

**Man is the Indestructible:
Blanchot's Obscure Humanism**

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In her *Paroles suffoquées*, Sarah Kofman writes that Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* shows us that

the abject dispossession suffered by the deportees signifies the indestructibility of alterity, its absolute character, by establishing the possibility of a new kind of "we," he founds without founding – for this "we" is always already undone, destabilized – the possibility of a new ethics. Of a new humanism.¹

By way of an apparently rhetorical, though necessary question, Kofman continues: in spite of everything that calls humanism into question "after the death of God and the end of man that is its correlate," she writes, "I nonetheless want to conserve it, while giving it a completely different meaning, displacing and transforming it. I keep it because what other, new 'word' could have as much hold on the old humanism?"²

At once prophetic and contemporary, this question is surprising, if not disarming. Following the death of God, it is said, 'Man' takes the stage, his emergence the necessary event of history. Yet the end of man is the 'correlate' of the death of God. The space occupied by divinity, or the sacred, has withdrawn. Humanism attests to a *mimesis* of the transcendental theme, and unwittingly confirms the emptiness of a sign without origin. Humanism

announces nothing new: the nihilism at the heart of onto-theology emerges fully. Its hypocrisy and pretension fatally exposed, humanism may now – and ought to be – discarded as a ‘metaphysics of the subject,’ a regime of negativity, exclusion and violence.

And yet, the existential instance remains – ‘here we are.’ Or, for the present purposes, the question about the ‘who’ sustains itself. ‘Who’ would consent to be the subject of a new ethics and a new humanism? This much situates the problem of humanism in the work of Maurice Blanchot, a problem intimately posed in rapport to Antelme. The question of humanism and the ethical task of humanistic thought retain their urgency – the ‘we’ is everywhere invoked, everywhere assumed and everywhere demanded. Against the disavowal of humanism (what amounts to the same nihilism, equally unable to contend with its own historicity), a new way of thinking humanism is called upon, one gestured or traced according to Derrida’s *‘une autre insistance de l’homme.’* Certainly in debt to Blanchot, and to Blanchot’s own reading of Heidegger, Derrida does not directly advocate a rethinking of ‘human being’ according to the language of ontology. But it nonetheless remains that ontology sustains the only significant examination of the question of ‘Man’ today. The rapport of *Eigentlichkeit* and proximity that Derrida explores in “The Ends of Man” takes as its point of departure the dissension of the ontological sign of ‘Man.’ The very figure of proximity itself remains irreducible: the ontological language of proximity gives sense to the deconstructive thinking of the sign, the trace, alterity, and, we may say, the subsequent appeals to ‘becoming,’ affect, sense and value.

To enter this reading, it is necessary to recognize how the spatial metaphor of proximity presupposes a temporality. The turn toward the theme of the other is not in any way a repudiation of the human: rather, it permits a way of engaging the very question of the relation of humanity to itself, a relation that can only emerge once the place of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ become problems of language and time. We may say that ‘the other’ is one of names of the demarcation between an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ humanism. The drawing of a limit for what humanity may claim for itself – for what action may be engaged or condemned in its name – is at once historical, juridical and political: it is also commemorative and ethical, the appeal to a better future and to the exigency of memory. Humanism confronts its other not as its contrary, but when face to face with its most extreme possibility – the inexplicable atrocity of a humanity that reserves the right to put to death in the name of humanity itself. Between the old and the new humanism lies the monstrosity of the inhuman, what otherwise takes the name of ‘the camps,’ the ‘crime against humanity,’ ‘affliction’ and ‘disaster.’

It would perhaps first of all be necessary to ask again what remains

exceptional for 'the ends of man.' After (or within) the conflict over *Les fins de l'Homme*, no matter how ill understood concept of 'end' (or for that matter, 'origin'), and whatever incredulity and impatience greets a thinking of humanism today, what is most dramatic in this conflict is not the repudiation of humanism, nor less the effacement of a 'subject,' but the force of placing what is 'human' into question. This, it must be stated, is the very possibility of a humanism – humanity emerges as a concept when humanity has become a problem for itself.

Properly speaking, an ontology of humanism is not a 'critique' of humanism, setting the regulative limits and conditions within which the idea of man is thinkable and necessary, nor less is such a thinking comparable to a political disagreement, the committed exchange of ideological mystifications (though Blanchot does not hesitate to employ the word 'ideology,' and perhaps in a less sophisticated manner). Understood in the double genitive, the 'ends' of man touch upon the dissension of the *form* of the concept of the human: the possibility and the finitude of 'the human.' The sense in which the name or time of 'man' is today finished – that, to paraphrase Hegel, 'man' is a thing of the past – remains dominated by the problem of form, of what the 'human' is and 'ought' to be.

The name of 'man' becomes historical, and for the first time, is able to articulate itself according to a responsibility for its own time, our own here and now and our future. The historicity of 'man' – that 'man' emerges at a definite point, and from this point onward gazes into the possibility of self-annihilation – means that the 'human being' finds itself in becoming a decision for itself. For this reason, it remains in dispute what the 'ends of man' – the completion of this theme – would mean. It cannot be said that the theme of the 'ends of man' has exhausted itself, that the problem of the meaning of humanism is anachronistic, that turning again toward a humanism attests to a naive regression. Rather, we need to question with greater caution, with attention to the tradition within which humanism becomes thinkable. The question of 'end,' and of the place of completion proposed by this theme, is predicated upon the profoundly historic philosophemes of *ergon* and *potentia*, of the setting into work of what *becomes a work for itself*. In short, the problem of form, and of the form of form.

