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## “VIENS!”: ON MAURICE BLANCHOT’S PRAYERS AND PROMISES

**Keywords:** Maurice Blanchot; prayers; atheism; come [viens!], prayer [prière], promise [promesse]

**Abstract:** The essay attempts to explore a highly controversial issue, that of Maurice Blanchot’s alleged atheism, and partially contradict it. Starting from Caputo’s proposal to look for Derrida’s prayers and tears, and investigating several Blanchotian récits, it similarly and persistently asks the Augustinian question on the French philosopher and literary theorist: “what do I love when I love my God?”. My aim is to find out who Blanchot’s God was and such a critical analysis resorts to a threefold structure based on one of Blanchot’s keywords (viens!- come), on what I tentatively called prière (prayer, praying, begging), and a final promesse (promise).

In John Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Derrida was portrayed as a hero who “has religion, a certain religion, his religion, and he speaks of God all the time” (Caputo XVII). Having in mind Mark C. Taylor’s study on tears in the field of theo-philosophy which explored the tears of thinkers such as Derrida, Blanchot, Jabès, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Austin, Ayre, Barth, Rorty, Tillich, I will attempt to write on *The Prayers* or possibly *The Tears of Maurice Blanchot* (See Taylor). If it was fairly easy for Caputo to analyse Derrida’s prayers, since, similarly to St. Augustine and to Jean-François Lyotard, Derrida wrote a confession in his *Circumfession*, Blanchot did not confess on his life, did not ask for forgiveness. Moreover, living in perfect seclusion, he did not participate in symposia, did not join roundtables or workshops, did not explain his thoughts in public, did not speak to his translators, did not use the second-person singular in addressing his friends (the only one he ever called “tu” instead of “vous” was Emmanuel Levinas (Cf. Blanchot, *Pour*, 35, Bident 38-42, Lescourret 64-72). Nobody ever thought of asking Blanchot if he believed in God, if he loved his enemies, if he confessed to God, if, beyond the “the holocaust, the absolute event of history – which is a date in history – that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up” (Blanchot, *The Writing* 47), he saw any feeble hope coming from God to guide people back to a normal life.

In spite of these major impediments, I would like to ask the Augustinian question “what do I love when I love my God?” on Blanchot, and treat his work in such a way as to wonder who Blanchot’s God was. After dealing with Blanchot’s so-called “atheism”, which Jean-Luc Nancy named “absentheism”, the essay will be structured in three parts. The first part corresponds to a keyword of Blanchot’s work: *viens!* and the last part (*promesse*) puts forward a promise that I withdraw from Blanchot’s récit *Death Sentence*,

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that promise of an impossibility that appears at the end of J.'s story; a rather prolonged interlude made up of three prayers represents my tentative search for his prayers in a part which I entitled *prière* (prayer, praying, begging).

Blanchot was taken for an atheist, first of all because he wrote much on Nietzsche, a pillar of agnosticism. Secondly, he wrote much on death and on the suicidal act, on the choices made by Dostoyevsky's heroes. Several of Blanchot's *récits* propose different contexts for *viens*, generally addressed by a male to a female. Moreover, Blanchot equated *l'écriture* to atheism in his *Infinite Conversation*, which made a few critics consider his *oeuvre* as a whole as the work of an atheist, without attempting to investigate how many times he speaks of God.

*Viens* (the imperative of the verb *venir*) calls for the Other (Elijah) who will step beyond and knock at our door in the future (the noun *avenir*). We might regard Derrida's "Pas" as a prayer for Blanchot, a tear shed in the name of a whole myriad of *pas*:- *pas* (steps, notes), passages, passions, passivity, and even patience. Comparing Blanchot's observation from *The Infinite Conversation* in which he suggested that the force bringing Lazarus back to life came from death itself, Kevin Hart concludes that "[i]n reviving J., the narrator is colluding with death considered as a force, the very death that Hegel assimilated to the negativity of the dialectic." (Hart, "The Gospel" 13). Kevin Hart does not ask what the entire name of J. is.

