Man Under Erasure: Introduction

I walk among human beings as among the fragments and limbs of human beings! This is what is most frightening to my eyes, that I find mankind in ruins and scattered about as if on a battlefield or a butcher field.

—NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

But if cows [and horses] and lions had hands / or could draw with their hands and make things as men can make / then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses / cows like cows, and they would make their bodies / similar in shape to those which each had themselves

—XENOPHANES

"Man" is the ideology of dehumanization.

—ADORNO, "THE JARGON OF AUTHENTICITY"

1. Neither Gods Nor Men

From World War I through the 1950s, a philosophical and intellectual revolution in France created a new kind of atheism, demolished the value of humanism, and altered the meaning of "the human" virtually beyond recognition. French thought began in the mid-interwar period to reject central intellectual foundations of nineteenth-century atheism and priorities of inquiries that had forged and sustained conceptions in which man was based on a human "nature" or "essence" that is given or immutable, or served as his own highest being and ideal. Faced with philosophical opposition and political catastrophe, the status of humanism eroded dramatically, taking with it the imagination of a modern humanity based on innate qualities, character, or rights. Once a foundation of knowledge, man was reconceived as a construct of science and technology, religion

and history, cultural structure and political fashioning. Once the horizon of existence and thought, the human being became a self-doubting mystery lacking all existential or epistemic certainty other than its own death. Once an ethical criterion and a priority of secular, atheist, and egalitarian commitments, humanism now offered evidence of an imperialism supposedly inherent in modern political projects. Allegedly corrupted by capitalism, humanism appeared to many philosophers and writers as an indefensible foundation of a modernity that needed to be overcome. Through its decline, humanism freed a space for a series of conceptual reorganizations in atheism, in philosophical anthropology, in the understanding of the history of modern thought, and also in a host of problems in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. The very process of thinking and defining the human imploded a conceptual foundation of modern thought into an unstable category, a figure, even an aporia.

The bulk of this conceptual reorganization took place in the period 1925 to 1950. By the mid-1960s, it had acquired the name "antihumanism" and had become an almost official face of French thought. Yet already by the mid-1930s, a number of very different philosophers and writers had come to recognize their century as an unredeemable era welded by catastrophe, false secular utopias, political hopelessness, and humanist stalemate, and many of them explicitly claimed that an insistence on the ambitions of humanism (as suggested by communism and other political projects) would not ease the suffering. If the nineteenth century was marked by a "Death of God," Man after the era of catastrophe—the age of World War I, the rise of Nazism, Stalinism, World War II, and the immediate postwar period—could no longer claim to fill the void left by God's absence without bringing forth the worst in human history and paradoxically denigrating the dignity of the human subject. Atheist humanism, especially after World War II, could no longer claim to offer a powerful and sufficient ethics for this world. Nor could the persistent conception of this world in terms of the philosophical and political centrality of *Man* (a conception dating to Descartes and proceeding through the tradition of natural law, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and nineteenth-century liberalism and Marxism) offer satisfactory alternatives to the economic, material, and political division and ruin of Europe. To approach anew the codes addressing human life and significance, these

thinkers developed the case for an atheist ethics not bound by humanism, rejecting Man's prominence as founder and guarantor of knowledge, thought, and ethics, and seeking to offer alternatives to the political and historical impasse they diagnosed.

The political and cultural stakes of this rejection of central premises of post-Enlightenment, liberal, and socialist European thought cannot be overestimated. The emergence and elaboration of "philosophical antihumanism" relied on (and fed into) a set and perhaps even a system of philosophical and political arguments. It became closely linked with a growing mistrust for the utopian and redemptive claims of fascism and communism alike, a contempt for the liberal compromises of the Third Republic, and a broad disappointment with the political engagements of the interwar period. The denigration of France to secondary-power status and the failure of the *résistance* to bring about a more radical change toward socioeconomic equality following the 1944 *libération* contributed further to the mistrust and disappointment. And as a response to this age, the new nonhumanist atheism came to be expressed at different times in existentialist, hyper-ethical, or cynical terms, in nondoctrinaire socialist, reactionary, ultramodernist, or even downright antipolitical principles.

