

## Impossible Imperatives.

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### Abstract.

The usual conception of transcendence is as the *success* of a process or practice of mediation, meditation, transmutation, salvation, supplication, application or implication. Blanchot's *unusual* transcendence escapes the inevitable ruin of such achievements by arriving in the form of the *failure* of immanence. Although it is impossible to describe that failure explicitly, it can be approached apophatically. Following an impossible imperative to see the whole, immanence generates inadvertent transcendence "thus exposing the essential ambiguity of transcendence and the impossibility that this ambiguity be measured according to truth or legitimacy." (*Writing of the Disaster* p.65). The demanding process of bringing enough ambiguity into play in order to elucidate the failure of immanence and demonstrate a glimpse of an unavowable transcendence shall be undertaken through an assemblage of fragments from *The Writing of the Disaster*, interpreted as instructions for constructing and interrogating a temporary singularity.

"Write in order not simply to destroy, in order not simply to conserve, in order not simply to transmit; write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks."  
(*Writing Of The Disaster* §152)

To call *The Writing of the Disaster* a book of aphorisms would be to underestimate its complexity. It is in fact 402 interrelated epigraphs, and, although Blanchot himself does not number them, I have and shall refer to them that way. In fact these passages (in length anywhere from a single sentence to a couple of pages) differentiate into a few types, like fragments of an explosion or better still like pieces of a kit for building a model of some kind. Some are long difficult questions; some are gnomic utterances in italics; some are engagements with Hegel, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, Levinas, Wittgenstein or Derrida, which dive without preamble straight into their most decisive questions. There are lines from stories too, possibly his own: but I can't say, for although I have read *Death Sentence* and *When the Time Comes* and *Thomas the Obscure* and the short pieces in *The Madness of the Day* and in *Vicious Circles*, like morning dreams I forgot every single word of them as soon as I had finished reading them. They installed themselves like some stealthy computer code, influential but invisible to my consciousness, dependent as it is upon having an icon to click on.

But *The Writing of the Disaster* is not like those works of fiction, for its fragmentary form shakes and rattles its reader into a vigilant state more akin to insomnia than to dreaming. This fragmentary form of writing abides by what Blanchot calls “the discontinuity imperative” in §272, or, “the fragmentary imperative” in §293, an echo of the mortality which makes of us both fragment and whole. This imperative, he says, “calls upon us to sense that there is as yet nothing fragmentary, not properly speaking, but only improperly speaking” (§239). The proper thing to do is to put the kit together, to build the model, or, to revert to my initial analogy, to conduct the forensic investigation which reconstructs the exploded object(s). But to be properly proper, the improper, fragmentary form must itself be taken into account. So speaking improperly will also be necessary. This essential ambiguity can not be avoided if we are to appreciate the phenomenon of the ambivalence of systematicity in thinking. Blanchot quotes Friedrich Schlegel's *Atheneum Fragments* §53:

To have a system, this is what is fatal for the mind; not to have one, this too is fatal. Whence the necessity to observe, while abandoning, the two requirements at once. (§234)

It is in an attempt to negotiate this dual imperative that Blanchot risks writing in fragmentary form:

Fragmentary writing is risk, it would seem: risk itself. It is not based on any theory, nor does it introduce a practice one could define as *interruption*. Interrupted, it goes on. Interrogating itself, it does not co-opt the question, but suspends it... (§228)

And in *Le pas au-delà* p.44 he says:

The demand of the fragmentary, not being the sign of the limit as limitation of ourselves, nor of language in relation to life or of life in relation to language, offers itself nevertheless, hiding itself, as a play of limits, play that does not yet have any relation to any limitation.

This demanding, risky form induces an alertness even to the point of irritability. “The interruption,” he says, “of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing.” (§92) *The Writing of the Disaster* tries to *show* its reader how much they themselves supply the unity to the work, and not vice versa, by magnifying this usually subliminal unifying operation up and over the threshold of perception.