### On Blanchot's "A(bsen)theism"

It has often been asserted that Blanchot was too much of a doubter who would often assert the absence of God which he transliterated in what Kevin Hart called the "dark gaze" (see Hart, *The Dark*). Nevertheless, the same Kevin Hart spoke of Blanchot's "gospel" in *Death Sentence* (Hart, "The Gospel" 10-16). Blanchot defined the sacred as "the reality of sensible presence" even if for him the sacred was, as Kevin Hart noted, "the effulgence not of a transcendent point to which all things aspire but rather of an illusory point beyond the earth, as it were, which comes into being as one writes and attracts as it withdraws" (Hart, "The Gospel" 23).

Levinas's approach to Blanchot made it clear that there are in fact two directions in his writings to be exploited simultaneously and with the same intensity: "on the one hand, the announcement of a loss of meaning, a scattering of discourse, as if one were at the extreme pinnacle of nihilism", on the other hand, "a world no human suffering keeps from being in order; a world that goes on willy-nilly . . .; a world that constitutes a totality in its indifference to values; . . .; a world that makes up a whole in the "everything is permitted" of Dostoyevsky, not because of his atheism, but because of his spirituality" (Levinas 154). Blanchot found it hard to put together apparently incompatible beliefs and he aspired to maintain discontinuity through his famous notion of the *neuter*. Among the various definitions of the *neuter* throughout his whole work, it is worth noting that in *The Step Not Beyond*, Blanchot defined it as a sort of refusal, in other words, representing a "pre-critical" notion for him, which makes it akin to deconstruction aiming to be a pre-critical activity: "not only to choose, but to submit itself to the possibility of a choice between two terms: such as one or the other, yes or no, this or that, day night, god or

man” (Blanchot *The Step* 77). With the help of the *neuter*, man can be mirrored in God incessantly, producing what the French thinker calls “the balancing of a man’s head given over to eternal oscillation” (Blanchot, *The Step* 77). Blanchot’s work “bears the neutral” (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 132), and calls out for a syntax that Derrida named as the “‘-less’ [sans, without] syntax” (Derrida, “Living On” 131) by which words and concepts are neutralized to such an extent that they are carried beyond the “system of philosophical oppositions” (Derrida, “Living On” 132). The *neuter* is connected to the name without name: “In the neuter-the name *sans* name-nothing responds, except the response that fails, that has always just missed responding and missed the response, never patient enough to “go/beyond”, without this “step/beyond” being accomplished” (Blanchot, *The Step* 118). As I previously shown in an article that worked on the notion of “pas” (translated as both negation and step, pace not(s)), the *X without X* is not purely privative but points to duplicity in the *pas-de, le pas au-delà* which makes passivity an arch-passivity on the side of the divide passivity/activity (Ionescu 65).

Feeling the neutrality of God was thus for Blanchot what he called “the supreme incertitude of the supremely certain, the presence of the absent God. *Vere tu es Deus absconditus*” (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 100; See also Derrida, *The Gift* ch.3). Man’s attempt was thus for Blanchot a permanent oscillation between making “the hidden God – hidden because manifest” and making him “present in his absence” correspond to both “a certainty and an uncertainty that are equal and equally absolute” (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 100). Such a credo made Jean-Luc Nancy rightly think that the French thinker “neither asks nor authorizes any ‘question of God’, but he additionally posits and says that such a question ‘is not to be asked’” (Nancy 87, translation modified). For Jean-Luc Nancy, Blanchot’s real purpose of affirming some sort of atheism was “only to dismiss atheists and theists alike” (Nancy 85). The association of atheism with *l’écriture* would place Blanchot in a desert where humanity cries, a humanity that gives up man and “all anthro-theology” (Nancy 85). However, as long as the prophet still “speaks for God and of God, who announces to others the call of and recall to God” (Nancy 85), Nancy suggests a term that delineates Blanchot’s creation better: not atheism but rather *absentheism* (Nancy 133). In fact, Blanchot did nothing else but recuperated, saved the name of God: he “did not yield on the name God – on the unacceptable name God – because he knew that it was still necessary to name the call unnamable, the interminable call to in-nomination” (Nancy 88).

