

# Introduction to *Infant Figures*

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At the heart of this volume is a meditation on two accounts of mortal exposure, two deaths of an enigmatic and haunting character. Each scene is singular in event and presentation, but each points beyond its narrated occasion (the death of a child) to questions of general import concerning the human relation to language. With the strange resonance of the “primal” or the “originary,” these two scenes from texts by Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Lacan make comparable claims on thought, compelling claims whose grounds are no less resistant to strict description than is the possibility of response. They call for a mode or modes of reflection (philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic) whose own rule and measure are always to be invented.

The response I will offer in this volume proceeds from an unfolding thought on the “origin” of language. In a form of questioning that respects the topic’s own reserve, I will attempt to describe the site from which the two scenes speak as the locus of an “infant figure,” naming with these last words an emergent figuration that attends a human subject’s birth to language. Only the second section of the volume, the central piece of its triptych, focuses thematically on such a figure. But each section moves back to its site to think the relations that enable or necessitate its birth. On each occasion, it is a question of exploring what the figural conveys of a material relation that is “before” or “otherwise than” Being and inconceivable apart from a human element that exceeds any symbolic determination. At each figural site, it is a question of following a pragmatics (of art, of writing) that seeks the limits of language.

Such an undertaking could not innocently follow the normal line of discursive inquiry or critical commentary--not once it had lost its innocence with the recognition that its topic could never constitute an *object* for research.<sup>1</sup> Nor could it be satisfied with forging in masterly fashion a theoretical neologism or chains of aporetic formulae designed to cancel their own signification and point to an “unsayable.” Even presuming it could reach such levels of sophistication, the present endeavour required a different kind of textual density. Or more accurately: this other density became inevitable once it was a matter of bearing witness--however faint--to the disruptions engaged by the forms of research (the art, the writing) that are examined in these pages. I would not hesitate to call this volume “experimental” if that term could evoke the manner in which these texts have sought a *response* to creations of a riveting insistence: a range of images by Francis Bacon, textual figures realized by Nietzsche, Blanchot and Lacan (among others, including Serge Leclair), and a set of “anonymous figures” by Salvatore Puglia.

Structures of counterplay thus gradually urged themselves upon an initial, rather modest attempt to honor in commentary and a play of graphics the haunting presence of a small group of images. If I were to try to account for these developments chronologically, I would begin by noting, first, the strangely recurrent pertinence of earlier work on the motif of cruelty in Nietzsche’s later writings, work that was not only relevant to my study of Bacon (even amusingly so), but also called upon by Lacan’s meditation on the “second death” in his seminar on ethics (a meditation that illuminates his understanding of the dream of the burning child from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*). I thus chose to “preface” this first section on Bacon with the analysis of Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*. But I

did not do so in order to provide a defining philosophical paradigm or even a tonality for the readings to follow (if the text functioned in such a manner, I would be most regretful). I was attempting, rather, to mark a horizon for what was to come and thereby clear a space of reflection. There was undoubtedly some risk in prefacing the essay on Bacon in this way; a hasty reader could conclude that I meant to promote a sexy version of the will to power under the guise of a fashionable theme and some no less fashionable pictures. I hoped, however, that by disjoining the texts as I did, a gap would open, and that *from that gap* I could evoke something of the strange force of Bacon's practice, perhaps even the material presence of what he calls, in his late, Shakespearean mode, an "essence." From a space of exposure like the one thought by Nietzsche under the name of the Dionysian, Bacon pursued a pragmatics of the image that forces us to rethink the relations between the image and the real. He worked for the sake of an event that is comparable to the one Friedrich Hölderlin saw in modern tragedy: a "forcing" of its participants *back to the earth* and into a time Hölderlin understood to be irreversible. I read the famous "presence" of Bacon's figures as a mark of that event--a mark of the fact of existence as taken in a tragic, sometimes tragi-comic apprehension of reality.

A further development in the counterplay to which I have referred marks the passage from the first section of the volume to the second. The step involved cannot be summarized in advance of the discussion, so I offer no more than a formula when I say that the fold that divides the first section is "internalized" in the second, appearing in a disruption of expository form and a fictive redoubling of the voice (a redoubling that should not be taken as a dialectical opposition--this is where the notion of a "counterplay" reaches its limit). In the briefest terms, the writing of the second section *suffers* the interruption marked in the first and unfolds from it in two periods of reflection.

