humanism. On the one hand, man enters the non-place of God as the irreducible Other of the 'relation without relation';<sup>88</sup> it is for this reason that Blanchot asserts, in response to Levinas, that, "Perhaps [ . . . ] it is time to withdraw this term *autrui*, while retaining what it has to say to us: that the Other is always what calls upon 'man' [ . . . ]. [N]ot the other as god or the other as nature but, as 'man', more Other than all that is other."<sup>89</sup> Here humanity comes to occupy the neutral abyss of what Blanchot regards as *the most profound question*, and itself assumes the role of the enigma: "The profound question is man as Sphinx; that dangerous, inhuman, and sacred part [ . . . ]"<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, the humanist 'question of man' coincides fundamentally with the question of man's disappearance as a self-possessed 'subject': "Be there God or the atom, the point is precisely that everything does not depend on man. In God's time this was very nearly clear [ . . . ]."<sup>91</sup> It is as though the most pious

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84. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 253.

85. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 19 and 102.

86. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 128.

87. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 247–48, 253.

88. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 59, 68, and 72.

89. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 72.

90. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 17.

91. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 270.



stance entailed a certain humanism deprived of man as the Sovereign: no longer man as *possibility* but man as the *impossibility* of any self-assured “I am” or “God is”. As Nancy notes, Blanchot’s intention is to affirm a humanist stance that refuses the temptation of both idolatry and “anthropotheology”.<sup>92</sup>

Blanchot’s humanism thus appears virtually synonymous with a certain religiosity, at least insofar as religion can be said to constitute a profound meditation on humanity’s experience of self-estrangement. This self-estrangement corresponds, in a significant manner, to humanity’s desire for total domination and manifest itself as much in theological or philosophical presumptuousness as it does in techno-scientific efforts to master nature. It is in this context that we should read Blanchot’s rather saturnine pronouncement, in which he paraphrases Levinas: “Enigma of Saying as of a god speaking in man, man who relies on no God, for whom there is no such thing as dwelling, who is exiled from all world without afterworld, and who finally does not even have language as his abode [. . .].”<sup>93</sup> In the midst of this passage, which explicitly draws a link between the affliction of language and the affliction of atheism—and declares this double-affliction as essential to the present age—we nonetheless encounter, yet again, the affirmation of the Jewish experience of the exodus as that which must be affirmed in contemporary discourse, whether literary, religious, philosophical, or scientific; for, as Blanchot points out elsewhere, the experience of exile, understood properly, signifies a new relation to ‘truth’, rather than its absolute negation.<sup>94</sup> If being religious thus necessarily entails being lost without refuge, humanism overlaps with this experience in an intimate manner, for it too names a nameless community crying out in the desert:<sup>95</sup> *Where am I?* As far as Blanchot is concerned, this is a more appropriate question than the metaphysically oriented: *Who am I?*

To cry in this manner is, for Blanchot, to be at the limit, to speak the speech of the Outside which, like the echo, is the speech of *no one*—a speech dispossessed of its self-certainty, suspended in some neutral non-place between the mouth and the ear, no longer able to grasp its precise

92. Nancy, “Le nom de Dieu chez Blanchot,” 68.

93. Maurice Blanchot, “Our Clandestine Companion,” Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 47.

94. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 127.

95. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 262–63.

origin, dwelling place, or proper destination—even as it necessarily always resonates with another speech, with the speech of the other. Nowhere without no, an incessant, nameless echo that belongs neither to silence nor to language: such is Blanchot's speech errant, deprived of both 'God' and 'Man'. But such, too, is the language of prayer—at least the dispossessed prayer of the poet who, having experienced in the most profound manner the 'default of God,' does not cease to speak, even if his speech is punctured by a silent abyss:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Praised be thy name, No One.  
For your sake  
we shall bloom  
Towards  
you.<sup>96</sup>

The sense of 'spiritual' dejection expressed in this fragment of Paul Celan's poem/prayer to an anonymous *Niemand* is simultaneously permeated with the awareness of a profound lack of completion: no convenient truth presents itself in the wake of God's absence—a truth that might, for instance, comfortably correspond to the name of 'atheism' or 'humanism'. Echoing Blanchot's concern, the poem suggests that 'we' turn *toward* this lack of truth and the exigency it presents: to learn, at the same time, to think more *and* less than we think—an exigency that is coextensive with *speaking both more and less* than we speak. In Blanchot's reading, certain kinds of literary and religious language bear witness precisely to this eccentric event, whereby language at once *speaks excessively* and *does not speak*, positioned, as it were, in the interval between a certain 'no longer' and a certain 'not yet'; which is also the interval between what, according to the demands of metaphysical logic, must correspond to *either* 'speech' *or* 'silence'. Hovering over an abyss, which it continually affirms but to which,

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96. Paul Celan, "Psalm," *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2001), 156–157. I have made some minor adjustments to the above translation with the help of Thomas Lornsen, formerly of McGill University's Department of German Studies.

nonetheless, it must not succumb, neither literature nor religion understood in this sense constitutes a simple refusal of language, but rather indicates, in a fundamental way, that *silence speaks*, and that the validity of speech can never be measured simply by its capacity to replace silence with words, concepts, or definitions. In the end, Blanchot's atheism (without atheism) embraces the experience evoked by Celan's poem in its own manner—denying by way of affirmation and affirming by way of denial: "Nietzsche's dictum 'God is dead' is not effective as knowledge that provides an answer, but as a refusal of an answer, the negation of salvation, a 'no' to the elevated agreement that humanity may rest and unburden itself of itself based on an eternal truth that God exists. 'God is dead' is a task, a task without end."<sup>97</sup> In this respect, the silence of literature and the death of God must be experienced today as two distinct events which, nonetheless, are not quite separate, for they share an intimate familiarity with a silence that is never merely the opposite of speech, and with an absence that is never merely contrary to presence.

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97. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 292.