The manifold sense of 'end' is concentrated upon this point: end as purpose, end as limit, end as completion, and end as failure. The problem of the end cannot be thought without reference to the formal structure of the philosophical *ergon*, nor the place of 'man' as the contemporary staging of the *ergon*. If the name of man is the name for a universal experience of the demand of freedom (freedom of and for the decision we take for our own possibility of being), then man as such is the *ergon* of the *ergon*, the

setting into work of any possible setting into work. If indeed literature's return into itself duplicates the 'aesthetic education of man,' then the fateful separation of literature from the aspirations of humanism, the arrival (or incessant departure) of the anonymous passivity of the *il*, nonetheless retains the form of form, the work as the comprehension of its own end and possibility – the negativity that must name its own negativity, think itself as Orphic failure. The displacement of 'man' from the center of meaning, the claim that 'man' is an effect (of language, of desire, of structure, etc), means this: that 'man' becomes a historical problem, and forms him or herself as the problem of history, of what it means to be a finite here and now. The end of man becomes nothing other than the interminable, endless question of what a human 'end' may or ought to be.

Unavoidably, the temptation to rehearse the dominant tropes of Blanchot's writing asserts itself: what 'appears in its disappearance,' and so on. Rather than pursue such figures – though without decrying their compulsion – it is necessary to isolate precisely the problem of form, what in the small text "The Athenaeum" Blanchot describes accordingly: "Literature (by which I mean all its forms of expression, which is to say also its forces of dissolution) suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself, and, in this manifestation, has no other task or trait than to declare itself." Blanchot continues, with a sentence decisive for the present theme:

Literature, in short, declares its power. The poet becomes the future of humankind at the moment when, no longer being anything – anything but one who knows himself to be a poet – he designates in this knowledge for which he is intimately responsibility the site wherein poetry will no longer be content to produce beautiful, determinate works, but rather will produce itself in a movement without term and without determination. (*IC* 354).

One further sentence deserves to be cited. The *Frühromantik* movement takes its measure not from the revolutionary manifesto, but the 'Revolution in person': that is, the event itself, the figure of the event as a work affirming itself: "The terror, as we well know, was terrible not only because of its executions, but because it proclaimed itself in this capital form, in making terror the measure of history and the logos of the modern era" (*IC* 355). Blanchot qualifies this by declaring: the revolutionary act is to be given its decisive force by establishing it as close as possible to its origin. This origin is the principle of 'absolute liberty.' For this reason, any figure of 'history' remains insufficient. It is history that must be set in motion, recreated, promised to a future, yet stripped of everything that would determine any goal it may assume, other than the goal of naming its own possibility of mo-

tion. We should also note that the Romantic exigency to 'poetize all of reality' was also understood as a 'potentialization.' Man affirms himself in the event that makes possible man as an event – the creative rapport to experience (in which privilege is given to the forms of poetry, politics and love) – and if in so doing, should also turn to literature and language to think the most formal possibilities of form (alongside the three critiques of Kant), and so absenting him or herself from the figures of representation (or more precisely, consenting now to be absented, or tracing one's own abstinence so as to affirm the work's own solitary freedom), this 'humanism' does so in the name of a more profound, essential freedom, a more profound, essential finitude: a responsibility to create from out of the origin.³

Modern humanism affirms 'man' as a work. At issue, then, is how the logic or structure of the *ergon* comes to determine the event of responsibility in which a 'humanism' may emerge, and how a 'new' humanism or a new ethics may in turn be proposed. In order to pursue this question in Blanchot, it will be necessary to circle back upon the initial problematic.

Did not the 'abject dispossession of the deportees' finally strip modernity of its humanist illusion, calling humanism into question so profoundly that the outrage in 'the name of man' signifies, instead, a disavowal of philosophical responsibility (for example, the turn to 'rights' and law, where law is not comprehended for what it is – pure form, responsibility without a subject, an institutional decision on violence)? What reconciliation is possible? And this is first of all to ask – can there be an 'us,' or more disturbingly, or more urgently – ought there to be an 'us'? Any appeal to 'community,' no matter the elision of the identity of a 'being-in-common,' is an offence to memory – or more prosaically, is simply no longer possible: the responsibility that this name would affirm has become empty, if not corrupt. One's only response would be silence.⁴

The insistence upon such questions, though, locates oneself as a subject of memory. This in turn, turns the question of community around. Perhaps community and identity are neither a goal nor a desire, but a condition (one for which refusal and differentiation – a right to insubordination – remain essential): in which case, the problem of community *also* assumes the problem of form. How may a 'people' come to be? There is no transcendence of the singular or the plural ('the' nation, 'a' people) without at the same time the appeal to and the elision of alterity, and in this elision, always, the possible fury of extermination. But similarly, there is no opening to an-other's demand without a deflection of one's own time and place, one's own facticity. The appeal to the universal remains the vital condition of Western political thought (which perhaps denotes the task of 'political thought' as such). The claim of the universal is also the delimitation and cri-

tique of every form of community, such that 'we' are then said to belong in a more significant manner – precisely where the limit and value of any given 'community' is held in critical suspension, open to *polemos*, loss and reinvention.