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot saw God in relation to our time and he realized that we cannot question Him, since “the word of God needs man to become the question of man. When after the Fall Jahweh asks Adam ‘Where are you?’ this question signifies that henceforth man can no longer be found or situated except in the place of the question. Man is from now on a question for God himself, who does not question” (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 14). In Nancy’s words, we cannot validate God with a question, since “God is not within the jurisdiction of a question” (Nancy 87). He “would be the name of that which – or of he or of she who – in the name escapes nomination to the degree that nomination can always border on sense. In this hypothesis, this name would de-name names in general, while persisting in naming, that is, in calling” (Nancy 88).

For Blanchot, the difficulty of the sacred (which is the unpronounceable) is related to “the disappearance of the *name* that the name itself makes appear” (Blanchot, *The Step* 48) to the extent of becoming either obscure or forbidden. Under such circumstances, the theological discourse (or rather the very act of appellation) seems too narrow to imbed God’s name, as with His name that has the capacity to heal us, “language speaks only as the sickness of language in as much as it is fissured, burst open, separated, failure that language recuperates immediately as its validity, its power and its health” (Blanchot, *The Step* 48).

Blanchot’s absentheism interrupts itself and leaves space for theological speculation. In the next part we will analyse a few fractures in what apparently passes for an atheist vision.

### *Viens*

Blanchot’s calling reflected in Derrida’s calling, Derrida’s calling echoed in Caputo’s calling always start by *Viens*.

– *Viens* ‘Come.’

*Viens*: what do you call what I’ve just, in French *je viens de* – what I just what? what I just said? Is *viens* a word? A word in French? a verb? On the face of it, it’s an imperative, necessarily present, a mood here conjugated in the second-person singular. This definition seems to be as reliable as it is inadequate. (Derrida, “*Pace*” 11)

That is the way Derrida opens his study on Blanchot, “*Pas*”, in which, similarly to *Awaiting Oblivion*, two voices converse on Blanchot’s texts: one belonging to a male is continuously interrupted by the other belonging to a female. “*Pas*” opens with the word *viens* (come), addressed by the male interlocutor to the female one. Several of Blanchot’s short stories and *récits* propose different contexts for *viens*, generally addressed by a male to a female. For instance, in *Au moment voulu*, a man calls his lover to come to the South:

Je lui dis: « Venez avec moi dans le Sud. » Elle secoua la tête. « Cela ne se peut pas. – Venez! » Elle m’aida à faire quelques pas, d’abord d’assez mauvais gré, puis avec une bonne volonté chancelante. (Blanchot, *Au moment* 130)

The unidentified (not named) male protagonist addresses the same imperious invitation to the female character from *Awaiting Oblivion*, whose name is never uttered by the narrator and who thus remains a “she” throughout the *récit*:

When he said to her: “Come” – and immediately she approaches slowly, not in spite of herself, but with a simplicity that does not make her presence closer – shouldn’t he have gone to meet her instead of formulating this imperious invitation? (Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion* 63)

In *Death Sentence*, “come” is almost the last word of the *récit*, invoking the feminine character:

I have loved it [the thought] and I have loved only it, and everything that happened I wanted to happen, and having had regard only for it, wherever it was or wherever I might

have been, in absence, in unhappiness, in the inevitability of dead things, in the necessity of living things, in the fatigue of work, in the faces born of my curiosity, in my false words, in my deceitful vows, in silence and in the night, I gave it all my strength and it gave me all its strength, so that this strength is too great, it is incapable of being ruined by anything, and condemns us, perhaps, to immeasurable unhappiness, but if that is so, I take this unhappiness on myself and I say eternally, "Come", and eternally she is there. (Blanchot, *Death* 80, translation slightly amended)

The infinite "come" from the end of Death Sentence and from the middle of *Awaiting Oblivion* becomes a term of mediation, or in Timothy Clark's opinion, "a term for dialogicity or the parole plurielle at work in Blanchot's récits" (Clark 135). Furthermore, Clark identifies a dislocation of Heideggerian Dichtung traced in Blanchot's récits, which Derrida is aware of in "Pas":