It is the other who exposes me to “unity,” causing me to believe in an irreplaceable singularity, for I feel I must not fail him; and at the same time he withdraws me from what would make me unique: I am not indispensable; in me anyone at all is called by the other – anyone at all as the one who owes him aid. The un-unique, always the substitute. The other is, for his part too, always other, lending himself, however, to unity; he is neither this one nor that one, and nonetheless it is to him alone that, each time, I owe everything, including the loss of myself. (§72)

I have privileged the metaphor of a kit to build a model over that of fragments of an explosion because the former captures this unifying function more clearly. Model building is an activity which gives unity. But what is modeled with an assembled (i.e. a *read*) copy of *The Writing of the Disaster* is not a machine, not even one for manufacturing meaning. What is modeled is the act of transcendence which reading itself symbolizes. Whether we are losing ourselves in a novel, or digging deep with some philosophy, the escape from the confines of the merely actual which reading can achieve always reminds us that immanence is not the whole story. We will see that this metaphor of the kit also has its limits, for a kit is a kind of system and so is insufficiently ambiguous to model transcendence.

In my youth I spent hundreds, even thousands of hours building model gliders with balsa-wood and tissue paper, each and every one of which more or less quickly became a crumpled heap of splinters at the bottom of a hill due to the infinite complications of the phenomenon of air turbulence. Those moments in which months of careful work were annulled in an instant, were, I now realize in retrospect, moments of transcendence. I saw the thought of all that time reduced to nothing, and I smiled sadly at the disaster which, after all, was now more *mine* than anything else could be.

§73: “Be patient.” A simple motto, very demanding. Patience has already withdrawn me not only from the will in me, but from my power to be patient: if I *can* be patient, then patience has not worn out in me that me to which I cling for self-preservation.

§397 says simply: “*Learn to think with pain*”. Patience and pain are thematized by Blanchot as passivity, which is utterly crucial, utterly radical, and inseparable from mortality itself. Pain and patience are so important to *The Writing of the Disaster*, not only because they are to some extent everyone’s lot, but even more so because they are in fact necessary reminders that we are not self-grounding, but rather that each and every one of us is a dependent, lucky to be alive. To reach again for a quote from *Le pas au-delà*, “grace is unjust” (p.24). The ambiguity of suffering is manifest in the inseparability of the mixture of the harmful and the beneficial.

Immanence is the immediate effect of its own transcendence in the thought of the

whole, and consciousness itself the mark of the operation of this idea. My whole consciousness, my whole body, my whole mind: these are the paradigms to which the whole world conforms. I see the whole, I know, I understand: these are essentially synonyms. Thus the first, the simplest and the most urgent imperative: see the whole. This thought arose before 500 B.C. in Xenophanes' 24<sup>th</sup> fragment:

ουλος ορα, ουλος δε νοει, ουλος δε τ'ακουει  
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hear the whole!; think the whole!; listen to the whole!

It is to this imperative that his student Parmenides famously responds. The concept which haunts Parmenides, the concept of “nothing,” a concept whose validity Parmenides denies with a passion, is fixated upon by Blanchot in the phenomenon of the disaster. To put what is a poetic point prosaically we can simply say that what might be called pride ensures that all achievements of immanence remain bound a priori to the perpetuation of that same immanence, and must be dedicated to the protection and perpetuation of its continuity.

It is in the conviction that subjectivity and possibility can and must be distinguished that the disaster becomes a significant phenomenon which writing can hope somehow to interrogate:

The demanding process that realizes itself by bringing into play and carrying outside itself an existence that is insufficient and that cannot renounce that insufficiency [is] a movement that ruins immanence as well as the usual forms of transcendence.  
(*Unavowable Community* p.7).

In other words, “*The disaster takes care of everything.*” (§7)

An immanence living comfortably, well within its limits, imagines that it could find those limits like a farmer walking his boundary fences. This side, my mind; over there, not my mind. This way of thinking can be thought only by a mind that has never actually approached its own limits, let alone attempted to extend them. Those with actual experience of such regions know in contrast that existence is more like a house of cards. Challenge a limit of immanence, and a situation may alter irreversibly. There is no taking back the last straw. Discontinuity erupts and immanence collapses back into some state which it may have toiled for years to transcend.