The 'we' of the humanist universal attests to a critical responsibility. The figure of the 'human' is the figure of justice, a 'humanism,' before it is the determination of a taxonomy (race, species, a political group, etc). The 'form' of the human is not itself a classification, but the appeal to the unique and exemplary instance of what resolutely resists subordination, that maintains itself in the affirmation of a *droit à l'insoumission*, that is, in regard to the responsibility that this right puts into motion. Humanity is not first of all a mass, but the event of a protest, or exigency, to form oneself for oneself. This responsibility, whether it be individual or collective, and so prior to a subject, enters into itself, its own form, as a responsibility for solitude. 'We' have no one else to rely upon, no one else to appeal to, save ourselves. The 'we' of humanity is, formally, without limit: no singular community dominates the dissension of human being. To cite Blanchot: "There is no solitude if it does not disrupt solitude, the better to expose the solitary to the multiple outside" (*WD* 5). Being a question for itself, the responsibility of community is finally without a contrary, though is not self-contained (or 'narcissistic,' misrecognizing itself). It is exposed to the problem of its limit: it affirms itself as absolutely inclusive, a community for whom no one is left out. (And this is also the profound temptation of the fascist community. It may be that fascism is not at all 'exclusive' in any conventional sense: it seeks to dominate everyone and everything. Dominating even death and the right to kill, it leaves nothing aside, not even the nothing.)

And yet. If 'we' remain dominated by the event of mass atrocity, if this event is still unfolding insofar as we have not yet found a way to respond, we cannot be assured that any contemporary humanism schematically divides between a 'before' and an 'after,' and that the temporality of this division measures a knowledge or an ethics, a perfectibility. We cannot say that today, we know better than to demand 'humanism' and its rights. Humanism is opened up to its 'other' – which is not God, nor the animal, but its own capacity for cruelty and outrage. How is it that humanism, predicated upon the singularity of being human, is able to respond to the 'indestructible' character of alterity? And what, indeed, is 'indestructible' about alterity? Its 'absolute character,' if such a phrase can be admitted, is less a return into itself than the gesture of the unbound, an experience or an event absolved of all relation. Does this appeal to the indestructible remain within the contours of a transcendence, the force of a projection that asserts a 'being-human' beyond, or before, or without, the insistence on the condi-

tions of history, politics and desire? The other who is prior to history would be as equally indestructible as impossibly irresponsible, non-affirmable. What is 'indestructible' is not therefore what resists violence to survive and affirm itself, but is the condition of that violence: the violence of the crime against humanity, for example, is rather the affirmation (without positivity) of humanity, meaningful only insofar as a political and biological concept of the human must be presupposed and (legalized) violence authorized in its name. If this appears dialectical, it is because even the dialectic must answer to the solitude of responsibility. It is no scandal to observe that the dialectic is indeed the violent narrative of the humanization of truth. The question for us is to what extent is humanism a *horizon* of both modern subjectivity *and* the contemporary philosophical-literary thinking of its end, such that any thought of a 'new way of being' is already determined by the humanistic *ergon*.

For Blanchot, Antelme's text is vital. We begin, writes Blanchot, "to understand that man is indestructible and that he can nonetheless be destroyed." Blanchot continues: "man should remain indestructible – this fact is what is truly overwhelming: for we no longer have the least chance of seeing ourselves relieved of ourselves or of our responsibility" (*IC* 130). Without the least chance of our responsibility in any way broken or come to an end, is it that a new 'we' would inherit everything said under the old name of 'humanism,' and yet, for reasons of critical vigilance, find ourselves unable to speak its language? The turn to 'the ethical' so pronounced in contemporary thought would seek to enact a transformation that is neither a break, nor a repudiation, nor less a revolution, but precisely a responsibility to find a new mode of responsibility, one that thinks itself from out of its own possibility. If 'man' is not an origin, but the effect of a 'relation,' for Blanchot, it falls to humanism alone to speak the event of this relation. To this Blanchot attests in the 1962 text "Being Jewish":

what we owe 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. (*IC* 127)

The singularity of 'being Jewish' is universalized. This Judaism no longer affirms a specific origin or experience: "even when God is nominally present, it is still a question of man; of what there is between man and man when nothing brings them together or separates them but themselves" (*IC* 127). Judaism does not abandon its identity or history, but would carry its particularity into a universal experience. It would speak of a right to universalize. For Blanchot, Judaism is a *humanism* precisely insofar as it is a

human experience of a relation opened up to 'the other.' And it is necessary to be more precise: it is not a relation of 'one' to 'the other,' but the opening of the relation itself, where the term of relation, 'to' means, rather, 'beyond,' or 'without.' There is nothing beyond ourselves that brings 'us' together or that separates us from each other. As Levinas would say, 'we' are *without* alibi.

This gestures toward the most dramatic and significant possibility of humanism: that every 'human' experience, no matter how singular or particular, is able to testify to the facticity of existence itself, that what can happen to anyone can, indeed, happen to anyone. Or to express this proposition more generally: all existence is finite, contingent, historical, without purpose, that all relations of power and domination, privilege and exploitation, happiness and freedom, belonging and particularity, remain finite. This facticity would be the condition of any claim to the universal. It renders every universal a singular statement: *this* can happen. (In this manner, we all witness, and all of the time. The last wish, though remains true. We read books on Auschwitz: know what happened, do not forget, but never will you know [WD 82]. Yet the camps keep reappearing: the rape-camp of Omaska, Abu Grahīb, to begin a list.)

If we concede that nothing special or unique remains for humanity – if humanity is an accident – what then is significant about the relation to alterity as an experience of responsibility? The commitment to identify 'responsibility' as the essential and defining trait of humanity – that there is 'nothing' to humanity as such save a *responsibility to or for* alterity – would appear to secure a ground of necessity. The 'ought' of responsibility sustains the insistence upon an absolutely unique status of the human species. Only we can name our own possibility, only we may then be assured of our significance. But this 'must' remains a decision. It traces the curvature of a responsibility that can always be disavowed, evaded. With the most advanced and technological means, we can kill *en mass*, and this means nothing at all (we can recall Hegel's reading of the French Revolution). We can no longer say because we *can* be responsible, we must.

