

Introduction

The Fall of Innocence

Hence, innocence amounts to non-action, like the being of a stone, not even that of a child.

—Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 270–71

Everything is innocence; and knowledge is the path to insight to this innocence.

—Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 58

Innocence: a sharp putting into question.

—Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, 125

Innocence is a dangerous topic. Whereas it could be reduced to a mere myth (located in an original paradise where it refers to ontological qualities), or to a mere negative determination (as when, in a juridical context, the innocent is the one who was not involved), there are fugacious but serious reasons to think that innocence has a form of existence that qualifies the human condition. In the first two cases, innocence is innocuous because it is nonexistent. It is either a myth¹ or a juridical determination that speaks of a *non-lieu* (the noninvolvement in a determined crime or offense). In these two cases, innocence makes sense negatively: it means the absence of guilt or of propension to guilty actions. In a way, the negativity of innocence is fundamental to the Western and, more precisely, Judeo-Christian conception of the subject. Any history of the autonomous subject would show that the

birth of the subject requires the loss of innocence. An autonomous and responsible subject is necessarily a subject that can be held accountable for its actions, that knows the rules of society, and that has been educated to the difference between good and evil, or between right and wrong. The myth of the loss of innocence is indeed the basis of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as of our juridical categories, but also of our understanding of the subject as historical. Indeed, innocent subjects are not in a condition to be held responsible for their actions. Moreover, they have no proper history precisely because they have not suffered loss. By contrast, the loss of innocence entails that subjects are able to acknowledge themselves as potentially guilty and hence as responsible. In addition, it is this loss that constitutes subjects as ex-sistent; namely, as opened individuals who are not immanent to an essence. In this sense, the loss of innocence is the beginning of history. Understood in this way, the myth of the loss of innocence is a structuring myth that explains the capacity to give an account of one's actions. It constitutes the structure of subjectivity in general. The myth of the loss of innocence puts at stake a lack that structures subjectivity and that defines the individual as existent, and therefore as historical.

Our point of departure, however, is that innocence is not a mere lack: a mere myth or a mere negative determination. Considered as a simple myth, innocence might have a structural dimension that permits the understanding of our ethical and juridical categories, but its understanding is only negative. The content of innocence remains outside of language, as something out of reach that has no more reality than a dream. By contrast, literature provides a multiplicity of innocent characters who show that innocence has a positive form of existence irreducible to ontological qualities (as if someone's nature could be qualified as innocent). In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, the "idiot" Prince Myshkin has the innocence of one who has not fully been fashioned by the rules of society. In Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* (*L'homme qui rit*, 2013), Dea and Gwynplaine, the blind girl and the disfigured boy, are beyond the social conventions that would qualify the boy as monstrous and the girl as disabled. The blindness of the former and the artificial face of the latter, carved by a permanent laugh, render them innocent of the common way of seeing and of laughing, and of the violence both senses might entail when used conventionally. In these cases, *innocence is not a lack but a surplus*. It coincides with a certain eccentricity or even idiocy; with a certain particularity that does not conform to a determined way of being.

In a different way, there are also works of literature that focus on characters whose innocence is due less to their particularities than to their

incapacity to judge. Melville's eponymous *Billy Budd* is a sailor whose actions, however criminal, are not intentionally so. By the same token, Meursault, the apparently cold character of Camus's *The Stranger* who remains without feelings on the day of his mother's funeral, has the same empty attitude on the day he faces trial for manslaughter. Interestingly, Meursault is not innocent because he has not committed the crime, but because he is structured in such a way that he seems to accept his actions without guilt. It is as if, albeit knowing the rules of society, he does not acknowledge the moral frame in which our actions make sense. Here, innocence could still be a form of ignorance. However, this ignorance is not a mere negativity that could be supplemented by knowledge. On the contrary, Meursault's ignorance does not result from a lack of knowledge, but takes place within it. It is in fact as if knowledge makes him indifferent, and hence, rather than making him different, makes him like any other person. Like Sorge, Blanchot's main character in *The Most High*, Meursault is not a "particular man"; he could be "anybody" (Blanchot 1996, 1). Meursault's apparent absence of feelings not only prevents him from being someone, a singular individual who has the capacity to account for his actions, but it also makes him anonymous, like anyone, giving birth to a sort of horizontal universality, as if Meursault's apathy were common because it is improper and hence irreducible. It is in fact as though his apparent apathy were like an atmosphere rather than an individual propriety, the strangeness of an epoch rather than a particular problem. *In this context*, thought of as a universal condition, *innocence is less (negatively) the ignorance of evil than evil as an irreducible condition of ignorance (and of indifference)*.