Studying the range of these positions and the way this range was coupled with a precise philosophical and theological transformation that grounded and formed it, this book proposes to reconstruct the emergence of an atheism disengaged from humanism during the second quarter of the twentieth century. It approaches this philosophical, intellectual, and theological problem in its historical and institutional context, in order to show the theoretical reformulations, the political and strategic implications, and above all the resonance of this new atheism and its philosophical world. My argument is that the shift away from classical atheism and humanism should be understood in terms of a synthesis of three parallel and interconnected movements, movements in which very different thinkers with divergent aims and arguments participate. The development, during the 1930s and 1940s, of *an atheism that would not be humanist*—that is to say an atheism mistrustful of secular, egalitarian, and transformative commitments—is the first and central change described here. But it is also a development echoed by and expressed in two others: the emergence of a *negative philosophical anthropology*, and the post-1918 elaboration of

critiques of humanism. Each of these three movements has its own history, its conceptual development, its sphere of import—and from the viewpoint of their respective discourses, each seems to encompass the others, to offer a space for their emergence.

2. Atheism Beyond the Death of God

Atheism is traditionally identified with secularism and humanism. To make up for the absence of God *in res hominem*, nineteenth-century thinkers from Feuerbach and Comte through Marx and Proudhon, Wagner and Nietzsche linked their atheism with positive ethico-philosophical arguments or projects that claimed to provide for man, as highest being, the modes and possibility of a good life and proper society. Feuerbach famously proclaimed, in *The Essence of Christianity*, that God was but a projection of human nature onto the heavens, indeed nothing more and nothing less than man's representation of his own essence.[1] Yet more explicitly, Feuerbach opened the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* with the famous statement, "The task of the modern era was the realization and humanization of God—the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology."[2] In France, Auguste Comte tied his positivist project for science and knowledge to a "religion of humanity," a metaphysical and world-historical vision originating in Saint-Simon's utopian socialism and offering an explicitly religious atheism replete with its own catechism, theory of knowledge, and sociological implications.[3] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon used *humanisme* in the later 1840s in a fashion that has been identified recently as an early appearance in France of the term in its modern, and nowadays quotidian, sense.[4]

By the conclusion of the Dreyfus Affair, distance from Catholicism and conservatism (in philosophy, literature, and the political domain) indicated a political engagement that could be identified as humanist; by the 1910s, more importantly, liberalism, "humanism, and idealism" had become moral and political expectations of the secular education projects that the Third Republic supported.[5] *Humanism*, in this broad sense, became what could reach, reveal, and cultivate the proper and ethical *humanum* of man. It turned this edification of man into the core of ethics,

and man himself into the irreducible, perfectible bearer and guarantor of dignity, equality, and freedom.

In the aftermath of World War I, this idea of a humanism that suffices as a project, as a mode of life, or as an ethical ground comes to be rejected. Atheism's subsequent antihumanist turn, is perhaps best described by the formulation *an atheism that is not humanist,* which I borrow from an expression of Emmanuel Levinas:

> Contemporary thought holds the surprise for us of an atheism that is not humanist. The gods are dead or withdrawn from the world; concrete, even rational man does not contain the universe. In all those books that go beyond metaphysics we witness the exaltation of an obedience and a faithfulness that are not obedience or faithfulness *to* anyone.[6]

The tendency that Levinas points to, this "surprising" disengagement of atheism from humanist hopes, this refusal to direct obedience or faithfulness at someone—Man or God—grounds the far-reaching transformation that occurs across Western European thought from the 1920s onward. Behind this development lay, to a considerable degree, World War I—and even more so World War II. The first war forced philosophers—as it did artists and poets—to address the possibility, fact, and effect of such unprecedented carnage at the heart of a Europe identified with progress and the supposed pinnacle of modernity, opening up an apocalyptic imagination and by and large destroying the cultural optimism that had marked the turn of the twentieth century.[7] In France, a number of young and later prominent philosophers and literary figures identified atheism, the "death of God," and the philosophical enterprise itself, *not* with secularism *but* with the collapse of a unified and virtuous figure of Western man, and with a sense of entrapment in a hostile and dangerous world. Rather than see man's modern control of nature as a sign of liberation, they found in WWI and in the rise of fascism and Stalinism evidence of a devastating failure of individual Man (and Man the species) to come to terms with the world he inhabited so as to offer a ground for ethics, knowledge, and hope. For example, in his early writings on atheism and his famous 1930s lectures on Hegel, Alexandre Kojève distanced himself from the more programmatic aspects of Feuerbach's overcoming of religion and sounded instead a somber note, seeing his times as imprisoning the human being