This section takes its point of departure from Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, and specifically from Blanchot's assertion (inspired by readings of Serge Leclaire and D.W. Winnicott) that all human speech and psychic life are haunted by the death of a child, a being whose passing is the condition of speech, and who is therefore, of necessity, *in-fans* (without language). The dialogue pursues a speculative development of this assertion through a reading of a brief narrative, "(A Primal Scene?)," that is implicitly presented by Blanchot as the *ur-text* for his meditation on the death of the infans. I use this term "ur-text" as a form of shorthand and only to suggest that Blanchot's narrative is not taken as the possible illustration for a thesis. In *The Writing of the Disaster* itself, there is no way of determining whether the narrative responds to the psychoanalytic discussions addressed throughout the volume, or whether it is the original event of writing that led Blanchot to those discussions (and the exact meaning of each of these alternatives is already worth long consideration). It is clear, however, that the problem of accounting for the nature of its legibility and the relation to which it calls its readers is indissociable from the questions that guide the meditation here and in the second half of the dialogue (addressed to Lacan's reading of the dream of the burning child). Among these questions is the one that introduces the "fold" to which I referred: that of the possibility of responding to the opening (an opening *of* language, but prior to any speech) that occurs in the mortal exposure of that being, in each of us, that is infans.

What is the precise status of this "infans," this figural inscription whose appearance in Freud's research (as it is given to us by Lacan) marks a decisive moment for his understanding of trauma and the function of repetition in the primary processes? How do we understand the strangely motivated character of this figure that Blanchot considers necessary

to all speech and life (is it a figure?), and how do we evaluate the speculative endeavours in which it is proposed to thought? How, for example, do we assess Blanchot's statement that the fantasmatic phrase he takes from Leclaire, "a child is being killed," cannot be fully heard or even properly spoken by any conscious (or even unconscious) subject?<sup>2</sup> And what do we make of Lacan's statement in reference to something he hears in the phrase, "Father don't you see I'm burning?," his assertion "that no one can say what the death of a child is--except the father *as* father, that is to say, no conscious being"<sup>3</sup> Are these statements possible from a philosophical and theoretical point of view? Or do they illegitimately conflate orders of analysis (philosophy of language and psychoanalytic research) via metaphor or fiction, and through an infusion of pathos deriving from the normal reaction to the imagined or real death of a child?

The long dialogical meditation that unfolds in the space of these statements will offer no definitive answers. In pursuing a formal account of what I will term "the exigency of the figure" (an account of the structural necessities to which the figure answers), and in attempting to honor the *presence* of that exigency in psychic life (a presence deriving from pathos only inasmuch as the latter marks relation to a more fundamental *pathein*, an immemorial exposure that precedes any subjective affect and is indissociable from the opening to language), I will make a passage between discursive orders (including fiction) that is unjustifiable in strict theoretical terms. I will also refrain from offering anything other than "literary" evidence and even shun some of the substantial empirical findings provided by studies devoted to the traumatic impact of the actual deaths of children. I will rely on textual support no stronger than what psychoanalysts adduce for the notion of a "primal scene" and the psychic relation to what Lacan terms the real.

I will also try to suggest, however, that there exists another form of evidence for the insistence or exigency of the figure, another kind of "offering" that is indissociable from our relation to language itself, a relation that certain literary and philosophical texts (like the ones read here) take as their "object." For a problematic like the one approached in this volume, I want to argue, we must rethink both the notion of evidence and the idea of an "answering" or corresponding thought of that evidence. We must rethink these notions *from* an experience with language that escapes any conceptual or descriptive grasp (which is why material from the extensive body of clinical studies devoted to the psychic meaning of the death of children will never suffice for the questions raised here).

It will be clear that I cannot provide in this introduction a justification for the shift in method to which I am pointing. But to provide a hint of what I am trying to convey here about my topic and the question of language itself, I would like to turn briefly to a passage from Primo Levi's *Survival at Auschwitz*, a passage that could well be added to the "dossier" treated in the dialogue inasmuch as it evokes an experience of the limits of language and something intimately related to what I have termed the death of the infans. I will not quell anxieties concerning the legitimacy of my enterprise by citing this text (no quantity of "literary evidence" will suffice in this respect--on the contrary...), but I may succeed in communicating part of what I am seeking in pausing over it, and for this reason I will cite at length.