In all these cases and in very different ways, innocence stands not as a purity of the heart but as a sort of strangeness of the feelings. Rather than referring to a lost past, it questions social conventions to the point of jeopardizing the normative frames that determine human values and actions, their moral beliefs. It hence entails a change of perspective. However, in the case of Camus's *The Stranger*, innocence is not confined to the strangeness of a character; it speaks to the strangeness of social configurations in general. Unlike "the idiot" who is one singular man, Camus's "stranger" refers to a general condition of humanity. Here the innocent is not the idiot, the one who cannot overcome its particularity, but the normal, the one who is fully conformed to a frame and who hence cannot question their actions. While the idiot's innocence suspends judgment, the innocence of the stranger amounts to an impossibility of questioning in general. Like Arendt's (2006) analysis of Eichmann's case as embodying the banality of

evil, Camus's "stranger" cannot become aware of his crime because he cannot question his actions in general. Such is the danger, or at least one of them, of innocence. In a world where systems have taken hold of everything, in which subjects have overcome their particularities in the name of universal motivations, individuals are no longer subjects but anonymous characters who function without judging. This innocence is neither a loss nor a myth in a remote and inaccessible past. On the contrary, it qualifies the human condition in general. Despite the foundation of the autonomous subject, despite the ideas of freedom and history at the core of Western thought, the freedom and historicity of the human condition might be only apparent.² In line with the main discoveries of structuralism, Camus's description of Meursault brings to light, as Levinas would say, that subjects are *acted* rather than actors: "Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command unbeknown to themselves" (Levinas 1991, 21). In this condition, the foundations of the subject's responsibility and awareness are not guaranteed. The maturity of a subject's awareness, the "truthfulness" of its knowledge, are insufficient conditions for the assumption of any responsibility. It is why innocence can be considered as one of the issues of our contemporary world. Neither modernity nor postmodernity has managed to give birth to a subject that would not be trapped in innocence. Although defined by its autonomy and awareness, the subject remains mute and stuck in the incapacity to respond for its own actions. As Günther Anders says about the apocalyptic dimension of technique, what stands today as the end of the world is not the possibility of destruction but the fact that one might destroy the world in perfect innocence, as being a mere agent of the system. What Anders calls the "law of innocence" is the fact that we can enact our own destruction without being accountable for it. Paradoxically, technique—and hence science and knowledge—make humans all the more unable to imagine the consequences of their actions. This is why Anders writes: "If there is something that can symbolize the evil nature of our situation, it is this innocence" (Anders 2006, 53). Understood in this way, innocence is the condition of a humanity that can no longer be judged. It makes impossible all justice and all freedom.



Innocence is a dangerous issue for a least two reasons, one moral and the other epochal.

First, innocence is not innocuous. On the contrary, precisely because innocence is associated with a form of unawareness, the innocent can mix with the worst crimes. The innocent ignores evil, unknowingly. Yet, this ignorance can be evil precisely in its radical form. This is the case of the eponymous character of Fritz Lang's movie *M*, where an apparently innocent man, ignorant of Good and Evil, cannot avoid raping and killing children. In this movie, streamed a few years before World War II—namely, before the legitimization of radical evil—what is interesting is that *M* is hunted by the officers of the law and also by the outlaws whose criminal activity is disturbed by this apparently innocent monster. At the end of the movie, *M* is judged by the criminals in an improvised trial before being arrested by officers of the law and in this way is “saved” by the police in order to have a supposedly legitimate trial. This scene reveals that legality and illegality go together, whereas innocence questions all juridical systems. As Blanchot (1992, 125) writes, where there is innocence, there is “a sharp putting into question.” When evil is merged with innocence, we don't exactly know how to judge it.

Second, innocence cannot be overcome. Of course, thought in mythical terms as the quality of a pure heart, innocence is necessarily lost at the moment in which one becomes a subject of knowledge, or a subject of law. As soon as one becomes a subject through the use of reason and in the relation to others, as soon as one enters the sphere of language, which is also the realm of law,³ one necessarily loses innocence. In this sense, innocence is always already lost. As previously stated, the loss of innocence is the beginning of the subject. For this reason, as Hegel believes, innocence does not properly exist: only a stone is innocent. But a stone is not self-aware. Hence, innocence is beyond the realm of awareness. It is not, or it is nothing.⁴ Our only understanding of innocence is a myth. However, if innocence is not merely a lack of knowledge but can be its correlative, if, as Meursault's case shows, innocence is *rather an impossibility of being aware through knowledge than a proper lack of knowledge*, if it is a form of indifference that we acquire in the moment in which all particularities are overcome and one becomes anybody instead of someone, then *innocence is not lost by knowledge but rather produced by it*. It cannot be overcome by the birth of consciousness because it is its very shadow. In these figure-cases, innocence speaks of a human condition that abounds in crime without being able to account for it. *Innocence is the problem of responsibility in an area in which there are no subjects to account for their actions*. Innocence is

dangerous in that it not only describes a stage of humanity that doesn't need to account for itself (this corresponds to innocence understood in mythical terms as the quality of a pure heart); it also stages humanity's condition as *unable* to account for itself (this corresponds to innocence understood as the shadow of awareness). As what cannot be overcome, innocence stages a subject that, albeit self-aware or at least able to reason and to acknowledge law, remains ignorant or indifferent to evil. In this configuration, it is not innocence that is outside of history (in that it would precede its birth). It is history that progressively relates to innocence as a form of ahistoricity that is inherent to it and that reveals evil as irreducible.

Albeit dangerous, innocence is promising. As stated, it gives birth to changes of perspectives than can open to new horizons and hence to new historical possibilities. In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, for example, Prince Myshkin's innocence is not a limitation from a perspective that remains particular. The idiot's innocence (as well as innocence's idiocy) implies a suspension of judgment in general that questions individuals despite themselves and that can bring about radical and unpredictable transformations. The idiot's presence and persistent idiocy not only manage to force people out of their ways and to question their beliefs, but also to transform the social dynamics. It thus has a political impact (even if imperceptible and bound to disappear). In this sense, innocence is the necessary moment for any change in perspectives (in the Nietzschean sense) and hence of revolutionary situations. Indeed, innocence is impossible *as such* (as a moral quality based on an ontological propriety: the "pure heart"), as the propriety of a posited or of a self-aware subject. Yet, awareness would be trapped in itself if it couldn't be questioned, if it couldn't go through changes of perspectives, if it couldn't be detached from the horizon that guides it. For this reason, although there is no innocence that is aware of itself,⁵ innocence is somehow a necessary condition of awareness.