Responsibility is not significant because it is, in some way, an end-in-itself, or assures the time and place of a humanistic significance. The very ability to be responsible is consistently put into question by Blanchot. The relation between the event of responsibility and what I find myself responsible for (for example, a political stance) is not a hermeneutic revelation. The prior or 'phenomenological' condition of responsibility – that it is addressed, that my address is always in response – does not itself offer the language by which to decide on how we ought to be responsible, or why. Responsibility is not an experience that can be decided upon in advance.

Rather, I only ever find myself in a condition of responsibility, which I may affirm or disavow, take on or remain indifferent towards. The refusal of responsibility is not necessarily evasion or denial: on the contrary, it may sustain a more intense responsibility, or it may appeal to a naivety, an innocence that finds delight in ridiculing the frustrations of 'bad conscience,' *aporia*, even decision itself.

Nevertheless, Blanchot's thinking remains critically engaged with the phenomenological possibility of the *meaning* of responsibility, and by extension, the 'humanity of being human.' Even so, a reading needs to remain circumspect. Blanchot's writing is also literary: it affirms the rights of imagination, of fiction, above and beyond the rigour of philosophical thinking, to say yes to another rigour and another exactitude, but which is not for that reason a 'purely' literary or aesthetic task. The detour of literature, we may say, is no less a site of responsibility, one that answers for itself as much as it evades itself,⁵ insofar as the experience reserved for literature is, perhaps, the facticity of facticity itself: becoming a question for itself, literature becomes literature (in the uncertainty of this designation) in the very form of its detour.

Any thinking of the ethical begins with an immediate problem – 'what should I do,' 'who should I be.' Such problems substantialize the question of normativity – giving reasons, being accountable, appealing to legitimacy, calculation, etc. None of which, one should add, is in any way dispensable. It falls to the phenomenological account of 'responsibility' to attempt to think how ethical thinking is at all meaningful, and prior to the distinction between reason and irrationality. Reflection upon the *conditions* of responsibility address what is perhaps obscured by normativity: that an event of address and response is taking place. I am not only concerned with a specific issue through which I come to a concept or experience of responsibility, but with the ontological *possibility* of responsibility (or justice, or ethics). This approach calls upon what is 'essential,' or more problematically, 'originary.' For Blanchot, this mode of ethical thinking affirms an experience that is both personal and anonymous. Uniquely called, I assume the place of anyone – or rather – no one. Yet can I assume a responsibility in which, to cite Levinas, "I never finish emptying myself of myself?"⁶ As Blanchot asks in *The Writing of the Disaster*:

if responsibility is rooted where there is no foundation, where no root can lodge itself, and if thus it tears clean though all bases and cannot be assumed by any individual being, how then, how otherwise than as response to the impossible, and through a relation which forbids me to posit myself at all (if not as always posited in advance, or presupposed, and this delivers to me to the utterly passive), will

we sustain the enigma of what is announced in the term “responsibility.” (*WD* 26)

Which is to ask – who is the ‘I’ that can assume responsibility, or who can find themselves in this calling? What is significant is that responsibility must be assumed. It must be taken over in order to take place. Perhaps this can only emerge with the ontological (and modern) problem of form: that the movement of thought must name its own possibility in its very movement.

What I would like to propose is that the place of humanism – even after the death of God and the death of ‘man’ – remains the horizon within which the question of responsibility is meaningful. The ‘I’ of humanism, the ‘I’ that speaks for or as a ‘we,’ must be thought of as both a historical, particular ‘I,’ and as an event that indeed sustains “the enigma of what is announced in the term responsibility.” It is less that my positing myself is forbidden, but that modern humanism *calls upon* the positing of an I (what Blanchot will later name a Self-Subject) open to its own horizon, and in this way, to its other – the absolute and violent negation of humanity itself. At issue, then, is a humanism that has changed. It is less than clear – it remains obscure – what this humanism is, or could be, or *ought* to be. It is not a humanism of the sovereign individual – though it remains sovereign. It is not a humanism of the liberal-democratic citizen, though it appeals to the language of rights (most famously, a right – *droit* – to death). It is not a humanism of the collective identity of mankind, but it affirms mankind as *such*, indeed, the anonymity and solitude of mankind beyond every form or possibility of community – an anonymity that remains to affirm the essential moment of a profoundly traditional humanism: the pure fact of the being-human of humanity beyond or before any possible determination or form (such as that of a ‘people,’ a ‘nation,’ a ‘group,’ etc). For example: against the detractors of May ’68, Blanchot writes: “it was a splendid moment, when anyone could speak to anyone else, anonymously, impersonally, welcomed with no other justification than that of being another person.”⁷ But this joyous moment, which perhaps captures Blanchot’s thinking of community, is not however the essential possibility of humanism in his work. *That* possibility lies in a much darker, and I would argue, more terrifying space. It is a space defined by an ontology or phenomenology of responsibility, but at the same time, and so difficult to separate out, the relation of law and atrocity.

