



The Ends of the Humanities

Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences

*Herausgegeben von Isabell Baumann,
Till Dembeck und Georg Mein*

The end of temptation: genealogy of a concept

Nathalie Roelens

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Edited by Till Dembeck, Georg Mein, Johannes Pause, Christoph Purschke



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1. The “modal tumult”

While temptation scenes in Western religion often turn temptation into seduction, the arts, partly since the artist is himself tempted by poetic licence, show the ambivalence of the temptation process, dramatise the trouble or struggle between desire and inhibition, what in semiotics is called “modal tumult” (Greimas 1983: 102), i.e. a tension or schizophrenia between “(social) prescription and (individual) will” (Fontanille 1999: 85); for example the Princess of Clèves who feels “inclination” toward the duke of Nemours, but is impeded by moral constraints, which lead to “embarrassment”:

The fear lest he should speak to her of his passion, and lest she should answer him too favourably; the uneasiness this visit might give her husband, the difficulty of giving him an account of it, or of concealing it from him; all these things presented themselves to her imagination at once, and threw her into so great an embarrassment, that she resolved to avoid the thing of the world which perhaps she wished for the most (Lafayette 2000: 360/Wikisource).

In their *Sémiotique des passions*, Greimas and Fontanille talk about a “modal surplus or excess” (Greimas/Fontanille 1991: 67) to characterise these moments when the *vouloir faire/être* (willing to do/to be) finds a hindrance in the *devoir ne pas faire/être* (to be obliged not to do/to be). Gérard Genette has also highlighted the ambiguity of the 17th century’s *devoir*, meaning both probability, verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*) (*It should rain this afternoon*) and decency, decorum (*bienséance*). The Princess *should* not take her own husband as confident of her love; Chimène, in *Le Cid* by Corneille, *should not* invite in her room the killer of her father. Besides, Rodrigue himself is puzzled by the dilemma between love and honour. This modal tumult seems to be inherent to the psychologising of the character in modernity. The three critiques conclude with the “extravaganza” (alloy between *optionality* (*ne pas devoir faire*) and *contingency* (*ne pas devoir être*) which is an expression of the protagonist’s freedom (Greimas 1983: 78).

This modal or existential oscillation of a subject torn by antinomic modalities is also at stake in da Ponte/Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* who stages the *hesitation* between /willing to/ and /not willing to/ in the mind of one of the principal “consenting” victims of don Giovanni. In the famous duet *La ci darem la mano*, the inner turmoil of Zerlina (*vorrei e non vorrei*), her repentance (*pietà*), her weakness (*non son più forte*), tend to postpone the final “let us go” (*andiam*) to which she assents in unison (before Don Giovanni flies away toward other conquests, others scenes of inconstancy leaving the victims empty-handed; cf. Roelens 2018).

Nonetheless, as we stated before, in most of the cases, temptation is reduced to blind seduction. In the Renaissance scenes by Ariosto or Tasso featuring the Christian paladin Rinaldo, brother of the evil witch Morgana and presumed founder of the House of Este, Rinaldo is abducted by the magician who uses enchanting spells so that he becomes bewitched and forgets the crusades: Alcina in Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (III, 30), and Armida in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (*canto* 5), both modelled on Circe in

Homer. The iconographic illustrations of the scene show Rinaldo sprawled in the arms of the enchantress, totally alienated.

Similarly, outside the world of art, for example in theology, temptation is deprived of its semantic richness. Even the Original Sin, stemming from Adam and Eve's disobedience against God's sovereignty, relates temptation to its single apologetic meaning of total depravity or collective guilt. Saint Augustine of Hippo saw humanity as a *massa damnata*, a condemned crowd, insisting on its moral corrupt nature and, for Luther and Calvin, concupiscence is already loss of freedom of will. St Paul's idea of redemption of the Ancestral Fault by the Christ is insufficient to redeem perdition. Hence, temptation, in all its ambivalence, does not receive enough place to bloom.

Crucial in Christian education is the way the seduction of Ulysses by the sirens is exploited by preachers as a parable to demonstrate how to resist to temptation (in an erotic sense), minimising or neglecting the fact that Ulysses was more tempted by wisdom than by the female charm. His thirst for knowledge already present in Homer culminates in Dante Alighieri's "crazy flight" (*folle volo*) of the *Inferno's Canto XXVI*, v. 125 (Dante 1993: 286) where Ulysses is condemned to shipwreck and drowning for having surpassed the Hercules Columns and thus betrayed the limits imposed by God to human knowledge without the help of the divine grace—Ulysses was pagan.