(which had usurped God's place) in a vicious circle marked by violence and the impossibility of further change—almost a "cosmic catastrophe" as he would later put it. Like Kojève, many contemporaries rejected the (communist, democratic, or fascist) options offered by the political world, treating these as ideologies equivalent to religions and reconceiving atheism as a way out of any and all ideological systems. For example, his student and friend Georges Bataille, offering a reading of Nietzsche attuned to this sense of spiritual/political devastation, wrote that "Nietzsche revealed this primordial fact: that once the bourgeoisie had killed God, the immediate result would be catastrophic confusion, emptiness, and even a sinister impoverishment."[8]

In these claims we find a series of theological questions mixed with a mistrust of political hopes and utopias.[9] Indeed, efforts toward the new atheism doubled as reformulations of the theologico-political domain—a new atheist political theology, a new relation of man (and the political domain) to the interrogation (and refusal) of the divine. This may at first appear surprising, given that religion would seem to have little ground in common with a radical antifoundationalism seeking to understand the modern condition not even by crying out "Neither Gods nor Masters!" but rather by whispering "neither God, nor Man. . . . " Yet this non- or antihumanist atheism configured both its secularist competitors and itself as engagements with religion and the divine. For it, theological shadows lurked in the history of modern thought, in concepts and ontological arrangements that ground notions of man, and even in political movements that flaunted their secular credentials. Hence the new atheism's fundamental opposition to the traditional atheist dismissals of religion as obsolete, as overcome by a combination of scientific teleology and social egalitarianism that supposedly aimed toward man's self-perfection *sans* God. Instead, for philosophers like Koyré, Kojève, Bataille, and Heidegger, secular humanisms tend toward religion (and specifically toward a naturalized Christianity). This is especially so because they are attached to ideological claims (and hence grow into what Raymond Aron in July 1944 called "secular religions") and also because they tend to replace God with man, history, a political messianism, the Nation, or the State, frequently pushing under the rug religious problems and questions.[10] Even the new efforts toward an atheism divested of humanist and ideological premises consciously main-

tain the theological and specifically Christian premise, structure, and/or history of certain questions, to the extent of critically rethinking problems of *anthropotheism*, of *transcendence*, of *finitude,* and so on. Nonhumanist atheism's determined opposition to foundational concepts of man, knowledge, and truth thus contributed to both a diagnosis of religion within humanism, and a self-diagnosis that revealed a dependency on Christian and theological motifs yet did not discredit its atheist credentials and politics. Kojève specifically saw the atheist's inability to think a *voie vers Dieu* as a major failure of atheism in general, which he used to develop a broad revision of "anthropotheism"—the divinization of man that Feuerbach, Comte, Wagner, and others had announced as a necessary consequence of modern self-consciousness and that Nietzsche had located in the Overman's replacement of the dead God and the diseased bourgeois man. A triumph of anthropotheism (in which Kojève thought Hegel's history was culminating) in fact denigrated man to a part of nature, to a content sacred animal wasted in the abyss of a futureless presence.[11] The 1930s critics of classical transcendence made no lesser claims regarding the effects of their philosophical work: Wahl, Koyré, Sartre, Bataille, and Levinas all came to treat the end of classical transcendence as a philosophically necessary and valuable gesture that nevertheless bore with it existential and religious catastrophes—for them, the disenchantment of the world was, politically speaking, a death knell for man. The entrapment of man in immanence had the particular effect of calling up as necessary an escape from the overdetermined world of politics and anthropotheist secularization—an escape that was nevertheless all but impossible.