The passage to which I refer comes early in *Survival at Auschwitz*. It recounts a dream that is recognized by Levi's friend and fellow prisoner, "Alberto," as one of his own, and as "the dream of many others, perhaps everyone." It is a dream concerning the impossibility of sharing the very experience of the camp that Levi is in the process of narrating:

*This is my sister here, with some unidentifiable friend and many other people. They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbour whom I would like to move.... It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.*

*A desolating grief is born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. It is pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake.*

*My dream stands in front of me, still warm, and although awake I am still full of its anguish: and then I remember that it is not a haphazard dream, but that I have dreamed it not once but many times since I arrived here, with hardly any variations of environment or details. I am now quite awake and I remember that I have recounted it to Alberto and that he confided to me, to my amazement, that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone. Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?<sup>4</sup>*

For the reader who is already familiar with the text by Lacan I will discuss in the course of the dialogue of the second section, the echoes will be strong.<sup>5</sup> But the essential tie concerns Levi's reference to a "barely remembered" affect associated with an experience of the limits of language. If we compare what Levi implies here with other accounts of the need and impossibility of testifying to an experience of affliction or destitution as extreme as Levi's, then we cannot but ask whether Levi is offering something fundamental about the human relation to language and an experience (before experience: "not tempered by a sense of reality") of infancy.<sup>6</sup> And we have further evidence that the latter experience must be thought in relation to the question of the other human being, or *autrui*, to use this term in the manner of Blanchot and Levinas. Blanchot raises this question powerfully in his meditation on the death of the infans in reference to a notion of responsibility. The mortal exposure that is the death of the infans must be thought, in his argument, within a structure of saying or address, and can only be thought from a reflection on the possibility of response. Lacan's own reflection on Freud implicitly foregrounds this question of the relation to the other, and points to the necessity of thinking the structure of exposure as an opening of the ethical relation.

Let me conclude this introduction to the problematic of the second section with a note on the second half of its dialogical meditation. The length of this portion of the dialogue derives in part from an effort to develop as fully as possible the terms of Lacan's discussion of the dream of the burning child (a "theoretical" text no less challenging in its mode of writing than the fragments I read in Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*).<sup>7</sup> But I want to observe, also, that I use an explication of the text to return to a question that arises at the horizon of my reading of Nietzsche. Here, I should add that one of my aims in undertaking such a careful and lengthy commentary of the scenes offered in these pages was to push past whatever pathos and whatever forms of identification might be provoked by them. I sought to traverse the "screen" constituted by these moving, even terrible representations, in order to approach the reality that lies behind their insistence. My *supposition* was that this reality involves something more than the subject's relation to the "nihilation" it knows in its assumption of its

relation to language (the mortal exposure that gives what Hegel proposed to us as “the life that bears death and maintains itself in it,” to use Blanchot’s words). A thought of the death drive that proceeds from the latter exposure (the very object of Nietzsche’s practice of “cruelty”) can carry us to the extreme of the tragic knowledge enunciated by the Oedipus who reaches Colonus: the knowledge Lacan finds in the words “*me phunai*.” And there is no question that one of the paths that crosses the plain on which “we” stand now, at the end of the metaphysics of subjectivity and at the time of the “death of God,” leads to this knowledge. But it is also possible to envision other relations to the limit of subjectivity, and thus other configurations of the limit. Other paths open if we think exposure as a structure of relation and think the relation to the other from an originary “yes.” “Infancy” is also about such a yes, and I hope that the pairing of the texts by Blanchot and Lacan will help to bring forth its structure and its presence.

The dialogue on the infant figure has appended to it--this is part of the fiction, part of the counterplay--a brief essay on the motif of *philia* in Antigone: “Antigone’s friendship.” The latter analysis takes up a thread from the preceding discussions (and the discussion itself) in that it attempts to draw forth a dimension of the question of relation that is explored under the rubric of relation to the other, or *autrui*. It is my hope that the notion of *philia* explored here will shed further light on the an-archic grounds of the ethico-political relation. The thought of another “pragmatics” (whose *pragma* is the world, or existence itself) has nothing less at stake. But with this theme of friendship, I also have something a bit more humble in mind that is pursued in the subsequent section on the work of Salvatore Puglia. I consider all of the work gathered in this volume to be inseparable from forms of accompaniment (among them, a form of friendship) that are very much threatened by the economics of the contemporary artistic and intellectual marketplace, including that marketplace referred to as the academy. I am sure that I need hardly argue for the point that critical or theoretical production can compete with any other with it comes to “alienation.” Puglia has pursued a mode of activity that modestly and soberly counters such alienation, and it has been my pleasure for almost two decades to work in his company (together with a number of others, some of whose names also appear in these pages). In writing a brief essay for an exhibition held at the Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies in New York, I had the opportunity to honor that working friendship, but I also began to approach something of what was at stake in an artistic practice devoted to the grounds of historical consciousness. To complement what I had been able to articulate in that essay devoted principally to a small number of works, I envisioned a dialogue with Puglia that would bring forth a larger trajectory and testify to the social and artistic practice in which it is embedded. Here again, I sensed that a “thetic” formulation, a critical “presentation” of the work, could not suffice--that different modes and a different graphics would be required. I cannot deny the factitious character of the means to which I have had recourse (the dialogue itself, though faithful to the movement of discussion, is a reconstruction of almost eight hours of conversation), but I hope that they will serve more than an aesthetic purpose. A statement regarding Puglia’s work, however lengthy, could never do justice to his own restless search for what he calls a “possible” beyond any statement. Thus, by combining a freely moving dialogue, reproductions, and a brief, focused text, I had recourse to a kind of analogue of his own practices of juxtaposition, shadowing, and overlay. From the density and complexity of the space created, I hoped to evoke a resonance that would capture both the movements in his work and something of its importance for my own very interested inquiry into the possibility of “a pragmatics of the real.”