Anyway, lessons to overcome sin and temptation are viral on the web. They establish a parallel between the sirens and Bathsheba seducing King David, between Odysseus tied to the mast and the Christ's principle "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Matthew 5: 30) and between plugging the ears with beeswax and evading exposure to pornography.

Avoiding the siren temptation trap: a lesson from Homer

[...] The Sirens present a powerful metaphor for the temptation faced by Christians. Like the Sirens, the temptation to fall into sin can be highly enticing and seductive. It may offer you pleasure here and now, but remember that the island is littered with the bones of previous victims. A Christian must not steer off from the course marked out for him. The Christian has means in his toolbox to gain victory over temptation. The stories spoken of above illustrate three ways in which yielding to temptation may be avoided: (1) Restricting our ability to respond to temptation; (2) Guarding our senses, particularly our eyes and ears; and (3) Listening to the sweeter melody of Christ. They also teach going back to John Owen's [17th century puritan pastor and the theologian] works to understand the verse of the prayer "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" (Matth. 6, 13) as "Do not 'allow' us, or 'permit' us, to be tempted to sin." But also, "Do not afflict or try us." (McLachie)

This denial of the real value of temptation urges us to consider how to provide new crevices for temptation in our society where the quickness of seduction is privileged, and where hesitation, inherent in temptation, is banned. Vladimir Jankélévitch, follower of Henri Bergson, has brilliantly demonstrated that the instant is an interval in which the

subject has to deal with the *nescio quid* (I do not know) inherited from San Juan de la Cruz, i. e. the fragile equilibrium between *not anymore* and *not yet*, the moment in which at the extreme limit of the threshold, one is about to capsize (cf. 1990: 82). Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, inquiring about the formula “I would prefer not to” by Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1835), show that the *potentiality* is crucial in this short story. Not *vouloir* but *pouvoir*. Deleuze insists in respect to the effects of the formula “I would prefer not to” of this *scrivener-who-doesn’t-write* which deconstructs (pulverises) the rational functions of the language or, indeed, undermines speech acts (e. g. to answer to your boss, to prefer something, to keep one’s promise). Bartleby does not refuse to do something (he is not a rebel), but invalidates every logic of presupposition, acts “deprived of any maxim”, as Genette would state (Genette 1969: 75), in other terms without motivation, without causality, inventing a new logic, “a logic of the preference” (Deleuze 1993: 95). The stubbornness or the insanity of the formula proliferates around him, exhausting the language, till the final silence after the expulsion from the office.

Giorgio Agamben confers a theological dimension to the debate, going back to Aristotle’s equation between philosophical thought (*nous*) and an inkpot where the philosopher dips his pen, endowed with the “omnipotence of being or doing and hence of not being or not doing (*dynamis me einai, me energein*)” (Agamben 1993: 48). In a further development (about medieval theology), Agamben shows that the image of the creator/scrivener writing with his stylus in the wax is denied by Sunnite orthodoxy, since they claim it is God who guides his hand, provoking the “demodalisation of the world” (ibid.: 54): “The category of the possible has been cancelled, all human omnipotence relieved of its fundament.” (Ibid.) Analogously, Islamic fatalism denies free will because it relies on the faith in the incessant divine miracle. Bartleby, on the contrary, reminds us of the Sceptics with their formula *ou mallon* (rather not) (Diogenes Laertius), Leibniz’s “absolute potency” (ibid.: 51) or Spinoza’s “*potentia* rather than its *potestas*” (Ethics 1677; ibid.: 61). The scrivener revokes the supremacy of will (*vouloir*) on potency and contingency (*pouvoir*) in which the illusion of morality consists. We could schematise: the Princesse de Clèves /*veut*/ but /*ne peut pas*/ whereas Bartleby /*peut*/ but /*ne veut pas*/.

Jacques Derrida, in turn, debates the formula and opposes the sacrificial gesture of Abraham, his final determination to trample ethics and reason, and the tenacious indeterminacy of Bartleby, no less sacrificial since the scrivener walks into “dead given by the law, by society” (Derrida 1992: 74). Abraham also *would prefer not to* but he decided to do so. To stop his arm, God only needs to see that Abraham was ready to act as a murderer, had the courage to be a murderer at the sight of the world, and renounced to hope (cf. ibid.: 72). In short, Abraham gave up the cowardice toward ethics in favour of faith, whereas Bartleby remains in his indeterminacy.