*come* exchanges nothing, does not communicate, says nothing, shows, describes, defines, states [*constate*] nothing, the instant it pronounces itself, nothing that may be a something or someone, object or subject. *Come* does not even call someone who would be there before the call. To say that it calls the call, that is calls itself would be more exact, provided no specular reflection is understood thereby, that would have to be specified shortly. (Derrida, "Pace" 16)

All Blanchot's *récits* take place in a room or a hotel which becomes what Derrida called their "'topic' according to the no/pace [pas] of this coming-and-going" (Derrida, *Demeure* 17). The two speakers interact intensely and interrupt each other endlessly in a discourse that expresses both attraction and repulsion, as well as proximity and distance. Their dialogue unfolds in a temporality that is itself paradoxical. It is the temporality in which the "object" of waiting [*l'attente*] is, as Clark put it, "both always to come and always absolutely past irredeemably at work as the very moment of that thought that would try to reify or capture it" (Clark 92).

*Awaiting Oblivion* testifies to the coming of gods in a sort of strange dialogue, bringing to mind Blanchot's texts on Nietzsche. The first-person narrator, an alter ego of the *désœuvré* writer, is aware of the presence of gods in the room and he attempts to converse with them. However, they would not communicate to him:

Two beings from here, two ancient gods. They were in my room; I lived with them. For an instant, I joined in their dialogue. They were not surprised. "Who are you? One of the new gods?" – "No, no, just a man." But my denial did not stop them. "Ah, the new gods! They have finally come."  
Their curiosity was light, capricious, wondrous. "What are you doing here?" I answered them. They did not listen to me. They knew everything; theirs was a light knowledge that could not be weighed down with the kind of partial truth that I gave to them. (Blanchot, *Awaiting* 31)

The coming of gods is yet always done in the absence of the feminine principle, and the moment "she" appears, they have to disappear because once they are gone, "he" can replace them:

she was a tall girl whom I was amazed to be able to look at, although I was not capable of describing her, and when I said to her, “Come”, she immediately drew nearer with a profound distraction that made me extremely attentive. He then disappeared for good. At least, it was more practical for me to think that he did. Does a god disappear? We have been living together ever since. And I almost no longer resist the idea that one day I may be the new god. (Blanchot, *Awaiting* 32)

Meditating on this fragment, let us not forget that the first-person narrator is a writer, the one who writes what she dictates. A possible explanation for the disappearance of gods was suggested by Levinas in his study on Blanchot, in which he speaks of the impersonality of the work, “that of the silence following the departure of the gods, as inextinguishable as a murmur” (Levinas 131).

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If grammarians were asked about *viens*, they would undoubtedly say this is a verb in the imperative. For Blanchot, *viens* is not a verb, because he makes the difference between “ordinary, lived time” and the “other” time, which is not only a time lacking present, but also “an exceedingly un-Husserlian time”, lacking “retention or protention”. Caputo relates Blanchot’s *viens* with a kind of “*Ur*-affirmation”. Moreover, he connects both Blanchot’s and Derrida’s *viens* to a call for God, a *viens* that heralds the event that it messianically “calls” for:

[t]he *viens* is like still another John, the precursor John whose Baptist voice cries out in the desert of the same for the other who is to come. *Viens* precedes the event structurally; it always precedes and calls for the event because, in messianic time, the event is always yet to come, struck through with non-occurrence, no matter what is presently in place. (Caputo, *The Prayers* 96)

*Viens* (the imperative of the verb *venir*) calls for the Other (Elijah) who will step beyond and knock at our door in the future (the noun *avenir*). Caputo connects the non-arrival of death in Blanchot’s texts to “what is to-come” and concludes that this axiom can

be expressed by saying that the Messiah never comes, that the very idea of the Messiah would be destroyed were the Messiah, to everyone’s embarrassment and consternation, have the indiscretion to show up and actually become present. The very idea of the Messiah is that he is to come, *à venir*, someone coming, not that he would ever actually arrive (Caputo, *The Prayers* 78).<sup>1</sup>

For Caputo, Messiah’s coming or arrival means protecting oneself from ordinary time and the present. However, Blanchot’s “come” does not protect, as it often interplays with “don’t come!” corresponding to the way the arrival of Messiah is welcomed with punishment and death and Jesus has to die first, so that Christians wait for him to come again.