No less significant to the development of a new political theology was a critique of 1920s idealism (which led to the critique of transcendence in the first place). In the 1920s, atheist humanism remained closely identified with idealist arguments about the capacity of the human mind to transcend and objectively pattern the things that compose the world around it. The new atheism rose with transformations in contemporary philosophy of science, with the reintroduction of Hegel around 1930, and with the new epistemological questions that guided the contemporary reception of German phenomenology. The introduction of scientific and phenomenological innovations brought about new debates over the notion of reality, which resulted in a philosophical rejection of subjectivist ideal-

ism—and the variety of atheism and political hope that this idealism bore with it.[12] To the point, the human subject was posited anew as thrown into its world, as finite, and above all as marked by its perennially unsuccessful attempt to come to terms with this world—a world that it plays a part in forming but cannot fully comprehend.[13] Because the world exceeds man, man forces himself onto the world and seeks to map it according to the picture he has formed of it. Yet, philosophers such as Wahl, Koyré, and Kojève argued, this attempt fails to offer a harmonious knowledge of the universe either in scientific terms (notably through the quantum critique of determinism), or in theological or existential ones. This *antifoundational realism* radically reorganized the terms of the philosophical discussion of atheism and the capacity of human knowledge. It stressed that man exists in a reality that is not only void of classical transcendence but also far greater and more complicated than he could understand. At the same time, this reality cannot be treated as simply independent of human consiousness: reality is always "human reality"—per the famous early French rendition of Martin Heidegger's *Dasein*.[14] This critique essentially destroyed the progressivist, teleological, and utopian hopes nineteenth-century atheism had associated with science as an objective representation, and it suggested the humanism of early twentieth-century idealists, realists, and positivists to be theoretically obsolete, scientifically false, and ethically disastrous.[15] In this context, Kojève, Sartre, and Bataille specifically sought an atheism for which the human subject did not simply "overcome" religion and institute a divine humanity that dominates this otherwise godless universe, but instead remained lost in a world without God, constructing gods over and over—whether in religions or in ideologies—and striving to understand this realm that exceeds it.

After 1945, the effort to escape from "secular religions" and subjectivist or voluntarist atheisms intensified. With the destruction left behind by World War II, as well as with the failure of humanism to even mitigate the violence, this atheist critique of transcendence, progress, and utopia turned into an ethical question of whether humanism places an excessive burden on man, drawing up paradises whose construction produces, rather than banishes, human suffering, and whose arrival cannot guarantee the (moral as well as political) harmony it promises. What was also troubling was that the might and violence of ideologies relied on definitions of

humanity that made this violence entirely plausible, rational, and for their partisans, almost necessary.[16] Such violence now delegitimated ideologies (including communism and colonialism) in which those defined as men could live with their decency and justice guaranteed regardless of what happened in the name of their humanity.

Particularly significant in this context was Jean-Paul Sartre's shift from an antihumanist ambivalence much informed by 1930s developments in the 1943 *Being and Nothingness* to an adamant defense of a specific kind of minimal humanist commitment in his postwar writing. In his October 1945 lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism," Sartre called for a new atheist humanism that would allow each man to be suspicious of the failures, religious implications, and violence of any humanism.[17]

One may understand by humanism a theory which upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value. . . . That kind of humanism is absurd . . . an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined. And we have no right to believe that humanity is something to which we could set up a cult, after the manner of Auguste Comte. The cult of humanity ends in Comtian humanism, shut in on itself, and—this must be said—in Fascism. We do not want a humanism like that. But there is another sense of the word. . . . There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human universe)—it is this that we call existential humanism. (EH 90–93 / 309–10)

Yet Sartre's turn met with detractors not only among Marxists, Catholics, and the political center—as is well known. Instead, his minimal "existential humanism" was accused by several of Sartre's contemporaries of palliating (and hence contributing to) the very worldview he was criticizing. If his existentialism seemed to bear out the 1930s phenomenological claim that the failure of foundations and of man's status in the universe ultimately called up a new ethical command, most intellectuals who had been instrumental in setting up antifoundational realism nevertheless refused his call for man to decide and to commit politically: this would bind the new atheism to political humanisms and old metaphysical commitments. Instead, at stake for them was a persistent effort to produce new categories unbound by any sense that "there is no other universe except the human

universe, the universe of human subjectivity"—by any sense that man is at the center of his world. To the extent that historians and philosophers treat these social and theologico-political problems as formative of a certain Western secular project, the recoil that characterizes the 1930s and 1940s speaks precisely of the movement toward a different political theology. Two more important aspects complicate further the stakes of the new atheism.