2. Temptation in arts

2.1 Adam and Eve

To turn back to temptation, we notice its fecundity in arts, the richness of plastic exploitation of the topic and, through the exhibition of the modal tumult in an often complex body language, somehow the legitimization of temptation, its humanisation.



1. The Fall and the Expulsion of the Paradise

In the miniature by the Brothers Limbourg, *The Fall and the Expulsion of the Paradise* (1412–1416; **figure 1**), temptation is impersonated by Satan as an alluring girl but with a serpent tail, handing over two golden apples to Eve. In the next scene Eve herself is the temptress: she hands over the remaining apple to Adam. His entangled body executing a rotation of 180°, half kneeling, half turned backwards, receiving and refusing the apple, evinces the effort he is making to resist temptation, this inner hesitation, hesitation reiterated by the last scene on the very right when Adam and Eve are chased by an Angel in fiery clothes out of Paradise through a Gothic golden gate. They nostalgically look back upon the place of their happy and peaceful life. In front of them stretches the unknown world of bare mountains and infinite seas, a world without bound-

aries. Significant are the legs, which are displayed in a paradoxical arrangement: crossed and peripheral and not centred anymore as they were in the spherical garden (cf. Peter Sloterdijk, about the relation between the sphere and monotheism), attesting the in-betweenness of subjects still anchored in a place from which they are evicted, reluctant to enter the unknown world.

2.2 Saint Anthony

To represent the episode of the *temptation of Saint Anthony*, the story of the spiritual torments endured by Anthony Abbott, one of the most prominent of the Desert Fathers in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, has always been a challenge. From Vezelay until Flaubert's novel, the Temptation of Saint Anthony is paradigmatic of poetic license, iconographic jubilation or debauchery, until surrealist obscenities in arts and finally in Humanities, which drives us to closer reading.

Both sources—Athanasius of Alexandria's *Life of St. Anthony*, and Jacopo da Varazze's (or Voragine) *Golden Legend*—described the devils or a whole bestiary which attacked the saint with horns, claws and teeth as a product of the saint's mind: "He provoked with his spirit the demons to new battles" (da Voragine 1967: 131). The other *dramatis persona*, Jesus, observes the hermit being tormented by visions precisely to "put him to the test" (*to tempt* in the first sense of the word, from the Greek *peirazo*). According to Varazze, Saint Antony died under Constantine in 340 at the age of 105 years. Interesting is the way secular spirit is already present in the ostentatious display of "visions", oneiric hallucinations of monsters and chimeras. As soon as the dogma muzzles temptation, it also muzzles the extraordinary and unbridled richness of fantastic imagery, always complicit in the intrinsically profane forbidden.

The iconographic richness of the topic challenges also the exegetes. In the basilica Sainte-Madeleine of Vezelay, a column capital shows the saint standing, hieratically resisting two big grinning devils, who attempt to take off his coat that he retains.

The copper engraving by Martin Schongauer (New York, 1470's) illustrates grotesque demons (a mixture of body parts from different animals) swarming energetically around the calmly resisting saint. The image could depict chapter 9 from Athanasius's *Life of Saint Anthony*, where the Saint is levitated in the air by his practice of rigorous ascetism, or—and we see how art historians are also puzzled by hesitation—chapter 65, where the hermit has a vision of himself floating through the air and undefined beings prevent him from ascending back to reality. Anyway, this engraving inspired *The torment of Saint Anthony* (1487–1488), by the 12 or 13-year old Michelangelo (**figure 2**). The multi-coloured almost naive dancing demons, in contrast with the frontal quiet of the soberly dressed saint, are even more powerful than in Schongauer.



2. The Torment of Saint Anthony

Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1512–1516, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar) for the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim near Colmar (along the route of Santiago de Compostela) arouses either a religious or a thaumaturgic interpretation. The Antonine monks were noted for their care and treatment of skin diseases, such as ergotism or *herpes zoster* known as *ignis sacer* “holy fire” or “Saint Anthony’s fire”. Ergotism is the effect of poisoning due to the ingestion of a fungus that infects rye and other cereals (as barley), resulting in swelling and ulcerous growths, leading to gangrene, but also to hallucinations close to symptoms of “bewitchment”. With its inner wings open, the altarpiece allowed pilgrims and the afflicted to venerate Saint Anthony who shared their pain.