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<sup>1</sup> However, a believer may easily argue against Caputo’s opinion.

The story that impresses Caputo most is in one of the fragments included in Blanchot's book on the Holocaust, *The Writing of the Disaster*, a story that Derrida cites in a footnote in *Politiques de l'amitié*. This story makes him assert that "Jewish messianic thought (according to certain commentators) suggests the relation between the event (*événement*) and its non-occurrence (*inavènement*)" (Caputo, *The Prayers* 79). In this context, "Jewish messianic thought" means for the American philosopher a possibility of rethinking time. As Blanchot's story unfolds, the Messiah is to come at the gates of Rome, in disguise, as a beggar, a leper or an incognito meant to "protect or prevent" his coming. Being recognized by someone, the Messiah is asked "When will you come?", which replaces "Come, Come." Thus, Blanchot shows that the Messiah's coming is not related to presence or rather to the present time, since even if He is ready to come right "now", his appearance invokes the messianic time in the future-to-come rather than the present.

Nevertheless, Caputo's concern with "come" has to be analysed in a larger context, as, for him, "come" is one of the "watchwords" of deconstruction. When uttering "come!", we always defer the moment of meeting the Messiah whose existence cannot be conceived without the idea of waiting, as Blanchot made it clear in both *Awaiting Oblivion* in its general meaning and, partly, also in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "All prophets – there is no exception – have prophesied only for the messianic time [*l'époque?*]" (Blanchot, *The Writing* 142). Quoting Derrida's *Psyche: Invention de l'autre* ("To invent would then be to 'know' how to say 'come' and to answer the 'come' of the other"), Caputo reduces deconstruction to saying "come!", by which it invites the "step of the other" (*pas de l'autre*), and, thus, also the step of Elijah at our door . . . ." (Caputo, *The Prayers* 73).

Blanchot's *The Step Not Beyond*, which invites the step of the other as well, even if from a different perspective, that of stepping back, of distancing oneself from the object that is being regarded in order to see better, ends on a messianic call: "Come, come, come (*viens, viens, venez*), you whom the injunction, the prayer, the wait could not suit" (Blanchot, *The Step* 135). This new occurrence of "come" for Caputo is not related to "ordinary time" and therefore is not to be taken as "a specific prayer" whose determination is in an identifiable Messiah, or an End of History, but it is rather some form of hope "for a break within the interstices of the laws of regularity, an outbreak of chance within the crevices of the continuous flow of presence" (Caputo, *The Prayers* 86).

### **Prier**

We might regard Derrida's text on Blanchot entitled "Pas" as a prayer, a tear shed in the name of a whole myriad of *pas*:- *pas* (steps, nots), passages, passions, passivity, and even patience. "Pas" is a dialogue between a man and a woman whose relation we do not know. Timothy Clark suggested that the very title of the volume in which "Pas" was included, *Parages*, bears a "signature effect" in Blanchot's *oeuvre*: "pa, par, para, ra, rage, age" (Clark 145). "Pas", meaning both the negation 'not' and the noun 'step', steps back into Blanchot's texts, interrupting them, and strengthening Derrida conviction that a text cannot have solidity or coherence unless it is interrupted by another: "no text could pretend to demonstrate or prove anything unless a certain movement of the other did not

come and make it say or let it say what here tries to say itself, or what ‘is having a go at’ itself [s’y essaie]” (See Derrida, Labarrière).

The next part of this essay explores what I will tentatively call three of Blanchot’s “prayers”. Spontaneous prayer comes as a “cry that is almost automatic, irrepressible, machinelike, mechanical, like a mainspring calling for help from the depths of panic and absolute terror” (Derrida, *The Beast* 77).