This space presents itself at the end of Blanchot’s “Atheism and Writing: Humanism and the Cry.” Here, in the choice for an ‘ideology,’ Blanchot is decisive:

we will choose our ideology. This is the only choice that might lead

us to a nonideological writing: a writing outside language and outside theology. Let us shamelessly call this choice humanist. A humanism of what kind? Neither a philosophy nor an anthropology: for to tell nobly of the human in man, to think the humanity in man, is quickly to arrive at an untenable discourse and (how to deny this?) more repugnant than all the nihilist vulgarities. What, then, is this “humanism”? (*IC* 262)

This humanism will testify to itself through what is most distant from language. It will not accord with the ‘logos of a definition’: this humanism is instead a ‘cry’

– cry of need or of protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry – or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls. It may be that, as one likes to declare, “man is passing.” He is. He has even always already passed away, inasmuch as he always been adapted to and appropriated by his own disappearance... So humanism is not to be repudiated: on condition that we recognize it there where it adopts its least deceptive mode; never in the zones of authority, power, or the law, not in those of order, of culture or heroic magnificence... but such as it was borne even to the point of the spasm of a cry. (*IC* 262)

At the end of this text, we are called upon to wait without hope for that which breaks up the ‘humanist’ cry (the ‘joy of anonymity’?). The incisive and troubling question, though, concerns the ‘origin’ and sense of this cry. Is it a cry that issues from what Blanchot names a “naked relation to naked existence,” the image of the human being stripped of social and political meaning, divested and traumatized, earlier than history and prior to politics? Or is it a cry that is in *response* to historical and political events, events given the name, in the twentieth century, of genocide and the ‘crime against humanity,’ the politics of dehumanization that Hannah Arendt famously describes as an ‘assault on human plurality,’ and that, in a manner similar to Blanchot’s writing on Judaism, universalizes the fate of European Jewry as an irreducibly *human* event? Here, to cite Arendt: the crime against humanity “is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon the characteristic of the ‘human status’ without which the very words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning.” And further: the “crime against humanity” addresses humanity as a whole. It is a crime that directly and irrevocably “violates the order of mankind ... the world shared in common.”⁸

If Blanchot’s humanistic cry is first of all a *response*, and meaningful as a desire to rehabilitate the concept of the ‘human status’ in the face of

terror, *a cry that has a truth* (the least deceptive mode), and in this manner, engages the responsibility of a political act, it is a cry still engaged in the *logos* of a definition. It is still a definition that must enter into the common existence of the name. It must enter into time and take on the shape of a meaning. The place of 'naked existence,' of vulnerability, itself has a history. It would not be outside of 'writing,' it could not itself define the exigencies of a humanism. Yet at this point, there is no suggestion that such a response is reducible to its context. One's response to an event (like the deportations, genocide) can nevertheless profoundly affect – indeed, transform – our understanding of the meaning of humanity, its present time and place, and its possible rapport to a future. It is in the face of atrocity that humanism is no longer meaningful according to the glory of enlightened self-assertion, but according to the boundary of the *intolerable*. And this means deflecting the problem of humanism once again. Humanism neither takes place as a purely given 'being-in-common,' nor as the affirmation of a plurality of irreducible differences open to alterity, but as a space defined by a certain *law* (humanitarian law, for example, 'human rights,' international courts). Humanism today is articulated as 'protecting' the rights and dignity of the vulnerable and the exploited. Man can be destroyed: this today is perhaps the very meaning of contemporary humanism and 'human rights.' But an immediate qualification is required. This is not a 'contextualization'; on the contrary, the 'intolerable' calls for a responsibility that cannot be limited to a relative knowledge, a particular way of being. It is here that perhaps the call for a new ethics and a new humanism is the most pronounced, a call that insists that what may be true of the past and the present cannot be said of a possible future. If contemporary human rights discourse cannot articulate this responsibility, it is because it cannot think into its own facticity. It maintains itself in alliance to juridical-political power and legitimacy. It upholds the citizen-subject as the perfected form of social being. The question for the contemporary *apostolos* of human rights is direct: is there a future for humanism without the form and violence of the law?

At this point, we may return to Blanchot's reading of Robert Antelme. A number of significant passages call for citation. In the midst of the horror of the Nazi prison camp, Antelme will as yet appeal to the fact of an irreducible humanity: "Contested then as a man, as a member of the human race," Antelme writes, "the calling into question of our quality as men provokes an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race." The SS may kill, but they "cannot make a man into something else." Their power is finite: "it serves," argues Antelme, "to make us think about the limitations of that race, about its distance from 'nature' and its relation to 'nature'; that is, about a certain solitude that characterizes our race; and finally – above all

– it brings us to a clear vision of its indivisible oneness.”⁹

Antelme’s affirmation of an “almost biological” belonging to the human race attempts to limit and contain the force of destruction. Man can be destroyed utterly, but the one who destroys a human being is him or herself another human being. Blanchot supports this argument: “At this moment when he becomes the unknown and the foreign, when, that is, he becomes a fate for himself, his last recourse is to know that he has been struck not by the elements, but by men, and to give the name man to everything that assails him” (*IC* 131). Yet for Antelme, the vision of ‘indivisible oneness’ is, resolutely, not an appeal to alterity. If, as Kofman suggests, we are indeed afforded the responsibility to think a new ethics and a new humanism in response to Antelme’s experience, we need to then think how Antelme’s understanding of humanity comes first not from a positive concept of the human, but is a *response* to horror, and finds within its outrage a *political* voice. At first, it may appear that Antelme bears witness to irreducibility of a biopolitics, that Antelme’s outrage attests to what Agamben names the ‘zone of indistinction,’ the politicization of *vita nuda*.