First, the atheist recoil from humanism mirrored to a considerable degree the Catholic critique of humanism—indeed at a time when progressive Catholics were turning to embrace a particular kind of "humanism" all the while rejecting secular humanism itself. Just as Catholicism had argued in criticizing secularism, humanity could not ground and fully explain the world it exists in. Pascal, in a classic French reference on the travails of the human condition, had made this very point at the beginning of his *Pensées*, opposing the "Wretchedness of man without God" with the "Happiness of man with God."[18] Ever since Joseph de Maistre, Catholic philosophers had argued vehemently that in an "enlightened" world deprived of God, men find themselves not only abandoned in a desperate, irredeemable situation but also deprived of genuine equality, hope, and ethical standards and obligations.[19] Atheism could not possibly be respectful to human beings, as no claims of respect for man could ever undo the harm carried out through the banishing of God. Yet while contemporary Christian personalism and the "new theology" looked to God to unite humanity and ground the dignity of the individual, this generation of atheist thinkers rejected this alternative as well.[20] Thus the Catholic and Counter-Enlightenment charge against atheism—that the human being (as imagined by secularism) cannot be grounded in itself, and is hence incapable of redemption and incapable of fully comprehending the world through its limited faculties—was now paradoxically imported into atheism, but without Christian promises.[21]

Second, a definitive aspect of the new atheist political theology—and perhaps the best description of its critique of classical atheism—is that it specifically targeted what philosophers like Kojève, Bataille, Sartre, and Koyré (not to mention Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno) thought of as its mysticism of progress, self-perfection, and history. For them, atheism led, despite itself, to a dehumanization of man—indeed a dehumanization

that humanism could not recognize or admit. Against this mysticism, they played with a series of other, no less mystical figures that lies only barely under their texts' surface, particularly in their anti-utopian and antiprogressivist claims and that found expression in the later literature of Maurice Blanchot (*The Last Man* and especially *The Most High*), in Georges Bataille's *Summa Atheologica*, in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in Beckett's *Molloy* and *Endgame*. Similarly, the revision of anthropotheism, the figuration of finitude, the critique of dreams of transparency, the effort to replace transcendence with excess or escape—all these figures persist, indeed with a certain mystical background or emphasis that can be felt even in the very effort involved in undoing the possibility of un-self-conscious humanist mysticism.[22] It is in this sense that the effort to overcome atheist anthropocentrism opens to religious and theological problems and questions that now come to coexist with its more radical overturning of both Christianity and atheism.

The abandoning of humanism in atheist thought could thus portray man through a dual figure: weak, mysterious, nonsovereign on the one hand, and on the other, a totalitarian Moloch trying unsuccessfully to portray himself as God, to dominate nature and other men.[23] At stake in this double critique was not a nihilism that, unsatisfied with the "death of God," wished to dispense with socialist hope or "human rights."[24] Instead, the goal groomed in the interwar period was the questioning of the secular Europe that, blasphemously raising the human subject to all-powerful status, had brought itself to the point of techno-scientific apocalypse and to a waste of hope in the self and in the rhetoric of equality and humanism.[25] If modern political movements had failed to improve on God's failures, then their intellectual aridity had to be interpreted in terms that could release philosophy and politics from the rigid, wishful image of man as a good subject and worthy goal in himself.[26] In this sense as well, the atheism that emerges during the interwar period bleeds into concepts of the human, particularly "negative" ones.

3. "Negative" Philosophical Anthropology

The second major dimension of philosophical antihumanism is its contribution to—and conceptual dependence on—the gradual elabora-