Just as innocence is required for a change of perspectives, there would be no revolutions in general (e.g., political, moral, epistemological) without this instance of suspension, this positive suspension of knowledge. A revolution is such only if it is bound to the unknown. A revolution that would already know its results would in fact not be a revolution; namely, a radical transformation (of the material conditions of production of the world as well as of humanity). Hence, albeit innocence in its mythical acceptance is definitely ahistoric, history somehow requires innocence to be such. The desire for revolution can only happen as an innocent desire. In order to desire revolution, one has to ignore the object of its desire. By the same

token, although innocence is contrary to morality (since morality requires a subjection to law and its acknowledgment), there would be no ethics without innocence. Without this instance of suspension of any secure values and of any determined knowledge, there would be no decisions, no singular affirmations, and, in this sense, no free judgment. As Derrida recalls in *The Gift of Death*, in order to be such, a decision cannot be a mere application of knowledge,⁶ but rather happens as a rupture of the order of knowledge. It henceforth requires an instance of suspension. In the same way, a judgment is not a mere application of a rule, but its renewal. And in the wake of Kant, who has largely inspired Arendt's political thought, we can say that a judgment does not merely presuppose its criteria:⁷ it produces its rule. Hence, although innocence (non-knowledge) is dangerously amoral, it is the condition of possibility of any creation of values, of decisions, of singular productions, and hence of newness, of history, of freedom. For these reasons, while it is irreducible to a knowledge, innocence has a transcendental⁸ dimension. It is constitutive, but it cannot be constituted.



Innocence is indeed double-edged. It is either stuck in the ahistoricity of its myth, or it is the condition of any true radical change. It coincides with the impossibility of morality, but it is also a condition of possibility of ethics. It is indeed the negative of any awareness, or it is its failure; yet, it is also the condition of possibility of any free sight, perspective, and choice. This double-edged dimension makes of innocence an intriguing subject but also a difficult one since its meaning cannot be fixed once and for all. Innocence might never be what it seems to be and might not be where it seems to be located. Whereas innocence is a *sinuous* topic (that might never *be* what it seemed to be), when it is thought *without this sinuosity*—that is to say, as if innocence could *be* and could be put at stake as an objectifiable element—it becomes indeed very problematic. Innocence escapes subjectivity and puts it into question. When the subject becomes immanent to innocence, the latter can become an unquestionable monster. Therefore, while innocence has a transcendental dimension (it is the condition of possibility of revolution, of newness in history), can we be innocent of innocence? Can we innocently desire innocence, ignoring its dangers?

There are at least two ways of thinking about innocence politically that merit critical reflection. In some figure-cases, as in revolutionary projects inspired by Marx's idea of revolution, innocence is an unknown

projected above knowledge.⁹ Indeed, although Marx's idea of revolution has a scientific and a dialectical base, it is directed toward the unknown.¹⁰ In this sense, albeit not based on faith, Marx's idea of revolution does have a Judeo-Christian inspiration: it aspires, if not to a redeemed humanity, at least to its complete renewal (which is a form of redemption).¹¹ But can this model still be desired *innocently*? Thought as the hope of a renewed humanity, revolution is still based on a dialectical model that separates knowledge and the unknown. Indeed, there is something romantic but also blindly violent in the innocence of revolution. On the one hand, as we know, these dialectical models end up justifying violence in the name of a Goodness that would transcend it. On the other hand, and correlatively, this idea of revolution seems to look for a purified humanity, as if humanity could and should start again, freeing itself not only from the possibility of evil, but also from the *memory of evil* and from its own history. Even while scientific, Marx's idea of revolution aims at redeeming humanity from its fallen condition, which is to say its alienation. Whereas in the first case we risk grounding revolution on a moral base rather than on a political one, in the second case, a humanity purified of its own memory of evil risks falling again into a form of innocence that is a mere unawareness of evil. Hence, albeit moral, this idea of revolution encloses the possibility of a complacency into irresponsibility.

In other figure-cases, innocence is claimed politically not as the necessity to save humanity from its fallen condition or from the different forms of its alienation, but rather to save the world from humans or, better said, from the anthropocentric dimension of politics. This is, for instance, the case of vitalistic thought where the ground of political claims is life and not the human being in common. In a historical moment in which the condition of possibility of life is put into question by climate change, life becomes evident (and crucial) as a new political objective. The latter can take the form of an affirmation of life's agonistic dimension, as in Esposito's (2008) description of a "positive biopolitics," or of a necessity to conserve life as in ecological claims that aim at saving the world from its end. These two claims, albeit different or even opposite (one is affirmative, the other is conservative), insist upon the necessity to overcome the human being for the sake of an innocence of life.¹² They both see in life a *value* that is affirmed for itself and the possibility to *overcome* the human and its endemic violence or forms of alienation and dominations.