Hieronymus Bosch even more, in *The Triptych of Temptation of St. Anthony* (oil/wood panels, c. 1501, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon) minorises Saint Anthony to emphasise a whole range of impious details, symbols of luxury, witchcraft or heresy surrounding the temptation. The background shows, at left, a city on fire, a traditional symbol of the protection granted by Anthony against ergotism and fire. In-

deed, but it enhances another interpretation, in which much of the images relate to ergotism and the forms of treatment turning the painting into a “performative picture” (Rimini 2011: 122) because it is capable of healing. The large fruit can be interpreted as a mandrake apple. Mandrake root was used often as a protection against ergotism, and the fruit was used for its narcotic effect, which helped alleviating the needed amputations resulting from the disease. The images of fish and thistle relate to alchemy from the time. The pig, emblem of the Antonine order, was an alternative to potentially infected bread, and the pork fat was used to prepare balsams. Analogously, the fish in the right panel can be read as the first step (flying) to the witches’ Sabbath or as a “cold” remedy to counter the “fire”. In the foreground is a naked woman, a symbol of luxury. She is peeping from a hollow trunk through a tent, which is kept open for her by a toad (another cold element). Her tempting body is being offered to the saint, who is portrayed as contemplating while looking at the observer at the same time. The rotation of his head shows once again the modal tumult. In the foreground are the last temptations: a table with bread and a jar of wine, supported by naked demons. One of the human pillars has his foot caught in a jar—an allusion to the sexual act or to the amputated leg due to gangrene? Besides, the evil depicted in the triptych by Bosch, originally exhibited at the Antonine’s Hospital of Lisbon, has also been related the monstrosities or aberrations of the dictatorial regime by Salazar (Estado Novo, 1932–1974). According to Thea Rimini, “Bosch’s triptych rich in monsters and fishes, offers a repugnant iconographic trousseau to whoever wants to narrate the obscure years of the regime.” (Ibid.: 130)

In another version of the Temptation by Bosch (Prado), the saint is portrayed in meditation, in a sunny landscape near the trunk of a dry tree. In contrast to the earlier paintings, this almost mystical version of the temptation finds the abbot calmer, in peaceful surroundings. The pig lies next to him like a pet.

Gustave Flaubert’s symbolic poem in prose *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1874) invites on the other hand to a “scientific” reading. In Genova (Palazzo Balbi) Flaubert had admired a famous Temptation, then attributed to Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Haunted by this theme that the Cain of Byron and the Faust by Goethe had already illustrated, Flaubert wrote three versions of this long cosmic poem where the Egyptian anchorite discusses with successive apparitions: visions of luxury, seduction of power, sensual pleasure. His disciple Hilarion appears presenting him “all the gods, all the rites, all the prayers, all the oracles”, underlining the contradictions of the Sacred Scriptures themselves. When the demon Science reveals to Anthony all the secrets of the universe, the anchorite, endowed with a *libido sciendi*, aspires to melt in the material of which he notices the extraordinary proliferation. But in the disk of the sun coming up, shines the face of God. Flaubert hesitates therefore between the Judeo-Christian world and the modern sciences.

The drawing by Félicien Rops, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1878, pastel drawing au pastel enhanced with gouache, 1878, Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, cabinet des estampes), asks for a psychoanalytic approach, since the temptress occupies the place of the Redeemer on the cross as a return of the repressed, anticipating Freud’s statement “the repressed thought returns at the very moment of its repression”, deri-

sion of the Catholic church pleading for abstinence and of the strict morality of the bourgeoisie. In a blasphemous way, Rops has replaced the emaciated figure of the Christ with a buxom naked woman, and the usual formula INRI (*Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*) with an explicit reference to Eros. Saint Antony, absorbed by his meditation, is surprised and abandons his book. The pig lies in wait.

Auguste Rodin (before 1900, marble, 61 x 117 x 70 cm, chapelle du musée Rodin), reduces the scene to two horizontally displayed figures: Saint Anthony, prostrated on the ground, enveloped in a monk's dress, kisses frenetically the cross on his face. On his back lays a voluptuous naked woman overturned, offered, as an erotic phantasm (inspired by Flaubert). For Rodin this topic is an opportunity to experiment with the contrasting treatment of the marble: the fine polishing for the woman's body, the roughness for the cloth of the monk's dress, the *non finito* for the base. The folds of the garment can be seen as testifying of the tension in the mind of the monk with the facial features pressed on the cross, of his inner battle.