The various texts that make up the three sections of this volume should ultimately bear no more relation to one another than do the images that compose some of Francis Bacon's triptychs. If the volume "works" (and the very meaning of this term lies in the path of its inquiry), then there should be no more than the hint of a necessity to their juxtapositions. Reasoned discourse, of course, normally requires a bit more than a hint; and in this respect, my experimentation in this volume may turn out to be unreasonable (just as it could fail by being reducible to its reasons). I hope, however, that I have provided in the course of these discussions the required conceptual apparatus and sufficient speculative foundation for intelligibility. I also hope that the counterplay of this volume traces some of the limits of the discursively legible.

## Endnotes

1. I could not pretend to say where such innocence was lost in relation to this project, for this is knowledge that must perpetually be reacquired. But I would note that the work in this volume was written in the wake of an effort to work through a notion of *usage* that makes it possible to speak in a consequent manner of the limits of language and the disrupted relationality that must be thought there. The latter notion, which is the basis of my references to a "pragmatics," is developed in *Language and Relation: ...that there is language* (Stanford, 1996), and extended in the course of the texts gathered here.
2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U. Of Nebraska, 1986), p. 72.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).
4. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 63.
5. There is the *common* character of the dream first of all, a trait that the dream of the burning child shares inasmuch as it is reported to Freud by a patient who claims to have reproduced elements of it after hearing it discussed in a lecture; then there is the structure of the dream's formation in relation to its circumstances.
6. An instance of the testimony to which I refer comes in Robert Anthelme's *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), a book to which Maurice Blanchot devotes several invaluable pages of dialogue in *The Infinite Conversation* (trans. Susan Hanson [Minneapolis: U. Of Minnesota Press, 1993], pp. 130-135). Blanchot meditates on the "reserve of speech" that each prisoner knows in affliction and from which each seeks delivery, joyously, at liberation. This reserved speech, he says, is the speech of *autrui*: "a speech unheard, inexpressible, nevertheless unceasing, silently affirming that where all relation is lacking there yet subsists, there already begins, the human relation in its primacy" (p. 135). But this speech, as Anthelme tells us, could not find expression at the time of liberation: "It was impossible. We had hardly begun to speak and we were choking." Immediately after citing these words, Blanchot asks: "Why this wrenching? Why this pain always present, and not only here in this extreme movement but already, as I believe it is, in the most simple act of speaking?" (P. 135). Infancy, as I will suggest, is a dimension of the opening of human

relation (“human relation in its primacy”), an opening *of language* that cannot be brought to speech and yet attends its every event like the trace of a primal scene.

7. I should note here that I am not the first to address the texts I will read in this volume, or even the topic of infancy itself. For the latter, I had before me the lead of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Lectures d’enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), and a contribution by Giorgio Agamben (*Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron [London: Verso, 1993]). My approach to Lacan’s text was also shaped by the many critical commentaries addressed to the pages on the dream of the burning child, foremost among which is Cathy Caruth’s discussion in *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1994). (I also want to mention another scholar from Yale University, Luc Kinsch, whose doctoral work on Mallarmé’s poem, “A Tomb for Anatole,” drew my attention back to this fascinating text.) I can only hope that my reading complements their own; it is not meant as a more definitive analysis. Indeed, if the meditation I have undertaken were read as a bid for critical hegemony, the essential would be lost (the “essential” relating to something Shoshana Felman has attempted to think under the name of witnessing).