Now, do these thoughts not again enact a redemptive scenario? The idea of a purity of life is indeed at the heart of the Christian idea of grace

as that which saves from death. Although they claim to overcome the anthropocentric aspect of the Judeo-Christian legacy, these claims operate on the basis of a similar redemptive pattern. Inspired sometimes by a quick reading of Nietzsche's idea of life and of a "becoming innocent" (Nietzsche 1996, 59), these "positive biopolitics" that aim at elaborating a post-human politics stage a redemption from the Judeo-Christian background of Western history and from civilization in general. Moreover—and this is what is problematic—these redemptive thoughts entail new forms of alienation. Instead of affirming life for human purposes, humans should be serving life—as if life were a new God. Indeed, these postures posit life as pure, as if it were not a theoretical construction prompted to become an ideology. Now, as Heidegger (1991) has pointed out very clearly in his *Nietzsche*, rather than overcoming metaphysics, these vitalistic thoughts install new ones. They posit life as a truth above human artifice, as a Goodness beyond the human's essential involvement with evil. These "positive biopolitics" see in life an innocence that should be claimed against humanity's history of alienation. In all these cases, innocence is no longer sinuous. Its double-edged dimension disappears behind an ontology of life where innocence is posited as a metaphysical truth that could serve ideological ends.



Innocence is a key issue in Blanchot's writings. Although this notion is not recurrent and only rarely mentioned, Blanchot's thought is grounded in innocence since it stems from the impossibility of the subject. His point of departure is not a fall that makes possible the subject and that structures it into guiltiness, but rather a *fall from the condition of the subject* and that questions not only its autonomy but also its unicity. His thought assumes that what makes possible the subject—its condition of possibility—is also what implies its collapse. The condition of possibility of the subject is therefore, at the same time, its "incondition."¹³ Assuming Hegel's idea that the subject is not substantial but that it is the fruit of a process, Blanchot thinks the subject is grounded on negativity; namely, on a process by which he is revealed to himself through the negation of its natural condition, a negation that is also the revelation of its spiritual content. Consequently, like Hegel, Blanchot thinks the subject is not given as a natural entity but shapes itself through experience. However, for Blanchot, negativity (or experience) is double-edged. Whereas negativity does shape the world and the humans into cultural forms, it is also faced with the fact that humanity,

in the ultimate instance, is not grounded. For Blanchot, the negative does not have a spiritual content. As he writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “If spirit is always active, then patience is already nonspirit” (Blanchot 1995b, 40). The negative is rather the void that haunts any truth, any experience, as well as the human condition. Hence, in the process that gives it its shape, the subject undergoes its own void. The condition of possibility of the subject is also its condition of impossibility, its “incondition.” The negative works (*œuvre*) and unworks (*désœuvre*). Subjects are the fruits of their works, of their experiences, and of their actions in the world. However, they are also confronted by an absence of meaning, by a void that dwells in these very works; by a form of unworking or inoperativity (*désœurement*) that threatens the subject’s very condition of possibility. Therefore, what allows the subject to be self-aware and thus free is also what exposes it to what cannot be negated or overcome. It is what exposes it to the very void that dwells within it. What allows the subject to be at home, in the cultural forms it produces, is also what exposes it to a foreignness that is its own impossibility of being. It is what prevents it from being within itself as an autonomous subject, and, in consequence, to be still, to take place. It is hence what exposes the subject to what Blanchot calls the Outside (*le Dehors*); namely, not what is opposed to the interior, but what prevents any possible interiority, any possibility of being at home. In its ultimate instance, negativity leads to an irreducible wandering (*errance*) in which the subject is no longer an interiorized “I,” master of itself. Destituted of the possibility of an interiority in which it feels at home, the subject is made anonymous, impersonal. In Blanchot, it is as in Freud, the unconscious that is foreign to consciousness in a duality that can eventually be overcome or at least be reflected on through analysis. Rather, foreignness dwells in consciousness, in the individuated subject: In the “I” dwells an “it” (*il*) that disarms the very possibility of the subject. In the determined individual dwells the anonymous. In the constituted human dwells what is no longer human. As *constituted*, the subject suffers its own loss. Blanchot’s subject undergoes a loss of which it is innocent in that there is precisely no self-founded subject to account for it. Here, consequently, it is not innocence that is lost in order to acquire consciousness, as when Blanchot writes that there is a “loss of innocence that is itself innocent” (1992, 104). It is, on the contrary, consciousness that undergoes its own loss, a loss that is surely “itself innocent” since there is no subject to account for it.

It is very important to highlight that in Blanchot the subject is neither overcome nor destroyed, but doubled or confronted by the shadow of its