Crying or shedding tears comes as an impetus in Blanchot’s *récits*. Men-narrators are the ones who invite to praying with their *viens*, and women usually shed tears. Before witnessing “the most terrible look which a living being can receive”, the narrator of *Death Sentence* hears J.’s “sigh which little by little became a light, weak cry” (Blanchot, *Death* 13).

In *The Step Not Beyond*, tears prepare that moment of passivity before praying:

And we can easily understand and say that the silent speech, this infinite murmur, thus also pronounces itself in us, that we die with the one who dies, as he dies in our place, in the place where we think that we sojourn-not dying because we lose a part of common life, but rather because it is “dying”, intransitive loss, that we share with him, in a movement of pure passivity that passion without tears sometimes seems to assume. (Blanchot, *The Step* 106)

Levinas chose the following excerpt from *Awaiting Oblivion* and called it a “prayer”: “Make it impossible to me to talk to you” was for Levinas a prayer with the following argumentation: “[i]t preserves that movement that is located between seeing and saying, that language of pure transcendence without correlation – like the waiting that nothing awaiting yet destroys – noesis without noema – pure extra-vagance, a language going from one singularity to another without their having anything in common . . .” (Levinas 148). Indeed, if we are to understand by prayer the invocation of a deity or the act that seeks to establish a connection with one, we have to admit that there is no religious practice in what we tentatively call Blanchot’s prayers. There is no petitionary prayer, no worship, no request for assistance, and no confession of sins, yet there is strong expressing one’s thoughts and emotions.

### **First Prayer: The Decisive Yes.**

“Yes, yes. Oui, oui. Amen” was in Caputo’s view “Derrida’s prayer”: “yes, amen, a very old and ancient Hebrew word. Amen to the God of amen (Isaiah 65: 1 6), the God of yes, “Jah” – weh,<sup>2</sup> yes first and last, yes, yes, according to an Irish/German, Catholic/ Jewish/Islamic, slightly atheistic prophetic tradition” (Caputo, *The Prayers*, XXIII). Clark’s understanding of Derrida’s oui oui is very different from Caputo’s, as for Clark, Blanchot’s way of reading represented “a mode of saying ‘yes’ to the work”. In line with this assumption, Derrida’s response to Blanchot’s text in “Pas” was an

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the pun of Angelus Silesius who speaks of the God of yes (*Ja*). (See also Caputo, *The Religious* 7, and Caputo, *The Prayers* XXIII). In the context of Jacques Derrida’s “prayers”, Caputo did not remark that “Weh” means ‘woe’ in German.



affirmation of Blanchot's reading, "a double 'yes' ('oui, oui'), the last words of the dialogue" (Clark 131). Thus, Derrida's "yes, yes" corresponds to what Blanchot named

the decisive Yes. Presence without anything being present. Through this affirmation, an affirmation that has freed itself from every negation (and consequently from every meaning), that has relegated and deposed the world of values, that consists not in affirming, upholding, and withstanding what is, but rather holds itself above and outside being, and sees himself assigned – between being and nothingness, and out of the infinite of the sovereignty of a being without being in the becoming without end of a death impossible to die. (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 209)

In *Le dernier homme*, Blanchot affirmed "the happiness of saying yes, of affirming without end" ("Bonheur de dire oui, d'affirmer sans fin") (Blanchot, *Le dernier* 11, my translation), a formula that comes back in several instances, becoming an intransitive affirmation: we end up affirming something without saying what we affirm. This is affirmation "without use" (affirmation "sans employ"), bringing to mind Bataille's opposite: negation "without use" (la négation "sans emploi"). Blanchot's yes is opened to the irreducible transcendence of the other, it is a yes not yet uttered, always to come and it is his first prayer, leading to a promise, being itself waited for.