Transcendence is imagined in this sort of immanence to be some sort of success: “the *success* of a process or a practice of mediation, transmutation, concentration, salvation, supplication, application or implication” as I said in my abstract. This kind of transcendence is always actually an annex of immanence and a colony of continuity. But as the moment the disaster arrives in immanence, immanence is destroyed, the disaster can never actually *be* immanent in the metaphysical sense of the word, but only in the everyday sense of its ambiguous ghostly double, i.e. “about to arrive.” The irony of the fact that this meaning actually encodes a form of transcendence is not lost on Blanchot, but he does not allow this blurring of meanings to distract him from what remains for him imperative: to write. In §15 Blanchot says, as if giving instructions to himself:

To read, to write, the way one lives under the surveillance of the disaster: exposed to the passivity that is outside passion. The heightening of forgetfulness. It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.

This mode continues intermittently until §289:

Words to avoid because of their excessive theoretical freight: ‘signifier’, ‘symbolic’, ‘text’, ‘textual’, and then ‘being’

and then continuing:

... and then finally all words, and this would still not suffice, for since words cannot be constituted as a totality, the infinity that traverses them could never be captured by a subtracting operation; it is irreducible by redaction.

So here we are reading, letting the disaster speak in us, carefully avoiding the s. word, the t. word and the b. word, and also showing, by our obvious failure to avoid words altogether, that we are not afraid to fail, valiantly attempting the impossible task of capturing thought in words, thereby not capturing the infinity which traverses them. See! Infinity not captured! Failure achieved!

Critique, in the strictly Kantian sense of the term, cannot be the quest of an explorer, pursuing the frontiers and seeking to expand the colony of my consciousness into hitherto unconquered savage realms. Critique as interpreted by Blanchot is rather the imperative to give voice to the constitutive role of disaster in the generation of the immanence effect. Everyone alive has so far cheated death, unaware perhaps of how close that ultimate among possibilities may have drawn. Death: the most personal and

intimate of disasters which would lovingly accept any one of us at any moment. That last disaster is always waiting and always will wait with infinite patience for each of us alone. See how special it makes you feel?

§42: We constantly *need* to say (to think): that was quite something (something quite important) that happened to me. By which we mean at the same time: that couldn't possibly belong to the order of things which come to pass, or which are important, but is rather among the things which export and deport.

Let me hastily cut off various erroneous interpretations which threaten at this point. For *Writing of the Disaster* is no pessimism:

§60: Let us not entrust ourselves to failure. That would only be to indulge nostalgia for success.

For although

§51: Reading is anguish.

it remains that

§48: There can be this point, at least, to writing: to wear out errors.

for

§333: "*Optimists write badly*" (Valéry.) But pessimists do not write.

Thus we read

§123: *Patience, belated perseverance.*

and

§224: *Always returning upon the paths of time, we are neither ahead nor behind: late is early, near far.*

We in our ignorance pursue many impossibilities. This is the unbounded ambition of immanence: to see it all, to do it all, to hear it all, know it all. But possibility inevitably eludes this absolute comprehension, and instead we are eventually left with nothing clearer than a catalogue of our limits, and a pervasive sense of curtailment. Thus Blanchot cries out:

§259: Infinite-limited, is it you?

Yes Maurice! Over here! Here we are, limited to being typical, and yet nonetheless completely different to one other:

§257: It is only inasmuch as I am infinite that I am limited.

Blanchot presents no tentative question or imperative infinitely open to interpretation. Here it is in black and white: it is only insofar as we are immanent that we transcend.

This is the importance of the limit-phenomenon of disaster. It is impossible that we are the pure immanence of which we dream and theorize and write. Each and every one of our disasters is an icon of that truth, and reminds us that it is impossible that we are what we think we are, and yet also imperative that we try to become it. So it is that we recognize ourselves in §75:

From the moment when the immanent silence of the immemorial disaster caused him, anonymous and bereft of self, to become lost in the other night where, precisely, oppressive night separated him so that the relation with the other night besieged him with its absence, its infinite distantness – from that moment on, the passion of patience, the passivity of a time without present, had to be his sole identity, circumscribed by a temporary singularity.

So here we have it: *The Writing of the Disaster* as a temporary singularity kit. The temporary singularity that we call "us" is modeled in this epitome, dependent not only on the ideals we imperfectly instantiate, but equally as well on the signature pattern of disasters which shatter existence into the unique fingerprint of fragments that we all call "me":

§380 “ ‘I’ can only save an inner self by placing it in ‘me,’ separate from myself, outside.”(Derrida) This is a sentence with unlimited developments.

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## **References**

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