loss. By contrast, considering that Blanchot merely assumes the “death of the subject” could lead to a merely dialectical understanding of Blanchot, where the subject is simply overcome by its negativity. However, in Blanchot, the void is the void of the subject, and there is no void without the subject’s constitution. This has an important consequence since it means that instead of progressing toward maturity or self-comprehension, the subject faces his own enigma. He faces what he loses in order to *be* a subject. In this sense, this void that dwells in the subject and that puts it radically into question, as the ordeal of its historical condition, allows for the thinking that innocence is not an original condition from which one falls or departs, but that *innocence is a fall and even an endless fall*. If consciousness contains a void that leads to wandering rather than to a fully determined action, then one is doomed to innocence as the ordeal of the impossibility of awareness. Innocence is the void that haunts the subject. It is not what precedes the subject but what is concomitant to its beginning and that becomes more and more haunting during the process of awareness’s history. Because it is concomitant with the unfolding of consciousness, innocence would be the destiny of the subject’s history.¹⁴ It is a fall that doubles the history of its mastery. The fall of innocence is history’s inherent destiny and the reversal of any awareness (and of any *whereness*).¹⁵ Rather than the entry into history, innocence is its fate. Better said: it is the fate inherent to our historical condition. But if innocence is an incondition rather than an original state, if innocence is a fall that entails the collapse of the subject’s autonomy and not what the subject negates in order to become such; if, moreover, innocence is a fate that doubles the subject’s history rather than an original condition from which the subject departs in order to constitute itself as historical, then is humanity trapped in irresponsibility and ahistoricity? Does the fact that innocence is before (in front of) the human rather than behind it mean that humanity is bound to the silence and immobility of innocence?



This nesting between the topics of innocence and the fall merits here a parenthesis on questions of the fall, innocence, and history such as elaborated in the Christian tradition and its philosophical legacy.

The topic of the fall is in fact a consequence of a Christian reading of *Genesis*. Now, it is interesting to observe that in a Christian perspective, the fall does not mean a declining movement from a spiritual life to a material one, such as described, for instance, in Plato’s account of the

relation between soul and body, where the body is a mere weight or tomb. On the contrary, Adam, the first man, or the first human being, is made of mud. Hence, the fall cannot relate to the mere materiality of the flesh. Rather, in a Christian reading of *Genesis*, the fall coincides with a relation to finitude and hence with a new experience of the flesh. More precisely, it coincides with an experience of the materiality of the body *as flesh*; namely, as vulnerable, as constituted by the possibility of temptation. God's warning in paradise is that if Adam, the first man, eats the prohibited fruit, he will die. As we read in the Douay Rheims Bible:

And he commanded him, saying: Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death. (Genesis 2:16–17)

It's worth noting that this warning doesn't mean that after eating the prohibited fruit, Adam will *be dead*, once and for all deprived of life. As emphasized by Augustine in *The City of God*, if Adam eats the prohibited fruit, he will not be dead, he will "die the death" (Augustine 1952, 304). This means that life will no longer feel its plenitude by union to the creation but that it will be crossed by death. Whereas the tree of life feeds Adam and Eve and maintains their connection to God's creation in its wholeness, the tree of knowledge disconnects life from the condition that grants this plenitude. Hence, *the fall means entering the time of death*; it means that life is no longer nourished. It means that life experiences itself as precarious. In this sense, to fall into disgrace means to experience life as separated from what connects it to the creation: it coincides with an exposition to life's fragility. Indeed, after eating the prohibited fruit, Adam's and Eve's eyes become opened to their nakedness (Genesis 3:7). They experience themselves as exposed, as finite. They are not only severed from the tree of life, but also exposed to the uncertainty of human will. To fall into disgrace is to experience the shivering of the flesh and of life's uncertainty. The tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil doesn't provide a theoretic knowledge but an existential one. It entails the shivering of the flesh that experiences finitude and is hence vulnerable. In this way, to fall entails an opening rather than a mere decline or a physical attraction toward the earth, as if the body were a dead weight. Indeed, in a Christian perspective, the fall is not due to the weight of the body but to a way of experiencing existence—the will and the way it dwells in the flesh—as finite. In this sense, Christianity is not

the rejection of the flesh but its adventure, its adventure as fragile, or—said in Hegelian terms—its adventure as spiritual.¹⁶

Both Hegel and Blanchot could be two interpreters of this idea that the fall coincides with the entering of death into life. On the one hand, Hegel is close to the Christian idea that the fall is the entering of death into the world. For Hegel, death is the negativity that allows all becoming. If in paradise Adam and Eve are good in the sense that they can't be tempted, by the fall they can *become good*. By the same token, if paradise is the time of eternity, of a life that is continually nourished, by death life can *become immortal*, thus overcoming its own negativity, its finitude. Hence, the fall in Hegel is indeed a necessary condition for the human being's spiritual life. As Hegel says in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: "It is said that human beings in Paradise and without sin would be immortal; they would be able to live forever. . . . On the other hand, however, it is also said that human beings will become immortal for the first time when they have eaten of the tree of life" (Hegel 2007b, 303). There is an immortality that can only be talked about as mythical (as when Hegel says "it is said") and another one that is the very work of knowledge and that hence coincides with the human's spiritual condition. This one, according to Hegel, can be factually described: "The fact of the matter is that humanity is immortal only through cognitive knowledge; for only in the activity of thinking is its soul pure and free rather than mortal and animal like" (304). Indeed, for Hegel the only true immortality is the one granted by the fall and by the history it makes possible, for this immortality is spiritual and not only animal. It is given to knowledge and as its own history.

On the other hand, Blanchot also shares this Christian pattern that the fall is concomitant to the introduction of death into life. *The Step Not Beyond* could in fact be a commentary of the thirtieth book of Saint Augustine's *The City of God*. As Blanchot says in *The Step Not Beyond*, and which Augustine beautifully explicates as a commentary on *Genesis*, death is not a mere end; it is concomitant to life. In Derrida's words, the fall coincides with a contamination that makes impossible the separation of life from death.¹⁷

This idea has numerous premises and consequences.