### **Second Prayer: Be at peace with yourself**

In *The Step Not Beyond*, Blanchot writes what can be neither completely a prayer, nor true confession, having no clear addressee:

"Be at peace with yourself. – There is no one in me to whom I can speak familiarly.  
– Be at peace. – Peace, this war that is only appeased. – Be at peace, without peace without war, outside of any page to write, outside of any pact to sign, outside of texts and of countries. – The outside does not promise any peace. – Be, without knowing it, at peace with yourself, in the beyond of peace that you would not know how to reach. – That which you promise, I don't desire. – Accept without desire the promise I make you." Outside of any mercenary speech, silence without refusal gives thanks. (Blanchot, *The Step* 136)

Strictly rhetorically, the text sounds like a dialogue with an enlightened monk or a God who speaks from beyond (au-delà), a possible explanation for the inverted commas used in the text. In what follows we shall attempt to reconstruct the dialogue: the voice that says "be at peace with yourself" seems an insistent, imperative voice, completely detached, coming from beyond, from the exterior world, yet it can also be an inner voice, a sort of what Blanchot called partenaire fictif (translated by Susan Hanson as "fictive partner") (See Blanchot *L'Entretien* 457 and *The Infinite* 311) of the self of the one who utters it, giving it this tone of a prayer addressed to oneself in a whisper, as some kind of confession.

The presence of "I" in relation to "you" creates the premises of a confession, what Lyotard considered to be the point of departure for all reflection and the circumstance in which the possibility of all experience is created. In his *The Confessions*

of Augustine, Lyotard had suggested that Augustine's "I" corresponded to Descartes's "cogito" and to Husserl's "transcendental ego". Blanchot seems to have opted for the Augustinian "I", the "I" that Lyotard defines as follows:

The confessing I looks for words and, contrary to all expectation, those that come to him are those that make physiology work to the point of pushing the body's sensorial and hence sensual powers to the infinite. . . . To deliver the soul from its misery and death, grace does not demand a humiliated, mortified body; rather it increases the faculties of flesh beyond their limits, and without end. (Lyotard 11-12)

Indeed, following Lyotard, we may see how Blanchot's first person singular is pushed "in[to] the beyond of peace", where he will get without knowing how to reach that place (without place). But since how he gets there is an enigma, this is the very proof of faith, in Lyotard's opinion: "Here lies the whole advantage of faith: to become an enigma to oneself, to grow old, hoping for the solution, the resolution from the Other" (Lyotard 55).

The lack of explicit meaning of this fragment pushes it outside theology, or shifting to Derrida's terms, outside reconciliation or redemption, since the "I's" purpose would not be "to improve" itself, "to change" itself (Derrida, "Composing" 26). Blanchot's 'prayer' has no therapeutic effect, it is not done for healing purposes, and it is not addressed to the Other, but to the self of the one who 'prays'. His Other self does not notice that he says the same thing four times.

### **Third Prayer: Begging**

begging to receive what had always been given him (winning over the complaints, the sighs, the murmurs that all escaped from him).

To beg:<sup>3</sup> to beg thought, to refine it to the point that it crumbles (Blanchot, *The Step* 86).

Before exploring the meanings of the third prayer, we need to make sure that "he", here in the dative (him), is not a real male character but the narrative voice bearing all the features of the neuter; the narrative voice is distinct from the narrating voice, it is what Blanchot called "a neutral voice that speaks the work out of this place without a place, where the work is silent" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 385). The narrative voice represented by "he" in our case, yet a "he" which is neither a simple third-person narrative, nor a "cloak of impersonality" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 384) was defined by Derrida as "both a-topical, mad, extravagant, and hypertopical, both placeless and over-placed" (Derrida, "Living On" 131). The voice in this prayer seems to be aware of the circle of giving-receiving and to gather the nonverbal gestures in order to pray for

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<sup>3</sup> Lycette Nelson, the translator of *Le pas au-dèla*, preferred the verb "to beg" to "to pray", which brings to mind the rationalist approach to prayer, strengthened by Rabbi Steven Weil's belief the word "prayer" is a derivative of the Latin *precari*: to beg. The Hebrew equivalent of "prayer", *tefilah*, as well as its root *pelel* or its reflexive *l'hitpallel*, refer to an act of self-analysis or self-assessment, making it possible for the person who prays to have a dialogue with God.

thinking. Blanchot prays to thinking. Detaining thought is the supreme goal he can aspire to; yet, once he has attained it, thought in the form of discourse becomes evanescent.