If man has become a fate – which would be another way of stating the form in which ‘humanity’ becomes a problem for itself – this fate is exposed to the limit of its sense. Certainly, the word ‘fate’ is today reserved for rhetorical impact. But the word ‘fate’ traces the profoundly historical dimension in play. If cruelty and atrocity take on the forms of the unknown and the foreign – the inexplicable – what is inexplicable is precisely *human* cruelty and *human* atrocity. If what is ‘human’ takes meaning from its limit (the crime against humanity), then humanity as such is defined within a responsibility for its own violence. And this responsibility is not first of all juridical. Or if it should be juridical – and perhaps may only be traced according to the invention of juridical norms (international law, human rights, the crime of genocide, and so on), it points rather to the finitude, the institutional character, of the law. Neither justice nor responsibility are reducible to any figure or form of law. For this very reason, the critical theme of ‘biopolitics’ remains insufficient. It is not that a biopolitics makes possible a modern humanism, but the reverse. Biopolitics is only a meaningful term of critical intervention given the defining threshold of the inhuman (and we should likewise take into account the history of the concept of biopolitics, its relation to the critique of instrumental rationality, and indeed, the Kantian prohibition of using the other as an end, etc).

Blanchot continues. He cautiously cites the term ‘anthropomorphism,’ suspending it. ‘Anthropomorphism’ would be the ultimate echo of a humanist ‘truth.’ But it does not signify any such human triumph. It no longer speaks of the self-assertion or pre-eminence of humanity:

But it is precisely in affliction that man has always already disappeared: the nature of affliction is such that there is no longer anyone to cause it or to suffer it; at the limit, there are never any afflicted – no one who is afflicted ever really appears. The one afflicted no longer has any identity other than the situation with which he merges and that never allows him to be himself. (*IC* 131-2)

There are many reasons for why this passage is significantly troubling. It identifies a murderous political program with what we might call the phenomenology of responsibility itself. This is perhaps a shocking claim, but should not be read as a fatal accusation against Blanchot. But to cite two more passages. Firstly:

this unknown from whom I separated by an infinite distance, and making of me this infinite separation itself – at this moment need becomes radical: a need without satisfaction, without value, that is, a naked relation to naked existence; but this need also becomes the impersonal exigency that alone bears the future and the meaning of every value, or more precisely, of every human relation. (*IC* 133)

And a second, longer passage:

When, therefore, my relation with myself makes me the absolutely other (*L'Autre*) whose presence puts the power of the Powerful radically into question, this movement still signifies only the failure of power – not 'my' victory, still less 'my' salvation. For such a movement to be truly affirmed, there must be restored – beyond this self that I have ceased to be, and within the anonymous community – the instance of a Self-Subject: no longer as a dominating and oppressing power drawn up against the 'other' that is *autrui*, but as what can receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true speech. Moreover, on the basis of this attention to affliction without which all relation falls back into the night, another possibility must intervene: the possibility that a Self were in my place, but become responsible for it by recognizing in it an injustice committed against everyone – that is, it must find in this injustice the point of departure for a common demand. (*IC* 134)

Antelme's claim of a 'biological oneness' is not necessarily biologicistic, or anthropomorphic. What is at issue for Antelme is *belonging* – the space of what relates one person to another, friend and enemy, prisoner and guard. The assertion of a biological belonging already *presupposes* an ontological 'being-in-common,' a condition of relation that allows the category of the biological to assume meaning. Man is the indestructible that can be de-

stroyed – and Blanchot insists that ‘he remains wary of this formulation’ – this does not appeal to a triumph of a human spirit. It means, rather, that even the act of murder presupposes a ‘humanity’ defined by its relation to what is ‘other.’ The dehumanization of the camps is both the radical negation of the values of humanism, but at the same time signifies the essential possibility of humanity: humanity only is humanity as a question for itself, as a relation to its limit, or inhumanity.

It is here that the work of Giorgio Agamben is particularly significant. I will only very briefly sketch Agamben’s argument. For Agamben, the biopolitical is not uniquely modern. Rather, Agamben traces its origin to the distinction, in Aristotle’s *Politics*, between *zoē* and *bios*. In a properly biopolitical space, the management of life and bodies (the material substance of human existence) relies upon the conception of life as *zoē*. Life is life itself, not any particular form of life (*bios* – and once again, the problem of the *ergon* emerges). Agamben is typically read as arguing that biopolitics manages what he calls ‘bare life’ (*vita nuda*). Yet, because this management is intensely political – it falls to the state to manage the life of both citizens and non-citizens – *bios* and *zoē* become indistinct. In the case of asylum-seekers, for example, they are thoroughly depoliticized (presented as nothing but a ‘suffering humanity’ incapable of responsibility and decision, unable to win recognition for the universal right to seek and enjoy asylum – and such imagery is common to both conservative politics and humanitarian agencies). But in this manner, asylum-seekers are thoroughly politicized. National identity and electoral advantage may be easily won at the cost of pathologizing the stranger. The border of the nation-state is not only traced as a geopolitical cartography, but delimited by the razor-wire of the detention centre. The camp takes place as a localized state of exception, a legal black hole. By deciding upon the sacrificial ‘exception,’ the biopolitical regime excludes by including. The ‘camp’ becomes the *nomos*, the biopolitical (or bio-juridical) ontology of the modern.

Agamben’s principle reference, however, is neither Blanchot nor Antelme nor Foucault, but Hannah Arendt. Here, Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1954) would allow us to further define the lineage of the concept of a ‘naked existence.’