First, death is not merely exterior to life as an outside element. As Blanchot reiterates, citing a proverb (namely, words that seem to carry a truth without origin) rather than its author (who is supposed to give an origin), "as soon as one begins to live, he is old enough to die" (Blanchot 1992, 95). A "proverb" Augustine could easily be referencing in *The City of God*: "Thus, man is never truly 'in life' from the moment that he inhabits

this dying rather than living body” (311). However, what matters to both Blanchot and Augustine is that if life is always already marked by death, then we seem to live the dying rather than a life. We dwell in a time out of time, rather than a linear chronology; in Blanchot’s words: “Dying—dying in the cold dissolution of the Outside: *always outside oneself as outside of life*” (97, my emphasis).

Second, because we seem to inhabit “the dying” rather than life, death cannot be localized. On this point, Augustine’s remark could certainly have inspired Blanchot in *The Step Not Beyond* when the latter speaks about the “unforseeability of death” (96): “For if a man is not ‘in death’ but is ‘after dying’ the moment that all life has disappeared, when can we ever say that a man is dead while he is dying?” (96). Indeed, if when death occurs, life has already disappeared—moreover, if we never really inhabit life but the “dying”—then death cannot be localized ontologically. But if death cannot be localized, then how is it possible to unify the different moments of time? Surprisingly, although Augustine hopes for redemption, for both authors death exists only as a gap that prevents any unification of time. In Augustine’s words: “thus in the course of time we look for the present but cannot find it; for the passage from the future to the past is without space” (313); in Blanchot’s words: “you die and yet you do not die and yet: thus, in a time without present, the dying that defers speaks to you” (107). In other words: death does not provide a directionality for time, but instead dislocates it. Now, because in Augustine the fall refers to an originary condition of innocence, there is a possible redemption, and hence a directionality to time. However, because in Blanchot the fall is not preceded by innocence, but rather coincides with it, there is no hope for a second Goodness, no hope for salvation, or to become a “second Adam.”

If death is concomitant to the fall, and if death coincides with a dislocation of time, then the fall cannot signify the mere entry in a teleological conception of time. Indeed, the fall is neither a mere declining (from the soul to the body) nor a mere elevation (from an animal one to a spiritual one). Whereas *The Step Not Beyond* could be a commentary on the magnificent pages Augustine dedicates to the question of death in book thirteen of *The City of God*, Blanchot, as we have often emphasized—and this will differentiate Blanchot from both Augustine and Hegel—does not consider the fall as secondary regarding innocence, but rather as a fall of innocence. While for Hegel the fall, as being the introduction of death into life (in Augustine’s case) and of negativity into the world (in Hegel’s case) is the condition of possibility of time and of history, for Blanchot death

has always already contaminated life and dislocated any possible unification of time. This preoriginary contamination entails that the negative (death) cannot be overcome. In this way, instead of giving birth to time, the fall of innocence attracts time *out* of time. More precisely, whereas the fall in Hegel entails the work of the negative, the overcoming of a negative condition, in Blanchot the negative is twofold: it works and unworks. It allows the constitution of time and at the same time pulls it toward the void of its foundation. Hence, in Blanchot, by virtue of the constitutive dimension of the fall, which constitutes time, there would also be a “fall of the time,” precisely because of the void that constitutes it. As one reads in *The Step Not Beyond*: “there where time would fall, fragile fall, according to this ‘outside of time in time’” (Blanchot 1992, 1). In brief, in Hegel and Augustine the fall has a teleological and constitutive dimension. It constitutes the human being into death and hence projects it toward its possible redemption. If the fall is a disgrace by which the human being knows its own propension to evil, by the fall the human being has to *become* good, which is now its responsibility. However, in Blanchot, because the negative is twofold, the fall at once makes possible and impossible the subject as well as history; the fall constitutes time but also attracts it out of time. In a way, the negativity of the fall, the twofold dimension of the negative or of death, is drawn toward innocence, its joyful cry, or its garden:

All words are adult. Only the space in which they reverberate—a space infinitely empty, like a garden where, even after the children have disappeared, their joyful cries continue to be heard—leads them back toward the perpetual death in which they seem to keep being born. (Blanchot 1992, 19)

Indeed, in Blanchot innocence is a dangerous topic that seems to drive in a mute and atemporal paradise. Our issue should be addressed again: if innocence is not merely surpassed, but threatens the subject and its very temporality, doesn't this fall of innocence entail the destruction of any ethics? Where does Blanchot's inverted Christianity lead?



We can now return to the ethical issues addressed beforehand. Blanchot's important fragments on the question of responsibility in *The Writing of the Disaster*, as well as his correlative and explicit dialogue with Levinas's

thought in this particular context, might suggest that Blanchot's thought of the subject amounts to the collapse of any ethics. First, because for Blanchot the "I" contains the specter of the anonymous, responsibility cannot be grounded on subjectivity or unicity, as is the case for Levinas. Hence, Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "The use of the word 'subjectivity' is as enigmatic as the use of the word 'responsibility'—and more debatable" (27). Second, Blanchot's radicalization of Hegel's idea of negativity does not open to the thinking of a subject constituted by the Other, as is the case in Levinas's thought. Rather, the subject's "own" (or rather improper) otherness might lead to an indifference toward the others and even toward the Other. Whereas for Levinas, as Blanchot reads him, "It is the Other who exposes me to 'unity,' causing me to believe in an irreplaceable singularity, for I feel I cannot fail him," for Blanchot, and precisely because of the radicality of this exposition, "I'm not indispensable; in me, anyone at all is called by the other" (13). This is why for Blanchot I am the "un-unique, always the substitute" (13). The void that dwells in the subject constitutes indeed a threat to any possible ethics. As we read in *The Writing of the Disaster*:

If responsibility is such that it disengages the me from me, the singular from the individual, the subjective from the subject, unawareness from consciousness and the unconscious, the better to expose me to the nameless passivity, and if responsibility achieves this to such a degree that it is through passivity alone that I can answer to the Infinite demand, then I can certainly call the response responsibility, but only abusively, naming it by its contrary, knowing all along that to acknowledge responsibility for God is only a metaphorical means of annulling responsibility (the burden that weighs upon one as the obligation to assume it), just as, once declared responsible for dying (for all dying), I can no longer appeal to any ethics, any experience, any practice whatever—save that of some counter-living, which is to say an un-practice, or (perhaps) a word of writing. (26)

For Blanchot, instead of constituting the subjectivity of the subject, its unicity, the exposition to the Other exposes one to the very vacuum that constitutes the subject and hence to its impersonal dimension. Whereas for Levinas responsibility is not grounded on the autonomy of the subject but on the way the encounter with the Other provokes its unicity, Blanchot

suggests that the encounter with the Other happens as an encounter with the Outside in which the subject can no longer be an “I,” or can be an “I” only by an abuse of language. For this reason, the focus put on the Other—as would be the invocation of God—only attests to the fact that there is no “I” to respond and, consequently, that “I can no longer appeal to any ethics,” any secure way to ground responsibility.¹⁸

The discussion between Blanchot and Levinas on the problem of responsibility correlates to the problem of the relation between passivity and subjectivity. For Levinas, the exposure to the Other (*Autrui*) that is constitutive of responsibility is such that it makes the “I” unique because it is an exposure from which I cannot withdraw. Where I am passive, where I am powerless, I am the unique, the unsubstitutable. Passivity in Levinas is not the contrary of activity. It is a “passivity more passive than any passivity” (Levinas 1991, 14); namely, a passivity that *resists* the subject’s activity and power and that exposes it as the unique. Passivity is individuating, whereas activity abstracts the subject from the core of its unicity. By the same token, in his early writings, Levinas describes the experience of suffering as individuating.¹⁹ To suffer is the impossibility of being abstracted from oneself. It is an obligation to oneself. This is the reason why it is a moment of individuation. By contrast, for Blanchot, suffering is what empties the subject of all individuality. In suffering, the subject is no longer working. Consequently, it can no longer produce itself as a determined subject. Rather than being an individuating instance, for Blanchot, suffering makes individuality impossible.²⁰ This radicality in the experience of the passivity of suffering leads Blanchot to revoke the very idea of a fall into guiltiness as what would allow a form of individuation (only an individual can assume guilt). The subject structured by guiltiness, as is the case of the subject of the fall, the subject of the law, supposedly assumes (by an abuse of language, as Blanchot would say) a fault they haven’t committed in order to elude the weight of innocence. Adam’s well-known fault is the fault of any human being who is made a sinner by the sin of one sole man (Barth 1956). Adam’s fault gives birth to humanity *as* structured by guiltiness. The condition of the sinner is the human condition. Now, as previously stated, because the condition of the sinner is subject to law, it gives birth at once to a responsible subject as well as to a subject open to its own history, to its redemption. However, innocence is a fall that exceeds the fall into the condition of sinner (of a vulnerable flesh, or of a finite will.) Innocence *exceeds* (and not precedes) individuation and redemption through guilt:

Suffering suffers from being innocent: thus it seeks to become guilty in order to lessen. But the passivity in it eludes delinquency. Perfectly passive is suffering, safe from the thought of salvation. (Blanchot 1986, 41)

Indeed, Blanchot's understanding of the subject as dwelling in its own void constitutes a threat to all ethics as well as to a history (be it individual or collective); namely, to a salvation—or, more simply, to any possibility of a change. If innocence is the subject's impossibility, innocence promises not a becoming, but only a form a being stuck in one's own incondition. The fall of innocence that can be thought with Blanchot leads to the collapse of the philosophical subject—the subject of self-awareness, as well as of the Judeo-Christian subject—the subject opened to being rescued from the loss that constitutes it through the history of salvation.

This “disastered”²¹ ethics does not, however, mean the end of all ethics. Interestingly, while Blanchot is critical of Levinas's understanding of responsibility and of a conception of ethics and Judaism as subjection to law,²² his peculiar reading of Hegel gives birth to a new possibility to relate to ethics that proceeds also from a new understanding of Christianity and more precisely of its redemptive pattern. It is this new understanding of Christianity that defines and orients Blanchot's relation to ethics, as well as the way innocence, thought as an endless fall, opens to new ethical perspectives. In other words, while Blanchot's reading of Levinas in *The Writing of the Disaster* leads to an ethical impasse, it is Blanchot's way of reading Hegel that permits opening new perspective on ethics.