### **Promesse**

Resorting once more to Caputo's challenging questions: "Must we not always divest ourselves of our own preconceived ideas about who God is and what God has in mind for us when we pray? Must not our intention always be to renounce our own intention? Must not our desire be to renounce our own desire? "Not what I want but what you want" (Mark 14:36). Does not all this intensify and provide the very conditions of prayer?" (Caputo, *Scanton* 102) we are going to explore in this part of our essay the Blanchotian promise.

Does Blanchot go close to God? Blanchot had asserted in *Awaiting Oblivion* that ancient god(s) are close to humans, yet humans do not seem to realise that:

Don't gods live in this way? Solitary, unique, unfamiliar with the light that emanates from them. They hardly disturbed me, it is true. I had grown accustomed to their presence. I rejoiced in being unknown to them, but I was unable to determine if this ignorance was a result of their extreme discretion or a divine indifference.

The ancient gods, the ancient gods, how near they are to us. (Blanchot, *Awaiting* 33)

Are Blanchot's characters angels? Before dying, J. does not look like a woman suffering from cancer in terminal stage. Her face is that of an angel who cries. The tears make J.'s face look young, as they defy the death which is approaching. Nonetheless, once tears have dried, they leave a severe trace of the actual sickness:

She had fallen asleep, her face wet with tears. Far from being spoiled by it, her youth seemed dazzling: only the very young and healthy can bear such a flood of tears that way; her youth made such an extraordinary impression on me that I completely forgot her illness, her awakening and the danger she was still in. A little later, however, her expression changed. Almost under my eyes, the tears had dried and the tear stains had disappeared; she became severe, and her slightly raised lips showed the contraction of her jaw and her tightly clenched teeth, and gave her a rather mean and suspicious look . . . (Blanchot, *Death* 26)

At this point, we may ask whether the first-person narrator from *Death Sentence* may be considered a sort of angel who brings J. back just to say good-bye. Why is her name J.? Does it have anything to do with Jesus, as Derrida's G. (Georgette, his mother) could stand for God?

When J. is dying, her sister, Louise begs the narrator: "Come, please come [*Venez, je vous en prie*], J. is dying" (Blanchot, *L'Arrêt* 31 and *Death* 17). This "come" uttered by a woman (yet doubled by begging, thus praying) is quite unique in Blanchot's short prose. For Kevin Hart, it corresponds to Mark's "I pray thee, come [*veni* (Vulgate)] and lay thy hands on her" (Mark 5.23) (See Hart, "The Gospel" 13). Comparing this assertion with Blanchot's observation from *The Infinite Conversation* in which he suggested that the force bringing Lazarus back to life came from death itself, Kevin Hart

concludes that “[i]n reviving J., the narrator is colluding with death considered as a force, the very death that Hegel assimilated to the negativity of the dialectic” (Hart, “The Gospel” 13). Hart does not ask what the entire name of J. (that the narrator whispers when she comes back to life) could be. And what he does not seem to mention either after bringing to mind this similarity with Mark’s words, is that the narrator does touch her, does lay his hands on her, yet after she has already been brought back to life:

I even think that something was happening then that I found completely disheartening, because I took her hand gently, by the wrist (she was sleeping), and scarcely had I touched it when she sat up with her eyes open, looked at me furiously and pushed me away, saying, “Never touch me again.” Then immediately she stretched out her arms to me, just as in the morning, and burst into tears. She cried, she sobbed against me in such a transport of grief that she was on the point of suffocating, and since the nurse had left the room in order not to witness this scene, I had to support her by myself without being able to get the oxygen balloon, which was just out of reach. While this was happening, the nurse came back and gave her the oxygen, which helped her to control herself. But after that she did not let me leave her bedside. (Blanchot, *Death* 25)

The reproach “Never touch me again” could mean ‘Never offer me the promise of life again, the possibility of impossibility’.

After taking a long look at death, and the absentism of Blanchot’s *récits*, we may venture to believe that there is a promise in the end even if it is hard to grasp. However, in this promise there is no way to conclude the inconclusive.

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