The movie by Georges Méliès, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1898), depicts a holy man who is beset by the unwanted irruption of his repressed desires into his consciousness, especially an attractive young woman. He prays for her disappearance. Méliès focuses on the perverted eroticism of kissing his memento mori. The greater his effort is to dismiss his repressed thoughts the more intense they become. He does not succumb but does not resist either. He succumbs to the imaginary, to the paradox of his unconsciousness. The Angel who appears in response for Antony's final plea for release from temptation is yet another seductive female. The topic allows Méliès to experiment with tricks, for example, the technique of the "double exposure" and other devices to obtain magic effects ("escamotages"). *Vice versa*, the temptation sequence benefits from the plasticity of the medium.

If we want to save humanity, we have to save this hermeneutic openness, sinuosity, vacillation: "Conflict of convictions is inherent to pluralism and to the hustle and bustle of a democratic life" (Debray 2006: 39).

3. "Remodalization" of the world

Hesitation and reluctance to choose are also banned in a political context. Hesitation establishes a state of exception, an embarrassing anomic zone for the "decision" makers. In the election campaign, the undecided or floating voters are persecuted by the candidates eager to *seduce* them, to force them into a clear decision. Aleatory behaviour "terrorises" the election campaign: the unexpected threatens the disposal of the surveys and undermines its presumed capacity of predicting the voters' behaviour. The unpredictable issue perturbs the *syntax* of the surveys which wants to guide the praxis of the voters. Politics is antithetic to aesthetics, to artistic fuzziness. Instead, we should give new breath to the aesthetics of a vote. Counting the blank vote would be a way of acknowledging the right to doubt, to abstain against the idiocy of self-confidence.

In the same spirit, in a small and still actual essay, Pierre Bourdieu sang the praises of the "non-answers" in opinion sampling. The sociologist accuses the postulate that pre-

tends everybody should have an opinion. A survey produces, as to him, “a consensus effect” (Bourdieu 1967 : 1294) and public opinion is nothing else than an artefact composed by statistic aggregation of oriented answers: “One of the most pernicious effects of opinion surveys consists of enjoining people to answer a question they never asked themselves” (ibid.: 1296). Roland Barthes takes over praising the non-choice, the self-contradiction: “supreme opprobrium: to contradict oneself” (Barthes 1973: 10). In his course at the Collège de France on the Neutral, he claims that “‘to change’ is an act which poses a lot of problems to the Doxa: unfaithfulness is always out of favour.” (Barthes 2002: 314) In the field of ethics, the Neutre thwarts the injunction to the right choice and to control in favour of living “according to nuance” (ibid.: 37) which is not weak but intense, full of desire. Other philosophers have fought for the non-choice. Hélène Cixous forges the concept of “structural infidelity” (1994: 19) to designate the incoherence between decision, choice and action. Finally, Greimas, in *De l'imperfection*, catches the trouble of aesthetic perception, the *guizzo*, by Calvino's Palomar hesitating between looking or not looking at the naked woman on the beach, his gaze making a small deviation, a “guizzo”, like a fish (Greimas 1987: 23), which is another way to assert that only culture is able to “remodalise” the world.

Conclusion

Arts and fiction suggest facing temptation instead of avoiding it, to see it as a real prerogative of Humanities, an antidote against radical thought and *pensée unique*.



3. Virgin and Child with an Angel

The Italian mannerist painter Correggio emblematises poignantly our eulogy of hesitation and temptation-without-seduction in his *Virgin and Child with an Angel* (ca. 1522–1525; **figure 3**), already noticed by Goethe in his, *Italienische Reise*: Baby Jesus hesitates between the mother breast and some pears presented by an angel. “*Es stellt eine Mutter Gottes vor, das Kind in dem Augenblicke, da es zwischen der Mutter Brust und einigen Birnen, die ihm ein Engelchen darreicht, zweifelhaft ist. Also eine ‘Entwöhnung Christi’*” (“Naples 22 March”; Goethe 2010: 218). Let us hope that the *Declaration of Saving Humanities* will keep the right to indecisiveness, the right to doubt.

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