Hegel plays a central role in Blanchot, particularly in his early writings. It's the case of *Literature and the Right to Death* and *The Most High*. These two works assume Hegel's logic, but to the point at which it is made impossible. Blanchot assumes the idea that being is dialectical (and not substantial). However, since the negative is double-edged (it makes possible being, but is also its void), then the dialectic of being necessarily interrupts itself: it faces its own void that it cannot overcome. In the work of being dwells its unworking (*désœuvrement*). Its condition of possibility entails its irreducible interruption—interruption that cannot be dialecticized and hence interrupted. In other words, Blanchot's reading of Hegel opens to being's nonbeing. It exposes the unworking of the work of the negative.

In a certain way, both *Literature and the Right to Death* and *The Most High* put at stake a certain innocence, a sort of Adamic consciousness inseparable from what Blanchot calls “the last man”²³; namely, a conscious-

ness that cannot be thought in terms of self-awareness but that constitutes awareness's ordeal. Whereas Blanchot recalls that for Hegel innocence is "nonaction" (Blanchot 1995b, 40)—and, in this sense, is nothing or is not—Blanchot puts at stake innocence (in opposition to Hegel) not as being, but, reading Hegel to its ultimate consequence, as the nonbeing of being, as the unworking of the work of the negative. It is interesting to observe that when Blanchot defines, as does Hegel, innocence as "nonaction," he quotes Hegel in order to locate his thought in the impossibility that grounds it. When Blanchot writes, as if it were a quotation: "Hegel: 'Innocence alone is nonaction' (the absence of operation)" (40), not only does he imperfectly quote Hegel, but he also repeats Hegel otherwise.²⁴ For Hegel, innocence is nonaction in the sense that innocence *is not*, is nothing that can be. For Blanchot, by contrast, *innocence is being as impossible*. It is nonaction in the sense of the unworking. Hence, the quotation of Hegel's understanding of innocence occurs not within Hegel's system, but within its interruption. As Blanchot states, just before quoting Hegel: "The *Aufhebung* turns inoperable, ceases" (40).

Blanchot's thought, either through an analysis of the question of writing or through the actual experience of writing, constitutes both a deepening of Hegel's thought of the negative, and, through this new reading—and experience—of the negative, a new approach to the Christian understanding of the fall: it is a matter of freeing the fall from any idea of "salvation." More precisely, because for Blanchot innocence is not before the fall but is concomitant with it, because innocence is not mere immobility but the unworking (what fails the work of meaning, the ground of the subject, mobility), innocence is "safe from the thought of salvation." It allows no exit, nor any teleology or end. It is henceforth nothing like a safe thought.

Let's see more closely how these two texts—*Literature and the Right to Death* and *The Most High*—through their peculiar elaboration of Hegel's thought allow a new way of staging the question of innocence and, while thinking of innocence not as a past or mythical condition but as an incondition, a new way of relating to this Biblical legacy and its ethical stakes.

In *Literature and the Right to Death*, Blanchot affirms that literature aspires to saying "the presence of things before the word exists" (1995a, 228); that is to say, before Adam's gesture of naming things and making them part of his world.²⁵ In this same line, for Blanchot "literature is concerned with the reality of things, for their unknown, free and silent existence" (330). Literature is said to be their "innocence and their forbidden existence" (330). However, literature relates to this silence of things through a language

that reflects its own void of meaning and that, in such a way, becomes a meaningless thing (328). It is thus through language that a certain Adamic silence can be, if not reached, at least put at stake.²⁶ It is through history that the ahistoricity of innocence begins to haunt the subject. However, through literature, one is not made aware of innocence as if it could become an object of knowledge (innocence, by definition, escapes knowledge: one ceases to be innocent as soon as they become aware of it). Because literature relates to the void that is constitutive of language, it does not give itself as an object of consciousness. On the contrary, literature, writes Blanchot, is “my consciousness without me” (328). In *Literature and the Right to Death*, Blanchot shows implicitly how literature, because it radicalizes the dialectic of being, does not meet Hegel’s Absolute Knowledge, but precisely its failure. It doesn’t reach self-consciousness, but rather a “consciousness deprived of self” (328). It doesn’t reveal the truth of things, but rather relates to their presence “before the world exists” (328). In following Hegel’s dialectic and his dialectic of consciousness, we meet (without properly reaching it) Adam’s silence—but we meet it only through the dialectic of consciousness and following its ultimate consequence; namely, its interruption.²⁷ We meet it only as the silence of “the last man”; namely, of the human being of the “end of history”²⁸ who copes with the impossibility of this end. In this sense, *there is no original and pure innocence; there is only an impure and secondary one*. Indeed, for Blanchot innocence would rather be the unworking than, as in Hegel, mere or stable “nonaction.” Through his reading of Hegel, Blanchot gives a new account of Christianity’s perspectives on humanity, an account that is not directed toward its redemption or—to speak here rather in Hegelian terms—to its divinization through its spiritualization. Its development is, on the contrary, a way of relating to its impossible origin, to an innocence that exists only by means of a fall: of its fall or as the failure of human being.

Blanchot’s narrative *The Most High* addresses a state in which the transcendence of the law is overcome and where citizens are no longer subject to the law but rather embody it. This narrative again unfolds a Hegelian logic *to its ultimate consequence*, namely, to the point of its interruption. It combines Hegel’s conception of freedom in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* with the topic of the end of history and with the Christian topic of the overcoming of the law by love that Hegel had approached in his early writings (as in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*). For Hegel (as is the case for Paul and for Luther), the exteriority of the law is alienating. Freedom coincides with the overcoming of this exteriority and hence with