Writing particularly in regard to the problem of statelessness and the phenomenon of refugees, Arendt explores the meaning of a universal humanity and universal human rights in the face of their manifest negation. The concept of human rights seems to affirm a being who exists nowhere in particular. As soon as the figure of man appears, he subsequently disappears, becoming a member of the ‘people,’ the ‘citizenry’ or the ‘population.’ Man becomes anonymous (we should also note the Blanchotian

resonance). We seem unable, Arendt argues, “to define with any assurance what ... general human rights, as distinguished from the rights of citizens, really are.”¹⁰ Human rights become meaningful, rather, as the substantive legal rights of a community able to forcefully assert their legitimacy. In contrast, and as a consequence, the stateless come to represent the ‘abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.’ Arendt concludes her account of statelessness with the claim that

The great danger arising from the existence of people forced to live outside the common world is that they are thrown back, in the midst of civilization, on their natural givenness, on their mere differentiation. They lack that tremendous equalizing of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth and yet, since they are no longer allowed to partake in the human artifice, they begin to belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species. The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general.¹¹

The figure of the refugee takes up the empty place of the figure of ‘man as such.’ Powerless before the ‘rights’ of the nation-state, man, Arendt concludes, can lose all so-called Rights of Man “without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity.”¹²

This paradox involved in the loss of human rights would appear to be provided for by the very foundation of modern humanism. The self-assertion of humanity – where humanity must take responsibility for itself – is an event of differentiation and emergence. Yet humanist self-assertion does not add anything to the concept of man. Man would be a given, prior to history and prior to politics. Humanism attempts to subtract, to remove, what stands in the way of the excellence of human potential and the responsibility of self-definition. Accordingly, it is possible to identify the political structure of ‘being thrown back upon a givenness’ as the origin of the figure of ‘affliction’ and vulnerability – there where we become “nothing other than this Other that we are not” (*IC* 130). The subject-at-risk of the modern state and the inhumanity of the crime against humanity would indeed define the figures a contemporary biopolitics. But this biopolitics can only take shape according to the modern conception of humanism and its particular form of responsibility, a form, once again, that has as its problem – its responsibility – as the form of form itself. Humanistic responsibility demands taking over a givenness and transforming it into a work of self-definition. This amounts to the Kantian form of law; imposing one’s law

upon oneself, the subject affirms its freedom to do so, and becomes a subject in this freedom. The extermination of other 'ways of being in the world' is not the failure or negation of a humanistic responsibility. On the contrary, the projects of political definition articulate themselves as a work, if not a necessity and a sacrifice. Contemporary with the formation of the nation-state, the crimes of genocide only become meaningful as a rapport to law: the problem finally, of law, is that law appeals to being itself the form of form – to being that which decides upon decision and responsibility. The law comes to decide upon, to declare illegal and unacceptable, the very violence that political-juridical institutions would otherwise authorize in the name of sovereignty. If modern international law is today engaged in the dismantling of state sovereignty, it does so in order to preserve its own form as a decision on violence as much as it enacts this decision in the name of a justice for which it will be forever inadequate.

The identification of 'man' as such with the victims of totalitarian violence is a powerful political judgement against that violence, an attempt to bear witness and to condemn the nihilism of modern law and politics. Man has not been destroyed, but survives. Refusal here takes on the force of affirmation, the universal appeal to a 'common demand': *we have nothing and no one else to appeal to*. Our relation to alterity, then, is not a relation to the infinite difference of 'the other,' but to a form without content whose nullity figures as the nothing that the work, to name its own possibility, must call to language and presence.

Is Blanchot's humanism based on an ontology that would suspend the historical and political forces to which it responds so as to arrive at an essential and originary understanding of humanity as a relation to this alterity? The proximity to the language of biopolitics would suggest that such a way of thinking humanism does not get behind or before its historical moment. The concept of the biopolitical itself is too intimately bound to the figures of law, too bound to the concept of the social body as a *nomos* of subjectification (or too bound to the concept of a 'social body' in the first instance). For this reason, contemporary thought needs to remain critically vigilant toward the themes of 'naked existence' and 'affliction.' Yet seeking to release a critical potentiality, Blanchot's thought offers more than its historical moment. It commits itself to the figures of political freedom and liberty, to invention and creativity, and affirms their force as a responsibility without finality, to the point of ruin.

If we think the 'crime against humanity' as a political response aimed at destroying, in Arendt's words, a certain way of being in the world, the crime against humanity certainly assumes meaning on the basis of a division between 'humanity' and 'non-humanity,' or between 'naked' and mean-

ingful life. Yet this distinction is already present in the very concept of humanity itself (though perhaps less for the reasons suggested by Arendt and Agamben): the politics of humanistic self-assertion are dependent upon presupposing a pre-political humanity that must arrive at itself by a decision or an affirmation, taking a responsibility for itself. Every humanism is already taking over of itself, entering into the problem of itself according to the circuit of a repetition. As a self-transcendence, what humanism must 'overcome' is, finally, nothing other than itself. This would indeed define the space and possibility of any modern legal system, and for this reason, any contemporary critique of a 'biopolitical modernity.' If modern law defines its humanism according to the limit of the intolerable, this negativity is itself meaningful on the basis of the ontological problem of nullity and absence, the undetermined and the 'not-yet.' It falls to the place of law to give this limit, and thus, its own form – a content. A modern humanism defined by a moral-legal response to the most horrific forms of nihilism remains dominated by this nihilism: modern humanism hollows itself out.

Here, the biopolitical distinction between naked existence and meaningful life finds itself understood according to a more original and essential reflection: the question of the place of responsibility, whether avowed or denied, the responsibility taken for defining the human, the non-human, and indeed, the 'superhuman,' the 'new man' of totalitarian regimes (and, it may be said, of modern capitalism, those entrepreneurial 'masters of the universe'). It may be argued, accordingly, that it only becomes possible to think a biopolitics *after* the totalitarian atrocities of modernity (atrocities that repeat themselves in contemporary democratic states, and not only in the 'war on terror').

If it can be said that an event like the 'crime against humanity' today informs our understanding of humanism – that is, for us today, humanism is meaningful as a *refusal* of what would 'destroy humanity' rather than as the affirmation of a human potential (perhaps because 'human potential' has become indistinct from the enjoyment of destruction), then it is possible to read Blanchot's 'humanism' as an example of this historical and political shift. Yet Blanchot's thinking is prior to or more original than a biopolitics. Following Levinas, Blanchot's humanism would suggest a way of suspending the impasse of the biopolitical thesis. In thinking the problem of form, what is at issue is a new potentialization, a potentialization that both comprehends its historical moment, and at same time exceeds it, is able, with significant critical insight, with a language of rights and an appeal to justice, to invent something new. A new humanism without the figure of the human assuming any given form. The potential to assume form – taking over one's own possibility – would describe a circle or repetition that fatefully does not

coincide with itself, and for the singular reason that form is not originary. There is no question or problem of form that is not preceded and made possible by repetition. Naming the repetition has only 'always already' repeated the repetition.¹³ It is only at this point of apparent impossibility that the radical question of 'something new' becomes a responsibility and a task of the work (literary work, political work). A responsibility for the new event breaks with the form of history itself.

The exigency to rethink 'humanism,' or a 'new kind of we,' or a 'new ethics,' remains an act of responsibility, one that situates all the forms of belonging and community, where 'belonging' and 'community,' the 'we,' are themselves already the finite forms of the relation of the one to the other. Our ability or power to be responsible is not an originary decision, but one that, if to take place, must be taken over, in the mode of a repetition. The 'humanist cry' is not itself, therefore, a 'necessary' condition, or the only possible mode, of a relation to alterity. Yet even the joy of anonymity in Blanchot is conditioned by the place of trauma or affliction. Nothing here is originary: there is only the form of becoming a problem for ourselves, which, in circling around itself, fails to decide upon a future. If it can be said that we ourselves are the 'nothing' and the no-one else to which a common humanity must address its aspiration for a common demand, perhaps then another contour of responsibility emerges: one that does not begin with what humanity is, or what humanity has been reduced to – though without forgetting this – but with what it *ought to be*, how humanity can be reimagined and reinvented beyond the forms of law and violence, which is to say, beyond or without the form of form. This in turn calls for another thinking of facticity, of the being-potential of human being. Certainly Agamben's work responds to this exigency: but even here, potentiality must not be thought of as the unfolding of what is already present, *in potentia*, such that nothing new can take place (or that a potentiality that prohibits any figure of identity becomes, in turn, a new law-preserving violence, the over-confidence that 'alterity' and difference will offer a new politics of non-violence). How we think 'potentiality' – even and especially the concept's formal and logical structure – is already situated within a certain horizon of meaning. Whatever meaning can be attributed to human being must be thought, first of all, in terms of being a possible way of being. Yet more is needed here. If modern humanism is organized around the figure of the intolerable, and if this figure is nothing other and nothing besides than the *inhuman*, then the inhuman is we ourselves, the potentiality of our own violence. And what this means, finally, is that there can be no meaningful 'ethics' or a new humanism that refuses to attend to the disaster of man-made mass-death. There can be no responsible thinking of a 'form of life' that does not address the

factical possibility of the inhuman. Yet rethinking humanism means thinking humanism beyond or without the horizon of modernity's enabling negation, and means thinking 'responsibility' beyond or without the violent solitude of a 'we' defined by our capacity for violence against each other. It would mean thinking without the inhuman as the defining limit of what is human. We could no longer rely upon the law to define the limits of humanity and its violence, and in turn, we could no longer rely upon the concept and limits of form itself. We would find ourselves thrown back upon an essential responsibility: to be the place where responsibility is at all possible, to be a self that, to paraphrase Blanchot, in recognizing an injustice recognizes an injustice committed against everyone.

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NOTES

- ¹ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988), p. 73.
- ² Kofman, *Smothered Words*, pp. 89-90, n. 62.
- ³ See, for example, the fragment on Schleiermacher: "By producing a work, I renounce the idea of my producing and formulating myself; I fulfil myself in something exterior and inscribe myself in the anonymous continuity of humanity" (*WD* 7).
- ⁴ As Blanchot writes elsewhere: "There is a limit at which the practice of any art becomes an affront to the affliction" (*WD* 83). Of course, it is also possible to reverse this proposition: art that is itself afflicted and that afflicts its addressee (whoever that may be), presents the agon of its own limit. Art and literature affirm their 'right' to death without regard to 'the ethical' or the 'the political.' Our own 'affliction' calls upon art to exceed all the forms of expression, to say something as yet unsaid, whatever the cost.
- ⁵ It would remain questionable to assert that literature expresses a more significant responsibility, or greater insight into the lawless demand of inspiration. With attention to the limits of genre, Blanchot's thinking is not opposed to the phenomenological or ontological question, but is another space or site where this question may find itself. Yet Blanchot is not simply part of a philosophical tradition, a familiar history. The ontological question posed to literature – the meaning or the being of the literary text – cannot be thought *without* a literary writing within which this question is located.
- ⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy", *Of God that Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 73.
- ⁷ Maurice Blanchot, "Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him", trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and

Brain Masumi, *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), p. 63.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 268-7.

⁹ Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Illinois: Malboro Press, 1992), p. 7.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 293.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 302.

¹² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 297.

¹³ "A nonreligious repetition, neither mournful nor nostalgic, a return not desired. Wouldn't the disaster be, then, the repetition – the affirmation – of the singularity of the extreme?" (*WD* 5).